

Washington Misses Opportunity to Protect the Freedom to Serve

December 23, 2015

A statement by Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

The bishops of the United States are gravely disappointed that the 2016 omnibus funding bill did not include the Abortion Non-Discrimination Act (ANDA). While the omnibus bill certainly addresses other critical issues, the modest reform that ANDA represents -- to make federal conscience laws on abortion workable and enforceable -- was an urgent legislative priority in these final months of the year.

Many Catholic and other institutions, including those that provide health care and other human services to the poor and vulnerable, have joined in our support of ANDA. Without ANDA, these caring organizations face legal threats to their very existence, as they lack clear and enforceable protection for their freedom to serve the needy in accord with their deepest moral convictions on respect for human life. Such threats to conscience also pose a threat to the most marginalized and vulnerable in our society--the poor and the sick, as well as the unborn.

I am deeply concerned that a foundational principle that has received long-standing, bipartisan support in the past has suddenly become partisan. No one should be forced by the government to actively participate in what they believe to be the taking of an innocent life. This is not about "access" to abortion. The principle at stake is whether people of faith and others who oppose abortion and abortion coverage should be compelled to participate in them. Federal law has long supported the rights of conscientious objection, and even in recent years, President Obama and many members of Congress have publicly declared their support for these existing laws. ANDA merely sought to give them a more consistent means of enforcement.

Despite this, ANDA was caught in the partisan polarization gripping Washington. To those who supported ANDA, we offer our gratitude and applaud your commitment to maintaining our national consensus in support of conscience protection. To those who opposed ANDA, we urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to reconsider your position, which stands in opposition to even the modest enforcement of a venerable principle that is rooted in the constitution and has long enjoyed broad, bipartisan support.

We join Pope Francis in "call[ing] for a renewal of that spirit of cooperation, which has accomplished so much good throughout the history of the United States," a cooperation that must be undertaken "with respect for our differences and our convictions of conscience." [Address to Congress, Sept. 24, 2015] We call upon our elected officials to rise above partisan divisions and to renew their support for this most basic right. ANDA should be enacted as soon as possible.

Without it, current federal conscience laws are, now for the first time, being enforced erratically or not at all in places such as California.

The mission of the Church in the public square is to witness to the dignity of every human life and advocate for the freedom to act in accord with one's moral and religious convictions in defense of those lives, no matter how young or vulnerable. We will continue to reach out to the White House and Congressional leaders untiringly until proper protections are guaranteed.

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