

Catholics rally against Obama contraception mandate

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NEW ORLEANS (RNS) From Maine to Arizona to southern Louisiana, Catholic churches across the country echoed with scorn for a new federal rule requiring faith-based employers to include birth control and other reproductive services in their health care coverage.

Dozens of priests took the rare step of reading letters from the pulpit urging parishioners to reach out to Washington and oppose the rule, enacted Jan 20.

The rule requires nearly all employers to provide their employees access to health insurance that covers artificial contraception, sterilization services and the "morning after" birth control pill.

The mandate exempts individual churches but applies to Catholic universities, Catholic-based charities and to groups affiliated with Methodists, Baptists and other denominations.

Roman Catholic leaders morally oppose artificial birth control and related services, and they called the rule an infringement on their constitutional rights.

"This is the government interfering in the workings of the church," said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has made fighting the contraception mandate a top-shelf priority.

Catholic Church actions in opposition to the federal edict included:

-- New Orleans-area churches read a letter from Archbishop Gregory Aymond at weekend Masses, directing churchgoers at the diocese's 108 parishes to denounce the rule and contact Congress to reverse the ruling. "This ruling is an example of government violating our rights," the letter read.

-- The Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix issued a similar letter to its 92 parishes, saying it plans to flout the law and urging churchgoers to write Congress.

-- Church leaders in Maine read a letter from Bishop Richard Malone protesting the rule he called a violation of the church's First Amendment right to freedom of religious practices and urging parishioners into action.

-- In a letter to his diocese, Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburgh said the Obama administration's message to U.S. Catholics is clear: "To hell with your religious beliefs; To hell with your religious liberty; To hell with your freedom of conscience."

It was not known exactly how many churches addressed the issue. About one-third of America's 67 million Roman Catholics attend weekly Mass, according to William D'Antonio, a sociologist at the Catholic University of America. However, in recent polls, about 95 percent of Catholics have said they use contraceptives, and 89 percent say the decision to use them should be theirs, not the church's, he said.

Judy Waxman of the National Women's Law Center said easier access to contraceptives could prevent unwanted pregnancies and cut down on the number of abortions. "This is such a major step forward for women in this country," she said.

Wesley and Lesley Sterling of McComb, Miss., heard about the rule for the first time while attending Saturday Mass at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. Both side with

the church on the debate.

"It's wrong," Wesley Sterling, 30, said of the rule. "It should not be forced upon what we believe in as Christians."