

We start and end with articles on the healthcare debate. Terry Mattingly directs the Washington Journalism Center at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

Religion: Catholic Bishops face health care dilemmas

By TERRY MATTINGLY, Scripps Howard News Service, July 29

In Catholic debates, it always helps to be able to quote the official Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Consider, for example, this reference to health care in its chapter on the biblical instruction, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God," notes the catechism. "Concern for the health of its citizens requires that society help in the attainment of living-conditions that allow them to grow and reach maturity: food and clothing, housing, health care, basic education, employment and social assistance."

The implication is that governments -- as a matter of social justice -- should help citizens obtain basic health care, according to a letter sent to Congress and the White House by the Domestic Justice and Human Development Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Health care is a human right, not a privilege, argued Bishop William F. Murphy. "All people need and should have access to comprehensive, quality health care that they can afford, and it should not depend on their stage of life, where or whether they or their parents work, how much they earn, where they live, or where they were born," wrote Murphy.

But there's a problem. The letter stresses that the church will support accessible, affordable, universal health-care reform if it "protects and respects the life and dignity of all people from conception until natural death."

Try telling that to Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sibelius, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, surgeon general nominee Regina Benjamin, Vice President Joe Biden and other Catholics who play strategic roles in Washington, D.C., right now -- while rejecting Catholic teachings on many critical health-care issues.

That's the political reality that the bishops are facing, said Leonard J. Nelson, a health-care law specialist at the Cumberland School of Law at Samford University.

For the bishops, Catholic teachings on the sanctity of human life are crystal clear, from birth to death, from abortion to euthanasia. Yet the bishops also support health-care for all -- rich and poor. It's getting harder to keep these issues woven together.

"The bishops have been talking about social justice and health care for years and years and now the political climate has changed around them," said Nelson, author of a new book, "Diagnosis Critical: The Urgent Threats Confronting Catholic Health Care."

"The politicians who are in command are ready to pass some kind of health-care reform and they have all kinds of reasons to include abortion in that package. ... That's the fix that the bishops are in."

Meanwhile, he said, leaders of Catholic hospitals and health-care systems will almost certainly face challenges in the near future.

For starters, they could be pressured to join networks and cooperatives that have no reason to follow the bioethical guidelines detailed in the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" adopted by the U.S. Catholic bishops. It will be hard for Catholic leaders to cooperate with government approved health-care programs and receive government funds while declining to offer services such as contraception, sterilizations and referrals for abortions.

Catholic leaders also know that another life-and-death issue looms in the background. As President Barack Obama noted in a recent New York Times interview, it's impossible to cut or control costs without government efforts to shape health care in the final years of life.

"That's where I think you just get into some very difficult moral issues," said Obama. "But that's also a huge driver of cost, right? I mean, the chronically ill and those toward the end of their lives are accounting for potentially 80 percent of the total health care bill out here."

The Catholic bishops, noted Nelson, have not addressed these end-of-life scenarios -- yet. Will government agencies or advisory boards be given the power to decide whether patients facing Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease receive expensive medications? Who will decide whether elderly patients have a high enough "quality of life" to continue receiving medical care?

"Productive people in the middle years of life are always going to get the health care they need," said Nelson. "The big threats to the sanctity of life come at the very beginning and at the end. If you're going to defend the church's teachings on health care, you have to focus on those threats. The bishops have to find a way to do that."

I am grateful to Sal for hosting, and forwarding, an informative string of discussions on Marcus Borg's book, *Jesus*. Bob contributed the following insight.

... Jesus lived and died in a world awash with competing deities. When he was executed as a criminal, his followers either had to go back to fishing or they had to lay out a convincing case that this ignominious end made no never mind. To do that they had to emphasize in whatever ways they could his divine credentials: born of the Holy Spirit to a virgin, proclaimed from a cloud as God's own son, defeating Satan in the desert, walking on water, feeding thousands from scant provisions, healing others and even raising them from the dead, and finally himself rising from the dead. These are his *bona fides*. Our Jesus/Christ/God is alive and well and, indeed, better than your gods. In the divinity sweepstakes, a smart player would place their bets on him.

