



By MOST REV. MICHAEL J. SHERIDAN, S.Th.D.

As I did just a few weeks ago, I once again alert you to an alarming and serious matter that negatively impacts the church in the United States directly, and that strikes at the fundamental right to religious liberty for all citizens of any faith.

The federal government, which claims to be “of, by, and for the people,” has just dealt a heavy blow to almost a quarter of those people — the Catholic population — and to the millions more who are served by the Catholic faithful. You will remember that last August the administration first proposed a nationwide mandate for contraception and sterilization coverage in virtually all private health plans in the country. At the same time, the administration also proposed a “religious employer” exemption. But this exemption was so narrow that it would apply only to those religious organizations that served primarily or exclusively other Catholics. Catholic schools, Catholic Charities and Catholic hospitals — which serve people of many religions — would not be exempt. These kinds of institutions were to be required to offer and pay for medical products and procedures (including drugs that result in abortions) that are in direct opposition to our Catholic faith. Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, commented that even Jesus and His disciples would not qualify for the exemption because they were committed to serve those of other faiths.

Since last August, hundreds of religious institutions, as well as hundreds of thousands of individual citizens — Catholic and non-Catholic alike — have raised their voices in principled opposition to the requirement that religious institutions and individuals violate their own basic moral teaching in their health plans.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced on Jan. 20 that almost all employers, including Catholic employers, will be forced to offer their employees’ health

coverage that includes sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception. Almost all health insurers will be forced to include those “services” in the health policies they write. And almost all individuals will be forced to buy that coverage as part of their policies. The administration considers this matter to be final. We are told that there is no openness to changing this rule which is an egregious affront to religious liberty.

Even those who may disagree with the church’s teaching on the sanctity of human life (including *The Washington Post* and the *New York Daily News*) recognize that the government has no business forcing religious institutions to sponsor and pay for procedures and drugs which violate their religious teachings.

In so ruling, the administration has cast aside the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, denying to Catholics our nation’s first and most fundamental freedom, that of religious liberty. As a result, unless the rule is overturned, we Catholics will be compelled either to violate our consciences, or to drop health coverage for our employees (and thus suffer the penalties for doing so). The administration’s sole concession was to give our institutions one year to comply. Cardinal-elect Dolan, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, commented on this concession by saying that we Catholics now have one year to figure out how to violate our consciences.

*We cannot — and we will not — comply with this unjust law.* People of faith cannot be made second-class citizens. We are already joined to our brothers and sisters of all faiths and many others of good will in this important effort to regain our religious freedom. Our ancestors did not come to these shores to help build America’s cities and towns, its infrastructure and institutions, its enterprise and culture, only to have their posterity stripped of their God given rights. In generations past, the church has always been able to count on the faithful to stand up and protect her sacred rights and duties. I hope and trust that she can count on this generation of Catholics to do the same. Your children and grandchildren deserve nothing less.

And, therefore, I ask two things of you. First, as a community of faith *we all must commit ourselves to prayer and fasting* that wisdom and justice may prevail, and religious liberty may be restored. Without God we can do nothing; with God, nothing is impossible. Second, I recommend that you *visit*

[www.usccb.org/conscience](http://www.usccb.org/conscience)

to learn more about this severe assault on religious liberty and how to contact the members of Congress in support of legislation that would reverse the administration’s decision.

Let us stand united in prayer and in defense of human dignity and religious liberty!