



January 31, 2012

Dear Friends in Christ,

On January 20th an agency of the federal government created a **serious threat to the freedom of religion** guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. As Americans and Christians, we must take steps to counter this threat.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a directive that all private health care insurance programs must include several reproductive services for women. These services must be provided without any co-pay or deductible. Among the services are FDA-approved prescription contraceptives (some of which can cause early abortion), sterilization procedures and related education and counseling. The directive applies to religious employers, even if the services in question violate their moral principles. It also places an unnecessary burden of conscience on other employers, Catholic and otherwise, who consider these services immoral.

The directive does provide an exemption for some religious employers, but the terms of exemption are very narrow. The employer must employ primarily members of its own faith and serve primarily members of its own faith. Certainly most Catholic hospitals would not qualify for an exemption and perhaps many Catholic universities. Catholic Charities would not qualify. It could be argued that Catholic dioceses, parishes and schools likewise do not qualify, since Christ clearly sent his followers to proclaim the Gospel to everyone, to invite everyone into his Kingdom and to serve all who are in need. The Church doesn't exist just to take care of its own.

Now, it is no secret that many Catholics dissent from the Church's longstanding teaching on artificial contraception, elective sterilization and abortion. However, pursuing old arguments on these issues will sidetrack us from the real one at hand. **The Health and Human Services directive is a violent breach of the wall of separation between church and state. For the government to force a religious body to pursue a course of action that contradicts its beliefs, particularly where no public interest is at stake, is completely unacceptable.**

Throughout the history of this country, religious groups, certainly the Catholic Church, have made good use of religious liberty by contributing enormously to the common good. We have run hospitals and nursing homes that cared for everyone, especially the poor. We built universities and schools that educated millions of people who went on to develop this nation. Every day we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, fight for the oppressed and in many other ways give hope to the downtrodden—all done in the name of God, all done because of our faith.

Now our ability to carry out many of these apostolates is at stake, and many of our dedicated employees are potentially at risk of losing their medical insurance.

Your help is greatly needed, both as Christians and as Americans. First, please pray that this grave threat to religious liberty be stopped. Surely, if the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church, God can manage a cabinet department. Second, support whatever efforts I may ask you to support in the future, such as legislative or judicial remedies. Even now, you can contact the President, the Secretary of Health of Human Services, and your members of Congress. Third, be courageous in your conviction. Take action of your own. For additional information about this issue, visit the special link on our diocesan Web site (www.dioceseofjoliet.org).

The United States is a great country. It was founded by people who sought freedom, initially, religious freedom. The first right enshrined in the Bill of Rights is the free exercise of religion. We are justifiably proud that in this country people of virtually every faith on earth are able to pursue their religious objectives in peace and friendship. Our federal government should help preserve and promote that heritage. Let us work together at this moment to assure that it does.

God bless all of you, whom I am privileged to shepherd in the name of Christ.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "R. Daniel Conlon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend R. Daniel Conlon
Bishop of Joliet