Scripture then and now has become the evidence pool *par excellence* for doing two things: 1) bringing into increasing clarity and intellectual acceptability Jesus' divine credentials, and 2) solidifying the Catholic Church's credibility as the divinely appointed certifier of all things revealed by God to us humans. This, of course, depends on how one understands scriptural revelation.

Is Scripture about proving that Jesus is divine? That certainly is the way that the Early Church and the Christian churches over the centuries have explained it. No matter your position on the ecclesiastical scales from far right to far left it all comes down to "our god is better than your god," and our understanding of God's revelation in Christ is better than yours. Catholic Scripture scholars are a strong bulwark, both offensively and defensively, in this fight over Christ, the Son of God. They accept as givens that 1) Scripture is divine revelation, 2) Scripture is all about proving that Jesus is the Christ, 3) Scripture irrevocably links Christ with the Catholic Church, and 4) on the basis of Scripture, the Catholic Church is *the* final interpreter of God's revealed interaction with the human race.

Although I fully understand this position and how it came about, I do not accept it. Why? because it simply does not fit my experience as being a follower of Christ. And therein lies the rub: the orthodox Christian position maintains that being a Christian means believing in Jesus and accepting what the Church holds about Jesus. As my years move inexorably by, I realize that I do not "believe in Jesus," nor do I look to some Jesus credentials' panel to get me to understand and accept what it says is the truth "about Jesus." For me, being a Christian is "to believe Jesus" rather than "to believe in Jesus." Moreover, I "follow Jesus" rather than buy into what other certifiers and credential checkers tell me I must accept/believe/obey.

Underpinning my position lies a very different idea of what divine revelation as embodied in Scripture is all about. For me, Scripture is not about Jesus nor is it about illuminating Jesus' divine credentials; it is, instead, about us and our divine credentials. Before the flags of heresy rise into furious flutter, let me explain.

The human race, and, indeed, all creation comes from God. All things are destined, living in and through and by God's life, to grow more and more into the final fruition of divine patrimony. In order for this to happen, however, this takes a terrible lot of divine assistance over the span of untold millennia. The possibilities for falling off the track are constant and almost inevitable. Jesus, a Jewish mystic, rises up out of this human journey as someone who "got God," someone who saw clearly what it is for God's creation, including us humans, to move inexorably toward God. Looking around, he saw all of the pitfalls of human suffering and mortality, selfishness and fear: it would be awfully easy to despair and to give up the journey. So he told us over and over again how sin and death don't hold all the cards; indeed, against all the odds, Life will win the race, not Death. How? Because God is with us. How? Because I know how to run the race and I am giving you the way to do it so that you will win? How? Because as you run, you do not run alone: I am right there with you. Live as I do: that is the way to win. Follow me. I don't give a whit whether you believe that I am God. I don't need your belief: I am who I am. But I care terribly that you move day by day toward God. Here's how. And I'm helping.

In the end, I do not care whether Jesus has or does not have divine credentials. That is why I am unattached to the activities of Catholic Scripture scholars. Nor do I need any

ecclesiastical assurances that I am right and that I am believing rightly. I will Live, I will Love; that is more than enough.

Is the provision for the traditional version of the Latin mass a harmless concession? Ted Rosean considers the issue in *U.S. Catholic* magazine. He is a securities broker from St. Francis Xavier Parish in Wilmette, Illinois.

Two rites make a wrong

July 15, 2009

We are one church and we need just one Mass, this Catholic argues - even if that one Mass is celebrated in any number of languages.

At one end of the archdiocese where I live, a Mass is held in a gymnasium every Sunday, and a group of lively folk musicians accompany the assembly through a relaxed and informal liturgy. The mood reflects the music. Because it's a gym, children seem to act less restrained, feeling free to roam a bit. Folding chairs are set up in a semi-circle around a portable altar that this group has used for many years.

There are no kneelers, of course, reflecting to some extent the impracticality of portable kneelers, but reflecting to a greater extent the theology of those gathered: These are "looking up to God in trust, not bowing down to God in fear" Catholics, nurturing a view of church and theology that was born at the Second Vatican Council.

