

**HOMILY FOR THE CATHOLIC MEDIA CONFERENCE MASS**

**Denver Marriott Tech Center**

**June 19, 2013**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good for us to be here to celebrate this Mass in conjunction with the Catholic Media Conference. At the end of this week the Catholic Church in the United States will observe a “Fortnight for Freedom,” beginning on the eve of the feast of the holy martyrs, Saints Thomas More and Cardinal John Fisher. As these two courageous saints were executed for refusing to obey an unjust law that contradicted their Catholic faith, these great martyrs provide much-needed inspiration in our efforts to protect religious freedom.

This two-week period, called a fortnight, will begin on June 21, the Vigil of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, and end on the Fourth of July. Thus, the “Fortnight for Freedom” connects this two-week period of prayer with the civic observance of our nation’s freedom.

The significance of this fortnight as an appropriate time to pray for religious liberty can be seen simply by looking at the liturgical calendar for this two-week period:

- As already noted, June 22<sup>nd</sup> marks the memorial of two British martyrs who refused to take the Oath of Supremacy, which purported to make the King head of the Church in England instead of the Pope. The reason for the King’s action was the Pope’s refusal to grant an annulment of the King’s marriage.

When King Henry VIII decided to annul his marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon, Bishop John Fisher appeared in court on her behalf, where he declared that, like John the Baptist, he was ready to die on behalf of the indissolubility of marriage. Sir Thomas More, who had resigned as the King's Chancellor, and Bishop John Fisher had remained faithful to the Church. For this they were both beheaded.

- June 24 is the Solemnity of the birth of St. John the Baptist, who was beheaded by King Herod for telling the King that it was wrong for him to have divorced his wife so he could marry his brother's wife (cf. Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21; Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9).
- June 28 is the Memorial of St. Irenaeus, bishop and martyr, who gave his life defending the fullness of the Christian faith. His greatest work is "Against Heresies." As a bishop, he understood that he held a particular charism and responsibility to witness to the fullness of truth.
- June 29 is the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, both of whom died as martyrs in Rome, during the persecution of the Emperor Nero, for their public witness of faith in Jesus Christ.
- June 30 is the memorial of the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome, honoring those many Christian who were tortured, crucified, and burned alive in 64 A.D. in Nero's gardens on the Vatican Hill.
- July 3 is the Feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle, who evangelized Syria, Persia and India. He also died as a martyr for the faith.

- There are other saints' feast days during the fortnight who were not martyrs, but who nevertheless bore great witness to the Christian faith:
  - June 21 is the Memorial of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, who cared for the sick during a plague until he contracted the disease and died from it himself. Technically this means that he was not a martyr, but he did give his life as a consequence of living out his Christian beliefs.
  - June 26 is the Feast of St. Josemaría Escrivá, the Founder of Opus Dei, who taught that God calls us to lead a holy life in ordinary things, not just in church, but also in our work and our family and social life.
  - June 27 is the Memorial of St. Cyril of Alexandria, bishop and doctor, who wrote treatises that clarified the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. By doing so, he helped prevent heresies from taking root in the Christian community. He was the most brilliant theologian of the Alexandrian tradition. His writings are characterized by accurate thinking, precise exposition, and great reasoning skills.

All of these commemorations of courageous witnesses of faith will culminate on the Fourth of July, which of course is not an ecclesiastical holyday, but a civic holiday. Nevertheless, the *Roman Missal* for the United States does provide liturgical texts for Independence Day. The Collect for Independence Day will provide a very fitting culmination to our Fortnight for Freedom: "God of justice, Father of truth, who guide creation in wisdom and goodness to fulfillment in Christ your Son, open our hearts to

the truth of his Gospel, that your peace may rule in our hearts and your justice guide our lives.”

This prayer helps to put this fortnight in its proper perspective, praying for justice, truth, wisdom, goodness and peace. The Fortnight for Freedom is not primarily about Bishops organizing public rallies, protests and demonstrations. However, that does not mean that the beneficial effects of our prayers should not go beyond the walls of our churches. Again, the new translation of the *Roman Missal* makes clear that the Communion we share in the Eucharist is to have an effect in our lives, as the dismissal at Mass proclaims, “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

Our late Holy Father, the great Blessed John Paul II, gave an extraordinary example of the connection between the Mass and the effect that our faith can have in the world. After his election as Pope in 1978, John Paul returned to his native Poland in June 1979 and celebrated an outdoor Mass in Warsaw, where more than a million people had come out to be with the Polish Pope. In Warsaw’s Victory Square, Pope John Paul II gave what papal biographer George Weigel called the greatest sermon of John Paul’s life. Why, the pope asked, had God lifted a Pole to the papacy? Perhaps it was because of how Poland had suffered for centuries, and through the 20th century had become “the land of a particularly responsible witness” to God. The people of Poland, he suggested, had been chosen for a great role, to understand, humbly but surely, that they were the repository of a special “witness of His cross and His resurrection.” He asked then if the people of Poland accepted the obligations of such a role in history. In response, the crowd began chanting, “We want God! We want God!”

