



On Religious Freedom and HHS Impacts

These words are written in Washington, D.C., on my way home from the Bishops' Meeting in Atlanta. Today I spent three hours at the National Mall, visiting the memorials to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln, as well as the memorials to patriotic service in World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. This walk through the history that has won and preserved our freedom as Americans was particularly timely in light of the grave threat to religious liberty we Catholics face in the federal government's health care mandates. The bishops are in agreement that this policy represents an intolerable restriction of our freedom to practice our faith. The Atlanta meeting updated us on the nationwide effort to have it overturned.

Let's review for a moment what's at stake. In January the Department of Health and Human Services ordered group health plans to cover medical practices which Catholic teaching considers seriously wrong: surgical sterilizations and the provision of contraceptives, including those that induce abortion. Though an exemption was granted for "religious employers," to qualify as "religious" an institution must exist for the purpose of inculcating religious values and it must "primarily" employ and serve people "who share the religious tenets of the organization." For Catholic colleges,

hospitals, and charitable services this exemption will be useless, since these institutions both employ and serve vast numbers of non-Catholics and they do not limit themselves to spreading explicitly religious values. It matters not to HHS what the Catholic Church may teach about the so-called "preventive services" in question; Catholic institutions must provide them in health plans they offer and subsidize them with fees they charge for insurance. So HHS confronts the Church with a very stark choice: violate your conscience or go out of business. This is why 43 Catholic institutions went to federal court in May to seek relief. As the Bishops put it in "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty," religious freedom means much more than freedom to worship - to go to Mass on Sunday, to pray the Rosary at home. It means "we can make our contribution to the common good of all Americans" by doing "the good works our faith calls us to do without having to compromise that very same faith." If HHS is successful in reducing religious freedom to freedom to worship, "the state alone will determine who gets to contribute to the common good and how they get to do it." But if the state can decide for us what it is to be Catholic, we will have lost our religious liberty. To be truly free we must be able to define our identity ourselves.

A government that limits religious liberty to what happens in church may one day abolish freedom to worship as well. That's just what the Mexican government tried to do in the 1920s, as we learn from the powerful new film about the Cristero revolt, "For Greater Glory." I strongly urge you to see this movie this summer to bring into sharp focus the challenge

we face in 2012. For the underlying issue comes right out of the pages of the Gospel: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." We must pray that we can make that distinction with wisdom and live it out with courage.