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# Gehring, Weigel and Cardinal George write about conscience compromise

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 15, 2012 NCR Today

Depending on who you believe, either President Obama is employing a "divide and conquer" strategy, pitting Catholic leaders against one another regarding his compromise over a controversial mandate regarding coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans, or the Catholic bishops "are moving the goal posts" in their supposed fight for religious liberty.

The dichotomy between the two views was highlighted yesterday in a flurry of statements and reports from bishops and other Catholic leaders concerning the compromise.

The archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George, argued for the first option in a written statement posted on the archdiocese's website yesterday [1], writing that there had been attempts to "weaken the unity between the bishops and the faithful."

Apparently referring to the differences in opinion between key bishops at the U.S. bishops' conference who say the compromise doesn't go far enough and other Catholic leaders who support it, including the heads of NETWORK and the Catholic Health Association, George writes that "this is the first time in the history of the United States that a presidential administration has purposely tried to interfere in the internal working of the Catholic Church, playing one group off against another for political gain."

An article posted on the *National Catholic Register*'s website yesterday [2] also took that tack, saying that the Catholic Health Association's immediate support of Obama's compromise created "confusion and possible institutional damage."

Vying for the second option, John Gehring, the Catholic outreach coordinator at Faith in Public Life, wrote in a piece posted to their website yesterday [3]that the bishops "are moving the goal posts" in their continuing disapproval of the compromise.

"At some point [the bishops] have to ask themselves whether they want to fight these lonely battles from the sidelines or be engaged in a more prudent way," writes Gehring. "I?m afraid Catholic bishops run the risk of alienating even moderate Catholics who respect our church leaders when they appear to relish a fight instead of finding common ground."

"In the coming weeks it will be critical for those Catholic institutions that have supported this sensible solution to defend it with as much energy as bishops and Republican leaders will oppose it."

Also weighing to to support George's viewpoint this morning was Catholic author George Weigel in a piece for the National Review Online. [4]

Writing that the Obama administration is misreading Catholics, Weigel says the thing that is "truly striking" about how the White House is explaining the compromise is that it is continually referring to the Catholic

Health Association's support, suggesting that the association "trump[s] the bishops? conference when it [comes] to who-speaks-for-the-Catholic-Church-in-America."

"In the administration?s view, then, primacy in the Catholic Church is not conferred by the pope, but by the White House," writes Weigel.

"Thus Sister Carol Keehan could be recognized by the president?s chief of staff as primate of the Catholic Church in the United States, because she headed an organization that ?knows a fair amount about . . . health care in this country? ? unlike, for example, those mulish bishops who had failed to be taken in by the administration?s shell game."

Continuing on in his letter, George appears to address recent polling data showing the bishops' concerns regarding religious liberty are not echoed by the majority of lay Catholics.

"What isn?t always understood is that the Bishops of the Church make no attempt to speak for all Catholics; they never have," George writes.

"The Bishops speak for the Catholic and apostolic faith, and those who hold that faith gather around them. Others disperse. That dynamic is clear in history and became clear also in the official visit to Rome that the Bishops of our region made this week."

Referring to the Illinois' bishops' recent ad limina visit to Rome, George concludes: "Our visit has reminded us that the Church enjoys divine assistance even when she is being attacked. It was a timely visit."

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