

A Basic Overview of Church Teaching on Health Care

“Christ took away our infirmities and bore our diseases.” -Matthew 8: 16-17

“The health of the human being, of the whole human being, was the sign chosen by Christ to manifest God’s closeness, his merciful love, which heals the mind, the soul and the body. Dear friends, may this always be the fundamental reference of your every initiative: the following of Christ, whom the Gospels present to us as the divine “doctor.” It is this biblical perspective that enhances the natural ethical principle of the duty to care for the sick. Going to the aid of the human being is a duty: both in response to a fundamental right of the person and because the care of individuals redounds to the benefit of the group.”

-Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, March, 2007



Catholic Approach to Health Care & Catholic Social Teaching Principles

Our approach to health care is shaped by a simple but fundamental principle: “Every person has a right to adequate health care. This right flows from the sanctity of human life and the dignity that belongs to all human persons, who are made in the image of God.” Health care is more than a commodity; it is a basic human right, an essential safeguard of human life and dignity. We believe our people’s health care should not depend on where they work, how much their parents earn, or where they live. Our constant teaching that each human life must be protected and human dignity promoted leads us to insist that all people have a right to health care. (Source: USCCB, A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform: Protecting Human Life, Promoting Human Dignity, Pursuing the Common Good)



The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ 2009 call for health reform includes these basic tenets:

1. a truly universal health policy with respect for human life and dignity
2. access for all with a special concern for the poor and inclusion of legal immigrants
3. pursuing the common good and preserving pluralism including freedom of conscience and variety of options
4. restraining costs and applying them equitably across the spectrum of payers

(See the Bishops’ web site on health reform: <http://www.usccb.org/healthcare>)

Timeline

NOTE: Since 1919, the U.S. Catholic Bishops have supported government-supported health care; the present U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops echoes the declarations of popes who have declared we are responsible for the entire community and that health care is a basic human right.

- 1891:** At the beginning of the modern tradition of social teaching, Pope Leo XIII strongly affirms that all human persons have “basic rights,” and declares that the rights of the poor must be “specially cared for, and protected by, national governments.” (from *On the Condition of Labor*)
- 1919:** In their Program of Social Reconstruction, the U.S. Catholic Bishops declares that “The state should make comprehensive provision for insurance against illness, invalidity, unemployment and old age.”
- 1963:** In *Peace on Earth*, Pope John XXIII declared medical care as a human right. “Humans have the right to live. . . the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services.” #11
- 1967:** Pope Paul VI, in *The Development of Peoples*, notes “we are all responsible for each other” and that the development of the poor and our own moral development are interlinked.
- 1986:** The U.S. Catholic Bishops, in *Economic Justice for All*, assert that social and economic policies must place the human person at the center and meet the basic needs of people if workers are to be treated as persons rather than simply a “factor of production.” Among the essential provisions for “the creation of an order that guarantees the minimum conditions of human dignity in the economic sphere for every person,” is affordable and adequate health care. EJA, #103
- 2000:** Pope John Paul II, in an address to the United Nations reaffirms that “Essential food, health care, education and work are fundamental rights of all human beings.”
- 2005:** In an address on human rights, Pope Benedict XVI echoed his predecessors by stating “the Church does not cease to proclaim and defend fundamental human rights, rights to life, food, a home, work, health care . . .”
- 2009:** Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi C.S., the Vatican’s Permanent Observer to the UN, reminded the global community that “access to primary health care everywhere is vital to improving global health. In an increasingly interdependent world, even sickness and viruses have no boundaries.”

In the letter to Congress of July, 2009, Bishop William Murphy, writing for the entire Conference of Bishops as chairman of their Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, said the U.S. bishops have advocated comprehensive health care reform for decades: **“Genuine health care reform that protects the life and dignity of all is a moral imperative and a vital national obligation.”**

Catholic Social Teaching Principles

Jesus Christ modeled the healing ministry that all people of Christian faith are called to support. The central Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles of Respect for Life and Human Dignity challenge us to ensure that all persons have access to the basic health care they need for human flourishing. We are called to have a special Option for the Poor, a growing number in our midst; the September 2009 U.S. census figures indicate the ranks of those considered living at or below the poverty line grew 2.6 million in the last year, for a total of 39.8 million living below the

poverty line, defined as an income of \$22,025 for a family of four. To promote the Common Good, Catholics are called by Church teaching, our recent popes, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to respect the right to health care and support health care reform. Solidarity and community participation demands we take a stand for health care reform. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states (#2211), the “state has a duty” to ensure the “right to medical care.”



From the Catholic Health Association, September, 2009:

“New figures from the U.S. Census Bureau confirm . . . that the middle class is struggling to afford and hold onto health care coverage as wages decline and insurance costs continue to rise. The Bureau's findings affirmed the economic and moral arguments President Obama made [in his recent speech] about our nation's need for good, meaningful health reform. As 46.3 million people went without any health insurance last year, median household income dropped 3.6 percent between 2007 and 2008, creating greater challenges for hard-working families. This explains clearly why the President and many in Congress have been highlighting how middle class families so urgently need reform.”

(See the Catholic Health Association on health reform: www.chausa.org/Pub/MainNav/ourcommitments/Health+Reform/)

Links for Additional Information:

Websites:

- US Bishops Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform:
<http://usccb.org/sdwp/national/comphealth.shtml>
- Catholic Health Care Association :
Core Values For Health Care:
<http://www.catholichealthcare.us>

Letter:

- A Bishop's Letter to Congress:
Read Letter to Congress to Help Reform Health Care, Protect Human Life and Dignity (PDF)
Bishop William Murphy, July 17, 2009
<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/2009-07-17-murphy-letter-congress.pdf>

Videos:

- Video Statement from Sr. Carol Keehan, DC of the CHA, Sr. Carol Keehan, DC discusses the latest census bureau report and President Obama's address to a Joint Session of Congress on health reform. See <http://www.chausa.org/PublicHome.htm>

- One out of three Americans under the age of 65 went without health insurance for some period of time during 2007 and 2008. Of these, four out of five were from working families.
- Sixty four percent of the uninsured are employed full time, year round.

Prayer:

Lord, we pray for your healing. Heal our spiritual and emotional wounds and keep us in good health. Heal us as individuals and as a community as we seek to live out your Word not in fear but in love and compassion.

We ask that you open us to your grace as well as to your teachings and the teachings of your church as we are called to respond to health care reform in our country.

Give strength to our voices as we attempt to speak your truth that all human beings are created in your image and are worthy of care. Give us patience and perseverance in our efforts to participate in the unfolding debate on health care. May our solidarity with all those in need of care be a blessing to this nation. Amen.

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