



Liberty, not birth control, at heart of dispute (guest column)

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By **Guest writer**

By Paul A. Long



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Nearly three years after President Barack Obama called for the protection of conscience rights at the University of Notre Dame, not only has he failed to honor his words, he recently finalized perhaps the most egregious and sweeping intrusion into the religious liberty and conscience rights of every American citizen.

On Jan. 20 the Obama administration announced through the Secretary of Health and Human Services that religious employers who serve persons of any faith or those of no faith at all must provide in their health benefit plans contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. In effect, the mandate forces charitable and educational institutions, against their conscience, to pay for services long held as immoral.

The mandate rightly elicited a vociferous national response from nearly every Catholic bishop in the United States, as well as prominent members of Jewish, evangelical, Southern Baptist and other faith traditions, many of whom do not share Catholic teaching on contraception. According to the National Association of Evangelicals: "Freedom of conscience is a sacred gift from God, not a grant from the state. No government has the right to compel its citizens to violate their conscience."

Among editorials opposing the mandate, USA Today said the administration "didn't just cross the line. It galloped over it. ... That's contrary to both Catholic doctrine and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom."

Due to push-back from nearly every segment of society, and certainly recognizing the political damage his administration had wrought, President Obama on Feb. 10 sought to appear to backpedal on the HHS mandate by announcing an "accommodation" for religious employers.

While some details are yet to be released, the president's "accommodation" is nothing but an accounting gimmick, a bad magic trick that seeks to silence critics while making little to no policy change. It is an insult to religious persons and indeed all Americans who value their constitutional right to religious freedom.

Under the Obama "accommodation," religious employers would still pay for health benefit plans that include objectionable services. The fact that the insurer, rather than the employer, would be mandated to provide the coverage does not remove the attack on the conscience rights of employers (and premium-sharing paying employees) who will be forced to pay for benefit plans that include those drugs.

There is no place in America for those who wish to trample on First Amendment rights and turn people of faith into second-class citizens. Our religious forefathers, our parents and our grandparents who helped to build this great nation, its institutions, towns and cities, did not come here only to have their posterity stripped of their God-given rights.

Some of those religious forefathers are cemented in American history for their contributions to this nation and its people. The National Statuary Hall Collection in the U.S. Capitol features 100 statues of prominent Americans, two from each state. Perhaps the most well-known Catholic hero is memorialized by Hawaii.

It is Father Damien, the priest from Belgium who sacrificed his life for the lepers of the island of Molokai. Cast in bronze, the statue depicts the saintly priest after being diagnosed with the disease of those he served. It shows the disfiguring scars on his face and his arm hanging from a sling.

Father Damien did not serve only Catholics. He did not preach the Catholic faith just to Catholics. His mission was to serve people in need, as Christ calls each and every person to do. According to HHS and the Obama "accommodation," the work of Saint Damien was not religious.

The Catholic Church in this state will not acquiesce to the unjust HHS mandate. She will not sit idly and attempt to negotiate the bedrock constitutional guarantee of religious freedom with an administration that is seeking to define who is and who is not religious. The HHS mandate is insulting and arrogant. It needs to be withdrawn immediately — or Congress should act to repeal it.

*Paul A. Long is president and chief executive of the **Michigan Catholic Conference**, the public policy voice of the Catholic bishops in Michigan.*

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