I know many of these Catholics and consider them to be very good people. Their liturgy is, I believe, a scandal.

At the other end of the archdiocese, a priest adorned in shimmering vestments murmurs prayers in Latin, facing the tabernacle, his voice barely audible to the assembly of worshipers kneeling behind him. Many of these are silently and privately praying the rosary. At certain moments there is an exchange of words between the priest and the assembly. These words are in Latin.

The atmosphere is reverent, reflecting to some extent the mood naturally created by silence, candles, and Latin, but reflecting to a greater extent the theology of those gathered: These are "kneeling before God in awe, not back-slapping brother Jesus" Catholics, preserving a view of church and theology set aside at the Second Vatican Council.

I know one of the people in the assembly to be one of the finest human beings alive-my father-but his liturgy is, I believe, a scandal.

An outsider observing the two rituals would never guess they belonged to the same church. And in fact, many of the participants at the respective assemblies might admit that they don't really share a faith with the participants in the "other" group.

This is what makes these liturgies scandalous. They represent such polarized expressions of worship that they drift from the central purpose of liturgy as stated in the introduction of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on

the Sacred Liturgy: "to be a sign lifted up among the nations, to those who are outside, a sign under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together until there is one fold and one shepherd." A church practicing such divergent forms of worship will hardly unite the scattered children of God.

Currently we are many folds under a shepherd who last year stirred the pot with his apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificum* (Of the Supreme Pontiffs), sanctioning wider use of the old Latin or Tridentine Mass. Besides allowing individual parishes to conduct Latin Masses at the pastor's discretion, secondhand reports suggest that Pope Benedict XVI would like to see a Latin Mass offered at every parish. Upon hearing this, I felt a rumbling that I'm certain was Pope John XXIII, who opened the Second Vatican Council, rolling in his grave.

The problem with the gym mass is not the gym, or the folk music, or even the lack of kneelers. The gym liturgies I've participated in mostly adhere to the rite promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. The scandal is the fact that 100 yards from the gym, a splendid church sits where liturgy is celebrated by the other 90 percent of the parish every Sunday.

Once, when gym repairs required the gym Mass to move back into the regular church for a while, there was some talk that the gym altar should be moved in to replace the regular church altar. Two altars at one parish screams division to me: "Our church is not your church; our worship is not your worship; we are not you." Such practices divide the Body of Christ-not the sort of thing those who led the council had in mind when they promulgated changes.

In the zeal that followed the council, many well-intentioned but liturgically ill-informed experiments cropped up in parish liturgies. Some progressive liturgies went too far and abused the intent of the council's changes.

Many of these alternative practices have fueled the reaction of extremists who now want to rewind church history and drop us all back into a Bells of St. Mary's world, as black and white as the cassock and surplice of a 10-year-old altar boy. At one end of our church, progressives dance to the beat of their very own drummer, while at the other end nostalgic traditionalists turn back the hands of time.

In my judgment, the progressive, alternative Masses are much less troubling than the return of the Tridentine Mass. As mentioned, gym liturgies are mostly faithful to the changes promulgated in the council. While they may cross the line at times, at least they seem to be reaching in the direction the council members were pointing us toward.

And let's face it, my generation, the flower-power gang, is, well, beginning to push up daisies. Progressive liturgies are fading away as the jingle-jangle of our tambourines increasingly exits stage left.

But prancing in stage right are the Tridentine Troubadours, flipping the altar around and turning their backs to the monumental progress of the Second Vatican Council.

What is scandalous about this practice is not the Latin. After discussing the issue with theologians and liturgists Keith Pecklers, S.J. and Mark Francis, C.S.V., both independently made the distinction between the Tridentine Mass, celebrated by

Catholics between 1570 and approximately 1965, and the post-conciliar rite practiced in the Latin language.

Pecklers explains that the church has, since the council, always allowed the use of Latin in the reformed liturgy. Saying the Mass in Latin is no different than saying it in Spanish or Polish or English.

