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Bishops are not 'Obama haters,' Dolan insists

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 14, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- Insisting that the Catholic bishops of America are not ?Obama haters,? soon-to-be Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York said this morning that while the bishops regard a recent compromise on insurance mandates announced by the administration as unacceptable, he?s committed to ?dialogue? and a ?posture of openness? in trying to reach agreement.

tThere?s still ?a little glimmer of hope,? Dolan said, that an acceptable solution can be found.

Dolan said he?s well aware that some Americans, including some Catholics, believe that ?the bishops can?t stand this administration anyway, so any thought of dialogue or moderation is really a waste of time, because the bishops aren?t about to stop opposing [it].?

tDolan insisted that impression is both ?strategically counter-productive? and ?factually untrue.?

"We didn't start this battle, and I'm kind of uncomfortable with it," he said, "We'd much rather be conciliatory."

tDolan also said he was ?disappointed? with the quick support given to the administration?s announcement by the Catholic Health Association, saying it amounted to "popping the champagne cork" before the bishops had a chance to react. There too, he said, he wants to keep the dialogue going.

tOn other matters, Dolan said that despite a recent series of scandals in the Italian press involving the current papal ambassador to the United States, Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, he believes Viganò can still be effective.

tIf anything, Dolan said, revelations of Viganò?s complaints about corruption and cronyism in Vatican finances may lift his stock in the States, making him seem like someone ?who does not look upon the internal workings of the Holy See with rose-colored glasses.?

tDolan spoke this morning in an exclusive interview with *NCR* from Rome, where he?s set to be named a cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI on Saturday.

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Having studied it, are you still convinced that the change announced by the Obama administration to the insurance mandates is unacceptable?

tI am convinced of that. That doesn?t dull the truth of the initial openness to a possible glimmer of hope that we saw in the beginning. As you know, the first press release the bishops put out said this might be a good first step. I?m still trying to keep that little flicker alive. We?ve got the fact that the President of the United States has shown attentiveness to an overwhelming expression of concern, not just from Catholics but the ecumenical and inter-religious community, and even the wider American community. There?s also the fact that he thinks that some mitigation is called for, and the fact that he?s said let?s continue to dialogue and work this out. That gives

us an undeniable little glimmer of hope.

tWhat?s threatening to suffocate and extinguish that flicker of hope is the fact, first of all, that the so-called mitigation he announced raises more questions than it gives answers. For example, what about the self-insured? What about individuals? It also raises an alarm about the overriding philosophical question about what right a bureau of the federal government has to tell a church how to define what it?s going to do and by whom it?s going to be done, which is scary and chilling for any thoughtful American. He hasn?t tended to that yet. Thirdly, the other thing that threatens to put out this little flicker of hope is that now senior officials, including his chief of staff, have said that it?s over, there will be no more moderation. That doesn?t gel with what the president has said publicly and what he?s said to me personally.

tI?m not ready to give up hope, but upon the further study that we bishops promised we would give of the president?s announcement, we don?t think it does it.

In terms of the politics, are you worried that the story is shifting from ?bishops have legitimate concern? to ?stubborn bishops won?t meet Obama halfway??

tYes, I am. I?m concerned on two levels.

tFirst of all, I?m concerned that the narrative might be getting out there that this is over and done with. The bishops bravely spoke up, the president listened, he?s given some very logical changes, case is closed. That bothers me, because as I just said, it?s not true.

tSecond, I am worried about a story being out there that the bishops can?t stand this administration anyway, so that any thought of dialogue or moderation is really a waste of time because the bishops aren?t about to stop opposing you. I?m concerned about that, first of all because it?s strategically counter-productive. Number two, it?s not true.

Do you believe that Obama is waging a war on religion?

tI don?t want to believe that. I find myself agreeing with many of President Obama?s policies. I find myself believing him when he assures me that he has the highest regard for the work of the church, especially in health care, education, and works of peace, charity and justice. I want to believe him when he says he wants this administration to do nothing to impede that good work, and that he considers the protection of conscience and freedom of religion to be one of the highest calls that he has as president, to protect the constitution. I want to believe him. I have to say that sometimes he makes it hard to believe him, but I will not place myself or my brother bishops in the camp of Obama-haters, because we?re not.

tAnybody familiar with the history of the Catholic church knows that with every single President of the United States, we?ve applauded some things that he?s done and we?ve sat on our hands for others. It?s no different now. This may be one of the more well-oiled and effective protests that we?ve waged to something a president has done, which is why it?s getting attention, and I?m glad it is. But that doesn?t make us bullies who are now trying to impose our beliefs on the rest of the country, and trying to utilize the offices of the federal bureaucracy to do that. I would say that we?re not the ones imposing anything here. We didn?t start this battle, and I?m kind of uncomfortable with it. I don?t like battles. I know it has to be part of our ministry. I?m going to be reminded on Saturday that sometimes we have to do battle at the cost of blood in defense of the faith, but we?d much rather be conciliatory. We?d much rather be cooperative.

