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Dear Brothers in Christ:

On January 20, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reaffirmed a Rule that under the 2010 health care law, virtually all private health care plans must cover access to sterilization, contraception and abortion-inducing drugs like RU 486 and "Ella" as part of the set of "preventive health services." This decision was made despite the clear, repeated and reasoned appeals of the U.S. Bishops, an array of healthcare organizations and many other clergy and lay Catholics.

The mandate contained in this Rule violates the long-standing tradition of conscience protections in federal law and the First Amendment protection of religious liberty. Catholic social services agencies, hospitals, universities and all other employers would have to fund procedures they find contrary to their convictions and harmful to others. Even those who do not share the Church's conviction that these procedures and drugs are not true "health care" and are morally wrong can share our distress and indignation that citizens would be forced to pay for actions that violate their personal consciences.

As Catholics, we support providing those services which can truly prevent disease or disability for women. Our hospitals and charities serve as the safety net for many thousands of people who otherwise go without help. However, we join other persons of good will who strenuously object to mandatory coverage for contraceptives, sterilization and abortifacients.

The rule is set to take effect August 1, 2012, although non-profit religious employers are given an extra year to comply – a meaningless gesture since a mere delay can never make such a mandate morally acceptable.

Since this matter affects the entire nation, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is developing a national strategy to urge this Rule be rescinded as an unacceptable infringement on the rights of freedom of conscience. In addition, I encourage you to do three things:

- 1) Pray that the Rule be rescinded and conscience protections be reinstated.
- 2) Contact Senators Klobuchar and Franken, and your federal Representative, to urge them to support the **Respect for Rights of Conscience Act** which has been introduced in both houses of Congress (H.R. 1179, S. 1467). This measure will ensure that those who participate in the health care system "retain the right to provide, purchase or enroll in health coverage that is consistent with their religious beliefs and moral convictions."
- 3) Contact the White House and petition President Obama directly to rescind the Rule.

You can find the links to these last two action items – and much more background – by going to the website of the Minnesota Catholic Conference: www.mncc.org/issues/life-bioethics/.

I leave it to the discretion of the pastors if you wish to read this letter in the parishes you serve, include it in your bulletins or communicate it in some other way to the faithful. Thank you for your action in support of life, conscience, and freedom.

With kind personal regards, I remain,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+John F. Kinney
Bishop of Saint Cloud