

Fortnight for Freedom

By Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien

Last week, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a call to action to defend religious liberty and urged the lay faithful to work to protect this First Freedom of the Bill of Rights (see article on Page A3).

In “Our First, Most Cherished Freedom,” the bishops state: “We have been staunch defenders of religious liberty in the past. We have a solemn duty to discharge that duty today ... for religious liberty is under attack, both at home and abroad.”

It is easy to lose sight of some of these attacks. Included among them are:

- The Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate forcing all employers, including religious organizations, to provide and pay for coverage of employees’ contraception, sterilization, and abortion-inducing drugs even when they have moral objections to them. This would be bad enough, but the government also dares to try and define which religious institutions are “religious enough” to merit protection of their religious liberty.
- Driving Catholic foster care and adoption services out of business. The cities of Boston, San Francisco, the District of Columbia and the state of Illinois have driven local Catholic Charities adoption or foster care services out of business by revoking their licenses, by ending their government contracts, or both – because they refused to place children with same-sex couples or unmarried opposite-sex couples who cohabit.
- Discrimination against Catholic humanitarian services. Despite years of excellent performance by the USCCB’s Migration and Refugee Services in administering contract services for victims of human trafficking, the federal government changed its contract specifications to require the U.S. Bishops to provide or refer for contraceptive and abortion services in violation of Catholic teaching. Religious institutions should not be disqualified from a government contract based on religious belief, and they do not lose their religious identity or liberty upon entering such contracts. Recently a federal court judge in Massachusetts turned religious liberty

on its head when he declared that such a disqualification is required by the First Amendment – that the government violates religious liberty by allowing Catholic organizations to participate in contracts in a manner consistent with their beliefs on contraception and abortion.

We are fighting a similar battle here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, where Baltimore City passed an ordinance forcing pro-life pregnancy centers to post signs stating they don't provide or refer for abortions or contraceptive services. Meanwhile, no such mandated speech is required of abortion clinics. A lower court ruled the ordinance unconstitutional. Baltimore City appealed that ruling.

The bishops' statement lists other examples, such as laws punishing charity to undocumented immigrants; a proposal to restructure Catholic parish corporations to limit the bishop's role; and a state university's excluding a religious student group because it limits leadership positions to those who share the group's religion.

"Religious liberty is not only about our ability to go to Mass on Sunday or pray the Rosary at home," the statement says. "It is about whether we can make our contribution to the common good of all Americans. Can we do the good works our faith calls us to do, without having to compromise that very same faith?"

Though the frequency and extent of these threats are troubling, such incursions are not new. Yet just because they are familiar does not mean we can become passive and assume no harm will come from them. In fact, the increasing secularization of our society so evident today increases with every battle that goes unfought.

Our own Cardinal James Gibbons certainly didn't pass on his responsibility to fight to protect this First Freedom. In 1887 in perhaps the most significant and celebrated statement on religious liberty and Church-state relations by any American prelate, the Cardinal said as he took possession of his titular church in Rome, "I say, with a deep sense of pride and gratitude, that I belong to a country where the civil government holds over us the aegis of its protection, without interfering with us in the legitimate exercise of our sublime mission as ministers of the Gospel of Christ."

And our current Church leaders, including Cardinal Timothy Dolan and our own Archbishop William Lori, are poised to lead us as we seek to engage our people in

this important effort once more.

“What we ask,” our bishops state, “is nothing more than our God-given right to religious liberty be expected. We ask nothing less than that the Constitution and laws of the United States, which recognize that right, be respected.”

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