The reformed liturgy is flexible enough to allow the use of Latin at times. Many parishes replace the "Lamb of God" and the "Holy, Holy, Holy" with the Agnus Dei and the Sanctus during the season of Lent. Besides being in complete conformity with the changes promulgated by the council, this appropriate use of the Latin can often deepen the spiritual tone of the liturgy and underline the gravity of the season.

But limited use such as this is far different from a complete 180-degree nostalgic return to an outdated rite.

The Tridentine Mass is not simply the current Mass (the one promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1970) spoken in Latin. The Tridentine Mass, which dates from 1570, reflects a very different-and incomplete-understanding of the early church. Francis argues that "the 16th-century framers [of the Tridentine Missal] lacked adequate historical resources, as they were unable to refer to manuscripts dating earlier than the pontificate of Innocent III, around 1216."

A church digging in its defensive heels at the peak of the Reformation developed the Tridentine Mass, taking shots at pagans, heretics, schismatics, and "perfidious" Jews. The rich revelation of the Old Testament is mostly absent, and the participation of the laity barely exists.

The Second Vatican Council had some very good reasons to call for an end to the Tridentine Mass and to promulgate a new rite. More sophisticated research uncovered a fuller understanding of how liturgy was celebrated in the early church. Improved scripture scholarship developed into a new lectionary with a wider selection of readings. Better historical research removed fictional saints from the liturgical calendar.

Perhaps most important for the average Catholic, the Mass was celebrated in the language of the people. Interestingly, while the Tridentine Mass began to be used in 1570, Masses were celebrated in Latin as early as A.D. 350. Originally, the Latin replaced Greek because people understood Latin, and using Latin allowed more people to understand what was going on. In 1965 the church once again came to the seemingly obvious conclusion that people should understand what is being said in Mass.

The Mass that emerged from the reform of Vatican II is wonderful, divine, human, and sublime. It works, and it is enormously superior to the Tridentine rite. We do not need to celebrate an old rite. We need to get more people to celebrate the existing rite well.

The stakes are high. We participate in the liturgy to praise God and to be transformed so that we can transform the world. We need to do this together. We cannot gather the scattered children of God together if we ourselves are scattered.

Is the 17-minute Tridentine mass that I experienced as a child more reverent than the liturgy we have today?

Daniel O'Rourke writes in favor of thoughtful discourse. This article was published on National Catholic Reporter (<http://ncronline.org>)

Talk Is Cheap And Sometimes Toxic

The Observer, Dunkirk, NY, July 23, 2009

It has been attributed to Buddhist gurus and their emphasis on mindful speaking, but no matter what pulpits preach it, it makes great sense. What is that distilled wisdom? We should ask ourselves questions before we speak. Is what I'm about to say kind? Is it necessary? Is it true? Does it improve the silence?

Most of us blurt out our words without thinking. At the least, such unbridled talk is dangerous. What the spiritual masters and the ancient faiths advise us is to reflect before we speak -- to filter what we are about to say. Most of us, myself included, often don't. Mindless chatter and gossip are common.

Gossip is casual or unconstrained conversation about other people; it involves unconfirmed details -- often juicy ones. Sometimes the gossip is merely chatty though it is always empty. Sometimes it may even be true, but sometimes it's malicious and prurient. Whatever it is, it goes on all the time. Someone once observed, "Great people talk about ideas. Average people talk about things. And small people talk about other people." I'm afraid many of us are often small.

Cable news, God help us, has elevated gossip to a new status. Sometimes the exchanges on cable television sound like conversations at the beauty parlor or pool hall. About a year ago after Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination but before the general election, Bill Clinton allegedly told an unnamed friend in London, who in turn told someone else, who told a reporter off the record, "Obama can kiss my ass before I'll campaign for him." On those sketchiest of facts a cable news anchor asked a political pundit to comment on television. In doing so she gave Clinton's unverified crudity instant publicity. Is that news? Of course not, it is merely hi-tech gossip.

Most gossip, of course, is not hi-tech. It is a face-to-face exchange between two or more -- but far from the people whose reputations we're dissecting. Both men and women gossip but in different ways. Men are more apt to talk about cars, money, sports and sex, while women are more likely to speak about relationships. Women are much closer to life's core here. Relationships are hugely important, more meaningful than the latest trade of over-paid ball players, but the flip side of talking about relationships can be gossip. And even if it has some semblance of truth, it is often unkind, unnecessary and does not improve the silence.

