

June 18, 2012

Media Alert

(June 14, 2012, U.S. Flag Day) – On the day that our country celebrates its national flag, honored for its symbolism of unity, liberty and justice, the Catholic bishops of Florida urge the faithful and others of good will to stand together to protect our sacred and shared right to religious freedom. In a joint statement, the bishops of Florida call for a Fortnight for Freedom, June 21 through July 4. This period of time is dedicated to prayer, study and action to defend against recent challenges to religious freedom and ensure the ongoing protection of religious liberty.

The 14-day Fortnight for Freedom will be observed by Catholics throughout the country. Local opportunities to participate in activities during the Fortnight are available in each of Florida's seven (arch)dioceses.

The full statement follows:

Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Florida on the Fortnight for Freedom June 21 - July 4, 2012

As bishops, we are called to be authentic teachers of our faith and steadfast witnesses to the love of Christ, even in the face of controversy and great debate. It is this responsibility that moves us to jointly and urgently appeal to the Catholic faithful and others of good will to stand together to preserve and protect our human and civil right to religious freedom, which is being diminished and marginalized today on many fronts.

To address this concern, we join our brother bishops around the nation to call for a Fortnight for Freedom, beginning June 21, the vigil of the Feasts of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, and concluding on July 4, Independence Day. This 14-day period is a special time for prayer and commitment on behalf of our beloved country and in support of our God-given right, which no government has the authority to take from us. Let us pray in thanksgiving for our heritage of religious freedom, reflect on attempts to limit this most cherished liberty and have the courage to take positive action.

Religious freedom is our first civil freedom – first in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution. This sacred right belongs to us all. It is the basis of our democracy and the very reason that early settlers fled to our protecting shores. We must never take for granted this right for which so many before us fought and gave their lives.

In a January 19, 2012 address, Pope Benedict XVI said, “It is imperative that the entire Catholic community in the United States come to realize the grave threats to the Church’s public moral

witness presented by a radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres.” Our faith inspires us to protect all human life, promote the dignity of every soul and serve those in need no matter who and where they are, and whether they follow our same faith or have no faith at all. The Gospel demands that we act on our core beliefs. If we can no longer practice our faith as we see it, but only as others do, the common good and our American way of life is at risk.

Today’s challenges to our religious freedom provide an opportunity to join together. During the Fortnight for Freedom, we encourage Catholics to:

- q Attend special events and Masses throughout Florida to celebrate and pray for religious freedom. (Please visit www.orlandodiocese.org for local opportunities for participation. Parishes in the Diocese of Orlando will celebrate Mass on July 4th and place a special emphasis on praying for religious freedom)
- q Pray daily for the specific intention of defending our religious liberty; this may be done in conjunction with the rosary, a novena or Eucharistic adoration.
- q Fast or make an appropriate act of reparation, such as meatless Fridays or a fast day, to create greater openness to the Holy Spirit and unite our sacrifices with those whom have suffered unjust religious persecution.
- q Ring Church bells at noon on the Fourth of July; we encourage all other faiths to join us in a national, interfaith effort to let freedom ring.
- q Read, study and discuss the U.S. Bishops’ Statement on Religious Freedom, Our First, Most Cherished Liberty. Utilize additional resources available through the U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops website at www.fortnight4freedom.org, including frequently asked questions about religious liberty, a study guide on Dignitatis Humanae, Vatican II’s document on religious liberty, and several one-page informational sheets outlining current threats to religious freedom both in the United States and abroad.
- q Learn about Florida’s Amendment 8 on the November 2012 ballot, which prevents further erosion of religious freedom at the state level by eliminating discrimination against churches and religious organizations that provide social services.
- q Join the Florida Catholic Advocacy Network at www.flaccb.org to receive updates on issues involving religious freedom and opportunities for advocacy at the state and federal levels.

As we commit to take action to protect religious freedom, let us pray that our actions exemplify the teachings of the Gospel and deepen our union with Jesus Christ.

Some recent threats to religious freedom include the HHS mandate to provide coverage for abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization and contraception; forcing Catholic foster care and adoption services to shut down for refusal to place children with same-sex couples; state immigration laws that forbid pastoral care of undocumented immigrants; discrimination against

Catholic humanitarian services for victims of human trafficking for refusal to refer for abortion services.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski

Archdiocese of Miami

Most Reverend Gerald M. Barbarito

Diocese of Palm Beach

Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch

Diocese of St. Petersburg

Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane

Diocese of Venice

Most Reverend John G. Noonan

Diocese of Orlando

Most Reverend Felipe J. Estévez

Diocese of St. Augustine

Most Reverend Gregory L. Parkes

Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

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The Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Florida. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy and serves as liaison to the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. The archbishop and bishops of the seven (arch)dioceses in Florida constitute its board of directors