

Fortnight For Freedom, Diocese of Rockville Centre, Rally for Religious Freedom

I. Introduction: Getting into the Issue

A. I'm delighted to be here to take part in this Rally for Religious Freedom. First and foremost I want to thank Bishop Murphy – thank you for your kind invitation to speak at this important gathering and most of all thank you for your leadership as a brother bishop and in the critical area of religious freedom! I also want to thank the Catholics for Freedom of Religion, who organized this rally, most especially your president, Barbara Samuells – your support and leadership in promoting and defending religious freedom is a wonderful example for dioceses through the United States. If, in every diocese there was a CFFR and a Barbara Samuells, I have no doubt that we'd be miles ahead in this struggle! Thank you so much!

B. And let me thank all of you for your presence here this evening. Your engagement in the struggle for religious freedom is crucial. It is important for bishops and priests to provide leadership but at the end of the day it is for lay men and women like yourselves to create a society that is truly just, peaceful, and free! Your prayers for religious freedom throughout the year, coupled with your willingness to engage in neighbor-to-neighbor evangelization regarding the truth about religious liberty – all this makes a big difference, as well as your willingness to contact elected and appointed officials to demand that they defend religious liberties in framing laws and policies. This work is absolutely critical and I thank you for your vigorous efforts!

C. As Bishop Murphy mentioned, I have been involved in religious freedom issues for a long time. I'd like to tell you that I was a student of constitutional law but the plain truth is that I was forced to get involved in religious freedom matters, a long time ago when I served as Bishop of Bridgeport, just across the L.I. Sound. It seems that a bill on "Corporate Forms" was introduced by the Judicial Committee of the Connecticut State Assembly. That sounded pretty innocuous until some folks looked

under the hood. What they found was a governmental plan to recognize Catholic parishes in a manner completely contrary to the Church's teaching and discipline - As a practical matter it would have shut out both the pastor and the bishop from any and all aspects of parish administration and instead forced the Catholic Church to be like the Congregational Church - fine for the Congregational Church but not fine for us. When news of that bill got to Catholic parishes throughout Connecticut, there was quite an uproar and quite a reaction. The bill had been introduced on a Wednesday, announcements about it were made in parishes on Sunday; by the following Wednesday nearly 5,000 people gathered on the steps of the State Capitol in Hartford for a rally. So massive was the reaction that the State Capitol shut down for a few days and the offending bill was withdrawn.

D. Even before this episode we knew that some in public life didn't much like the Church, but this effort to single out Catholic parishes and to regulate them was a wakeup call. I realized that we're not just dealing with difficult legislative sessions and bills but rather with a more fundamental attack on religious liberty. So I sat down and wrote a pastoral letter entitled "Let Freedom Ring" - not exactly an original title but an attempt to lay out the challenges to religious freedom and share the Church's teaching as well as the heritage of religious liberty that is ours as Americans. It was also meant to challenge church leaders and members of the laity to take seriously threats to religious freedom in a land where, frankly, we had come to take them for granted. I also learned that reports of religious liberty challenges being received by the Conference of Bishops from many dioceses around the country. As a result Cardinal Dolan, then the President of the Bishops Conference, invited me to chair a newly formed Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty and I'm still at it. Like most of you, not too long ago I never thought religious freedom would be an issue in the United States. Religious liberty challenges and violations were something that happens elsewhere - in Eastern Europe, in Africa, parts of Asia - but not in America - yet here we are.

II. Freedom to Witness

A. When we face a serious problem, we try to analyze the roots of the problem and think about strategies and tactics for addressing it. And it's important for us to do just that when it comes to religious freedom. But I think something more is

