

HHS move amounts to 'to hell with you,' bishop says as protests mount

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Jan. 27, 2012

WASHINGTON -- A week after the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services told individuals and institutions who oppose contraception "to hell with you," as one bishop put it, members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy were mobilizing their followers to fight.

Bishops across the country -- including Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta, Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond of New Orleans and Bishop Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla. -- were preparing letters to be read at all Masses during the Jan. 28-29 weekend.

But one of the most strongly worded reactions to HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius' Jan. 20 announcement that religious organizations could delay but not opt out of a requirement that all health plans cover contraception and sterilization at no cost came from Bishop David A. Zubik of Pittsburgh, in a column titled "To hell with you."

Sebelius and the Obama administration "have said 'To hell with you' to the Catholic faithful of the United States," Zubik wrote. "To hell with your religious beliefs. To hell with your religious liberty. To hell with your freedom of conscience. We'll give you a year, they are saying, and then you have to knuckle under."

He called on Catholics in the Pittsburgh Diocese to "do all possible to rescind" the contraceptive mandate by writing to President Barack Obama, Sebelius and their members of Congress about this "unprecedented federal interference in the right of Catholics to serve their community without violating their fundamental moral beliefs."

Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria, Ill., enlisted the aid of St. Michael the Archangel in fighting "this unprecedented governmental assault upon the moral convictions of our faith."

In a Jan. 24 letter to Peoria Catholics, he directed that the prayer of St. Michael be recited "for the freedom of the Catholic Church in America" during Sunday Masses at every parish, school, hospital, Newman center and religious house in the diocese.

The prayer reads in part: "Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil" and "cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits, who roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls."

"I am honestly horrified that the nation I have always loved has come to this hateful and radical step in religious intolerance," Jenky said in the letter.

"While it is primarily the laity who should take the leading role in political and legal action, as your bishop it is my clear responsibility to summon our local church into spiritual and temporal combat in defense of Catholic Christianity," he added. "I strongly urge you not to be intimidated by extremist politicians or the malice of the cultural secularists arrayed against us."

"We cannot -- we will not -- comply with this unjust law," declared Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix in a

Jan. 25 letter.

"Our parents and grandparents did not come to these shores to help build America's cities and towns, its infrastructure and institutions, its enterprise and culture, only to have their posterity stripped of their God-given rights," Bishop Olmsted said. "In generations past, the church has always been able to count on the faithful to stand up and protect her sacred rights and duties. I hope and trust she can count on this generation of Catholics to do the same."

The Catholic bishops of Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, said in a joint statement that they "cannot stand by silently" in light of what they called "an unprecedented and untenable abrogation of religious freedom in the United States."

"This is part of a pattern in the United States that has degenerated from the recognition of religion as good and salutary in our society to religion being subjected to punitive discrimination," said the statement signed by Bishops Kevin J. Farrell of Dallas and Kevin W. Vann of Fort Worth and Dallas Auxiliary Bishops J. Douglas Deshotel and Mark J. Seitz.

They urged the nearly 2 million Catholics in North Texas, along with "other people of good will," to join them "by speaking out for the protection of conscience rights and religious liberty that are essential to the common good of our nation and in keeping with the basic human rights enshrined in our American way of life."

Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron of Detroit, in a Jan. 21 statement, called on lawmakers in Washington to "step up, step in, and protect the rights of their fellow citizens from a government mandate that is truly unconscionable."

"This fight against the federal government's overreaching exercise of its power is everybody's fight," he added.

Aymond, who was in Rome for his "ad limina" visit to Pope Benedict XVI, said Jan. 26 that he had already sent a letter to members of Congress protesting the HHS decision and now expected the Catholic faithful to take action.

"This is a critical time and one that will call for us to engage in public dialogue," he said. "We cannot stand by and allow this to move forward without speaking out."

Aymond said Catholics "must be able to live the message of Christ in the U.S. and follow our conscience."

"We are not demanding that others live our Christian values, but we should have the right to do so," he added.

Although both Gregory and Lynch had announced they would write letters to be read at weekend Masses, the texts of those letters had not been made public as of the afternoon of Jan. 26.

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* Jan. 25, Cardinal-designate Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the HHS decision rejected the "loud and strong appeals" by "hundreds of religious institutions and hundreds of thousands of individual citizens" since the comment period began last August.

He said it is naive to think that contraception and sterilization will be "free" under the HHS mandate.

"There is no free lunch, and you can be sure there's no free abortion, sterilization or contraception," he wrote. "There will be a source of funding: you."

Speaking that evening at Fordham University in New York, the archbishop told reporters that Obama had called

him the morning of Jan. 20 "to tell me the somber news" before the HHS decision was announced publicly.

He said he felt "terribly let down, disappointed and disturbed" and found it difficult to reconcile the decision with what the president had told him during a meeting in November -- "that he considered the protection of conscience sacred, that he didn't want anything his administration would do to impede the work of the church that he claimed he held in high regard, particularly in the area of health care, education, works of charity and justice."

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