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The Bishops and Ecclesiology

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

The feud, if it might be called that, between the Catholic Health Association (CHA) and the U.S. Catholic bishops over the health-care reform legislation that has already been passed by both houses of Congress and signed into law by President Obama, is the subject of this week's column.

The CHA supported the legislation and the bishops opposed it, and continue to do so.

An interesting wrinkle in the dispute has recently developed. According to an interview with John Allen, senior correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago and president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), claims that the dispute also involves ecclesiology.

What is at issue, Cardinal George said, is the bishops' right and duty not only to teach moral principles (for example, that all life is sacred, and therefore abortion is always immoral), but also to apply those principles to specific pieces of legislation (whether the health-care reform legislation permits funding for abortions or not).

According to the Catholic News Agency (CNA), which partners with Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network, Cardinal George accused the CHA at the recent bishops' meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida, of having created a "parallel magisterium" to the bishops.

Helen Osman, Secretary of Communications for the USCCB, charged that quotations attributed to Cardinal George were "just wrong" and "just plain dishonest." The CNA, however, posted an item the same day (June 21), saying that the agency "stands by its report," and asserting that it had been corroborated by "several bishops."

The core ecclesiological principle at issue here, according to Cardinal George's interview, is "about the nature of the church itself, one that has to concern the bishops" -- namely, who speaks for the Church on faith and morals?

"The bishops have to protect their role in governing the church," Cardinal George said.

Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity and president of the CHA, insisted that "We did not differ [with the bishops] on the moral question, or the teaching authority of the bishops."

Cardinal George, however, isn't so sure. "This may be a narrow disagreement," he told John Allen, "but it has exposed a very large principle."

The principle is ecclesiological, John Allen wrote, "Who speaks for the church on matters of faith and morals, including how morality is translated into law?"

"If the bishops have a right and duty to teach that killing the unborn is immoral, they also have to teach that laws which permit and fund abortion are immoral," Cardinal George insisted. "It seems that what some people are saying is that the bishops can't, or shouldn't, speak to the moral content of the law, that we should remain on the level of abstract principles."

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The CHA's way of framing the dispute, however, drew support from Father Bryan Hehir, a Harvard ethicist who also serves as the secretary for health care and social services for the Archdiocese of Boston, is the former head of Catholic Charities USA, and is a former long-time official of the USCCB.

"There was a foundation for the different judgments made about the bill [by the bishops and the CHA]," Father Hehir said. "It was not about being inside or outside the permissible range of Catholic moral tradition."

Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Florida, a member of CHA's Board of Trustees, made an important point about the dispute, noting that religious women, who constitute much of the leadership of Catholic health care in the United States, are currently the subject of an Apostolic Visitation initiated by the Vatican.

"I think religious women are on the receiving end of what they perceive, at least, as a lot of negative reactions by church authority," Bishop Lynch told John Allen. "That's a climate we have to recognize."

Bishop Lynch also differed implicitly with Cardinal George's ecclesiology. Although associated with the USCCB since 1972, "I have never before heard the theory that we enjoy the same primacy of respect for legislative interpretation as we do for interpretation of the moral law. I think this theory needs to be debated and discussed by the body of bishops."

Criticism of Cardinal George's ecclesiology also came from *Commonweal* magazine (6/18/10). "It has long been the position of the USCCB that, while bishops must provide moral guidance, lay Catholics are fully competent to make decisions in the public sphere, whether in the workplace or in politics."

This column joins with Father Bryan Hehir, Bishop Robert Lynch, *Commonweal*, and others in support of the CHA and its president, Sister Carol Keehan.

Ecclesiology is indeed at issue here, but not the ecclesiology espoused by the USCCB's president.

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