

Reactions to the HHS mandate

Like most Catholics, I have been following the debate surrounding the HHS mandate. Quite simply, it would have been impossible for me to avoid it as my Facebook feed has been inundated with articles and blog posts covering every angle of the controversy. As I perused the information and different perspectives, I began to wonder if the real story of the whole fiasco was the reaction to the mandate, not the mandate itself.

I have been following the intersection of politics and faith for years, and I cannot recall a similar outpouring of Catholic protest in my life. Since the Kennedy compromise of the 1960s, Catholics have been determined to place country ahead of faith in order to win a place on the center stage of the political arena. As a result, the political voice of the church has grown weaker and more divided in the following decades, but something changed a few weeks ago.

The Catholic community has come together to speak powerfully and publicly on a key moral issue. For most of my adult years, the mainstream media has focused on the sexual abuse scandal when covering Catholicism. For once, the bishops are not in news to defend their actions during a dark period in our history, but instead they have been forcefully and unanimously promoting a teaching of the church.

Catholic intellectuals, who are often divided among liberals and conservatives, have come together speaking as one to demand repealing the mandate. Any trepidation found in our priests is gone as sermons on Sunday have grown bolder and more direct. President Obama did not intend to unify and vitalize the Catholic Church, but he and his advisors clearly underestimated the response of the faithful.

This episode highlights a consistent storyline in the history of the church: persecution only helps the church grow. Examine the Irish under British rule or American Catholics during the era of nativism or the Polish amid the Cold War. They all faced great obstacles, yet Catholicism flourished. On the other hand, the faith tends to stagnate after the discrimination subsides. Individuals, perhaps, become too comfortable and take their ability to practice their faith for granted.

I wonder if among the petitions and protest letters, will a Catholic send the president a thank-you note? Thanking him for reminding us that we should not assume that we have the freedom to practice our faith, for uniting the church and helping place aside our differences, and for emboldening the leaders of our church.

(The last thing I want to do is underplay the very real and difficult struggle facing Catholic institutions. Clearly, any gratitude I have for the mandate is tongue-in-cheek. I am trying to highlight the upside to this debate in that God rewards our efforts and not our successes, and even though Catholics have been on the losing end of many recent political struggles, we can take solace in the resistance of our leaders and many of the laity.)