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Make your voice heard in the health care debate

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

Does thinking about health care reform give you a headache? Are the rhetoric, the cross messages, and the overflow of information—and misinformation—tempting you give in to the pessimistic thought that the sick who are most in need of health care, the poor, the marginalized, the immigrant, don't stand a chance, "as always," in front of powerful financial and political interests? Do you question getting involved at all?

The task seems daunting, but this is not the moment to give up or disconnect. The debate has reached a critical moment when the Catholic voice needs to be heard clearly and strongly.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have spoken with one voice on the principles that should guide the discussion. They have been advocating for decades for the reform of a fragmented health system, one that is currently expensive, filled with inefficiencies and leaves too many people out.

The introduction of several bills in Congress this session (there are several different versions circulating in the House and the Senate as this is being written) acknowledges this reality. This has provided the opportunity to present the Catholic teaching on this issue and, in light of the tensions and complexity of the debate, has made the clear outlining of certain basic moral principles more necessary than ever.

A Catholic in good conscience cannot blindly vow support for one proposal or another without first measuring it against the fundamental principles of subsidiarity, solidarity and the common good.

Following Catholic social teaching, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

1. Supports universal health coverage which protects the life and dignity of all, from conception to natural death, especially those who are poor and vulnerable.
2. Opposes any efforts to expand abortion funding, mandate abortion coverage, or endanger the conscience rights of health care providers and religious institutions.
3. Supports effective measures to safeguard the health of all of society by expanding eligibility for public programs, such as Medicaid, to all low income families and vulnerable people, and by offering adequate subsidies for cost-sharing of insurance premiums and out of pocket expenses. Legal immigrants, and all pregnant women and children, regardless of immigration status, should be included.

The urgency of the matter has seen many bishops present these principles in order to educate the faithful and the public, encourage them to get involved, and also ensure they are aware of the dangers, subterfuges and subtleties hidden in the different proposals.

Locally each bishop has put emphasis in that which concerns him the most but, in the end, the message is always the same: it is urgent to reform the U.S. health system, but don't do it at the expense of the poor, the children in their mother's womb, or the consciences of doctors, nurses and other health workers. We can do better than this.

There are different ways to achieve access for all. We can debate and compromise on the proper role of government.

Let us find solutions where all the stakeholders can play a role and do it according to their religious convictions.

Let us stop the noise and the finger-pointing and turn to the issue at hand: the *health of the nation*. As one of our veteran Hispanic bishops, Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, New Mexico, put it recently, "in our public discourse, let us not allow anger to suffocate wisdom, nor let slogans replace solutions."

If there is a country where the means exist to remedy the health care crisis, it is this one. But, is there a will? Solidarity and the common good come at a price.