

‘Our Voices Must be Heard’

Several weeks ago, I wrote in this column about the calculated steps taken by President Barack Obama and his administration to dismantle laws aimed at protecting life. Following his immediate actions authorizing the use of taxpayer dollars to fund abortions overseas and stem-cell research here in the United States, the President is now preparing to strip healthcare workers of their conscience-informed right to refuse to perform abortions.

In a very acute way, healthcare professionals must exercise their consciences regularly in matters of life and death. They are called to be guardians and servants of human life. This noble vocation invites moral, cultural and legal pressures into its everyday practice. Freedom of conscience is essential to facing these pressures and responding to them “with an impassioned and unflinching affirmation of life,” as Pope John Paul II called for in *The Gospel of Life*.

The current administration, on track to live up to projections that it would be one of the most radically pro-abortion administrations in recent history, is seeking to rescind a federal regulation that ensures that our tax dollars do not fund programs in which healthcare professionals and institutions are penalized or otherwise subjected to discrimination because of their conscientious objection to abortion and other serious moral issues. This regulation implements and enforces three long-standing federal laws that protect rights of conscience. Its stated purpose is “to ensure that Department (of Health and Human Services) funds do not support morally coercive or discriminatory practices or policies in violation of federal law.” Prior to the promulgation of this regulation, there was (and will be if the Obama administration is successful) no systematic enforcement or education of the medical community of these laws, evidenced by attempts to attack conscience rights by advocacy groups, professional societies, and some state and local governments. Consequently, Catholic medical professionals were deprived of their ability “to refuse to take part in committing an injustice,” as Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, which is not only their “moral duty ... (but) also a basic human right.”

Catholic nurses, physicians, pharmacists and other healthcare professionals have the

right to practice both medicine and their faith. We applaud their generosity and their commitment to providing healthcare to our community that reflects the profound respect due to the human person and the dignity of each and every patient. We must ensure that they can continue in this mission guided by their consciences and that they are guaranteed an opportunity to refuse to take part in consultation, preparation or execution of acts against life. Failing to guarantee this to healthcare professionals leaves them with two choices – act in violation of their consciences or abandon their honorable vocation to medicine. Neither is an acceptable choice in a democratic society that is committed to individual freedom and religious liberty.

Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago and President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, insists that “(n)o government should ever come between an individual person and God. That’s what America is supposed to be about.” Government action seeking to force citizens to choose between the practice of medicine and their faith verges on despotism; it attacks religious liberty and basic human rights.

The Obama administration, as required by law, has called for public comment until Thursday, April 9, on the proposed plan to remove this regulation and chip away at the legal protections currently afforded to healthcare professionals.

I join with Cardinal George in urging you to let the Department of Health and Human Services know that you stand for the protection of conscience, especially for those “guardians and servants of life” who provide the healthcare so necessary to a good society.

For more information and to voice your support for preserving this conscience-protection regulation, please see <https://www.usccb.org/conscienceprotection>.

In addition, I invite all Catholic healthcare professionals to join me on May 9, 2009, at the First Symposium for Catholic Medical Professionals, *Conscience and Ethical Dilemmas in Catholic Healthcare*. Visit archbalt.org for more information about this event or send an e-mail to johanna.coughlin@archbalt.org.