After Warsaw, the Pope went to Krakow. A crowd of two million to three million people came for another outdoor Mass with the Pope. In his homily there, John Paul took on communism directly by focusing on communism's attempt to kill the religious heritage of a country that had for a thousand years believed in Christ. He said:

"Is it possible to dismiss Christ and everything which he brought into the annals of the human being? Of course it is possible. The human being is free. The human being can say to God, 'No.' The human being can say to Christ, 'No.' But the critical question is: Should he? And in the name of what 'should' he? With what argument, what reasoning, what value held by the will or the heart does one bring oneself, one's loved ones, one's countrymen and nation to reject, to say 'no' to Him with whom we have all lived for one thousand years? He who formed the basis of our identity and has Himself remained its basis ever since."

The Holy Father continued, "As a bishop does in the sacrament of Confirmation so do I today extend my hands in that apostolic gesture over all who are gathered here today, my compatriots. And so I speak for Christ himself: 'Receive the Holy Spirit!'

"I speak too for St. Paul: 'Do not quench the Spirit!'

"I speak again for St. Paul: 'Do not grieve the Spirit of God!'

"You must be strong, my brothers and sisters! You must be strong with the strength that faith gives! You must be strong with the strength of faith! You must be faithful! You need this strength today more than any other period of our history. . . .

You must be strong with love, which is stronger than death. . . . When we are strong with the Spirit of God, we are also strong with the faith of man. . . . There is therefore

no need to fear. . . . So . . . I beg you: Never lose your trust, do not be defeated, do not be discouraged. . . . Always seek spiritual power from Him from whom countless generations of our fathers and mothers have found it. Never detach yourselves from Him. Never lose your spiritual freedom.”

Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass and preached a homily about God, about freedom, about not giving in to discouragement, about staying strong. Then he went back to Rome, but the people went home changed by that Mass and that homily. After that Mass they would never be the same. Poland would never be the same. It was the beginning of the end of Soviet communism.

When I became Bishop of Springfield three years ago, I had no idea that within a year the State of Illinois would force Catholic Charities out of foster care and adoption services because of our religious beliefs about marriage and family life. I did not expect that in my second year we would be back in court, this time seeking to prevent the federal government from imposing a mandate on us that is contrary to Catholic teaching. I would prefer not to have to fight these cases in court, but that is where we are and that is what we must do. My job as shepherd is to protect the flock, but we cannot and must not run away from this challenge. As St. Thomas More wrote, “You must not abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds.... What you cannot turn to good, you must at least make as little bad as you can.”

As we receive Christ into our hearts in this Eucharist, I give thanks for the graces that Almighty God has granted to our Catholic Media and I am confident that the Lord will provide for us in all of our needs. As Saint Thomas More wrote to his daughter

Margaret while he was in prison, "do not let your mind be troubled over anything that shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best." In the words of Saint Paul, which we heard in the reading from his Second Letter to the Corinthians, "God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work."

As Pope John Paul II extended his hands and prayed over his people in their time of need, I now do the same and make his words my own, asking for God's graces to face the challenges of our time:

"And so I speak for Christ himself: 'Receive the Holy Spirit!'

"I speak too for St. Paul: 'Do not quench the Spirit!'

"I speak again for St. Paul: 'Do not grieve the Spirit of God!'

"You must be strong, my brothers and sisters! You must be strong with the strength that faith gives! You must be strong with the strength of faith! You must be faithful! . . . You must be strong with love, which is stronger than death. . . . When we are strong with the Spirit of God, we are also strong with the faith of man. . . . There is therefore no need to fear. . . . So . . . I beg you: Never lose your trust, do not be defeated, do not be discouraged. . . . Always seek spiritual power from Him from whom countless generations of our fathers and mothers have found it. Never detach yourselves from Him. Never lose your spiritual freedom."

May God give us this grace. Amen.