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Cardinal to Obama: Don't reverse life-related policies

Dennis Coday | Jan. 20, 2009

Second letter in a week

WASHINGTON -- It would be "a terrible mistake" for President Barack Obama to reverse current policies on embryonic stem-cell research, conscience protection and other life-related matters, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops told him in a new letter.

Such actions "could introduce significant negative and divisive factors into our national life, at a time when we need to come together to address the serious challenges facing our people," said Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago in a letter dated Jan. 16 and made public Jan. 19.

The letter came less than a week after Cardinal George sent another letter to Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden and each member of Congress outlining the bishops' broad policy agenda as the new administration and Congress begin their work.

"I expect that some want you to take executive action soon to reverse current policies against government-sponsored destruction of unborn human life," Cardinal George said. "I urge you to consider that this could be a terrible mistake -- morally, politically and in terms of advancing the solidarity and well-being of our nation's people."

Specifically, the USCCB president mentioned the recently issued Department of Health and Human Services regulation protecting the conscience rights of health care providers and institutions; the so-called Mexico City policy barring the use of U.S. family planning funds to promote or perform abortions in developing nations; and current embryonic stem-cell policy prohibiting federal funding of research involving embryonic stem-cell lines created after 2001.

Cardinal George said he hoped the new president would "consider these comments in the spirit in which they are intended, as an invitation to set aside political pressures and ideologies and focus on the priorities and challenges that will unite us as a nation."

"Again I want to express our hopes for your administration, and our offer to cooperate in advancing the common good and protecting the poor and vulnerable in these challenging times," he added.

The cardinal noted that during his campaign Obama "spoke often about a need to reduce abortions" and had said he had no definite answer when asked at what point a baby has human rights.

"I think your remarks provide a basis for common ground," Cardinal George said. "Uncertainty as to when human rights begin provides no basis for compelling others to violate their conviction that these rights exist from the beginning. After all, those people may be right.

"And if the goal is to reduce abortions, that will not be achieved by involving the government in expanding and

promoting abortions," he added.

Commenting specifically on the HHS conscience guarantees, Cardinal George said the regulation was "a long-overdue measure for implementing three statutes enacted by Congress over the last 35 years."

"An administration committed to faithfully implementing and enforcing the laws of the United States will want to retain this common-sense regulation, which explicitly protects the rights of health professionals who favor or oppose abortion to serve the basic health needs of their communities," he said.

"Suggestions that government involvement in health care will be aimed at denying conscience, or excluding Catholic and other health care providers from participation in serving the public good, could threaten much-needed health care reform at the outset," the cardinal added.

He said the Mexico City policy, first implemented in 1984, "has wrongly been attacked as a restriction on foreign aid for family planning" but instead ensures that family planning funds "are not diverted to organizations dedicated to performing and promoting abortions instead of reducing them."

"Once the clear line between family planning and abortion is erased, the idea of using family planning to reduce abortions becomes meaningless, and abortion tends to replace contraception as the means for reducing family size," said the cardinal's letter to Obama.

On embryonic stem-cell research, Cardinal George said "recent startling advances in reprogramming adult cells," along with progress in research using adult and cord-blood stem cells, make any change in current policy "especially pointless."

"To divert scarce funds away from these promising avenues for research and treatment toward the avenue that is most morally controversial as well as most medically speculative would be a sad victory of politics over science," he said.

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