“Contraceptive” has become an explosive word in the last two months. This is largely due to the Health and Human Services Mandate that would require institutions (such as charities, schools, universities and hospitals) in the United States to provide sterilizations and contraceptives, some abortive, to their employees free of charge. Narrow religious exemptions, the mandate’s very origin, and the question of religious freedom and conscience have many citizens legitimately concerned, particularly Catholics morally opposed to contraception, sterilization and abortion.

Religious exemption from the mandate will only be granted to an institution which “primarily employs [and] serves persons who share its religious tenets.”

This unsurprisingly excludes many institutions including Catholic ones; “catholic” by definition means “universal,” serving the common good and people of all beliefs. On February 10, under pressure to broaden its definition of a religious institution, the Obama Administration announced a vague “accommodation” which would not alter the exemption policy, but would instead transfer the cost of contraceptives from the institutions themselves to insurers. While this slight-of-hand adjustment quieted many opposed to the original mandate, essentially nothing changed: Catholic employers will still have to pay for insurance coverage for their employees, which will fund contraception, sterilization and abortifacients.

The mandate originates from a 2011 study funded by the National Institute of Health. The study concludes that free provision of contraception would greatly reduce national health costs by reducing medical costs accruing from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies. Other studies, which link contraceptive use with riskier sexual behavior and increased instances of STIs, cast significant doubt on these claims. Moreover, such studies suggest that when sexual abstinence and fidelity have been encouraged over contraceptive use, STI rates have decreased. In addition, forms of contraception such as the birth control pill have been linked to increased rates of breast and cervical cancer.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the health care industry is in place to ensure wellness, treating and preventing diseases. Pregnancy is not a disease. In fact, it has been quite useful in the continuation of the human race.

However even if we assume that contraception is an essential element of health care and that a large percentage of Catholic American women have used it (as is often claimed?), the question at hand is still whether or not those who morally oppose contraceptive coverage should be forced to pay for it. This is a question of religious freedom.

While it is unclear if the mandate blatantly violates the First Amendment’s vague language, it would violate statutes, such as The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA, 1993). People of other faiths are uneasy as well. If Catholic institutions are forced to violate their conscience, how long un-
As a seminarian I have always found Valentine’s Day to be a strange celebration. What’s a celibate person supposed to do on a day devoted entirely to romance? Should he ignore the holiday and pretend that everyone else is crazy? This works if you live in pretend-land, but I prefer to live in the real world. Should he sit around and try to make himself feel better with the thought that he is ‘dating the Church’? No thanks. After some deep brooding, I came to the conclusion that I should celebrate celibacy on Valentine’s Day by going to see The Vow by myself.

In the movie, Rachel McAdams and Channing Tatum play a young married couple in downtown Chicago. McAdams’s character, Paige, is a sculptor with the usual ‘open-minded’ and ‘free-spirited’ characteristics that we often associate with such folks. Paige lives estranged from her rich family. Tatum plays a musical hipster named Leo, who owns a recording studio. After the couple gets in a car accident, Paige suffers a traumatic brain injury which causes her to forget the last few years of her life. She doesn’t remember leaving her family, becoming an artist, or even meeting her husband. As a result she moves back to her parents’ house, and returns to her old life without her husband. For the rest of the movie Leo desperately tries to get Paige to remember him and return to their life together.

Apart from some cheesy date scenes where...
Leo and Paige share a glass of wine and put chocolates in each other’s mouths. The Vow was a thought-provoking and enjoyable movie. It also was pretty funny to watch Channing Tatum play a quasi-hipster married to a free-spirited sculptor, but all in all, Tatum and McAdams did a good job with the acting. Last, but not least, anyone with a beating heart should have felt the proverbial ‘warm and fuzzies’ when the show was over.

Now that’s all very nice and cute, but what can the viewer take-away from the movie? The Vow shows that marriage is hard. In the movie, Leo has to love his wife, even when she doesn’t remember him. I was reminded of a man at my parish that goes to the nursing home everyday to feed his wife dinner. She doesn’t know who he is anymore, but he still comes. That is love.

