

# Why Should I Care?: The HHS Mandate and Religious Freedom

By Fr. Mike Schmitz



*Editor's Note: As Catholics, it's our duty to understand what's going on in the world and what the Catholic Church has to say about it. The HHS Mandate is "what's going on" and **it's a big deal**. Don't be ignorant about it! Fr. Mike explains it really well. You can jump to which question you're the most curious about, or read all of it! Either way, I pray you take to heart what you learn and speak the truth courageously. – Christina*

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## Why do Catholics care so much about health care?

Being a follower of Christ is tough. But c'mon, it's always been tough.

During the first centuries of Christianity, there were a number of times when super nasty plagues broke out. Normal people would abandon their "loved ones" at the first sign of sickness. Out of the desire for self-protection, they would kick the sick out of the house and leave them to die. At the same time, Catholics would walk through these same villages and cities and collect those who were infected, sick, and dying. They brought the sick into their own homes and cared for them in their illness.

They did this *despite* the fact that many of these people would still end up dying.

They did this *despite* the fact that many of them would catch the plague and end up dying.

They did this *despite* the fact that almost none of these people were Catholic.

They did this because they realized that Jesus Christ had given them a mission and a vision to care for those who were “hungry, naked, poor, imprisoned, and sick.” Those Catholics believed that when they cared for the “least of these,” they were caring for Jesus Himself.

This was the beginning of what has come to be known as “health care.”

Not a ton of people know this, but before Catholicism came on the scene, there were no such things as hospitals. Oh sure, you had your “healers” and whatnot, but there was no group of people who openly cared for any and all of the sick.

The hospital system was originally developed by the Catholic Church. Why? Because the Catholic Church introduced this truth to the world: *all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore have dignity.* Think about this revolutionary idea. Until the Catholic Church brought this teaching to the world, literally no religion or philosophy or culture thought that “all men were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.”



1 in 6 people are cared for in Catholic hospitals!

Sound familiar? Our very Declaration of Independence is based off an idea that, while the Founding Fathers considered it to be “self-evident,” was only actually believed and practiced when the Catholic Church introduced this idea to the world. It has become the foundation for our entire system of government.

Because of all of this, I think that the Catholic Church might have a few things to say about health care . . . which brings us to today’s issue.

## What is the HHS Mandate?

If you’ve been following the news lately, you’ve noticed that the bishops of the United States have been talking a lot about the “HHS mandate.” This has nothing to do with Houston High School’s new mascot (“Goooooo Mandates!”) and everything to do with religious freedom.

Wait. What? Back up, padre. I heard that your “HHS” dealio was about contraception. I also heard that most Catholics don’t agree with the Church regarding contraception. I also heard that my best friend’s sister’s boyfriend’s brother’s girlfriend heard from this guy who knows this kid who’s going with the girl who saw Ferris pass out at 31 Flavors last night. I guess it’s pretty serious.

Okay, here is the thingamajig. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services wants to improve health care in the United States. This, in and of itself, is a noble goal. But here is the problem: they are mandating that all

health-care agencies and institutions must pay for insurance that covers contraception, sterilization, and certain kinds of abortifacient drugs. This means that Catholic hospitals and universities must provide something that we believe violates our religion and is a sin.

Now, before you say, “Ohhhhh . . . so this is about contraception . . .” and regress into a 21st century-pagan-American-relativistic stupor, let me slow you down here.

(Want to know more about the Church’s teaching on contraception? Check out some articles [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

Yes, the mandate involves contraception, but it is way (WAAAAAAAAAYYYY!) bigger than that. This is about the government believing that they have the authority to tell the Catholic Church what it can and cannot do.



We’re being bound to do something that is against our Catholic conscience

**Heads up:** *this is the single biggest attempt on the part of the United States government to control religion that this country has **EVER SEEN**.*

What is the official wording of the Constitution? Check out this noise:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .”

**THE FIRST AMENDMENT**  
**CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW RESPECTING AN ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIGION, OR PROHIBITING THE FREE EXERCISE THEREOF; OR ABRIDGING THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH, OR OF THE PRESS; OR THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE PEACEABLY TO ASSEMBLE, AND TO PETITION THE GOVERNMENT FOR A REDRESS OF GRIEVANCES.**  
**PROTECT THE FIRST AMENDMENT, SUPPORT THE CBLDF**

This means that, from the beginning of our country, the government has stated that it must not prohibit the free exercise of religion. The state cannot tell the Church what to do.

And yet the HHS Mandate is exactly that! The U.S. government is stepping over its boundaries and is now telling the Catholic Church:

*“This is how you are going to run your hospitals, schools, and clinics.”*

*“But this violates our consciences!”*

*“We don’t care.”*

Do you know why the government says that we must do this? They said, “If you were only employing *Catholics*, and if you only took care of sick *Catholics*, then you could do what you want. But because you don’t discriminate whom you employ and whom you care for and educate, we get to tell you how to run your institutions.”

Think about the audacity (of hopelessness) of that action! Because we live out our faith and try to love everyone, the government says they are “the bosses of us” (which is clearly not true; I learned long ago that my older sister is apparently the boss of me).

If we kept our religion behind the walls of the church building, they would leave us alone. But since we bring our faith in Jesus to real life, our current administration can tell us what to do?

Uncle Sam, puh-lease.

Here is an analogy I heard from Bishop Lori. This action on the part of the government is like what would happen if Congress mandated that a Jewish delicatessen owner serve pork. The Jewish man might claim that this violates his religion. The government then points out that he employs non-Jews. Also, there are non-Jews who eat at his deli who like pork and might want to eat it at his establishment.

The government might say, “If you kept to yourselves, then we would leave you alone. Since you don’t, you have to do what we say.”

