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A promise was made; now it needs to be kept

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Eight weeks ago President Obama promised a joint session of Congress that "his" health-care plan would not include or provide public monies for abortion. This seemed persuasive because it made sense. As polling has shown, most Americans do not want abortion or its funding included in any publicly supported health plan.

The president's support for a federal "right" to abortion is a matter of record. Like it or not, voters can assume that he'll appoint judges who share that view. Therefore, the main concern of his "pro-choice" constituency is safe under his leadership. This is bad news for the rest of us, but it does give the White House room to compromise. Excluding abortion funding from the president's health-care efforts - I mean *really* excluding it and not sneaking it in under the cover of some bureaucratic shell game-would be an easy concession for Congress and the White House to make. It's a modest price to pay for Catholic and similar pro-life support, or at least their neutrality. It might also put some meat on the bones of Washington's talk about "common ground."

Eight weeks later, there is no "president's" plan. Instead, as of Nov. 1, Congress has produced five different proposals, including a merged House version totaling nearly 2,000 pages of complex and sweeping legislation. Few citizens have actually read the text. Even fewer really understand its implications. But all of the proposals have one thing in common: *Not one of them lives up to the president's promise.*

Let's remember that America's Catholic bishops have pushed for national health-care reform for decades, long before our mass media discovered it as a theme. The Church regards access to basic health- care services as a right, not a privilege. But to be legitimate, reform efforts need to respect the dignity of the *whole* human person from conception to natural death. That includes the unborn child, the immigrant and the elderly. Genuine reform also demands strong protections for the conscience rights of medical professionals and institutions. And it also requires that our ideals rest on a foundation of sound reasoning. In other words, real reform must be economically realistic and financially sustainable.

Since August, the U.S. bishops and their staff have worked tirelessly with members of Congress and the White House staff, trying to craft mutually acceptable health-care legislation. The Church in the United States *wants* to find the common ground that would enable Catholics to support Congress and the White House in ensuring access to basic health services for all our people. But every effort by concerned members of Congress to ensure morally acceptable legislation-despite the outstanding leadership of Democratic Rep. Bart Stupak-has been rebuffed, often with the kind of political doubletalk that seems deliberately designed to confuse.

Here's the result. On Oct. 28, Chicago's Cardinal Francis George and other leaders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) announced that all efforts to adequately revise current health-care proposals have failed. In other words, *not one* of the current legislative proposals offers legitimate "common ground" on the issues vital to Catholics. And to date, despite the president's original promise, the White House has done nothing to fix that problem.

To put it bluntly: *all* of the health-care reform solutions currently facing Congress violate human dignity in potentially grievous ways. Unless these proposals are immediately changed to reflect the concerns of Congressman Stupak, other like-minded members of Congress, and leaders of the national

Catholic community, Catholics *need to vigorously oppose and help defeat this dangerous legislation.*

Bishop Conley and I will speak directly to the people of the archdiocese on this urgent matter through a letter read at all Masses in all parishes this weekend, Nov. 7-8. Materials will be made available to all parishes outlining the vital issues that remain in the health-care reform debate, and urging parishioners to immediately contact their federal representatives.

The health-care reform debate has been dogged by a pattern of misleading, complex and at times flatly dishonest claims in Congress about the content of the 2,000-page legislation now taking final shape and nearing a vote. Don't be fooled. Contact your senators and representative. Demand that current health-care proposals be changed to respect Catholic and pro-life concerns. And equally important for all of us: *We need to do it now.*

ACTION ALERT:

Vital background information on the current health-care debate can found at www.usccb.org/healthcare and www.archden.org.

Contact information for federal lawmakers can be found at www.nchla.org or www.usccb.org/action.

To send a pre-written, instant e-mail message to Congress go to www.usccb.org/action.