necessary - because religious freedom challenges—before they are legal or administrative— are in fact serious cultural challenges. When a society values its fundamental freedoms and watches over them with an appropriate degree of vigilance, chances are they will be preserved and society will flourish. When society begins to change its mind about the value of fundamental freedoms, it's not surprising that those who are in power - not only government officials but also opinion makers - will seize the day - and encroach upon freedoms they wouldn't otherwise touch. This requires not only strategies and tactics but men and women of faith & courage, men and women who will be witnesses to freedom - who know and value the God-given gift of freedom and are willing to stand up and defend it even when it is costly to do so. Some of our sisters and brother abroad are suffering bloody persecution because they will not abandon their Christian religion. We have seen images of them about to be beheaded. Their executioners have touted these slayings across the media, they have bragged about them, set them to music, packaged them in videos, but with no one in the West has held them accountable... Beyond that we see heart-rending images of refugees streaming from their homes in Syria, Iran, and Iraq, dispossessed, reduced to abject poverty, separated from loved ones because of the religious persecution underway in the Middle East. These men, women, and yes, children are witnesses to freedom. Their profession of faith has indeed been costly. Here let me note the strenuous and effective efforts of the Knights of Columbus, led by Supreme Knight Carl Anderson, to have the atrocities in the Middle East declared to be "genocide" by the Department of State.

B. How important that we stand in solidarity with these heroes and that we not let them down by surrendering our freedoms in the face of bureaucratic, legislative, or judicial challenges, as well as the challenges of an increasingly secular society. As Pope Francis has pointed out, we do not face a bloody persecution but rather a "polite persecution" - especially if it's known that we take our faith seriously and adhere to its teachings. As a result, we too must be not mere strategists and tacticians but rather we must be witnesses to freedom in our own country.

You no doubt experience this at work, in your extended families, even at parties, for as members of the laity you are on the front lines.

C. Let us spend a moment reflecting on the challenges we face at home. While

America largely remains a religious country, it has taken a decidedly secular turn in recent decades and that turn has, if anything, accelerated in recent years. More and more people are indicating that they belong to no religion whatsoever and in many places (but not here thanks to Bishop Murphy) – religious institutions and constituencies have begun to weaken. Such weakness brings a loss of political will and power. As a result, the Congress, the Courts, the Executive Branch and its agencies feel somewhat freer to attenuate religious freedom – especially when it comes to areas of church teaching that are countercultural – such as the Church’s teaching on sexuality, life, and marriage. And for that reason, we see here in the United States policies and rules that would force many people of faith including the Little Sisters of the Poor to become entangled in providing abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and contraceptives in their health insurance plans. When the government took on the Little Sisters of the Poor, however, they had no idea what they were getting into! Let’s applaud the great courage of these faithful women who lead beautiful lives of prayer and service right out of the pages of the Gospel! At the same time we want to thank all those who are defending their rights against the HHS mandate, including a number of my brother bishops, and many other ministries. They are being helped most often on a pro-bono basis by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, the Alliance Defending Freedom, Jones Day and many other skilled and generous professionals – our thanks to them!

D. I wish their struggle were the end of the story, but it’s not. We see that pressure is being brought to bear on hospitals in California to provide abortions and the rights of medical professionals and small business owners not to participate in activities contrary to their faith are being trampled. In the media religious liberty is regularly presented as a way of discriminating against the rights of minorities and some have begun to suggest that even preaching these moral teachings constitutes a kind of “hate-speech” that should be prosecuted. We should all be alarmed that the Mayor of Houston tried to subpoena that homilies of pastors who preached in defense of traditional sexual teaching ... Let us remember that our fundamental freedoms travel together. Once religious freedom suffers, freedom of speech and assembly will also suffer under the thumb of a dictatorship of relativism and secularism. Yes, it important we vigorously defend our rights and that we choose the best means of doing so – but to return to the theme of this year’s Fortnight – good

strategy and tactics are not enough, we need to be witnesses. What will it take for you and me to be witnesses?

III. Formation as Witnesses for Freedom

A. As Christians and Catholics, we always begin with the Lord Jesus who bore witness to his Father's love by laying down his life for us. As Jesus stood before Pilate, he manifested a sovereign freedom that Pilate, for all of his power, could not touch. Pilate could allow him to be condemned but Pilate could not touch the freedom with which Jesus laid down his life for us. Caesar could not touch the things of God. The same is true of the early Christian martyrs, many of whom were condemned for "hate-crimes". In spite of the torture and death that awaited them, they possessed a God-given deep spiritual freedom no one could touch and so offered their lives in witness to Christ and to the faith. We see this in the life of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher whose relics are being venerated throughout the United States in these days. We see this same sovereign spiritual freedom in the victims of ISIS: violence, even death, will not force them to give up their faith. Terrorists, radical Islamists, cannot force them to abandon their faith. Indeed, the age of the martyrs is not over. Pope Francis points out that today there are more martyrs for the faith than there were even in the first centuries of the Church. We owe it to these martyrs to keep faith with them, to stand in solidarity with them, to keep the flame of liberty burning brightly. Imagine what it would say to those who face death because of their faith if we were to give up the fight for religious freedom merely because of legal complications or the threat of fines or bureaucratic red tape!

