

**Homily for the 13th Sunday of the Year - Cycle A
June 28, 2020**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield**

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

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Immediately after my homily today, it will be my privilege to receive Kylie Kahle (KAY-lee) into the full communion of the Catholic Church and administer to her the Sacrament of Confirmation. After Mass, Father House will baptize Quentin, the newborn son of Kylie and her husband Eddie.

While becoming Catholic and receiving the sacraments may seem like routine practices in our country, we should not lose sight of the fact that what the Kahle family is doing today is an exercise of our right to the free exercise of religion as protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. Unfortunately, that is not the case everywhere in the world.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, church buildings are forbidden, and so Christians meet in house churches, which are frequently raided. Christians may be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and deported for their faith. There

are a few Muslim-born Christians, since conversion from Islam is punishable by death.

In North Korea, Christians are required, like everyone else, to worship the nation's leader, and belonging to another religion makes you an enemy of the state. Thousands of Christians are imprisoned, and many have reportedly been tortured and executed. Believers meet secretly, and risk arrest and death by doing so.

In Somalia, Islam is the state religion, and converting to another religion is illegal. The Islamist group al-Shabaab has stated that it wants to rid Somalia of all Christians, and people suspected of following the faith are likely to be killed on the spot. Many meet in secret, or do not meet at all, and cannot own Bibles. Many more examples from around the world could be given, but these are among the worst places on earth to be a Christian.¹

The fact that religious liberty is protected in our U.S. Constitution should not lull us into complacency, as we see an increasing number of incidents where religious freedom is being compromised or threatened even in our own country.

In health care, for example, the Church has carried on the healing ministry of Christ for centuries by building institutions dedicated to medicine and accompaniment of the dying. 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. But the Little Sisters' work is at risk because of lawsuits challenging the religious and moral exemption to the HHS contraception mandate, and Catholic hospitals are constantly defending themselves against lawsuits and government orders that try to force them to participate in harmful procedures, such as sterilization, gender reassignment surgery, and even abortion. 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.

Another area of concern is with foster care and adoption services. Caring for "the orphan" is a demand of the gospel. Over the centuries, the Church has put this work of charity into practice by building adoption and foster care institutions. Today, the opioid crisis has put a strain on the foster care system. 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. In places like Massachusetts, California, the District of Columbia, and Illinois, in fact right here in our own diocese, the faith-based service providers who have a track record of excellence in recruiting and assisting foster families have already been shut down. In Michigan, sexual orientation/gender identity activists have gone out of their way to challenge Catholic Charities, and Philadelphia Catholic Social Services is taking the struggle to continue to foster children to the Supreme Court. Moreover, in recent years, states that have worked to protect faith-based adoption and foster care have found themselves targeted by powerful corporations looking to appeal to activists. Intolerance for religious views has real consequences, and in this case, it is vulnerable children who have suffered.

Most recently, government actions in response to the coronavirus pandemic have also exposed bias against religious expression on the part of some civic officials. Just this past Friday, a federal judge ruled that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio violated the Constitution by restricting religious services while simultaneously condoning mass protests that took place across the state. In New York City, groups of protesters much larger than ten people – the

limit de Blasio set for non-essential gatherings – were not broken up by law enforcement. But days after de Blasio spoke at a large protest in Brooklyn, a group of Hasidic Jewish children was kicked out of a park in Williamsburg by a police officer for not abiding by the ten-person limit.²

Here in Illinois, churches were not allowed to have more than ten people present for religious services until a petition for an injunction was filed before the United States Supreme Court.

Cases such as these are a reminder that we must not grow complacent but must remain vigilant in defending the free exercise of religion. For this reason, the Catholic Bishops of the United States declared June 22nd to 29th this year to be Religious Freedom Week, urging that we pray, reflect, and take action to defend religious liberty, both here in this country and abroad.

Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, the acting chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, has encouraged Catholics to pray and uphold religious liberty at home and abroad during Religious Freedom Week 2020, which began on June 22nd, the Feast of Ss. Thomas More and John Fisher, and ends tomorrow, June 29th, the Solemnity of Ss. Peter and Paul.

The theme chosen for this year is, “For the Good of All.” Archbishop Wenski said, “Religious freedom is under stress throughout the world. Even in our Western liberal democracies, discrimination against religion in general and Catholic Christianity, in particular, is growing – albeit in perhaps more sophisticated and less violent ways. . . . The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person. Religious freedom is the human right that guarantees all other rights – peace and creative living together will only be possible if freedom of religion is fully respected.”

As we receive Jesus truly present in this Eucharist, may we be strengthened to take up our cross every day and follow Our Lord, “so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/jul/27/where-in-the-world-is-it-worst-place-to-be-a-christian>

² <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/federal-judge-rules-cuomo-de-blasio-exceeded-authority-by-restricting-religious-services-while-condoning-protests/>