NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Move forward after differences on health reform, priest says

Catholic News Service | Jun. 22, 2010

Fr. J. Bryan Hehir (CNS)

DENVER -- Differences within the Catholic community during the health reform debate were not about the objectives to be accomplished but about the ?degree of assurance? provided by the bill on those objectives, Fr. J. Bryan Hehir told the annual convention of the Catholic Health Association June 13.

?It is time to face the future, not replay the past continually,? said Hehir, secretary for health and social services for the Boston archdiocese, in a keynote talk on the opening day of the June 13-15 convention in Denver.

His talk focused on what he called the ?challenging future? of Catholic health care as the new health reform law takes effect after an ?exhausting, intensive debate.?

?Understanding that debate -- its process and its product -- is a necessary task, but far more urgent is the need to answer the question of moving forward from where we are to where we need to go to provide health care which is morally grounded, legally protected and provided with compassion and competence,? he said.

Hehir, who also serves as a professor in the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and is former president and chief executive of Catholic Charities USA, said the debate was complicated by ?a disturbing characteristic of the American political process -- polarization that is both intellectual and political.?

?This made an intrinsically complex policy discussion infinitely harder to carry on,? he said.

But he said the end result of the debate ?has the proportions and the potential? of such legislative landmarks as the Social Security Act of the 1930s, the civil rights reforms of the 1960s and welfare reform in the 1990s.

As the debate began, there was widespread agreement in the Catholic community about four objectives to be accomplished by the legislation, Hehir said. Those objectives were basic health care for all; no federal funding of abortion; expanded access to health care for immigrants; and conscience clause protections for religiously based health care, he said.

?As the legislation advanced toward its final outcome, the Catholic debate surfaced, not about the objectives but

about methods of achieving them and judgments about the degree of certitude needed in the bill to promote these various objectives,? he said.

With passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act on March 21, ?the four objectives are partially met,? Hehir said. ?It will take continuing work on each [objective] to meet the potential of a just health care system protective of human life and human dignity from life?s inception along the spectrum to its natural end.?

In the final days of the health reform debate, the Catholic Health Association and the heads of many Catholic religious orders announced their support for the legislation along with an executive order by President Barack Obama promising no federal funding of abortion. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops insisted, however, that the final bill and the executive order did not adequately guarantee conscience rights or guard against expanded federal abortion funding.

Hehir said debate over the ?meaning, status and significance? of the Hyde Amendment, which bars federal funding of abortion except in cases of rape, incest or danger to the mother?s life, ?became one of the primary fault lines in the secular and Catholic debates? about the health reform bill.

?Precisely on the point where the ethical objective and the empirical context of the bill merge is where the fissure occurred,? he said, adding that ?there was foundation for the different judgments made on the bill in the Catholic moral tradition.?

?The final judgment on this bill is not about Catholics inside and outside the permissible range of Catholic moral teachings,? he said.

Hehir quoted the late Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray in distinguishing between mistakes and errors. Murray said mistakes are ?deficiencies of intelligence,? while errors are based on a ?deficiency of goodwill.?

?His point was not to assume mistakes are errors,? Hehir said. ?His conclusion was that the Christian community is not in error, no matter how many mistakes are made.?

Source URL (retrieved on *09/02/2014 - 04:27*): http://ncronline.org/news/politics/move-forward-after-differences-health-reform-priest-says