



Amish, Ok. Catholics, No.

The Amish are exempt from the entire health care reform law. So are members of Medi-Share, a program of Christian Care Ministry. Yet, when the Catholic Church asks for a religious exemption from just one regulation issued under the law – the mandate that all employers, including religious institutions, must pay for sterilization and contraceptives, including abortion-inducing drugs – the Administration balks.

The government respects the First Amendment that guarantees the right to freely exercise one's religious beliefs, but only to a point. In the health care law it picks and chooses which beliefs it respects. The Amish do not believe in insurance, and the government understands. Christian Care Ministry believes people should form a religious community and pay medical bills for one another, and the government says okay. Yet when the Catholic Church opposes being forced to pay for services that violate its beliefs, the Administration says "tough."

What is so special about this mandate that it cannot be touched? It was added after Congress passed the health care law and offers no exemption for religious charitable or educational institutions. It will not accept Catholic charities and schools as "religious enough" unless they hire only Catholics, serve only Catholics, have the narrow tax exempt status granted to houses of worship, and teach religion as their purpose.

Amazingly, this mandate has more force than the overall health care law. In fact recent regulations allow states to decide which "essential health benefits" to require in health plans, such as hospitalization, prescription drugs and pediatric services. At the same time, all insurance plans must include the objectionable services mentioned above. Here federal law trumps state law and threatens to fine into submission institutions that dare oppose it. The going rate is at least \$100 per day per employee.

What has the government got against the Catholic Church? Has it forgotten the contributions the church has made to the poor and needy for centuries?

Catholic elementary and secondary schools provide the only real alternative to public schools in many parts of the nation. Catholic colleges offer outstanding education, be it at the university or the community college. The contribution has a long history, back to 1789 when Georgetown University was founded by the Jesuits. Yet under the health care law, if these schools and colleges wish to remain faithful to their religious principles the government will fine them into submission. There's a thank-you note.

Many Catholic hospitals were founded by religious orders of women, and today one out of six persons seeking hospital care in the United States goes to a Catholic hospital. Until now, religious background of the patient has not been an issue. "Where does it hurt?" is the first question, not "Where is your baptismal certificate?" This approach threatens to deny hospitals any real protection as "religious employers" under the new rule. Yet their Catholicity means many of these hospitals have an added benefit. At Providence Hospital in Washington, DC, for example, patients not only get medical care, they can get clothing too if they need it. It comes through the Ladies of Charity, an auxiliary of the Daughters of Charity who founded the hospital in 1861.

Bringing Good News to Life!

Catholic social service agencies, including adoption and foster care agencies, parish food banks, and soup kitchens, meet human concerns. Services depend on need, not creed. Church sponsorship means the services have a little extra, be they volunteers from parishes, financial donations through diocesan appeals, or the dedication that comes from working for God as well as paycheck.

A Catholic might take personally the Administration's dissing their beliefs. Lucky the Amish, who have their basic constitutional rights respected. If only we objected to health insurance generally, we might be able to enjoy the same protection. Seems odd that the Administration is more inflexible on contraception than on services that actually treat disease.

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