



Fortnight for Freedom
Homily Offered During Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction
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Cathedral of Saint Joseph
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Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles and Martyrs

Thank you for praying with us tonight as we join the Roman Catholic Church in the United States for the fourth year of Fortnight for Freedom. It is a fourteen day endeavor of prayer, education, and action toward preserving religious freedom in the United States and around the world ending on the Fourth of July.

The theme this year is "Freedom to Bear Witness". Thus it is especially appropriate that we gather on this the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul who were martyred, put to death, because they bore witness to their belief in Christ crucified and risen and would not bend to the government authority's demand to renounce Christ, and therefore his teachings, and then to worship pagan gods. Martyr means witness. St. Augustine wrote: "The martyrs (Peter and Paul) realized what they taught: they pursued justice, they confessed the truth, they died for it." We must in our day realize what we believe, pursue moral justice and while dying physically seems unlikely at least in our country, we must be willing to sacrifice if necessary at the hands of government and other authorities who seek to marginalize even demonize believers.

It is also especially appropriate that we seek to bear witness given the tragic persecution of Christians around the world where so many are tortured and butchered and so many more displaced and forced to live in unhealthy environments without proper provision of necessities. Their witness has been heroic and ought to inspire us to bear witness ourselves in solidarity with them.

Pope Francis in his homily on this Solemnity of Peter and Paul earlier today noted that "A Church or a Christian who does not give witness is sterile; like a dead person who thinks they are alive; like a dried up tree that produces no fruit; an empty well that offers no water! The Church has overcome evil thanks to the courageous, concrete and humble witness of her children. She has conquered evil thanks to proclaiming with conviction: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (cf. Mt 16:13-18)."

We come together not as partisans who seek political influence, nor as a special interest which seeks favors, nor as those seeking profit. We come together as disciples of Jesus Christ who seek to follow his directive to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and our neighbor as our self. We come together as did the early Christians with resolve to joyfully live out our faith whatever the consequences confident that the disciplines of a life guided by faith will be fruitful.

While the most focus today is on the radical decision of five out of nine Supreme Court justices to attempt to redefine marriage, the threats to religious liberty and freedom of conscience are much greater.

One journalist recently wrote that we Christians are now exiles in our own country. If so we come together to make clear that we have not left our country and that we will stand up for our God-given right to religious liberty and freedom of conscience and recommit ourselves to defending them. Thomas Jefferson wrote: “No provision of our Constitution ought to be dearer to man than that which protects the rights of conscience against the enterprises of the civil authority¹.”

We also come together to pray for those who reject faith and those including some government officials, corporate powers and ideological zealots who view believers as old-fashioned, as pests and even as enemies. We pray for their conversion and restored hearts. We do so not as victims but with the hope that comes from knowing that our Lord has overcome the world; not as adversaries but as evangelists who seek to share the joy of Christ with all; not as dividers but as healers, as instruments of Christ’s invitation to fullness of life in Him.

As we face disagreements and hostility we do so with civility, compassion, forgiveness but also with courage. We will not forsake Christ for popularity or paper peace. Our souls and the souls of those who touch our lives are on the line.

God has gifted each of us with a free will and with reason by which we make decisions. I am a sinner as are we all. I thank God for sticking by me, forgiving me and leading me toward true happiness which is based in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I wish that for others. It is with that context we approach everything that comes our way. Thus we recognize the rule of law in our country to which we owe respect; we also recognize the law of God to which we owe obedience. While respecting civil law generally we cannot disown God’s law. As this most recent Supreme Court decision evidences, there are occasions when conflict occurs. We are such a crossroad most every day, thus this annual Fortnight for Freedom. The need for prayer and witness did not begin with last week’s Supreme Court decision nor will it recede because of it.

What are God’s laws that we must defend and are threatened in today’s culture? They include:

the dignity of human life from conception to natural death,

the freedom to support those in need all the years in between while being true to our faith,
that marriage as intended by God as the union of one man and one woman open to children,

the opportunity to feed the hungry, comfort the sick and welcome the stranger in ways consistent with moral Truth,

all of which is not possible if freedom under the banner of Christ is denied or restricted.

