

Archbishop Myers speaks out on religious liberty



Beginning June 21 and continuing until July 4, every diocese across the nation will be participating in a program known as "Fortnight for Freedom." This is a call for an end to an institutional coercion by the government against conscience, and government intrusion into the ordering of Church institutions. Archbishop John J. Myers recently sat with Jim Goodness, archdiocesan communications director, to talk about the significance and purpose of these suits, and what the Fortnight for Freedom means for Catholics, non-Catholics and people of no particular faith. The article is presented in a question-and-answer format.

Q: There seems to be some confusion about why the Church is taking a stand for religious liberty at this time. Some news reports say the Church is concerned only about contraceptives.

A: It isn't about contraceptives at all. It's about making sure that government does not tell faith communities how they can practice their faith, and equally important, what constitutes a religious institution. The guidelines that the current administration finalized concerning healthcare are merely one concrete example of how it is trying to redefine Church. Religious liberty—the ability of every faith community to express and live out its beliefs and guiding principles freely in the public sphere—has always been a hot topic nationally and regionally since the start of our nation. For example, under the guidelines finalized by Kathleen Sebelius, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Catholic hospitals can only be Catholic hospitals if they serve Catholics only, employ Catholics only. As you know, Catholic hospitals are mainly located in urban areas that have large non-Catholic populations and poor or underemployed groups. In the Gospel, Jesus told us to serve all of the poor, all of the needy. It's the same thing with Catholic schools and social services. Under the Sebelius guidelines, all of these institutions either have to violate Church teaching, or stop fulfilling our Catholic mission to serve. Neither option is acceptable.

Q: Is this the only instance where religious liberty is an issue?

A: Not at all. The Sebelius guidelines are only the most recent instance where the federal government has pursued a campaign against the Church for our beliefs. There was a recent Supreme Court decision—a unanimous decision, by the way—that overturned a U.S. Justice Department's attempt to limit how a church or faith group could define who was a minister of that faith group. Last year, the U.S. government made a political decision not to award a Catholic agency the contract to serve victims of human trafficking—a Catholic agency that had operated the program for the government for a number of years successfully. The career staff of the federal agency responsible for the program all agreed that the Church did the best job of any organization involved in the effort. The Obama administration, however, decided that Catholic beliefs, not Catholic results, were unacceptable and denied us the opportunity to continue to serve these vulnerable people. That's simply not right.

Q: Some media writers question the vigor of the Fortnight for Freedom campaign and the forcefulness of the lawsuits. Why haven't the U.S. Bishops, for instance, been as forceful on other issues like poverty, housing or the death penalty?

A: That's plainly ridiculous. To claim that the Catholic bishops of the United States do not show concern for Catholic teaching on all issues is blatantly wrong. Any reporter who did his or her homework would know immediately that, in the past 10 years alone, the NJ Bishops issued a strong and clear statement on poverty in New Jersey and convened task forces to address it. We called for action on immigration reform and affordable housing, and worked with key NJ legislators to eliminate the death penalty in New Jersey. The U.S. Bishops launched a national justice for immigrants initiative, and spoke out early and clearly with the Holy See against the War in Iraq (in March 2003). They've called for comprehensive healthcare, including universal access, decades before it was politically fashionable. This information and much more is readily available on the U.S. Bishops' and New Jersey Bishops' Web sites. I think the bigger issue here is that the media has, in general, chosen to ignore these initiatives when they occurred and wants readers now to think they never happened. They believe it helps them in arguing that we're only interested in stopping abortion.

Q: Let's get back to the contraceptive issue. Why aren't the lawsuits an attempt to stop contraceptives or other similar drugs?

A: Contraceptives are readily available in this country and they are affordable. Most employer-sponsored insurance plans already include coverage. They are also available to people on Medicaid. The real question in the lawsuit is whether religious organizations should be forced to provide services or drugs that violate their teachings directly, in direct defiance of the First Amendment and subsequent federal laws respecting religious freedom.

Q: Some reporters and commentators have been quoting, as part of their arguments against the Church's position, that a majority of Catholic women already use some form of artificial birth control. If so, why doesn't the Church just pay for the cost?

A: The issue isn't whether individuals practice artificial birth control. It's about forcing the Church to violate its beliefs and teaching. Do we change the math books because a good number of people, for example, may want firmly to believe that two plus two equals three?

Q: I want to step away slightly from the topic of the lawsuits for a minute and ask you about another issue that TV and newspapers seem to have latched on to—the Vatican directive to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

A: It's unfortunate, but all too true, that stories about the Vatican's doctrinal assessment of the LCWR need some perspective. The Vatican assessment is not a judgment on Religious Sisters' past or current work in social outreach, education, medicine and other ministries. These ministries are indeed central to Catholic social teaching and the Gospel message. All in the Church rightly and with great pride should be grateful to Religious Sisters for this work.

Q: What, specifically, is the core of the matter?

A: The assessment questioned why LCWR leadership has permitted speakers at meetings who promote "moving beyond the Church," or even beyond Jesus. What is Christianity, what is the Church, if it is not centered on Christ? It questioned why LCWR leadership protests or disregards Church teachings on sexuality, ordination, or the sanctity of life at all stages, even pre-birth. The LCWR's Mentoring Leadership Manual, for example, is silent on reaffirming the right to life from conception to natural death. It questioned why LCWR meetings host speakers and presentations that have distorted and denigrated basic Christian belief as expressed in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, a belief shared by Anglican, Lutheran, United Methodist and other Christian communities: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord." Such actions undermine the doctrines of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, and the inspiration of Sacred Scripture. If non-Catholic Christians support and promote these tenets of faith, surely the LCWR should, too. Remember, we aren't Church because we do social work; we do social work because we are Church.

Q: And to sum up?

A: Religious liberty is central to our very humanity. It is a cornerstone of our democracy. The HHS mandate fundamentally alters the fragile balance between government and religious groups created by the framers of our Constitution. Never before has the government forced religious organizations to provide products and services that violate their beliefs. They cannot be allowed to do it now or ever. The same First Amendment that protects religious freedom protects freedom of the press. We wouldn't want the state telling newspapers or news programs what to write or whom to interview, would we?

(Editor's Note: Resource information about the Fortnight for Freedom is available on Web sites www.rcan.org/religiousliberty and www.fortnight4freedom.org)