

# The O's and religious liberty woes

Wednesday I enjoyed a sun-drenched afternoon at my first Baltimore Orioles game, and yesterday I spent the day at the Ethics and Public Policy Center's 2012 National Religious Freedom Conference in Washington, D.C.

The two days couldn't be more different, right?

Watching a baseball game with a beer and hotdog was as American as apple pie.

And working to defend religious liberty was as American as ... oh wait.

Last night, Archbishop William Lori, our new archbishop, gave the keynote address at the conference's dinner. (He also received the 2012 National Religious Freedom Award for his work as chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty.)

In his remarks, he highlighted America's history of religious freedom, which has deep roots in Maryland. He quoted President George Washington, who, in a 1789 letter to the United Baptist Churches in Virginia, wrote: "[I]f I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny, and every species of religious persecution."

The U.S. bishops are convinced they have the nation's founding fathers on their side as they make their case against the HHS mandate and other attacks on religious liberty. And they're not alone. What was so clear to me yesterday at the conference was how united many Christian denominations and other religions in the United States are against this mandate.

Yesterday's panels included leaders from Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Southern Baptist, Orthodox Jewish and Mormon congregations, and Muslims, Sikhs and others have also voiced support. Few actually think of this as a "Catholic issue," and that was reiterated throughout the day.

What struck me was how uniquely American this commitment to religious freedom was for our nation's founders. Consider that the French Revolution took place roughly 15 years after the American Revolution, and French Catholic priests fled to the United States to escape persecution.

It's clear from many of the founding fathers' writings that religious freedom was greatly cherished. In a 1790 letter to the Jewish congregation in Newport, R.I., Washington made it clear that Judaism was not just to be "tolerated" in America, but that Jews were full citizens. This just wasn't the case in Europe at the time.

In the typical elaborate prose of the time, Washington wrote, "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."

Take a vine and fig tree or the surrounds of Camden Yards, but indeed, there should be nothing in this great country to make any of us "afraid" of fully participating in the great American Experiment with our consciences unscathed.