



805 NORTSHORE DRIVE SW • KNOXVILLE, TN 37919-7551 • (865) 584-3307 • FAX (865) 584-7538

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
DIOCESE OF KNOXVILLE

February 2, 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I write to you having just returned from my *Ad Limina* visit with Pope Benedict XVI who shares deeply the concerns that I and all the U.S. bishops have regarding a matter that calls for our steadfast prayer, solidarity and action. On January 20th, the federal government cast aside the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and essentially stripped Catholics and citizens of any faith of our Nation's first and most fundamental freedom—our religious liberty.

In a decision that the Obama Administration calls “fair and balanced,” the mandate of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *forces* almost all employers, *including Catholic employers*, to include sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception in their employees' health coverage. Additionally, almost all health insurers will be *forced* to include these “services” in their health policies. And regardless of a person's conscience, almost all individuals will be *forced* to buy that coverage as a part of this Administration's policies.

This ruling will have dire consequences upon Catholics nationwide and the millions who are ministered to and served through our Catholic schools, higher education institutions, hospitals and charities. It is these that bear the name “Catholic,” founded as expressions of our Christian witness as disciples of Christ, that the Administration now deems to be secular in nature and subject to their manipulation. In so ruling, Catholics are compelled to either violate their consciences or to drop health coverage for employees and to suffer the penalties for doing so.

Let us not be deceived. What we are witnessing, as Pope Benedict XVI stated, is the drastic shift from “religious freedom to a mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience.” This shift is but a thinly disguised way of silencing the moral witness of Catholics in protecting the sanctity and dignity of every human life, in defending marriage and family from attacks upon it, and from sowing the seeds of our faith through our works of mercy. It is an attempt to put a bushel basket over the light of our Catholic faith (Luke 11:33) and to keep it a private matter to be expressed only inside a church, and even then with limits.

And so I join with my brother bishops throughout our nation in emphatically stating that we cannot and will not comply with this unjust law! It is time for Catholics to act.

But no call to action is first without a call to prayer. And so I ask you to join me in prayer and fasting to ask God for the strength and wisdom to fight this unjust law. I ask you also to contact Congress and to ask them to reverse this decision and enact legislation that protect the rights of conscience. You can do so through the U.S. bishops webpage at www.usccb.org/conscience.

With my blessing and prayers for all of you and your loved ones.

Sincerely in Christ,

The Most Reverend Richard F. Stika
Bishop of Knoxville