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USCCB Renders Mixed Verdict on Conscience Regs

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Distinctly Catholic

The USCCB today said it was "disappointed" about some aspects of the new conscience regulations issued by the Obama Administration, but also praised other aspects of the new rule. In a press release, Deirdre McQuade, of the USCCB Pro-Life Secretariat, said

"The Administration's action today is cause for disappointment, but also offers reasons for hope regarding an emerging consensus in Washington on the need for clear conscience protections for health care providers."

It is very disappointing that the Administration has chosen to eliminate much of the existing regulation on conscience issued in December 2008. Among other things, the final rule issued today eliminates important clarifications that would have helped in interpreting and enforcing longstanding federal statutes protecting the conscience rights of health care providers. It also eliminates a regulatory requirement that recipients of federal funds certify compliance with those statutes.

However, it is welcome news that the Administration says it will take initiative to increase awareness of the conscience statutes, work to ensure compliance with them, and require that government grants make clear that compliance is required. We look forward to working with the Administration and Congress to ensure that these endeavors are carried out, so providers receive the full conscience protection they are due.

We also hope that the Administration will place its full support behind efforts in Congress to clarify conscience protections and make them more secure, by endorsing such initiatives as the Protect Life Act (H.R. 358), the No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act (H.R. 3), and the Abortion Non-Discrimination Act (H.R. 361).

This balanced verdict seems about right, although I think the USCCB should recognize that it is a big, really big, question whether the Bush rules would have survived a court challenge. That court challenge, begun by eight states, was stayed pending the issuance of the new regulations. Still, I am wondering if the voices of the pro-choice movement will be as balanced as that of the bishops' conference.

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