

Fortnight for Freedom, Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Opening Mass

I. Introduction: The Faithful Witness

A. Tonight we celebrate the opening Mass of the 2016 Fortnight for Freedom, returning to this, the first Cathedral in the United States, a Cathedral that was under construction even as “a new nation conceived in liberty” began to take shape. But we are not here tonight to argue a point of constitutional law nor are we here to re-argue what has already been persuasively argued in our courts. No, we are here to honor the martyrs, to celebrate the freedom to bear witness, beginning with Jesus Christ, “the faithful witness” of the Father’s love (Cf. Rev. 1:5), for Christ and his sacrificial love are the very heart of the Eucharist we celebrate.

B. The Lord Jesus bore witness to his Father’s love in many ways. As the Word Incarnate, he proclaimed the Good News. As the Divine Physician, he healed the sick and raised the dead. And at length, when the hour of his own death had come, he was brought before Pilate who asked him, “Are you a king?” (John 18:37) Jesus stood in that tribunal, which represented the authority of Caesar, not a rabble-rouser seeking confrontation with the state but rather as the very personification of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:1-12a) he once proclaimed on the mountainside. He came before Pilate in the sovereign freedom of the Father’s love: poor in spirit with few possessions and no visible means of defense; full of sorrow and anguish for our sins; meek and mild, the Lamb of God, seeking only the Father’s will; a man of singlehearted love who came to bring us the peace of God’s kingdom, and who was now being persecuted for the sake of righteousness. This is the Christ who stood before Pilate: at once meek and invincible. No decision Pilate could render would deter him from his mission. Caesar could not touch the things of God. (Cf. Mark 12:17)

II. Those Who Followed Christ

A. Many others would follow in the footsteps of Jesus, even unto death. There was Stephen, the first martyr, then the Apostles. There were the early Christian martyrs who led lives of deep charity yet found themselves accused by the Roman Empire of “hating humanity”. All these martyrs faced unjust judgment yet responded truthfully and respectfully to their accusers. All of them re-produced in their own flesh the sacrificial death of Christ, the ultimate testimony to the Father’s self-giving love. The relics of two such martyrs are with us tonight: St. Thomas More & St. John Fisher. We are here to honor their memory and to draw from their example and prayers the wisdom we need to become “witnesses to freedom” in our time and place.

B. Thomas More was a lay person, a man of celebrated accomplishment, who served as Councilor to King Henry VIII of England and as Lord High Chancellor. When Henry broke with the Church of Rome over his divorce and remarriage he declared himself the supreme head of the Church in England and demanded that all men under his dominion take an oath acknowledging his supremacy in religious matters...or else face the consequences. For his part, Sir Thomas More sought to withdraw from public life. He did not oppose the king publicly. He did not seek to foment controversy. Yet his well-formed conscience would not allow him to take the oath. Henry, for his part, could not abide either More’s discretion or his refusal and thus he was put on trial. More sought to defend himself, vigorously and cleverly, but also charitably. His letters to his daughter Meg, written during his imprisonment in the Tower of London, reveal the inner beauty of a soul preparing to die for Christ and his Church. On July 6, 1535 he was beheaded.

C. St. John Fisher, on the other hand, was a member of the clergy, to be sure, a learned priest and an acclaimed leader of Cambridge University. He was a preacher of renown and chaplain to the mother of Henry VII. Above all, he had a genuinely pastoral heart deeply concerned about those he served. In 1504 he became Bishop of Rochester, a small and poor diocese, even as many speculated that his clerical career would rapidly advance. His career did indeed advance but not in ways the pundits had predicted. As Henry VIII proceeded with his divorce against Catherine of Aragon, Fisher befriended and counseled her, much to Henry’s displeasure; indeed many compared Henry to Herod and Fisher to John the Baptist! Fisher too

was obliged to take the Oath of Supremacy and he declined, he, alone, among all the bishops of England. Like More he had sought no confrontation but knew he must stand his ground. During his imprisonment in the Tower, a time of great suffering, his gentle priestly soul manifested its serene and sovereign freedom. In consequence, he too was martyred on June 22, 1535. Both Fisher and More died not merely for freedom of conscience in the abstract but for freedom of conscience in defending marriage and the rights of the Church.

