

US bishops: 'Justice has prevailed' at Supreme Court

Joshua J. McElwee | Jun. 30, 2014 NCR Today

The president of the U.S. bishops has praised Monday's Supreme Court ruling regarding coverage of contraceptive services in health care plans, claiming that "justice has prevailed."

Issuing a statement in response to the Court's decision that some private corporations should be afforded religious exemptions from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) contraceptive mandate, Louisville, Ky., Archbishop Joseph Kurtz said the decision recognizes "that Americans continue to follow their faith when they run a family business."

"In this case, justice has prevailed, with the Court respecting the rights of the Green and Hahn families to continue to abide by their faith in how they seek their livelihood, without facing devastating fines," wrote Kurtz, who signed the statement along with Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, the head of the U.S. bishops' ad hoc committee for religious freedom.

"Now is the time to redouble our efforts to build a culture that fully respects religious freedom," the archbishops continue.

Monday's decision was made in regard to two companies that had cited religious objections to providing contraceptive services to their employees: Hobby Lobby, primarily owned by the Green family; and Conestoga Wood Specialties, primarily owned by the Hahn family.

In a contentious 5-4 decision, written by associate Justice Samuel Alito but opposed by all three women serving on the court, the justices ruled for the first time that certain businesses can hold religious views, effectively requiring the Obama administration to find another way to provide contraceptive services to women employed by those companies.

The businesses, the court said, are afforded such protection by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), a 1993 law aimed at preventing legislation that infringes on a person's free exercise of religion.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, a key advisor to Pope Francis and head of the U.S. bishops' pro-life committee, also praised Monday's ruling in separate statement.

All three Catholic prelates also connected Monday's ruling to some three dozen lawsuits filed in different states claiming the healthcare mandate also does not provide enough accommodation for non-profit religious employers like churches and charities.

While the Obama administration's final version of the health care mandate, announced in June 2013, provides exemptions for those groups, many -- including several Catholic dioceses and institutions -- claim they do not do go far enough.

Monday's ruling, said O'Malley, "does not address the full range of challenges the HHS mandate poses for religious organizations."

"It is our sincere hope that the Administration will take the necessary action to protect religious organizations' ability to serve the public interest and the guarantee of freedom of religion," O'Malley continued.

Said Kurtz and Lori: "The Court clearly did not decide whether the so-called 'accommodation' violates RFRA when applied to our charities, hospitals and schools, so many of which have challenged it as a burden on their religious exercise. We continue to hope that these great ministries of service, like the Little Sisters of the Poor and so many others, will prevail in their cases as well."

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