

# WHAT WE HOLD MOST DEAR

After the Way of the Cross in the heart of our city and in most cities in the United States, we are full of gratitude for being able to publicly express what we hold most dear in life. While thankful for this freedom -- which is not available everywhere, as we read in the newspapers every day -- we are also concerned about the attempts in our country to curtail it through the recent unprecedented mandates by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As the U.S. Catholic Bishops recently wrote, “we wish to clarify what this debate is—and is not—about. This is not about access to contraception, which is ubiquitous and inexpensive, even when it is not provided by the Church’s hand and with the Church’s funds. 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—consisting of its faithful and all but a few of its institutions—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.”

Our nation’s roots lie in the ardent desire of men and women to freely live out their deepest religious convictions, as the supreme expression of their perennial desire and search for truth. The Founding Fathers recognized and valued this history when they drafted the first amendment of the Constitution, which not only protects a right to worship one’s god of choice behind closed doors, but to freely and publicly exercise one’s religion and to dialogue with the culture at large. As Pope Benedict XVI stated, “religious freedom should be understood... not merely as immunity from coercion, but even more fundamentally as an ability to order one’s own choices in accordance with the truth. (...) Precisely for this reason, the laws and institution of a society cannot be shaped in such a way as to ignore the religious dimension of its citizens or to prescind completely from it.”

The recent HHS mandates violate religious freedom by requiring both institutions and individuals pay for procedures and medicines that directly contradict their foundational convictions about the nature and dignity of human life. Appealing to notions of equality, rights, and freedom, this ruling claims to have the final word on what the human person is and denies what is most intimate to each of us, namely conscience, the relation to God, free and creative social life, and the very possibility of accessing ultimate truths. A people that accepts government dictating what is most fundamental to human nature is a people at the whim of power.

What is at stake in this moment of our history is not just the possibility for religious groups to continue to give their own original contribution to American society, but also the possibility for any man or woman to gain access to the truth of life. For this reason, we will not give up the right to publicly witness to the world, through our lives and our work, what we hold most dear. With the words of the Russian writer Vladimir Soloviev, we repeat today what Christians have been repeating for 2,000 years.

“In the grieved voice the Emperor addressed them: ‘Tell me yourselves, you strange people...you Christians, deserted by the majority of your brothers and leaders: what do you hold most dear in Christianity?’ At this Elder John rose up and said in a quiet voice: ‘Great sovereign! What we hold the most dear in Christianity is Christ Himself - He in His person. All the rest comes from Him, for we know that in Him dwells bodily the whole fullness of Divinity.’”

Happy Easter.