

After the Fortnight

By Archbishop William E. Lori

I am deeply grateful to all who made the opening Mass for the Fortnight for Freedom at the Basilica of the Assumption so beautiful – the many people who attended, the spirit of gratitude for our God-given freedoms that was so evident, coupled with a genuine love of country and concern for the common good. Dioceses all around the United States scheduled many Fortnight activities including Masses, prayer services, rallies, talks, discussion groups and the like. The closing Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington also drew an overflow crowd and Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia preached a magnificent homily. It was clear that determination to defend religious freedom had grown during that 14-day period.

Now the Fortnight for Freedom has come and gone. In the meantime, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld in large measure the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act. Summer vacations are under way. And so we may be left wondering, “What’s next?”

Let’s begin with a quick clarification. Whatever turn the national debate about health care takes, we need to be clear that the Supreme Court did not answer the First Amendment questions which churches, church-related organizations and businesses have raised, namely, “Can the federal government force religious organizations to fund and/or facilitate in their employee health care plans medical services which are against church teachings?” The 12 lawsuits representing 43 Catholic organizations – dioceses, Catholic charities, Notre Dame University, Our Sunday Visitor, etc. – are still very much in play. Further, there is renewed interest on Capitol Hill in arriving at a legislative fix so that churches, church-related organizations and conscientious employers will continue to have the same First Amendment protections they have enjoyed under federal law until now.

Second, we are fast approaching the Aug. 1 deadline when conscientious employers

will have to comply with the onerous HHS mandate (churches, by the way, have been given a year before having to violate their teachings to be in compliance with federal law). A private employer who wishes to run his or her enterprise according to Christian precepts has been free to do so until now – but after Aug. 1 that won't be the case. Such employers will be forced to violate their convictions by funding or facilitating pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures they find morally objectionable. This is also true for private companies which were founded to serve the mission of the church but which are not themselves religious organizations, such as Catholic publishing houses. The Becket Fund and other groups are providing legal assistance to such employers and a number of them are included in the 12 lawsuits I mentioned earlier. Such employers will need to review this whole question from a moral and legal standpoint.

Third, the religious liberty texting campaign has begun in earnest. This is an easy way to receive updates on your mobile device about fast-moving developments related not just to the HHS mandate but to the many challenges to religious freedom at the local, state and federal level. These text messages are not alarmist, unreasonable or any way partisan. They are informative and help all of us as believers and citizens to participate fully in a very important national debate. Simply text the word “Freedom” to 377377 to begin receiving these updates.

Fourth, I think we all recognize that we have a lot of work to do. As our culture becomes more secular, less room is made for God and the things of God. When people drift from the active practice of religious faith, they perceive less clearly its importance for the overall good of society and are apt to miss the connection between what a church teaches and the good it does, not only for its own members but for society. As a result, religious liberty is in danger of being devalued and indeed trumped by so-called “rights” which have no textual basis in our nation's founding documents. This is where the New Evangelization and religious freedom intersect; The more we practice the faith robustly and fill our churches on Sunday with families and individuals who are truly opening their minds and hearts to the living presence of Christ in their midst – the more religious liberty will flourish in our society.

And this brings us to the ultimate reason why we are defending religious liberty. We

are seeking to protect religious liberty not for partisan political purposes as some have cynically suggested but rather because we want to use our God-given freedom to pursue a deeper freedom – the true freedom of the sons and daughters of God. This is not mere freedom of choice but freedom to choose what is good, indeed what is excellent. And nothing is more excellent than freely welcoming the Holy Spirit who pours the love of God into our hearts so that we might be the living images of Christ, and specifically the Christ of the Beatitudes. The freedom to become those persons that God wants us to become: that is why we are defending religious freedom.

It is true that many saints have attained true and authentic freedom in the midst of persecution and repression. It is also true that many have lost their authentic freedom while enjoying their civil liberties – but it doesn't have to be that way. Let us show our gratitude for the God-given gift of freedom by embracing our faith wholeheartedly and living it robustly. Then we will enjoy a peace and a freedom which no earthly power can deny us. Then we will also be best equipped to defend those God-given liberties guaranteed by the First Amendment.

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