



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SPOKANE
(509) 358-7305 – Fax (509) 358-7302
POST OFFICE BOX 1453
SPOKANE, WASHINGTON 99210-1453

February 7, 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write to you about the recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) decision to require most religious institutions to be included in the federal mandate to pay for coverage of contraception, sterilization and two potential abortifacients. The HHS decision seriously threatens the free exercise of religion guaranteed by the Constitution, for now a government bureaucracy will determine for the purposes of granting an exemption to the mandate what it means for any church to be a church and what defines the permissible exercise of religion. The HHS religious exemption policy is so restrictive, as Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA noted, that “the ministry of Jesus Christ himself would not be considered a religious entity.”

In effect this means that to be eligible for the exemption, even churches and houses of worship must show the government that they hire and primarily serve people of their own faith and have the “inculcation of religious values” as their purpose. Some churches may serve the broader community as a major focus, for example, by providing direct service to the poor regardless of faith. Such churches could be denied an exemption precisely because their service to the common good is so great. More importantly, a vast array of other religious organizations – schools, hospitals, universities, charitable institutions – will not be exempt.

Let’s be clear. Although the argument begins, in part, over government enforcement of insurance coverage of services and procedures the Catholic Church finds morally objectionable, it does not end there. Nor is the issue primarily about freedom of conscience, for in fact, there is a conscience clause provision, though quite restricted in its application. And while, as a recent *America* magazine editorial succinctly put it “the ruling is a threat to our living as a church in the Catholic manner,” this is not just about the Catholic Church. **The real issue is that now a government bureaucracy – heretofore specifically precluded from doing so by the Constitution and over 230 years of court precedent – will decide what it means for any church to be church and what defines the permissible exercise of religion.**

Practically speaking, if this mandate is not reversed, our schools, hospitals and charitable organizations will be left to choose one of three options: 1) violate our beliefs by providing insurance coverage for medications and procedures we believe are immoral, 2) withdraw insurance coverage for all of our employees and face fines that will put our operations at risk of shutting down altogether, or 3) hire and serve only Catholics in the hope that then we will qualify for the exemption.

This mandate from the HHS is a direct assault on the Church’s teaching mission handed on to us by Christ, for as we teach the truths of our faith, we will be required to pay for coverage of procedures and drugs which violate those same truths. We, or any community of faith, should

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not be put in this untenable position. Nor should we be put in the Catch 22 situation of being forced to deny our employees access to affordable health care, a basic human right and then find ourselves as a result in the financial jeopardy that comes with being assessed onerous fines. Nor should we be forced to close the doors of our hospitals, schools, and social services to people who are not Catholic. This mandate is bad for the Church and bad for the nation.

Regrettably, attempts to undermine the free exercise of religion have come from legislatures and the courts for more than a decade. In fact, our own Washington State legislature is presently considering a similar mandate with regard to forcing our religious organizations to provide insurance coverage for abortions.

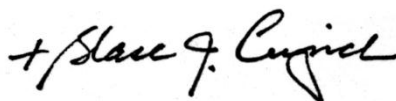
For the good of the church and the good of the nation these chilling developments on both the state and federal level cannot go unchallenged. We need to defend the constitutional right of the free exercise of religion on behalf of our churches, schools, hospitals and social services. But, we also need to see this effort to uphold this right as a service to our nation and to our democracy. While dictatorships allow for some personal freedom, they do not allow for institutional freedoms. The freedom of institutions is the unique characteristic of a democracy.

This is a moment to act and for our voices to be heard, on behalf of both our church and our nation. I ask:

- you to pray, for as a faith community, we should always turn to a God through whom we trust all things are possible;
- our pastors to dedicate on President's weekend, February 18-19, special intentions in the General Intercessions for the cause of the free exercise of religion in our country;
- you to let your voices be heard by contacting your state senator and representatives to let them know of your opposition to HB 2330 and SB 6185 mandating that our churches, schools and social services provide coverage for abortions in our state. The easiest way to do this is by logging on to the website of our Washington State Catholic Conference www.thewsc.org and clicking the appropriate site;
- you to learn more. I invite you to visit the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops www.usccb.org/conscience, where you will find resources to support legislation that would reverse the HHS decision.

I will continue to provide updates as circumstances develop. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Blase J. Cupich". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Blase J. Cupich
Bishop of Spokane