

## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

*"... We stand in the midst of a great cloud of witnesses."*

These words taken from the Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 12, verse 1, quite aptly characterize the reality of the human condition. No matter how we might try, even those who work so hard to live in complete anonymity, we all are being observed on the stage of life from the very time that life begins and through all the years following as we pursue our courses of study, choose a vocation and enter into the adult world. From birth to old age, we all stand amidst a great cloud of witnesses and daily we allow ourselves to be judged, evaluated, selected and even rejected, to be acclaimed and sadly at times to be defamed. We live in a world that watches and analyzes everything we do, how we act and what we say.

How much more so then are those elected and chosen to apply the law of this land standing amidst a great cloud of witnesses. How often we pray that God the Father will bestow His gift of the Holy Spirit upon those called to serve the causes of justice, love, peace and mercy. Their mandate is to guard and to guarantee freedom and the fundamental right to religious liberty for all citizens of any faith. Those who make, apply and execute the laws and policies by which we are bound hold within their hands that which controls, frees, condemns, judges, exonerates and penalizes peoples. Great is the responsibility they bear in developing and applying laws which so intimately touch the lives of others, to determine the course that lives will take and to mark the path of another's journey!

The great cloud of witnesses expects from legislators and government officials the best possible environment which truly respects and elevates the dignity of the human person within the context of our culture – culture, a term and a concept understood in many ways but ultimately referring to the ambient in which we live: the situation encompassing our traditions, languages, heritage, laws that govern us, and finally what we believe, whom we worship, who is our absolute guide. Faith, one's creedal belief, cannot be divorced from culture and it cannot be ignored, and still worse trampled upon by the laws, legislation and jurisprudence which exist within a culture.

In his essay, *"The Christian Vision in T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism,"* Michael M. Jordan in commenting upon T.S. Eliot's *"The Idea of a Christian Society"* writes: "Eliot's essay has essentially one subject and theme: religion should be the basis of culture and community. In other words, a healthy culture must have a religious base, and the religion must be based in a community." (*The Christian Vision in T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism*, Michael M. Jordan, **Star**,

May/June 2005). In that same essay, Jordan quotes T.S. Eliot's celebrated work, "*The Rock*," where the poet cries out:

*"You, have you built well, have you forgotten the  
cornerstone?  
Talking of right relations of men, but not relations of men to  
God."*

How well the poet understood that God is the heart and foundation of all life since He is its very author. So it is only right and just that laws governing His creation be guided and inspired by Him. For as we move through this life, He is the first among the great cloud of witnesses to observe us and the One who ultimately will be our judge.

In speaking of culture and religion, we must give particular attention to the Vicar of Christ and successor to Saint Peter, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, who so very well understands our situation. Pope Benedict XVI recently addressed these words to a group of Bishops from the United States who were in Rome for their *Ad limina Apostolorum* (To the threshold of the Apostles) visit:

"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 Judeo-Christian tradition, but increasingly hostile to Christianity as such." (Consistory Hall, Thursday, January 19, 2012).

As our Holy Father understands, our Founding Fathers, firmly intent upon preserving the prized gift of freedom, encompassing religious liberty, were unafraid to receive their guidance from the Lord. Samuel Adams wrote: "The right to freedom is the gift of God Almighty... the rights of colonists as Christians may best be understood by reading and carefully studying the institutes of The Great Law Giver, which are to be found clearly written and promulgated in the New Testament." ("*The Rights of the Colonists*," 1772). Likewise, others espoused these same principles. Alexis de Tocqueville, considered by many to be a keen analyst of American life, came from France in 1831 to study the penal system in the United States. Among his many thoughts, we find the following: "Despotism may be able to do without faith, but freedom cannot." It appears that de Tocqueville may have realized that faith gives birth to and sustains freedom. Maybe knowingly or unknowingly his own voice joined that of the psalmist in proclaiming that the nation whose God is the Lord is indeed a happy one. (Cf. Psalm 33:12).

In his treatise, *Of Civil Government* (1690), John Locke alludes to this connection between law and its Supreme Maker: "Though this be a State of Liberty, yet it is not a State of License... No one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions. For men are all the workmanship of one Omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker..."

