

Baltimore archbishop calls defense of religious liberty an ‘American issue’

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Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore said that the U.S. bishops’ efforts to push back against the “erosion of religious liberty” is an American response, not a partisan battle.

“We didn’t choose the time. We didn’t choose the place. We’re not trying to throw an election. We are simply trying to defend fundamental freedoms,” he said. “It’s not a Democratic or Republican issue, not a Catholic issue, but an American issue.”

Archbishop Lori chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty. He gave his remarks June 6 on a conference call with Catholic communications professionals from across the United States.

Across the country, dioceses are preparing for the Fortnight for Freedom, 14 days dedicated to prayer, education and public action on religious liberty issues. The U.S. bishops called for the Fortnight in the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty’s March 2012 statement, “Our First, Most Cherished Liberty.” National and diocesan events are planned for the Fortnight, which begins with a Mass in Baltimore June 21 and ends July 4.

At the forefront of the U.S. bishops’ religious liberty concerns is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ mandate that all employers, including

most Catholic employers, provide insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs, which violate church teaching.

The U.S. bishops are not trying to expand the liberties enjoyed by the Catholic Church in the United States, but rather to preserve those liberties “for the sake of the mission,” Archbishop Lori said. The church is also defending the rights of “conscientious individuals” who want their personal and professional lives to comport with their personal convictions, he said.

“The Health and Human Services (department) is intruding on the church’s territory by forcing the church to fund and/or facilitate a product contrary to its teaching,” Archbishop Lori said. “Whether or not one agrees with particular church teachings, this intrusion violates a principle and creates a slippery slope. If we can be forced to violate teaching ‘A’ today, we can be forced to violate teaching ‘B’ or ‘C’ tomorrow. That’s why we are drawing the line now, whether or not our teaching is culturally popular.”

Last month, 43 Catholic entities filed 12 lawsuits against the federal government over the HHS mandate. Neither the Archdiocese of Baltimore nor any Catholic organizations in the archdiocese are among the lawsuits’ plaintiffs.

“We did it now because we felt these issues had ripened sufficiently,” Archbishop Lori said, making clear that by “we” he was speaking of the collective Catholic institutions, not the U.S. bishops. “We did it now to get our issue out there in the legal system before the HHS mandate kicks into gear, and for many of our institutions, that will be happening in August, barring unforeseen developments.”

Archbishop Lori pointed to places around the world like Syria and Sudan where people have been killed for their faith, calling them “modern-day martyrs.”

“We’re not at home crying in our beer just for ourselves,” Archbishop Lori said. “We are engaged in the domestic struggle because we believe that we have to keep the torch or flame burning brightly at home, so to be a beacon of hope for oppressed people around the world.”

Archbishop Lori plans to update the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on religious

liberty efforts at their annual Spring General Assembly June 13-15 in Atlanta.

The U.S. bishops are working with all three branches of the federal government to overturn the HHS mandate. However, the overturn of the HHS mandate would not alleviate the bishops' overarching concern, Archbishop Lori said.

"Religious liberty is not a short-term struggle," he said. "The larger cultural issue of defending and preserving religious liberty and the place of religion in our culture is something we'll have to engage in for many years to come."

The Fortnight includes the June 22 feast day of Sts. John Fisher and Thomas More, who were martyred in 1535 for their refusal to reject their Catholic faith at the behest of King Henry VIII. Archbishop Lori said the U.S. bishops are not afraid to take a similar stand.

"At the end of the day, if we have to make a choice between violating our faith to get along, or holding up our faith and not get along, I think our choice will be pretty clear," he said. "Who knows what the consequence will be, or what form it will take, but I think it's something that all of us have to think about and pray about."

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