

**Homily for Religious Freedom Week
on the Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist**

Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: our Eucharistic liturgy today marks our diocesan observance of *Religious Freedom Week*, designated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to take place from June 22 to 29. The Week officially began on Friday with the Feast of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More, ends with the Solemnity of Saint Peter and Paul, and includes today's Feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist.

The theme for this year is **Serving Others in God's Love**. Religious freedom is necessary if we are to have the space to continue to serve in areas like education, adoption and foster care, health care, and migration and refugee services. We encourage Christians to reflect on the importance of religious liberty so that the Church might have the freedom to carry out her mission of service and mercy. We also invite Christians to pray for our brothers and sisters who face intense persecution in other parts of the world.

The Bishops' Committee on Religious Liberty has decided that Religious Freedom Week will replace the Fortnight for Freedom, which was observed in recent years. Many public awareness campaigns take place over the course of a week—such as Catholic Schools Week, National Migration Week, and National Marriage Week. The hope is that a week will provide a focused period of time to concentrate our attention on the issue of religious freedom. This particular week centers around the feast days of saints who bore particular witness to religious liberty.

Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, whose Feast Day we commemorated on Friday, fittingly exemplify this year's theme of **Serving Others in God's Love**. These saints were martyred in 1535 for standing up for the sanctity of marriage and the freedom of the Church in opposition to King Henry VIII of England. In our country today, the Church faces challenges to her freedom to serve in healthcare, child welfare services, and education. While we seek to be faithful to Christ by serving our neighbors, ignoring conscience cannot be the condition placed on people of faith for service in the public square. Saints Thomas More and John Fisher show us what faithful service looks like. They loved and served their country. Yet

they rightly recognized that they were being forced to choose between the Church and the king. They were faithful to the Church. May their example continue to illuminate the path for us, as we seek to faithfully serve our Church and country.

Today's feast day of the Birth of Saint John the Baptist is celebrated in accord with Sacred Scripture six months before the birth of Jesus (cf. Luke 1:36 and John 3:30). Saint Augustine found this date, right after the summer solstice, to be appropriate because, after the birth of John, the days begin to grow shorter, whereas after the birth of Jesus, daylight begins to increase. This is in keeping with the prophecy of John the Baptist, who put his relationship with Jesus into proper perspective with these words: "He must increase; I must decrease" (John 3:30). Saint John the Baptist was also beheaded because he spoke out against the adulterous marriage of the King, in this case, King Herod (cf. Matthew 14:3-12).

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.

A major area of national concern this year is freedom for child welfare service providers. The opioid crisis is putting a strain on the foster care system, since many parents with drug addictions are unable to care properly for their children. The number of children in need is going up. The number of families willing to take the children into their homes is going down. Yet while more children are waiting to be placed in families, faith-based child welfare providers are being targeted for closures because of their religious convictions, as we know all too well here in our diocese. For decades, Catholic Charities in Illinois provided these services. They excelled at recruiting families to serve as foster parents because they could go directly into churches and invite Catholics to serve in this way.

In addition to Illinois, service providers who have a track record of excellence in recruiting and assisting foster families in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, California, and the District of Columbia are being shut down. In March, the City of Philadelphia issued an urgent call for 300 new foster parents to provide loving homes for some of the over 6,000 children in Philadelphia in need of foster care. That same month, however, the city abruptly barred Catholic Social Services of Philadelphia, one of the city's

top-rated foster agencies, from placing children with foster families. The city decided to stop allowing Catholic Social Services to place children in foster homes, solely because the city disagrees with the agency's religious beliefs – a decision the City is threatening to make permanent on June 30th.

The proposed federal Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act (H.R. 1881 / S. 811) that has been introduced in Congress would protect the religious liberty of child welfare service providers, including adoption and foster care agencies. Similar legislation has been introduced and passed in several states. Intolerance for religious views has real consequences, and in this case, it is vulnerable children who have suffered. We need to pray and act to keep political ideology from harming the best interests of children.

Acts of healing were central to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. Christians have over centuries developed healthcare ministries dedicated to the study and practice of medicine. Indeed, the Church invented the hospital as we know it. Today, orders like the Little Sisters of the Poor serve elderly low-income Americans of all backgrounds, yet the Little Sisters' work is at risk because of lawsuits brought by the states of California and Pennsylvania against the expanded religious and moral

exemption to the HHS contraception and abortifacient mandate. In New York, Catholic medical professionals have been forced to violate their consciences and participate in abortions. It is unthinkable that we would undermine our mission to heal by destroying innocent life and harming the persons for whom we are called to care.

Education is a central aspect of the Church's mission. One of the Spiritual Works of Mercy is to teach. In the U.S., Catholic schools have played an important role in offering hope in impoverished, primarily urban, areas. Catholic schools have been significant anchor institutions in many neighborhoods, and thus they benefit even those who are not their students. Catholic leaders played a leading role in ensuring that African-American children could have access to quality education. Education is what Catholics do, and it is difficult to imagine an America without Catholic schools. Catholic schools need the space – indeed, the freedom – to operate in accordance with Catholic convictions if they are to continue to be a source of vitality for our society.

Schools that operate in accordance with Church teaching about marriage as the life-long union between one man and one woman face

significant pressure to change their policies. When Solicitor General Donald Verrilli argued before the Supreme Court in favor of redefining marriage, he acknowledged that religious institutions, including schools, could lose their tax-exempt status. The proposed First Amendment Defense Act (FADA) is a direct response to this threat. If enacted, this law would protect the tax-exempt status of non-profit entities, including schools.

The Church has long sought to serve the unique needs of “people on the move,” from providing for basic needs, to assisting with resettlement, to offering legal services to help newcomers navigate the system of their host country. The Church provides exceptional service in this area and plays an indispensable role in our nation’s immigration and refugee resettlement system. In recent years, Christian services have faced legal attacks, because the Church refuses to facilitate abortions for the children who come under our care. Groups like the ACLU set up a perverse dilemma, trying to force the Church to choose between unborn children and migrant children. By defending religious freedom, we are saying that we refuse to make such a choice.

In other parts of the world today, Christians in the Middle East are among those religious minorities confronted with persecution, despite their having been critical to the vitality and pluralism of the region since the earliest days of Christianity. In July 2015, Pope Francis said, “Today we are dismayed to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus.... [I]n this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide – I insist on the word [as he said] – is taking place, and it must end.”

Religious freedom is for everyone. Religious freedom is rooted in human nature, and therefore it is a fundamental human right. When we speak up for religious freedom, we do so not only for ourselves, but because we are called to defend the dignity of every individual and community that seeks the truth about God. Through prayer, education, and public action during this Religious Freedom Week, we seek to promote the importance of preserving the essential right of religious freedom, for now and the future, for Catholics and for people of *all* faiths.

May God give us this grace. Amen.