



God's Faithful Servant First

a gathering to pray in defense of the freedom of religious conscience

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Cathedral of St. Joseph

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Offered during the Fortnight for Freedom recognized by dioceses from across the country and organized by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

We come together this evening with thousands of Catholics and concerned citizens around the country who are worried, worried about their future and worried about the weakening of the values which have undergirded our nation over the years. The Church today, indeed our country today, is facing a threat to the free exercise of religion and the sanctity of religious conscience by which we live out what we believe.

We Bishops of the United States in a prophetic statement entitled "Our Most Precious Liberty," have declared that "We are Catholics. We are Americans. We are proud to be both, grateful for the gift of faith which is ours as Christian disciples, and grateful for the gift of liberty which is ours as American citizens. To be Catholic and American should mean not having to choose one over the other¹." We cannot and we will not make such a choice. I am convinced that most of our fellow citizens would not ask us to do so but first they and we must be aware of the dangers ahead.

That is why raising the profile of this threat is so necessary, I served as legal counsel to a governor of Wisconsin and was involved in politics before my conversion and ordination. I know how certain special interests can bludgeon their way on public policy and how public officials might give in not fully appreciating the long term impact. The long term impact of the denial of the free exercise of religion and freedom of conscience is grave and destructive for the future of our country and for the generations to come.

Thus this evening we begin a Fortnight for Freedom, a time for prayer, for education and for healing. It begins on the vigil of the memorial of St. Thomas More, a layman, and St. John Fisher, a clergyman, who were both put to death because they would not compromise their faith or surrender their conscience under the pressure of government power exercised by the king of England and supported by many religious and political leaders who compromised to get along. It will conclude on the Fourth of July when we recall the courage of those who signed the Declaration of Independence declaring, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."²

We here in Sioux Falls gather under the theme "God's Faithful Servants First", adapted from the reported words of St. Thomas More spoken before he was beheaded, "I am the King's good servant, but God's first."³ And so must we be good citizens but God's faithful servants first.

We are privileged to be here on the steps of the Cathedral of St. Joseph, dedicated to that just man, Joseph, who protected the child Jesus from the unjust exercise of government power. Rising above us is the magnificent sculpture of Christ the King with the words in Latin: *Oportat Illum Regnare*, which loosely translated means "It is fitting that He reign." We must be God's faithful servants first.

Religious liberty and freedom of conscience have long been protected in law which was insisted upon by those who came to this country having suffered religious persecution in other countries; many still do. These basic human rights have ever been present in our hearts from the moment of our conception. Yet today are being told we must condone and even pay for what we know is morally wrong such as abortion inducing drugs, sterilization and artificial contraception or face government penalties. One wonders what the true intent of these enforcers is and what morally objectionable demands will be added as time goes on. Be assured that this attack on religious liberty is not limited to one regulation, nor will it be resolved by one decision of the United States Supreme Court.

History has shown that faith and its free exercise at home and around the world must continually be defended. The martyrs of the past teach us and embolden us. The threat to religious liberty is not limited to our country and its violent results are seen every day around the world in the vicious attacks on Christian communities in many lands and the burning of Christian churches by extremists representing many ideologies while governments including ours look the other way.

The challenge in the United States is more subtle but no less dangerous. An aggressive secular ideology has taken hold which seeks to remove religious based arguments from the public square and impose its own ideology on us all. Today it is seeking to force the Church to choose between living our moral beliefs and living our social teachings. Under the current federal government's definition of Church, for example, your parish is safe for now, but Catholic hospitals and clinics no longer are accepted as religious; neither are Catholic schools or Catholic social ministries that serve those in need. In effect what is being imposed is that the ministry of charity can no longer be freely practiced. This applies as well to individuals in business and other enterprises where you seek to live the faith by exercising the ministry of charity.

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."⁴ It is the exercise of the ministry of charity that is especially threatened by some government officials. The restriction on the right to proclaim the word of God in the public square threatens the stability that Judeo-Christian values have produced in our country over the years even with all our diversity.

Of gravest concern is the fact that federal government bureaucrats can now define what a church is and which of our agencies are religious enough to be freed from their regulation. Clearly there is a concerted attempt to restrict us to "worshipping" only because our moral beliefs are not popular with some who now hold power. Restrictions on religious liberty are not only at the federal level but are also being enacted by state and local governments. Fortunately that has not been the case here in South Dakota, though we must be ever vigilant.

