



DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

STATEMENT OF MOST REV. PAUL G. BOOTKOSKI ON
THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES RESCINDING THE "CONSCIENCE RULE"
AND
SUPPORT FOR THE "RESPECT FOR RIGHTS OF CONSCIENCE ACT"

Freedom of conscience has always been the foundation and glory of our American republic. Our ancestors came to America seeking a place where they could worship God, live freely as God's people, build lives of liberty and prosperity, and for the promise that the consciences of all men and women would be worthy of respect. Until now, our government has embraced this mandate by providing those with deeply held religious convictions the opportunity to maintain their proud allegiance both to their religious and national identities.

This religious liberty has been an abiding blessing for people of faith and for all their sisters and brothers in communities throughout our land. Men and women of faith, urged on by Christ's command to serve him by serving all those in need, have ennobled our nation by their service as government, social, educational, and business leaders. They have founded hospitals and health care institutions, established colleges and schools, cared for our young and elderly, maintained a social safety network for those most in need, and provided a warm welcome and loving concern for people with nowhere else to turn. Adherence to their well-formed consciences has led countless men and women to provide these services at considerable cost to themselves and their loved ones. Religious sisters and brothers joined them, bringing educational and health care services to a growing republic. Catholic educational, health care, and social service agencies proudly serve millions of Americans, and support hundreds of thousands of employees, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. They have been havens where the divisions of class, creed, and ethnic/racial differences are set aside to serve the God-given dignity of each and every human person. And, of course, while we welcome all comers, we do not desire to impose our views, however deeply held, on others. We wholly support the option of those who disagree with our moral convictions to freely avail themselves of the services and employment opportunities provided by those more aligned with their own preferences.

I am writing to you today because a recent decision by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, with the approval of President Obama, threatens to destroy our American and religious tradition of freedom of conscience. This decision chillingly takes the First Amendment's guarantees of religious freedom, intended to prevent government compulsion in matters of conscience, and ironically turns them into weapons threatening to destroy that very freedom. Secretary Sebelius and the Obama Administration have promulgated new rules which will require either that all religious institutions pay for insurance coverage for employee abortions, sterilizations, and contraception, or serve only those of their own religious denominations. The Obama Administration's plan would drive all institutions maintained by people of conscience out of the health care, social service, and educational arenas. Can this possibly be in the best interests of our nation? Is this really the way that you want your social services provided? Such a plan would require Catholic hospitals, schools, and the like either to violate their consciences or to hire only Catholics, admit only Catholic patients, educate only Catholic children, and so on. This unbridled assault on the freedom of conscience must be stopped.

This decision of the Obama Administration also once again threatens to impose upon all Americans the anti-life agenda which classifies pregnancy as a disease and abortion as a legitimate cure for that disease. If Catholic and other conscience based institutions and individuals are sidelined by this political maneuver, who will be left standing to herald the message that women and their unborn children are to be cherished and cared

for? Who will be left to care for those undergoing difficult pregnancies, those seeking to provide the best possible health care to children in distress, both the born and the unborn? Who will be left to advocate for the rights of women and men seeking to love and care for their child as a precious blessing; the anti-life community considers the destruction of such a child as just another choice—do you really want to leave the fate of your children alone in their hands?

And so I, as your Bishop, need your assistance at this crucial moment in our religious and political history. I am asking you to contact the White House as well as your Senators and Representatives in Congress. Tell them that you demand that the proposed rule eliminating most conscience protections be withdrawn. Ask them to support the Respect for the Rights of Conscience Act (HR 1179) which would further enshrine protection for the freedom of conscience in law. If you would like information about how to contact your elected representatives, I refer you to the USCCB web site, www.usccb.org. And finally, please join me in prayer that our government leaders may once again respect our rights to live out our faith, participate in society, and care for those in need. These rights are our proud boast—both as Americans and as Catholics.

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