

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

I must be missing something. I've been thinking about this for a number of months, did some reading about it, tried to sort it out, and wanted to be supportive but it just never came together.

Religious liberty. Not religious liberty in general, or theoretically, but the specific religious liberty that's caused all the commotion the past few months, the issue attached to the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) ruling that requires most health care plans to cover contraception and sterilization procedures. The most critical questions arise when Catholic institutions like hospitals and universities are included. There are obviously many details and implications in this ruling, but I can't get past the big picture.

Is it really a violation of religious liberty when these Catholic institutions, which take millions of government, taxpayer dollars, refuse to follow government policies? Is the government denying these institutions their religious liberty by requiring them to treat all citizens, including their employees, equally? Or, are these institutions denying their employees their civil rights?

There are centuries of law embedded in these questions, and I am certainly not qualified to dissect these issues and make profound pronouncements about what's right or wrong here.

But I am a practicing Catholic and I do have the right to question what our Episcopal leadership is claiming. My questions remain and my confusion is real.

Here are some reasons why I am confused:

- If religious institutions take no money from government sources, then these institutions can, in my mind, limit their benefits package for employees however they want when they employ members of their faith.
- If they do take money from the government, then they are required to follow the stipulations that accompany that money. The government must represent and respect the rights of all citizens and follow the rulings of our judicial system. If some of those rulings are considered unjust or immoral, appeals are available through our judicial system. Or, pass a new law.

- This may come as a surprise to some people, but the USA is not, and never was, a Christian nation. The purpose, mission, and parameters of a country are contained in its constitution, and our constitution does not establish a Christian nation. In fact, the first amendment distinctly and deliberately insists that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...” My guess is that our founding fathers had enough of European “Christendom”, the marriage of Church and State. They wanted nothing to do with it. Some Muslim nations are trying it again today with predictable negative results.
- In terms of contraceptive measures, there is no civil law against their use, and according to all polls, most people in the country use, have used, or will use some form of artificial contraceptive. The Church can condemn that usage, exhort its members not to use them, even reject users as members but they can’t force or expect the government to enforce their beliefs. The government must follow the constitution and the laws of the land. If we don’t like a law, then we can try to persuade people to change it. But we cannot expect the government NOT to apply the law, or condemn them when they do enforce it.
- Specifically, the Bishops have lost the battle against contraceptive use and abortion. They can continue appealing to individual consciences but the government must follow the constitution and law of the land.
- So, here’s one thing I don’t get: how is it a violation of religious liberty when the government requires an institution which hires from the general population, serves the general public, and uses public funds to follow the laws of the country and apply benefits equally to all its employees?

That’s part of my confusion about this issue. Then the Bishops’ launched their “Fortnight for Freedom” campaign a few months ago. (By the way, when was the last time you used “fortnight” in a sentence? It’s not your typical effective campaign language!) Not surprisingly, the campaign didn’t accomplish much.

I admit that I didn’t get involved with it. It’s all too confusing. I am all for religious liberty and still applaud Vatican II’s Declaration on Religious Freedom. But I just can’t connect the dots from that document to this campaign.

Where have all the dots gone?