

**Homily for Religious Freedom Week Mass
13th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

June 26, 2022

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear priests, deacons, and brothers and sisters in Christ:

“For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. For you were called for freedom, brothers and sisters.”

These words from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Galatians that we heard in today’s second reading (Gal 5:1, 13-18) are very fitting as we observe Religious Freedom Week, which began on June 22nd, the feast of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, and continues through June 29th, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Religious freedom allows the Church, and all religious communities, to live out their faith in public and to serve the good of all. During this Religious Freedom Week, the Catholic Bishops of the United States invite Catholics to pray, reflect, and act to promote religious freedom.

The theme for this year’s Religious Freedom Week is Life and Dignity for All. Just this past Friday, in the midst of Religious Freedom week, the

United States Supreme Court issued its decision in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson*, in which, by a vote of six to three, the Justices of the Supreme Court overturned the infamous and wrongful decision of *Roe v. Wade*, which in 1973 had declared abortion to be a constitutional right. The Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson* has sparked many reactions and debates around our country about abortion. We in the Catholic Church play a crucial role in bearing witness to the gospel of life and serving all who will be affected by these discussions and their outcomes.

Friday's decision by the Supreme Court of the United States marks an important moment for our nation, lifting a cloud that has hung over our country for nearly a half century.

There is no way to undo the tragedy of tens of millions of innocent lives lost or the decades of division sown by the *Roe v. Wade* decision. But, for the sake of future generations, we can now move forward with a more honest debate and efforts to advance policies and support programs that protect innocent life and promote stability and security for vulnerable mothers. Much work remains to be done on both fronts, and that work will now necessarily have more of a local focus, particularly in our own home

state of Illinois. Importantly, these efforts must include prayer and concerted efforts to preserve peace in the face of recent violence, intimidation, and criminal vandalism against churches and government officials.

We must also pray for the conversion of those who continue to deny that the right to life of unborn babies should be protected from the moment of conception. Such conversion comes through God's grace, with which we generously cooperate by giving an example of our care for children and adults throughout life until the moment of natural death.

In this regard, we in the Catholic Church — clergy, religious, as well the lay Christian faithful — must redouble our already robust efforts to help mothers and their children. This includes volunteering and giving to crisis pregnancy centers, Catholic Charities, Catholic food banks, St. Vincent de Paul Societies, and organizations like the Catholic Children's Home in Alton and the St. Martin de Porres Center in Springfield. The people of the pro-life movement must increase their commitment to helping organizations like these as the *Dobbs* ruling and a culture that is more and more recognizing the dignity of human life inside the womb will mean more support is needed.

That support will also be needed in our area specifically because Illinois politicians passed laws in recent years making the killing of human life in the womb a “fundamental right.” These politicians are already advertising around the Midwest that Illinois will welcome mothers here for abortion. As of this past June 1st, Illinois politicians repealed parental notification, which had been required when a minor was seeking abortion. So, with abortion becoming more pronounced in Illinois, our work to defend human life and help mothers and their children must become more pronounced.

Science has proven that a unique human being is present at the moment of conception. The sound of a heartbeat and image of the child on an ultrasound machine proves just that. Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Our prayers today should be to thank God for the Supreme Court’s ruling and for more people to embrace the greatest gift, the gift of life.

Another Supreme Court decision issued this past Tuesday has made this a good week for religious freedom in another important area as well. The Supreme Court on June 21st affirmed in the case of *Carson v. Makin* that

the state of Maine may not selectively discriminate against religious schools or the families who choose to send their children to them. Chief Justice John Roberts wrote that the First Amendment prohibits denying to religious individuals and institutions public benefits that are available to others. This decision in *Carson v. Makin* is the third installment of opinions written by Chief Justice Roberts on this theme. In *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer* in 2017, *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* in 2020, and now *Carson v. Makin*, “the justices made clear that the Constitution neither requires nor permits discrimination simply on the basis of religion in education funding. Cooperation between governments and religious schools doesn’t establish religion, and antireligious discrimination is inconsistent with the guarantee of free exercise.”¹

These favorable Supreme Court decisions should not lull us into complacency, thinking that the struggle to protect religious liberty has been won. This past June 15th the White House issued an executive order that will dramatically advance its radical LGBTQ agenda. President Biden’s new executive order attacks the science that we are made male and female, promotes the destruction of innocent human life, and undermines protection

of religious liberty and the ethical ordered liberty enshrined in our Constitution. These regulations will violate the God-given dignity of men, women, and children.

Before the June 15th executive order, the administration had already promised a new Health and Human Services rule that will require employers and health care providers to cover or perform abortions, gender transition services, and unethical fertility treatments. We must continue to fight such regulations and, if necessary, challenge them in court in order to protect the freedom of Catholic dioceses, hospitals, schools, ministries, religious orders, and businesses to be guided by our Catholic values.

All of this requires on our part that we be faithful disciples of Our Lord. In today's reading from the Gospel of Saint Luke, Jesus and his disciples are making the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Along the way, three would-be followers are confronted with the radical demands of discipleship. The first claims he will follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus responds by emphasizing how discipleship demands constant mobility. Even foxes and birds have more stability than does the Son of Man. Another potential follower wants first to go and bury his dead father. Jesus responds

by telling him to let the dead bury the dead. Proclaiming the kingdom of God has higher priority than burying even one's father. A third would-be follower wants first to return home and say farewell to his family. Again, Jesus refuses. Once a decision has been made to follow Jesus, there is no turning back for any reason. None of these three is willing to give discipleship the priority that Jesus demands. Discipleship brings with it unyielding requirements. No one can enter it lightly. At stake is the kingdom of God.

In his homily at Baltimore during his 1995 visit to the United States, Pope St. John Paul II challenged all of us to a nobler notion of freedom when he said that "freedom is not a matter of doing what we like, but having the right to do what we ought."

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Richard W. Garnett, "A Good Week for Religious Freedom," THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, June 24, 2022.