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Missouri ad seeks to simplify contraception mandate

by Brian Roewe

The Catholic dioceses of Missouri are running 16-second television ads across the state during local news programs and late-night talk shows advocating against the contraceptive coverage mandated by the Obama administration's health care reform.

The campaign, which started running in late October, is being paid for by an anonymous donor to the St. Louis archdiocese.

The U.S. bishops have opposed the mandate, which would require employers provide health care plans that offer contraceptive coverage without fees or co-pays, as a violation of religious liberty.

Although the ads were scheduled to run through Election Day, representatives for the St. Louis and Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., dioceses said the ads were not political in nature.

(St. Louis archdiocese)

Titled "It's that simple," the ad was created in-house by a joint effort between its Respect Life apostolate and communications department of the St. Louis archdiocese.

The ad features three women, each offering a single statement:

Woman 1: "You wouldn't force an atheist to buy you a Bible, it's that simple."

Woman 2: "You wouldn't force a vegetarian to buy you a hamburger, it's that simple."

Woman 3: "Why then would you ask a Catholic employer to purchase your birth control?"

Advertisement

The commercial concludes with the words "Protect," "Religious" and "Liberty" booming one by one onto a background of an American flag behind a bald eagle.

"I feel like often times, people are often bombarded with too much information, and there's a lot of confusion around key and critical issues, and it really doesn't have to be that difficult," said Karen Nolkemper, executive director of the Respect Life apostolate for the St. Louis archdiocese.

It was through that position that the "It's that simple" tagline came to Nolkemper, as she found herself saying it more and more when explaining to people how the contraception coverage mandate from the Department of Health and Human Services affects all employers except a narrowly defined group of religious organizations.

"I'm the kind of person where I like to cut through all the politics and the rhetoric, and what's the core of the issue, what's the bottom line?" she said.

The first television airing of "It's that simple" appeared in late October in St. Louis and has since run in the media markets of Columbia, Kansas City-St. Joseph and Springfield, which are part of Missouri's three other dioceses.

The commercials appear on network channels, usually during morning, mid-day and evening news as well as during mid-day and late-night talk shows.

The ad was originally intended as an online viral video and part of the archdiocese's larger campaign on religious freedom, said Katie Pesha, the St. Louis archdiocese's executive director of communications and planning.

That campaign began May 27 on Pentecost, she said, and is scheduled to run through the Solemnity of Christ on Nov. 25.

After the video first appeared on YouTube on Oct. 17, where it has since been viewed more than 64,000 times as of Tuesday, an anonymous donation to the St. Louis archdiocese provided the funds to extend its reach into TV markets across the state.

The donation covered the entire media buy cost, and no other diocese provided financing for the project, Pesha said. The archdiocese declined to provide the cost of airing the commercials statewide, citing the donor's wish to remain anonymous.

Despite the HHS mandate's origination with President Barack Obama's administration and the presence of a constitutional amendment addressing religious freedom on Missouri's ballot, the archdiocese insists the ad was not connected to the election nor directed toward a specific candidate, party or issue.

"It's not a political ad whatsoever. We're not endorsing any candidate, any party. We're just not doing that, period. Plain and simple," Nolkemper said.

That the ad happened to debut in the midst of the election's final weeks was more a reflection of resources and individual schedules aligning than a political statement, she said.

On the Missouri primary ballot in August was Constitutional Amendment 2, a proposal to prevent any establishment of an official state religion, while defending an individual's right to express his or her religious beliefs, which includes praying in public and private settings. The amendment passed by a wide margin, with more than 80 percent of the vote.

"When we had this opportunity of this donor coming forward, and by the time we could get everything put together and ready to go and sent out, it just, this is the time that it was promulgated," Pesha said. "But that's not to say that we have not been pushing the issue of religious liberty since it became an issue earlier this year."

Jack Smith, interim director of the communications office of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese, which features the ad on its website's homepage, said it's fair for people to make the connection between the ad and the election, but its purpose is "as part of the church's ongoing education about the threat to religious liberty" the HHS mandate presents.

"The ad doesn't mention political parties, doesn't mention the upcoming election, doesn't mention candidates. It's three simple questions about religious liberty," Smith said.

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Editor's note: This story has been edited to correct information regarding Missouri Constitutional Amendment 2.

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