

Faith and the Full Promise of America: A Statement from Archbishop William E Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the USCCB's Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty

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For the current Chairman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, religious liberty is reduced to “nothing except hypocrisy,” and religion is being used as a “weapon... by those seeking to deny others equality.” He makes the shocking suggestion that Catholic, evangelical, orthodox Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim communities are comparable to fringe segregationists from the civil rights era. These statements painting those who support religious freedom with the broad brush of bigotry are reckless and reveal a profound disregard for the religious foundations of his own work.

People of faith have often been the ones to carry the full promise of America to the most forgotten peripheries when other segments of society judged it too costly. Men and women of faith were many in number during the most powerful marches of the civil rights era. Can we imagine the civil rights movement without Rev. Martin Luther King, Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel? In places like St. Louis, Catholic schools were integrated seven years before the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Jesus taught us to serve and not to count the cost.

Our record is not perfect. We could have always done more. Nevertheless, we have long taught that the one God, maker of heaven and earth, calls each and every

individual into being, loves every individual, and commands believers to love and show mercy to every individual. The idea of equality, which the Chairman treats as a kind of talisman, is incomprehensible apart from the very faith that he seeks to cut off from mainstream society.

Today, Catholic priests, religious and laity can be found walking the neighborhood streets of our most struggling communities in places abandoned by a “throwaway culture” that has too often determined that quick profits matter more than communities. We are there offering education, health care, social services, and hope, working to serve as the “field hospital” Pope Francis has called us to be. We wish we were there in even greater numbers, but we are there to humbly offer the full promise of America to all. Rest assured, if people of faith continue to be marginalized, it is the poor and vulnerable, not the Chairman and his friends, who will suffer.

Catholic social service workers, volunteers and pastors don’t count the cost in financial terms or even in personal safety. But, we must count the cost to our own faith and morality. We do not seek to impose our morality on anyone, but neither can we sacrifice it in our own lives and work. The vast majority of those who speak up for religious liberty are merely asking for the freedom to serve others as our faith asks of us. We ask that the work of our institutions be carried out by people who believe in our mission and respect a Christian witness. This is no different from a tobacco control organization not wishing to hire an advocate for smoking or a civil rights organization not wanting to hire someone with a history of racism or an animal rights group wishing to hire only vegetarians.

In a pluralistic society, there will be institutions with views at odds with popular opinion. The Chairman’s statement suggests that the USCCR does not see the United States as a pluralistic society. We respect those who disagree with what we teach. Can they respect us? We advocate for the dignity of all persons, a dignity that includes a life free from violence and persecution and that includes fair access to good jobs and safe housing. People of faith are a source of American strength. An inclusive and religiously diverse society should make room for them.