This is an important reminder to idealistic young people. Many folks have a super-romanticized vision of marriage as some perfect furnace of love, second only to the Blessed Trinity in power. Now, there is some truth in this rosy view of marriage. With authentic love and sacramental grace, Christian marriage can be a beautiful thing. But what would happen if your spouse suffered a horrible injury or developed a bad case of Alzheimer’s? Let’s push it further. What would happen if your spouse left the Church after a sudden crisis of faith? Could you still love her or him? I think that we still can, but most people get scared because things haven’t worked out like they had hoped. The Vow tries to give a picture of how to love – even when everything has gone wrong.

That being said, The Vow isn’t necessarily a shining example of the difficulties of married life. In fact, the movie made Leo and Paige’s conflict look too easy. Maybe this is outright pessimism, but the real world seems to be more complicated and difficult. Nonetheless, The Vow is an entertaining movie, and it does offer some hope that people can work through the hardships of marriage. Despite its cheesiness and glossy portrayal of conflict, The Vow still manages to be a thoughtful and heart-warming film.

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Simple Blessings in the Land of Eternal Spring

This past January I was fortunate enough to travel to Guatemala with the St. Thomas VISION program. We spent three weeks in San Lucas working with the mission started by Father Greg Schafer from the Diocese of New Ulm, MN. The San Lucas Mission helps the local community with projects including coffee farming, reforestation, and construction and strives to provide eye-opening and educational volunteer opportunities for those who come to serve.

I had never before been south of the United States so everything about Guatemala was new to me. Each moment was an opportunity for cultural exchange, from the food we ate to the conversa-
tions I had (in the little Spanish I knew) to the smells that would meet me as I walked down the street to the Mass spoken in Spanish. It was ultimately from the Guatemalan people that I found my inspiration for service.

One day we were at the Women’s Center hauling rocks from one pile... to another. It was monotonous and tiresome; the sun was out and it was hot. I told myself to not think about the work and zoned out completely from my surroundings when an innocent “hola” broke my concentration. I looked up and saw a group of children standing on the edge of the road. When I smiled and said “hola” back they all giggled and ran away. I continued to work and sure enough they returned. “Hola.” I smiled at them and this time they stayed. As I bent down to pick up another rock, I was surprised to see that suddenly about ten small hands were clamoring around the pile, picking up as many small rocks as they could, helping us with our work. The kids were determined to help us...we who were there to help them. The children inspired in me a childlike desire to serve my Lord with newness and excitement. And as I continued hauling rocks, complimenting my new little helpers’ “músculos,” the rocks didn’t seem as heavy.

Some of the most impactful experiences of my trip to Guatemala were the stories I heard from the people. One of the cooks at the mission, Chona, took an afternoon to share her story with the volunteers. Chona grew up in San Lucas and when civil war broke out her people were greatly oppressed. Many times Chona’s life was in danger and she often feared for the lives of those she loved. One day this fear became reality when Chona’s husband never came home. She will never know exactly what happened to him, whether he was imprisoned or killed right away. As her eyes filled with tears over the mystery that remains in her heart, I found my own heart stirred for this woman and the story that she has lived.

While trying to live a simple life in Guatemala, I began to foster a new appreciation for the things I have at home. Living with a limited amount of clothing, minimal showers, no makeup, no cell phone, and no computers allowed me to be fully present at each moment in Guatemala. I was thankful to be separated from these distractions in my life for a time, and as I reflected on these things, I began to wonder if they were necessary at all. To continue my VISION experience, I gave up makeup for Lent this year. Further, I try to be more intentional about showering – both the amount and length of showers I take. My biggest struggle, though, has been monitoring my shopping. Living with a limited closet opened my eyes to the amount of clothes that I have at home. Maintaining this view of my wardrobe and realizing that I have too many clothes, rather than too little (usually what I’m thinking as I stare blankly into my closet Monday mornings), has been a great reminder of the simplicity of life that I practiced in Guatemala.

