

RELIGIOUS RIGHTS THREATENED

Catholics have been mobilized in great numbers to respond to imminent threats to religious liberty. The threats come mainly from government, with the Obama administration leading the way.

The president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, announced in October the establishment of *the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty*; Bridgeport Bishop William Lori will chair the committee. The Catholic League pledged its full support.

Bishop Lori knows first-hand how contemptuous government can be of religious liberty—he fought a prospective state takeover of the administrative affairs of the Catholic Church in Connecticut. Archbishop Dolan is also no novice: he has fought anti-Catholic bigotry for years. The Catholic League has worked with both bishops before, and has done so successfully.

The Department of Health and Human Services is seeking to force private healthcare providers to carry contraceptive and sterilization services; it also wants to force the USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services to provide "the full range of reproductive services." In addition, the federal government is seeking to force international relief programs to offer reproductive health services.

To show the seriousness of this issue, 20 national Catholic organizations signed a letter protesting the "preventive services" mandate that would force Catholic employers to pay for sterilization and contraceptives, including drugs that induce abortion. "As of now," the statement said, "a narrowly-written religious exemption to the rule would apply only to church institutions that hire and serve mostly Catholics."

Meanwhile the Department of Justice is attacking the Defense of Marriage Act, arguing that support for marriage is a form

of bigotry. In a disturbing move, it is also attacking a religious liberty known as the ministerial exception; this right insulates religious employers from state encroachment.

At the state level, New York recently legalized gay marriage, providing a very narrow religious exemption; the Illinois Catholic Conference has been fighting for months to maintain its policy on adoptive and foster care services; and the California Catholic Conference protested a state mandate to allow the controversial HPV vaccine Gardasil free of charge to young girls without parental consent.

At issue is the right of religions to practice their beliefs freely, without government coercion. That we should even have to fight to exercise our First Amendment rights is dismaying. The Catholic League has been voicing its objections to state encroachment on religion for many years, but only in recent times has it declared government to be the number-one threat.

Fortunately, those who belong to other religions are realizing what is at stake, and they have joined with us to fend off these threats. But we are being besieged on all sides, with powerful interests out to deny us our basic liberties. If they win, the cause of freedom is lost.