

Statement of Bishop Felipe J. Estevez

Fellow citizens and brothers and sisters:

As we approach our national elections in a few short weeks, I ask you to keep clearly in mind that one of our most cherished freedoms seems sadly to be hanging in the balance. From the very beginnings of this nation religion has inspired and motivated our individual lives, our public lives at all levels, and our very national purpose and objectives. Faith in God and the public acknowledgment of our religious beliefs is present in our Declaration of Independence, was present at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and remains present even today in the symbols and ceremonies of our nation and state. And yet, today we find that the free and public exercise of religion is clearly and unequivocally under attack at the very highest levels of our government.

At the vice presidential debate a week ago on national TV, the Vice President asserted that there was no assault on the Catholic Church at all contained in the HHS mandate. It was said that no religious institution or believer would have to violate their conscience by providing or supporting products or services which they consider to be immoral and contrary to God's law. It was said that the HHS mandate now included an accommodation that would protect our rights of conscience - our right to practice our faith free from government mandate and interference. But sadly this was wrong. The HHS mandate's so-called accommodation is no such thing. It keeps religion out of the public square where it has a right to be, and locks religion up inside the four corners of the church building where it can suffer the slow death of isolation and irrelevance.

The HHS mandate remains a vehicle whereby Catholics will be forced to violate their consciences or forego the basic human need for medical services. If the government can put Catholics in this untenable position today, the government can put any other believers in that same untenable position tomorrow. Our right to the free exercise of our religious beliefs hangs in the balance as it never has before - make no mistake about it.

But for sure, there is one place still left in our nation where we can freely exercise our religious beliefs and freedoms - and that is in the privacy of the voting booth. I urge all of my fellow citizens to vote - it is our civic duty and our right. And I urge all to vote their consciences - do not leave your religious beliefs **outside** of the voting booth. Whether those beliefs are Catholic or Protestant or Evangelical, or anything else - take your conscience and your beliefs with you when you vote. Let your religious faith **inform** your vote, for that **too** is your right and even your duty.

May God bless America,

Most Reverend Felipe J. Estevez
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of St. Augustine