



January 29, 2012

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

On January 20th, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued an unprecedented ruling that negatively impacts the Catholic 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.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced last week 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. Almost all individuals will be *forced* to buy that coverage as a part of their policies.

In spite of many appeals, the current Administration also refused to broaden the religious exemption to these rules – an exemption limited to groups that hire and serve people primarily of their own faith. Consequently, most churches and church-run institutions do not qualify because of their very openness to serving the common good of society and all people regardless of creed. In so ruling, the Obama 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 must be prepared either to violate our consciences, or to drop health coverage for our employees (and suffer the penalties for doing so). The Administration’s sole concession was to give our institutions one year to comply and “*adapt*” to this new rule.

You must know that we cannot—we will not—comply with this unjust law. Even those who may disagree with the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of human life recognize that the government has no business forcing religious institutions to sponsor and pay for procedures which violate those teachings. People of faith cannot be made second class citizens. Our ancestors in faith did not come to these shores to help build America’s cities and towns, its infrastructure and institutions, only to have their descendants stripped of their God-given and constitutional rights. In generations past, the Church has always been able to count on the faithful to stand up and protect the Church’s sacred rights and duties. I hope and trust it can count on this generation of Catholics to do the same. Our future generations deserve nothing less.

Therefore, I would ask of you three things. First, as a family of faith we 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. Secondly, I urge you to contact your representatives in Congress seeking their support of legislation that would reverse the Administration’s decision. Thirdly, I would invite you to learn more about this unprecedented assault on religious liberty in our nation and what is at stake with this ruling by visiting the U.S. Bishops’ website at www.usccb.org/conscience.

United in prayer and in our defense of human dignity, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Terry R. LaValley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley
Bishop of Ogdensburg