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Catholic bishops rebuke Biden over contraception mandate claims

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In a rare public rebuke, Catholic bishops chided Vice President Joe Biden for saying during Thursday's vice-presidential debate that Catholic hospitals and institutions will not be forced to provide contraception coverage to employees.

Without mentioning Biden by name, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said the "inaccurate" statement "made during the Vice Presidential debate" was "not a fact."

Biden and GOP vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan are both Catholic.

During Thursday's debate, Biden said "No religious institution -- Catholic or otherwise, including Catholic social services, Georgetown hospital, Mercy hospital, any hospital -- none has to either refer contraception, none has to pay for contraception, none has to be a vehicle to get contraception in any insurance policy they provide. That is a fact."

Biden also said that there is no "assault on the Catholic church." Ryan responded, "Why would they keep suing you?"

More than 35 suits have been filed against the Obama administration's plan to require employers to provide no-cost contraception coverage to employees. Religious employers like churches are exempt from those rules, while affiliated institutions -- hospitals, universities and others -- that serve the general public are not.

The White House later offered a complex compromise that would allow insurance companies, rather than employers, to pay for the contraceptive coverage. Critics -- including the bishops -- say it doesn't go far enough.

"They will have to pay for these things, because the premiums that the organizations (and their employees) are required to pay will still be applied, along with other funds, to cover the cost of these drugs and surgeries," the bishops' conference said.

The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which filed the first suit against the mandate on behalf of Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina, used Biden's statement to fire off a fundraising appeal, saying, "In short, what the Vice President of the United States said last night was, to use a respectful term, woefully inaccurate."

Clo Ewing, an Obama campaign spokeswoman, stood by Biden's statement, and criticized Ryan and running mate Mitt Romney for using the issue as a "political football."

"President Obama and Vice President Biden believe standing up for women's health and respecting religious liberties are not mutually exclusive, and they are committed to upholding both principles," she said in a statement to Religion News Service. "As it stands, no religious institution will have to refer, provide, or pay for contraception."

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