For instance state immigration laws in Alabama make it illegal for a priest to baptize, hear the confession or anoint an undocumented immigrant or child. Connecticut has attempted to restructure the civil legal construct of parishes in violation of canon law. In California a Christian student organization was denied college recognition and therefore use of college facilities because its leaders were required to be Christians. In several states Catholic Charities and other organizations have had their licenses removed or been prohibited from offering adoption and foster care services because of their refusal to place children with unmarried couples. The contract with the USCCB to assist victims of human trafficking was not renewed because we would not provide abortion and contraceptive services to those hurting victims. The list could go on in both statutory and case law. These intrusions of government power threaten our ability to be God's faithful servants first.

The history of the United States and of the civilized world also shows us that not only religious faith but liberty itself must be repeatedly and vigorously defended. This reality has resulted in the great sacrifice of American men and women around the world which continues to this day. We pray for the souls of those who suffered the ultimate sacrifice in years past in defense of freedom and for the safety of those at risk today.

This issue really hits home with me as we remember the martyrdom of St. Thomas More, declared by popes as the patron saint of politicians and statesmen. He as was I a civil lawyer and a government official. Law and public service are honorable professions. In 1969 when I was serving in the Vietnam War we were given the opportunity to take a few days away from the war for R & R, rest and recuperation. I went to Singapore. While there the government showed us the movie "A Man for All Seasons", based on the play about Thomas More. I was not Catholic at the time but the movie stuck with me. It surely reminded us all about what we were fighting for so far from home, freedom in all its dimensions for all persons. We were not successful; historians can sort out why. What I know is that while in Vietnam I became friends with a young Catholic family whose freedom of religion was directly under attack. Sadly it still is.

Having viewed the movie many times since, it has struck me that Thomas More sought to avoid a confrontation with King Henry VIII, resigning his political post and refusing to say why he would not sign the Oath of Supremacy which accepted the king not the pope as head of the Church. He believed that he and his family could sit out the controversy. But the government would not let him off that easily. In an interesting colloquy Thomas has with the king in the movie, he asks the king with all the support he has why does he need More's endorsement. The king's response is telling: "Because you are honest, Thomas, and people know that you are honest."⁵ If we are honest in what we believe, we cannot sit out these attacks on religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

We are called to live what we believe. What we believe is that there is a God to whom we and all people will be held accountable and in the eyes of God the dignity and equality of every person is precious. What we believe is that we are one family and therefore must care about one another body and soul. This must result in setting forth for public consideration the Catholic tradition that reflects Gospel values and witnessing in word and practice our concern for all persons from conception to natural death, for marriage and family life, and for reaching out to the poor, the vulnerable and those with special needs whether they are Catholics or not.

We do not seek to impose our beliefs on others but to live them ourselves, always calling others to discover the joy and peace that comes in knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. As someone has said, we do not reach out to others in need because they are Catholic but because we are Catholic.

I raise this with you to encourage you to become fully informed about the threat to religious liberty and the right of conscience that will remain with us beyond this year's elections and current officeholders. Share what you learn. The Church of course does not endorse candidates or political parties. While it is the role of the bishops, priests and the Church to teach and inform consciences on the great moral issues of the day, it is the role of you the laity to take by word and witness Gospel values into the public square and into public life. I urge you to do so with greater intensity in this time of challenge.

Join me and Catholics around the country in prayer this fortnight and beyond. Commit to engage in the public dialogue on how to protect religious liberty and freedom of conscience as well as the dignity of all person gifted by God with life.

"We are Catholics. We are Americans. We are proud to be both. To be Catholic and American should not mean having to choose one over the other." We cannot and will not, and with the grace of God we need not. It is fitting that He reigns. St. Joseph, protect us so that we may truly be good citizens but God's faithful servants first.

As we prepare to journey inside the Cathedral to pray, let us join the O'Gorman students in singing God Bless America, land that we love and ask him to stand behind her and guide her in these harrowing days ahead.

1 – Our Most Precious Liberty, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, April 13, 2012
2 – Declaration of Independence, 1776
3 – The Life of Thomas More, Ackroyd, Peter, 1999
4 – *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI, December 25, 2005
5 – A Man for All Seasons, 1965