

September 20, 2009

During Jesus' ministry, He showed compassion and extended healing to those who were sick and infirm. He has entrusted that ministry to the Church. From the earliest days of the Church, the disciples sought to continue Jesus' healing ministry. From the earliest days of our country, religious communities have built hospitals to extend the compassionate care of Jesus to the sick and dying.

The Church has an important contribution to make to the current discussions about health care reform. It is our responsibility to form consciences and to stimulate, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice." In his first encyclical, "God Is Love," Pope Benedict states in no. 27: "The Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically."

The teaching of the Catholic Church concerning health care is rooted in the fundamental issue of human life and dignity. Every person is created in the image and likeness of God and, therefore, possesses inherent and inestimable value. Life and health are gifts from God that are to be respected and nurtured.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Health Association, and Catholic Charities U.S.A. have collaborated very closely in sending a clear message to the White House and to the members of Congress insisting upon policy priorities that reflect Catholic social teaching which is based on the rights and dignity of every human person.

We are concerned that comprehensive health care reform must lead to health care for all, including the weakest and most vulnerable in our society.

Decent health care is not a privilege, but a right and a requirement to protect the life and dignity of every person. Currently, as many of you know firsthand, many families simply lack the resources to meet health care expenses. Thus, any comprehensive plan must assure that premiums and cost-sharing charges do not prevent barriers to obtaining coverage or seeking medical attention.

We are also insisting that the new comprehensive plan not include abortion as a part of a national health care benefit. Neither should it include technologies that similarly fail to uphold the sanctity and dignity of human life. It is morally wrong to compel taxpayers to pay for the destruction of human life.

Further, the plan must not discriminate against individuals or health care systems because they decline to provide, pay for, or provide coverage for or refer others for abortion. Health care reform cannot be a vehicle for those who refuse to respect the freedom of conscience of others.

Health care is a critical component of the ministry of the Catholic Church. The 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 hospitals, shelters, and in our parishes. One out of every six patients is cared for in Catholic hospitals. We bring strong moral and ethical considerations, as well as experience, to the issue of health care.

We Catholic bishops, Catholic Health Association, and Catholic Charities continue to bring our moral convictions and experience to the White House and to our legislators on this critically important issue of comprehensive health care reform. It is also very important for you to be heard as well. Your voice can make a difference in our country adopting health care reform that respects the life and dignity of every person from conception to natural death.