



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on March 14, 2012

Anti-religion Group Urges Catholics to Leave the Church

The U.S. Department of Health and Education has ruled that religious affiliated organizations are not covered by the exemption for churches and other houses of worship under the healthcare reform legislation called the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, passed by Congress and signed by President Obama in 2010. The law requires that contraceptive coverage be provided free of charge and without any deductible. The Catholic bishops have objected to the application of the mandate to Catholic schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations, claiming it runs counter to Catholic doctrine. Forcing religious institutions to be a party to providing the coverage would be a violation of religious freedom, they argue.



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In its ad, labeled an "OPEN LETTER TO 'LIBERAL' AND NOMINAL' CATHOLICS," the Freedom From Religion Foundation condemns what it calls "the Bishops' war against women's right to contraception." Under the headline, "IT'S TIME TO CONSIDER QUITTING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH," the ad asks, "Will it be reproductive freedom or back to the Dark Ages? Do you choose women and their rights or Bishops and their wrongs?... Why are you aiding and abetting a church that has repeatedly engaged in a crusade to ban contraception, abortion, and sterilization, to deny the right of women everywhere, Catholic or not to decide whether and when to become mothers?" Those who stay in the church are "doing 'bad'" to women's rights, the ad states, and are acting as "an enabler" to a church that "discriminates against half of humanity."

The ad claims the liberal Catholic who remains in the church is like "the battered woman, who, after being beaten down every Sunday, feels she has no place else to go." Catholics are deluded, it says, if they think they can change get the church to "lighten up on birth control, gay rights, marriage equality [or] embryonic stem cell research." The ad also urges Catholics to stop sending their children to parochial schools "to be indoctrinated into the next generation of obedient donors and voters." The bishops are "launching a ruthless political Inquisition in your name," the ad warns.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation describes itself as "the largest membership group of free thinkers atheists, agnostics and other skeptics," with a mission to "educate the public about nontheism and to keep religion and government separate." Its ad drew a [sharp rebuttal](#) and protest from William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

"Never has there been a more vicious anti-Catholic advertisement in a prominent American newspaper," Donohue said in a statement released the day the ad appeared. The church's opposition to a mandate to include "abortion-inducing drugs, contraception and sterilization in its insurance plans" is a pretext for



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the organization's real agenda "to smear Catholicism," said Donohue, noting the ad blamed the church and its opposition to contraception and abortion for "acute misery, poverty, needless suffering, unwanted pregnancies, overpopulation, social evils and deaths."

"Not a single Catholic who reads this ad will be impelled to leave the Church," Donohue said. "That is not the issue.... The issue is the increase in hate speech directed against Catholics." Why the *Times* agreed to publish the ad, Donohue said, "is another issue altogether."

Other voices, less strident than that of the FFRF, have also been raised in criticism of the bishops' stand on the mandate. *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, having previously criticized the Obama administration for a lack of sensitivity toward the church and its beliefs concerning reproductive issues, earlier this week blamed the bishops for not accepting an alternative offered by President Obama under which the religious institutions would not be required to either pay for the contraceptive coverage or refer women to alternative sources for it. The cost would be absorbed by the healthcare insurers. Since many Catholic institutions are self-insured, however, the mandate would still fall on the institutions themselves.

The Catholic Health Association endorsed the alternative proposal, Dionne noted, but "right-wing bishops and allied staff at the bishops' conference took control" of the debate "with attacks that, at their most extreme, cast administration officials as communist-style apparatchiks intent on destroying Roman Catholicism." Claiming the conservative bishops appear willing to abandon the commitment to social justice and turn the church into "the tea party at prayer," Dionne, a Catholic, posed the question: "Do they want to defend the church's legitimate interest in religious autonomy, or do they want to wage an election-year war against President Obama?"

Writing in *National Review Online*, Catholic theologian and author George Weigel denied any conflict between the church's stand on social justice and the bishops' opposition to the mandate for contraception coverage.

"Social-justice concerns are not the preserve of self-styled progressive Catholics such as E. J. Dionne," wrote Weigel, noting that "in a Catholic understanding of public life, religious freedom is a social-justice issue." A just society, he said, "does not use governmental coercion in matters of belief, nor does it attempt to control the internal lives of religious communities, in themselves or as their convictions compel those communities to be agents of charity in society; and the just society recognizes that both individuals and religious institutions enjoy these rights."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is expected to have more to say about the mandate following today's conclusion of a two-day meeting of its administrative committee.



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