NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://ncronline.org)

Obama to forbid LGBT discrimination by federal contractors

Thomas Reese | Jun. 16, 2014 NCR Today

President Barack Obama has ordered his staff to prepare an executive order that will require federal contractors not to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. The White House says that in preparing the order, it will listen to all interested parties.

Buzzfeed broke the story this morning [1].

Depending on what exemptions are provided, the new requirement may affect Catholic Relief Services, Catholic hospitals, Catholic education and other Catholic charities that receive federal funds. These institutions normally provide services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people without discrimination, but problems have arisen with regards to adoptions by gay couples and spousal benefits for gay employees.

Similar rules at the state and local level have been opposed by the U.S. bishops and led to the closing of some Catholic programs funded by the states. For example, in 2006, Catholic adoption programs were closed in Massachusetts and San Francisco because the state and city said the agencies could not receive funds if they refused to sponsor children with gay couples. Dioceses in Illinois pulled out of adoption services for the same reason in 2011.

Prior to the legalization of gay marriage, Catholic adoption services in San Francisco and Boston did sponsor kids with gay individuals who may or may not have been living with a partner on a "Don't ask, don't tell basis." But when a married gay couple asked to adopt a child, the bishops said no, and the Catholic agencies directed the couples to other agencies that would serve them. This did not satisfy government officials who eliminated their funding.

In 2010, the Washington archdiocese also got out of the adoption business when gay marriage became legal in the city. It was also threatened with the loss of funding to help the poor when the city council required that employers with city contracts provide spousal benefits to gay employees. Instead, the charities eliminated spousal benefits for all future employees. Since heterosexual employees would not receive spousal benefits, the agencies could not be accused of discrimination.

In 1997, San Francisco Archbishop William Levada tried a different approach. He allowed Catholic agencies to offer benefits to one other person living in the employee's household, which might be a dependent parent, child, sibling or partner. Since the focus was not on domestic partners, he found this acceptable. But once gay marriage was legal, this solution fell apart.

The timing of the Obama announcement could not have been worse, just before the U.S. bishops' Fortnight of Freedom, which begins June 21. Up until now, the fortnight focused on the bishops' opposition to the contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act. The Obama announcement will undoubtedly spur Catholic bishops to redouble their efforts to rouse public opinion to see this as another threat to religious liberty.

While the White House says it wants to hear from interested parties, based on the experience with the

Affordable Care Act, it is doubtful that the administration and the bishops will come up with mutually acceptable exemptions for religious institutions. But the stakes are too high for both sides and for the poor who are served by Catholic institutions not to try to find a workable solution. Defunding of Catholic organizations that served the poor is unthinkable.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for *NCR* and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. His email address is treesesj@ncronline.org [2]. Follow him on Twitter: @ThomasReeseSJ [3].]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Thomas Reese's column, Faith and Justice [4], is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [5].

Source URL (retrieved on *05/04/2016 - 14:27*): https://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/obama-forbid-lgbt-discrimination-federal-contractors

Links:
[1] http://www.buzzfeed.com/chrisgeidner/white-house-to-proceed-with-federal-contractor-lgbt-executiv
[2] mailto:treesesj@ncronline.org
[3] http://www.twitter.com/thomasreesesj
[4] http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice
[5] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup