



# PENNSYLVANIA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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March 7, 2012

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The assault by the federal government on constitutionally guaranteed religious liberty continues. Our concern and alarm flows from a mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) which punishes the Church for its firmly held beliefs and consistent teaching. This mandate – published in the federal register without change, despite claims of “accommodations” – would force Catholic employers to pay for abortion-causing drugs, sterilization and contraception.

Some falsely suggest that the HHS mandate is about contraception. This is primarily about religious liberty and our First Amendment rights to the free exercise of our religion. Make no mistake about it – this government mandate is a step which will inevitably lead to other mandates that continue to strike at the heart of our Faith and the constitutional liberties we have been guaranteed. The mandate cannot stand – it must not stand!

This same mandate also, alarmingly, purports to tell churches what type of activities the government thinks are religious. Catholic schools, hospitals, nursing homes and Catholic charities do not qualify for a religious exemption. Why? Because they serve non-Catholics. Under the government’s view, Jesus and his disciples would have been deemed not religious enough. We have entered dangerous territory – the government is defining religion and limiting its practice. This is an unprecedented and gross infringement on our religious freedom. We did not pick this fight, but neither will we run from it.

Religious liberty does not belong to the Democrats or Republicans, it belongs to all Americans. Long before these mandates were issued, the bishops in the United States worked for health care reform and universal coverage that respects all human life from conception to natural death and includes language to protect religious conscience and practice of all citizens. Our fervent entreaties were answered with promises that we had nothing to fear. We cannot now sit idly by and let this happen. We cannot, as a Church, be silent because some have sought to politicize our plight. Please visit [www.pacatholic.org](http://www.pacatholic.org) to send a message to your legislators in support of conscience rights. Our voices and yours must be heard. The mandate must be rescinded. Our freedom and liberty must be preserved. And in this effort, we must remain steadfast.

Throughout history, Catholics in times of need have turned to God through prayer and fasting, as these practices allow us to grow closer to the Lord, inspire us to do His will and invoke His protection in answer to our prayers. During the Fridays of Lent, the faithful are obliged to abstain from eating meat. As Eastern Rite Catholics, on Monday, the First Day of Lent, and Good Friday, we are also asked to fast from meat, eggs and dairy products to aid our spiritual life. Recognizing the efficacy of prayer and fasting as well as the challenges we face in overcoming the recent attack on our religious freedom, we, the Bishops of Pennsylvania, request that all Catholics dedicate the regular Lenten Friday practice of prayer and abstinence as well as the additional practice of fasting on **Friday, March 30**, to the preservation of religious liberty. On that day, offer your sacrifice for the cause of religious

liberty, that the Church may be granted the basic right to practice what she preaches, and for our political leaders, that their eyes may be opened to the rights of all Americans, including those of faith. We will join with the over 3 million Catholics in Pennsylvania to mark this day of prayer, fasting and abstinence for religious liberty.

As we continue on our Lenten journey, we know the Lord walks with us during times of trial and concern. Let us do all that we are able – prayer, fasting, abstinence and the exercise of faithful citizenship – to uphold the freedoms of Christ’s Church and to grow closer to Him.

In Christ,

+ Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.  
Archbishop of Philadelphia  
Metropolitan of Philadelphia

+ John O. Barres

The Most Reverend John O. Barres  
Bishop of Allentown

+ Mark L. Bartchak

The Most Reverend Mark L. Bartchak  
Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown

+ Donald W. Trautman

The Most Reverend Donald W. Trautman  
Bishop of Erie

+ Lawrence E. Brandt

The Most Reverend Lawrence E. Brandt  
Bishop of Greensburg

+ Joseph P. McFadden

The Most Reverend Joseph P. McFadden  
Bishop of Harrisburg

+ David A. Zubik

The Most Reverend David A. Zubik  
Bishop of Pittsburgh

+ Joseph C. Bambera

The Most Reverend Joseph C. Bambera  
Bishop of Scranton

+ Stefan Soroka

The Most Reverend Stefan Soroka  
Metropolitan Archbishop for  
Ukrainians in the USA

+ Very Rev. Eugene P. Yackanich

The Very Reverend Eugene P. Yackanich  
Administrator of the Byzantine  
Catholic Archdiocese of Pittsburgh