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ARCHBISHOP CALLS FOR PRAYER AND FASTING

As Christians around the world prepare to observe the penitential season of Lent, Cincinnati Archbishop Schnurr is urging Catholics and people of all faiths to pray and fast during this period for religious liberty.

“The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has issued regulations that would force almost all employers, including Catholic institutions and business owners, to pay for employees’ health coverage that includes abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and contraception,” he says in a Lenten podcast recorded for the Archdiocese website, www.CatholicCincinnati.org. “A so-called ‘accommodation’ to religious employers, announced after two weeks of growing backlash to this unjust regulation, did not remove the threat to religious liberty. In the end, we would still be forced to indirectly pay for services that we find morally unacceptable.

“The Church has a mission to protect the life and dignity of all people, which includes the safeguarding of their sacred human rights. These include the right to religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Please join me in praying and fasting this Lent that wisdom and justice may prevail and religious liberty may be restored in our country.”

At noon on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 22, as the church bells ring, Catholics are asked to pray the following or a pluralized version if praying in a group:

A Prayer for Religious Liberty

Blessed are you God and I praise you for the gift of freedom. This day, I pray especially for government leaders – the men and women elected or appointed as the stewards of our rights and the overseers of our needs. Grant them true discernment so that they may never stray from the duties with which we citizens have entrusted them to uphold our religious freedom and care for our well-being. Give me the power to touch with your truth everything and everyone I meet this day. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Parishes were provided with petitions to pray for religious liberty at Mass each of the Sundays of Lent.

Although the nation’s bishops are open to continued dialogue with the Administration to find solutions, they also are seeking legislative and judicial fixes.

Catholic institutions that provide food, shelter, health care, and education to advance all human life and dignity have been outspoken in condemning the HHS mandates, including a number that have signed a statement:

http://www.kofc.org/un/en/resources/communications/conscience_rights.pdf

Local Catholic institutions also have made clear their concern.

“Catholic Health Partners, the largest health system in Ohio, joins with the Archdiocese and those concerned with recent decisions of the Obama Administration, in calling for restoration of and re-commitment to one of the fundamental philosophical beliefs and Constitutional Rights of our nation: Religious Freedom,” said John Fishpaw, Vice President, Advocacy & Government Relations for Catholic Health Partners. “CHP will encourage its leaders, associates and friends to join with Archbishop Schnurr and others who are concerned with the erosion of our Right to Religious Freedom to participate in the Archbishop's call to prayer and fasting this Ash Wednesday.”

Kathleen Donnellan, executive director of Catholic Charities of Southwest Ohio, said she remains deeply concerned with the final rule of the HHS regulations regarding so called “preventive services.”

“Insurance companies, who would now be required to provide these services with no cost to the consumer, would likely pass those costs to the employers, forcing employers to pay for services contrary to the teaching of the Church,” she said.

“I am also concerned with the very narrow definition of a religious organization. According to the administration’s definition, Catholic Charities would not qualify, not because of sources of our funding, but because we do not restrict our services to only Catholics. We maintain that serving anyone in need is precisely what makes us Catholic. To do otherwise would compromise our mission.”

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, well known for serving the poor, agrees.

“The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Cincinnati stands firmly with the Catholic Bishops, hospital systems and organizations seeking to maintain religious freedom and our ability to provide vital, life-affirming services as guided by our religious and ethical

convictions,” said Sandy Brielmaier, president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul – Cincinnati. “We ask that people of all faiths join us in praying that our elected leaders take all necessary actions to uphold these rights.”

Local Catholic colleges and universities also share the concern of the bishops and the Catholic faithful.

“As a Catholic university in the Jesuit tradition, Xavier University is deeply distressed over the recent assault against religious freedom embodied in the recent HHS mandate, freedom guaranteed in the Constitution and long honored in federal public policy,” said Fr. Michael J. Graham, S.J., president of Xavier. “With all interested parties, and under the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we pledge to work for the restoration of these traditional freedoms through all available legal means. Meanwhile, we invite the prayers of all people of good will for an amicable outcome that guarantees going forward this cornerstone of American liberty.”

“The College of Mount St. Joseph is concerned about protecting religious liberty that has been threatened by the recent HHS mandate,” said Dr. Tony Aretz, president. “The original mandate was morally and politically unacceptable and historically unprecedented. We will work with the USCCB and our elected political leaders as the regulations are finalized to ensure that our nation’s constitutional protection of religious liberty is maintained.”

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati is the 38th largest Catholic diocese in the country, with almost 500,000 Catholics, and has the eighth largest network of Catholic schools in terms of enrollment. The 19-county territory includes 214 parishes and 113 Catholic primary and secondary schools.