



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 6, 2011

BISHOPS OPPOSE FEDERAL PREVENTIVE SERVICES MANDATE

The leaders of Wisconsin's five Roman Catholic dioceses have written the Obama administration to express opposition to the mandated full coverage of sterilization, contraception, and related counseling services by private health plans as required under new federal health care reform regulations. The bishops asked that the mandate be rescinded completely or at least modified to include a broader protection for religious groups opposed to abortion, contraception, and sterilization coverage, arguing in a letter to United States Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius that the regulations do not adequately protect the religious liberty of institutions, employers, insurance providers, and others.

“Such a mandate undermines our teaching that human fertility is not a disease. It is a gift, which exercised responsibly, allows humanity to prosper,” the bishops wrote. “Further, in its current form the rule employs a much too narrow definition of religious employer. Its effect is to so constrain religious activity as to diminish the religious liberty of Catholics in Wisconsin and the United States.”

The mandate contains a very narrow conscience exemption that will not apply to Catholic universities, hospitals, and charitable organizations that serve the general public. The bishops note this fails to respect the Church's ability to function in society.

“[F]or Catholics, religion is a matter of personal conviction with social consequences. Ministry in the Catholic tradition is not limited to houses of worship. It finds full expression in service to others. The faith we profess and celebrate in the parish is taken into the world through our public ministries.”

The letter continues, “That is why Catholics in the United States, from the time they arrived, have contributed to the common good by serving the poor and vulnerable – irrespective of their faith – in our many schools, hospitals, and charities. America is the richer for this faith-inspired witness and its many contributions to the general welfare.”

“Yet, our witness – and the public good that flows from it – is compromised when we are compelled to act in ways inconsistent with our values. This mandate does just that,” the bishops noted.

“As written, the mandate compels our institutions to either act in ways inconsistent with our values or forces them to retreat from serving the most vulnerable. Further, the mandate is also contrary to the very natural law to which our nation's founders appealed in declaring our nation's

independence. That declaration recognized that our inalienable human rights come from our Creator, not the state. This includes the freedom to worship and to live according to one's religious convictions."

The bishops pointed out that the mandate nullifies a forty-year bipartisan consensus of respect for rights of religious liberty and conscience in matters of health care. These rights, recognized in the Church Amendment of 1973, the law governing Federal Employees Health Benefits Program, and federal legislation for combating AIDS in developing nations, are denied in this mandate.

The bishops acknowledged that many do not share Catholic beliefs regarding contraception, sterilization, and abortion, but said that is not relevant to a claim a religious exemption.

"...[O]ur nation's founders did not define the free exercise of religion by the number of believers who claim it. On the contrary, they promised it to all people, whether they are members of a large majority or of a small minority who hold a sincere conviction as to what their faith asks of them," the bishops wrote.

"Health care reform should expand, not restrict, the ability of employers and providers to offer the best possible care. It should provide Americans with real health care options that support and do not undermine their most cherished values. The Administration promised us nothing less before. It should deliver nothing less now," they added.

The Department is accepting public comments on the exemption from the mandate for religious employers until October 1, 2011. The bishops urge Catholics and others to join them in asking for federal health care reform that protects the religious liberty of individuals and institutions and does not force them to act in a manner contrary to their values.

Interested citizens may direct comments on the issue to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services one of four ways:

- Electronically at <http://www.regulations.gov/#!documentDetail;D=HHS-OS-2011-0023-0002>.
- By mailing written comments to: Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Department of Health and Human Services, Attention: CMS-9992-IFC2, P.O. Box 8010, Baltimore, MD 21244-8010. (Please allow sufficient time for mailed comments to be received before the close of the comment period.)
- By express or overnight mail to: Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Department of Health and Human Services, Attention: CMS-9992-IFC2, Mail Stop C4-26-05, 7500 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21244-1850.
- By hand or courier.

A copy of the letter is attached.