

Bishops' new ad hoc committee will tackle religious liberty concerns

WASHINGTON - Saying they are increasingly distressed over government policies that promote contraception, abortion and same-sex marriage and amount to an assault on religious freedom, the U.S. bishops have established a committee to shape public policy and coordinate the church's response on the issue.

The Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty was announced Sept. 30 by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., was named chairman of the new committee.

"There is a common and factually grounded perception that religious liberty is increasingly under assault at the state and federal level in the United States, whether through unfriendly legislation or through rules and regulations that impede or tend to impede the work of the church," Bishop Lori told Catholic News Service Sept. 30, explaining the motivation for forming the committee.

"Hopefully, we will raise up the issue for the entire Catholic community in the United States," he said. "We will help educate about the issue and hopefully there will be good and effective action."

Bishop Lori has been a public defender of religious liberty over the last year. In October 2010 he issued "Let Freedom Ring: A Pastoral Letter on Religious Freedom," which carefully laid out an argument that some legislative efforts in the government seemed to be aimed solely at the Catholic Church.

He also addressed the topic at the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in April.

Bishop Lori said the USCCB has discussed its concerns about restrictions on religious freedom repeatedly, most recently at its June meeting in suburban Seattle and again when the administrative committee met in Washington in mid-September.

In his announcement, Archbishop Dolan said that committee members will work with a variety of national organizations, ecumenical and interreligious partners, charities and scholars to “form a united and forceful front in defense of religious freedom in our nation.”

“Never before have we faced this kind of challenge in our ability to engage in the public square as people of faith and as a service provider,” the archbishop said in a statement. “If we do not act now, the consequence will be grave.”

Archbishop Dolan cited a series actions at various levels of government that pose dangers to the free exercise of religion.

Specifically, he pointed to the narrow religious exemption in New York in regard to same-sex marriage, the Justice Department’s recent argument that the support of traditional marriage as defined in the Defense of Marriage Act amounted to bigotry, and the requirement by the Department of Health and Human Services that the USCCB’s Migration and Refugee Services provide the “full range of reproductive service” - including abortion and contraception - to trafficking victims in its cooperative agreements and government contracts.

He also repeated the U.S. bishops’ concern about Health and Human Services regulations that would mandate the coverage of contraception and sterilization in all private health insurance plans while failing to protect insurers and individuals with religious or moral objections to the mandate.

“As shepherds of over 70 million U.S. citizens we share a common and compelling responsibility to proclaim the truth of religious freedom for all and so to protect our people from this assault which now appears to grow at an ever-accelerating pace in ways most of us could never have imagined,” Archbishop Dolan said.