



February 4, 2012

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last Friday (January 20th) President Barack Obama informed the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Cardinal-designate Timothy M. Dolan that it was his decision that the Affordable Health Care Act regulations would require many Catholic institutions and agencies to provide mandatory insurance coverage for contraceptive procedures and medicines. As a consequence, all of our elementary and secondary schools, Catholic colleges and universities, Catholic Hospitals, Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services to name only a small sector of Church agencies affected may be required by August 2013 to provide these services and medicines under federal mandate. A huge piece of the wall of separation between Church and State has been breached and if allowed to stand, one has to wonder what the government might require next. Mandatory abortion coverage sometime in the future should not be discounted by anyone if we allow this regulatory implementation at this moment to go unchallenged.

The President and his Secretary for Health and Human Services are willingly and willfully precipitating a constitutional crisis by causing this assault on the freedom of religion at the federal level. Their judgment cannot be allowed to stand. I am certain that our Church will pursue both judicial and legislative relief in the days and months coming. I also believe that we will prevail in the end, most likely in the judicial approach. The latest action follows the denial of funding to a respected agency (Migration and Refugee Services) of the Church to help female victims of sexual trafficking heal from the terrible wounds inflicted on them in this country. Why? Because the church agency refused to provide abortions and contraception as options for these women.

The lofty and hopeful words of the President at the time of his speech at Notre Dame three years ago about freedom of and respect for the religious conscience of all have been rendered questionable at best. What a tragedy and what a shame.

Those of you who have known and watched me over the sixteen years it has been my privilege to be your bishop know that I have until now refrained from engaging in political discourse. But this is now a moral issue and the timing by the President leaves me no option but to inform you of what is happening which I believe to be an assault on the sacred. I and my brother bishops did not choose this moment, the President and Secretary Sibelius did.

I write this to you in the hope that you might better understand the high stakes involved in this matter and that our efforts to overturn and reverse last week's decision can be the beneficiary of your prayers and support. For additional information on this matter, I refer you to the diocesan website (<http://www.dosp.org>) and to my personal blog articles which can be accessed through the same address.

John Carroll, our nation's first Catholic bishop, and the early Catholics of the thirteen original colonies came to these shores to escape precisely this form of religious intolerance and tyranny. For well over two centuries we have enjoyed the pluralistic benefits of their vision for freedom for all religions in this land of plenty. We just wish to be left alone to follow the dictates of our conscience. This is indeed the worst assault on religious freedom by the federal government in a long time. It cannot be allowed to stand.

Wishing you every peace and blessing of this New Year, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ

Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch
Bishop of St. Petersburg