Women have been accused of being gossip queens. Let me quickly come to their defense, although they don't need any justification from me. Typically -- not always of course -- women confide and help each other. They share their inmost feelings and make themselves vulnerable. Men -- again typically and not always -- have difficulty doing this. I envy my wife's openness with her best friends. They unburden their souls and help heal each other.

Gossip is something else altogether. We don't talk to each other we talk about others -- often in a judgmental and destructive way. Gossip is basically judgmental. We literally shake our heads or roll our eyes about the others' lives. There is a reason that gossips are compared to magpies -- those cackling birds that scavenge upon others.

All of us would do well to heed the words of Jesus, "Do not judge." The whose verse is, "Do not judge or you too will be judged." (Mt. 7:1) I doubt that Jesus meant it in this way, but those who gossip about others will also -- when we are out of sight -- gossip about us. We should be realistic about that. Some say that what others say about us is none of our business, but only the intensely spiritual can react that way. For most of us our skin is not that thick.

Don Miguel Ruiz in his insightful little book, "The Four Agreements," said the first agreement (with ourselves) is to "be impeccable with your word." He said it was both the most important and the most difficult agreement. He would have us say what we mean, not to disparage ourselves, not to gossip about others, and to direct the power of our speech towards truth and love.

Often we should just bite our lip and shut our mouth. Our silence would improve the atmosphere.

Impasses in today's church

By Richard McBrien

July 27, 2009

Terrence Tilley is chair of the Department of Theology at Fordham University and immediate past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

In his presidential address at the recent Catholic Theological Society of America convention in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Tilley spoke of the negative effects of the "stalemate" or "impasses" that currently afflict the Catholic church (for the full text, "Three Impasses in Christology," see Origins 6/25/09).

The three ecclesial impasses are "a shrinking and in some places demoralized presbyterate that cannot be enlarged significantly under present rules, a laity that loves the church but has stopped listening to the bishops and a hard-working and loyal body of religious women who are disgusted and discouraged by repeated investigations of religious life and attempted reversals of self-governance."

Some of the bishops, Tilley observed, have tried "to work through these difficult impasses," but others prefer to ignore them. Still others make these even worse by following the example of "the vigilantes of the political and religious right by making noisy attacks on Catholic institutions of higher education."

Was Tilley perhaps thinking of the criticisms voiced by many bishops this spring against the University of Notre Dame for inviting President Barack Obama to deliver this year's Commencement address and to receive an honorary degree?

Tilley also expressed concern about the large numbers of Catholics who have simply drifted away from the church, according to last year's survey by the Pew Forum on

Religion and Public Life. He speculated that this "may be the response to stalemate in church."

As for the three Christological impasses, and specifically the loss of a spirit of cooperation and collaboration between the church's scholarly community and officials in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and in the hierarchy generally, Tilley counseled a "more adequate tactic," namely, allowing the "virtues of hope, constancy, fidelity, tenacity, and solidarity" to work.

"The vices of inertia, expediency, marginalizing the other and changing the subject are deadly," he pointed out.

"Stopping the dialogue by silencing theologians [such as Jesuits Roger Haight in our time and Teilhard de Chardin back in the 1950s] does not resolve impasse. You can kill theologians, but you cannot silence them!! short of gagging their mouths and tying their hands behind them," Tilley continued.

"Theologians keep writing and keep talking. The habitus of their vocation is too strong to be stopped by human authorities." But here one might enter a few words of reservation.

The atmosphere can become so toxic that some, perhaps even many, theologians begin to pull their scholarly punches lest they draw unfriendly attention to themselves. Not everyone, it must be acknowledged, is built for combat or can tolerate being in official disfavor.

Tilley did note, in support of his claim, that the French liberals of the first third of the 19th century and the European modernists of the early 20th century, both of whom were condemned by Rome, kept writing and speaking, and thereby became the cornerstones of Catholic social teaching in the first instance, and of the Second Vatican Council, in the second.

