

Reflections for the Fortnight for Freedom Prayer Rally

Lincoln Statue at the State Capitol

June 22, 2016

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear friends of religious liberty:

We come here today for the fifth annual observance established by the Catholic Bishops of the United States called the “Fortnight for Freedom.” This year’s Fortnight began officially began yesterday on June 21st and continues until July 4th, when we celebrate our nation’s “Independence Day.” The theme for this year’s Fortnight for Freedom is “Witnesses to Freedom.” This two-week period is a time when our liturgical calendar in the Catholic Church celebrates a series of great martyrs who gave witness to religious freedom by remaining 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.

Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, whose feast day is today, fit precisely this year’s theme: “Witnesses to Freedom.” For their refusal to assent to King Henry VIII’s divorce of Catherine of Aragon, the widow of

his brother, and Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn, as well as their refusal to sign the Oath of Supremacy accepting Henry as head of the Church of England, both were martyred in 1535; they were beheaded nine days apart.

In his apostolic letter proclaiming St. Thomas More the patron of statesmen and politicians, St. John Paul II wrote, "What enlightened his conscience was the sense that man cannot be sundered from God, nor politics from morality." St. John Fisher also fits that mold.

When both men were canonized in 1935, Pius XI said of John Fisher in his homily, "It was because of his courageous determination to defend the sacred bond of Christian marriage – a bond indissoluble for all, even for those who wear the royal diadem – and to vindicate the primacy with which the Roman pontiffs are invested by divine command."

Regarding St. Thomas More, Pope Pius XI observed that, "when he saw that the doctrines of the Church were gravely endangered, he knew how to despise resolutely the flattery of human respect, how to resist, in accordance with his duty, the supreme head of the state when there was question of things commanded by God and the Church, and how to renounce with dignity the high office with which he was invested."

Bishop John Fisher was named a Cardinal of the Church while he was in prison. In his canonization homily, Pius XI described Cardinal

Fisher on his way to the scaffold as raising prayers in supplication for himself, for his people and for his king. “Thus did he give another clear proof that the Catholic religion does not weaken, but increases, the love of one’s country.”

Saints such as Thomas More, John Fisher and John the Baptist died as martyrs because of their belief in the true meaning of marriage and human sexuality. We should draw strength from their example.

As we celebrate this Fortnight for Freedom, it is good to reflect on the true meaning of freedom. There is the false notion of freedom, as seen in the words of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, who wrote his infamous “mystery passage in the 1992 decision of the United States Supreme Court, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

This theme was repeated in the decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, issued one year ago on June 26, where Justice Kennedy said, “The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity.” One might call this fantasy freedom, where people use their imaginations to create their own subjective realities. The current

expression of this is the attempt to redefine marriage and in the transgender issue, where people invoke freedom to define their own gender identity regardless of their biological reality of their physical bodies.

In contrast to fantasy freedom, there is the true freedom that we find in the Bible, the freedom expressed in Exodus 32:12, which describes the commandments engraved in stone. This is the same freedom expressed by the prophet in Jeremiah 31:33 and by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:3, which describes the letters of the law engraved not on tablets of stone but in our hearts. In James 1:25, we read that God's way is the perfect law, which is the law of liberty.

Seen in this way, freedom is not a license to do as one pleases, but the ability to live in accord with God's law, free from external coercion from the state, big business, or anyone else.

During this Fortnight for Freedom, we join our prayers with others throughout the nation who understand that true freedom, not false freedom or fantasy freedom, is what made our country great.

May God give us this grace. Amen.