

A time for Catholic action and Catholic voices January 26, 2012, By Archbishop José Gomez

Last Thursday in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a remarkable address to a group of visiting American bishops. Our Holy Father praised America's founders for their commitment to religious liberty and their belief that Judeo-Christian moral teachings are essential to shaping citizens and democratic institutions.

The Pope warned that our heritage of religious freedom faces "grave threats" from the "radical secularism" of political and cultural opinion leaders who are "increasingly hostile to Christianity."

Last Friday, the day after the Pope's address, our federal government issued a ruling that confirmed his worst fears about our country's anti-religious and anti-Christian drift.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced a final decision to mandate that every U.S. employer must provide health insurance coverage that makes birth control, sterilization, and even abortion-causing drugs available to its employees free of charge.

The government rejected the U.S. bishops' efforts to negotiate an exemption for faith-based employers — including Catholic hospitals, charities and colleges — that are morally opposed to abortion and contraception.

Instead, the government is giving us until August 2013 to obey or suffer the consequences — fines so large they could drive some Catholic employers out of business.

It is hard not to see this new mandate as a direct attack on Catholic consciences and the freedom of our Catholic institutions.

The mandate does not promote any civil liberties and it does not advance any significant public health goals.

The government justifies the mandate by arguing that employers who do not provide these services are discriminating against women. But access to free contraception has never been a basic human right. And there is no evidence that birth control has any effect on women's health; pregnancy is not a disease for which "preventive medicine" is required.

The Health Department justifies denying exemptions to Catholic charities, hospitals and colleges because it says they are not really "religious" institutions. This may be the most troubling part of this new mandate.

Because in effect, the government is presuming it has the competence and authority to define what religious faith is and how believers should express their faith commitments and relationship to God in society. These are powers our government has never before assumed itself to have.

In this case, the government is imposing a narrow, radically individualistic idea of religion — defining religion as only worship and moral teaching. As many have noted, under this definition, much of what Jesus Christ did would not qualify as a "religious" ministry. The fact is that everything the Church does is "religious." All our ministries and institutions are motivated by our love for God and our mission to spread the Gospel. We don't do these things because we are social workers or philanthropists. We do them because we are disciples.

The Catholic Church is the only visible religious group in American public life that holds consistent beliefs regarding the morality of life issues, including abortion and contraception. And Catholic institutions make a major contribution to our social fabric — healing, educating and caring for the needs of millions of our fellow citizens, especially the poor.

So it is hard to escape the conclusion that the government is singling out the Church with this new mandate.

But the issues here go far beyond contraception and far beyond the liberties of the Catholic Church. They go to the heart of our national identity and our historic understanding of our democratic form of government.

There will be much more to say about this in the weeks ahead. But this is clear:

Now is a time for Catholic action and for Catholic voices. We need lay leaders to step up to their responsibilities for the Church's mission. Not only to defend our faith and our rights as Catholics, but to be leaders for moral and civic renewal, leaders in helping to shape the values and moral foundations of America's future.

In his address last Thursday, Pope Benedict gave us some prophetic advice for these troubling times.

Here once more we see the need for an engaged, articulate and well-formed Catholic laity endowed with a strong critical sense vis-à-vis the dominant culture and with the courage to counter a reductive secularism which would delegitimize the Church's participation in public debate about the issues which are determining the future of American society. The preparation of committed lay leaders and the presentation of a convincing articulation of the Christian vision of man and society remain a primary task of the Church in your country; as essential components of the new evangelization, these concerns must shape the vision and goals of catechetical programs at every level.

We need to pray for one another this week and we need to pray for our leaders.

I entrust us to the intercession of the Mary Immaculate, Patroness of America, and the Mother of Hope.

Please go to <http://uscgb.org> for more information and links for contacting your congressman.