

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

understanding the basics ▪ defending a right

Limiting Freedom: The HHS Mandate (3 of 7)

On January 20, 2012, President Obama approved new regulations from the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that would require most private health insurers, including, with few exceptions, all Catholic employers, to cover sterilization, contraception and drugs that induce abortion, even if they have religious objections against doing so. Despite a so-called accommodation by the Administration on February 10, the sweeping HHS mandate stands today little changed. Some were satisfied with the President's concession, but not our shepherds. Speaking for his brother bishops about the current regulations, Cardinal Dolan said, "We're still as worried as ever."

In an unprecedented way, the Administration's plan for better healthcare impinges upon the religious liberty of the nation's citizens. The HHS regulations will both force religious institutions to facilitate and fund a product contrary to their own moral teaching and purport to define which religious institutions are religious enough to merit protection of their religious liberty. Upon taking effect next year, the mandate will force religious employers, like Catholic Health Services of Long Island and Catholic Charities, which provide services beyond the Catholic community, to violate their moral convictions and religious beliefs.

Some see the issue as concerning only contraception or sterilization, but it encompasses much more. As Archbishop-designate William Lori of Baltimore testified to Congress, "This is not a matter of whether contraception may be prohibited by the government. This is not even a matter of whether contraception may be supported by the government. Instead, it is a matter of whether religious people and institutions may be forced by the government to provide coverage for contraception or sterilization, even if that violates their religious beliefs."

Bishop Murphy makes clear what is at stake: our cherished freedom. "This mandate," he says, "directly interferes with the freedom of conscience of individuals and with the freedom of religious belief and practice of our Catholic institutions. The Administration has chosen to cast aside the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, denying to Catholics our nation's first and most fundamental freedom, that of religious liberty and free exercise of conscience."

The HHS mandate is alarming. It is the most recent infringement upon our nation's understanding of religious freedom. It shrinks the grandeur of religious freedom that Americans have long valued as both freedom to worship and freedom of conscience. It continues a pattern that seeks to marginalize faith, making it a purely private matter, irrelevant to the shaping of the life of the nation.

"As a community of faith, we must commit ourselves to prayer and fasting that wisdom and justice may prevail and religious liberty may be restored."

BISHOP WILLIAM MURPHY

PRAYER

Almighty God, Father of all nations, for freedom you have set us free in Christ Jesus (Gal 5:1).

We praise and bless you for the gift of religious liberty, the foundation of human rights, justice, and the common good. Grant to our leaders the wisdom to protect and promote our liberties; By your grace may we have the courage to defend them, for ourselves and for all those who live in this blessed land.

We ask this through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, our patroness, and in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, with whom you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.