

Catholic Conference of Kentucky
Health Care Summit – Closing Comments
Bishop Ronald Gainer, Diocese of Lexington
November 4, 2009

Bob Castagna's letter inviting you to participate in today's conversation promised an "inside the beltway" perspective on national health care reform. I hope you agree that our presenters delivered that and more. In the name of the Kentucky bishops, I thank our "insiders" Michael Rodgers and John Carr for their very helpful contributions. Special thanks also to the members of our panel: Marie Alagia Cull, Mary Haynes, Father Pat Delahanty and Bob Castagna for their enlightening responses. I also want to thank Ben Wiederholt and all the members of the CCK Health Care Committee for their hard work in preparing today's program. Karen Chambers, Father Pat Delahanty and Bob Castagna, we are all grateful to you for the gathering so informative and flow so well.

I don't have an "inside the beltway" perspective but - I suspect - that more than anyone else in the room I have the freshest "inside the health care system" perspective – the view from the hospital bed, having been discharged from the hospital after surgery just a week ago today.

Just like you, I am among the fortunate for whom the highest quality of health care is exceedingly accessible and practically affordable - even at my pay grade. Creating reform that will give that same advantage to all in our country and protect the life and dignity of all people from the moment of conception until natural death is the desired outcome of the health care reform debate currently engaging our friends on Capitol Hill.

Catholic Health Care providers have an essential role to play in this public policy process. The Church has always sought to embody our Savior's concern for the sick. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry draw special attention to His acts of healing and those compassionate acts on the part of our Lord provide the foundation upon which Catholic Health Care ministries have been built.

Today, even as we gather here, elected leaders of our nation are formulating dramatic changes in our nation's health policies. Their efforts and proposals thus far – to the degree that we can understand them - appear disappointing and do not

seem to meet the fundamental moral tests that Catholic moral theology must apply to any genuine reform. The much needed health care reform must maintain the long-standing federal protections that restrict abortion funding and mandates, must articulate clear protections for the freedom of conscience for both institutional and individual health care providers and must not be anti-immigrant.

The American health care system stands today as an oxymoron. It is neither focused on health but on sickness and it is not a system but rather it is fragmented into proprietary components. Our health care system is in urgent need of reform to conserve resources, to provide affordable needed health care, to correct the injustices of access for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized, and to protect the sanctity of life in all its stages. Health reform is an urgent priority on our public agenda. But reform without moral and ethical foundations is not acceptable. We as Catholics and as Catholic health professional cannot, must not and will not lend our support to any misguided efforts that contradict binding moral truths.

The Church has a long history of advocacy for morally proper health care reform. Our commitment and involvement is based upon the fact that health care is not a privilege but rather a fundamental human right and a moral obligation for a civil society – “...what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (Matt. 25:45).

The animated debate over reform is often reduced to a contest of conflicting rights: the right to life of the unborn versus the right of the woman over her own body and wellbeing; the right of the patient to the full spectrum of medical procedures versus the right of the provider to follow principles of conscience. But any discussion of rights cannot be effective apart from a clear understanding and articulation of the duties that correspond to those rights. This is a point well formulated by Pope Benedict XVI in his third encyclical entitled, *Caritas in Veritate - Love in Truth* - which was promulgated this past June. The Holy Father teaches:

“ ... it is important to call for a renewed reflection on how *rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere license*. Nowadays we are witnessing a grave inconsistency. On the one hand, appeals are made to alleged rights, arbitrary and non-essential in nature, accompanied by the demand that they be recognized and promoted by public structures, while, on the other hand, elementary and basic rights remain unacknowledged and are violated in much of the world[107]. A link has often been noted between claims to a “right to excess”, and even to

transgression and vice, within affluent societies, and the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary health care in areas of the underdeveloped world and on the outskirts of large metropolitan centers. The link consists in this: individual rights, when detached from a framework of duties which grants them their full meaning, can run wild, leading to an escalation of demands which is effectively unlimited and indiscriminate. An overemphasis on rights leads to a disregard for duties. Duties set a limit on rights because they point to the anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part, in this way ensuring that they do not become license. Duties thereby reinforce rights and call for their defense and promotion as a task to be undertaken in the service of the common good (n. 43).

Last week, in exercising our duty as moral teachers, my brother Bishops and I sent a letter through the Catholic Conference of Kentucky to all our parishes calling them to action at this critical moment in the national health care debate. In union with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, we asked these leaders to mobilize parishioners to fervent prayer and to action as faithful citizens.

The message was succinct – contact your Senators and Representatives. Tell them that the current legislative proposals do not meet the fundamental moral tests that protect life, do not safeguard the conscience of health care providers, do not assure the prohibitions against expanding abortion with public funding or insurance mandates, and do not provide access for all with a special concern for the poor and immigrants.

In the current public debate over health care reform, we have already witnessed intense acrimony, contradictory assertions of facts, and posturing shifts based not on principles but on political advantage. These unfortunate characteristics only serve to underscore the serious duties that we, as faithful citizens, have at this particular time in our nation's political process. The founders of Catholic health care institutions, mostly women religious, had a definite understanding of their duties for the health of society and met that responsibility with well formed consciences. It is incumbent on us, the benefactors of their vision and mission to do no less than they did – to be the advocates, the proponents, and the visible presence of the moral pathway for health care reform.

The Catholic faithful and the Catholic health professionals must join with the bishops in a unified stance regarding this current legislative effort at health care reform. Catholic health care institutions have a unique role and opportunity to leverage their influence for a proper and moral outcome. We must be unified in acknowledging that health reform is badly needed. But badly configured and immoral health care is not and cannot be mistaken for genuine health care reform.

The founders of Catholic health care deserve our unity of purpose, our fidelity to their mission, vision and Catholic values. In our unified stance on the moral principles of life, conscience, and justice, we honor the work of our heroic predecessors and we continue their rich legacy for the future. As both Mike Rodgers and John Carr told us, the President has committed that health care reform will contain no federal funding for abortion and will include the necessary conscience protections. We have the opportunity and the obligation to assure that the final legislation is true to President Obama's public commitment.

Since our nation's earliest years, the Catholic Church has worked with American civil authorities in many mutually supportive ways to advance what Thomas Jefferson called "the wholesome purposes of society" (C. Chaput, "Catholic Charities Adrift", First Things: November 2009, p. 25).

We, the Bishops, and you, the Catholic health professionals of Kentucky, and your colleagues across the country hold privileged places in society; we cannot remain passive bystanders at this decisive moment in our history. Responding to the call of the Gospel includes our faithful action. Today we have received reliable information, additional resources and suggested strategies for action. Pray fervently, make your voices heard, mobilize your organizations, and redouble your efforts that Congress will act to ensure that the needed health care reform will prevail through their debate and legislative votes. Authentic reform and that reform alone will truly protect the life, dignity and health care of all persons in our nation.