Bringing Facts and Principles to the Health Care Debate

Kathy Saile

Polls show that voters consider health care a central national issue for the upcoming elections. There is growing consensus that the health care system in the United States is broken and needs reform. It serves too few and costs too much. The Catholic bishops of the United States have offered several basic criteria for assuring health care coverage for all that offers a moral framework for discussion in this election year. They include:

- Respect for human life and dignity
- Priority concern for the poor and vulnerable
- Pursuing the common good and preserving pluralism
- Restraining health care costs

This overdue national discussion ought to begin with some basic facts. The fact is nearly one million babies a year do not see their day of their birth as a result of abortion on demand. The fact is 47 million people in the wealthiest and most technologically advanced country in the world lack health care coverage. The fact is that $1 of every $6 spent in the United States is spent on health care. And, the fact is if you live in poverty in the United States your life expectancy is nearly five years shorter than your more affluent neighbors'. As a nation this is not morally right. We can do better.

The bishops' statement *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* stresses that "affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right." Catholic teaching calls on society to respect and protect life from the moment of conception until natural death. All people have a right to health care regardless of where they work, where they come from or how much money they have. Quality health care should be accessible to every person as a part of basic respect for human life and dignity.

As part of how we exercise faithful citizenship, Catholics voters should assess how political candidates' health care positions will bring about effective and affordable health coverage for all and enhance or diminish the level of dignity with which those in need are treated. No one should be left without essential health care. In addition, no national health care proposal should advance or include threats to life, like abortion, euthanasia or assisted suicide.

Health care reform proposals should support preventive health care strategies as well as ways to restrain increasing health care costs. Health care reform should begin with pursuing coverage for all and include a basic standard of care for physical and mental health as well as respect for pluralism in health care delivery, including religious and other non-profit providers of care.

Health care is not just another issue for the Church. It is one way the Church continues Jesus' mission of healing and care for the "least of these" (Mt. 25:40). The Catholic Church provides health care, purchases health care and picks up the pieces of a failing health care system. We serve the sick and uninsured in our emergency rooms, shelters and on the doorsteps of our parishes. One out of six Americans is cared for in Catholic hospitals. We bring strong convictions and everyday experience to the issue of health care. Our faith and this election year require Catholics to join with others in public debate and to share Catholic teaching and experience in the search for effective health care reform.

The Catholic community offers voters a variety of resources to help form consciences as we cast our votes and hold elected officials accountable. The recent bishops' statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, and accompanying resources are available at www.faithfulcitizenship.org. The bishops' *Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform* (www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/COMPCARE.PDF) remains timely and offers useful criteria for reform. The Catholic Health Association (CHA) offers many resources, such as "Our Vision for U.S. Health Care," which is rooted in the teaching of the Church and in the experience of Catholic health care providers throughout the country (www.chausa.org). And, Catholic Charities USA's Campaign to Reduce Poverty offers specific policy recommendations for addressing the health needs of poor people in our communities (www.catholiccharitiesusa.org).

The voices of the Catholic community should be loud and clear in public discussion on health care in this election and beyond. The health care status quo is morally unacceptable. Our nation can and must do better.

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