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Catholics around the country rally for religious freedom

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Seven-year-old Gabe Haanen holds a sign at a rally in Green Bay, Wis., on Friday. The rally was part of the national "Stand Up for Religious Freedom" effort. (CNS/The Compass/Steve Wideman)

WASHINGTON -- Catholics in dioceses across the country made their stand for religious freedom in a series of rallies Friday.

Organized by the Pro-Life Action League in Chicago and Citizens for a Pro-Life Society, based in Michigan, the rallies took place on the same day in an estimated 145 cities and all together drew about 63,000 participants.

The focus of the rallies has been the federal Health and Human Services mandate that would require the Catholic church and other religious employers to provide free health insurance coverage for contraceptives, abortion-inducing drugs and sterilizations -- services they deem immoral.

A pair of "Stand Up for Religious Freedom" rallies drew about 200 each to the federal courthouses in both Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

The mandate that employers who do not meet a narrow religious exemption be required to pay for such coverage for all employees is "an unprecedented intrusion of the state" into the workings of religious institutions, said Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami at the Miami rally; he also attended the Fort Lauderdale event.

Wenski said a trend in U.S. society today seeks to marginalize people of faith, to silence their voices in the public square.

"Religion is personal. But it should never be private. As people of faith we have a right to make our proposals," he said, noting that the purpose of the so-called "separation of church and state" is to "protect the church from the state, not the separation of religion from society or of society from religious belief."

A Mass at St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral in Trenton, N.J., was the starting point for a rally outside the Statehouse. A standing-room-only crowd estimated at more than 900 packed the cathedral.

"We come to pray for an end to this unwarranted and unprecedented governmental assault on religious freedom, created by the unwarranted and unprecedented intrusion of the federal government upon our ability as a people of faith to be who we are and to believe, freely and without restriction, as God has invited us to believe, has called us to believe," said Bishop David M. O'Connell of Trenton in his homily.

"But let's be clear, an opponent strikes only when that opponent senses or perceives weaknesses in the one to be assaulted. An opponent triumphs only when the opponent discovers that such perceived weaknesses are real," he said.

"I worry that we ourselves, within the church, may have set the stage for the 'radical secularism' of which Pope Benedict (XVI) has spoken by the way we have failed to hand on our Catholic faith, whole and entire, to this and to the next generation," he added.

Citing statistics that, among other things, put the number of Catholics who go to weekly Mass at 25 percent and those who believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist at under 50 percent, O'Connell said "the fault, as Shakespeare wrote, may not be 'in our stars, but in ourselves.'"

An estimated 1,700 turned out for an interfaith "Stand Up for Religious Freedom" rally in Santa Ana, Calif.

"This is everyone's fight," Rabbi Dov Fischer told the crowd. "There is one common theme that unites us: A religion is not touchable by the government."

"All men are created. We're all anxious to get to the 'equal' part -- but all men are created," said another speaker, Greg Weiler, president of the St. Thomas More Society of Orange County. "The bottom line is that there is a God, and I'm not him."

Weiler added, "Where do your rights come from? Not from President Obama or even from President Reagan -- but from God."

Another rally, this time outside the federal building in downtown Detroit, drew an estimated 1,000 people.

"It is no longer enough for us to just be good Catholics or good Christians; God needs saints. It is time for us to take a stand," Auxiliary Bishop Michael J. Byrnes of Detroit told the gathering.

Felician Sr. Rose Marie Kujawa, president of Madonna University in suburban Livonia, said the Felician-sponsored university is among the church-related institutions that would be required to provide the objectionable coverage under the mandate.

"Our question now is: If our government can withdraw our right to religious liberty, what is the next freedom that can be suspended?" she said. Perhaps the government will also find freedom of speech or freedom of the press inconvenient, she suggested, asking, "If one freedom can be swept under the carpet, why not others?"

In Green Bay, Wis., a large crowd filled the Brown County Court House Plaza.

"It's time for us to stand up and stand together to call people's attention to what's happening in our country, which is so precious," Bishop David L. Ricken told the crowd. "This is an act of solidarity where we are saying, 'wake up people' because these rights can crumble and be taken away from us very fast and almost underneath our own eyes. So we have to stand up and have people listen."

He closed his talk by encouraging people to take part in the "fortnight for freedom" called for by the U.S. Catholic bishops June 21 to July 4. Events are being sponsored in all U.S. Catholic dioceses.

Another thousand people stood outside the federal building in downtown Phoenix amid sweltering temperatures for a midday rally that took aim against the HHS mandate.

"Authentic health care prevents disease, saves lives and offers medical support to all, including unborn children and their mothers," said Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix. "Authentic health care does not kill anyone. It seeks first of all to do no harm."

Catholic obstetrician-gynecologist William Chavira told the crowd life and liberty are under attack and that he objected to the government's attempt to interfere with his rights.

"I will not stand for it ... for a government entity to impose what they define as religion or the practice of medicine on me. I will not tolerate it," he said.

At a rally in Boston, Raymond Flynn, former mayor of Boston and a onetime U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, spoke of the HHS mandate "causing a serious rift between the Democratic Party and Catholics -- and people of all faiths, for that matter."

Still, Flynn added, "despite what you hear from the media and some politicians, this is not about access to contraception; it is about the principle of whether the federal government can force religious organizations to take actions that violate their own faith and their own conscience."

Flynn said, "You can't imagine how I felt when I saw my longtime friend Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York city filing a legal challenge against the Obama administration for their discriminatory policies against religious institutions in America. I am proud of Cardinal Dolan, but ashamed that this administration has let it come to his.

"Nobody would have thought that this could have been imaginable 25 years ago. The Catholic Church suing the White House for violations of religious liberties? Unthinkable. What happened to separation of church and state?"

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