

# Little Sisters of the Poor stand firm against mandate

CATONSVILLE - The phone rang at the Catonsville headquarters of the Little Sisters of the Poor just moments after a Dec. 31 televised news program reported on Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's order to temporarily prevent the Little Sisters of the Poor from being required to comply with the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate.

A 12-year-old girl from Colorado had been watching the breaking news with her parents and wanted to call the Little Sisters to support their lawsuit against the federal government.

The sisters object to having to provide contraceptives, sterilizations and abortifacient drugs within their employee health insurance coverage under what is popularly known as "Obamacare."

"The girl wanted us to know that she and her family were Catholic and were 100 percent behind us and that they were praying for us," remembered Sister Lawrence Pocock, a Little Sister of the Poor who ministers at St. Martin's Home for the Aged in Catonsville. "She said she wanted to be a nun when she grows up. It was so touching."

The telephone call was but one in an avalanche of calls, letters and requests for interviews the Little Sisters have received from all over the country in recent weeks.

The Baltimore and Denver provinces of the Little Sisters of the Poor and their co-plaintiffs, Christian Brothers Services and Christian Brothers Employee Benefits Trust, filed the suit and are represented by the Washington-based Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and others.

For a religious community happy to stay out of the spotlight and minister to low-income seniors in unsung ways, the intense media attention - both positive and negative - has been overwhelming. It's not preventing them from continuing their ministry, however, and it will not change their determination to defeat what they see

as an unjust provision in the law.

Mother Alice Marie Jones, superior of St. Martin's Home for the Aged, in her only media interview since Sotomayor's order, told the Catholic Review it's the Little Sisters' respect for life from conception to natural death that compels them to take a stand against the mandate. The Catholic Church teaches that contraception, sterilization and abortion are "grave sins against human dignity," she said.

"Our faith requires that we cannot participate in providing such things to our employees," Mother Alice Marie explained. "Our country was built on religious freedom; therefore, we wish to exercise this right freely."

The government asserted that the Little Sisters would be exempt from the mandate if they would sign a "self-certification form" acknowledging their religious objections to providing coverage for contraceptive services. But supporters of the Little Sisters' suit contend that the form would also require them to tell their insurance provider of its "obligations" to provide contraception and other services under provisions of the Affordable Care Act.

The Little Sisters' current insurance provider falls under a church plan that the government maintains would not be required to provide contraceptive coverage.

The Little Sisters believe, however, that signing a self-certification form would be tantamount to their legitimizing the very coverage they find objectionable.

"We cannot do what the church and our conscience tells us is wrong," Mother Alice Marie said.

The Little Sisters, who take a vow of poverty, are concerned about potential daily fines of \$100 per employee that could be imposed if they lose their case and refuse to sign the form.

At St. Martin's, the Little Sisters serve 65 residents. Fourteen Little Sisters live there, and the home employs 120 full-time and part-time workers. The annual budget is nearly \$8 million, half of which the sisters raise through begging. Throughout the United States, the Little Sisters operate 30 homes for the elderly poor.

“We have no endowment,” Mother Alice Marie said. “The penalties would steal away about a third of the homes’ annual budget. It would be a terrible wrong for the government to take the resources that people have given us to serve the elderly poor.”

Most people have been supportive of the sisters’ stand, Mother Alice Marie said.

Edward Pribyl, an 86-year-old St. Martin’s resident, said his late wife had lost 20 pounds in another nursing facility. After she relocated to St. Martin’s, she gained the weight back and led a happy life in her last years. That was made possible by the loving way the sisters care for residents, he said.

“The sisters don’t deserve the way they are being treated by the government,” said Pribyl, a former parishioner of St. Wenceslaus in East Baltimore. “I think the country’s in trouble.”

Celine Morrissey, a St. Martin’s resident since October, described the ministry of the Little Sisters as “an answer to prayer.”

“I don’t know what we’d do without this home,” said Morrissey, 82, a former parishioner of St. Jerome in Baltimore and St. Mark in Catonsville. “The fines they are facing are fantastic. I would just hope that everyone would pray so that this doesn’t happen.”

Marie Cusick, a 100-year-old St. Martin’s resident, said the sisters care about each resident. Part of the sisters’ ministry is to be by the bedside of each resident as he or she is dying – providing prayer and comfort no matter the time of day or night.

“They don’t look down on us old people,” said Cusick, a former parishioner of St. Joseph Passionist Monastery in Irvington. “The employees are nice, and I think that’s because the sisters are nice and they take their cue from the sisters.”

Mother Alice Marie said prayer is at the cornerstone of the sisters’ ministry.

“As we serve our residents, we know that it is Jesus himself whom we are serving in them,” she said, “and so we try to serve them with the same love and attention as if we could actually see him.”

The Little Sisters have big plans for expanding St. Martin's. They have already raised \$13.9 million to complete renovations to independent living apartments, an assisted living cottage and two skilled nursing cottages at St. Martin's. Future phases of a capital campaign will provide other improvements. Once the renovations are complete, the sisters hope to expand the number of residents to 80.

In what she described as a "critical time" in the history of her religious community, Mother Alice Marie said prayer will get them through. She recognizes the far-reaching implications of whatever is decided in their suit.

"If we win this case, she said, "the legal principles from it will help protect all of our homes - and other religious ministries nationwide."

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