

"Religious Liberty Must Be Defended from Attack"

Earlier this year legislation was introduced in the Michigan Senate that would mandate every employer across the state that offers prescription coverage in a health benefit plan to include contraceptives. Similar measures have been introduced in past legislative sessions but failed to move through either chamber of the Legislature, as they are not without controversy.

The Michigan Catholic Conference has been one voice among many staunchly opposed to these bills for reasons that have nothing to do with the moral attributes, or lack thereof, of contraception. Significant reservations exist, however, concerning legislative mandates that fail to protect the religious liberty of those faith-based organizations that believe health care to be a matter of social justice but find contraception morally objectionable. Consequently, it is rather insolent for a previous op-ed writer to attack the civil right of the Catholic Church to protect those religious freedoms that our founding generation so wisely secured.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution protects religious freedom through two clauses - the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause, with the former ensuring government does not establish a national religion, and the latter guaranteeing all religions the freedom to believe and, within obvious reason, practice their faith. Despite these core constitutional principles, some in the political arena continually utilize the legislative process to violate brazenly the free exercise clause by mandating faith-based employers provide objectionable, non-emergency coverage. This is not an "accidental" or "unintentional" effect. The lack of appreciation for religious freedom is evident, as repeated calls to exempt such employers have been routinely ignored.

Freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience are inalienable rights of the American people and must be defended wherever necessary. As our nation continues to evolve in a pluralistic manner, society has an obligation to honor and continually respect our neighbor's concerns, needs and beliefs.

Such respect was evident following the 1803 Treaty of Cession, commonly referred to as the Louisiana Purchase, when the Religious Order of St. Ursula in New Orleans expressed concern for their religious liberty in a letter to President Thomas Jefferson. In a hand-written response that epitomized his respect for pluralism, President Jefferson assured the Sisters that "the principles of the constitution and the government of the United States are a sure guarantee to you...that your institution will be permitted to govern itself according to its own voluntary rules, without interference from the civil authority." President Jefferson closed the letter by stating, "be assured your religious institution will meet all the protection which my office can give it."

With those calming words from our third president, the Michigan Catholic Conference will not "hush up" as the aforementioned op-ed writer stated in such vitriolic fashion. Rather, we will continue to advocate within the constitutional boundaries established by those who sought to protect the nascent union from efforts to oppress religious freedom.

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*Submitted to Lansing State Journal
13 March 2007*