

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Fortnight for Freedom 2017 Opening Mass

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Basilica of the Assumption

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The future must have seemed bright to Thomas More and John Fisher: The first, Sir Thomas More, was Chancellor of King Henry VIII. He enjoyed a widespread reputation for integrity and wisdom. In learning, in virtue, piety, and penance he was luminous. These qualities were reflected not only in his career but also in his household. Erasmus of Rotterdam, a famous humanist scholar and a keen observer of humanity, described More's household thusly: "More had built for himself...a country house that is dignified and adequate without being so magnificent as to excite envy. Here he lives happily with his family... It would be difficult to find a man fonder of his children than he...." Describing the formation More & his wife provided their children, Erasmus said this: "You would say that Plato's Academy had come to life again. But I wrong More's home in comparing it to Plato's Academy, for in the latter, the chief subjects of discussion were arithmetic and geometry and occasionally ethics, but the former rather deserved the name of a school for the knowledge and practice of the Christian faith." [1]

The second figure was John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester. At 14 he was enrolled in Cambridge, at 22 ordained to the priesthood, at 35 years of age, he was appointed and ordained a bishop. Gentle and gifted by nature, Fisher not only excelled at Cambridge; he also contributed decisively to the excellence of Cambridge itself, [2] and, to no one's surprise, was appointed its Chancellor. Like More, Bishop John Fisher lived a life of penance and self-denial, all the while devoting himself entirely to the pastoral mission of his diocese. If More conducted his household with Christian learning and joy, Fisher conducted the household of the faith with holiness, learning, and diligence.

In the meantime, the future of the Catholic Church in England was relatively bright. [3] It seemed to have been spared the painful divisions that racked the

Catholic Church on the Continent of Europe in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. King Henry VIII was declared a defender of the faith and ordinary Catholics showed their love and loyalty to the Church. Monastic life and learning were flourishing – yes, the future seemed bright indeed for More, for Fisher, and for the Catholic Church in England.

Who could have imagined the severe test More, Fisher, and English Catholicism would face in so short a time? Frustrated that his wife, Catherine of Aragon, did not produce an heir to throne, Henry VIII sought a dispensation from Pope Clement VII so that he could divorce Catherine and marry a member of the nobility, Anne Boleyn. When the Pope refused to do so, Henry VIII separated himself and indeed the Catholic Church in England, from communion with the Pope and the Universal Church. Not content with that, however, Henry VIII also demanded that prominent subjects, men such as More and Fisher, take an oath declaring their acceptance of his supremacy in religious matters in England—no matter what they really thought. Henry's attempt to control consciences and to seize control of the Church prefigured modern totalitarian regimes that would crush conscience rights and religious liberty.[4] When More and Fisher refused to take the oath, their fortunes changed drastically. Brutally martyred in 1535, they participated in the sufferings of Christ in a way that would have seemed virtually impossible only a short time before.

Thinking of their lives and their example, the words of St. Peter echo in our hearts: "...rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ...."

More and Fisher did indeed participate in the sufferings of Christ, and in the process, contributed to Christ's mission in the world in ways they could not have imagined. Sir Thomas More a lone voice in Westminster Hall defending the Church and defending for all time the rights of conscience. Cardinal John Fisher, the sole bishop in England who declined to take the oath, a bishop who spoke out for the rights of the Church and its God-given mission. Both, in quick succession, would die a martyr's death, and like all martyrs they advanced the saving mission of Christ in the world. More, a witness to the integrity of conscience and human dignity; Fisher, a model of fidelity for bishops and all those in service of the Church.

Their painful execution, meant to shame them and discredit them, in fact revealed a

sovereign freedom no executioner could touch, a freedom granted, not by any earthly authority, but by God. In freedom they embraced the Gospel, opened their hearts to Christ, and followed him with quiet and dignified determination. I'll never forget holding in my hand the prayer book of St. Thomas More and looking at the notations written in his own hand in the margins. In that moment it dawned on me that More was free because he was holy. It was in *the holiness of freedom* and *in freedom for holiness* that St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher fulfilled their mission of bearing witness to Christ in their time, their place, their circumstances. And, dear friends, we've gathered in prayer tonight asking to acquire in the power of the Holy Spirit, a greater measure of holiness, so that we too can use our freedom, not for ourselves and our own desires, but rather for Christ and the mission of spreading the Gospel far and wide.

