

## Bishops aim to protect religious liberty

Dennis Coday | Sep. 30, 2011



Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., delivers the keynote speech during the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in Washington April 27. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Saying that religious liberty, a basic right enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, "is now increasingly and in unprecedented ways under assault in America," the president of the U.S. bishops' conference today announced the formation of an ad hoc committee for religious freedom with the aim of protecting "our people from this assault."

Announcing the new ad hoc committee, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York called this "a new moment in the history of our conference."

The assault on religious liberty is coming "in an increasing number of federal government programs or policies that would infringe upon the right of conscience of people of faith or otherwise harm the foundational principle of religious liberty," Dolan said.

This assault, he said, "now appears to grow at an ever accelerating pace in ways most of us could never have imagined."

Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., will chair the new committee.

The announcement came today in a letter signed by Dolan and addressed to "My Brother Bishops." The letter was released about midday Friday.

"Support for the [ad hoc committee] work will include adding two full-time staff at the [bishops' conference offices], a lawyer expert in the area of religious freedom law, and a lobbyist who will handle both religious liberty and marriage issues," a press release from the bishops' conference said.

In his letter Dolan said, "The work of the ad hoc committee will begin immediately. ... This is because we cannot waste time in this vital area."

Explaining the urgency, he cited "new threats to religious liberty that have arisen just since [the bishops']

meeting in June":

- New proposed guidelines from the Department of Health and Human Services that would mandate the coverage of contraception and sterilization in private health insurance plans. The guidelines would give a very narrow exemption for religious employers, but no protected conscience exemption for individuals.
- Other regulations from the Department of Health and Human Services that would require the bishops' Migration and Refugee Services to provide the "full range of reproductive services" to trafficking victims and unaccompanied minors.
- Pressure on Catholic Relief Services from the U.S. State Department to provide condom distribution as part of comprehensive HIV prevention activities and artificial contraception as part of reproductive health activities in international relief and development programs.
- The Department of Justice "actively attacking" the Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, as unconstitutional and "claiming that supporters of the law could only have been motivated by bias and prejudice."
- Passage of marriage equality legislation by the state of New York.

In his letter, Dolan said, "The establishment of the ad hoc committee is one element of what I expect to be a new moment in the history of our conference. Never before have we faced this kind of challenge to our ability to engage in the public square as people of faith and as a service provider. If we do not act now, the consequence will be grave."

In a statement issued after Dolan's announcement, Lori said he welcomed "the opportunity to work with fellow bishops and men and women of expertise in constitutional law so as to defend and promote the God-given gift of religious liberty recognized and guaranteed by the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States."

"This ad hoc committee aims to address the increasing threats to religious liberty in our society so that the church's mission may advance unimpeded and the rights of believers of any religious persuasion or none may be respected," he added.

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