

## The Detroit News

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# Editorial: Obamacare suits seek to affirm religious rights

Catholic groups, including the Michigan Catholic Conference, are fighting for right to practice their faith freely

BY THE DETROIT NEWS

The Michigan Catholic Conference joined dozens of other religious organizations this week in filing a court challenge to the Obamacare mandate that all employers - even those affiliated with faith-based institutions - provide coverage of contraceptives, sterilization and abortifacient drugs as part of their health insurance plans for employees. Charges that the conference is waging "a war on women" are inevitable, given that's a theme of the presidential campaign, but distortions should not be allowed to cloud the real issue.

What's at stake, and what the lawsuits seek to affirm, is the right of religious groups to adhere to their own specific beliefs under the Free Practice Clause of the Constitution.

This is not about a woman's access to contraception, as supporters of the mandate contend. Nothing in the position taken by the Catholic Church would deny a woman the right to purchase or use contraceptives. This is not an excessive burden to place on a working individual, and the \$10 to \$50 monthly cost of contraception is not likely to dissuade someone who doesn't want to get pregnant from making that purchase.

But the Catholic Church considers the avoiding or ending a pregnancy a sin. Whether or not the Obama administration or anyone else finds that position to be quaint or archaic is irrelevant. It is a well-established tenet of the church, and under the Constitution, the church has an explicit right to follow its conscience.

The case is a concern beyond followers of Catholicism. If Catholic groups can be compelled to pay for things they deem morally objectionable, then the government can justify in the name of the common good any intrusion on the free practice of religion.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal, Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon explained, "At the deepest level, we are witnessing an attack on the institutions of civil society that are essential to limited government and are important buffers between the citizens and the all-powerful state."

The great irony here is that the Catholic Church was a major backer of Obamacare. Now it is seeing firsthand the potential of the health care law to erode the freedoms that form the foundation of American society.

We will not give in to cynicism and suggest that the Obama administration made a political calculation to throw Catholics under the bus to attract female voters. The president clearly sees a national interest in the widespread availability of low-cost contraception. In that case, the government has a number of resources at its disposal to deliver that service.

But a political agenda should never be allowed to overwhelm fundamental freedoms.

The narrow-visioned will see this issue only in the context of a woman's right to control over her own body, a right that should not be stripped away.

But rights are lost a piece at a time. If the guaranteed freedom to exercise your faith apart from government interference is lost, other freedoms will fall, too.

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