



MINNESOTA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

September 21, 2011

The Honorable Keith Ellison
1027 Longworth Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Ellison:

We, the Catholic bishops of Minnesota, write to urge your support for and co-sponsorship of the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act (HR 1179). This bipartisan bill will help to ensure that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) continues to uphold the long-standing legislative tradition in our nation that has protected freedom of conscience and religious beliefs. The Respect for Rights of Conscience Act will protect religious freedom and the rights of conscience for those who offer and purchase health insurance coverage in our nation.

A major deficiency of the PPACA is that it lacks a conscience clause to prevent the Act itself from being used to suppress the rights of those who may have moral or religious objections to specific procedures or “services.”

This deficiency is more than theoretical. Recently, the federal Department of Health and Human Services issued its interim rule that includes a “preventive services mandate” pursuant to the PPACA. While we support providing access to those services which can truly prevent disease or disability for women, such as pap smears and mammograms, we join other persons of good will who strenuously object to mandatory coverage for contraceptives, sterilization procedures, abortifacient agents like Ella, and education and counseling that would promote such measures.

But even if we cannot agree about either the immorality or shortsightedness of abortion and birth control as public policy, we should be able to agree that no person or entity should be forced to violate the dictates of his or her conscience or religious beliefs. And let there be no misunderstanding; if the Department of Health and Human Services mandate is not rescinded, those who sponsor, purchase or issue health plans will, by force of federal mandate, be required to violate their deeply held convictions.

Requiring individuals and institutions—Catholic and otherwise—to pay for and provide abortion drugs, sterilizations, and contraceptives contrary to their convictions—all in the name of reproductive autonomy—is a serious assault on one of this country’s most cherished traditions.

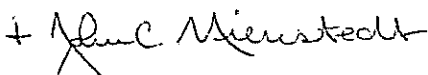
Minnesota’s Catholic bishops have long advocated for healthcare reform and access to quality, affordable healthcare. But, at the same time, there has been insistence that moral and religious conscience must not be suppressed. Yet that very thing will occur if the HHS mandate is not rescinded. This concern, and others that may develop, can be addressed in the same manner that has been successful in the past: specific conscience protections in law. The Respect for Rights

of Conscience Act is an opportunity to provide these protections in the changed context of health care reform.

Catholics, from the time they arrived in the United States, have contributed to the common good by serving the poor and vulnerable—irrespective of their faith—in our many schools, hospitals and charities. America is the richer for this faith-inspired witness. But one consequence of failing to respect the rights of conscience is that the vast educational and social service network of the Catholic Church will be imperiled, and with it not only those who are employed and assist us in our works of mercy, but also those who are served: our neighbors in need.

Again, we urge you to support and join with Reps. Jeff Fortenberry and Dan Boren in co-sponsoring the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this important matter.

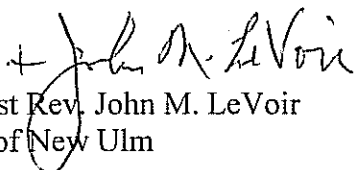
Sincerely,



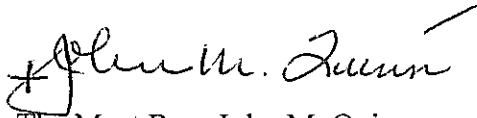
The Most Rev. John C. Nienstedt
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis




The Most Rev. John F. Kinney
Bishop of St. Cloud



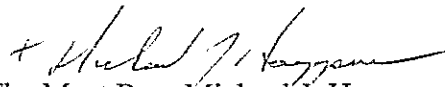
The Most Rev. John M. LeVoir
Bishop of New Ulm



The Most Rev. John M. Quinn
Bishop of Winona



The Most Rev. Paul D. Sirba
Bishop of Duluth



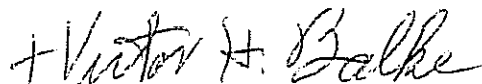
The Most Rev. Michael J. Hoeppner
Bishop of Crookston



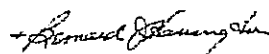
The Most Rev. Lee A. Piché
Auxiliary Bishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis



The Most Rev. Harry J. Flynn
Archbishop Emeritus of St. Paul and
Minneapolis



The Most. Rev. Victor H. Balke
Bishop Emeritus of Crookston



The Most Rev. Bernard J. Harrington
Bishop Emeritus of Winona