

If you have followed the local news the last few days, you have heard that Bishop Jenky released a letter to be read at all the masses this weekend. This letter is in response to the announced decision by the Department of Health and Human Services this past week. The issue before us stems from the Obama Health Care law passed by Congress. The law required that the department of Health and Human Services decide which institutions would be exempted from having to pay for contraceptives under their health plans. Last Friday they announced that while churches would not have to pay for contraceptives other associations linked to churches, such as schools, hospitals and charitable agencies would not have an exemption. The one concession offered was to allow employers an extra year to comply with the law. As you know, on a local level, we have a school, with employees who are insured. This is an issue that directly affects St. Philomena church.

The last few days our local newspaper published articles on this issue. The articles were more opinion based than actually reporting true facts about the church and state issue, but one article did illustrate a fundamental concern we should all have as Catholics. The article portrayed two faithful Catholics, one who would go to church this weekend to hear Bishop Jenky's letter and one who would not. The one who planned to attend church was quoted as saying, "I know they (meaning the Church or the Bishops) believe what they are saying, that birth control is wrong, but I've never understood why it's wrong." Ultimately this lack of understanding gets to the heart of what is so important for us as Catholics today.

As Catholics, we believe the Church was instituted by Christ to provide us the grace we need for salvation. Grace comes to us through the sacraments, for example Eucharist and Confession, and through the Magisterium. The Magisterium is the official teaching of the Church. This teaching is the Bible and any documents from Church Councils, where the bishops gathered in unity with the Holy Spirit. From the moment of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven onto the Apostles and Mary, we believe the Bishops, when gathered in union with the Pope, are guided by the Holy Spirit. The book of the Acts of the Apostles (15:28) explains this well in response to a first century church problem, the book states "it is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us"; a solution was prayed for and a decision was made. We believe the Scripture is a record of God's decisions and decisions by humans blessed by God; this continues in the Church today. We believe God chose to make His will known to us personally through the self-revelation of Jesus Christ and through the teaching of His Church. The Church has never just made up things nor made decisions on a whim. In fact, the Church always errs on the side of more prayer and discernment, no matter the issue. So as Catholics, we profess to believe what our Church teaches. We don't and can't make up our own doctrine. St. Paul talked about a religious submission of will. This is not a submission to power but to wisdom. When we don't know or we don't understand, the beauty of the Church is that people of holiness have been praying for and seeking guidance from God for thousands of years. When we don't know, we are called to read, study and learn what the holy ones before us have taught. We may be advancing as a scientific culture but God and the spiritual world of truth have always been and will always be the same. All the teachings of our Church are so readably available to us, especially with modern technology. Ultimately, every time we process forward in church to say Amen to the Body of Christ, to the Eucharist, we profess three things. We profess that we believe the Eucharist is the real, substantial Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, that we are united as one community of believers, and that we believe and profess all that the Catholic Church teaches. If we spiritually can't make these statements then the Church asks us not to receive

communion. The Church is a teaching of truth that is meant to lead us to heaven. The woman quoted understands our Bishops believe in past Church decisions and she believes the Bishops are firm in current guidance but she doesn't to learn why artificial birth control is wrong.

This expression is a truth for many Catholics and it points to the need for all of us to understand the Church and what the Church teaches. From the beginning of the Bible, Creation is an act of God. Life is a gift from God. No matter what scientific knowledge we may have or what instruments we may develop, human life is never a human decision, it is a gift. The Catholic Church teaches that life begins at Conception and ends at natural death. The Church defends life in all its stages. Whether that human life is in the womb or that human life is behind bars serving a life sentence for murder. Aside from just war, when humans must directly oppose an aggressor who is active destroying life, war on humans is wrong in every respect.

In 1968, Pope Paul VI released the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. This document prohibited Catholics from all forms of modern artificial birth control because it is a direct affront on human life. This is the issue before us today. No matter if the form of birth control is abortion, sterilization, or prevents conception, by forcing abortion. Unfortunately we have seen the horrific results of this kind of human birth control. Not only do we have the direct destruction of future life, we are witnessing the men and women, teen aged boys and girls, being pulled into an attitude of pride, selfishness, and pleasure; sex is for fun and not for an expression of true love and procreation. As a priest, I have witnessed firsthand the pain of abortion and the sadness of girls almost forced onto birth control out of fear. It is estimated that a woman has at least one medicine induced early abortion, every year she's on the pill. In addition to the loss of life, the medical side effects to contraceptives are serious. Our women face increased risks of cancer from the pill's hormone therapy as well as high blood pressure, blood clots, stroke, heart attack, depression, weight gain, and headaches, all so that they can use their beautiful bodies in ways God didn't intend.

In the late 1800's Pope Leo XIII had a spiritual encounter after celebrating Mass, in Rome. There are a few accounts of the event, but basically the pope spiritually heard a conversation between Satan and Jesus. In this conversation, Satan claimed he could destroy the Church and the Lord permitted him to try. Satan's greatest desire is to destroy the life that God so freely creates and to make us believe life doesn't matter, that we don't matter. So in response to this spiritual threat, Pope Leo drafted the St. Michael prayer and mandated the global church say the prayer. It is for this same reason that Bishop Jenky has asked the Peoria Diocese to recite the prayer each Sunday. The prayer is a call for the divine power of God to protect us from the assault of evil, in all its forms. In 1994, Pope John Paul II called Catholics to continue saying the St. Michael prayer to "obtain help in the battle against forces of darkness and the spirit of this world."

In response to the decision of the Department of Health and Human Services, Archbishop Timothy Dolan, the president of the US Bishops, stated "In effect, the president is saying we have a year to figure out how to violate our consciences." The government is trying to directly force us to purchase something that violates our beliefs. John Paul II termed our culture a "culture of death" in response to the lack of respect for life. As I've been thinking about all this, I woke up Saturday morning to open church and saw someone had written, on the church sidewalk in front of the Sacred Heart statue, "I hate life". This deepened my sadness over our collective failure to love the life God has given. As I prayed for the person who wrote it, I think he or she offered us a good reflection on what we are really fighting

for. We are fighting to convince people, to convince the world, that human beings matter; that what human beings do matters. Life matters, you and I matter. Life may be difficult but God is here to love us through the challenges. Ultimately life is a gift from God, no matter if it is life to be born 9 months from now, an elderly life to be born into heaven tomorrow, or any stage of life in between. Let's not be fooled to think that popular opinion shapes or dictates Church teaching. It never has and never will. The Church is meant to be a beacon of hope and truth in a fallen world not just another compromising agent to humans that don't want objective truth. So together let us express our joy in being human, of being created, of being a Catholic Christian, by living and celebrating life in all its forms. Amen.

A copy of Bishop Jenky's letter on this issue can also be found on the St. Philomena webpage, www.stphils.com/church.