

So Jesus said to them: “Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” (Mt 22:21/Mk 12:17/Lk 20:25)

My brothers and sisters, we stand here today because of an alarming and serious matter that strikes at our fundamental right to religious freedom. The federal government – which was formed to be “of the people, by the people, and for the people” – has decided to tell some of those people that we are free to *hold* our faith, but *we will be required to deny it in practice*. We are here to let the government know that *we will render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but we will NOT render unto Caesar what belongs to God!*

In late January, the Department of Health and Human Services announced that almost all employers -- *including Catholic employers* – would be *forced* to offer their employees health coverage that includes contraception, sterilization and potentially abortion-inducing drugs. This is in direct contradiction to the teachings of the Catholic faith.

Recognizing this as a grave threat to religious liberty, many people spoke out against the Mandate.

In response to this reaction, President Obama’s Administration announced a so-called “compromise” in early February. Now, instead of the *Catholic Church* being required to pay for contraception, sterilization and potentially abortion-inducing drugs, the *insurance companies* will be required to provide those services *free of charge*.

We need to say loud and clear: Mr. President, there’s no such thing as a free lunch! Contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs aren’t free. Someone has to pay for them. If the *insurance company* has to provide them, the cost will be passed on to the consumer one way or another – that’s how the economy works!

In addition, the point of fact is that *the Archdiocese of St. Louis is self insured* – as are many other Catholic organizations across the country. Yes, United Health Care processes and investigates our claims, and negotiates rates on our behalf; but the money to pay for them comes entirely from our pockets.

In other words, the so-called “compromise” didn’t change anything. Catholic employers – and the Catholic Church itself – will still be forced to pay for things that directly contradict our faith. Apparently we are free to *believe*, but not free to put our beliefs *into practice*. In other words, we have *freedom of worship*, but not *freedom of religion*.

Our ecumenical brothers and sisters are standing with us today as co-sponsors of this event, and I welcome them – the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God USA. Their witness today says loud and clear: ***this is not about contraception. This is about religious liberty.*** Today, the government is telling the Catholic Church how to define its mission; the government is telling us which of our ministries are or are not “religious;” the government is telling us what teachings we can and cannot act on. Our ecumenical brothers and sisters know that if the government can tell the Catholic Church those things *today*, then it might be their heads on the chopping block tomorrow. They are here so that we can say together as one body: *we will render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but we will NOT render unto Caesar what belongs to God!*

So, what are our options?

+We can submit to the Mandate ... and violate our teachings. Many Catholic colleges have already done just that. But let's be clear what's at stake here: we are being asked to *say* that we hold the faith, but to deny it in practice. That's hypocrisy, and we cannot accept it.

+We can shut down our Catholic hospitals, our Catholic schools, and our Catholic charities. We can accept the invitation to get out of the public square. But if we do that we violate the mission Jesus gave us, and we abandon the practices on which he told us we would be judged: to teach, to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked. In other words, we would break faith with our mission and jeopardize our salvation. We can't do that.

+Our institutions could seek exemption as religious employers -- if they agree to *hire* primarily Catholics and to *serve* primarily Catholics. Just imagine Jesus saying to the Samaritan woman at the well: "I'm sorry, I can't reveal the truth to you. If I minister to foreigners it would jeopardize my religious status."

Jesus Christ didn't come to serve only his own people, and neither do we. Catholic hospitals and Catholic charities and Catholic schools don't serve people because *they* are Catholic; we serve people because *we* are Catholic, and Jesus Christ himself gave us a mission to share the Good News with *everyone*.

The bottom line is this: the government has left us no good options. We cannot, in good faith, comply with the mandate as written. Every avenue compromises our mission, and forces us to render unto Caesar what belongs to God.

So what should we do? Thankfully, we have a roadmap, because *we've been here before!* If you think about it, our situation is just like that of the early Christians living in the heyday of the Roman Empire. For the first three centuries of our Christianity, Roman culture and law provided a climate that was not particularly friendly to the Church, and was openly hostile to it at certain points.

How did the early Church survive and thrive in a hostile culture? How did it come to pass that the Church is still a living reality, but the Roman Empire only lives in history books?

It was the witness of believers. It was their faithfulness – in word and deed – to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their witness to faith won the day then, and our witness to the faith can win the day again.

The Church today, like the early Church, needs people who are ready and willing to let their words and deeds bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the public square. We need people who are willing to make sacrifices so that the truth of the Gospel can be heard, our culture challenged, and our world transformed.

Most often the sacrifice required of us has been the ‘white martyrdom’ of a life that is faithful to the Gospel rather than faithful to the culture. *But the time has come when we must be prepared for extraordinary sacrifices as well.* And that’s precisely what Jesus himself promised us and told us to expect:

“He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them; Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. (*Mk 8:34; Mt 16:24; Lk 9: 23*)

I am convinced that taking up the cross is the way to life. I am convinced that ‘before the cross there is no defense.’ I am convinced that Jesus won victory on the cross, and that he will win victory in us if we take up our cross and follow him.

Will you stand with me and say “Jesus, I will take up my cross and follow You”?

Will you stand with me and say: Mr. President, we cannot comply with this Mandate. We WILL render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar; but we will NOT render unto Caesar what belongs to God. Mr President: *restore our religious freedom!*

Brothers and sisters: we must be prepared to suffer for our convictions.

But our faith tells us – and history shows us – that suffering will make our witness grow stronger. With that conviction, let us recall the words of EITHER Saint Paul to the Romans OR St. Peter:

I urge you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when His glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you... whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name. (1 Peter 4: 12-16)