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US bishops again reaffirm health care mandate opposition

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 13, 2013 NCR Today
Fall bishops' meeting 2013

The U.S. bishops on Wednesday reaffirmed their opposition to a federal mandate requiring coverage of contraceptive services in healthcare plans, alleging that ?the government is refusing to uphold its obligation to respect the rights of religious believers.?

While the statement said the bishops ?stand united in our resolve to resist this heavy burden,? it did not specify what measures the bishops plan to take to resist the mandate, first issued in January 2012 by the Department of Health and Human Services as part of the health care reform law.

?We will continue our efforts in Congress and especially with the promising initiatives in the courts to protect the religious freedom that ensures our ability to fulfill the Gospel by serving the common good,? said the statement, which was issued late Wednesday afternoon.

The bishops have been meeting in Baltimore for their annual plenary assembly since Monday. While proceedings were open to the press Monday and Tuesday, on Wednesday and Thursday the bishops are meeting in closed-door executive sessions.

A release [1] from the conference said the statement was passed by the bishops unanimously. Some 400 of the nation's bishops, including those retired from ministry, were attending the Baltimore gathering.

Passage of the statement on the healthcare mandate comes after the public portions of the bishops' meeting saw significant changes in emphasis and tone from the bishops.

Outgoing U.S. bishops' president New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan barely mentioned the prelates' fight against the Obama administration in his presidential address Monday [2], instead focusing on the issue of religious freedom globally.

Conversely, Wednesday's statement seems to be a sort of retrenchment by the prelates in their nearly two-year struggle against the administration, which has seen sometimes strident remarks by some of the nation's bishops towards Obama or his staff.

Wednesday's statement identifies three key problems the bishops have with the mandate, including that it does not provide an appropriate exemption for business owners who object to contraceptive services.

The mandate, the bishops write, "compels our faithful people in business to act against our teachings, failing to provide them any exemption at all."

The mandate has been revised several times by the Obama administration since its 2012 release. According to the final version, which is to go into effect January 1, 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.

Dolan, who has led the bishops since 2010, is stepping down as their president at the conclusion of this week's assembly. Wednesday's release effectively signifies his successor, Louisville, Ky., Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, may inherit one of the concerns that most occupied the bishops during Dolan's tenure.

Kurtz was elected [3] as the bishops new president Tuesday by a 53 percent majority of the prelates.

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