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April 14, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin, III  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

I write today with grave concerns regarding the provision of Religious Services at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, specifically Catholic pastoral care, and request you immediately provide access for Catholic priests who seek to offer pastoral care to servicemembers and Veterans who are in the hospital.

On April 4, 2023, a cease-and-desist letter was issued to Holy Name College Friary, a community of Franciscan priests and brothers, who have a strong record of providing pastoral care to military patients and Veterans at Walter Reed for nearly two decades, barring them from providing any form of religious services. This letter was issued during Holy Week, five days before Easter – the most sacred period for those who practice the Christian faith.

The Catholic pastoral care contract awarded to the Franciscans of Holy Name College expired on March 31, 2023, and a new contract was reportedly awarded to Mack Global LLC, a defense contractor, self-described as “your one-stop procurement for janitorial supplies, industrial machinery, aggregates and raw materials”<sup>1</sup>. This highlights questionable judgment by officers awarding a Catholic pastoral care contract to a for-profit company best suited to provide industrial services instead of a Catholic religious institution with a strong record of providing pastoral services.

While Walter Reed claims it can provide a full-range of Catholic services without a contract through its current active-duty Army Catholic Chaplin, the Archdiocese for the Military Services notes this individual is in the process of separating from the Armed Forces. Furthermore, to require one Chaplin to serve the population one of the largest military medical centers in the world is burdensome, unreasonable, and demonstrates a lack of attention to the spiritual needs of our nation’s servicemembers undergoing medical recovery – of which spiritual care is a critical component.

His Excellency, the Most Reverend Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D., Archbishop for Military Services, states “It is incomprehensible that essential pastoral care is taken away from the sick

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mackglobal.com/what-we-do/>

and the aged when it is so readily available...I fear that giving a contract to the lowest bidder overlooked the fact that the bidder cannot provide the necessary service.” It is imperative the Department of Defense moves immediately to rectify this situation and conduct a review of contracting practices related to the provision of religious services at military institutions throughout the Defense Department.

Disturbingly, the lack of consideration to servicemembers religious needs and rights of conscience is not a one-time event. The large number of denials for religious exemptions for the COVID-19 vaccine and the questionable decision making regarding the provision of pastoral care services, raise serious concerns regarding the Department of Defense’s commitment to respecting the rights of conscience for those who volunteer to serve our nation. Coupled with the recent revelation of the FBI targeting Catholics for increased surveillance in Richmond, Virginia, and the failure of DOJ to prosecute repeated anti-Catholic vandalism at churches, this decision raises serious concerns regarding the Executive Branch’s position regarding 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment protections and invites questions regarding the Federal Government’s respect for, and protection of, the innate religious rights of Catholics in the United States.

I respectfully request a response to the following questions:

1. Why did the Department of Defense send a cease-and-desist letter to a religious order providing free religious services during Holy Week?
2. After nearly two decades of providing care to servicemembers undergoing medical treatment at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, why did the Department of Defense award a contract to a for-profit defense contractor instead of Holy Name College Friary?
3. What are the Defense Department policies regarding contracts for pastoral care services?
  - a. Are they low bid contracts?
  - b. Do they take into consideration the bidder’s relationship with established religious institutions?
4. Was Holy Name College Friary notified in a timely manner that their contract was to expire?
5. Was Holy Name College Friary notified in a timely manner of a new RFP/RFQ for pastoral care services at Walter Reed?
6. What steps will be taken to review the departmentwide contracting process and requirements regarding contracts for pastoral care services?
7. Please provide the justification used for awarding a Catholic pastoral care contract to a for-profit defense contractor over a religious order affiliated with the Catholic Church.

Please respond to this request within 14 days.

Sincerely,

  
CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH  
Member of Congress