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Behind-the-scenes Baltimore sisters unlikely face of ongoing contraception battle

Pat Perriello | Jan. 8, 2014 NCR Today

The Little Sisters of the Poor have been a fixture in Baltimore for many years. They are a behind-the-scenes order ministering lovingly to the elderly in the community, including many elderly priests. I'm pretty sure that none of their members or those they minister to has any direct issues related to contraception. Yet they have wound up in the spotlight of the battle with the Obama administration over the mandate to offer contraceptive services as part of the insurance packages offered by the Affordable Care Act.

How did they wind up in this position? I suspect it is no accident. Clearly, they are acting nobly as loyal servants of the church. Could it just be, however, that the American bishops have put the sisters up to their public role in this fight? It is pretty easy to argue against the big bad bishops, but how does one argue against the devoted sisters who only want to mete out mercy and kindness to those who are suffering?

Jean Marbella in a Baltimore *Sun* editorial [1] puts the struggle in perspective. She makes three important points. First, she says we are discussing an issue that had presumably been resolved decades ago. She describes a major disconnect between the church and reality. She notes that close to 100 percent of sexually active women have used birth control at some point in their lives. The data she cites include both Catholic and non-Catholic women. Birth control is no longer seen as a moral or religious issue by the public.

Second, she explains that the nuns are already exempt. They need only sign a statement confirming their objections to the policy on religious grounds. Additionally, their insurance policies are provided by the Christian Brothers, who are not going to be offering insurance plans that include birth control coverage. In short, none of their employees are in any danger of receiving coverage for these services unless they go out and find them for themselves through the exchanges.

Finally, Marbella invokes the spirit of Pope Francis and muses that she had been expecting a change in focus that would have made such struggles unlikely. She says she thought the days of the pope as the "chief rapper of knuckles" were over.

Why do the bishops continue to want to fight over this issue rather than support their people in receiving needed health care services? Do they feel the need to save face after investing so much of their efforts on a flawed notion of religious liberty and resistance to health care coverage that they had championed for years? Are they still trying to figure out how to put the spirit of Pope Francis into practice?

One wonders who the bishops are trying to protect. I don't hear any voices from the pews clamoring to support the bishops' position on this issue. It seems to me that the bishops simply want to prove how strong they are politically. They seek to impose their will on the entire country regardless of what others may believe. They seem determined to win, even if their efforts wind up denying services to thousands of women around the country. The bishops may be possessed of absolute truth, but even so, they are not the only ones who possess rights and freedom in this country.

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[1] http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/bs-md-marbella-little-sisters-20140103,0,3944950.story?