

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 11, 2013 at 4:17pm

Dolan: Bishops still have concerns over HHS mandate

by Joshua J. McElwee

Washington — The nation's Catholic bishops continue to have serious concerns about an Obama administration mandate regarding coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan said Wednesday.

Dolan, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, said the concerns were "grave" and may require the bishops to ask Catholics to consider switching insurance carriers.

He said the bishops are continuing to give the issue "careful study" but "still worry about how, if, where we can comply because the problems, the questions that we have remain grave."

Dolan spoke Wednesday at the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops' headquarters in Washington during a press conference billed as a chance to comment on the group's continuing response to a possible U.S. military strike in Syria.

He and dozens of bishops have been in Washington this week to attend a meeting of the conference's administrative committee, a 36-member group of bishops that directs the work of the conference between its twice-yearly plenary sessions.

In January 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services issued its mandate as part of the health care reform law that contraceptive care, such as prescriptions for birth control pills, must be fully covered as part of any insurance plan. Some religious organizations are exempt from this rule, but a number of Catholic groups say those exemptions are not enough.

While the bishops have continued to oppose the mandate, other Catholic groups, such as the Catholic Health Association, have said the administration has addressed their concerns in the revisions.

The administration "has now established an accommodation that will allow our ministries to continue offering health insurance plans for their employees as they have always done," the association's president, Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, said in June, after the release of the final version of the mandate.

According to the final version of the federal mandate, which the administration released June 28, any organization that self-certifies as a nonprofit religious group with religious objections to contraceptive coverage can defer coverage of contraceptives to a separate health insurance issuer.

The Catholic Health Association, which describes itself as the largest group of nonprofit health care providers in the nation, comprises more than 600 hospitals and 1,400 long-term care and other health facilities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Dolan said while he and the bishops have "enthusiastic appreciation" for Keehan and her organization, he found her June statement "less than helpful."

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"We have not ourselves as bishops been able to arrive at the same conclusion," Dolan said. "There's no way that we're ready to say that yet."

Dolan also said while the bishops look to the health association for expertise, "they are not the official teachers in faith and morals in the church."

The start date for the federal mandate is Jan. 1. Asked by a reporter if, given that approaching deadline, the bishops were considering asking Catholics to change health care plans, Dolan said that and other options remained "on the table."

The bishops, he said, are "not quite there yet" in knowing how to respond.

"Obviously, every bishop in his own diocese is going to have to use some prudential judgment to decide how to do this," Dolan said.

"We as a bishops' conference remain united in saying we know we're not going to violate our consciences, we know we're going to agree on the clear, consistent principles in our Catholic moral theology, and we know that we're going to come together and deciding how we're going to react to it," he said.

Dolan has served as president of the bishops' conference, an elected position, since 2010. His three-year term is set to expire at the group's annual meeting in November in Baltimore.

In July, Dolan said the bishops continued to have three areas of concern with the mandate, including whether for-profit businesses with Catholic owners would be exempt.

The bishops have attracted a range of groups outside their norm as partners in their fight against the measure, with Baltimore Archbishop William Lori announcing in July that he had aligned with 57 other religious leaders, including those from the Southern Baptists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

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