

# Fortnight for Freedom

**By Archbishop William E. Lori**

By now you have likely heard about the Fortnight for Freedom. Maybe you have seen a sign or poster advertising it. Perhaps you have seen references to it online. It is an idea whose hour has come. Religious freedom as protected by the First Amendment is at risk.

It is most palpably jeopardized by the Health and Human Services mandate, whereby, for the first time, the federal government would force churches to fund and facilitate so-called “services” in its employee health care plans that violate the teachings of those churches. And not only would churches be forced to fund abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization and contraception in violation of their teachings, they would also be forced to counsel employees on the advisability of using them. Similarly, the mandate will require employees of church organizations to have these things in their insurance plans whether they want them or not.

But the HHS mandate endangers religious freedom in another way. In order to be exempt from the mandate, a religious body has to prove to the federal government that it is “religious enough.” It has to prove that it hires only its own members, serves only its own members, and exists solely to inculcate its own teaching. If a church organization steps out of these narrow confines, it no longer qualifies. That is to say, if a church organization seeks to serve the needs of others, including those who do not belong to it, it would not be deemed “religious enough” by the federal government to qualify for the exemption and thus be able to follow its own teachings.

Let’s put a human face on this. Consider Blessed Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity reaching out to the poorest of the poor without regard for their religious affiliation. Or Our Daily Bread and inner-city Catholic schools that serve people of all religious backgrounds and none at all. The church seeks to affirm the dignity of those we serve not because they are Catholic but because we are Catholic. The faith we profess, including its moral teachings, impels us to reach out – just as Jesus did – to those in need and to help build a more just and peaceful

society.

Much is being done to turn back the HHS mandate. But even if the mandate were upended, the struggle to preserve religious liberty would not be finished. Major Catholic international relief agencies still face discrimination in competing for contracts because they refuse to violate Catholic teaching. Catholic Charities in various parts of the country are still forced to close down their adoption services because they would not place children with same-sex couples. In secular universities and colleges, religious groups are being de-legitimized and pushed off campus. And all of us are familiar with relentless attempts to remove all references to religion on public lands. Instead of being a land that is tolerant of religious faith, we are becoming quite intolerant.

As our culture becomes more secular and crowds out God and the things of God, there is real danger that secularism will become the established belief system of the land.

The time has come for us to pray for the restoration and preservation of religious freedom in the United States of America and beyond. It is also a time for us to deepen our understanding of what the church teaches on religious freedom and on our heritage of freedom as Americans guaranteed by the First Amendment.

The Fortnight for Freedom has been set for the two-week period culminating with the Fourth of July. Fittingly, the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the nation's first diocese, was chosen as the place where the Fortnight will be launched. On June 21, at 7 p.m., I will offer the opening Mass of the Fortnight for Freedom at the Basilica of the Assumption. Here, in the nation's oldest cathedral, whose cornerstone was laid by Bishop John Carroll in 1806, we shall begin a nationwide period of prayer, study and action, asking the Holy Spirit to strengthen us in the work of keeping the torch of religious freedom burning brightly, not only for ourselves but indeed for those who come after us and for religiously oppressed people the world over who look upon the United States as a land of freedom and opportunity.

Much has been planned for the Fortnight for Freedom all around the archdiocese. I want to thank those parishes that have planned events – prayer services, rosaries, litanies, talks, and much more. I might add that the Mayor of Rome has invited me to

give a talk on religious freedom while I am there to receive the pallium from the Holy Father during the Fortnight.

I warmly invite everyone to the opening Mass for the Fortnight for Freedom, which concludes in Washington, D.C. with a Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on July 4. On that day, we are also encouraging all churches to ring their bells at noon, to ring them loud and clear. United in faith and in love of country, may we let freedom ring!

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