



# Catholic Social Thought and Health Care

Catholic discussion of health care begins with the Catholic teaching that health care is a basic human right. As the U.S. Bishops recently explained, “The first right of the human person, the right to life, entails a right to the means for the proper development of life, such as adequate health care.”<sup>1</sup> The key enunciation of this right was made in 1963 when Blessed Pope John XXIII articulated human rights that are “universal and inviolable, and therefore altogether inalienable.”<sup>2</sup> This right is contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Bishops explained its foundations as follows:

*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. It implies that access to health care which is necessary and suitable for the proper development and maintenance of life must be provided for all people, regardless of economic, social and legal status. Special attention should be given to meeting the basic health care needs of the poor.*<sup>4</sup>

The basic right, then, is derived from human life and dignity.

In 1981, to protect and promote this right, the U.S. Bishops called for a national health insurance program:

*Following on these principles and on our belief in health care as a basic right, we call for the development of a national health insurance program. It is the responsibility of the federal government to establish a comprehensive health care system that will ensure a basic level of health care for all Americans. The federal government should also ensure adequate funding for this basic level of care through a national health insurance program.*<sup>5</sup>

Articulating governmental responsibility for the right to health care was consistent with increasing recognition in Catholic social teaching of government’s responsibility to ensure the common good—including individual human rights—and awareness that Catholic social teaching emphasizes both individual conscience and political, legal, and economic systems and structures.<sup>6</sup> This proclamation by the bishops echoed an earlier call for comprehensive health insurance in 1919 as part of their proposals for recovery from World War I.<sup>7</sup>

Recent Catholic calls for health care reform have included fundamental values that reflect the dignity of the human person, protect basic human rights, and respond to the unique claims of those who are poor and vulnerable. As the debate over health care reform intensified in the 1990s, when 32 to 34 million Americans were without health coverage, the U.S. Bishops framed eight key criteria and commended them to the nation’s

leaders: (1) respect for life; (2) priority concern for the poor; (3) universal access; (4) comprehensive benefits; (5) pluralism (meaning the participation with government and business of voluntary, religious, and nonprofit providers of health care and services and respect for religious and ethical standards in care delivery); (6) quality; (7) cost containment and controls; and (8) equitable financing.<sup>8</sup>

In November 2007, in preparation for the upcoming elections, the U.S. Bishops again addressed health care:

*Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. With an estimated 47 million Americans lacking health care coverage, it is also an urgent national priority. Reform of the nation’s health care system needs to be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, and meet the needs of the poor and uninsured, especially born and unborn children, pregnant women, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations. Religious groups should be able to provide health care without compromising their religious convictions.*<sup>9</sup>

In the debate over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, passed by Congress in 2010, these values undergirded Catholic advocacy about the contours of reform and continue to shape the debate over implementation.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Facilities*, 5th Edition, 2009, p. 10.
- 2 Blessed Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, no. 11.
- 3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana– United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), no. 2211.
- 4 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Health and Health Care*, 1981, no. 57.
- 5 *Ibid.*, no. 63.
- 6 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986, no. 259.
- 7 Administrative Committee of the National Catholic War Council, *Program of Social Reconstruction*, 1919, no. 25.
- 8 A Resolution of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, *A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform: Protecting Human Life, Promoting Human Dignity, Pursuing the Common Good*, 1993.
- 9 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, November 2007, No. 80.