



Catholic Church of Eastern Montana

DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

Founded 1904

Live the Gospel. Bring Light to the World

February 2, 2012

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As most of you are likely aware, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a ruling on January 20, 2012, that will force nearly all private health plans to include coverage for all FDA-approved prescription contraceptive drugs and devices (some of which are abortifacients) as well as surgical sterilization. These are listed among "preventive services for women" that all health plans will have to cover without co-pays or other cost-sharing, regardless of whether the insurer, the employer or other plan sponsor, *or even the woman herself* objects to such coverage.

The exemption provided for "religious employers" is so narrow that it fails to cover the vast majority of faith-based organizations, including Catholic hospitals, universities, and social service organizations that help millions every year. Though its implementation will be delayed until 2013, this mandate will call Catholic institutions and individuals to violate conscience or forego health care and face the penalty for doing so. It is an unconscionable mandate and undermines the religious liberty of every citizen regardless of their faith convictions.

Never before has the federal government forced individuals and organizations in our country to go out into the marketplace and buy a product that violates their conscience. This shouldn't happen in a land where free exercise of religion ranks first in the Bill of Rights. And yet, in mandating this action, the present Administration has seriously weakened what we all hold near and dear as citizens of this land, i.e., religious freedom.

We simply cannot abide by a decision that is so fundamentally unjust and contrary to the Bill of Rights. And we cannot sit by idly and allow this mandate to go unnoticed. In fact, many from other faith convictions likewise recognize the threat of this action. It is not a "Catholic" issue but an issue of "religious freedom" and "conscience." If this is allowed to stand then what will be next? Let your elected leaders know that you want religious liberty and rights of conscience restored and that you want the Administration's contraceptive mandate rescinded.

As with my brother Bishop, George Leo Thomas, I ask you to respond in two ways. First of all, we must continue to pray and fast that wisdom may triumph and that justice for all ultimately may be restored. Our country that has historically so prized religious liberty must not lose its founding vision. Secondly, I urge you to visit www.usccb.org/conscience in order to learn more about this attack on religious liberty and conscience and how to contact members of the Administration and Congress, urging them to reverse this mandate. Your voice is critical and must be heard! Please take time to contact Senators Baucus and Tester and Representative Rehberg, urging their support for the **Respect for rights of Conscience Act** (H.R. 1179, S. 1467). A sample letter could be as follows: "Please co-sponsor the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act (H.R. 1179, S.1467) and help enact it into law. The Obama Administration's decision to require even religious institutions to provide coverage of sterilization and contraceptives, including drugs that can cause an abortion, make passage of this measure especially urgent. Please ensure that the rights of conscience of all participants in our nation's health care system are respected."

Yours in Christ,

Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings

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