

February 2012

## In the Heartland

### With Bishop Pates

#### At stake: Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Conscience

To the Faithful of the Diocese of Des Moines

The founders of our nation, had remarkable insight into the components of democracy. They enshrined their vision in documents that have weathered periodic storms and stiff challenges. These documents – The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution and the Bill of Rights have been the bedrock of our government and our life together. They have also sparked inspiration for other nations as they labor to shape their governments especially in the documents' universal applicability to the dignity of the human person.

One guarantee that has been particularly instrumental in preserving the freedoms we cherish is that of Freedom of religion and its companion freedom of conscience. As recently as January 11, 2012, when the Supreme Court rendered the decision *Hasanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC* these freedoms have been vigorously upheld. In writing for the court in its unanimous decision, Chief Justice Roberts stated “The government is not to tell religion what to believe.”

These foundational rights, are now being seriously threatened. When Congress passed the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act” it assigned to the cabinet department, Health and Human Resources (HHS), the responsibility of drawing up the “Rules” that would govern the implementation of this legislation.

In late summer, HHS published rules, for which before being finalized, it sought comment. Comment indeed HHS received. Over 400,000 messages were sent highly critical of the provision that all employers, including those of Catholic institutions like our Universities, colleges, hospitals (now serving 1/6 of the country's population) be forced to provide healthcare insurance that included coverage for sterilization, abortifacients (abortion inducing drugs) and birth control drugs. There would be no co-pay and no sharing of costs.

The contention of those communicating with HHS in opposition to these rules was that the use of institutional (Catholic) money for this purpose was intrusion of government into religion, mandating action that was contrary to religious beliefs and thus violating our consciences. We as Catholics believe according to natural law and scripture that this is coverage of procedures that are immoral and thus we cannot use our resources to make them possible.

In addition to the veritable flood of messages opposing these rules, leaders of our Catholic institutions signed on in opposition. Locally these included the President of Mercy College of Health Care Sciences, the Presidents of our two High Schools and hospitals. Further reaction and opposition since the most recent announcements have come from the heads of the Catholic Hospital Association, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services and The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

Despite all this widespread preliminary negative reaction, HHS finalized the rules on January 20, 2012, as originally presented. There was one concession that being the institutions, mostly Catholic, would have the extension of a year to implement the rules.

As we digest these developments, editorial support for our position has been received from publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Daily News* and *The USA Today* website.

Our conclusion to this action of HHS and the government is that the rules are unacceptable. In initial reaction, I invite all of the members of the Catholic Community through their parishes and other faith relationships to educate themselves on the serious issues at stake. The second and ongoing step, as always in matters such as these, is to pray that our future response will be guided by wisdom and inspired by courage.

An initiative that each of us can take at this time is to communicate the unacceptability of these provisions to our Congressional representatives and our Senators, to HHS and to the White House. Finally, there will be ample and timely opportunity to organize so that we can speak as the Catholic Church in the United States with one voice on this matter.

## **Lent, Springtime of the Soul**

On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, we will celebrate Ash Wednesday, introducing the season of Lent.

Lent is that unique opportunity, through the classical practices of Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving to be about change in our personal and community lives.

In the first place, we acknowledge our personal sinfulness and confess it. We thereby make room for the love and presence of Jesus – always a welcome change and growth in our lives. We also address institutional growth in our parishes, schools, hospitals and diocese. May we together be ever more authentic, corporate representatives of the Body of Christ in our days. May it be said of us, “They are of one of heart and one mind.”

As the ashes are administered on our foreheads, let us consciously resolve to repent and believe evermore strongly in the Gospel, indeed the Good News.