

# Catholic bishops reject new contraception proposals

by [David Gibson](#)

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The nation's Catholic bishops on Thursday (Feb. 7) rejected the Obama administration's latest proposals to broaden accommodations for religious groups in regulations that require insurance companies or employers to provide free birth control coverage.

The administration last week released a long-awaited compromise for faith-based employers that have religious objections to offering health insurance that could be used by employees to access contraceptives and sterilization.

Yielding to demands by the bishops and other critics, the new accommodation contained a more expansive definition of what constitutes a religious group.

It also detailed how faith-based institutions that may not be exempt – especially religiously affiliated hospitals and universities – would be shielded from any involvement in providing contraceptive coverage; under the new rules, the insurance companies themselves would arrange that with the individual employee.

But New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the proposals fail to address or ease all of the hierarchy's concerns, and said the bishops would continue to press ahead with efforts to overturn the mandate in court.

"Throughout the past year, we have been assured by the Administration that we will not have to refer, pay for, or negotiate for the mandated coverage," Dolan said in his statement. "We remain eager for the Administration to fulfill that pledge and to find acceptable solutions – we will affirm any genuine progress that is made, and we will redouble our efforts to overcome obstacles or setbacks."

In fact, while criticizing the latest accommodation in what has been a yearlong dispute, Dolan made it clear that the bishops are hoping to work with the White

House to find an acceptable compromise.

The cardinal's statement also hedged on a number of points that he said were still unclear to the bishops, leaving the chance that private talks with the administration could clarify and allay some concerns.

That tone of engagement is itself a shift from the contentious, at times apocalyptic rhetoric that the bishops and their conservative allies deployed against Obama last year, especially as the presidential campaign heated up.

Church insiders say that some of the bishops, and perhaps Dolan himself, have recognized that Obama's decisive re-election victory – winning a slim majority of Catholic voters, as well as single women and others who support the administration's birth control policies – meant they are not in a strong negotiating position.

Moreover, the latest White House proposals could undermine many of the claims made in lawsuits by church groups that are now clearly exempt from the contraception mandate, such as the Catholic dioceses headed by the bishops themselves.

Dolan's rejection of the proposals was itself not surprising. The administration's compromise made no provision for exempting private, for-profit business owners who argue that they should not have to provide health insurance coverage they find morally objectionable.

Several Christian business owners have sued on those grounds, and the bishops have said they back their claims. But the legal prospects for those arguments are much less certain, and the White House is unlikely to make exemptions for them because of the precedent that could set for other business owners who might have faith-based objections to other government obligations.

Nonetheless, Dolan's negative response seemed inevitable after many Catholic conservatives and their allies immediately and loudly denounced the compromise as worthless.

While the compromise cheered the president's Catholic supporters and won over a number of those who had objected to earlier versions of the mandate, hard-liners like Philadelphia Archbishop Charles J. Chaput dismissed the proposals as "coercive

and gravely flawed."

That put pressure on Dolan, and seemed to short-circuit what were expected to be longer deliberations by the leadership of the USCCB.

Still to come, however, are formal responses from the nation's Catholic hospitals and Catholic universities who are most directly affected by the contraception mandate, and who have perhaps the greatest sway in the negotiations. —*RNS*