

Dear Disciples of Christ,

Last week in church we read a letter from Bishop David Ricken regarding a new mandate that violates our religious freedom. As part of the Health Care Reform that is currently being enacted, the US Department of Health and Human Services has mandated that all health plans provide the full range of FDA-approved contraceptive methods as “preventative health services” for women (this includes not only contraceptives but also so-called “emergency contraceptives” and surgical sterilizations). Furthermore, no co-pays are to be charged to beneficiaries. The Church believes that these kinds of treatments are morally wrong and has refused to offer them in the past. The new laws come with an exemption for “religious employers” but have made the definition so narrow that it doesn’t really apply to most Catholic entities.

First, I want you to realize that the Catholic Church has some very good reasons for oppose these kinds of “treatments.” Here are three big ones:

- **Pregnancy is not a “preventable disease”**

What the “preventative health services” are preventing is not a disease but a pregnancy. The government mandates certain vaccines, for example, because they can help prevent a deadly disease. The problem is that the government mandates treat pregnancy like a disease. They want to provide you with all the tools possible to keep you from “catching” pregnancy. But pregnancy isn’t a disease. If a baby results from an act of sexual intercourse, it doesn’t mean something went wrong – it means something went right! That’s what your physical act was trying to do. Children are a gift. Classifying pregnancy within “preventative health services” will only continue to undermine the dignity of women and children.

- **Sterilizations are not health care.**

Imagine a man visiting his doctor and saying, “Doctor, I want you to give me something to make me blind. I’m sick of seeing.” No doctor in his right mind would say yes. A doctor’s job is to make sick organs healthy, not stop healthy organs from functioning properly. Sterilization is precisely asking a doctor to stop a healthy organ from functioning properly. The only reason it has become socially acceptable is because we do not accept our fertility as a gift. Getting yourself “fixed” implies that there was something wrong. What was wrong was that everything worked right, and we didn’t like it. This is the opposite of health “care”.

- **The Pill has side effects. Nasty side effects.**

Taking hormonal contraceptives can cause depression, weight gain, and migraines – and those are the minor side effects. The pill can also cause high blood pressure, strokes, and even blood clots that have lead to death. Taking the pill before your first child also increases the rate of breast cancer by 40% (as much as 70% if used for 4 or more years). Also, oral contraceptives can prevent implantation of the embryo, leading to an early abortion. None of this is good for women. The so-called “emergency contraceptives” are also designed to cause early abortions. If a child is already conceived, they make sure that the child cannot implant in the woman’s womb.

The facts are clear that sterilization and birth control are not good health care. Yet most of society fears an unintended pregnancy so much that they are willing to accept all kinds of side effects. The Church disagrees; she believes that fertility is a gift and that women are too precious to be subjected to these risks. Fortunately, there is room in America for lots of different opinions. Many Catholics don't agree with the Church on these issues (but the truth is, most Catholics have never really heard the Church's side). You may not agree with the Church, and because you live in America, no one is going to force you to agree. America has a long history of religious freedom and respect for conscience. Even during wartime we will allow people to not defend our country if they are morally opposed to war. George Washington said:

*"The conscientious scruples of all men should be treated with great delicacy and tenderness; and it is my wish and desire, that the laws may always be extensively accommodated to them."*

If you have a right to follow your conscience, then I have a right to follow mine. And that includes not paying for procedures that I believe are sincerely immoral. Catholic health care and educational institutions have the same rights. This isn't just a problem for Catholics – this is a problem for everyone. The Catholic Church is a very large organization. She represents about one quarter of the American population. The Catholic Church is the largest provider of non-governmental health, education, and social services in this country. The Catholic Church is far older than the United States, and even the Catholic Church's stand on contraceptives is older than the United States. If the State has no qualms about pushing such a large institution around, just because it holds unpopular beliefs, will the state stop to respect your conscience, when you hold unpopular beliefs? This is not just a problem for the Bishops; this is a problem for you and me.

I encourage you to get involved. Educate yourself about Catholic moral teachings; they are a great treasure. Many failed marriages could have been avoided if people had taken the time to understand church teachings and to live them. Visit [www.onemoresoul.com](http://www.onemoresoul.com) for more information. Then visit [www.usccb.org/conscience](http://www.usccb.org/conscience) to learn more. Pray and fast for religious freedom in our country. What is at stake is not just the freedoms of the Church. At stake are your freedoms and mine. Let's hope that we will not be a generation to repeat these words:

*"First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out.  
Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out.  
Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out.  
And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me." --Martin Niemoeller*

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Joel". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, decorative flourish at the end of the name.