



PROTECTING CONSCIENCES

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WHY CONSCIENCE IS IMPORTANT

During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Americans shone the light of the Gospel on a dark history of slavery, segregation, and racial bigotry. **The civil rights movement was an essentially religious movement, a call to awaken consciences.**

In his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in 1963, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. boldly said, “The goal of America is freedom.” As a Christian pastor, he argued that to call America to the full measure of that freedom was the specific contribution Christians are obliged to make. He rooted his legal and constitutional arguments about justice in the long Christian tradition: “I would agree with Saint Augustine that ‘An unjust law is no law at all.’... A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law.”

Some unjust laws impose such injustices on individuals and organizations that disobeying the laws may be justified. Every effort must be made to repeal them. When fundamental human goods, such as the right of conscience, are at stake, we may need to witness to the truth by resisting the law and incurring its penalties.

The church does not ask for special treatment, simply the rights of religious freedom for all citizens. Rev. King also explained that the church is neither the master nor the servant of the state, but its conscience, guide, and critic.

Catholics and many other Americans have strongly criticized the recent Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate requiring almost all private health plans to cover contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. For the first time in our history, the federal government will force religious institutions to fund and facilitate coverage of a drug or procedure contrary to their moral teaching, and purport to define which religious institutions are “religious enough” to merit an exemption. **This is a matter of whether religious people and institutions may be forced by the government to provide such coverage even when it violates our consciences.**

What we ask is nothing more than the right to follow our consciences as we live out our teaching. This right is not only about our ability to go to Mass on Sunday or pray the Rosary at home. It is about whether we can make our contribution to the common good of all Americans. Can we do the good works our faith calls us to do, without having to compromise that very same faith? Without religious liberty properly understood, all Americans suffer, deprived of the essential contribution in education, health care, feeding the hungry, civil rights, and social services that religious Americans make every day.

What is at stake is whether America will continue to have a free, creative, and robust civil society—or whether the state alone will determine who gets to contribute to the common good, and how they get to do it.

What can you do to ensure the protection of conscience rights?

- The U.S. Bishops have called us to get informed, pray and advocate. To send your message to HHS and Congress telling them to uphold religious liberty and conscience rights, go to www.usccb.org/conscience today! Thank you for joining the effort to end this unprecedented government coercion.
- The Bishops have called for a **Fortnight for Freedom - June 21-July 4**. Please go to www.fortnight4freedom.org for more information on this important time of prayer and action!