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Witness to life; witness to religious freedom

On the eve of the annual Pro-Life March in Washington, Allison O'Brien, the dynamic director of our diocesan Respect Life Office, e-mailed me to say that, this year the Diocese of Rockville Centre has registered 38 buses and 1,803 people who will be participating in the March for Life on Monday, January 23. The Cathedral Parish of St. Agnes has become a central point for different areas. From the cathedral there are three buses leaving for the March. As Allison said to me, "We have a great team!"

When the Pro-Life movement was getting its start in response to Roe v. Wade 40 years ago, much of the national leadership came from lay faithful of our diocese. Bishop McGann was a staunch supporter and Bishop McHugh, as a young priest, became the engine of the Church's pro-life efforts, nationally and internationally. What a tribute to those pioneers is this annual turnout of Long Islanders to stand up for human life, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death and every moment in between.

As Allison was coordinating the final preparations for this commitment to life, human dignity and freedom, the U.S. bishops and, an hour later, our own nation, received some heartbreaking news from President Obama. It too dealt with life, human dignity and freedom. However, instead of protecting human dignity and freedom, the news from the President concerned an attack on them. The President called the president of the US Bishops Conference, Cardinal-elect Dolan, to tell him that he had approved a decision of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) that mandates contraceptive services be included in almost every health insurance plan in the country. To that contraceptive mandate, HHS added, and the President approved, a broader mandate that includes not only contraceptives but also sterilizations and abortion-inducing drugs.

This mandate is a radical incursion on the part of our government into freedom of conscience founded on our religious beliefs! It contravenes the First Amendment and several federal laws. More importantly, it violates the law of God who gave us life and calls us to respect all human life. The Bill of Rights assures us that we have a right



FAITH AND NEW WORKS

BISHOP WILLIAM MURPHY

in this country to obey God's law and follow our conscience, free to live out our religious beliefs as individual persons and as institutions. Forcing all of us to buy or provide coverage for sterilization and contraceptives, including drugs that induce abortion, is a **radical incursion into our freedom of conscience and religious exercise.**

There is in this mandate a very narrow exception clause that is practically meaningless to the exercise of freedom of conscience and religious belief. It would, in an alarming number of circumstances, not except or exempt even Jesus, or anyone else who offers the healing care of Jesus to others, from being forced to act like persons who do not share their beliefs. It is, therefore, a direct assault on our own right to freedom of exercise of our beliefs. Further, with so few exceptions protecting religious freedom, this mandate forces virtually all insurance plans to cover such services and, in so doing, endangers the ability of our Catholic hospitals to continue to provide health care according to the tenets of Jesus and the Church, rather than the government.

Beyond the fact that the mandate mentions only three things that violate our conscience, the more alarming point is that the federal government has knowingly and willingly jettisoned the First Amendment and, in so doing, placed an unjust burden on a significant portion of American citizens. Pregnancy is not a disease. This mandate is not about health care. This is our government bending to a well financed lobby that wants to guarantee, not only that its own point of view is protected, but that its point of view is mandated for all of us whose religious sensitivities and whose religious beliefs now count for nothing.

The President did emphasize that there is a one year "window" given to persons and institutions whose religious beliefs are being violated, "to adjust to the new mandate." Do not be fooled. The federal

government is not offering us an opportunity to seek the wider exceptions or exemptions to which we are entitled under the Constitution. They are telling us that we have one year to conform to government mandates and not one day more!

This of course leaves us in a very difficult predicament. Friday last, Pope Benedict addressed a group of U.S. bishops on their *ad limina* visit on the issue of religious liberty. It is a clear and concise, very readable, defense of religious freedom. You can read about it in this week's Long Island Catholic on page six. I e-mailed it to every priest in the diocese. You can find the full text at www.vatican.va. Consistent with the teaching of Jesus and the Church as found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Holy Father helps us to articulate and defend the right to religious freedom that is ours from God. All the governments of the world, regardless of their history and culture, acknowledge the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which in Section 18 makes that right the standard for every civilized nation.

The U.S. bishops have publicly called on the President to rescind this violation of the First Amendment embodied in the HHS mandate. If the Administration will not do so, the Congress must. If neither does, then we, not for any partisan purposes or any political preference for any particular candidate, but for the defense and protection of the First Amendment and the most basic of human rights, the right to freedom of conscience and belief, must be as one at the ballot box in November as we keep these issues in mind.

As Pope Benedict told the bishops last Friday:

"It is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the Church's moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres ... Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit the most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion ..."

There can be no doubt that a more consistent witness on the part of American Catholics to their deepest convictions would make a major contribution to the renewal of society as a whole..."