

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF JACKSON

237 AMITE STREET • P.O. BOX 2248
JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI 39225-2248

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

601-969-1880
FAX 601-960-8455
joseph.latin@jacksondiocese.org

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TO BE READ AT ALL MASSES THE WEEKEND OF FEBRUARY 11TH AND FEBRUARY 12TH, 2012

Dear Friends in Christ,

I write to you today to express my deep concern and dismay for the ongoing attacks by the President Obama Administration on the religious liberty of the Roman Catholic Church and indeed all faith traditions. Religious liberty is a right so esteemed by the Founding Fathers that they made it the first freedom in the Bill of Rights of our United States Constitution. Religious freedom is the lifeblood of the American people, the cornerstone of American government.

The decision by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to adopt regulations that will force Catholic health care institutions nationwide and social service agencies such as Catholic Charities to violate the teachings of our Roman Catholic Church is a direct attack by this administration on the tenets of our Catholic faith and the basic right of religious liberty of Catholics to adhere to their faith.

The HHS decision was made in spite of advice, counsel and input accepted by HHS from Catholics at every level including laity in the pews, health care providers, doctors, nurses, pastors and bishops. Forcing our Catholic hospitals and agencies to provide health care that includes funding for abortions and contraception could indeed lead to the closure of these institutions thereby causing an end to quality health care grounded in Christian values and respect for the sanctity of life. Thousands of people without regard to their religious beliefs were served last year by our Diocesan educational and social programs. These programs would either be forced to cease to exist, or to restrict its employees and social services to practicing Catholics alone.

This decision further cuts away at the fabric of our nation by threatening our constitutional right as individuals and as a church to religious liberty. On behalf of the Diocese, we again ask the HHS to rescind this mandate because it is an unprecedented federal interference in the religious liberty and freedom of conscience of the Catholic community and the Diocese.

Below are clarifications on the regulations offered by the USCCB:

The mandate does not exempt Catholic charities, schools, universities, or hospitals. These institutions are vital to the mission of the Church, but HHS does not deem them "religious employers" worthy of conscience protection, because they do not "serve primarily persons who share the[ir] religious tenets." HHS denies these organizations religious freedom precisely because their purpose is to serve the common good of society—a purpose that government should encourage, not punish.

The mandate forces these institutions and others, against their conscience, to pay for things they consider immoral. Under the mandate, the government forces religious insurers to write policies that violate their beliefs; forces religious employers and schools to sponsor and subsidize coverage that violates their beliefs; and forces religious employees and students to purchase coverage that violates their beliefs.

The mandate forces coverage of sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs and devices as well as contraception. Though commonly called the "contraceptive mandate," HHS's mandate also forces employers to sponsor and subsidize coverage of sterilization. And by including all drugs approved by the FDA for use as contraceptives, the HHS mandate includes drugs that can induce abortion, such as "Ella," a close cousin of the abortion pill RU-486.

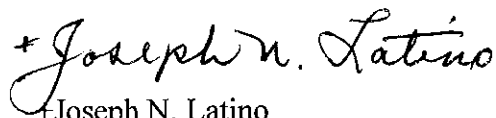
Catholics of all political persuasions are unified in their opposition to the mandate. Catholics who have long supported this Administration and its healthcare policies have publicly criticized HHS's decision, including columnists E.J. Dionne, Mark Shields, and Michael Sean Winters; college presidents Father John Jenkins and Arturo Chavez; and Daughter of Charity Sister Carol Keehan, president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association of the United States.

The federal mandate is much stricter than existing state mandates. HHS chose the narrowest state-level religious exemption as the model for its own. That exemption was drafted by the ACLU and exists in only 3 states (New York, California, Oregon). Even without a religious exemption, religious employers can already avoid the contraceptive mandates in 28 states by self-insuring their prescription drug coverage, dropping that coverage altogether, or opting for regulation under a federal law (ERISA) that pre-empts state law. The HHS mandate closes off all these avenues of relief.

There are times and situations in life when one may remain silent, but there are also times in life when one MUST speak. As Catholics this is the time and the situation when we must speak in opposition to this immoral mandate and defend our freedom to practice our faith.

No matter your political persuasion this mandate is a direct attack on the teachings of our Church and on the right to religious liberty guaranteed by the Constitution.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph N. Latino". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Joseph N. Latino
Bishop of Jackson

For more information visit www.usccb.org