



(Dreamstime/Denys Kovtun)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 10, 2026

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Religious liberty is in the headlines again. In [Illinois](#) and [New York](#), laws permitting assisted suicide raise religious liberty concerns and, in Florida, [the state's attorney general is arguing](#) that Catholic schools are violating the religious liberty of those parents who refuse to vaccinate their children.

The U.S. Supreme Court on Sept. 8 declined an emergency appeal from a Catholic mother in New York who is seeking a religious exemption from the state mandate for vaccines in public schools. The court did not rule on the merits of the case, but voted to allow the case to proceed through the lower courts. Unlike the other three instances, this case does not involve the church's right to religious freedom, only the right of an individual believer.

How to apply the religion clauses of the First Amendment is not self-evident. Each generation of Americans needs to evaluate not the value of religious liberty, but its scope, and how it is to be realized alongside other values. As Catholics, too, we need to place our constitutional rights within the context of a host of church teachings on life, marriage, family, healthcare, the environment and most importantly our teaching on conscience.

Assisted suicide laws require all hospitals, including Catholic ones, to inform terminally ill patients that seeking assisted suicide is an option. There is probably a First Amendment free speech issue here as well: When the government compels speech, all of us should get nervous.

Nonetheless, the core of our Catholic argument is a simple one: We draw a bright red line when it comes to killing people. The Catholic Church's commitment to human life is not always popular, but it is one of the most foundational moral beliefs we hold. Asking Catholic institutions and individuals to help someone kill themselves is, in the strictest sense of the word, unconscionable.

In the context of assisted suicide, however, there is a further consideration: The vulnerability of the person to whom assisted suicide is being offered as an option. "It is awful for Illinois to be forcing every sick and dying person within its borders to hear its message of suicide at their lowest moment — regardless of whether they want it or not," said Mark Rienzi, president of the Becket Fund and lead attorney for the [healthcare providers suing Illinois](#). "Patients deserve the freedom to seek

healing, hope, and accompaniment without the government forcing suicide into the conversation."

Boston College professor of law and theology [Cathleen Kaveny](#) recently demonstrated the frightening appeal of assisted suicide in [an article](#) at Commonweal. Reflecting on the ambivalence she found about the issue among women who were attending a pro-life conference 30 years ago, Kaveny observed, "They repeatedly expressed concern about becoming a burden on their loved ones on the way to their own natural death. Their identity was wrapped up with being helpful, not being helped. And the prospect of burdening anyone, particularly their children, was anathema." When this deeply seated cultural attitude combines with pressure from insurance companies, those who champion assisted suicide as an exercise in autonomy are deceiving themselves.

Advertisement

The Catholic lawsuits in Illinois and New York are not an example of "Heads I win, tails you lose" politics. Yes, the Catholic Church opposed the enactment of these laws, but they passed anyway. We did not abandon our constitutionally protected religious liberty when exercising another constitutionally protected right, to petition the government.

We Catholics employ the theological concept of cooperation with evil to navigate maintaining both our responsibilities as citizens and our beliefs as Catholics. We do not believe you can avoid paying taxes because some of the money is spent on things the Catholic Church opposes. These assisted suicide laws require a deeper level of direct participation on the part of our institutions and their personnel in a practice that is abhorrent to us. We wish it was abhorrent to more people. Whatever the majority decides, we will never, and can never, participate in this morally offensive practice. Only a bastardized version of liberal democracy would seek to compel us to do so.

In Florida, the case is different. The Catholic schools require all students to be vaccinated. It is shocking that in the year of our Lord 2026 anyone is arguing about vaccinations. If you knew nothing else about the insanity of Donald Trump's leadership, one word should be enough to demonstrate the degree of derangement the president has occasioned: measles. That the attorney general of the great state

of Florida, James Uthmeier, is defending the right of parents to not vaccinate their children when there are outbreaks of measles for the first time in decades is appalling but, sadly, no longer surprising.

Uthmeier, however, crossed another line, the religious liberty line, when he wrote to Florida's Catholic bishops insisting that they grant religious exemptions to children who are not vaccinated. The bishops were not having it. "As explained in detail below, the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops (FCCB) and the Catholic bishops in Florida do not have to justify to your office their position on Catholic teaching and their reasons for the current vaccine policies," the bishops wrote in a [letter](#) to the attorney general. But "out of respect for you and your office," they schooled him on religious liberty anyway.

"It is beyond cavil that the bishops, not the state, decide how to interpret and apply Catholic principles and theology," the bishops wrote. First, two thumbs up for invoking a splendid, somewhat arcane, word: cavil. Second, this spanking of the attorney general on what the Constitution allows upends the normal political landscape, where it is Republicans who invoke religious liberty. Third, the bishops are simply right; not complexly right, simply right.

The bishops went further, and this is the most important part. Citing the catechism and other doctrinal statements, the bishops recognized that other moral values are at stake in these discussions: "Vaccinating a child — even with a vaccine developed or tested using historically abortive-derived cell lines — is morally permissible because the parent is not cooperating with the original immoral act and the protection of the common good provides a proportionate reason." The exercise of religious freedom occurs alongside the need to protect and further the common good.

In short, you can't claim a religious exemption if the religion you invoke thinks the grounds for the exemption are fallacious. And for Catholics, more than any other religion, it is abundantly clear who does and does not teach in an official capacity.

Religions should not sit too easily in secular society. There will always be tension, and sometimes conflicts, between the realities of the City of Man and the aspirations of the City of God. In all the commentary about the [anniversary of 9/11](#), it is often unmentioned that the attacks were motivated by religion. In our country, we take these conflicts to the courts and there contend about how the free exercise of religion promised by the Constitution is balanced by the prohibition of a religious

establishment. Our point of view does not always prevail. The jurisprudence develops over time. But in Illinois, New York and Florida, our Catholic leaders, healthcare providers and educators are on the side of the angels and of the Constitution.

You are reading a selection from Michael Sean Winters' weekly newsletter. To get the full edition — including the "In the News" link roundup — delivered 24 hours before it appears online, [sign up here!](#)