In far too many parts of the world, the Church's mission is conducted amid raging persecution. A 2016 report from the University of Notre Dame, entitled, *Under Caesar's Sword*,^[5] chronicles the persecution of Christians in twenty-five countries around the world. Recent Pew Foundation studies have found that nearly one-third of the countries of the world have high restrictions on religion. It found that the majority of humanity lives in countries in which religious restrictions - whether imposed by government or social groups - reach high levels of severity.

The reality behind such statistics is brought home to us in the fate of Christians and other religious minorities - including some Muslims - who suffer for their faith. We think of Chaldean Christians beheaded in Iraq simply for professing their faith; or in the plight of the Coptic Christians killed while praying in church on Palm Sunday and ambushed while on pilgrimage to a monastery. Many fellow Christians and other religious minorities struggle just to survive; some band together with others to secure their rights and safety; but a few confront their persecutors; most respond to their suffering non-violently, right out of the pages of the Gospel, sharing as they do in the suffering of Christ. Even as their numbers dwindle, these fearless believers display a spirit of holiness, courage, and mission like that of More and Fisher.

But what could be said of Western style democracies such as ours? Do we not live in relative freedom, peace, and security? For all our challenges, is not our future as believers bright? Are we not members of a Church that in many ways remains

robust? Are not the challenges to religious freedom minimal compared to the suffering of refugees and modern-day martyrs? Should we not simply go about our mission of mercy with serenity, making whatever compromises are needed to ensure its continuance? To be sure, we Christians in the West do not experience severe repression but in recent years we have seen “serious curtailments of [our] religious freedom, particularly with respect to [our] convictions about sexuality, marriage, and the sanctity of life”.[6] The Notre Dame report, *Caesar’s Sword* tells us that between 2007 and 2013, “... restrictions on religion increased in 37 out of 43 European countries, as well as in Canada and the United States, while social hostilities increased in 38 out of 43 countries.”[7]

Pope Francis, reading the signs of the times, observes the burdens that have been placed by Western governments “on universities, schools, hospitals, charities, students, public officials, employees, and citizens who have been fired, fined, threatened with a denial of accreditation, evicted from campuses, and otherwise barred from living out their convictions.”[8] Pope Francis terms these trends in the West “polite persecution” indicating kinship, solidarity with those suffering overt persecution round the world. For that reason, Christians and other believers in the United States have engaged in political advocacy, litigation, lobbying for good laws and conscience exemptions; we have formed committees and made new associations; and, most of all, we have studied, taught, and prayed –this Fortnight for Freedom being one vehicle for doing all of the above.

Not unlike More and Fisher, we find ourselves in a new situation undreamt of only a short time ago. And while no one as yet has paid the ultimate price, we must not fail to recognize that, in many quarters, religious freedom no longer is understood as a fundamental human right taking precedence over others. At best it is deemed “a social luxury” or “a matter of political charity.”[9] and at worst a mask for intolerance and bigotry. In the meanwhile, human dignity itself hangs in the balance.

This movement against religious freedom does not depend entirely on what political party happens to be in office at any given moment. Rather, it is weaving itself into the fabric of our culture, leaving little or no room for those who would dissent. And while in no sense can our government be called “totalitarian” let us not miss the advance of “the dictatorship of relativism” that ultimately will not countenance

religious teachings and conscience demands that run counter to the prevailing culture.

How can we live out our mission to preach the Gospel and serve the poor? Some say we should withdraw from the fray and sometimes we do need time and space for spiritual renewal. In the end, however, should we not follow St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher by developing in our hearts the holiness of freedom and freedom for holiness -an irrepressible spirit of freedom, courage, and mission that no earthly power can take away from us. Then we shall truly be free. Then we shall be true missionary disciples!

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!

[1] Cf. Fr. Charles P. Connor, *Defenders of the Faith in Word and Deed*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003, p. 75.

[2] *Ibid*, pp. 87-88.

[3] Cardinal Donald Wuerl, *To the Martyrs, Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road*, 2015, pp. 69-70.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[5] *In Response to Persecution: Findings of the Under Caesar's Sword Project on Global Christian Communities*, University of Notre Dame, 2016, p. 32 ff.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Timothy Samuel Shah, et al., *Religious Freedom: Why Now? Defending an Embattled Human Right*, Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2012, p. 4.