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Action Against LCWR Undermines Bishops' Freedom of Religion Campaign

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In a recent example of "do what I say, not what I do," the U.S. Catholic bishops announced their "great national campaign" for religious freedom in the United States while at the same time assisting in the Vatican takeover of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. LCWR represents more than 80 percent of U.S. women in religious life and is alleged to have, well, too much conscience, although that is not what the bishops call it.

The "great national campaign" portrays the bishops as under attack by the Obama administration because of the recent Health and Human Services mandate requiring access to contraceptive coverage in employee health plans; the loss of a multi-million dollar government anti-trafficking grant for failure to meet the grant requirements to refer victims for contraceptive and abortion services; and the loss of some state licensing as foster care and adoption providers because of Catholic Charities' refusal to place children with same-sex couples. Concerns with state-based anti-immigrant laws infringing on immigrant access to the sacraments, state limits on small church usage of public schools for weekend worship services, and questions of leadership of college Christian groups came along for the ride.

If you feel this list is a bit narrow given the multitude of conscience issues we face, you have reason to be suspicious. The bishops' religious freedom campaign is largely a cover for their fight against the Affordable Care Act and its HHS contraception mandate. Other issues were added when it became clear that a single focus on contraception would be a hard sell given the generally positive attitude of Catholics themselves toward contraception. In short, the "great national campaign" is the bishops' anti-Obama political strategy for this electoral season.

While the bishops' resistance to supporting what they consider grave immoral acts is praiseworthy, if selective, their campaign does not mention the effects of their freedoms on others whose freedom of

religion is, apparently, irrelevant. This understanding of religious freedom as, in part, freedom to impose belief also underlies the hostile takeover of LCWR.

The more than 45,000 religious women represented by LCWR seem less inclined to impose than to serve. In fact, one of the Vatican's complaints is that the sisters' ministries lack sufficient focus on contraception and abortion. True, the women have largely focused elsewhere: on the homeless, the low-income and destitute, prisoners, the undocumented, militarism, economic injustice, worker's rights, the cast-offs of modern capitalism and its sins. They broadened their availability to the people of God because, after Vatican Council II, the Catholic bishops asked them to, and because such availability echoes the Gospels.

In turn, the sisters often became a voice for the powerless, even sometimes sitting at the tables of power. During the health reform debates, nationally known nuns, along with medical experts and moral theologians, publicly disagreed with the bishops' conclusion that the Affordable Care Act increased access to abortion. The bishops took offense, loud and long.

Today's bishops are generally single-issue men, focused on the sexual morality of others, and either unable or unwilling to implement the full range of Catholic social teaching within church or society. Their concept of church is historically different than that of Vatican II. More than anything else, they want obedience from the sisters, which, as the takeover document notes, means "allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium (teaching role) of the Bishops." The sisters, on the other hand, have become what the bishops were supposed to be; a ministering reflection of God in the world. They are multi-focus women whose power comes from their presence among the powerless. One can imagine the different perspectives on allegiance, leadership, collaboration, truth and transparency to which these two paths have led.

The greatest threat to the bishops' "grand national campaign" for religious freedom is not the Obama administration; it is the bishops' own reaction to 45,000 plus women with well-formed consciences, not to mention the millions of others who know religious persecution when they see it.

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