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Religious liberty under fire, panel says

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Reading Eagle: Ian Maule

DeSales University philosophy professor Dr. Joshua Schultz, left, and acting chief of urology at Lehigh Valley Hospital Dr. Edward Mullin, center, listen to attorney Matt Kloiber, vice president of the St. Thomas More Society in Allentown, address a question from the audience during the Forum for Religious Liberty at Berks Catholic High School on Thursday night.

Religious liberty is under attack by federal government mandates, including provisions of the Affordable Care Act, according to speakers at a forum Thursday in Berks Catholic High School.

Organized by the Allentown Catholic Diocese, the Forum for Religious Liberty was part of a nationwide campaign in opposition to the Aug. 1 deadline for religious institutions to provide birth control and abortion counseling as part of their employees' medical insurance plans.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops designated a two-week period of prayer and action, known as Fortnight For Freedom, in churches nationwide. It concludes July 4 with a ringing of church bells in Catholic churches.

About 20 people attended the two-hour discussion in Berks Catholic, the second in a series in the diocese.

Mary Fran Hartigan, who heads the diocesan Secretariat for Catholic Life and Evangelism, opened the forum with a prayer for divine guidance at a "decisive hour in the history of our nation."

The forum came on the day after the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a ruling striking a provision of the Defense of Marriage Act, paving the way for same-sex marriage in California.

Theologian Joshua Schultz, one of three panelists, suggested the ruling was an example of the

government's coercive power.

"No earthly power, no government of men has absolute control over our lives," declared Schultz, who teaches philosophy at DeSales University. "We have a natural right to refuse to obey when a government commands us to do what's wrong."

Attorney Matthew Kloiber, vice president of the St. Thomas More Society in Allentown, said the Affordable Care Act's preventative care provisions are vague and subject to interpretation by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As currently interpreted, he said, the act would make available the so-called 'morning after' birth control pill.

"Regardless of how you feel about birth control," Kloiber said, "the government is deciding what constitutes a religious practice."

A recent HHS ruling, Kloiber acknowledged, would exempt some Catholic institutions from offering birth control or abortion services in their health plans. If the health plans changed, however, the institution would have to comply with the HHS mandate.

Dr. Edward Mullin, a member of the Catholic Medical Association chapter in Allentown, was also on the panel.

During a discussion period, panelists agreed that there was a need for a grassroots initiative to inform Catholics about the threats to their religious freedom.