I cannot begin to express how my time in Guatemala has changed me as a person. The culture, simplicity, and stories that I was immersed in truly impacted my life. I learned that through service we simultaneously give of ourselves and receive an outpouring of blessings. Now two months after I have returned I realize that my Guatemalan experience is not yet finished. Each day I reflect on my trip to the Land of Eternal Spring and each day I remind myself of the beauty God revealed to me during January.

To learn more about the San Lucas Mission, visit their website at http://www.sanlucasmission.org/.

Paige Patet
Headlines were made in early February when the Susan G. Komen Foundation, known for its pink ribbons and three-day walk to end breast cancer, cut its funding of Planned Parenthood. But just kidding! Three days after Komen’s original announcement, executives were back in the spotlight reinstating their financial support of the largest abortion provider in the nation. Whatever the reason behind this gigantic flip-flop, the irony of the whole Komen-Planned Parenthood relationship is worth an examination.

The National Cancer Institute at a 2003 workshop came to the sweeping conclusion that abortion is not associated with increased breast cancer risk. Among those advocates for this position was Dr. Louise Brinton, chief organizer of this workshop. However, an April 2009 study by Jessica Dolle, MPH, of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center contains an admission from Dr. Brinton and colleagues that abortion does in fact increase breast cancer risk by 40%.1

According to the Breast Cancer Prevention Institute, “It is the interplay of...two principles, estrogen exposure and breast lobule maturation, which accounts for the fact that abortion can lead to breast cancer.”2 The more a woman is exposed to estrogen, from early menstruation or birth control pills, for example, the greater the risk of breast cancer. This is because estrogen has been proven to cause genetic mutations and increase the proliferation rate of mutated cells, which can easily become cancerous.3

However it is the increased estrogen levels caused by hormone secretion from the baby early in pregnancy, that are of most significance for our purposes here. Females are born with type 1 lobules and form type 2 lobules during puberty. Estrogen exposure causes large amounts of type 1 and 2 lobules to be produced. These are where breast cancer is able to begin. After 32 weeks types 1 and 2 lobules mature into types 3 and 4 lobules in preparation for breast feeding. These are cancer-resistant lobules. Thus carrying a child to term, and having children in general, protects against breast cancer. Similarly, having no children, or terminating a pregnancy early, increases the risk of breast cancer because of the large amounts of type 1 and 2 lobules and lack of types 3 and 4 lobules that are present at that point in time.4

But why do so many physicians fail to acknowledge the abortion/breast cancer correlation? Why does Susan G. Komen’s website cite abortion as having “No increase or decrease in risk” despite the fact that science explains why it is a great hazard?5

Perhaps it comes from the fact that the whole abortion industry is built on a lie and that lying about the link between abortion and breast cancer follows naturally. Dr. Bernard Nathanson co-founder of the pro-abortion group NARAL, recalls the late 60s when the abortion rights movement was just catching speed. “Knowing that if a true poll were taken, we would be soundly defeated, we simply fabricated the results of fictional polls,” Nathanson recalls. “We announced to the media that we had taken polls and that 60% of Americans...
were in favor of permissive abortion. This is the tactic of the self-fulfilling lie. Few people care to be in the minority."

The lingo of the abortion industry calls the baby a "product of conception," "piece of tissue" or even a "blood clot." And in an industry driven by Blood Money, to quote the recent documentary by this name, revealing that the "piece of tissue" in question is actually a human being would break the deal. At $300-950 per first trimester abortion, often with no checks or credit cards accepted, doctors rack in cash salaries and don’t need to report their earnings. Revealing the abortion/breast cancer correlation would no doubt cause more women to reconsider this procedure and the industry’s income would fall.

Breast cancer is a terrible disease that has claimed many innocent lives and an ethical cure should be sought and hopefully found one day. However, abortion is always a grave evil, whatever the circumstance. It is not morally right for any organization to fund another that performs infanticide daily, whether the funds are directly financing the abortion procedures or not. The Susan G. Komen Foundation, in its financial support of Planned Parenthood, is digging itself in a deeper hole, rather than climbing out of one.

Paula Thelen

3 ibid.