

Bishops defend opposition to health care reform

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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BALTIMORE (RNS) The outgoing head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops vigorously defended the bishops' opposition to the health care reform bill, asserting that only bishops can speak for the church on matters of faith and morals.

"All the rest is opinion," Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said on Monday (Nov. 15), "often well-considered and important opinion that deserves a careful and respectful hearing, but still opinion."

George's three-year presidential term ends Tuesday, when the bishops will elect his successor.

George and nearly 300 other U.S. bishops are meeting here through Thursday for their annual fall assembly. In his farewell address, George touched on several highlights of his term, including Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 visit to New York and Washington, and President Obama's election as the nation's first black president.

But George acknowledged he has presided over a deeply divided church, which has challenged the bishops "to keep the Catholic people united visibly around Christ in his body, the church."

George devoted the bulk of his address to rehashing the health care

debate, lamenting the "wound to the church's unity" as umbrella groups of Catholic hospitals and nuns broke rank with the hierarchy to support the bill.

The cardinal, however, asserted that developments since the bill's passage in March "have settled the empirical issue" that it expands federal funding for elective abortions.

"Our analysis of what the law itself says was correct and our moral judgments are secure," the cardinal said without elaborating on which developments had settled the debate.

The Obama administration, health care experts, and lay Catholics have contested George's claim. A press conference that was to include George after his address was abruptly canceled.

Chris Korzen, executive director of the progressive political group Catholics United, said anti-abortion groups and the bishops continue to assert that the bill funds elective abortion, but have not been able to produce any examples.

"Until they do so, their accusations ring hollow," Korzen said.

Supporters say the legislation and a related executive order signed by Obama maintain federal prohibitions on funding abortion except in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the mother's life -- restrictions that have been in place since 1976.

But only bishops can speak for the church on matter of faith, morals, "and the laws surrounding them," George said, even as they "have

no illusions about our speaking for everyone who considers himself Catholic,"

Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobby based in Washington that supported the health care bill, agreed bishops are the church's chief spokesmen on faith and morals, but said it is the role of lay people to apply Catholic teachings.

Campbell, who said she's tried unsuccessfully to meet with bishops about the health law, said the bill is "being carefully implemented to ensure there will be no federal funding for abortion."

"It breaks my heart that we cannot put our energy into having a real conversation about applying our Catholic faith, which is so deep a part of our lives -- as well as of the bishops' -- to practical reality," said Campbell, who's also an attorney.

George, too, lamented the deep divisions that emerged among Catholics during the argument over health care reform, even as he insisted the bishops were correct.

"We need to be deeply concerned ... about the wound to the church's unity that has been inflicted in this debate, and I hope, trusting in the good will of all concerned, that means can be found to restore the seamless garment of ecclesial communion."

While the tensions among Catholics are "acute," they are not necessarily novel, George said, calling on bishops to "strive to keep everyone together in Christ with the authority given us by him."