

Many of us are familiar with the story of the prophet Jonah being swallowed by a whale. That happened because Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and preach. Maybe Jonah didn't want to deliver God's message because it threatened doom, or because he didn't know how the people would react: repent, or attack?

I feel a little like Jonah. I would rather not have to deliver this message, mostly because the message itself is sad and disturbing.

You may have heard the news item from this past Friday: Kathleen Sebelius, Health and Human Services Director, decreed that a religious organization (like a Church) that offers health insurance to its employees will be forced to cover contraceptives (some of which can cause an abortion) and sterilizations, free of charge, even if it believes in conscience that these are morally objectionable.

Sebelius went so far as to say that she believes that this decree "strikes the appropriate balance between respecting religious freedom and increasing access to important preventive services." But how can you speak of balance when the result is taking away religious liberty and conscience protection?

There are exceptions; for example, a religious organization will not be forced to go against its conscience *if* it qualifies as a religious organization according to the federal tax code, *and* if it hires and serves mainly people of the same faith, *and* if its sole purpose is to teach religious doctrine. I can't think of what kind of religious organization might possibly qualify for this exemption.

The only other exception is for religious organizations that since 2010 have made no changes to their health insurance plans beyond those specifically allowed by the federal government.

The Diocese of Wichita and its employee health insurance program enjoys this second exemption, at least for now. But we may still be forced by the federal government to provide notice to employees about where contraceptives and sterilizations are available.

Even though the Diocese of Wichita as an employer presently enjoys an exemption, the Catholic faithful here should still be concerned ...

... Concerned because the federal government could in the future still make new requirements that would force us to do something against our conscience. A lot depends on who is running the government, and whether or not that administration is friendly towards religious liberty and conscience protection.

... Concerned because it does affect many other religious organizations, Catholic and others, that are denied religious liberty and forced to act against their conscience.

... Concerned because this mandate does not respect the diversity that is so much a part of our national unity.

... Concerned also because religious liberty and conscience protection are being threatened in a very real and concrete way, right here and now: the government forcing a Church to do something that it judges to be morally objectionable.

Catholic social justice teaches that, in keeping with human dignity, people have a right to health care. But it also teaches that, again, in keeping with human dignity, people have a right to freedom of religion and of conscience; to have that taken away is too high a price to pay for health care.

I said earlier that I feel a little like Jonah, also because I am not sure how people will react to this message. I am not looking that we fast, put on sack cloth and sit in ashes. My hope is rather that we will contact our elected leaders and let them know that we do not want to be forced to act against our beliefs, we or anyone else, and that we want religious liberty and conscience protection restored. And pray, pray more, pray more harder.