

# CONGRESS MUST ACT ON RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, houses of worship have been closed down in most states for months, and in some cases they still are. Even those that are open are under strict restrictions that limit the number of people who can attend services. With few exceptions, the clergy of all religions have cooperated with the shutdown.

The churches, synagogues, mosques and temples have been hit hard, losing most of their expected revenue during this period. Religious schools have also taken a hit. Catholic diocesan schools, for example, are dependent on funding from their parish and diocese for support. Most are now in a precarious situation.

It is commonly said that with rights come responsibilities. The obverse is also true. Houses of worship were held responsible to the president, governors, and mayors in shutting down. The losses that they incurred cannot now be put aside.

The Small Business Administration, under the Trump administration, came through with the Payroll Protection Program, as incorporated in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, and it fortunately covered religious institutions. Whether there should be another bill, similar in nature, deserves serious discussion. In the meantime, Congress needs to up its game by helping Catholic schools.

Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez is president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and what he recently said about Catholic schools would no doubt be supported by all his fellow bishops. He addressed the situation they are facing

given the restrictions mandated by government.

“Parishes, shut down for three months, have lost millions in collection monies,” Gomez said. “Across the country, we see drop-offs in enrollments for next year, as families fear they will no longer be able to afford tuition.” He rightly stated that so many of the Catholic students who are served come from “minority and low-income families.” That they succeed in school is not debatable.

Archbishop Gomez notes that the U.S. Supreme Court will soon rule on the constitutionality of the so-called Blaine Amendments, legislation that bans public support for religious institutions. These laws were born in anti-Catholic bigotry, and are still operative in 37 states: they were designed to hurt Catholic schools.

Gomez maintains that “Congress and the White House cannot afford to wait” until the high court rules. “They should act now to provide immediate relief to help families handle their education expenses and also to expand nationwide school-choice opportunities for poor and middle-class families.”

Everything that Archbishop Gomez says is true. Catholic churches and schools accepted their government-mandated responsibilities and yielded on their First Amendment religious liberties. It is now time for the government to assist these institutions, in the form of grants, to compensate for their compliance with government edicts that hurt them financially.