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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**BISHOPS PROMISE TO CONTINUE ‘VIGOROUS EFFORTS’ AGAINST HHS
VIOLATIONS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN HEALTH CARE REFORM MANDATE**

**Declare government has no place defining religion, religious ministry
Seek protection for conscience rights of institutions, individuals
Stress action with the public, White House, Congress, courts**

WASHINGTON—The U.S. bishops are strongly united in their ongoing and determined efforts to protect religious freedom, the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) said in a March 14 statement.

The Administrative Committee, chaired by Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the USCCB, is the highest authority of the bishops’ conference outside the semi-annual sessions of the full body of bishops. The Committee’s membership consists of the elected chairmen of all the USCCB permanent committees and an elected bishop representative from each of the geographic regions of the USCCB.

The full statement can be found at www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/upload/Admin-Religious-Freedom.pdf

The Administrative Committee said it was “strongly unified and intensely focused in its opposition to the various threats to religious freedom in our day.” The bishops will continue their vigorous work of education on religious freedom, dialogue with the executive branch, legislative initiatives and efforts in the courts to defend religious freedom. They promised a longer

statement on the principles at the heart of religious freedom, which will come later from the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty.

The bishops noted that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate that forces all private health plans to provide coverage of sterilization and contraceptives – including abortion-inducing drugs – called for an immediate response. Of particular concern, they said, are a religious exemption from the mandate that the bishops deem “arbitrarily narrow” and an “unspecified and dubious future ‘accommodation’” offered to other religious organizations that are denied the exemption.

The bishops thanked supporters from the Catholic community and beyond “who have stood firmly with us in our vigorous opposition to this unjust and illegal mandate.”

“It is your enthusiastic unity in defense of religious freedom that has made such a dramatic and positive impact in this historic public debate.”

The bishops said this dispute is not about access to contraceptives but about the government's forcing the Church to provide them. Their concerns are not just for the Catholic Church but also for “those who recognize that their cherished beliefs may be next on the block.”

“Indeed, this is not about the Church wanting to force anybody to do anything; it is instead about the federal government forcing the Church – consisting of its faithful and all but a few of its institutions – to act against Church teachings,” they said.

The Church has worked for universal healthcare in the United States since 1919, they added, and said the current issue “is not a Republican or Democratic, a conservative or liberal issue; it is an American issue.”

The bishops called the HHS mandate “an unwarranted government definition of religion,” with government deciding who is a religious employer deserving exemption from the law.

“The introduction of this unprecedented defining of faith communities and their ministries has precipitated this struggle for religious freedom,” the bishops said.

“Government has no place defining religion and religious ministry,” they said.

“If this definition is allowed to stand, it will spread throughout federal law, weakening its healthy tradition of generous respect for religious freedom and diversity,” they said.

The bishops said the government's foray into church governance “where government has no legal competence or authority” is beyond disturbing. Those deemed by HHS not to be

“religious employers,” the bishops said, “will be forced by government to violate their own teachings within their very own institutions. This is not only an injustice in itself, but it also undermines the effective proclamation of those teachings to the faithful and to the world.”

The bishops also called the HHS mandate “a violation of personal civil rights.” The new mandate creates a class of people “with no conscience protection at all: individuals who, in their daily lives, strive constantly to live in accordance with their faith and values,” the bishops said. “They too face a government mandate to aid in providing ‘services’ contrary to those values – whether in their sponsoring of, and payment for, insurance as employers; their payment of insurance premiums as employees, or as insurers themselves – without even the semblance of exemptions.”

The bishops called for the Catholic faithful, and all people of good will throughout the nation to join them in prayer and penance “for our leaders and for the complete protection of our First Freedom – religious liberty.”

“Prayer is the ultimate source of our strength,” the bishops said, “for without God we can do nothing. But with God all things are possible.”

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