The same thing is happening to the Catholic Church right now. The government is making an effort to tell us which doctrines of the Church we can and can’t follow.

So, the Catholic Church has politely told the government that it can’t do this. The government responded with, “In that case, we will give you a year to figure out how you are going to get used to violating your consciences.” (Which seriously, is suuuuuper generous!! No, really. No. REALLY. I’m being sarcastic.)

The U.S. bishops are united in saying that [they will not comply](#) with this law. It is what we call an “unjust law” (which is really no law at all), and that we would “rather obey God than man.” And we are prepared to accept the consequences.

So . . . what are the consequences of this law? What are the consequences of violating this law?

Good question, camper. That might be nice to know.

## **What’s going to happen?**

In the centuries before Jesus came on the scene, the land of Israel was occupied by the Greek empire. It was important to the Greeks that they were able to control the daily lives of their subjects; so while the Jews could read their Scriptures and worship the One True God (albeit in a limited way), the Greeks wanted to make the

Jews “like everyone else.”

In order to do this, they began to pressure many Jews to break some of their laws. Things like throwing a pinch of incense into a bowl in front of a statue of the emperor, or eating forbidden foods like pork.

There were some that went along with it, but there were some who refused. Among them there was a faithful and tough-as-nails old man named Eleazar ([2 Maccabees 6](#)) and one mom and her seven sons ([2 Maccabees 7](#)). These men were tortured to death rather than eat a piece of pork and renounce the covenant God had made with the Jewish people. (If you want to read some serious Braveheart-esque bad-assery, check out these stories.)

Rather than violate the teachings of the Lord, they died. Others were imprisoned. Others were fined. These were the consequences of not “going along with” the mandate.

While this is a true story from history, it is also an analogy for our time. The government has mandated that Catholic institutions provide health care insurance that pays for contraceptive services, abortifacient drugs, and sterilization.

Granted, there may be many Catholics who want to be like the rest of the world and go along without hesitation. But if we want to be faithful to Jesus and to His Church, then we must not comply.

And here is the catch – if we’re prepared to not comply, then we must be prepared for the consequences.

Now, while I hope and pray that we don’t come to the point where martyrdom or imprisonment is the consequence, there could still be some serious consequences.

Any and all Catholic institutions which come under the purview of the mandate will be forced to comply or pay a fine. These fines will shut these institutions down. Effectively, the United States government will be saying, “If you don’t do what we tell you, then we will put you out of business.”



“You have to violate your consciences!” said the very blue eyed Greek man a long time ago



And what is the “business” that will most be affected? The “business” of caring for the sick, poor, the homeless, and the dying. As of this moment, the Catholic Church is the single largest charitable organization in the world. One in six sick people are treated at Catholic hospitals in this country. What will happen when these institutions are shut down? What will happen when Catholic schools are forced to violate their Faith or are forced out of the field of higher education?

This is completely unnecessary. No one would be denied health care if the HHS removed this mandate from the law. Catholics are merely asking for the freedom that is guaranteed in the First Amendment: the freedom to live out our beliefs in public.

As Melissa Moschella, put it:

*“The key to understanding conscience rights correctly is to recognize that there is a world of difference between a law that makes me do something I don’t want to do and a law that makes me do something I have an obligation not to do. The former is an annoyance, the latter an assault on my moral integrity.”*

## **What can I do about it?**

The virtue needed today is **courage**. It is the virtue to do what is needed, when it is needed, in the way it is needed.

Americans are facing the largest threat to religious liberty that our nation has ever seen. It will no longer be enough for Catholics to be “believers” in Jesus Christ and His Church; we will need to be witnesses to Christ and His Church.

Yeah, but how?

- **First, by understanding the issue at stake.**

With the HHS Contraceptive mandate, our First Amendment rights to religious freedom are under attack. It is imperative that Catholic high schoolers and college students understand this issue and can speak intelligently about it.

This means that we argue points, not people. We do not attack, we explain. We do not bluster about with arrogant speech, but we give the reason for our position with “with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:16).

- **Contact your state representatives.** Contact our Federal representatives. Someone down in my own state’s public offices told me recently that it is a myth to imagine that the phones are ringing off the hook down at the capitol. Your call has a lot of weight. There are few people outside of special interest groups who actually take the time to contact their reps and inform them on issues.

- **Look at your life.** We need to not only witness to the Church with our *lips*, but also with our *lives*. This means that we are called to make a serious examination of our own consciences.

How am I living? Am I a “pick-and-choose” Catholic? Or am I willing to be like Eleazar, or Saint Peter, or Mother Teresa, or Miguel Pro? (This doesn’t mean that I never sin, but it does mean that I intend to follow the Church’s teachings.) I might still have questions, but that is a very different thing from being in rebellion.

The Church doesn’t merely need better “arguers.” The Church needs saints.

Yes, I need to be informed. Yes, I need to be gentle in my argument for the truth. Yes, I need to take action and speak when speech is called for.

BUT.

More than anything, the Church needs men and women who are what they should be\*. The Church needs men and women who have placed Jesus at the center of their lives. The Church needs men and women of courage.



The Church needs saints.

Do you want to know what you can do? How about what you can be?

Be courageous. Be a saint.

You want some practicals? Here are three things you can do.

1. **Work** for the Church (get informed and patiently proclaim the truth).

2. **Pray** for the Church (offer your Masses, Rosaries, and Holy Hours).

3. **Suffer** for the

Church (pick a day to fast for religious freedom, deny yourself some summer treat occasionally to stop this mandate, or some other penance . . . I don't know, offer up your sunburn!).

\* *Saint Catherine of Siena: "If you are what you should be, you would set the world on fire!"*



Daniel was thrown into the lion's den for standing up for truth, but God protected him.