



Office of the Bishop
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February 9, 2012

To: Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Baton Rouge

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I write to you concerning an alarming and serious matter that directly and negatively impacts the Church in the United States, striking 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 millions more served by the Catholic faithful.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently announced 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 a part of their policies.

In so ruling the federal 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 to violate either 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.

We cannot - we will not - comply with this unjust law. People of faith cannot be made second-class citizens. We are already joined by our brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations and faith traditions, and many others of good will, in this important effort to regain our religious freedom.

Therefore, I ask you to do three things. First, as a community of faith please be committed to prayer and fasting that wisdom and justice may prevail, and religious liberty may be restored. Second, kindly visit www.usccb.org/conscience, to learn more about this severe assault on religious liberty and how to contact Congress in support of legislation that would reverse the administration's decision. Third, I ask you to follow the action item in the accompanying USCCB Bulletin insert.

I stand firm in solidarity with my brother Catholic Bishops of Louisiana, and those of our country, to denounce this ruling and to express our complete opposition to its implementation. This assault on the guaranteed constitutional right for us as Church to exercise our religion is unprecedented, unwarranted and unacceptable. We pray our efforts to have this decision reversed may be swift and complete.

Yours always in Jesus, the Good Shepherd,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert W. Muench".

Robert W. Muench
Bishop of Baton Rouge