

FREEDOM: GIFT AND RESPONSIBILITY

“Jesus wants us free, and this freedom - where is it found? It is to be found in the inner dialogue with God in conscience.”

– Pope Francis

FROM BISHOP NOONAN

Religious Freedom in the Public Square - August 1, 2012

‘Never let evil talk pass your lips; say only the good things men need to hear, things that will really help them.

Do nothing that will sadden the Holy Spirit with whom you were sealed against the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice of every kind. In place of these, be kind to one another, compassionate and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you in Christ’ Eph 4:29-32

Dear People of God:

I have chosen these words to greet you; you, the people of God. What does it mean to be a person of God in our world today? Do we greet each other as anointed? Do we celebrate the breadth of God’s love among us? Have we brought about a communion of persons through Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in our daily living?

St. Paul’s words to the Ephesians seem especially appropriate to me during this difficult time in our country. Recently, some of you questioned the Catholic Church’s advocacy on behalf of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. I’ve received letters from you expressing difficulty because bishops throughout the country and I asked you to pray during the Fortnight for Freedom. You have written to me because your pastors have spoken openly about the beautiful gift of life from conception to death. You have questioned the use of the church, during Mass, as a forum for topics of the “public square.”

My dear people, let us remember again who we are. We are the people of God. God’s “public” square is found within the sanctity of the celebration of Mass. It is found within the walls of our churches and schools, and workplaces and homes. God’s public square is not put aside in certain times or places. From our baptism, we are called to make God’s presence known in all ways in all places at all times. God’s public square is our world.

What is this religious freedom for which we ask you to pray? It is the freedom, which we receive through the passion, death and resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is not the tangible freedom of this world. It is the freedom born through Christ’s suffering and ultimate forgiveness. We pray that we are able to bring the sacred to this secular world. Soon, you will be learning more about Amendments 6 and 8, two amendments, which will only be on the Florida ballot

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in November. Government has long recognized parents' natural rights regarding their children's education, health, and well-being. Particularly with a life-changing medical procedure such as abortion, the right of parents to protect their child's welfare must be restored. To restore this right, the 2011 Florida legislature proposed constitutional Amendment 6, which opens the door to future legislation requiring parental consent for minors seeking an abortion, and would also prohibit the use of taxpayer dollars to fund abortions. I ask you to vote yes on Amendment 6.

I also ask you to vote yes on Amendment 8. By eliminating a clause placed long ago in our state's constitution that discriminates against religious institutions, Amendment 8 preserves time-honored public-private partnerships between government and social service organizations. It also ensures continued delivery of crucial social services by faith-based organizations, such as the Catholic Church.

May we speak and act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom.

Fortnight for Freedom - June, 2012

Bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God. - (2 Timothy 1:8)

My Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our world is one filled with false gods. We live in the midst of this sinfulness and we are called to proclaim the Gospel through the thick of it, boldly and fearlessly. In order to proclaim the Gospel well, we must first know what we believe and live our faith to the best of our ability.

We believe that Jesus Christ, as it is written in Scripture, is the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments. We believe that we are called to love one another as He loves us. We believe the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ. We believe that in our communion with the Eucharist, we become one Body in Christ. And, we believe in God, the creator of all life, and because of this, life is sacred from conception to natural death. Mary, the mother of Jesus, in her yes to become the temple for the Son of God, showed us the sacredness of life when she accepted the Gift of Jesus. Christ came not so that life would be taken away but so that life would be restored through, with and in God. As one Body in Christ, we believe that we are not only responsible for ourselves individually, but we are also responsible for the faith of each other and we tend to this faith through our participation in the life of the Church.

Our faith is not a private matter. The Church plays a role in the promotion and attainment of justice and protection of the common good. We are called to be steadfast witnesses to the love of Christ even in the face of controversy and great debate.

In the last few years, we have seen our ability to practice our faith slowly erode and compromise the ministries of charity and service in our Church. The Health and Human Services (HHS) Mandate is an example of this. The health mandate does have a great effect upon us. Our faith requires us to bear responsibility for one another. If we believe that all life is sacred from the moment of conception to death, then providing for health care coverage is

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important. But mandating health care coverage which does not uphold the teachings of life and goes against what we believe is unacceptable. Requiring Catholic hospitals, universities, and institutions which do uphold these teachings of life must now provide drugs to assist with the destruction of life also diminishes our ability to practice our faith. The payment of our insurance premiums will also subsidize abortion inducing drugs, even though we do not believe in this culture of death.

The first amendment of the Bill of Rights says: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In its current form, the HHS Mandate prohibits the exercise of our faith. That is why we say this is an issue of religious freedom.

For generations, Catholic hospitals, schools, and charities provided services as the hands and heart of Christ in our communities. If the HHS Mandate is not reversed, the Gospel message of life would be at great risk. It saddens me that these institutions, the breath of our faith, may expire.

In response to these direct affronts to our right to practice our faith, I and bishops throughout the United States ask you to participate in a **Fortnight for Freedom**, **fourteen** days dedicated to prayer, penance, and rededication to our Lord, Jesus Christ, beginning on June 21 and ending on July 4, the celebration of Independence Day in the United States. During this time, we are called to pray that the practice of our beliefs; of our faith will be preserved for generations to come.

Let us be heralds of the Gospel. Let us be a people of prayer. Let us pray that these issues will be resolved in the Lord’s name. Let us shine forth the Light of Christ to one other. Let us join with each other to write our legislators consistently about the regrettable consequences of the HHS mandate. Let us pray what we live and live what we pray.

Religious Freedom at Risk - February, 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I write to you concerning an alarming and serious matter that negatively impacts the Church in the United States directly, and that strikes at the fundamental right to religious liberty for all citizens of any faith. The federal government, which claims to be “of, by, and for the people,” has just dealt a heavy blow to almost a quarter of those people—the Catholic population—and to the millions more who are served by the Catholic faithful.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced last week that almost all employers, including Catholic employers, will be forced to offer their employees’ health coverage that includes sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception. Almost all health insurers will be forced to include those “services” in the health policies they write. And almost all individuals will be forced to buy that coverage as a part of their policies.

In so ruling, the Administration has cast aside the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, denying to

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Catholics our Nation's first and most fundamental freedom, that of religious liberty. And as a result, unless the rule is overturned, we Catholics will be compelled either to violate our consciences, or to drop health coverage for our employees (and suffer the penalties for doing so). The Administration's sole concession was to give our institutions one year to comply.

We cannot—we will not—comply with this unjust law. People of faith cannot be made second class citizens. We are already joined by our brothers and sisters of all faiths and many others of good will in this important effort to regain our religious freedom. Our parents and grandparents did not come to these shores to help build America's cities and towns, its infrastructure and institutions, its enterprise and culture, only to have their posterity stripped of their God given rights. In generations past, the Church has always been able to count on the faithful to stand up and protect her sacred rights and duties. I hope and trust she can count on this generation of Catholics to do the same. Our children and grandchildren deserve nothing less.

And therefore, I would ask of you two things. First, as a community of faith we must commit ourselves to prayer and fasting that wisdom and justice may prevail, and religious liberty may be restored. Without God, we can do nothing; with God, nothing is impossible. Second, I would also recommend visiting <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/conscience-protection/index.cfm>, to learn more about this severe assault on religious liberty, and how to contact Congress in support of legislation that would reverse the Administration's decision.