

No Compromise

The U.S. Catholic Bishops, united in defense of religious freedom.

By George Weigel – March 14, 2012

In May 1953, the Polish government ordered the implementation of a decree giving the state the authority to appoint and remove Catholic priests and bishops throughout the country: The Catholic Church was to become a subsidiary of the Polish state; its clergy would act as agents of state power; and its educational and charitable activities would be approved (or rejected) by a state intent on bringing the most important institution in Polish civil society to heel. The bishops of Poland, who had tried for years to find a *modus vivendi* with the Communist regime, now drew the line. Meeting in Kraków under the leadership of the country's primate, Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, the Polish episcopate issued a memorandum deploring the government's attempt to turn the Church "into an instrument of the state" as a violation of the natures of both church and state. The memorandum concluded memorably: "We are not allowed to place the things of God on the altar of Caesar, *Non possumus!* [We cannot!]."

Americans accustomed to religious freedom may, at first blush, find it hard to imagine any possible analogy between our situation today, in the midst of the debate over the HHS "contraceptive mandate," and that of Poland's Christians in 1953; of course those brave men and women faced challenges far beyond those facing American believers today. Yet the structure of the moral and political argument, then and now, is eerily similar. In both cases, an overweening and arrogant government tries, through the use of coercive power, to make the Church a subsidiary of the state. In both cases, the state claims the authority to define religious ministries and services on its own narrow and secularist terms. In both cases, the state is attempting to co-opt as much of society as it can, while the Church is defending the prerogatives of civil society.

The March 14 statement of the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "United for Religious Freedom," does not contain the kind of rhetorical flourishes that reached a dramatic coda in the Poles' ringing "*Non Possumus!*" Still, the U.S. bishops have drawn an unmistakably clear line in the sand.

Resisting pressures from both within and without the Church to retreat from their hitherto firm and unified opposition to the administration's HHS mandate and its bogus

“accommodation” of religious concerns, the Administrative Committee — which includes bishops from across the spectrum of Catholic opinion and which does the conference’s most urgent business between the semi-annual meetings of the entire episcopate — strongly reaffirmed statements by the conference president, Timothy Cardinal Dolan, and by individual bishops, that both the mandate and the “accommodation” are unacceptable. Moreover, the statement affirms, against charges of exaggeration, that present administration policy represents a threat to religious freedom of “unprecedented magnitude” that must be “rejected.” And as for those who have long sought to play divide-and-conquer in this affair — from government officials to journalists to advocates of Catholic Lite — they, too, are sent an unmistakable signal in the March 14 statement: **“We will not be divided, and we will continue forward as one!”**

In a deft response to the spin and distortion that have characterized this debate for two months, “United for Religious Freedom” usefully clarifies just what the argument is not:

This is *not* about access to contraception, which is ubiquitous and inexpensive. . . . This is *not* about the religious freedom of Catholics only, but also of those who recognize that their cherished beliefs may be next on the block. This is *not* about the bishops’ somehow ‘banning contraception,’ when the U.S. Supreme Court took that issue off the table two generations ago. Indeed, this is *not* about the Church wanting to force anybody to do anything; it is, instead, about the federal government forcing the Church . . . to act against Church teachings. This is *not* a matter of opposition to universal health care, which has been a concern of the Bishops’ Conference since 1919, virtually at its founding. This is *not* a fight we want or asked for, but one forced upon us by government on its own timing. Finally, this is *not* a Republican or Democratic, a conservative or liberal issue; it is an American issue.

The Administrative Committee’s statement then crisply defines what the HHS mandate involves:

It involves an “unwarranted” and “extremely narrow” definition of who is a “religious employer” - a definition that “creates and enforces a new distinction” between Catholic houses of worship, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Church’s charitable activities and its educational efforts. According to the administration’s regulatory scheme, the latter will become “second class” citizens, in a dramatic break with both Catholic tradition and federal law.