

“CONSCIENCE CLAUSE” NEEDED IN D.C. FUNDING BILL

Today, the House of Representatives is scheduled to consider H.R. 2944, the District of Columbia Appropriations Act. The bill contains a provision that prohibits the enactment of the Health Insurance Coverage for Contraceptives Act of 2000 unless a religious “conscience clause” is adopted; the clause would allow religious organizations an exemption from the coverage.

In July 2000, the Catholic League strongly objected to a bill passed by the Washington, D.C. Council that mandated health insurance coverage of contraceptives without a provision exempting Catholic hospitals and employers on religious grounds. We also objected to the anti-Catholic bigotry of some of the bill’s supporters. After much debate, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams subsequently pocket-vetoed the bill.

Catholic League president William Donohue spoke to this issue today:

“Separation of church and state is a vital principle that cannot be trespassed without just cause. There is no just cause involved in this case. Any bill that would force religious institutions to choose between maintaining allegiance to their doctrinal teachings and foregoing health coverage to its employees cannot be justified in instances when there is a long-standing solution to this problem: allow religious organizations to opt out of the mandated coverage.

“The Catholic League understands that no constitutional right is absolute but it also understands the need for rational exemptions from absolutist legislation. A one-size fits all mentality is not the American way. The American way is based on pluralism—the kind of diversity that marks our culture and

colors our approach to constitutional law. It is for this reason that we urge the adoption of a 'conscience clause' in the D.C. appropriations bill."