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PROMOTING RELIGIOUS LIBERTY THROUGH ADVOCACY

"Never before have we faced this kind of challenge to our ability to engage in the public square as people of faith and as a service provider. If we do not act now, the consequence will be grave."

—USCCB President Cardinal Timothy Dolan in a letter to U.S. Bishops, September, 2011

In August 2005 *focus* published with specific attention to utilizing technology for the common good. That year Michigan Catholic Conference launched the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network*, an online tool to facilitate communication between Catholics and elected officials. In an age of legislative term limits, Catholics now have simpler means to communicate concerns about policies that impact human life, religious freedom, marriage, justice, education and other issues to their representatives in Lansing, who increasingly rely on hearing from constituents before voting on an important issue.

Grassroots advocacy remains a critical resource and a valuable opportunity for Catholics to urge public officials to enact policies that advance the common good and uphold the moral fiber of the state. While the *Legislative Network* continues to grow in 2012, new and frightful legislative challenges have arisen. Regrettably, policies have surfaced at the congressional level, now funneling down to the state level, that obstruct the Catholic

Church's constitutional right to exercise its faith free from government intervention.

Much has been publicized about the "preventive services" mandate the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued in August 2011. The mandate forces any employer that offers its employees health care benefits to include in its benefit plan contraception, including those that act as an abortifacient. Religious employers nationwide, including and especially the Catholic Church, have rightfully argued that this mandate violates conscience and religious liberty rights. In response to the mandate, tens of thousands of messages have been generated electronically from concerned Catholics and other religious persons articulating objections to this government intrusion.

The HHS "preventive services" mandate may represent the first time in American history that the federal government, through fiat, has attempted such brazen interference in the internal policies and institutional conscience of organized religion. Going forward, online advocacy will better enable the faithful to communicate with their legislators and to vocalize opposition should elected officials continue to target religious communities and their ministries. ■



ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS

TO BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

One of the most memorable aspects of my Pastoral Visit to the United States was the opportunity it afforded me to reflect on America's historical experience of religious freedom, and specifically the relationship between religion and culture. At the heart of every culture, whether perceived or not, is a consensus about the nature of reality and the moral good, and thus about the conditions for human flourishing. In America, that consensus, as enshrined in your nation's founding documents, was grounded in a worldview shaped not only by faith but a commitment to certain ethical principles deriving from nature and nature's God. Today that consensus has eroded significantly in the face of powerful new cultural currents which are not only directly opposed to core moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such.

For her part, the Church in the United States is called, in season and out of season, to proclaim a Gospel which not only proposes unchanging moral truths but proposes them precisely as the key to human happiness and social prospering (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 10). To the extent that some current cultural trends contain elements that would curtail the proclamation of these truths, whether constricting it within the limits of a merely scientific rationality, or suppressing it in the name of political power or majority rule, they represent a threat not just to Christian faith, but also to humanity itself and to the deepest truth about our being and ultimate vocation, our relationship to God. When a culture attempts to suppress the dimension of ultimate mystery, and to close the doors to transcendent truth, it inevitably becomes impoverished and falls prey, as the late Pope John Paul II so clearly saw, to reductionist and totalitarian readings of the human person and the nature of society.

With her long tradition of respect for the right relationship between faith and reason, the Church has a critical role to play in countering cultural currents which, on the basis of an extreme individualism, seek to promote notions of freedom detached from moral truth. Our tradition does not speak from blind faith, but from a rational perspective which links our commitment to building an authentically just, humane and prosperous society to our ultimate assurance that the cosmos is possessed of an inner logic accessible to human reasoning. The Church's defense of a moral reasoning based on the natural law is grounded on her conviction that this law is not a threat to our freedom, but

rather a "language" which enables us to understand ourselves and the truth of our being, and so to shape a more just and humane world. She thus proposes her moral teaching as a message not of constraint but of liberation, and as the basis for building a secure future.

The Church's witness, then, is of its nature public: she seeks to convince by proposing rational arguments in the public square. The legitimate separation of Church and State cannot be taken to mean that the Church must be silent on certain issues, nor that the State may choose not to engage, or be engaged by, the voices of committed believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation.



In the light of these considerations, it is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the Church's public moral witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres. The seriousness of these threats needs to be clearly appreciated at every level of ecclesial life. Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. 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. Others 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.

ESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT, JANUARY 19, 2012¹

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.

In this regard, I would mention with appreciation your efforts to maintain contacts with Catholics involved in political life and to help them understand their personal responsibility to offer public witness to their faith, especially with regard to the great moral issues of our time: respect for God's gift of life, the protection of human dignity and the promotion of authentic human rights. As the Council noted, and I wished to reiterate during my Pastoral Visit, respect for the just autonomy of the secular sphere must also take into consideration the truth that "there is no realm of worldly affairs which can be withdrawn from the Creator and his dominion" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36). There can be no

doubt that a more consistent witness on the part of America's Catholics to their deepest convictions would make a major contribution to the renewal of society as a whole.

Dear Brother Bishops, in these brief remarks I have wished to touch upon some of the pressing issues which you face in your service to the Gospel and their significance for the evangelization of American culture. No one who looks at these issues realistically can ignore the genuine difficulties which the Church encounters at the present moment. Yet in faith we can take heart from the growing awareness of the need to preserve a civil order clearly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as from the promise offered by a new generation of Catholics whose experience and convictions will have a decisive role in renewing the Church's presence and witness in American society. The hope which these "signs of the times" give us is itself a reason to renew our efforts to mobilize the intellectual and moral resources of the entire Catholic community in the service of the evangelization of American culture and the building of the civilization of love. With great affection I commend all of you, and the flock entrusted to your care, to the prayers of Mary, Mother of Hope, and cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord. ■

USCCB RESPONDS TO ATTACK ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

In September 2011 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) announced the creation of an Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty to address growing concerns over the erosion of freedom of religion in America. In its announcement, USCCB President Cardinal Timothy Dolan cited six religious liberty concerns arising since June 2011:

- HHS mandate coercing church employers to sponsor and pay for services they oppose.
- HHS requirement for USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services to provide abortion and contraceptive services to victims of human trafficking.
- Growing concerns from Catholic Relief Services that the U.S. Agency for International Development, under the Department of State, is increasingly requiring condom distribution in HIV prevention programs.
- The U.S. Justice Department refusing to uphold the federal Defense of Marriage Act, and citing "bigotry" as a reason for those who support traditional marriage.
- The U.S. Justice Department opposing the rights of religious employers to determine employment practices. (Supreme Court upheld the "ministerial exception" in January 2012.)
- New York State's new law redefining marriage, with only a very narrow religious exemption. ■

THE CHURCH AND GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY

The Church has a unique role in the political life of society. Political issues often have moral dimensions that require vigilance on the part of Catholics in acting responsibly. The Gospel of life has social implications requiring one's attentiveness to various political issues. One way that the Church in Michigan participates in the public square is through the Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC).

Located in Lansing, the MCC is guided by a board of directors that includes Michigan's seven arch/diocesan bishops, five lay persons, one religious sister and a diocesan priest. The MCC brings the public policy positions of the Church in Michigan to the legislative and executive branches of state government. Grassroots advocacy has become increasingly vital for elected officials to better understand the concerns of their constituents.

As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' biennial document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*² states: "As Americans, we are also blessed with religious liberty which safeguards our right to *bring our principles and moral convictions into the public arena*" (emphasis added). This serves the purpose of putting our Catholic faith into action for the betterment of society through participation in the public square.

In operation for nearly seven years, the *Catholic Legislative Advocacy Network* is a web-based, grassroots program that allows Michigan Catholics the opportunity to participate in the democratic process by e-mailing state and federal officials either in support of or opposition to pending legislation.

Signing up requires a name, email and home address. When users receive an email action alert, background information is provided related to the legislative issue that requires a Catholic response, and sample messages are provided that can be sent to legislators as-is or can be tailored to the user's preference.

To sign-up and to begin receiving action alerts:

- Visit www.micatholicconference.org/legislativenetwork
- Beneath the introductory paragraph, click "Click Here" to be taken to the sign-up page
- Enter your information in the required fields, including Name, Address and Email Address
- Click "Submit" ■

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Click here with your smart
phone to sign up for
the Catholic Legislative
Advocacy Network

1. Pope Benedict's full speech may be found at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120119_bishops-usa_en.html
2. <http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org/>