

Fortnight for Freedom Reflections
Prayer Rally at the Lincoln Statue at the State Capitol
Springfield, Illinois
June 23, 2015

S.S.P.: "The Freedom to Bear Witness" to the truth of the Gospel.

The "Fortnight for Freedom" is taking place in Dioceses across the United States of America. The initiative, launched by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, takes place every year. This year's Fortnight began this past Sunday on June 21st and continues until July 4th, when we celebrate our nation's "Independence Day." This two-week period is a time when our liturgical calendar celebrates a series of great martyrs who remained faithful in the face of persecution by political power – St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, St. John the Baptist, SS. Peter and Paul, and the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome. Yesterday was the feast day of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More. These two English Saints were martyred for the faith in the face of tremendous political pressure and persecution during the reign of King Henry VIII. Saint Thomas More's last words, "I die the King's loyal servant, but God's first," have continued to resonate for Catholics throughout the centuries.

The theme for this year is “The Freedom to Bear Witness” to the truth of the Gospel. Archbishop William E. Lori, Archbishop of Baltimore and Chairman of the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, explains the theme of the “Freedom to Bear Witness” in these words: “Keeping the spirit of the Gospel means that Catholic institutions are to bear witness in love to the full truth about the human person by providing social, charitable, and educational services in a manner that fully reflects the God-given dignity of the human person.”

Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, wrote in his recent pastoral letter that our political culture is losing patience with the inconvenient truths of the Catholic faith, saying, “Here in the United States ... priests, professors and others on college campuses have already been threatened with disciplinary action for expressing Catholic teaching.”¹ Noting current challenges Catholics face in living their identity, the Cardinal points out how in many parts of the world, Christians are being murdered because of their faith. In the United States, Cardinal Wuerl says that laws, policies and practices are being enacted that infringe on the freedom of individual Catholics to live their faith, and on Catholic ministries to carry out their work while remaining true to Church teaching.

“Claims of discrimination should not be allowed to become the new weapon for diminishing religious freedom and outlawing institutional Catholic identity,” he says.²

This past April 26, Tom Farr, Director of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs in Washington, D.C., delivered the opening keynote address at the Annual Conference of the National Diocesan Attorney’s Association, entitled, “ISIS and Indiana: the Global Crisis of Religious Liberty and Catholic Responsibility.” Farr argued that the decline of religious liberty in the United States is handicapping U.S. foreign policy, with dramatic consequences for American national security, the fate of Christians and other minorities abroad, and the Roman Catholic Church. He exhorted Catholics to defend religious freedom as necessary for their fellow citizens and to the continued health of American democracy.³

John Garvey, President of the Catholic University of America, has written about religious liberty and the practice of charity, saying, “We show God’s image, and our likeness to him, through the practice of charity. ‘God is love.’ This was revealed most perfectly to us, St. John explains, when ‘God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life

through him' (1 Jn 4:8-9). When we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, we imitate the love of God. And by imitating divine love, we manifest divine love. When people experience charity motivated by believers' love for God, they experience God's goodness. Throughout the Church's history, her practice of charity has been the most compelling witness to the goodness of God and the value of religious devotion. . . . Even when the experience of charity does not lead others to belief in God, it demonstrates that religious devotion makes an invaluable contribution to the common good. At the same time, through the practice of charity, believers manifest the great dignity of the human person—their own and that of the people they minister to. By serving others out of a love grounded in faith, we witness to the ability of the human person to devote himself freely to God and to participate in the divine life of love. Our practice of charity affirms the dignity of those we serve by demonstrating that what they need, as much as food, shelter, and health care, is love—because human beings are made for God, who is love."⁴

Imitating and manifesting divine love through our actions is the reason why freedom of religion cannot be reduced to freedom of worship. Religious liberty is more than being able to pray in our churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship; religious liberty means being able to put those beliefs into practice in our hospitals, schools and social services like Catholic Charities.

In this regard, Pope Francis has said that “a healthy pluralism...does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques.”⁵ In his Address to Participants in the Conference on International Religious Freedom and the Global Clash of Values, Pope Francis remarked, “Religious freedom is not only that of private thought or worship. It is the liberty to live, both privately and publicly, according to the ethical principles resulting from found truth.”⁶

These threats to religious freedom are occurring not just in far-away places, but right here in Springfield in our State Capitol, where a bill is being pushed that would diminish the conscience rights of health care workers. In courts throughout our country, we continue to hope for justice

to protect our religious institutions from the threats of the federal government imposed by the mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services requiring the provision of morally objectionable services.

In closing, let us heed the call of Pope Francis when he said, “We must promote religious liberty for all people. Every man and woman must be free to profess his or her faith, whatever it may be. Why? Because that man and that woman are children of God.”⁷

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <http://www.adw.org/2015/05/24/cardinal-wuerl-issues-pastoral-letter-on-catholic-identity/>.

² <http://www.adw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Being-Catholic-Today-Pastoral-Letter.pdf>.

³ <http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/isis-and-indiana-the-global-crisis-of-religious-liberty-and-catholic-responsibility>.

⁴ <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday/human-dignity/teaching-aid-garvey.cfm>.

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), no. 255.

⁶ Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in the Conference on International Religious Freedom and the Global Clash of Values,” June 20, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/june/documents/papa-francesco_20140620_liberta-religiosa.html.

⁷ **Pope Francis, Pentecost Vigil, May 20, 2013,** <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1302229.htm>.