

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

On September 25, the House of Representatives debated 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.

Like many other pieces of legislation, this bill took a back seat to the pressing demands of a U.S. counteroffensive. Nonetheless, the Catholic League put out a news release arguing that separation of church and state “is a vital principle that cannot be trespassed without just cause.” We hastened to add, “There is no just cause involved in this case.”

We explained our reasoning by saying, “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.”

It is the position of the league that “rational exemptions from absolutist legislation” should be made. “A one-size fits

all mentality,” we stressed, “is not the American way.” The American way is based on pluralism. This should be sufficient reason for the adoption of a “conscience clause” in the D.C. appropriations bill.