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Bishop: Conscience protection must be legislated

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Feb. 14, 2012

WASHINGTON -- Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, said the ongoing debate over a federal mandate requiring employers, including most religious entities, to provide no-cost contraception and sterilization coverage demonstrates the need that a religious right to conscience protection be enacted into federal law.

"Our religious freedom is too precious to be protected only by regulations," Bishop Lori said in a Feb. 13 phone interview with Catholic News Service. "It needs legislative protection."

"More legislators, I think, are looking at it. There's more bipartisan support for it. There should be a lot of pressure exerted on Congress to pass it and for the president to sign it," he said.

Among the bills under consideration is the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act, introduced by U.S. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb.

On Feb. 10 President Barack Obama announced a revision to the contraceptive mandate that allows religious employers not to offer such services to their employees but would compel insurance companies to do so. The change came after three weeks of intensive criticism that the contraception mandate would require most religious institutions to pay for coverage they find morally objectionable.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius first announced the contraception mandate and the religious exemption Jan. 20.

Catholic and other religious leaders have objected that the exemption is written so narrowly that institutions such as hospitals, schools and social service agencies would not qualify. Questions also have been raised over how the revision announced by Obama will pertain to self-insured parties, like many dioceses and Catholic organizations, and whether it could still force entities morally opposed to contraception to pay for such services.

Bishop Lori also suggested that Obama administration officials would have better understood the concerns religious organizations have about the revision had they tried to talk with the Catholic bishops, evangelicals and Orthodox church leaders who objected to the mandate.

"That certainly did not happen," he said.

Only after the original rule regarding contraception and sterilization coverage was revised and ready to be announced Feb. 10 did the White House contact Cardinal-designate Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, according to the bishop.

Such a meeting would have allowed the bishops "to bring it home that our ministries of charity, health care and education flow from what we believe and how we worship and how we are to live," Bishop Lori told CNS.

"These are not side businesses that the church runs," he said. "They flow from our discipleship. Therefore I do

not think the government should be intruding in these things."

An administration official told CNS in an email Feb. 13 the White House planned to convene a series of meetings over the coming weeks "with faith-based organizations, insurers and other interested parties to develop policies that respect religious liberty and ensure access to preventive services for women enrolled in self-insured group health plans sponsored by religious organizations."

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