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Catholic bishops issue rallying cry for ëreligious freedomí

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Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix leads hundreds of people in prayer during a rally for religious liberty March 23 in downtown Phoenix. U.S. bishops are calling for a "Fortnight for Freedom" this summer. (CNS photo/J.D. Long-Garcia, Catholic Sun)

The nation?s Catholic bishops are calling on the faithful to pray and mobilize in a ?great national campaign? to confront what they see as a series of threats to religious freedom, and they are setting aside the two weeks before July 4 for their ?Fortnight for Freedom? initiative.

The exhortation is contained in a 12-page statement [1] released Wednesday (April 12) by the bishops? Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty, and its chief concern is the Obama administration?s proposal to provide contraception coverage to all employees with health insurance, including those who work for religious groups.

The statement represents the hierarchy?s latest effort to overturn that policy, and it includes an explicit threat of widespread civil disobedience by the nation?s 67 million Catholics.

?If we face today the prospect of unjust laws, then Catholics in America, in solidarity with our fellow citizens, must have the courage not to obey them,? the statement says. ?No American desires this. No Catholic welcomes it. But if it should fall upon us, we must discharge it as a duty of citizenship and an obligation of faith.?

The document cites a number of other perceived threats to religious freedom besides the contraception policy, such as harsh immigration laws that could impede the church?s social ministry and university policies targeting campus student religious groups.

The statement also makes a concerted effort to portray the Catholic campaign as bound up with the fight to defend American values from an overbearing central government.

?What is at stake is whether America will continue to have a free, creative, and robust civil society ? or whether the state alone will determine who gets to contribute to the common good, and how they get to do it,? the statement says. ?This is not a Catholic issue. This is not a Jewish issue. This is not an Orthodox, Mormon, or Muslim issue. It is an American issue.?

The ?Fortnight for Freedom? covers the period during which the church calendar recalls ?great martyrs who remained faithful in the face of persecution by political power,? as the bishops put it ? such as John the Baptist, who was killed by Herod; the apostles Peter and Paul, who were killed in ancient Rome; and Sts. John Fisher and Thomas More, who were executed under England's King Henry VIII.

Religious progressives and church-state watchdogs quickly pushed back.

The Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, head of the Interfaith Alliance [2], argued that while he agrees there are genuine threats to religious freedom, the bishops' fight against contraception coverage means that ?the Catholic Church?s definition of religious freedom is one that is only concerned with its own beliefs and practices and makes no room for those whose views differ.?

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, head of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, noted that many church-affiliated agencies operate on taxpayer dollars and therefore should follow public policy guidelines.

?When taxpayers are forced to support sectarian agencies that refuse to meet the needs of women, gay people and other communities that?s a real violation of religious liberty,? Lynn said [3]. ?If the bishops want to run sectarian social services, they ought to collect the money from their parishioners, not the taxpayers.?

In their statement, the Catholic bishops deploy both the soaring rhetoric of American patriotism and the vivid examples of Catholic martyrs in calling for two weeks of parish activities, devotions and public rallies that would begin on June 21 and conclude on July 4. By invoking martyrs and saints, the bishops aim to recall the church?s sacred history of ?resistance to totalitarian incursions against religious liberty.?

The bishops have grown increasingly concerned about the advancement of laws promoting or protecting gay rights, for example, and fear that churches and affiliated agencies that use taxpayer dollars will have to comply with nondiscrimination policies.

But it was the Obama administration?s release of a policy mandating that all employers provide free birth control coverage in their health care plans that sent the hierarchy into overdrive. The bishops have couched the fight as a battle for religious freedom because they say they know Americans ? including the vast majority of Catholics ? do not agree with church teachings against contraception.

The White House has proposed modifying the mandate so that insurance companies would provide the contraception coverage separately to employees and with no cost to the faith-based employer. But the bishops ? as well as their conservative allies in other denominations and the Republican Party ? say that accommodation is insufficient.

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