

# Q&A with Archbishop Lori on religious liberty: Part I

**By Sean Gallagher**

*Courtesy The Criterion*

*Editor's Note: Archbishop William E. Lori will open the fifth annual Fortnight for Freedom June 21 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. A native of New Albany, Ind., the archbishop talked to The Criterion, which serves the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, about religious liberty.*

## **First of two parts.**

The U.S. bishops' fifth annual Fortnight for Freedom will be held from June 21-July 4. Since the first period of prayer, advocacy and education related to religious liberty in 2012, this freedom has come under increasing pressure both here in the United States and around the world.

This year's fortnight has "Witnesses to Freedom" as its theme and features men and women from across Church history, from St. John the Baptist to Egyptian Coptic Christians killed for their faith in 2015 by Islamic State militants.

The fortnight will also include a 10-city tour of relics of the English saints Thomas More and John Fisher. The saints share June 22 as their feast day. Both died in 1535 after refusing to accept Parliament's Act of Supremacy, which declared that King Henry VIII was the head of the Church in England.

Archbishop William E. Lori has led the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty since the fall of 2011 and so has been closely involved with the planning of each Fortnight for Freedom.

The following are excerpts of that interview.

**Q. Since starting in 2012, this year's Fortnight for Freedom will be the fifth one that the Church in the U.S. has observed. What effects do you think it has had thus far, what challenges does the Church face in making it more effective, and what hopes do you have for it this year?**

Archbishop Lori: The Fortnight for Freedom is mostly an event of prayer. It's a time to remind everyone that religious freedom is a precious gift that is under challenge in many ways at home and abroad. We must pray for those who are persecuted and the preservation of our own freedom.

Praying about these matters also raises our awareness of them, not as a partisan political issue, but rather as a gift with which God has given to our humanity. So, I think the fortnight is very important for doing that.

This year, the theme is 'Witnesses to Freedom.' We will be doing a tour in over 10 cities of the relics of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, who certainly bore witness to the importance of religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

As we venerate the relics of these two great saints, we will remember in a very special way those who have given up their lives in our own time in the face of oppression and a denial of religious freedom. Their witness to freedom should prompt us to understand of preserving the freedom that is ours in the United States.

**Q. Why do you think it is important at this time in our history and in our current cultural atmosphere to focus on the stories of these witnesses instead of, perhaps, on calling attention to particular issues related to religious liberty?**

Archbishop Lori: It's important that we take inspiration from those who have either given their lives because they have used their freedom to bear witness to God and to the love of Christ or those who have endured suffering or persecution for that reason.

There is a great danger of our becoming complacent about this, thinking about it as a kind of a partisan issue or even coming to regard religious liberty as code for

discrimination rather than a gift that enables us to respond freely to God's love and to serve those around us.

To be witnesses to Christ is fundamental to our religion. To be witnesses to the beauty and goodness of religious freedom and to use our freedom well is very important.

**Q. You just mentioned changes in understanding about the nature of religious liberty in some people in society. A growing number of people, especially people who have the opportunity to shape public opinion, see religious liberty as the desire of one group of people to discriminate unjustly against another group. What are your thoughts?**

Archbishop Lori: Often it's the case that opinion makers are not going after religious liberty in any direct or theoretical way. But rather, religious liberty is always embedded in an issue, a decision to practice one's faith in a decision to adhere to moral convictions or in a decision to follow the dictates of natural law.

Sometimes, when we do that, we get in the way of other agendas. And that's when religious liberty gets in the cross hairs of culture. That's what we're seeing today.

It's playing out one way in the Middle East. And it's playing out in another way in the West where we are beginning to experience what Pope Francis has called a 'polite persecution.'

**Q. How can ordinary Catholics in their daily lives counter such perceptions, especially when they don't have the megaphone in our society that some opponents of religious liberty in popular culture, politics and the media have?**

Archbishop Lori: First of all, it's important for us to have confidence as Catholic Christians that we are being directed, not to discriminate against people, but to try to embrace the full truth about human life and human dignity, the beauty, joy and goodness of marriage, and that these teachings are not directed against anybody. They are directed toward fundamental human goods.

I think if we grow in our understanding of that, we can then bear witness as good and loving people who are seeking to build a good and a just society where human beings can flourish and grow. I think that's an important thing to remember.

An ordinary Catholic—and I don't think there's anything ordinary about any of us Catholics—can do a couple of things. We can certainly pray. And the fortnight is certainly a prayer event.

We can also try to understand the nature of religious liberty more deeply. The Church has a lot of resources to do this. They're a click away on the bishops' conference website, [uscbb.org](http://uscbb.org). There's a video there on ... religious liberty. There are many resources. And it's important for us to understand what the Church really does teach about religious freedom.

Then I think it's important for us to renounce all forms of unjust discrimination, because there are instances where religion is used to discriminate unjustly. At the same time, we should resist having our teaching on marriage, sexuality and medical ethics be portrayed as discriminatory. They are not. They are expressions of the value of human life and our human dignity.

**Q Since he was a layman, a lawyer and a statesman, how might St. Thomas More provide challenges to lay Catholics today to value religious liberty in their own lives and take steps to defend it in society?**

Archbishop Lori: Certainly, St. Thomas More was a man of great learning, a man of great culture, a man who was very devoted to his country. He loved his country. And he sought to serve his country to the very end of his life. Finally, he came to the point of understanding that martyrdom was one of the ways he would serve his God first and his country second.

Thomas More is, not only for lawyers but anyone in their professional and working life, a model of integrity. He's a model of following one's conscience where it leads. The fact that this witness was given precisely as a layman is very important.

On the other hand, John Fisher was a bishop and a cardinal. He's a model for those of us who are ordained, that we must show some courage and leadership.

It's not easy to speak about religious freedom in our culture today. It's not easy to address some of the hot button issues in which religious liberty issues are wrapped. And we know that, when we do, we will meet inevitably with criticism to our opposition.

Yet, St. John Fisher would urge us not to be afraid of the criticism that we might receive.

**Q. He was the only bishop in England who refused to accept the Act of Supremacy.**

Archbishop Lori: He was the only one. So, he also shows us that this kind of leadership is sometimes quite lonely.

*In part two of his interview with The Criterion, Archbishop Lori reflects on lay Catholics involved in defending religious liberty, the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision regarding the Affordable Care Act's abortifacient, sterilization and contraception mandate, and how religious liberty relates to the current presidential election campaign.*

*Read Part II of the Q&A [here](#).*

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