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Oklahoma Catholics seek legal relief from Obamacare mandate

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OKLA. CITY — Local Catholic leaders are plaintiffs in a new lawsuit seeking relief from a federal rule forcing employers to provide insurance covering contraception.

Archdiocese of Oklahoma City spokeswoman Tina Dzurisin said the Catholic Benefits Association filed suit Wednesday morning in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma.

Dzurisin said the association represents nearly 200 Catholic employers and 19,000 employees nationwide.

Other plaintiffs include The Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Inc., All Saints Catholic School in Oklahoma and Catholic organizations in Kansas, Maryland and North Carolina.

Dzurisin said the suit seeks to stop the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services mandate that would force faith-based employers to violate their religiously-held beliefs and Catholic teachings by providing health insurance coverage for surgical sterilization, contraceptive drugs and abortion-inducing drugs to comply with the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare.

While Catholic dioceses and archdioceses are themselves exempt from the mandate, their Catholic affiliates that are separately incorporated, such as high schools and charitable institutions, are not, Dzurisin said.

Other Catholic ministries, including hospitals, colleges and Catholic businesses have also been ordered by the government to comply, Dzurisin said.

Paul S. Coakley, Archbishop of Oklahoma City, said regardless of the corporate structure within they work, Catholics cannot in good conscience provide employees with coverage that undermines human dignity and the sanctity of human life and jeopardizes the physical and mental health of those who use them.

“It is my prayer that the courts will recognize that the federal government has no compelling public interest that justifies burdening our free exercise of religion by requiring us to pay for or provide conscience-violating drugs and procedures,” Coakley said.

The Catholic Benefits Association consists of Catholic employers united in their defense of their First Amendment right to give witness to their Catholic faith through their ministries and businesses, by providing their employees with life-affirming health care coverage consistent with Catholic teaching.

Nearly 200 Catholic employers and some 1,000 parishes in the United States belong to the association. They include Catholic dioceses and archdioceses, religious orders, local Catholic charities, colleges, nursing homes, cemeteries, retreat centers and medical facilities.

The Catholic Benefits Association serves both non-profit ministries and for-profit businesses.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius has said an exemption covers religious organizations that primarily employ people of their own faith. It includes churches and other houses of worship and could include other church-affiliated organizations.

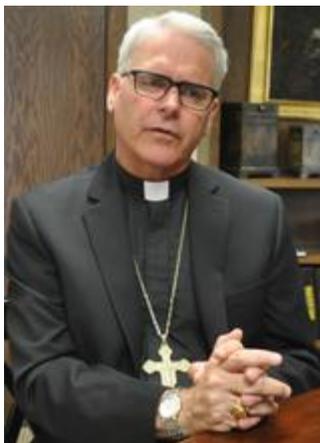
The religious exemption in the administration's rule is the same as the exemption in Oregon, New York and California, Sebelius contends.

Sebelius has said virtually all American women use contraception at some point in their lives and a large body of medical evidence shows it has significant benefits for their health and the health of their children. Sebelius estimates birth control can cost an average of \$600 a year, making it unaffordable for many women.

In June 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Affordable Care Act of 2010. The law, drawing upon recommendations developed by the Institute of Medicine and adopted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, requires new private health plans written on or after Aug. 1, 2012, to cover contraceptive counseling and services and all U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved methods without out-of-pocket costs to patients.

For many plans, this requirement took effect in January 2013.

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Archbishop of Oklahoma City Paul S. Coakley said Obamacare is not consistent with Catholic beliefs.

- See more at:

<http://www.edmondsun.com/local/x787213255/Oklahoma-Catholics-seek-legal-relief-from-Obamacare-mandate#sthash.QS2bTYj5.dpuf>