

RELIGIOUS RIGHTS DEMANDED; BISHOPS REFUSE TO BUDGE

On March 14, the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a statement, "United for Religious Freedom," that is the clearest exposition of contemporary Catholic thought on religious liberty in America. It is also the definitive response to attempts by the Obama administration to force Catholic institutions to violate their beliefs.

The statement yielded nothing to Church critics. The product of a two-day meeting in Washington that was attended by over 40 bishops, it speaks directly to the Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate that seeks to force Catholic non-profits to cover services it deems objectionable in its insurance plans. Mincing no words, the document declares the HHS edict to be "unjust and illegal."

The bishops debunked many myths about this issue: it is not about contraception; it is not just about Catholic religious rights; it is not about the Catholic Church trying to impose its will on others—it is about the federal government trying to impose its agenda on us; it is not about opposition to universal health care (the Church has long championed this right); and it is not about choosing political sides. It is about religious liberty.

Most important, the statement argues that the HHS mandate seeks to create a three-tiered class of citizens' rights: by defining religious rights as applying only to those who work for religious institutions that hire and serve mostly people of their own faith, the Obama administration has relegated those who work in religious institutions that serve everyone to a second-class status; those who are not a religious employer but nonetheless object on religious grounds to

funding immoral insurance plans constitute a third-class of citizens.

Bill Donohue issued the following statement as soon as the statement was released: "The good news is that the bishops aren't flinching: there is no room for compromise when the subject is our constitutional rights—rights that come from God, as the Declaration affirmed, not government. It warms the heart to read that the 'unprecedented magnitude of this latest threat has only strengthened our resolve' to do what is right. The bishops have the unqualified support of the Catholic League."

In the run-up to the meeting, Catholic critics of the bishops were telling the media how important it was for the bishops—not the Obama administration—to budge. They even predicted that the bishops would have to expand their notions of religious liberty to encompass other issues. As it turned out, their side walked away with absolutely nothing. The bishops stood fast on principle.