

Silent erosion of religious liberty

“Religious Freedom expresses what is unique about the human person, for it allows us to direct our personal and social life to God, in whose light the identity, meaning and purpose of the person are fully understood,” – Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day for Peace, January 1, 2011.

Last week, the Catholic Bishops of Maryland, through our Maryland Catholic Conference, issued a statement about the erosion of religious liberty in our society.

The statement, “The Most Sacred of all Property: Religious Freedom and the People of Maryland,” calls to the attention of Maryland Catholics the many threats to our religious liberty – subtle and not-so-subtle – that we face today and which loom on the horizon.

The document also provides to Catholics and others of goodwill some helpful suggestions regarding how we can work to preserve religious freedom amidst the hostile, politically charged climate that exists in Maryland and elsewhere in our country.

In addition, the statement details Maryland’s unique role in the establishment of religious freedom in the United States, one that should not be lost on any of us as local efforts to censor pro-life pregnancy centers and to redefine the institution of marriage make our state Ground Zero of the religious liberty debate.

An attractive, 12-page document shared first in the Catholic newspapers of our state and distributed (electronically and in hard copy) to every parish, it is a must-read. Understanding that many may not take the time to read the entire document, I hope to use this column to highlight for readers the document’s key messages.

Contribution to the Common Good

Religious freedom is so fundamental to our nature that not only does it uphold individual human dignity, but it is also integral to the establishment of a good and just society. Individuals who are free to exercise religious liberty are free to live out their faith in service to others and to build up the common good.

Religious liberty also enables religious groups to provide a voice for the voiceless. For example, at the dawn of our nation, the Quakers led the charge in publicly challenging our national government to abolish slavery. The Catholic Church in Maryland, in 1989, was a leader in successful efforts to ban the execution of those with an intellectual disability. And, the Civil Rights Movement was led by a Baptist minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who expressed an explicitly religious call for the equal treatment of African Americans. Rev. Dr. King argued that there is a legal and moral responsibility to obey just laws but, he said, citing St. Augustine, “an unjust law is no law at all.”

Threats to our Religious Freedom

The erosion of some religious liberties in Maryland and throughout the country - and the resulting change in some attitudes about the appropriateness of religious freedom - are what prompted the creation and release of this document.

Americans are blessed to enjoy freedoms for which many in our world can only hope. But in recent years there has been a serious and subtle promotion of the idea that religious liberty should be restricted to Sunday morning worship. The right to exercise our faith and to follow our conscience in all aspects of our lives are rights that are increasingly viewed with hostility.

A healthy democracy can function only when its citizens are able to freely engage in public debate. That includes the freedom to approach the public debate through the lens of faith and moral values.

- The State of Illinois threatened to close a small-town pharmacist’s business because he refused to sell the “morning-after pill.” The pharmacy owner was forced to retain an attorney and sue for his right to practice his profession in accordance with his religious beliefs.
- As part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services efforts to enact the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Department is proposing to mandate that all private health insurance plans cover surgical sterilization procedures and birth control (including IUD, “morning-after pills” and abortion-inducing drugs), in addition to “education and counseling” for women and girls of

reproductive age. There is no genuine exemption for the Catholic Church and other religious institutions not to offer health insurance with these mandates.

- The U.S. Senate recently voted to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act, which was enacted during the Clinton Administration and defined marriage as between one man and one woman. Here in Maryland, the General Assembly is once again expected in 2012 to vote on a bill that would legalize same-sex “marriage,” as the District of Columbia did in 2010. While no meaningful protections were offered to religious institutions in the 2011 bill to redefine marriage, the impact of the passage of such a measure would apply to many others. For example, religious business owners, like florists, bakers and musicians – would be forced to work at same-sex “marriage” ceremonies.

Defending Religious Freedom

What do we do to preserve and strengthen the great gift of religious liberty?

- Prayer: The most powerful tool we have, prayer is our time with the Lord when we ask for His grace in helping us to become effective instruments of His to assist others in making prudent decisions.

- Education: Religious liberty and the right of conscience will be further eroded unless the Catholic community stays informed about the challenges these rights face and the reasons why they are integral to a just society.

- Action: The most basic way for Catholics to participate in the political process is through voting in local, state and federal elections. Our Maryland Catholic Advocacy Network, run by the Maryland Catholic Conference, provides updates on public-policy issues and provides pre-drafted emails to send to lawmakers. Register online at mdcathcon.org.

- *“The Most Sacred of All Property: Religious Freedom and the People of Maryland” can be downloaded and viewed at archbalt.org. If you would like a hard copy of the statement, ask your parish or call the Archdiocesan Office of Communications at 410-547-5378.*