

ANTI-CATHOLICISM SURFACES IN BATTLE OVER D.C. HEALTH CARE BILL

On July 11, the Washington, D.C. Council passed a bill mandating health insurance coverage of contraceptives without a provision exempting Catholic hospitals and employers on religious grounds. The bill would mandate that Catholic institutions based in Washington such as the United States Catholic Conference, the Catholic University of America and Catholic parishes provide contraceptive coverage to employees. If this wasn't bad enough, the debate over the bill witnessed a flurry of anti-Catholic remarks

During debate on the bill, which passed 13-0, council member Jim Graham called the Catholic Church homophobic and urged his colleagues against "deferring to Rome" according to the Washington Post. Auxiliary Bishop William Lori of the Washington Archdiocese was quick to challenge both the substance of the bill and Graham's bigoted remark. So was the Catholic League. The following was our initial statement on this subject as released to the media:

"Auxiliary Bishop William Lori is absolutely right when he says this is 'evidence of anti-Catholic bigotry of the unreconstructed kind.' We are calling on the D.C Council to reconsider the bill. This is a blatant example of the state imposing its will on religion. The American Medical Association recently refused to compel Catholic hospitals to provide certain contraceptive and reproductive procedures. Even the plan covering federal employees contains a 'conscience clause.' We are not interested in imposing Catholic views on public health care. We would appreciate the same consideration. If the council does not reconsider, we will appeal to Congress to exercise its oversight of council

action.

"We are also calling for the censure and resignation of councilman Jim Graham. A public office holder cannot betray the public trust. The language he used out-Joneses Bob Jones University. To those in Washington outraged about Bob Jones, we await your furor in this matter. Councilman Graham crossed from speech into action. This should concern all members of Congress."

We were pleased that our involvement jarred some members of the D.C. Council by forcing them to reconsider the wisdom of the bill. We were even happier to learn that Rep. Ernest Istook, who chairs the D.C. Appropriations subcommittee, quickly tackled this issue by pledging to block the bill unless a "conscience clause" was included that protected Catholic institutions. As for Graham, he responded to the league's initiative by writing directly to William Donohue.

Graham asked Donohue to "share my concern about the disparaging remarks made by the Pope" during the recent World Gay Pride event in Rome. Though he was not specific, in an op-ed article in the Washington Post, Graham wrote, "the pope attacked gays as 'disordered,' saying that homosexual acts are 'contrary to natural law.'"

Not satisfied to leave it at that, Graham then baited Donohue by saying, "as an organization committed to 'civil rights,' I hope the Catholic League cares at least to some extent about the rights and welfare of gay people...." He then said of the pope's remarks, "I shudder to think of the number of gay people worldwide who will be injured and discriminated against due to these comments."

Donohue's rejoinder was shared with the press:

"Jim Graham keeps digging himself in deeper. First he shows utter contempt for diversity by backing an attempt to ram a health care plan down the throats of Catholics, then he whips

up classic anti-Catholic fears by urging his colleagues in the D.C. Council not to '[defer] to Rome,' and now he intentionally misrepresents what the pope has said so he can bait the Catholic League into joining him in his Catholic-bashing campaign."

Graham never did tell the truth about what the pope actually said. So in response, Donohue offered: "At the close of the typically vulgar gay pride parade in Rome, the pope simply quoted from the Catholic Catechism what has been a long standing teaching of the Church regarding homosexuality. The pope did not attack gays as 'disordered,' rather he said the homosexual 'inclination' is disordered, a position that is consistent with the teaching that homosexual acts are 'contrary to the natural law.' The pope then said that homosexuals 'must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity.'"

Donohue then concluded his statement by saying, "One more thing: if Graham is really concerned about injury to gays, he ought to admonish them to practice sexual restraint. It saves lives better than any condom ever will." After we faxed this to Graham's office, a staffer in his office said Graham would be responding to Donohue's remarks. He never did.

As things evolved, Washington Mayor Anthony Williams said he would refuse to sign a bill that would penalize Catholic institutions. However, Rep. Istook wasn't going to take any chances: he said that a veto wouldn't be necessary because House members would never allow such a bill to become law in the first place. As it turned out, the D.C. Council, fearing that the House would hold up the district's budget, agreed to revisit the legislation in September.

Just when everyone thought that there would be no more to say about this bill until the fall, Congressman James P. Moran of Virginia jumped on the anti-Catholic bandwagon himself.

On July 26, Moran lashed out at the Catholic Church for its position on homosexuality. Moran was angry that House Republicans placed an attachment to the District budget bill that would nullify the controversial health care bill. In offering support for councilman Graham's objections to the Republican initiative, Moran spoke of his "disappointment, and the intolerance, and yes, the hypocrisy of the Catholic church as an institution towards homosexuality..."

To make matters worse, an aide to Rep. Moran deleted the anti-Catholic words of his boss in the Congressional Record. Moran was told to restore the original language and was informed by Rep. Bill Thomas, chairman of the Committee on House Administration, that he had violated ethics rules, which prohibit such alterations.

In a statement to the media, Donohue commented that "The fact that a bill which the Catholic Church objects to cannot be debated without resorting to anti-Catholicism is indicative of the depth of this invidious form of bigotry." Donohue called on colleagues of Moran and Graham to go on record denouncing their bigotry. Also registering objections to Moran's remarks were Bishop Paul S. Loverde of Arlington and Auxiliary Bishop Lori.

Finally, Donohue had it out with Frances Kissling in the pages of the Washington Times over this issue. Graham had leaned on a dubious report by Catholics for a Free Choice to justify his position and Donohue snapped back arguing that the organization was "one of the nation's most notoriously anti-Catholic organizations." Kissling defended herself in her usual enfeebled way.

The issue not only shows the prevalence of anti-Catholicism in government, it shows what can be done to defeat bigoted legislation if Catholics stand up to the bigots.