

# ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

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Office of the Archbishop

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May 14, 2012

Dear Catholics of the Archdiocese of Chicago:

Because public discussion of the Department of Health and Human Services' interpretation of the requirements of the health care reform legislation will remain a matter of public debate, I would like to pinpoint the Catholic Bishops' concerns. They are two: 1) government infringement on religious liberty; and 2) restrictions on freedom of conscience.

1) Religious liberty means that all religions are free to identify and control their own ministries, without interference from the government. The institutional names of our public ministries are well known; for example, there are Catholic universities (like Loyola, DePaul and others) and schools (like St. Ignatius, Marian, Fenwick and others). There are Catholic hospitals and health care centers (like Resurrection, St. Anthony's, St. Bernard and others). There are Catholic social service agencies (like Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese) and child welfare institutions (like Misericordia, Mercy Home, Marillac House and many others). Under the HHS regulations, none of these institutions is Catholic. The government has unilaterally decided that it has the right to determine what is Catholic (or Jewish or Muslim) and what is not. Religious ministries are reduced to public services, with their identity changed by government edict. This is a novel intrusion of the government into the internal life of the Church and other religious organizations. It is a First Amendment issue and will eventually be decided by the courts.

2) Freedom of conscience means that neither an institution nor an individual should be coerced by the government into doing or paying for an action they believe to be immoral. Conscience had previously been protected in federal health care legislation by the Hyde, Church and Weldon amendments. These legal protections have been removed from the health care law, and freedom of conscience has been restricted. This is a policy issue and will probably be decided by either legislative or executive action.

It will take time to decide these issues, and the public debate will be acrimonious. In an election year, it will be hard to avoid partisanship; but religious liberty and freedom of conscience are issues that should be bigger than politics. I hope these few comments are helpful to a better understanding of what is at stake in the disputed HHS mandate. Thank you for your life of faith in the Church and of faithful citizenship in our country.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francis Cardinal George" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.  
Archbishop of Chicago