State’s Catholic leader calls birth-control mandate unjust

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The archbishop who leads the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Oklahoma City said he was shocked when a new federal mandate was issued Jan. 20 that effectively requires Catholic-affiliated organizations to pay for services such as contraception. That shock quickly turned to indignation over

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SEE MANDATE, PAGE 4A
Mandate: Archbishop says compliance is not an option

FROM PAGE 1A

what the Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley called an “unprecedented intrusion by the federal government.”

The federal measure that has drawn Coakley’s ire, and that of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as a collective body, requires employers, including those affiliated with religious groups, to provide employee health coverage of services such as contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs.

The mandate would affect Catholic-affiliated hospitals, universities and agencies like Catholic Charities. The targeted organizations have been given one year to comply with the new mandate.

The Obama administration mandated the coverage of birth control last summer, after developing a list of preventive tests and procedures that should be covered without additional co-pays or deductibles under health care reform.

They include exams for breast and colon cancer, and for sexually transmitted diseases — and all Food and Drug Administration-approved birth control — and become effective as plans begin to renew, beginning in August.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said the decision on contraception was necessary to reduce health costs and provide better access to the most commonly taken drugs by young and middle-aged women.

Coakley said he and other bishops talked about the mandate last November but thought that the Obama administration was committed to finding some sort of compromise that would allow organizations with concerns to be exempted from the measure. But he found out on Jan. 20, when the mandate was issued, that the compromise did not happen.

"Fundamentally, it is an assault on religious liberty and the right of conscience," Coakley said.

"We are asked through the mandate — required by the mandate — to pay for something which we find morally objectionable and contrary to our religious beliefs and teachings."

He noted that Catholics must be prepared to either violate their conscience or to drop health coverage for their employees and suffer the penalties for doing so.

"We cannot — we will not — comply with this unjust law," he wrote. "People of faith cannot be made second-class citizens."

Tim O’Connor, the executive director of the archdiocesan-affiliated Catholic Charities, said he believes the administration has struck the right balance to ensure women have access to needed medical services while also protecting and respecting the rights and beliefs of religious organizations.

O’Connor said Tuesday, Catholic Charities believes in health access for all people, but the mandate, as Coakley described, is morally objectionable to Catholic teaching.

"We’re in a bad spot because we can’t make a good choice in this. It’s a double bind," O’Connor said.

The right balance

Not everyone is against the Obama administration’s mandate.

Some organizations and lawmakers applauded the move, including Maryland Democratic Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski.

"I believe the administration has struck the right balance to ensure women have access to needed medical services while also protecting and respecting the rights and beliefs of religious organizations," she said.

At least one other faith group in Oklahoma is envisioning the mandate for possible far-reaching effects.

"We will be studying and following with a close eye the implications of the proposed OBRA mandate, especially as it affects religious liberty and the dignity of human life," said Brian Hobbs, communication director for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

"Each year, our state Ethics and Religious Liberty Committee has a key role in proposing a set of resolutions for Oklahoma Baptists to consider, and this issue may very well rise to the forefront," Hobbs said, adding that he helps coordinate the committee’s activities.

Contributing

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