

By Bishop Richard Pates
Diocese of Des Moines

The Catholic Church's position on abortion is no secret. Based on the natural law or what the framers of the Declaration of Independence identified as "self-evident truths," it's part of a defense of life that includes opposition to capital punishment and euthanasia, and limiting war. Simply, we believe that the right to life, including the life of a developing child, is basic, and that it trumps other rights – including the right to privacy. And we believe the state has an obligation to protect life.

But the church's position on the primacy of conscience may not be so well known. That position is deeply planted in our moral tradition and society's as well. St. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century philosopher and theologian, championed the primacy of conscience. He taught that one must not only follow one's conscience, but form it correctly.

One thinks of how important the primacy of conscience has been in history, from the stands of St. Thomas More and Martin Luther King through the teachings of Mohandas Gandhi and the Nuremberg Trials after World War II. There, many Nazis were accused of following an illegitimate and evil authority instead of their consciences.

Just as the state must protect life, it must also protect the right to follow one's conscience to truly guarantee the freedom of religion promised in our constitution. That means, for instance, that hospital personnel and health-care workers must not be coerced into violating their consciences by providing abortions.

Is this a real issue? According to recent testimony before a congressional subcommittee by a spokesman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, an ethics committee of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which supports "abortion rights," wants "pro-life physicians to refer for abortions in a wide array of circumstances (and) to perform abortions themselves when referral is not possible." And the State University of New York at Stony Brook recently suspended eight nurses for saying they would not assist in abortions.

No matter our position on abortion, do any of us really want people – especially health-care providers – to violate their consciences?

My fellow bishops and I support, and urge all supporters of religious freedom, to back H.R. 3, a "no taxpayer funding for abortion" passed by the U.S. House of Representatives and now before the U.S. Senate. Besides definitively forbidding the use of federal money for abortions, it ensures that federal agencies, and state and local governments receiving

federal money, don't discriminate against health-care providers who don't perform or participate in abortion because of conscience objection.

Some say current law is sufficient to prohibit abortion and protect conscience rights. But current law, including the Hyde Amendment, does so only in a piecemeal and inadequate manner. H.R. 3 would provide a permanent and consistent policy across federal government.

Catholics have been particularly important in providing health care, in Iowa and the U.S. especially for the poor and indigent. Catholic hospitals care for one in six patients in the U.S. each year. But this bill is not just about Catholics. Without the bill, all like-minded health-care providers will be at risk of having to decide between providing care and following their consciences. No one should be placed in that position.

I urge Iowa's senate delegation to join the 251 members of the House of Representatives who have voted in support of H.R. 3 in protection of freedom of conscience.