

Archbishop calls Fortnight a success at closing Mass

By Maria Wiering

mwiering@CatholicReview.org

Twitter: @ReviewWiering

The Fortnight for Freedom came to a close with a July 4 Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

The two-hour liturgy was the finale to 14 days dedicated to prayer, education and public action for preserving religious liberty in America, and drew an estimated 5,000 people to the basilica.

Celebrant Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl noted the “immense turnout” in his opening remarks, and said Catholics attended in large numbers “to simply bear witness to the blessings we’ve received from God and to celebrate our freedom.”

At the beginning of Mass, apostolic nuncio Archbishop Carlo Vigano presented a message from Pope Benedict XVI stating his “spiritual closeness” to those attending the Mass.

Calling the Fortnight a “symphony of prayer,” the message said “the Holy Father expresses his hope that the faithful will be strengthened in their religious and patriotic commitment ... to the most cherished of American freedoms, freedom of religion.”

Four other bishops concelebrated the Mass, including Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore. Also concelebrating were Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia; Bishop Richard B. Higgins of the Archdiocese for the Military Services; Bishop Barry Knestout, auxiliary bishop of Washington; and about 170 priests.

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia gave the homily, focusing on the familiar gospel reading from Matthew in which Jesus told the Pharisees – who were trying to “entrap him in speech” on a question of taxes – to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to give to God what belongs to God.

“The point of today’s gospel passage is not how we might calculate a fair division of goods between Caesar and God,” he said. “In reality, it all belongs to God and nothing – at least nothing permanent and important – belongs to Caesar.”

In the gospel, Jesus draws the Pharisees’ attention to the image of Caesar on the coins as the mark of to whom they belonged. As the coins bore Caesar’s image, men and women bear God’s image, as described in Genesis, Archbishop Chaput said.

"Once we understand this, the impact of Christ's response to his political enemies becomes clear," he said. "He's making a claim on every human being."

Archbishop Chaput said that religious liberty, while at the core of Fortnight events, is not an "end in itself."

"In the end, we defend religious liberty in order to live the deeper freedom that is discipleship in Jesus Christ. What good is religious freedom, consecrated in the law, if we don't then use that freedom to seek God with our whole mind, our whole strength and our whole soul, and all that we are," he said.

In upcoming years, American Christians will continue to face serious challenges to religious freedom, which is why the Fortnight was important, Archbishop Chaput said.

"And yet, the political and legal effort to defend religious liberty - as vital as it is - belongs to a much greater struggle to master and convert our own hearts, and to live for God completely, without alibis or self-delusion," he said.

Attendees gave Archbishop Chaput a standing ovation, as they did Archbishop Lori of Baltimore, who gave closing comments.

In his remarks, Archbishop Lori responded to "opinion leaders" who say there is no true threat to religious liberty in America by pointing to the Observatory on Religious Liberty—recently established in Rome by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs—which has chosen America's situation as its first case study, he said.

"If religious liberty can be threatened in America, they say, it could happen to them," said Archbishop Lori, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty. He addressed the organization during its first meeting last week while in Rome to receive the pallium.

"Now the rest of the world has begun to look under the curtain to see what we have all begun to recognize as a dangerous train headed down a track toward no good ending," he said.

He called the Fortnight "a success," based on the large turnout for the Mass and the observations from other bishops.

"Each of us now has a responsibility to do our part to defend religious liberty for ourselves, for our children and their children, for our church and for other churches, for people of faith and of no faith at all, and for love of our nation," he said.

He urged Catholics to join the U.S. bishops' religious freedom awareness campaign by texting "Freedom" to 377377 to receive updates.

Earlier in the Mass, Cardinal Wuerl commended Archbishop Lori's leadership throughout the Fortnight.

"I know of no one who has worked as hard, who has worked as long, or has worked as effectively on behalf of the Fortnight for Freedom as Archbishop Lori," he said.

The Mass included a prayer penned by Archbishop John Carroll, the first American bishop and first archbishop of Baltimore, that asked for God's guidance for the president, Congress, judges, elected officials and American citizens.

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