

Religious Liberty - Public Session

USCCB

I. Introduction

My brother bishops - let me begin this segment on domestic religious liberty by thanking all of you for your strong efforts in support of that cause.

We are facing not just one, but a series, of extraordinary challenges in this area. Nothing less than our full and undivided efforts in response will suffice to meet those challenges. As His Eminence, Cardinal Mahony, has put it in describing just one of these challenges, our response will require “all the energies the Catholic community can muster.”

And all of you, my brother bishops, have done that, in a remarkable sign of unity, and for this I am most grateful.

I have only a short time during this session, so rather than detail all of our activities over the last six months to promote and defend religious freedom, I want to address three highlights briefly.

First is the unanimous statement of the Administrative Committee, “United for Religious Freedom,” which focuses on the HHS mandate particularly.

Second is the statement of the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, “Our First, Most Cherished Freedom,” which was unanimously authorized for publication by the Administrative Committee, and serves as a foundational statement which addresses the broader range of threats to religious freedom.

Third is the upcoming “Fortnight for Freedom,” which the Ad Hoc Committee proposed in “Our First, Most Cherished Freedom” as “a great hymn of prayer for our country” over the two weeks preceding the Fourth of July.

II. “United for Religious Freedom”

First, the document “United for Religious Freedom.” It is remarkable in many respects, but among its most important features is how it manifests in various ways

the unity of the bishops in relation to the HHS mandate:

On the level of form, it is a statement of the Administrative Committee, which consists of almost forty bishops, all of whom are elected by other bishops to act in important representative capacities. As you know, about half of the Committee are your regional representatives, about half are the Chairs of the standing committees of the Conference, and the remainder are the officers of the Conference and the Chair of CRS. The unanimity of that group is an especially powerful sign of the unity of the bishops more broadly.

On the level of substance, the document exemplifies the Catholic “both/and,” which is more inclusive, and therefore unifying. The document reflects the full breadth of the applicable Church teaching on religious liberty, not just parts. In this way, the document foresees and forecloses some of the potential divisions that our opponents would create among us.

For example, the document discusses both of the fundamental problems with the mandate: not simply government coercion against conscience but also intrusive and narrow government redefinition of our religious institutions—so narrow that any church institution that mainly serves the common good would not be exempt from the mandate.

Similarly, it discusses the concerns of both institutions and individuals; and among institutions, both the religious and the non-religious.

And it shows concern for the consciences not only of employers, but also of the various other stakeholders in the health insurance process, such as insurers and employees.

Even at the level of concrete responses, the document reflects the same “both/and” approach. It calls for prayer and education, as well as public action; and that public action is not just through the legislative and executive branches, but also the judicial.

III. “Our First, Most Cherished Freedom”

The second document, “Our First, Most Cherished Freedom” offers an overview of

the Church's teaching on religious freedom in light of the American experience. It follows in this same "both/and" mode:

The document makes clear that the religious freedom problems we now face are not limited to the HHS mandate, but are unfortunately numerous and growing:

The document lists problems at the federal level other than the mandate, as well as some at the state and local level. And these problems come from both ends of the political spectrum.

The document also recognizes that our religious freedom problems in the United States—serious and growing though they are—pale in comparison to those problems abroad. (This will be illustrated dramatically in our second hour today.)

Importantly, the document affirms that it is not merely the rights of Catholics that are at risk and warrant our concern, but others as well, including ...

Other Christians; Jews, Muslims, and all people of faith; even those who reject religion altogether—the right to religious freedom belongs to all of them.

That is because religious freedom is not only their legal right and proud heritage as Americans, but also a universal human right, one that flows directly from their inherent dignity as human persons.

IV. Fortnight for Freedom

Third, I want to discuss the Fortnight for Freedom, which is fast upon us, beginning a week from tomorrow.

Here again, it is important to emphasize the whole, not just the parts:

It involves public action, yes—but it is primarily a matter of prayer and education. Our main goals are:

- to educate Catholics and the public at large about both the teaching of the Church on religious freedom, and the current and growing threats to that principle; and
- to encourage them then to pray for the protection of religious freedom, and

to take action where they can, in their own lives, to advance that principle

The Fortnight has some national elements, such as the Masses at the Basilica of the Assumption in Baltimore to start on June 21, and at the Basilica of the National Shrine in DC to conclude on July 4, as well as the nation-wide ringing of bells at noon eastern time that day. But it is mostly local, as a large and growing list of diocesan activities on the fortnight4freedom.org website attests. The activities of over 70 dioceses can be found there.

It is also important to emphasize what the Fortnight is not, particularly as some have already tried to distort and manipulate it to their own purposes.

Though there may be some peaceful public demonstrations, particularly where a bishop sees fit locally, the Fortnight is not intended as an occasion for civil disobedience, as some have suggested.

Also, the Fortnight is strictly about the issue of religious freedom, at all levels of government here in the U.S., as well as abroad—it is not about parties, candidates, or elections, as some others have suggested. Our focus on the issue is reflected in the materials we have produced for the Fortnight, and I am confident it will be reflected in the Fortnight activities themselves.

Before leaving the topic of the Fortnight, let me take the opportunity again to thank all of you for the extraordinary work you have done, and will do, to mark that special period. The energy and creativity that you and your diocesan staffs have brought to this event have inspired us all, and have provided just a hint of what it will mean to summon “all the energies the Catholic community can muster.”

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to offer a further word of encouragement for what could be a difficult road ahead.

Already, we have seen reactions to our work that are hostile, unfair, inaccurate, and derisive—usually in the secular media, but even from some Catholic commentators. For example:

- The idea that individual persons have a right to conscientious objection

against coercive government action like the HHS mandate—though firmly established in both the teaching of the Church and the policy of the Conference for generations—has not merely been called into question, but mocked as some kind of novel or marginal theory.

- Some have suggested that, because the federal government chose to pick a fight with us on a fundamental issue in an election year—indeed, a fight we have worked literally for years to prevent from coming to this point—we are now supposed to remain silent. And if we don't, we should face still more government penalties, this time from the IRS.
- Even though the problem we face is the State coercing the Church to violate our religious and moral convictions, we are somehow accused of forcing our beliefs on others by law. What we seek is merely a preservation of the long-standing status quo against a new threat to religious freedom—not the expansion of our rights.
- In the face of this resistance, it may be tempting to get discouraged, to second-guess the effort, to soft-pedal our message. But instead, these things should prompt us to do exactly the opposite, for they show us how very great is the need for our teaching, both in our culture and even in our own Church. They show us how far we have fallen, and how far we have to climb, before we can rest assured that religious freedom stands on firm footing.

My brother bishops, we have a great task in front of us. It will not be easy, and we may well suffer, as we are called to do. But we will not fail. And that is because we are well-equipped with the tools we will truly need—the love of Christ and the truth about the human person. All that remains for us to do is to take up those tools and put them to work.

With that, I turn the program over to Professor John Garvey, Fifteenth President of the Catholic University of America, so that we can benefit from his reflections, which combine his great scholarly expertise and his deep commitment to our Catholic faith.