MARYLAND CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE † ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON † DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON

September 19, 2011

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Sebelius:

We write as the Catholic bishops serving the states of Maryland, Delaware and the District of Columbia to convey our grave concern regarding the pending mandate that private health insurance plans provide coverage of all FDA-approved contraceptive methods, sterilization procedures, and educational services about such methods and procedures. Never before has the federal government required private health plans to include such coverage. The mandate directly conflicts with the religious beliefs of individuals and institutions who have a moral objection to such practices, and who do not believe that such "preventative services" constitute legitimate health care.

Despite the laudable goal of the *2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* to expand access to genuine health care for all Americans, especially the poor, this mandate contradicts promises made to the American people that the new federal law would not include coverage for abortion. By mandating coverage of all FDA-approved contraceptives, including the drug Ella, this policy would in fact include coverage not only for drugs that prevent pregnancy, but also for abortifacients with the capacity to terminate a pregnancy in its early weeks.

The proposed religious exemption would be applicable only to those institutions that serve only members of their faith community, exclude those of other faiths from their employment, and focus solely on the inculcation of their religious beliefs. In other words, under the mandate a Catholic institution would only qualify if it hired only Catholics, served only Catholics, and attempted to convert to Catholicism anyone who used its services. This is not in keeping with our mission. Through our schools, our hospitals, and our vast array of social service programs, the Catholic Church, like most other religious organizations, serves all those who come to us in need and welcomes people of all faiths to our employment whenever possible. This new mandate would impose an unwarranted burden on our ability to freely practice our religious beliefs as we embrace our neighbors.

Regardless of one's beliefs about the specific issues of contraception and abortion, it is difficult to accept that people of faith should be compelled to act in a manner inconsistent with their moral convictions in order to receive or provide health coverage. This mandate would impose such a compulsion on any religious institution that wishes to continue to employ and serve people of all faiths, and to provide health coverage to those who work in their institutions. There is no exemption for such organizations under the mandate's terms, which present a radically new and unprecedented attack on religious freedom.

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Our concern is real because the challenge is real. We are aware of no Catholic school, Catholic health care facility, Catholic Charities agency or other Catholic social services provider in the District of Columbia, Maryland or Delaware that could meet this narrow interpretation of religious freedom. Our Catholic schools, hospitals, clinics, and social service programs serve tens of thousands of non-Catholics. No one is required to become Catholic in order to receive these services. Yet this mandate would require us to violate our religious beliefs to serve them.

We urge the removal of this provision from the "preventative services" mandate, and a renewed focus on the important goal of providing expanded access to health care for those most in need in our country.

Sincerely,

Donald Cardinal Wuerl Archbishop of Washington	Most Rev. Edwin F. O'Brien Apostolic Administrator Archdiocese of Baltimore	Most Rev. W. Francis Malooly Bishop of Wilmington

Cc: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

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