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Bishops need to rethink understanding of religious freedom

Pat Perriello | Oct. 28, 2013 NCR Today

David DeCosse has written an article [1] that sheds significant light on the U.S. Catholic bishops' fight against contraception and its inclusion in the administration's new health care law. He explains how the bishops are utilizing an outdated notion of religious freedom that fails to consider the individual's right to freedom of conscience. I was so pleased to see his scholarly article as it illustrates a point I have been trying to make for some time [2].

What DeCosse highlights is that Catholic teaching since the Second Vatican Council is focused on the individual's freedom of conscience, which enables and even requires that individual to make his or her own personal moral decisions. The elevation of Pope Francis to the papacy now all but demands a change in the way the bishops are approaching this concept of religious liberty.

The bishops are simply off-base. They are following a medieval theology based on the divine right of kings and an understanding that falsehood has no rights. Since error has no rights, the church is free to demand that its point of view be deemed the only view that is acceptable. This ideology is what enabled the Inquisition and the not infrequent slaughter of those who refused to accept the truth as the church understood the truth.

Of course, the church does not use such extreme measures today, but the thinking of these bishops has not changed. Unfortunately, they have attempted to abrogate the truths of the Second Vatican Council. It is no wonder traditionalists want to pretend the council never happened or that it is inauthentic. The teachings of the council demand a change in behavior. Now the teachings of Pope Francis also demand a change in behavior.

It is time for our bishops to stop trying to compel the entire country to follow their dictates. Lip service or a distorted notion of freedom of conscience is not sufficient. Bishops need to truly understand that individuals have a mind and a conscience that cannot be violated. Interfering with the freedom of others in order to attain the freedom you want for yourself and your truth as you define it is not good enough in the church of Francis.

The saddest part of this misguided episode by the bishops is that it has put them on the wrong side of the health care issue. For years, the Catholic church has espoused the importance of universal health care coverage. They have advocated for health care as a right, not a privilege. Now they come down on the side of denying millions of Americans health insurance, just as the most extreme tea party members seek to do. What a shame.

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