

My dear friends in Christ, as you have come to know over the past year and half, my preaching style can be a little academic at times. I like to draw from scripture commentaries and past college classroom lectures. I like to preach from the mind more than from the heart, and that's just the way God made me. But today, I have to speak a little bit more from the heart. And I speak to you today from a pastor's heart--a heart deeply concerned about the happenings in our world and how they affect people's opinions, choices, and faith.

I have to speak from the heart today because my heart, as a Catholic, and as a priest--your priest--has been deeply troubled over some recent events in our country. A month ago, I spoke to you about the growing debate in America which has stemmed from the Obama administration's decision to force employers, and now, insurers, to cover certain drugs and procedures which are considered intrinsically evil by the infallible teaching of the Church¹, and morally repugnant by many other people of good will. The government wants us all to bear the cost of free contraceptives, including some that can cause very early abortions, as well as sterilizations, which destroy a normally healthy power of the human body. Even though so-called "accommodations" have been made, our bishops, supported by professional moral theologians, and in their position of authority to teach the faithful in matters of faith and morals, have determined that many Catholic institutions will still have to cooperate with evil acts in a way that is unacceptable, unconstitutional, and unnecessary.

I was deeply disappointed that on Thursday, a bill failed in the Senate which would have reinstated the decades-old kinds of conscience protections supported by the Bill of Rights. But I have been even more deeply hurt and scandalized by the kinds of rhetoric which news media have embraced, by the exclusion of important information, and by the misinformation that has been presented as fact. The Church has been dragged through the mud these last months and weeks. And the Church is my family. I've given my life to it. I believe it's teachings are true, and its logic and reasoning are sound. But more than that, I love my Church.

So Friday afternoon, fired up by all of this, I did something predictable. I started writing a homily that became a point-by-point argument against all the omissions, lies, and half-truths which have been spread over the airwaves and on the internet lately. When I hit three pages, with over ten unique points, and hadn't even gotten to the weekend Scriptures, I sat back, took a look at it, and realized how totally obnoxious it would have been to preach that homily.

So, instead of commenting on everything, I'm going to say two things, and then tie them in to the Scriptures. As far as I'm concerned, these two points are my best one-two punch. If these points don't bother, interest, disturb, or motivate you at all, then I don't know what to say, and I'll just sit down and be bothered all by myself. I'm pretty good at that. My two points are not opinion or rhetoric; and they are actually not central to the

¹ http://jimmyakin.com/2004/11/contraception_i.html. Also, <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=110257>. And, <http://thecatholicwife.blogspot.com/2010/05/is-churchs-teaching-on-contraception.html>.

debate. But since supporters of the contraception mandate have refused to confront the central point--the question of religious freedom--I will play in *their* sandbox instead. These are the two facts you need to know, and have not been told: that combined oral contraception--the birth control pill--has been classified several times as a Group one carcinogen by the World Health Organization. And secondly, the Obama administration is not telling the whole truth when it claims that it based its contraception mandate on science and evidence in favor of health.

First, it is a little known fact, but a certain fact, that the International Agency for Research on Cancer, a division of the World Health Organization, has defined combined oral contraceptives, known as the birth control pill, as a "Group one carcinogen."² There are five groups. Group one is the worst. This group is not made of things which "probably cause cancer," but which "cause cancer." The pill shares this grouping with 106 other nasty things like arsenic, asbestos, tobacco smoke, and plutonium. Not that they are all equally dangerous, but they do belong in the same category. They cause cancer. The administration keeps telling people that free contraception is important because it is all about women's health. They claim that the pill reduces risks of certain cancers, and that is is true. But the cancers it helps prevent are less common, and less deadly, than the cancers it tends to cause.³ If a supplement promised you a less likely benefit and a more likely and more serious risk of harm, would you take it, or ask your spouse to do so? Would you give it to your children? Would you even give it to your *enemies*, given Jesus' command to love and pray for them? You know, it's one thing to have to share the health care costs for a person's decision to smoke throughout their life, but it's another thing entirely *to be forced to help pay for their cigarettes*. I can accept supporting another person's care, even if it comes from their questionable choices, but I will always resist being forced to help purchase a drug *which is not strictly necessary for health*, and is known to cause higher risk of cancer.

Second, and lastly, :), the news is getting out about the questionable practices the administration used to get support from the medical and scientific community before it issued its mandate to provide free contraceptives. The administration wanted people to think that its decision was based on science and evidence, not partisan politics or ideology. So it tasked the Institute of Medicine, which is an independent, non-profit arm of the National Academy of the Sciences,⁴ with the with the job of studying whether contraceptives and sterilization should be included as so-called "preventive services" by every health insurance plan in the nation. Sounds like a good idea. We want an objective, independent, expert opinion on this kind of thing. Except for the fact that the panel that studied the question was entirely staffed with persons who have advocated for contraceptives, have made financial contributions to politicians and organizations who support their widespread use, and had every reason to try to come to a pre-

² <http://gerardnadal.com/2012/02/15/world-health-organization-data-on-birth-control-pill-and-estrogen-replacement-carcinogenicity/>

<http://www.abortionbreastcancer.com/news/050831/index.htm>

⁴ <http://www.iom.edu/About-IOM.aspx>

determined conclusion based on their beliefs.⁵ Some of the research they considered was done by organizations with a vested financial and ideological interest in the outcome. One of the panel members dissented from the group's recommendation, claiming that what he witnessed was not science or evidence-based research, but rather a "mix of objective and subjective determinations filtered through the lens of advocacy."⁶ In layman's terms, this scientific effort amounted to a bunch of baloney. The administration seems to have stacked the deck. They repeat the mantra that their mandate is good science and good health care, but the mantra was all but predetermined; all they had to do was massage the data to find it. If this is what counts for science and evidence in the 21st century, count me out.

Persecution and scandal will inevitably come. Jesus said so. What weighs heavily on my heart is the lack of charity, honesty, and truth which have been a part of this debate. So, if you don't find these two points troubling, fine. These are home runs as far as I'm concerned. The other eight or nine things I deleted from this homily are doubles and triples in comparison, which is my way of warning you that now that spring training is underway, it's open season on baseball analogies.

Having presented my best two points, I can turn now to the Word of God and see what is being asked of me as a Catholic Christian in response to this situation in our country. The stories told in our readings today can be boiled down to one question for all of us: "To whom belongs my heart?"

The first reading told the shocking story of God's testing of Abraham, as he was asked to sacrifice his only son, born to him late in life, when he was an old man and his wife was thought to be barren. We know that human sacrifice, especially the murdering of one's own innocent child, is a crime that cries out to heaven. But the ancient religions practiced it all the time. Abraham probably began to wonder, "Is my God like that, too?" Isaac was the greatest gift he had ever received. And God, the giver of that gift, was asking him to make a return, no questions asked. Abraham set out to do it, even answering his son's touching question along the way, "Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" He said, "Son, God will provide the lamb." (Genesis 22:7-8) Abraham foretold the way that God the Father would provide the sacrifice which would take away the sins of the world: the lamb of God, *his* only-begotten Son. God did not actually have Abraham slaughter his son. Whether we are comfortable with it or not, all he wanted was to train Abraham in the same path we all have to follow: we have to listen to God first. Always. Exclusively. Obediently. This is the only source of true life for us, as Abraham was blessed to hear: "Because you have acted in this way, I will bless you abundantly." And he received from God not just the promise of one life, but the rich blessing of descendants countless in number. To whom belongs your obedience? Abraham, our father in faith, answered for us.

⁵ <http://www.hliamerica.org/truth-and-charity-forum/promised-objectivity-americans-receive-planned-parenthood-ideology/>

⁶ [ibid.](#)

In the Gospel, the Transfiguration presented us with an astonishing image of Jesus: a glimpse of the glory that would become his after his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. Terrified at seeing this glory, and two dead men speaking to Jesus, the disciples had absolutely no idea what to do next. God told them from the heavens: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Listen to Jesus, we are told. When we are afraid, when we are lost or bewildered, when we have no idea what to do next--listen to Jesus. To whom do you listen? To whom belongs your heart?

As faithful citizens, our obedience certainly belongs to things like just laws. But now that the legislative branch has failed to solve a problem which exists in our newly revised health care system, a final standoff against this mandate has become a little more likely. Maybe something will happen before then to resolve the issue. Maybe the courts will make the right decision.

But if a standoff takes place, come August 2013, we as Catholics--led by our bishops--have to decide our answer to the question: To whom belong our hearts? That is, our ultimate obedience. To a president? To a political party? To an unjust law?

Before then, many things can happen, and many of those things are up to us. We may not have much power in the great scheme of things, but we have a voice, and we have a vote. What I say next is not partisan or political, but it is about fundamental issues, which I *am* allowed to talk about from this pulpit: we have a voice and a vote, and we should join our fellow men and women of good will in using our voice and marking our vote contrary to bad health care backed by ideology and bad science, contrary to vested interests, contrary to abortion, and in favor of freedom of conscience, the protection of human life, and the health of our families. So help us God, we may have to answer a very specific question soon: To whom belong our hearts?

Because all of this nation's bishops have spoken out about this mandate, I know where my shepherd's heart is. And because of what I have said to you today, you know where your shepherd's heart is, too.