

# RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AFFIRMED; EXECUTIVE ORDER ISSUED

On May 4th, President Trump signed an executive order affirming his support for religious liberty.

He is to be commended for this initiative, even though the statement lacked the kind of teeth that we expected; the leaked draft that became available in February offered greater detail. Bill Donohue was invited to the White House but a scheduling snafu prevented him from going.

The most specific part of the executive order deals with the Johnson Amendment. This provision allows the IRS to challenge the tax-exempt status of churches and religious non-profit organizations if they endorse candidates for public office, or become directly involved in the political process.

It is up to the Congress to overturn the Johnson Amendment, though what Trump did is hardly meaningless. His initiative makes it clear that his Cabinet will not enforce this IRS code, thus vitiating its essence.

We hasten to add that there is an underside to the repeal of the Johnson Amendment. Many of the faithful do not want to turn their churches into a venue for political theater, nor does the Catholic League want to be lobbied by Republicans and Democrats to get on board. Church should be about worship, not politics.

On the issues most important to Catholics—ensuring conscience rights, and allowing Catholic non-profit organizations to exercise their doctrinal prerogatives with impunity—the executive order did not offer specifics, though the president did instruct his Cabinet to ensure that religious liberty will be protected.

So while in comparison to the leaked draft version, the final executive order was watered down, it nevertheless sent the right signal to executive agencies: religious liberty must be given a priority status when implementing legislation.

We certainly expect that the Trump administration will ensure that Catholic non-profits, such as the Little Sisters of the Poor, will finally be free of the pernicious pressures brought to bear on them by attorneys out to sunder their mission. The nuns should not have to comply with any mandate that forces them to be complicit in immoral acts.

At the heart of this controversy is something that transcends an executive order. To be exact, no government agency should have the right to strip Catholic organizations of their religious exemption merely because they hire and serve large segments of the population that are not Catholic.

Much more is needed to guarantee religious liberty: the Congress must act, and the federal courts must uphold the First Amendment rights of religious individuals and entities. But we can at least thank President Trump for pointing these branches of government in the right direction.