

Not siding with bishops on conscience exemption is foolish

Phyllis Zagano | Feb. 1, 2012 Just Catholic

"Ignore the Bishops" has long been a favored indoor sport of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. As it moves to international -- even Olympic-level -- competition, its dangers become apparent.

Witness the fracas over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) -- what pundits call "Obamacare" -- and its religious exemptions.

Basically, unless you are a religious employer and only hire folks for religious duties (essentially interpreted as direct religious ministry in the church building), you have to provide insurance coverage for birth control, sterilizations and abortifacient devices and chemicals by Aug. 1, 2013.

Federal regulations forbid paying for (or encouraging) abortion, but the federal act mandates any woman can get an IUD or some other device or chemical to interrupt pregnancy. The government says that's not abortion, which it cannot mandate or pay for. Yet.

The hue and cry is not letting up. Nor should it.

[The archbishop of New York wrote densely in *The Wall Street Journal*](#) [1]; the cardinal archbishop of Galveston-Houston complained to Congress. Bishops are writing in their diocesan papers or having letters read at Sunday liturgies.

But who is listening?

There are plenty of friendlies out there. The United States is three-quarters Christian and 22 percent Catholic. Yet despite the fact that a quarter of the U.S. House of Representatives and a quarter of the Senate have co-sponsored identical amendments to reverse an agency determination of what constitutes "religious exemption," there is not much steam in this engine.

Why?

Because it is seen as a fight started by the overseers of awful scandals in their own houses who continue to rule as if nothing ever happened. Further, the bishops lost on birth control more than a generation ago. Folks hear their objections as objections to insurance for birth control. Quite frankly, they don't care.

Then there is the overall issues mix-up, which makes the bishops less and less credible. In Kansas City, Mo., [a bishop who entered pre-seminary at the age of 12](#) [2] faces trial because he appears to have covered up a priest-pornographer. In Los Angeles, [folks learned an auxiliary bishop maintained a family in another state](#) [3]. In Philadelphia, a legal barn dance forestalled [a now-dead cardinal](#) [4]'s testimony on pederasty.

Catholics do not look to the chancery for advice on sex.

So while Catholics are largely anti-abortion, the issues are confused. That some means of "birth control" remove

or prevent the newly conceived human being from attaching to its nine-month home in the uterus is lost on the flock. When the bishops lost on birth control (most Catholics who need to either use it or have used it), they lost on abortifacient birth control as well. The bishops never taught the clear distinction. Now their words are mostly ignored as too much ado about nothing.

But this is serious and this is real. If you think there should be a religious exemption to anything, there should be a religious exemption to forcing not only birth control, but sterilization and abortifacients as well. Folks who work for Catholic agencies know the score, so if they accept the job they accept the rules, or at least their consequences. Catholic agencies that chafe under Catholic restrictions can disaffiliate.

The United States -- indeed, the entire world -- is disbelieving about what the Catholic church teaches, or tries to teach, because its arguments for "life" so often run below the fold, after the latest news about the latest pederast, embezzler or cover-up. The bishops are assumed to be liars about these matters; why should anyone listen to them about anything else?

It does not have to be this way.

Maybe Catholics should look to others for advice on how to untie the knot?

When Dominican Sr. Mary Hughes delivered her presidential address to the August 2011 assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, she had a one-word message: forgiveness.

It was -- and is -- a tough message for a tough crowd. U.S. women religious, especially their leaders, had spent enormous amounts of time and energy responding to a [Vatican-mandated inquisition begun at the whim of a now-retired curial official](#) [5]. The meetings, reports and visits were all done. It was now time to move on.

But turning the other cheek, Hughes said, does not mean everything was OK to begin with.

"Forgiveness never pretends that all was well," she said.

True enough. All was not well. All is not well.

"Neither does forgiving mean that one does not speak," Hughes added.

Supporting the bishops' agenda regarding Obamacare does not affirm everything they have done -- collectively or individually. One can forgive, even while remaining critical.

But not supporting the defense of religious freedom against a government bent on eroding it seems a foolish choice for any religious group, especially the largest single denomination in the United States and in the world.

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