The so-called "new theology" that developed in mid-20th century France, just prior to Vatican II, did not die out, in spite of the concerted efforts of what was then called the Holy Office (the forerunner of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). The movement's leading figures, such as Dominican Fr. (later Cardinal) Yves Congar, lived on and became major figures at the council.

The same was true of the then-premier theologian in the United States, Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray, who was silenced and then deliberately kept off the council's invitation list for the first session. He returned, thanks to the efforts of New York's Cardinal Francis Spellman, to become the chief architect of the U.S. church's major contribution to Vatican II, namely, the Declaration on Religious Freedom.

If the ideas of such figures perdure and help to shape the future life of the church, Tilley declared, it is "because they enable thoughtful people to live in and live out of the faith tradition in new contexts."

Therefore, the way through our impasses, according to Terrence Tilley, is "not for theologians to repeat the formulas of the past and not for authorities to insist on one model for the mystery nor for theologians to close their ears to criticisms but for all to

work to communicate the tradition in the present using many models understandable in the present. ..."

We can thereby "continue to practice the faith despite ideological diversity, and thus to allow these impasses, like all temporalities, to pass."

Such words, one hopes, will not fall on deaf ears.

The following thoughts were offered on the readings for the 18th Sunday of the year by Roger Karban.

I vividly remember the pictures in my grade school Bible History of Israelites catching the manna floating down from heaven. I don't remember any pictures, though, of them grabbing, killing and cleaning the quail which "came up and covered the camp." Such a scene probably was regarded as too disturbing for young minds. As it does in today's gospel pericope, the manna always took center stage. Manna has become the classic symbol of Yahweh's care for Yahweh's people.

John's Jesus employs the manna image, showing that, by the end of the first Christian century, the Eucharistic bread has been singled out as the bread, which "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Scholars remind us that our idea of the Eucharist would be quite different if our Christian Scriptures didn't contain John's gospel. Paul, Mark, Matthew and Luke concentrate more on the meal than the menu. They certainly wouldn't have understood our practice of "Eucharistic devotions."

A few of my students through the years have been disturbed when they learned manna's "non-faith dimensions." Our sacred authors poetically refer to it as something raining down from heaven, and even call it bread. Yet today's Exodus passage provides a description of it, which most readers ignore. "In the morning dew lay all about the camp. When the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground..." Moses told them, "This is the bread which Yahweh has given you to eat."

The text itself tells us that manna literally wasn't "bread come down from heaven." People familiar with the Sinai remind us that manna's still out there today. It's the overnight secretion of insects on the area's bushes, vegetation, and rocks. Not the most appetizing fare. But in a pinch, scraping it off and eating it will keep a starving person alive until something better comes along.

In other words, Yahweh cared for the Chosen People by having someone show them how to employ the survival tactics native Bedouin used to keep body and soul together while they crossed that barren stretch of land. (The "quail" probably are migratory birds whose yearly arrival in large numbers supplied them with meat for at least a short period of time.)

No wonder some of the Israelites "grumbled." It took a certain amount of faith in Yahweh to see God's care for them in the natural phenomena which the wilderness provided.

That's why today's Ephesians reading might be the most important of the three. The author reminds his community, "You must lay aside your former way of life and the old self... And acquire a fresh, spiritual way of thinking. You must put on that new person created in God's image..."

People of faith live in the same world as people without faith. Our faith simply is the filter through which we look at that world. Like all filters, it highlights some things and obscures others.

John's Jesus presumes we'll go through life looking at the Eucharistic bread and wine as a sign of Jesus' care for his people, guaranteeing we'll never again hunger or thirst for what really counts in life. Of course, to be cared for by Jesus in that way, we must have a deeper hunger and thirst than many around us; the same hunger and thirst the historical Jesus experienced and the risen Jesus wants us to be concerned about.

To close, from the Associated Press, the following article on fact and fiction in the health care debate.

FACT CHECK: Distortions rife in health care debate

By Charles Babington

August 2, 2009

Confusing claims and outright distortions have animated the national debate over changes in the health care system. Opponents of proposals by President Barack Obama and congressional Democrats falsely claim that government agents will force elderly people to discuss end-of-life wishes. Obama has played down the possibility that a health care overhaul would cause large numbers of people to change doctors and insurers.

