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'Unified, focused' bishops pledge to continue religious liberty defense

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Mar. 15, 2012

A depiction of the Statue of Liberty appears in mosaic, part of a larger piece in a side chapel at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. The U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee vowed at a meeting in Washington on Tuesday and Wednesday to continue to fight against the government mandate that all private insurers cover sterilization and contraception in their health plans. (CNS photo/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

WASHINGTON -- Declaring themselves "strongly unified and intensely focused," the nation's top Catholic bishops vowed to continue their multipronged defense of religious liberty in the courts, Congress and the White House.

The five-page statement titled "United for Religious Freedom" was approved March 14 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Administrative Committee, made up of the USCCB officers and committee chairmen and an elected bishop representative from each of the geographic regions of the USCCB.

The bishops opened their statement with thanks for "all who have stood firmly with us in our vigorous opposition to this unjust and illegal mandate," referring to the Department of Health and Human Services' requirement that nearly all employers must provide free coverage of contraceptives and sterilization to their employees through health insurance plans.

"This is not about the church wanting to force anybody to do anything; it is instead about the federal government forcing the church -- consisting of its faithful and all but a few of its institutions -- to act against church teachings," they said. "This is not a fight we want or asked for, but one forced upon us by government on its own timing."

The debate over the contraceptive mandate is "not a Republican or Democratic, a conservative or liberal issue; it is an American issue," the bishops added.

Nor is the issue about access to contraception or about "the bishops somehow 'banning contraception,' when the U.S. Supreme Court took that issue off the table two generations ago," they said.

What especially concerns the bishops about the contraceptive mandate and the narrow religious exemption to it is the "new definition of who we are as people of faith and what constitutes our ministry," the statement said.

"Government has no place defining religion and religious ministry," the bishops said. "HHS thus creates and enforces a new distinction -- alien both to our Catholic tradition and to federal law -- between our houses of worship and our great ministries of service to our neighbors, namely the poor, the homeless, the sick, the students in our schools and university, and others in need, of any faith community or none."

Such a definition creates "a second class of citizenship within our religious community" that could "spread throughout federal law, weakening its healthy tradition of generous respect for religious freedom and diversity," they added.

The bishops said their Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty plans to publish a statement on religious liberty that will "address the broader range of religious liberty issues."

The upcoming document "reflects on the history of religious liberty in our great nation, surveys the current range of threats to this foundational principle, and states clearly the resolve of the bishops to act strongly, in concert with our fellow citizens, in its defense."

The bishops closed their statement by calling on Catholics and other people of faith "to join us in prayer and penance for our leaders and for the complete protection of our first freedom -- religious liberty -- which is not only protected in the laws and customs of our great nation, but rooted in the teachings of our great tradition."

"Prayer is the ultimate source of our strength -- for without God, we can do nothing; but with God, all things are possible," they added.

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Editor's Note: The full statement is available at www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/upload/Admin-Religious-Freedom.pdf.

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