



PRAYER AND ACTION ARE NECESSARY TO KEEP OUR FIRST FREEDOM FIRST

When Pope Benedict visited the United States in 2008, he asked the U.S. bishops a question: **“Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs?”**

The Holy Father then answered his own question: **“...Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.”**

Although the full impact of the Holy Father’s words might not have been understood then, they have since proven prophetic. The Pope was challenging Catholics in the United States to resist the growing pressure to confine religious beliefs to houses of worship and to prevent the Church and individual believers from living out their faith in their day-to-day work and care for others.

The U.S. bishops have since raised numerous concerns over the increasing threats to religious freedom, especially the now-finalized rule of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which would force virtually all private health plans nationwide to provide coverage of sterilization and contraception—including abortifacient drugs.

While there is an exemption for certain “religious employers,” it only covers employers that serve people of their own faith. **Jesus and his apostles would not qualify. Mother Teresa would not qualify.** As the bishops noted in their statement, *United for Religious Freedom*, this is an extremely narrow and unprecedented federal definition of religion, resulting in coercion to act against our teachings and the violation of civil rights.

Federal law has long been generous in protecting the rights of individuals and institutions to not to act against their religious beliefs or moral convictions. Is that now changing? **Are we entering a time when the federal government may now force the Church—consisting of its faithful and all but a few of its institutions—to act against Church teachings?**

While we seek remedies from the White House, Congress, and the courts, the U.S. bishops have called upon the Catholic faithful, and all people of faith, throughout our country to join in prayer and penance for our political leaders, and for the complete protection of our first freedom—religious liberty. Prayer is the ultimate source of our strength—for without God, we can do nothing; but with God, all things are possible.

What can you do to help protect religious freedom?

- To get breaking news and opportunities for action, text the word **“Freedom”** to **377377** on your cell phone.
- To learn more about our first freedom, and to send your message to Congress urging them to stand up for conscience rights in health care, go to www.usccb.org/conscience.
- To join in the **Rosary Novena for Life and Liberty, October 14-22**, or to sponsor a Marian Pilgrimage or other prayer efforts for religious freedom and conscience rights, go to www.usccb.org/freedom.