



On HHS Conscience-crushing Provisions

When you read these words, the “Fortnight for Freedom” will have ended; but the threat to religious liberty has not. This August the regulations of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) begin to take affect which mandate insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization, and abortion-inducing drugs. These conscience-crushing provisions confront the Church with a bitterly unpalatable alternative: refuse to comply and pay huge fines or relinquish control of Catholic institutions built up over generations. But that is not all.

This unprecedented body blow to our religious practice is accompanied by another, equally offensive, attack on our religious identity: HHS has seen fit to assign us a new Catholic identity with its authoritative definition of a “religious institution.” To qualify as such under the new health care act a Catholic organization must serve primarily Catholics. This means that only those good works we direct to our fellow believers count as Catholic charity. In effect, says HHS, the St. Vincent de Paul Society ceases to be “religious” if Vincentian volunteers feed and clothe mostly non-Catholics. Up to now Vincentians have always asked, “Are you hungry?” Catholic hospitals have always asked, “Are you sick?” HHS would have us ask instead, “Are you Catholic?” We help people because we are Catholic, not because they are.

The HHS definition shrinks freedom of religion (how we live out our faith) down to freedom of worship (what we do in church). But the God who calls us to worship Him in church sends us forth to serve Him in the least of his brethren in the world. As Pope Benedict XVI has written, “The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”

Separation of church and state was meant to protect churches of every denomination from precisely the kind of arbitrary bureaucratic interference HHS has embarked on. How have Catholics so offended our fellow citizens as to merit so sudden and severe a restriction on our religious liberty? Should we apologize for providing opportunities for non-Catholic students to graduate from Catholic universities, for non-Catholic sick people to be healed in Catholic hospitals, for the non-Catholic hungry to be fed in our soup kitchens? Is not America a better land for the distinct contribution we Catholics make to build up the common good?

The “Fortnight of Freedom” concluded on the 4th of July, when the Declaration of Independence proclaimed our rights to be “inalienable.” This means they can’t be taken away or given away. Religious liberty is not a right the government gives us; it is a right the government owes us. We rightly claim it as our own because, as the Declaration states, we are endowed with it by our Creator. We inherit this precious liberty from those who won it for us at the cost of great courage. We now face a challenge that demands similar courage from us if we are to

hand down to those who come after
us the religious freedom we received
as such a great gift.