The early architects of these United States saw our nation as being "one nation under God" where the City of God was not in conflict with the City of Man. In his Farewell Address to the Nation (Published in *The Independent Chronicle* on September 26, 1997), George Washington proclaimed:

"Of all the dispositions and habits, which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and Citizens... Let it simply be asked, Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice?" (No. 27).

It is against this backdrop of our historical preservation of the gift of freedom and religious liberty that we cannot help but to be deeply disturbed at the ruling of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), issued on January 20, 2012, which confirmed that virtually all private health plans, including those of Catholic organizations, will be required to include coverage for sterilizations and contraceptives, including abortion-inducing drugs, and almost all individuals will be forced to buy that coverage as a part of their policies.

Thus, I join with my brother bishops throughout the United States in bringing to your attention this grave matter, which strikes at the fundamental right to religious liberty for all citizens of any faith. By its ruling, the Administration has cast aside the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, denying Catholics our Nation's first and most fundamental freedom, that of religious liberty, and compelling an individual to violate his or her conscience - conscience, defined in *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II, December 7, 1965, 16) as "man's most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths." (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1776). And, interestingly, described by James Madison, author of the First Amendment, as "the most sacred of all property." (Cf. Cardinal-elect Timothy M. Dolan, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, **The Wall Street Journal**, *ObamaCare and Religious Freedom*, January 25, 2012).

The formation of conscience has always held a place of prime importance in Catholic theology. The Second Vatican Council clearly emphasized and appreciated the need for each person to follow his or her conscience in making those decisions which affect so many aspects of human existence. This same Council carefully noted how the formation of conscience and Church doctrine are intimately joined when it stated: "...in the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. The Catholic Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself." (Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, December 7, 1965, 14).

So often the Catholic Church is criticized for interfering in matters considered political, when, in fact, these subjects have their roots in a person's relationship with God and with one another and, thereby, become concerns impacting upon one's faith and conscientious judgment. This present ruling of the United States Department of Health and Human Services unnecessarily intrudes upon the religious rights of Catholics; disturbingly, it is an example of the government interfering in the right of a person to practice freely and without coercion his or her religious creed. A person "must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters." (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3§ 2; cf. also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1782).


Even those who are not in agreement with the Catholic Church's teaching on the sanctity of human life recognize that the government cannot be allowed to force religious institutions to sponsor and pay for procedures and drugs which are contrary to those teachings. Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Daily News* have editorialized against the HHS ruling. The Catholic Health Association, Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA have spoken out against this decision. At this same time, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty is actively exploring options for litigation and legislative proposals to remedy this injustice.

United with my brother bishops throughout the United States, I ask for your prayers that wisdom and justice may prevail, and religious liberty may be restored. I would recommend visiting [www.usccb.org/conscience](http://www.usccb.org/conscience), to learn more about this severe attack on religious liberty, and how to contact members of Congress, urging them to support legislation that would reverse the Administration's decision.

You and I stand before a great cloud of witnesses, our fellow citizens, our brothers and sisters in the community of faith, those who oppose us and those who agree with us, but preeminent among these witnesses, the very First Witness, the ultimate judge of our actions, is God. Let us then take to heart the words of Saint Augustine: "... in everything you do, see God as your witness." (Saint Augustine as referenced in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1779). May He find us a people of faith who cherished His gift of life and sought to defend and uphold it. May charity and the desire for truth characterize our actions in reversing the decision of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. And in humility may we seek the Lord's forgiveness for our own personal failures to follow His will. Rich in mercy, He never abandons us; it remains for us to seek Him out and thereby discover anew His abundant love.

Assuring you of my prayers and invoking the intercession of Our Mother Mary, Patroness of these United States, and begging her to plead with her Son to bless America, I remain,

Devotedly yours in Christ,



The Most Reverend Salvatore R. Matano  
Bishop of Burlington

Given at the Chancery Office of the Diocese of Burlington on the twenty-sixth day of January, the Memorial of Saints Timothy and Titus, in the Year of Our Lord two thousand and twelve.