

Q&A with Baltimore's archbishop

Catholic Review staff writer Maria Wiering interviewed Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore June 5 about the upcoming Fortnight for Freedom, which the U.S. bishops called for in their March 2012 statement on religious liberty, "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty."

The Fortnight begins June 21 with a 7 p.m. Mass at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore, and concludes July 4 with a 12:10 p.m. Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. EWTN plans to broadcast both Masses. Parishes in the Archdiocese of Baltimore also plan to hold events throughout the Fortnight.

Archbishop Lori is chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty.

CR: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services mandate (which requires employers, including most religious employers, to provide insurance coverage that includes contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs, which violate church teaching) has been getting a lot of attention as the Catholic Church voices its concerns about threats to religious liberty, but that's not the only issue the U.S. bishops are concerned about. Can you put the HHS mandate into context with the overall concern?

+WEL: Certainly the HHS mandate has put our work to defend religious liberty on steroids, but there are many other religious liberty issues that have cropped up, mainly because over the years, there has been an erosion of religious liberty, both culturally and legally. For example, in Alabama, a state law was passed that would criminalize providing "Good Samaritan" services to undocumented immigrants, and that includes churches, that would be an example of it. Another example would be in Hawaii, where legal action is being taken against a church that does not want to host a same-sex marriage on its premises in contraction to its own teachings.

Another example would be on college campuses, there are Christian organizations

that want to meet for religious purposes, and they want only Christians as members. There are heavy-handed policies by school administrations that forbid this. Also, another example would be driving Catholic Charities out of adoption services because we want to follow our teachings in support of traditional marriage, and thus do not want to place children with same-sex couples.

On an individual level, there was a town clerk in upstate New York who was penalized because she would not officiate at a same-sex marriage because of conscientious reasons. These are just a few examples of what's going on out there.

CR: The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, which you chair, wasn't formed until last year. When do you think the U.S. bishops became concerned enough about these issues to realize that a committee needed to be formed?

+WEL: We talked about it in our June meeting of 2011. A number of state Catholic conferences and individual bishops were reporting to the bishops' conference of violations in regard to religious liberty. Some wrote on it; I was among those who wrote a pastoral letter on the subject. In hearing this from all around the country, it became apparent that the church in the United States has found itself in a new position, culturally and vis-à-vis the federal government, not only state governments. So it became clear that we needed to make the preservation and restoration of religious liberty one of the priorities of our country.

CR: Why call for the Fortnight for Freedom now? I realize that this was called for in the March document. This is before the bishops could have foreseen that these lawsuits would be in front of us, or that the U.S. Supreme Court would be handing down its decision on the health care law this month.

+WEL: It's probably best to say it's providential. We could not have foreseen the timing. We could not have planned it. We knew that we were going to probably have to file suit. We knew that there were challenges to the health care law, but the reason that we chose this period is because it's the run-up to the Fourth of July, and in the middle of it is a wonderful feast day, that of St. Thomas More and of St. John Fisher (June 22), both martyrs who stood up to their government. It seemed to the bishops that this would be an ideal time for prayer, for education and for catechesis.

CR: What can Catholics learn from these martyrs?

+WEL: What we can learn from them, first of all, is their courage and their integrity. They were not disloyal citizens, they loved their country. They had made enormous contributions to the well-being of their country, and yet they were being asked by their country essentially to surrender their faith to bow to political authority, and they refused to do it. Our situation is somewhat different. We're being asked to fund and facilitate a so-called product contrary to our teaching, but whenever the government asks us to violate our consciousness and our religious teachings, it's time to stand up and be counted.

CR: People keep asking if this is a political battle, and from your comments at the 2012 National Religious Freedom Conference, this is not a political battle for you. Why do you think this is breaking down along party lines?

+WEL: We didn't pick the timing of this struggle; in fact, we would rather not have it at all. We have work to do. We have the gospel to preach. We have services to deliver. But it was forced on us. I suppose because it was forced on us by a particular administration by a particular party, it's thought to be a partisan issue.

The fact of the matter is, we're not out to make a partisan point. We're out to defend a principle that we believe transcends party affiliation. We believe that if you're a good Democrat or a good Republican or a good independent, one ought to want to preserve religious liberty as a fundamental American value, not a partisan value. We're fighting for the God-given right to exercise our faith in the fullest sense of that word in the manner that our foundational documents provide for. That's what we're fighting for here.

CR: You'll be saying the Mass that kicks off the Fortnight here in Baltimore, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. What is the significance of this particular place for the Fortnight?

+WEL: We're having this opening Mass in the nation's oldest Cathedral. The first archbishop in the United States, John Carroll, comes from a Catholic family that experienced limitations and bias because they were Catholic, yet they persevered and they were at the heart of the American experiment to grant full religious liberty

to all. Archbishop Carroll's cousin was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

This basilica stands as a testament to a new country founded on the proposition that all are created equal, and endowed, by the Creator, with rights to life, liberty and happiness. So here we are at that place, opening up a two-week period of prayer and catechesis in defense of religious liberty. It's entirely appropriate.

CR: What do you hope to see come from the Fortnight for Freedom?

+WEL: What I am hoping is that hundreds of thousands of people will pause to pray—either by coming to an event in their parish or diocese—for the restoration of religious liberty. The Lord said, “Without me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5), so if we are really serious about preserving and restoring religious liberty, then we need to pray for it. That's number one.

Number two, how many people do we know that have no idea about our country's recognition of God-given freedoms? So, how important it is that they be educated. I think that if more people stopped and thought about this, about the erosion of liberties, that they'd be willing to speak up about it and do something about it.

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