

# Cardinal DiNardo backs bill to ensure conscience rights in health plan choices

WASHINGTON - Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston urged members of the House April 6 to support legislation that would guarantee the rights of Americans to buy health insurance “that meets their medical needs and respects their deepest convictions.”

The cardinal, chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Pro-Life Activities, said the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act of 2011, H.R. 1179, “will help ensure that the new health reform act is not misused to violate the religious freedom and rights of conscience of those who offer and purchase health insurance coverage in our nation.”

The legislation, introduced March 17 by Reps. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., and Dan Boren, D-Okla., would “restore the legal status quo” by allowing health insurance plans to exclude “specific procedures that violate the moral or religious convictions of those providing or purchasing the plan,” Cardinal DiNardo wrote.

He cited abortions and abortion-causing drugs, in vitro fertilization treatments and “treatments using material from deliberately killed unborn children” as among the “procedures specifically rejected by the teachings of some religions.”

Passage of the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act would ensure that health insurance plans “shall not be considered as failing to provide ‘essential health benefits’” under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act if they exclude those procedures, he added.

Cardinal DiNardo noted that the health reform legislation “does respect religious freedom in some contexts,” explicitly exempting the Amish and other religious sects “that decline participation in social health programs generally” and allowing some Christian Scientists to choose prayer as their sole form of healing.

“However, it arbitrarily and inexplicably does not protect the many religious denominations – including those providing the backbone of the nonprofit health care system in this country – whose moral teaching rejects specific procedures,” he said.

“If religious and other stakeholders are driven out of the health insurance marketplace by this aspect of PPACA, legislation whose purpose was to expand health coverage could have the opposite effect,” he added.

Calling the proposal “modest and well-crafted legislation,” Cardinal DiNardo said it “does not reverse or alter any requirement under current state or federal law” but rather prevents the health reform law “from being misused to deny Americans’ existing freedom to seek health care coverage” that does not violate their consciences.

“I am sure that most members of Congress voting for PPACA did not intend that it should deny or take away this freedom,” he added.