

Religious freedom ‘under threat in US’

Religious freedom ‘under threat in US’



Pope Benedict XVI has urged bishops in the United States to mobilise Catholics against “powerful new cultural currents” in American society that are “increasingly hostile to Christianity” and endanger church freedoms.

In a remarkably hard-hitting address to a group of US bishops on their five-yearly ad limina visit to Rome on 19 January, the Pope spoke of the “grave threats” to freedom of religion in the United States, and the erosion of America’s Judaeo-Christian foundations, emanating from the “political and cultural spheres”.

“Many of you have pointed out that concerted efforts have been made to deny the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices,” he told the bishops. “Others of you have spoken to me of a worrying tendency to reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience,” he said.

Just a day after the Pope spoke those words, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced that it would not revise a religious exemption to the requirement that all health-care plans offer free contraceptives and sterilisation. The bishops immediately protested. They, with Catholic hospitals, schools and charitable organisations, had argued the exemption was too narrow for most of their institutions to qualify.

“In light of [the] announcement about the health-care mandate, it seems that the Holy Father has ‘nailed’ the issue in advance,” said Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the US bishops’ pro-life committee. “Conscience protection and religious liberty for all of us who work for life have been put in jeopardy,” the cardinal added last Sunday night at the annual National Prayer Vigil for Life.

The Obama administration said the measure is aimed at reducing rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion. And it gives non-profit organisations 12 months to comply with HHS rules. New York’s Cardinal-designate Timothy Dolan, president of the bishops’ conference (USCCB), called the mandate “unconscionable” and “as much an attack on access to health care as on religious freedom”.

The USCCB posted his comments on its website under the title, “US bishops vow to fight the HHS edict”. And since then bishops across the US have added their condemnation. “The Obama administration has now drawn an unprecedented line in the sand,” said Cardinal-designate Dolan, using a military metaphor. The bishops would work to “reform the law and change this unjust regulation”.

The president of the Catholic Health Association, Sr Carol Keehan DC, said she was “disappointed” by the HHS ruling but hinted that the issue might still be resolved through “an effective national conversation on the appropriate conscience protections”.

Pope Benedict told the bishops during their 19 January audience that one of their “primary tasks” was to educate “committed lay leaders” to enter into such conversations so that they could “advance the Christian vision” in America.

Robert Mickens - The Tablet