

Catholics at Fortnight for Freedom Mass hoped to show solidarity

By Maria Wiering

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Dr. Marie-Alberte Boursiquot sat in the front pew for the Fortnight for Freedom's opening Mass June 21 wearing her white doctor's jacket. As board member of the Catholic Medical Association and president of the association's Baltimore Guild, she encouraged her colleagues to wear their white jackets to the Mass as a sign of their support for the U.S. bishops' efforts to preserve religious freedom.

Several other doctors sat with her for the Mass, which was held at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Mass began 14 days of prayer, education and public action dedicated to preserving religious liberty, which will culminate July 4 with a closing Mass in Washington, D.C., and the ringing of church bells nationwide.

The U.S. bishops called for the Fortnight to respond to what they call "religious liberty under attack," including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' mandate that employers, including most religious employers, provide insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs, which church teaching calls "morally objectionable."

Boursiquot appreciates the leadership role Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, who was the Mass' principal celebrant, has taken in the U.S. bishops' efforts to preserve religious liberty. Archbishop Lori is the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty.

"I think that the day is approaching when physicians of good conscience who take our ethical obligations and Hippocratic Oath seriously will be forced to violate our consciences and participate in these practices or violate the profession altogether,

so this is a very difficult time,” she said.

She hopes the Fortnight helps Catholics fight complacency and become more vigilant in protecting religious freedom.

“I think any project or any campaign that begins or is founded on prayer can only bring about good results, because prayer should be the basis of everything we do,” she said.

Mark Marozza, the basilica’s sacristan, estimated that more than 1,000 people attended the Mass, filling the church’s choir lofts and standing throughout the nave. It was the largest crowd he had ever seen at the basilica, he said. Many of those who attended were from Maryland and Washington, D.C., but Catholics from nearby states such as Pennsylvania also traveled to Baltimore for the Mass.

Phil and Danielle Turner and their two young children arrived just before the Mass began.

“It’s important to bring our kids here at a young age to show them our faith in action, and to let people know that we’re going to stand up for our faith and our traditions,” said Phil Turner, whose family attends St. Philip Neri in Linthicum.

Danielle Turner said that the HHS mandate concerns her, but said it is not a “contraception issue,” even though she and her husband do not use artificial birth control.

“We’re not telling people they can’t practice contraception, we’re saying you may, but we’re not going to subsidize it on our health care plans, which is (the employers’) right,” she said.

She hopes the Fortnight encourages people who feel “lukewarm” about discussing religious freedom issues to express their support for the Catholic Church, she added.

Estella Chavez, an immigrant from Cuba who now serves as one of Archbishop Lori’s administrative assistants, said it’s important to take a stand against the HHS mandate.

"It's not only an attack on religious freedom," she said, "it's an attack on freedom, period."

She noted that Catholics should educate themselves on the issue.

"Start reading about the candidates (for political office), their positions and vote your conscience," she said.

Zachary Moko, a parishioner of St. Joseph, Cockeysville, said he attended the Mass to be in solidarity with those who oppose assaults on religious freedom.

"I don't expect us to be forced to pay for activities that are against our faith, such as abortions or contraception or other things in that line of activity," he said. "I'm completely against it."

Anthony Armstrong, a parishioner of the basilica, said he attended the Mass to "ensure" that his city, state and nation see how important religious freedom is to Catholics.

"People of faith throughout the country have been awakened to things that are so fundamental to our freedom as a nation as Catholics," he said, adding that he hopes the entire Fortnight is "as vigorous as we've seen tonight."

Sue Saumenig, a parishioner of St. Michael the Archangel, Overlea, was concerned about the administration's narrow definition of what constitutes church.

"The Catholic Church is much more than just Catholics meeting each week (at Mass)," Saumenig said. "We have all kinds of social programs - we run hospitals, we run schools and we run other (outreach ministries)."

Several representatives from religious communities also attended the Mass, including Sister Philip Joseph Davis, a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecelia, who staff Mount De Sales Academy in Catonsville.

"We all have to be together in this," she said. "Everyone has to stay focused on what we're about, and what our Catholic faith means, not just to us personally, but what it means to society, what it means to the total church at large."

She hopes Catholics will make “small sacrifices” throughout the Fortnight as an offering to God of thanksgiving for religious freedom, said.

The Knights of Columbus were also well represented, including members of the fraternal society’s Color Corps, who participated in the Mass’ procession. Mike Conlon, a member of the Maryland State Council and the State Catholic Scouting Liaison, said as a fourth-degree Knight, his rank focuses on patriotism.

The freedom of religion is the first right listed in the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. Conlon wants government decisions affecting religious freedom to be made “in light of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights,” he said.

George P. Matysek Jr. contributed to this story.

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