



DIOCESE OF CHEYENNE
Office of the Bishop
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+ February 10, 2012

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ:

As you are most undoubtedly aware, on January 20, 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services announced its decision *not* to expand the unacceptably narrow “religious employer” exemption to its mandate that virtually all health insurance plans must include, as so-called “preventive services” sterilizations, abortifacients, and contraception. Since that time, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and I began immediately preparing to meet this challenge.

The Bishops’ Conference committee on Religious Liberty is actively engaged in planning a nation-wide response on a number of levels. I simply want you to know that the bishops are fully engaged in this process, and a significant, sustainable, and long-term strategy is our goal.

You are invited to visit the USCCB website for continually updated information regarding our efforts to defend freedoms of conscience and religious liberty, and to better inform yourself as to what you can do as individuals. There is already information on this website to assist you in writing your representatives to express your deep concern for the protections of freedom of conscience and religious liberty.

I want to be very clear. We as church, and all believers, share a deep concern for women’s health. However, we take serious issue with any effort to portray pregnancy as a disease. Regardless of the present contraceptive practices of women and couples, the Church will always teach the integrity of the whole moral law of marriage and of human sexuality, for to do so is to support the true growth of human civilization. (See *Humanae Vitae* 18) God in His Providence has provided for the natural means of conceiving children, and the natural and nurturing place for their development is in the mother’s womb. This “sacred sanctuary” is and should be the first priority of healthcare, if healthcare is truly about nurturing and sustaining human life.

Regarding the Obama administration’s intention to mandate free healthcare coverage of contraceptives, abortifacients and sterilization procedures, let us be very clear. This mandate seeks not only to *reflect* some women’s reproductive behaviors, but to *change* all women’s behaviors. Should this mandate stand, we can easily see into the future how this or any future administration will then feel quite emboldened to take the next step of mandatory coverage for abortions, infanticide, and so called ‘assisted suicide’. Indeed, this mandate will *already* cover the cost of certain FDA approved medications that are known to cause the early destruction of a human embryo, thus leading to the loss of life in the womb.

As serious as the above issue of life is, this mandate raises another grave concern, with far-reaching consequences, and that is Religious Liberty. Even though most churches and houses of worship are exempt from this mandate, other religious institutions, through which Catholics and other Christians carry out our Gospel Mission, are not. Faith-based institutions such as schools, hospitals, universities and charitable institutions will be required to follow this new mandate, or pay stiff financial penalties. In addition, individual employers who wish to act on their faith and provide their employees health insurance but do not want to provide services contrary to their religious beliefs are forced to either not provide health insurance and face a fine or act contrary to their faith. In short, the government is requiring that people of faith purchase something that violates their moral beliefs.

If we allow this mandate to go unchallenged, if we allow it to stand, we are surrendering our constitutionally protected right under the First Amendment, to freely exercise our religious faith in American society. This has serious consequences for our dioceses, parishes and other religious institutions and the way we are presently able to freely carry out our faith-based ministries. We believe firmly that our moral presence in the public square and our charitable service to those in need is not only protected under the First Amendment, but is also *good* for our culture and society. Once a country or government loses its moral foundation, there will be an inevitable destruction to “decent society” and the disintegration of culture and democracy.

This mandate is a “not-so-subtle” revelation of this administration’s *misinterpretation* of Religious Liberty as a mere “freedom of worship.” In other words, this mandate is telling people of faith: “Keep your faith at home or in your church, synagogue, mosque or temple and out of the market place, or we will enact regulations that will prevent you from practicing your faith in public.” This is a wake-up call to all Catholics and all people of faith in American society. This is one more step in the direction of declaring “no-god” the official religion of the State, and every person who holds dear their faith in God had better stand up and take notice.

I urge you to contact President Obama, Senators Barrasso and Enzi and Representative Lummis and state your objections to this new requirement, and ask for the repeal of this mandate or at least for a religious exemption that would allow people of faith not to have to provide contraceptive, abortifacients and sterilization coverage.

I invite all of you to please stay abreast of the developments around this HHS Mandate. I also strongly encourage fasting and prayer as a proper response to this challenge. Last but not least, our response should always be one of faith, hope and respect. Please know how grateful I am for your faith. With assurance of prayers for you and your families and loved ones, I remain,

In The Heart of Christ,

+ *Paul D. Etienne*

Most Reverend Paul D. Etienne
Bishop of Cheyenne