

65 East Wacker Place • Suite 1620
Chicago, Illinois 60601
(312) 368-1066
FAX (312) 368-1090



108 East Cook Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704
(217) 528-9200
FAX (217) 528-7214

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Headlines declared “free birth control for all” when the federal government recently issued an interim rule mandating health care plans to cover sterilization and prescription contraceptives, including the abortifacient drug Ella. But an under-reported provision of the same rule proposed an incredibly narrow definition of religious employer for exemption from the mandate.

The Catholic Church’s teaching on the immorality of contraception and sterilization as a rejection of God’s life-giving design may lack popular support. However, our nation’s commitment to protecting the free-exercise of religion has led to long-standing conscience exemptions from mandates concerning abortion, contraception and sterilization in both federal and state law for health care professionals, insurers and purchasers. President Obama’s health care plan, the Illinois Health Care Right of Conscience Act and the exemption of “church plans” in various federal laws are just a few examples.

But the newly defined exemption for religious belief is stricter than anything found in current federal law. Exemptions may now be unavailable to individuals or insurers and apply only to religious employers that meet the extremely narrow criteria of (1) having the purpose of teaching religious values, (2) primarily hiring persons who share the organizations’ religious tenets, (3) primarily serving people who share those tenets and (4) being a nonprofit as described in the Internal Revenue Code.

Under this proposal, an organization would not be “religious enough” if it served people of different faiths, failed to hire based on religion or did not restrict its mission to the teaching of religious values. As organizations striving to serve all people in need, Catholic hospitals, Catholic universities and Catholic social service agencies would be denied the exemption.

Astonishingly, Jesus Christ and the early Church could not qualify for the exemption. His ministry was not confined to members of the Church, nor did it consist only of preaching.

By ignoring individual conscience and attempting to determine which ministries of the Church are not “religious enough,” the federal government abrogates existing law and undermines the free-exercise protections of the First Amendment. Left unchanged, the final implementation of this provision will present an impossible dilemma: forcing the Catholic Church to either withdraw from public ministry or violate deeply-held religious belief through the compelled provision of health insurance coverage for contraceptives and sterilization.

Illinois residents surely cannot accept this threat to religious freedom.

Zach Wichmann
Director of Government Relations
Catholic Conference of Illinois
Springfield, IL 62704
217-528-9200