To complicate matters, there is no clear-cut "Obama plan" or "Democratic plan." Obama has listed several goals, but he has drawn few lines in the sand.

The Senate is considering two bills that differ significantly. The House is waiting for yet another bill approved in committee.

A look at some claims being made about health care proposals:

CLAIM: The House bill "may start us down a treacherous path toward government-encouraged euthanasia," House Republican Leader John Boehner of Ohio said July 23. Former New York Lt. Gov. Betsy McCaughey said in a July 17 article: "One troubling provision of the House bill compels seniors to submit to a counseling session every five years ... about alternatives for end-of-life care."

THE FACTS: The bill would require Medicare to pay for advance directive consultations with health care professionals. But it would not require anyone to use the benefit. Advance directives lay out a patient's wishes for life-extending measures under various scenarios involving terminal illness, severe brain damage and situations. Patients and their families would consult with health professionals, not government agents, if they used the proposed benefit.

CLAIM: Health care revisions would lead to government-funded abortions. Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council says in a video, "Unless Congress states otherwise, under a government takeover of health care, taxpayers will be forced to fund abortions for the first time in over three decades."

THE FACTS: The proposed bills would not undo the Hyde Amendment, which bars paying for abortions through Medicaid, the government insurance program for the poor. But a health care overhaul could create a government-run insurance program, or insurance "exchanges," that would not involve Medicaid and whose abortion guidelines are not yet clear.

Obama recently told CBS that the nation should continue a tradition of "not financing abortions as part of government-funded health care."

The House Energy and Commerce Committee amended the House bill Thursday to state that health insurance plans have the option of covering abortion, but no public money can be used to fund abortions. The bill says health plans in a new purchasing exchange would not be required to cover abortion but that each region of the country should have at least one plan that does.

Congressional action this fall will determine whether such language is in the final bill. CLAIM: Americans won't have to change doctors or insurance companies.

"If you like your plan and you like your doctor, you won't have to do a thing," Obama said on June 23. "You keep your plan; you keep your doctor."

THE FACTS: The proposed legislation would not require people to drop their doctor or insurer. But some tax provisions, depending on how they are written, might make it cheaper for some employers to pay a fee to end their health coverage. Their workers presumably would move to a public insurance plan that might not include their current doctors.

CLAIM: The Democrats' plans will lead to rationing, or the government determining which medical procedures a patient can have.

"Expanding government health programs will hasten the day that government rations medical care to seniors," conservative writer Michael Cannon said in the Washington Times.

THE FACTS: Millions of Americans already face rationing, as insurance companies rule on procedures they will cover.

Denying coverage for certain procedures might increase under proposals to have a government-appointed agency identify medicines and procedures best suited for various conditions.

Obama says the goal is to identify the most effective and efficient medical practices, and to steer patients and providers to them. He recently told a forum: "We don't want to ration by dictating to somebody, 'OK, you know what? We don't think that this senior should get a hip replacement.' What we do want to be able to do is to provide

information to that senior and to her doctor about, you know, this is the thing that is going to be most helpful to you in dealing with your condition."

CLAIM: Overhauling health care will not expand the federal deficit over the long term. Obama has pledged that "health insurance reform will not add to our deficit over the next decade, and I mean it."

THE FACTS: Obama's pledge does not apply to proposed spending of about \$245 billion over the next decade to increase Medicare fees for doctors. The White House says the extra payment, designed to prevent a scheduled cut of about 21 percent in doctor fees, already was part of the administration's policy.

Beyond that, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said the House bill lacks mechanisms to bring health care costs under control. In response, the White House and Democratic lawmakers are talking about creating a powerful new board to root out waste in government health programs. But it's unclear how that would work.

Budget experts also warn of accounting gimmicks that can mask true burdens on the deficit. The bipartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget says they include back-loading the heaviest costs at the end of the 10-year period and beyond.

Your thoughts and articles for sharing are appreciated. Send them to comments@tonyercolano.com