

On Friday, January 20, of this year, the secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Kathleen Sebelius announced that institutions such as Catholic universities and hospitals have one-year to “adapt” their policies to ensure employee coverage for all FDA approved contraceptives, including the abortion drug Ella, with no co pays, no deductibles.

Cardinal-designate Timothy M. Dolan, archbishop of New York and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops says that a decision made by Barak Obama today is effectively a message that **“we have a year to figure out how to violate our consciences.”**

This was Cardinal-designate Timothy Dolan’s response to a decision to continue to demand that sterilization, abortifacients and contraception be included in virtually all health plans. That announcement means that this mandate and its very narrow exemption will not change at all; instead there will only be a delay in enforcement against some employers.

The cardinal-designate continued, **“To force American citizens to choose between violating their consciences and forgoing their health care is literally unconscionable. It is as much an attack on access to health care as on religious freedom. Historically this represents a challenge and a compromise of our religious liberty.”**

The Health and Human Services rule requires that sterilization and contraception – including controversial abortifacients – be included among **“preventative services”** coverage in almost every health care plan available to Americans.

**“The government should not force Americans to act as if pregnancy is a disease to be prevented at all costs,”** added Cardinal-designate Dolan.

At issue, the U.S. bishops and other religious leaders insist, is the survival of a cornerstone freedom that ensures respect for the conscience of Catholics and all other Americans. **“This is nothing less than a direct attack on religion and First Amendment rights,”** said Franciscan Sister Jane Marie Klein, chairperson of the board at Franciscan Alliance, Inc., a system of 13 Catholic hospitals. **“I have hundreds of employees who will be upset and confused by this edict. I cannot understand it at all.”**

Daughter of Charity Sister Carol Keehan, president and chief executive officer of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, voiced disappointment with the decision. Catholic hospitals serve one out of six people who seek hospital care annually. **“This was a missed opportunity to be clear on appropriate conscience protection,”** Sister Keehan said.

Cardinal-designate Dolan urged that the Health and Human Services mandate be overturned. **“The Obama administration has now drawn an unprecedented line in the sand,”** he said. **“The Catholic bishops are committed to working with our fellow Americans to reform the law and change this unjust regulation. We will continue to study all the implications of these troubling decision.”**

Coincidentally or not, eight days before the Health and Human Services announcement, an open letter from Religious Leaders in the United States to All Americans was released. These 39 leaders of various churches and organizations, Catholic and non-Catholic Christian, Jewish leaders, and the National Commander of the Salvation Army among others joined together to affirm their concerns regarding marriage and religious freedom. I hope to have a copy of this open letter posted to the St. Patrick web site soon.

One of my first homilies at Saint Thomas Aquinas church in Ames was based on the second reading from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9 verse 15 where Paul says "woe unto me if I do not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ"

He goes on to say that he needs to administer the Good News which was entrusted to him.

So too, it is with deacons, by virtue of our ordination we are entrusted to preach the gospel Of Christ.

Over the years I have tried my best to do just that, but I must tell you that preaching is not always easy and sometimes it forces me out of my comfort zone and might even make you uncomfortable.

The truth can be hard to accept at times, but as Jesus says in John's gospel, **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"**.

In the past, I have shared statistical information with you that can be quite disturbing;

35 to 40% of Catholics don't believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, although this is a truth in the teaching of the Catholic Church.

There are as many Catholic marriages that end in divorce as do non catholic, although the church has sound teaching on the sacrament of marriage.

Even in very controversial issues the church teaches that we should love our neighbor. Hate the sin, but love the sinner.

There is not an organization in the world that has done more to help the poor and those in need than the Catholic Church.

As we are all aware, we are somewhere in the middle of an election year and frankly it is not very pretty. No matter which side of the aisle you set on it seems that nothing can get done right. It seems that government wishes to impose more laws, restrictions, and requirements all the time. Our founding fathers of the USA came together and they fought a war to break free from the tyranny that was imposed in that day. Independence was declared and a new Constitution with its amendments was passed and put in place to be the law of the land.

There are currently threats to our religious freedom that will impact our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren that we couldn't have imagined as little as 30 or less years ago.

We as Catholics have a need to know just what they are and how they will impact us for generations to come. Our religious freedoms should not be threatened nor eliminated by the actions of any administration.

Eighteen years ago in my homily I stated that I stood with my bishop, and today I stand with a growing number of bishops and religious leaders as I share this information with you. I invite you to stand with us to protect our religious freedoms.