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As bishops ratchet up HHS rhetoric, Dolan to receive award for fight

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 9, 2013 NCR Today

The president of the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, is to receive an award for his vocal and sometimes antagonistic stand against a federal mandate requiring coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans.

Dolan is to receive the 2013 William Wilberforce Award from the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview at a Washington ceremony April 27, the organization announced Tuesday.

In a release announcing the award [1], the organization said Dolan's arguments regarding the federal mandate have "served as a rallying cry for people of faith fighting to preserve their God-given and constitutional right to the free exercise of religion."

The William Wilberforce Award, named after the 19th-century British politician known for his opposition to slavery, was established by Charles Colson, an aide to U.S. President Richard Nixon, who experienced a conversion to Christianity after being jailed for charges related to the Watergate scandal.

Given since 1988, the award has recognized a number of global leaders, including several U.S. Catholics noted for their alignment with more conservative viewpoints.

In 2003, the award went to Sam Brownback, a Catholic convert and Republican who was then a U.S. senator and is now the governor of Kansas, known for his efforts to do away with income tax in the state. In 1998, it went to Fr. Richard J. Neuhaus, founder of the conservative journal *First Things*.

In announcing the award, the Colson Center described Dolan as nothing less than a martyr for the faith.

"During his first days as the Catholic Church's new pontiff, Pope Francis visited the tombs of St. Peter and other early Christian martyrs who held strong in the face of persecution by Roman emperors, and preserved the right to practice their faith for millions to follow," the center wrote [1].

"Today in America, it might be said that Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York is leading a modern-day journey of defiance, guiding the Christian faithful across the country to stand against unjust laws that marginalize their beliefs."

As head of the U.S. bishops' conference, Dolan over the past year and a half has voiced strong opposition to the federal mandate, a provision of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as part of the implementation of the health care reform law, claiming it does not do enough to exempt religious organizations opposed to contraception.

After the Obama administration issued wide-ranging changes [2] to the mandate in February -- its second attempt to adjust the measure to meet criticisms -- the bishops' conference released a March 20 statement [3] saying the measure was "an unprecedented ... violation of religious liberty by the federal government."

According to the administration's changes, any employers who are exempt from filing taxes because of their religious status, partially defined as "churches, their integrated auxiliaries, and conventions or associations of churches," would be exempt from the mandate.

Additionally, any nonprofit organizations that oppose providing coverage and consider themselves to be religious entities will also be exempt.

The bishops' conference made their statement in comments filed with the Department of Health and Human Services, which was accepting public comment on the matter through Monday. The bishops raised five specific complaints against the newest changes, saying, among other things, they do not provide for organizations that self-insure and they define religious employers in "intrusive and constitutionally improper" ways.

Dolan, along with a number of other American bishops, has taken a strident tone toward the administration. After the initial release of the mandate in January 2012, several bishops painted the matter as an assault on religious freedom.

Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh wrote [4] at the time that the administration had essentially said " 'To hell with you' to the Catholic faithful of the United States." Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill., called it an "unprecedented governmental assault upon the moral convictions of our faith."

A number of lawsuits against the mandate, some filed by Catholic dioceses and institutions, are still pending.

The U.S. bishops' ad hoc committee for religious liberty, led by Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, released a statement Monday expressing "deep gratitude" for those filing the suits.

"Their goal is nothing less than securing the freedom of the Church to continue to obey the Lord's command," wrote Lori in the release [5].

Acknowledging the February modifications by the Obama administration, Lori called them a "small, incremental step" and that "most of the serious problems with the definition and mandate remain, and so we will continue our vigorous efforts to correct those remaining flaws."

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