



Fortnight for Freedom
Homily Offered During Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction
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Cathedral of Saint Joseph
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Monday in the Twelfth Week of Ordinary Time

We come together once again on this third Fortnight for Freedom called by the Bishops of the United States to pray for religious liberty and freedom of conscience which are continuing under attack directly and indirectly by our government and others with power.

It is important that we continue to do so because the surest way for the Evil One to win out is to distract our attention to other things, to lure us into believing that this is an old issue and that we are getting along just fine. Or to suggest that it is not really a moral question but rather a political dispute which those who win elections can choose to impose.

Yet while there are political motivations by some, the threat to religious liberty is much more than that. It is a complex question for us all as we deal with our daily challenges. It includes moral, legal, constitutional, regulatory and practical elements. It is hard to keep on top of its implications. But make no mistake about it, the appetite of those who seek to remove the core values that have inspired and held us together as a nation and to relegate faith to worship in the back room will not weaken but rather will intensify. We pray for them and for the salvation of their souls.

As a result of this reality, we lay and clergy alike in our own ways must be ever vigilant and must contest all threats to religious liberty and freedom of conscience not just for ourselves but in the name of religious freedom for all peoples.

Around the world these days we see the persecution of Christians and other minorities where the authority of government has already relegated our brothers and sisters to enclaves of worship. With the angry mobs we now see that even those enclaves are attacked, churches burned, religious articles destroyed and innocent people forced from home and made refugees because religious liberty is absent. Pope Francis has said “The persecution of Christians is even more virulent than in the first centuries of the Church and there are more Christian martyrs than in that era.” He said it gives him “great pain”. It should us as well. While we are not facing such direct attack in the United States what happens here affects the world. Should the light of religious liberty be weakened here it will surely be so elsewhere.

Ultimately religious liberty comes down to the core belief in the respect for human life, all life, from conception to natural death and those years in between when we live out our faith in personal and public ways. Thus this is not a Catholic concern alone; it ought to be a concern by

all persons of faith or no faith because it seeks to assure the freedom of each person to be whom God created them to be or even to err for which God's mercy is ever present.

Thus it is important that we make clear that the challenge to government and societal censorship of religious liberty and freedom of conscience is not based on a selfish search for personal exemptions from laws we dislike, or that we only wish the opportunity to live as we please in ways others may not share. Rather we seek the recognition of the natural law and the natural right of any person to believe and exercise his faith or no faith. The natural law concept is described in the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This is the undergirding for our Constitution and it is the safety net for our society that natural rights flow from God's gift of life including religious liberty.

The theme for this Fortnight for Freedom is Freedom to Serve. We are not only a church of creed and of prayer, we are a church that seeks to live out our personal relationship with Jesus Christ by caring about our brothers and sisters especially the poor and those in need whether they share our creed or not.

Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, God is Love, noted:

"The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity. These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, (he said) charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being." (17)

Inherent in what we believe is when we see someone in need we reach out in whatever way we can. That is the history behind Catholic health care, education, nursing homes, child care facilities, food pantries, meal offerings and other caring ministries.

Here in our diocese we have a long history of such caring ministries especially started by religious orders and, in the present day, supported by lay men and women of faith. We as a diocese in cooperation with others are seeking to address the vacuum in providing safe shelter for women and men and families at the Bishop Dudley Hospitality House and then offer to them a helping hand for a more hopeful tomorrow. Through St. Joseph Catholic Housing affordable and senior housing has been made available in many communities. If some of the proposals to restrict religious liberty and freedom of conscience become law, we may well need to withdraw from providing these essential services in order not to violate our responsibility and duty to stand for moral truth and respect life whatever the cost.

One of the great scourges of our day is human trafficking, especially of young girls. Yet because of government mandate the Bishops Migration and Refugee Services, after years of leading the way no longer offers this ministry because it would not refer girls saved from this slavery for abortions. That is only one sad example.

This may all seem so overwhelming. Who can successfully contest governments and others with secular power? Yet we must, not to win political jousts, but to win eternity.

While there may be a period of darkness ahead that will call for courage, we need not live in darkness for Christ is the light of the world. In the Liturgy of the Hours today one of the

readings was the account of the encounter between David and Goliath. David volunteered to King Saul to confront the threatening presence of the giant Philistine. The king first had him put on the armor of a soldier and carry a sword. But it was too heavy and awkward for the young David. So he approached the ominous giant in regular garb armed only with a sling and some stones. Goliath mocked him and his seeming weakness. To which David replied that he came armed “with the name of the Lord.” And so do we.

He whom we adore tonight is our hope and our strength; we stand up for moral truth in the name of the Lord who won victory over sin and death on the cross. And who remains with us. Ultimately truth and justice will prevail because He has overcome the world. Until that day comes, let us continue to pray, to witness and to be beacons of hope for others. AS our reading from the Psalms reassures us, “the Lord watches over the way of the just.”

May Mary, mother of life and of hope, and St. Joseph, our patron, watch over and protect us all.