

## **Obama Administration: Catholic Conscience Not to be Tolerated**

On January 20, 2012, the Obama administration made an unprecedented move to curtail the freedom of religion in the United States. It mandated that all institutions providing health insurance to their employees must also provide for sterilization, artificial contraception and abortifacients (drugs that induce abortion), religious beliefs notwithstanding. Despite many attempts to get the government to respect the conscience of Catholics and others who hold contraception, abortifacients and sterilization as morally evil, Kathleen Sebelius, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, confirmed that the present administration will allow no exemptions.

Church-affiliated hospitals, universities, dioceses, agencies and charities are now being mandated to pay for services that clearly go against the teaching of the Catholic Church. One concession. Nonprofit employers who do not currently provide such coverage in their insurance plan because of religious beliefs have a grace period of one year before they must comply with President Obama's healthcare bill, *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*. Really? One year to be free before being forced to violate their conscience.

The U.S. bishops are not alone in opposing this new mandate. Other religious leaders who find mandated contraception, abortifacients and sterilization morally wrong are speaking out as well. These procedures are not preventative medicine. Unless, of course, you consider the birth of a child a disease!

The final ruling of Department of Health and Human Resources is insidious. Yes, it does touch on what should rightly be considered preventing a disease. But deeper than that, it is the blatant, insensitive and unnecessary undermining of our constitutionally protected freedom of religion. This is the first instance in the history of our country than any administration is forcing some of its citizens to purchase something that violates their conscience.

Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, also challenged this latest ruling of Health and Human Resources. He said, "What we are seeing here is precisely

what the First Amendment was intended to prohibit: state action targeted against the religious consciences of particular religious communities, and intended to attack their conceptions of justice, equality and the common good. It is tyranny, pure and simple. The stakes go beyond the questions of contraception and abortion to the very meaning of American democracy” (Joan Frawley Desmond, “HHS Secretary Sebelius: Church Groups Must Provide Contraception,” *National Catholic Register*, January 21, 2012).

Just one day before the Obama Administration announced its final decision not to allow any reasonable exemption to Obamacare on the basis of religious belief or conscience, Pope Benedict XVI spoke to some U.S. bishops on their *ad limina* visit. He warned them precisely about what we are witnessing in this decision. The Pope said, “it is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the Church’s public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres. The seriousness of these threats needs to be appreciated...”

What will be the results? Will Catholic institutions, including schools, universities and Catholic Charities, no longer be able in conscience to provide health insurance for their employees? Will we see other rights soon denied by a government that refuses to respect conscience? Will the government mandate other morally objectionable practices in the future? Why not? Once the moral conscience of a substantial group of Americans is simply swept aside by any government, no right remains safe.

In this most recent ruling on healthcare, a government that avidly promotes freedom of choice has decided not to allow Catholics the freedom to choose. It need not be this way. But, the line has been drawn in the sand. Can Catholics simply accept the fact that the Catholic conscience is not to be tolerated in America?