B. So let us remind ourselves that this struggle is primarily a spiritual struggle within our own hearts and within our own communities of faith to preserve in our hearts and in our homes the God-given gift of freedom, a freedom that transcends the power of the state - which is why we can call it "sovereign" freedom. The II Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty teaches that religious freedom is not merely freedom from state coercion on individuals and religious communities, important as that is. Religious freedom is something much deeper and more beautiful. It is inscribed in human nature; it is part of our spiritual DNA, given us by God so that we might respond to him freely, in love. It is the freedom to embrace the

full truth about God and our humanity; and thus religious liberty is not merely a civil right but an integral part of dignity as human beings. In defending religious freedom, we are bearing witness to human dignity, including the dignity of religious minorities.

C. As we take stock of religious persecution around the world, we begin to get an idea of what societies lacking religious freedom look like. Whenever this fundamental, God-given freedom is taken away or compromised, human beings and their institutions do not thrive – quite the opposite happens. Look at what is happening in our own country. Efforts to undermine religious liberty are aimed at religious institutions that serve the common good by serving the poor and vulnerable: schools, hospitals, social service agencies, adoption services. These institutions that are doing yeoman's service in some of our poorest neighborhoods, including inner-city Baltimore, are the ones that have been targeted by government mandates, by ACLU lawsuits, and by the media. And it's people who run small businesses – such as bakers and photographers – who contribute the life of their local communities that are being driven out-of-business.

D. Let us take this a step further. People do not die or suffer for what they do not believe in. It's well and good for us to say that religious freedom is a gift from God and to understand clearly what life would be like without our liberties. Yet, we also need to understand that rarely do we defend religious freedom in the abstract, unless we are writing a paper or engaging in an academic debate. Most of the time, religious freedom is tied to an issue. With the early Christian martyrs, it was refusal to sacrifice to the pagan gods. With Thomas More and John Fisher it was their defense of marriage and their adherence to the authority of the Holy Father. In the Middle East, it is the refusal to submit to forced religious conversion. In the United States, religious liberty is in the crosshairs because of our defense of marriage as between one man and one woman and because of our defense of the sacredness of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. If we were to go along to get along with the culture, there'd be few, if any problems when it comes to religious liberty. As we reflect on the theme, "witnesses for freedom" you and I need to look into our hearts and ask about the courage of our convictions. Am we willing to suffer for our faith? Do we believe in what we profess each Sunday, even to the point of laying down our lives? Am we embarrassed about the Church's teaching, so

frequently ridiculed in the media, teachings which, if broadly followed, would dramatically improve our society? Do we succumb to the social pressure, even the intimidation tactics of others to abandon teachings that go to the heart of human dignity? This is the “polite” and sometimes not so “polite persecution” of which Pope Francis speaks.

IV. Conclusion

A. When Pope Francis visited the United States last September, he spoke frequently about religious freedom ... whether at the opening ceremonies at the White House or before the Congress, or at Independence Hall in Philadelphia. He reminded us that constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom is a precious gift that we should not squander but protect. He reminded us to use our freedom to serve those in need and to create a society that is truly free of unjust discrimination, even as he expressed support for the bishops’ efforts to defend religious liberty. And if there were any doubt about his support, he made an unscheduled visit to the Little Sisters of the Poor in Washington.

B. Let us heed the challenge Pope Francis puts before us! Let us unite in being witnesses to freedom after the examples of the martyrs throughout history, in solidarity with those who serve, for the common good of our society, and for the glory of God, the giver of every good gift! Thanks for listening! Thanks for your defense of religious freedom! God bless our Church and God bless these United States of America!