

# RELIGIOUS RIGHTS FOR HEALTH PROVIDERS

On December 18, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services issued a regulation that considerably strengthened the rights of doctors, nurses and other health care workers to practice according to their conscience; it affects those who work in federally funded health care institutions. This measure protects health care workers from being discriminated against if they refuse to perform or assist in abortions, as well as other morally contentious procedures. We were thrilled that the Bush administration pushed this along and asked President-elect Barack Obama to show prudence on this matter.

This regulation builds on the conscience rights for health care workers that was first broached in the 1970s by the Church Amendments, and later enhanced in 1996 by Congress. The December 18 regulation gives the men and women in the health care field the right to be free from discriminatory edicts invoked by those who have no respect for their conscience rights. No one in the health care field should ever be compelled by law to perform or assist in a procedure that violates his or her conscience. This should be an elementary right, yet there are those who want to trespass on it.

We have noted in the past that Barack Obama has pledged his support for the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA), a bill so draconian that it would jeopardize the right of Catholic hospitals and doctors to refuse to perform abortions. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice was so excited about this pledge that it sent him a letter calling on him to make good on this promise. If Obama does follow through on this pledge, it would lead, in the words of a Vatican official, to the "equivalent of a war."

To put it differently, if FOCA were to become law (it needs to

be introduced to the House), the culture war that the Vatican official was referring to would come to a boiling point. In practical terms, this would mean the closure of every Catholic hospital in the nation: No bishop would stand by and allow the federal government to dictate what medical procedures must be performed within Catholic hospitals.

Make no mistake about it; the bishops would shut down Catholic hospitals before acquiescing in the intentional killing of an innocent child. Were this to happen, it would not only cripple the poor who benefit from Catholic hospitals and health care, but it would cripple the Obama administration as well.

In our news release following the Health & Human Services announcement, we said it is imperative that Obama resists the appeal of pro-abortion extremists to overturn this regulation. These fanatics would literally force objecting Catholics, and others, to perform abortions as well as other morally objectionable procedures, if they could. We closed our release by saying, "Consistent with the prudence he has shown so far, Obama would be wise to ignore the zealots and allow today's regulation to stand."

We sincerely hope that Obama, who is a strong abortion-rights advocate, makes a critical distinction: it is one thing to be pro-abortion, quite another to compel health care workers to violate their conscience. Let's see what he does on January 22.