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US bishops? spokesperson: Contraception fight like civil rights movement

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Vocal objections by U.S. bishops over a proposed federal mandate requiring coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans are in line with faith leaders' participation in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, writes the U.S. bishops' spokesperson.

During the last year, writes Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, "misrepresentations abounded" about the bishops' objections to the mandate, a provision of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as part of the implementation of the health care reform law.

"Spinmeisters turned the Catholic Church's right to religious freedom -- including its right to practice what it preaches -- into a war over contraception," writes Walsh in a Tuesday posting at the online news journal *Religion & Politics*.

"When religious freedom became a political football, people criticized the healing church but not the well-heeled abortion lobby fighting it," continues Walsh, director of media relations for the U.S. bishops' conference.

"The reality is that a churchman, even a bishop, does not give up his civil rights when he dons a Roman collar," Walsh writes. "He can have and voice an opinion about the issues of the day."

Comparing the bishops' efforts to those of civil rights leaders, Walsh writes that "clergy were active in the civil rights movement."

"The greatest hero of that movement, Martin Luther King Jr., held the title 'Reverend' because he was a

Baptist minister," Walsh writes. "Joining him were Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who walked with King on the march to Selma, and Rabbi David Teitelbaum, who worked on the March 1965 voter registration drive of African Americans."

Since the federal mandate on contraception was first proposed in January 2012, both the U.S. bishops' conference and a number of individual bishops have issued strident critiques of the government's measure, claiming it does not do enough to exempt religious organizations opposed to contraception.

Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh wrote at the time that the administration had essentially said " 'To hell with you' to the Catholic faithful of the United States." Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill., called it an "unprecedented governmental assault upon the moral convictions of our faith."

Taking up the matter as a whole, the U.S. bishops launched a Fortnight for Freedom in June and July, asking Catholic dioceses to address the matter with "prayer, study, catechesis, and peaceful public action."

"The efforts of religious groups in the last election reflect the American tradition of religious leaders speaking out," Walsh concludes.

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"In the new information age, their voices may have seemed louder and their reach farther, but they followed democracy's way where good citizens engage in the political process.

"And true to politics, some people thought the religious figures were right on, and some thought they were way off. That's how it goes. Jesus had a similar problem"

The Obama administration announced a new set of proposed exemptions from the mandate Feb. 1.

Under the new proposals, any employers who are exempt from filing taxes because of their religious status, partially defined as "churches, their integrated auxiliaries, and conventions or associations of churches," would be exempt from the mandate.

Additionally, any nonprofit organizations that oppose providing coverage and consider themselves to be religious entities will also be exempt.

The U.S. bishops' conference has yet to indicate a position on the new regulations, stating in a Feb. 1 release the bishops "welcome the opportunity to study the proposed regulations closely."

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