

Secretary Sebellius is wrong; this is not a year to “adapt.” The Catholic Church will not adapt by violating fundamental elements of our faith. Instead of adapting, this is a year to unify, and to fight injustice and flagrant disregard for the institutional protection of our religious practice.

The recent decision by HHS should make clear for all Catholics that under the proposed health care plan, the freedom to practice our religious faith is in jeopardy. Catholic groups who claimed that this health care plan, with its narrow "conscience clauses" and "religious exemptions," would respect Catholic teaching must face the facts. Compromising with pro-choice, pro-contraceptive political agendas can have dangerous consequences. The bell tolls for our religious freedom.

Catholics must take the lead in restoring our Constitutional religious freedom. We need to work in all reasonable ways to convince the Department of Health and Human Services to reverse its policy; the Church will continue to lobby for this change. If that fails, which it may, we need to work with Congress to protect basic religious liberty.

There is an answer to this attack on our religious freedom. The “Respect for Rights of Conscience Act,” now before Congress, is more important than ever before. All Catholics need to support its passage. All Christians should join us by praying for a return to justice and by visiting www.usccb.org/conscience to begin contacting their representatives.

For many Christian denominations, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has just concluded. Unity has never been more important. Certainly, there is disagreement among Christians about the legitimacy of contraception. But there should be no disagreement among Christians about religious freedom. Each of us has an interest in defending liberty. Now is the time. The bell tolls for us all.

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“The Bell is Tolling”

By Most Rev. James D. Conley, S.T.L., Apostolic Administrator

“Any man’s death diminishes me,” wrote John Donne in 1624, “for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”

The bell is tolling for religious liberty in America. All of us should listen well.

On Friday, Jan. 20, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced that most religious institutions – including Catholic hospitals, schools and social service agencies – would not be exempted from a federal government requirement that employee health plans must provide free contraceptives. This is a critical issue for us that must not be ignored.

The announcement was a death knell for religious liberty in the United States. Many recall that in August, HHS announced the obligation of contraceptive coverage in private insurance plans, and a narrow religious exemption which will cover, in fact, only some churches – and almost no other religious entities.

Many recall the outrage of religious leaders over this plan. Many recall that the Catholic Church, among others, pleaded with the federal government to reconsider. The pleas fell on deaf ears.

Moving forward with the plan, and in weak attempt to provide concession to religious institutions, HHS announced that nonprofit groups would be given a year to “adapt” before being required to provide contraceptive coverage. HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebellius stated that “this proposal strikes the appropriate balance between respecting religious freedom and increasing access to important preventive services.”

Let’s be clear. This decision does nothing to respect religious freedom. Without change, Catholic institutions will soon be legally required to provide services which violate a fundamental principle of our religious beliefs. If plans go unchanged, the Catholic Church, acting through our Catholic institutions, will no longer have legal protection for the free exercise of religion.

