

Rhode Island bishop criticizes Catholic congressman's abortion stance

PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Providence Bishop Thomas J. Tobin asked U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., if as a Catholic, he really understands what it means "to be a Catholic."

He questioned if Kennedy could really describe himself as Catholic since his stance on abortion was "unacceptable to the church" and "scandalous to many of our members."

Bishop Tobin made the comments in his "Without a Doubt" column in the Nov. 12 issue of The Rhode Island Catholic, his diocesan newspaper.

He was responding to an Oct. 29 letter Kennedy sent to the bishop in which he stated: "The fact that I disagree with the hierarchy of the church on some issues does not make me any less of a Catholic."

"Well, in fact, Congressman, in a way it does," the bishop wrote. "Although I wouldn't choose those particular words, when someone rejects the teachings of the church, especially on a grave matter, a life-and-death issue like abortion, it certainly does diminish their ecclesial communion, their unity with the church."

The principle is based on Scripture and the church's tradition and has been made more explicit in many documents, the bishop wrote.

The exchange of comments between Bishop Tobin and Kennedy began when Kennedy criticized the U.S. bishops in October for threatening to oppose health care reform unless the legislation banned the use of federal funds to cover abortion. In an interview, Kennedy said their stance was "fanning the flames of dissent and discord."

Bishop Tobin asked for an apology from Kennedy and requested a meeting, which

was eventually scheduled for Nov. 12. But the meeting has been postponed and a Nov. 10 press release from the Providence Diocese said: "Bishop Tobin remains hopeful he can meet with Congressman Kennedy in a personal and pastoral setting in the very near future."

Late on Nov. 7 House members voted to include strict language prohibiting funding for most abortions in the Affordable Health Care for America Act. They passed the full measure in a 220-215 vote, moving the legislation on to the Senate, which was expected to take up debate on its own health care bill later in November.

Kennedy voted in favor of the overall proposal but against the abortion amendment.

In his column, which he wrote as an open letter to Kennedy, Bishop Tobin said that since their correspondence on the abortion issue and health care reform had been made public, he decided to share a few reflections about Kennedy's faith publicly.

He said he was not sure if Kennedy fulfills "the basic requirements of being a Catholic," saying that Catholicism involves much more than being baptized into the faith, family ties or cultural heritage. He also called Kennedy's "rejection of the church's teaching on abortion ... a deliberate and obstinate act of the will" and something which "absolutely diminishes your communion with the church."

Bishop Tobin invited Kennedy "to enter into a sincere process of discernment, conversion and repentance," and said he would be honored to assist Kennedy in any way he can as the congressman "travels the road of faith."

The Providence Journal daily newspaper reported that Kennedy refused to respond in detail to the bishop's comments when asked about them during a Nov. 10 press conference on health reform, except to say he found it "very disconcerting" that the bishop would not keep a discussion of his faith private.

Kennedy also said he has sought the sacraments of reconciliation and Communion from his pastor, whom he would not name. When asked if he had been threatened with denial of Communion or other sanctions, he said he would discuss this with the bishop and "and ideally, hopefully, we will keep it between us."