tWhen I went into the Oval Office in November, the first thing the president did is to say, ?Archbishop Dolan, let?s rehearse the areas in which my administration and the Catholic community in the United States is cooperating.? He went into a litany of about ten minutes, and all I could do was nod my head in agreement. I

also added a few more he had forgotten. It?s not like there?s total conflict, and I want to get that out. Strategically, we do not need to be painted into a corner where we?re some bully, obstinate bishops who do not want to dialogue or have any posture of openness to this administration. More importantly, it?s factually not true.

When Obama announced the revision, the Catholic Health Association quickly supported it. Were you disappointed by that?

tI would have to say I was disappointed. I have high regard personally for Sr. Carol [Keehan, head of the Catholic Health Association]. I?ve worked with her, I hope we can continue to do that, and I have a lot of respect for the Catholic Health Association. I was disappointed. Some people have said that the bishops don?t want anybody in conversation with the White House besides themselves, but that?s not true. I?m thrilled that Sr. Carol has an entrée, and that she?s making the Catholic voice heard. My disappointment is that she made an announcement that was pretty much popping the champagne cork before we could even respond. After the health care debacle, she had said to me, ?Archbishop, though I stand behind what I did, one of the things we need to do is to work more closely hand in glove.?

tI haven?t had the honor of a conversation with her, though I have let her know of my disappointment in writing. I look forward to meeting with her personally. I have been led to believe by people that have spoken with her and other organizations that although they might see a bit more hope than we bishops do, they also, after the dust has settled, have serious reservations and continuing questions.

You want to keep the dialogue open with CHA?

tWe have to. By the way, I think Fr. John Jenkins [president of the University of Notre Dame] was excellent. I don?t mind telling you that he called me early Friday morning to say, ?Archbishop, I have been reached by the White House with news of a possible announcement today. My posture has been, you need to be talking to Archbishop Dolan.? He waited, as did the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Catholic Relief Services, and Catholic Charities, to hear what we bishops were going to say before they put any release out. I highly appreciate that.

Here in Italy, the perception is that the papal ambassador in the United States, Italian Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, has been badly compromised by a series of leaks and scandals. Do you believe Viganò can still be effective?

tYes, yes, yes, for a number of reasons. First of all, we American bishops usually divide by ten any gossip that we hear from the Vatican. We don?t know how accurate it is, and most of the time we turn past that and go to the sports page. Number two, in the short time he?s been in the States, we?ve grown to love him. I mean that sincerely. He stood before us in November, and even back then some of this gossip was hovering over him. We knew that. He stood up in front of us, in utter sincerity, obviously rather shy, and said, ?Brothers, I am honored to be here. I?m happy to be here. I consider it an honor, and your welcome has only given me more encouragement.? Even in the first three months, we?ve grown to appreciate his sincerity and his humility.

tFor me personally, and I?ve spoke to enough other bishops about it, I think that if anything, this enhances his role. You?ve got to keep in mind that for us bishops, the nuncio is not only the representative of the Holy See to the United States. One of his major jobs is to bring back our sentiments and observations to the leadership in the Vatican. This, in a way, enhances his credibility as someone who does not look upon the internal workings of the Holy See with rose-colored glasses, but is well aware of difficulties there. In a way, I think it enhances his credibility as somebody who wants to constantly hold the church, both the Holy See and the church in the United States, to the highest standards of fidelity to the gospel. When that doesn?t happen, he?s not afraid to confront it, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

You don?t get the sense that he sees being in the States as an exile or consolation prize?

tNo, not at all. At the beginning, I brought that to his attention, and he just smiled and said, ?How can anybody think an assignment to the United States is a demotion?? He said he?s honored to serve in this capacity. Loyal churchman that he is, his heart is broken over a controversy that he wishes would never have risen to this level. In my conversations with him, since, however, my impression is that he remains more committed than ever to his role as the bridge between the Holy See and the Catholic Church in the United States.

Have you picked up any concern in the Vatican about the situation in the United States?

tNobody?s asked me about it. Cardinal [Francis] George told me that we need to talk because he?s been getting some questions, but he led me to believe it was mostly information questions, helping [the Vatican] to understand this. The nuncio is right on top of things, Archbishop Viganò. I called him on Friday to bring him up to date with the posture of the bishops, and he was highly attentive to that, which speaks well of him. I?m pretty confident that he?s getting some of the interpretations over.

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