

## The Indispensable Sister Carol

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 22, 2010 NCR Today

It is always a bit dangerous to predict how future historians will interpret events. Certainly, Xavier Rynne never foresaw Joseph Ratzinger, by way of example. But, when historians come to analyze the reasons health care reform passed this time when such political giants as FDR and LBJ failed to achieve it, many people will get the credit. First and foremost, the voters who elected Barack Obama who pledged to deliver health care reform deserve a large bit of credit. Obama himself deserves his share of the plaudits, especially because the Massachusetts special election in January gave him ample reason to set the troublesome issue aside. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's performance shamed the historical reputation of the men who wielded the Speaker's gavel before her. But, one woman seems to me to have been especially indispensable: Sister Carol Keehan.

Sister Carol, who is the CEO and President of the Catholic Health Association, publicly supported the bill despite the fact that the USCCB declined to endorse it. Her endorsement was weightier than most others. She has spent a lifetime caring for the sick and the poor. Her pro-life credentials are second to none. Her expertise extended to policy but, unlike many experts, it also included a practical awareness of how complex legislation works itself out on the ground. Her courageous stance received a powerful second from a group of sisters who also supported the legislation.

For her efforts, Sister Carol is now being attacked by conservative Catholics. She has been called "disloyal" and worse. Pro-life Congressman Bart Stupak has been the object of similar attacks. Sister Carol and Cong. Stupak should take comfort in the fact that the people attacking them today were attacking Cardinal O'Malley last August when he presided at the funeral of Sen. Edward Kennedy. They are in fine company. There is a wing of the Catholic Church that seems always to forget that the old joke about being "more Catholic than the Pope" was always intended as a joke. Being attacked by them is a badge of honor.

Last May, in his masterful Laetare speech at Notre Dame, Judge John Noonan referred to the fact that he had originally not been slated to give the speech. Professor Mary Ann Glendon declined the honor in the midst of the controversy over President Obama's presence at the commencement ceremony. He said: "One friend is not here today, whose absence I regret. By a lonely, courageous, and conscientious choice she declined the honor she deserved. I respect her decision. At the same time, I am here to confirm that all consciences are not the same; that we can recognize great goodness in our nation's president without defending all of his multitudinous decisions; and that we can rejoice on this wholly happy occasion." The words jump off the page: all consciences are not the same. The bishops, for whom I have nothing but respect, followed their conscience and Sister Carol followed hers. She does not deserve opprobrium. She deserves, and she will receive, a place in the history books.