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Which Catholics are against contraception coverage?

Keith Soko | Feb. 1, 2012

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COMMENTARY

There's a battle brewing in America, one that is at the very heart of religious freedom, separation of church and state, and of individual conscience.

Or so one might think in listening to the U.S. Catholic bishops and some conservative Catholic and Christian media.

They argue against the Obama administration's requirement that health care coverage for women mandated by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act include contraception, and that "that strikes at the fundamental right to religious liberty for all citizens of any faith," according to one bishop's letter to his diocese.

In fact, at least 100 bishops who head dioceses issued letters condemning the new Health and Human Services rules, and many had letters read at weekend Masses. The U.S. bishops have implored the concept of "conscience," saying that this mandate would force Catholics to go against their own consciences. Cardinal-designate Timothy Dolan accused Obama of making an "unprecedented incursion into freedom of conscience [1] " with the new mandate that employers provide free birth control.

But which Catholics would really be against providing access to contraceptives in health care coverage for women? Is it the 90-some percent of Catholic married couples of child-bearing age who use contraceptives? Is it the 98 percent of sexually active Catholic women who use contraceptives? No, it is not.

So who would it be? It must be a small minority.

One, of course, is the U.S. bishops and the rest of the Catholic hierarchy, including the Vatican. They are all men. In 1968, Pope Paul VI published the "birth control encyclical" called *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life"), which affirmed the Catholic church's opposition to contraception. This was in spite of the pope's own commission, which voted 75 out of 90 in favor of changing the church's teaching and allowing contraception for married couples. Immediately, Catholic theologians issued a statement arguing against the document's methods and conclusions. Years later, the long pontificate of Pope John Paul II began, with him reaffirming the "official" Catholic teaching against contraception, despite the fact that most Catholic theologians disagreed and most

Catholics rejected the teaching.

So who else would be against access to contraceptives? Pro-life groups. The official Catholic position is that human life should be protected from the moment of conception. It is also against any method except the rhythm method (now natural family planning). But for some people, the problem would only be with methods working after conception, such as preventing implantation. Some refer to these as abortifacients and give them the moral equivalence of an abortion. Others would see something that prevents implantation as being a far cry from a later abortion. And this is where, for some, the waters get muddy as to what is contraception and what is abortion. But if you are drawing the line at conception, then that is the boundary you will not cross. But would all people in the pro-life movement object to contraception that works before conception?

And what about this new pleading to the role of conscience? Does it take into account the conscience of otherwise faithful Catholic women and couples who feel that it may be more responsible to use contraceptives to plan and provide for their families? No, it does not. Nor does it take into account the consciences of Catholics who for decades have debated and disagreed with this belief, all in good faith, all in the spirit of making the church better. This current view of conscience is focused more on obedience than on the view of conscience articulated in the church's own documents of Vatican II. The Declaration on Religious Freedom, in referring to a well-informed conscience, states that "he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience ..." (n.3) (Excuse the all-male/exclusive language of the documents from the 1960s.)

If the U.S. bishops and the conservative Catholic and Christian media are going to appeal to "conscience," then they better allow for the well-informed consciences of Catholics and non-Catholics who work at Catholic institutions to make their own decisions.

No one is forcing Catholics to use contraception. It is merely stating that they should have access to contraception. Many Catholic theologians have argued that it is a fair and just decision that respects the ability of Catholic and other women to follow their own consciences and make decisions as responsible adults about their own health care and that of their families.

And they also must respect the well-informed consciences of professors at academic universities whose job is the pursuit of knowledge and truth, and for some, the pursuit of justice as well. This includes Catholic theologians who are trying to give advice on improving the church. Since the bishops and others have introduced this into the public arena, they need to respect the consciences and expertise of those voices without the threat of job loss or excommunication.

This is not a question of teaching Catholic doctrine in a classroom; this is wrestling with public policy in a democratic and pluralistic society, and that can get messy. And Catholic teaching has in the past acknowledged that public policy and morality are two separate things. Everything that Catholic teaching argues is immoral is not illegal, as that would not always be practical public policy.

Which Catholics are really against providing contraceptive coverage? My guess is not many, but they are vocal. And probably most of them would be men. Men controlling women. History marches backward.

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