III. A Cloud of Witnesses

A. The relics of St. Thomas More & St. John Fisher form, as it were, a lens through which we can appreciate more deeply the sacrifice of that great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:21) who, through the centuries, have testified to Christ at the cost of their lives. We may think that the days of the martyrs have ended but as Pope Francis points out there are more martyrs for the faith in our times than there were during the first centuries of the Church. We remember with reverence and love those who died for their faith – Jews, Catholics, and Protestants – an ecumenism of blood, as Pope Francis says – during the reign of terror that was Nazism and Communism. This night we draw close to the martyrs of the 21st century in Iraq, Iran, Syria and parts of Africa – those slain for their faith – in plain sight of us all with no one to hold their persecutors accountable. Refugees are streaming from the Middle East just as Jews tried to escape from the horrors of Nazism – only to find that they are held suspect and they are un-wanted.

B. And we would like to think “such things could never happen here”. We often describe our nation, the United States, as exceptional, a nation conceived in liberty, a nation that has undergone “a rebirth of freedom” – how could such atrocities ever happen on these shores, in this great land? Yet, there are ominous signs that protections for religious freedom have waned as bad laws, court decisions, and policies pile up and as the prevailing culture more readily turns away from religious faith. Let us be clear that challenges to religious freedom in our nation pale in comparison to those faced by our brothers and sisters in many parts of the world – yet who is served when we fail to take seriously the new and emerging challenges to religious freedom that are before us? Surely not those who remain strong in their witness in the face of violence and death!

C. There is, of course, the HHS mandate which seeks to force religious employers to provide in their employee health insurance plans so-called services contrary to deeply held teachings of the Catholic Church. All one has to do is sign a paper, we are told, and all will be well, a so-called accommodation that makes religious health care plans the vehicle for the delivery of abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and contraceptives. This night we recognize gratefully the courage of all who are resisting the mandate, especially the Little Sisters of the Poor. They are vigorously defending their freedom and ours – and they are doing so with a beauty and a joy, born from the heart of the Gospel, just as their way of life and their ministry of caring for the poor and the aged also come from the very pages of the Gospel. Like More, like Fisher, they sought no confrontation with the government yet were impelled in conscience to defend the freedom to be true to the faith that inspired their ministry in the first place. Let us express our thanks to the Little Sisters of the Poor for their witness to freedom!

D. As we thank the Little Sisters let us also not forget the plight of medical professionals whose rights of conscience are increasingly violated; or individuals whose businesses suffer because they uphold traditional marriage; or the exclusion of Catholic adoption services because they too uphold the Church's teaching on marriage; or an increasing tendency to label Christian doctrine as "hate speech" – something that in fact happens in our neighbor to the north, in Canada; Let us indeed "read the signs of the times" as we witness what Pope Francis calls a "polite persecution" going on all around us. We may not be called upon to shed our blood but we are called upon to defend our freedoms, not merely in the abstract, but as embedded in matters such as immigration, marriage, and the Church's teaching on sexuality.

IV. Our Response

A. What then should our response be? Surely we must pray earnestly for those who are persecuted abroad and for the preservation of religious freedom at home. Surely we must demand that government leaders do more to end religious persecution and to protect its victims, including refugees, even as we give generously to Catholic relief agencies at work in those countries where the persecutions are most severe. Surely we seek to defend our religious freedoms at home, using the lawful means

that our nation puts at our disposal as citizens, demanding that elected and appointed officials uphold our God-given freedoms while using our freedom to reject every form of unjust discrimination. All this we must do and more.

B. But in the end, if we wish to be catalysts of peace and justice in our land, all of us, whatever our vocation, must stand before the world as witnesses to freedom: to the sovereign freedom of Christ standing before Pilate, to that excellent freedom of the prophets, the apostles, & the early Christian martyrs, and to that gentle and courageous freedom of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher. This we must do by loving and praying for those who engage in violent persecution, as well as for those who seek to limit our ministries and curtail our freedoms at home. We must love them and pray for them as we seek first the Kingdom of God. We know not what the future holds, but let us approach the future as Jesus would: “[with] heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” – (Col. 3:12) If we do so, then, no matter happens, we shall truly be free! (Cf. John 8:32)

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!