

TIME IS RIPE FOR CONSCIENCE RIGHTS

Although the health care bill in the House is better than the one in the Senate on the issue of federal funds for abortion, neither adequately provides protection for the conscience rights of health care workers. It is important to recognize that one of the issues which hurt Martha Coakley in her run for the Massachusetts Senate seat was her adamant rejection of conscience rights: she effectively told Catholic doctors and nurses that they either perform abortions or look for another job. This didn't go over big with Catholics, as well as many others in the Bay State.

At Notre Dame, President Obama declared that he fully supports conscience rights for health care workers. But there is no evidence that he is working to secure these rights in either the House or Senate bill. Even when he invoked the name of Rev. Martin Luther King in January while pushing for health care reform, he never cited what King had to say about conscience rights.

King strongly believed that "an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law." King's plea, which is an application of Catholic teaching on natural rights, needs to be heeded by Obama and the Congress. Rather than forcing Catholic health care workers to break the law—which they most certainly will do, if pushed—it would be more prudent to guarantee their conscience rights in these bills.

King understood how important these rights are. It's time those who lean on his legacy adopted them as well.