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US bishops: 'Firm resolve' to continue fight against HHS mandate

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The main leadership group of U.S. Catholic bishops unanimously decided to continue fighting an Obama administration mandate regarding coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan said Tuesday.

Dolan, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, said in a letter to the nation's bishops [1] that the 36-member committee elected to lead them was "unanimous in their resolve" to keep fighting the mandate.

"They asked me to convey that firm resolve to you," Dolan writes in the letter, which was made available by the bishops' conference Tuesday afternoon. "If there's any perception that our dedication to this fight is flagging, that's dead wrong."

Dolan's letter comes following the meeting in Washington last week of the bishops' administrative committee, the group of bishops that directs the work of the conference between its twice-yearly plenary sessions.

At a press conference at the end of that meeting, Dolan said the concerns the bishops had about the mandate were "grave" [2] and may require the bishops to ask Catholics to consider switching insurance carriers.

In January 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services issued its mandate as part of the health care reform law that contraceptive care, such as prescriptions for birth control pills, must be fully covered as part of any insurance plan. Some religious organizations are exempt from this rule, but a number of Catholic groups say those exemptions are not enough.

While the bishops have continued to oppose the mandate, other Catholic groups, such as the Catholic Health Association (CHA), have said the administration has addressed their concerns in the revisions.

According to the final version of the federal mandate, which the administration released June 28, any organization that self-certifies as a nonprofit religious group with religious objections to contraceptive coverage can defer coverage of contraceptives to a separate health insurance issuer.

The administration "has now established an accommodation that will allow our ministries to continue offering health insurance plans for their employees as they have always done," the Catholic Health Association's president, Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, said after the release of the final version of the mandate.

The organization, which describes itself as the largest group of nonprofit health care providers in the nation, comprises more than 600 hospitals and 1,400 long-term care and other health facilities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

In Tuesday's letter, Dolan said the bishops had three main concerns regarding the final version of the mandate, including whether nonprofit groups that provide church ministries will be given the same leeway around the

mandate as the churches themselves.

While the mandate specifies that religious employers such as churches are exempted from its requirements, the other groups are covered by a separate accommodation.

Dolan also said the bishops are concerned that the mandate does not cover for-profit businesses run by individuals who may oppose certain contraceptive services.

While the final regulations state the administration is not providing relief from the mandate for for-profit businesses, they also state that the accommodation for nonprofit groups is meant to ensure they will not have to "contract, arrange, pay, or refer for contraceptive coverage" to which they object on religious grounds.

In his letter, Dolan also says any perception the bishops were not continuing the fight against the mandate may have come from CHA's acceptance of it, which he says was "untimely and unhelpful."

He says the bishops will continue to discuss the meeting at their upcoming November plenary assembly, to be held in Baltimore. That meeting will be the last as president for Dolan, whose three-year term in the elected position concludes during the plenary.

The bishops have attracted a range of groups outside their norm as partners in their fight against the measure, with Baltimore Archbishop William Lori announcing in July that he had aligned with 57 other religious leaders, including those from the Southern Baptists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

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