

# The Examiner

WASHINGTON

## Opinion: Op-Eds

# Economic freedom: Good for the parish, good for the poor

June 3, 2012 | Modified: June 12, 2012 at 7:00 pm

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**Antony  
Davies**

The Washington  
Examiner

Last month, 43 Catholic institutions filed 12 lawsuits challenging the Department of Health and Human Services' requirement that these religious institutions provide health insurance that pays for sterilizations and birth control, including kinds believed to cause early chemical abortions. Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is partially correct in calling the HHS mandate an assault on religious freedom. But the cardinal is not seeing the whole problem.

In forcing employers to offer one-size-fits-all insurance, the HHS mandate forces Catholic institutions to pay for services that they believe are morally wrong. The bishops see this as a violation of religious freedom. But what the mandate really does is interfere with Catholics' abilities to purchase or not purchase a product. Religious freedom is why the bishops are suing. But economic freedom is what they are suing for.

Economic freedom is fundamental because, without it, we cannot exercise our other freedoms. The freedom to speak is meaningless if the government prevents us from traveling from our homes or paying for a phone call. The freedom to write is meaningless if the government prevents us from selling newspapers. The freedom to worship is meaningless if the government forces us to behave immorally. The violations of freedoms of speech and press and religion are why we resist government. But the violation of economic freedom is what we resist.

Broader appreciation of the importance of economic freedom would help the Catholic Church and many other faiths advance the causes they support, such as helping the poor. Out of concern for the working poor, Cardinal Dolan recently called on the New York Legislature to increase the minimum wage. Yet economic theory and historical data show that restrictions on economic freedom, including the minimum wage, hurt rather than help the most economically vulnerable.

Workers compete for jobs on the basis of knowledge, talent and cost. In the absence of a minimum wage, lesser-educated and lesser-skilled workers can compensate for a lack of knowledge and talent by offering their labor at a lower cost. Because a minimum wage forces employers to pay the least-skilled workers as much as more-skilled workers, the minimum wage increases the likelihood that the least-skilled worker will have no job at all. In turn, this impedes the worker's ability to build skills that could lead to better wages in the future.

A second, perhaps more compelling argument hinges on human dignity. Life is a gift from God. It is not a gift to the state, but a gift to the person and, through the person, to the world. The government does not own my life and so has no right to tell me whether and for what price I can offer my time and effort to an employer. Yes, I'd rather earn \$8.50 an hour than \$7.25, but if my choice is \$7.25 or nothing, human dignity demands that I have the right to choose for myself whether I will take the \$7.25. A minimum wage removes that choice from me and so demeans a key component of my humanity -- my ownership of my own labor.

When the Church uses its moral authority to encourage people to serve each other, and government only uses coercive authority to prevent people from harming each other, the economically vulnerable do not get trampled. The best way to serve the poor is for government to protect people's economic freedom, thereby giving all people the maximum ability to act, and for the Church to convince free people to use their freedom to care for the poor. The Church has a name for this: community.

Antony Davies is an associate professor of economics at Duquesne University and a Mercatus Affiliated Senior Scholar