

Beloved National Family,

A Blessed First Friday and First Saturday in February to all of you. May our Lord's Sacred Heart and our Mother's Immaculate Heart intercede for all of us!

Please permit me to make the three following requests.

First, it doesn't take a great deal of attention to notice that we live in an increasingly pluralistic and irreligious society, and democratically elected governments may increasingly reflect that reality. My first request from all of you and your fraternities is that we pray for this great land and its elected officials that we all may serve as instruments of the Lord's peace and justice, doing the Lord's will as best we can. "Pray without ceasing," as St. Paul urged (1 Thessalonians 5: 17).

My second request is that all of you not only support, as many of our Regional Ministers and National Executive Council have already done, but also share, publicize and distribute the following statement drafted by our JPIC Chair Kent Ferris:

"The National Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan Order of the United States of America joins the United States Catholic bishops in their strong condemnation of the "Preventive Services" mandate of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. All thirty national regions, representing over 13,000 individual members, support that condemnation.

Catholic organizations that provide health care insurance to their members will have their long established conscience rights violated by the mandate to make available, and use organizational funds to procure insurance plans covering sterilization and contraceptive drugs, including those which are abortifacient. This mandate preempts individual and organizational choices in conformance with the Church's sanctity of life teachings.

It is an abuse of religious freedom, as it subordinates traditional religious beliefs of Catholics and many others to the will of the State. While the Church has a responsibility to participate in society, that participation must be conditioned by the beliefs and practices of the Church. We live in a pluralistic society in which only when the rights of all members are respected is the common good attained. The Church's beliefs in the sanctity of life permeate its charitable works, its outreach to the world. These beliefs make many contributions to our society, helping, nursing, feeding and caring, all without trampling on the religious rights of others.

As Secular Franciscans, we are bearers of peace. We seek out ways of achieving unity through dialog. Mindful of these responsibilities, we pray for and seek from our elected officials an alternative to the present U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ruling; one that is life-affirming and respectful of the religious beliefs of all."

This weekend, last weekend and next weekend, Bishops in Dioceses all across the United States are offering statements similar to ours, similar to the words of Cardinal-designate Timothy Dolan, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) posted on the USCCB website: www.usccb.org/conscience, and in the Wall Street Journal:

“Religious freedom is the lifeblood of the American people, the cornerstone of American government. When the Founding Fathers determined that the innate rights of men and women should be enshrined in our Constitution, they so esteemed religious liberty that they made it the first freedom in the Bill of Rights.

In particular, the Founding Fathers fiercely defended the right of conscience. George Washington himself declared: "The conscientious scruples of all men should be treated with great delicacy and tenderness; and it is my wish and desire, that the laws may always be extensively accommodated to them." James Madison, a key defender of religious freedom and author of the First Amendment, said: "Conscience is the most sacred of all property."

Scarcely two weeks ago, in its Hosanna-Tabor decision upholding the right of churches to make ministerial hiring decisions, the Supreme Court unanimously and enthusiastically reaffirmed these longstanding and foundational principles of religious freedom. The court made clear that they include the right of religious institutions to control their internal affairs.

Yet the Obama administration has veered in the opposite direction. It has refused to exempt religious institutions that serve the common good—including Catholic schools, charities and hospitals—from its sweeping new health-care mandate that requires employers to purchase contraception, including abortion-producing drugs, and sterilization coverage for their employees.

Last August, when the administration first proposed this nationwide mandate for contraception and sterilization coverage, it also proposed a "religious employer" exemption. But this was so narrow that it would apply only to religious organizations engaged primarily in serving people of the same religion. As Catholic Charities USA's president, the Rev. Larry Snyder, notes, even Jesus and His disciples would not qualify for the exemption in that case, because they were committed to serve those of other faiths.

Since then, hundreds of religious institutions, and hundreds of thousands of individual citizens, have raised their voices in principled opposition to this requirement that religious institutions and individuals violate their own basic moral teaching in their health plans. Certainly many of these good people and groups were Catholic, but many were Americans of other faiths, or no faith at all, who recognize that their beliefs could be next on the block. They also recognize that the cleverest way for the government to erode the broader principle of religious freedom is to target unpopular beliefs first.

Now we have learned that those loud and strong appeals were ignored. On Friday, the administration reaffirmed the mandate, and offered only a one-year delay in enforcement in some cases—as if we might suddenly be more willing to violate our consciences 12 months from now. As a result, all but a few employers will be forced to purchase coverage for contraception, abortion drugs and sterilization services even when they seriously object to them. All who share the cost of health plans that include such services will be forced to pay for them as well. Surely it violates freedom of religion to force religious ministries and citizens to buy health coverage to which they object as a matter of conscience and religious principle.

The rule forces insurance companies to provide these services without a co-pay, suggesting they are "free"—but it is naïve to believe that. There is no free lunch, and you can be sure there's no free abortion, sterilization or contraception. There will be a source of funding: you.

Coercing religious ministries and citizens to pay directly for actions that violate their teaching is an unprecedented incursion into freedom of conscience. Organizations fear that this unjust rule will force them to take one horn or the other of an unacceptable dilemma: Stop serving people of all faiths in their ministries—so that they will fall under the narrow exemption—or stop providing health-care coverage to their own employees.

The Catholic Church defends religious liberty, including freedom of conscience, for everyone. The Amish do not carry health insurance. The government respects their principles. Christian Scientists want to heal by prayer alone, and the new health-care reform law respects that. Quakers and others object to killing even in wartime, and the government respects that principle for conscientious objectors. By its decision, the Obama administration has failed to show the same respect for the consciences of Catholics and others who object to treating pregnancy as a disease.

This latest erosion of our first freedom should make all Americans pause. When the government tampers with a freedom so fundamental to the life of our nation, one shudders to think what lies ahead” (Cardinal-designate Timothy M. Dolan is the archbishop of New York and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. This article originally appeared in the Wall Street Journal on January 25, 2012, and is reprinted with permission of the author).

Again, my second request is that we all support our Bishops in their work here to protect religious freedom. Encourage them in person, by phone, by letter or email. Share with them our statement. Pray for them.

My third and final request is that you exercise your essential rights of citizenship and in some way communicate to a local Senator and Congressman these concerns. The USCCB at their website directs us to the National Committee for a Human Life Amendment and they offer the following (<http://www.nchla.org/actiondisplay.asp?ID=292>):

“ACTION: Contact your U.S. Representative by e-mail, phone, or FAX letter:

- **Call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at: 202-224-3121, or call your Members’ local offices.**
- **Send an e-mail through NCHLA’s Grassroots Action Center at: [HERE](#).**
- **Additional contact info can be found on Members’ web sites at: www.house.gov and www.senate.gov.**

MESSAGE: "Please co-sponsor the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act (H.R. 1179, S. 1467) and help enact it into law. The Obama administration’s decision to require even religious institutions to provide coverage of sterilization and contraceptives, including drugs that can cause an abortion, makes passage of this measure especially urgent. Please ensure that the rights of conscience of all participants in our nation’s health care system are respected.”

WHEN: Now.”

May God bless our efforts to protect life and to safeguard our religious liberties.

Tom