

## **US Bishops Press On in Defense of Conscience Say Forcing Catholic Hospitals to Cut Services Won't Bring Better Access to Health Care**

WASHINGTON, D.C., OCT. 12, 2011 (Zenit.org (<http://www.zenit.org>)).- If you support access to health care, then you need to protect conscience rights.

This is the line of reasoning offered by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Congress and the White House.

In what the bishops are calling an "open letter (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/conscience-protection/upload/open-letter-conscience-protection-11-10-11.pdf>)"

from 20 national Catholic organizations, the USCCB is asking Congress and the administration "to protect conscience rights in health care."

The HHS aims to force private health care plans to include contraception, sterilization and abortifacients as "preventive care."

The title of the bishops' letter, "Support access to health care?

Protect conscience rights," alludes to the fact that the Church's extensive network of health care institutions in the United States will be compromised if the administration continues in its aim to restrict conscience rights.

The USCCB letter notes that "as written, the [HHS] rule will force Catholic organizations that play a vital role in providing health care and other needed services either to violate their conscience or severely curtail their services. This would harm both religious freedom and access to health care."

The letter also says the HHS has put "many faith-based organizations and individuals in an untenable position" and will "undermine respect for religious liberty and freedom of conscience."

USCCB criticism of the new HHS regulation focuses on the narrow exemptions for "religious" employers, which fail to cover the vast majority of faith-based organizations, including Catholic hospitals, universities and other service organizations.

The letter can be utilized by local churches, dioceses and other Catholic groups as a bulletin insert or advertisement. It ran Tuesday as a full-page ad in two D.C. dailies. Signatories include the presidents of Notre Dame and the Catholic University of America, and the presidents of the Catholic Medical Association and Catholic Relief Services.

Partially in response to the recent mandate by the HHS, the U.S. bishops last week formed an Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty. The USCCB Web site

(<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/conscience-protection/index.cfm>)

has been updated with more actions Catholics can now take to protest the HHS mandate.

The site provides more information in handy formats, and suggests that Catholics write to Congress in support of the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act. It notes that the HHS received more than 57,000 comments generated through the bishops' campaign before the administration's Sept. 30 deadline.