Let me say a word about the recent Supreme Court decision which is only one of many decisions in many sectors of society that turn away from God’s teaching. With unequivocal clarity, I reiterate that we do not judge any person; judgment is to be left to God. All persons are children of God deserving of respect and to be treated with dignity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church now decades old declares that those who experience same sex attraction are to

be treated “with respect, compassion and sensitivity.” They are our brothers and sisters, members of our family and are welcome in Christ’s Church on journey to holiness as are we all. Close friendships and support structures not dependent on law are time honored, life giving and to be encouraged.

Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington has summarized well what is Christ’s teaching on marriage to which we must continue to adhere. He wrote²:

“What does the Church teach about “marriage” and has it changed? The opening chapters of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, reveal to us the deepest truth about the nature of the human person and God’s plan for us. The revealed Word of God is still what it was before the Supreme Court decision. Marriage is the lifelong union of a man and a woman given for the purpose of their mutual good and for the procreation and education of children. Sacred Scripture confirms this meaning of marriage and Jesus raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament which means that, for the baptized, marriage is a sign and means of God’s grace. With the eyes of faith we see so much more when a man and a woman pledge their love to each other.”

“Marriage” under the civil law is a contract with certain rights, duties and responsibilities. Marriage under Christ’s law is a covenant of love, open-ended for the good of the spouses and for the procreation and education of children. It is a sign and means of God’s grace. The civil law as now defined by the Supreme Court is inconsistent with Christ’s law. Therefore we cannot in conscience accept it. The fact that the two are called the same does not make them the same. Man cannot change what God has intended and planted in our hearts whatever judges or others declare. Abortion is killing a baby despite what courts say. Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman open to children despite whatever judges or others declare.

The fact is that we now are surrounded by a culture grounded in self-indulgence and relativism and thus we need to guard against its shallow attraction which the evil one subtly entices us to do. Sadly many in our society, including many who declare themselves Christians, do not believe that there is a heaven or hell, that God exists and so does the evil one. Pope Francis noted this trend which is not limited to our country. He said, “When in the name of an ideology, there is an attempt to remove God from society, it ends up adoring idols, and very soon men and women lose their way, their dignity is trampled and their rights violated.” (Sep 23, 2014) Among the idols of our day are ourselves and politically-motivated civil laws.

What is on the horizon that may restrict our religious liberty and freedom of conscience? Many are already present in many states. Though perhaps not so much in South Dakota yet, we can anticipate their arrival. That threat includes the use of government regulations to force individual believers and Catholic institutions to violate moral truth such as the mandate to provide drugs that cause abortions. They include the use of government to force employing in Catholic schools and other institutions those who reject in word or action Christ’s teaching. They include efforts to punish faith-affirming speech as harassment or discriminatory or bigoted hate speech. They include efforts to restrict or withhold accreditation and licenses unless our beliefs are compromised. They include prohibiting government grants and contracts and tax-exemptions that will limit the ability of outreach ministries responding to our baptismal call to serve all, Catholics and not. They include using law suits as time-devouring weapons or to bully

settlements that weaken financial support for Church ministries. They include intimidating small business owners to violate their consciences or face going out-of-business. The list could go on.

Some say there is nothing really to worry about, that the First Amendment to the United States Constitution will protect us. It reads:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Note that it reads “Congress” shall not. How about five justices on the Supreme Court, or bureaucratic regulators or councils and commissions or corporate boards?

Thus we, clergy, consecrated and lay, must declare not only a fortnight for freedom but a daily ministry defending freedom that seeks to preserve religious liberty and freedom of conscience every day of the year. In that ministry we will be good citizens and persons of charity, but with the motto ever in our hearts, as St. Thomas More, another witness and martyr for the faith, put it, “I am the King’s good servant but God’s first.”

Let me end on a more hopeful note. Pope Francis in his homily earlier today noted:

“Everything passes, only God remains. Indeed, kingdoms, peoples, cultures, nations, ideologies, powers have passed, but the Church, founded on Christ, notwithstanding the many storms and our many sins, remains ever faithful to the deposit of faith shown in service; for the Church does not belong to Popes, bishops, priests, nor the lay faithful; the Church in every moment belongs solely to Christ. Only the one who lives in Christ promotes and defends the Church by holiness of life, after the example of Peter and Paul.”

May we in our limited time on earth live in Christ with integrity defending the Church by our holiness of life.

May Our Lady watch over and Saint Joseph protect you all and our country.

1 - Thomas Jefferson, Letter to New London Methodist, 1809

2 – Letter to Priests, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington, June 26, 2015