

Wisconsin bishops object to state mandating contraception coverage

MADISON, Wis. – Wisconsin's Catholic bishops have called a provision in the recently enacted state budget that mandates employer health insurance policies to cover contraceptive services as "blatantly insensitive" to the moral values of Catholics and the church's teaching against artificial contraception.

The bishops commented on the provision in an Aug. 20 letter to Catholics. The letter was distributed to the state's diocesan newspapers.

The mandate takes effect early in 2010, or upon the expiration of any existing contract or agreement.

It affects the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the Green Bay and Madison dioceses, whose employee health insurance policies are the kind that must be altered to comply with the new law when they are renewed next year. The mandate does not apply to the self-funded health insurance plans of the La Crosse and Superior dioceses.

Most states that have adopted this type of mandate include an exception for religious institutions or for certain employers. However, the provision in the Wisconsin state budget did not include such an exception.

In their letter, the bishops wrote they would continue to provide health insurance to employees as they consider their options for contesting the policy. Diocesan leaders were assessing how to react to the mandate.

"Whatever course we pursue in this matter, we want all Catholics in Wisconsin to know that we will also continue to affirm and communicate the teachings of our faith," the bishops wrote. "No legislation can repeal or annul our commitment to upholding the dignity of human life and the means by which each life is conceived.

"We know that many of you find the teaching of our faith on contraception difficult to accept or live out in practice," they said.

“As pastors and teachers, we find our conviction much reinforced because artificial contraception is not, in the first place, a ‘Catholic issue,’” they continued. “Rather, the prohibition of artificial contraception is a principle of the natural moral law, which is inscribed in the mind and heart of all human beings.”

“Many fail to recognize the truth of our conviction, not because they are irrational, but because, in our day and age, the fashionable proposition that there is no objective truth renders human reason itself directionless,” the bishops said.

They said it was incumbent on them “as pastors and teachers” to keep engaging Catholics on the issue “in charity.”

Signing the letter were: Bishops Robert C. Morlino of Madison, David L. Ricken of Green Bay, Jerome E. ListECKi of La Crosse, and Peter F. Christiansen of Superior, and Auxiliary Bishop William P. Callahan of Milwaukee, archdiocesan administrator.

John Huebscher, executive director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference in Madison, the public policy arm of the state’s bishops, noted that dioceses in other states with similar laws have opted to self-fund their health insurance plans, but he emphasized that no Wisconsin diocese affected by the new law has made any decisions at this time.

“There is time to review and analyze all the options carefully and the diocesan leadership is doing just that,” he said.