

Tuitio Fidei Award; Cuban Association, Order of Malta

A. I am very grateful and humbled to receive the Tuitio Fidei Award for my work with the Bishops of the United States in fostering religious freedom. I am especially honored to receive this award from you, the Cuban Association of the Order of Malta. You and your families know firsthand what it means to lose your civil liberties at the hands of a government driven by an ideology that does not respect human dignity and human rights. You know the damage it does to families and society when a government undermines religious freedom of individuals and institutions. The effects of such repression are only too obvious even if we are at a point at which we might dare to hope for a more open society in Cuba. Let me briefly tell you how I got involved in religious freedom issues.

B. I've been a bishop for over twenty years and a priest for almost forty. Throughout most of that time, I was aware that there were challenges to religious freedom in the United States, but most I thought of violations against religious freedom as something that happened in other places, like the Soviet Union or Cuba. In 1990, when the Supreme Court rendered a decision that weakened the constitutional protections for religious freedom, the U.S. Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) and it was signed into law by President Bill Clinton. It was warmly supported by Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. Religious freedom seemed to be a human right that everyone valued.

C. Ten years later, I was a bishop serving in Connecticut. I got to know many elected officials and met with many fine public servants. But I also sensed a growing hostility against the Church, in part because of internal problems in the Church itself, and in part because the Church's teachings on life and family were fast becoming countercultural. Well, it all came to a head back in 2009 when a bill was introduced by a committee of the General Assembly that would have reorganized Catholic parishes in the State of Connecticut. In other words, the State proposed to tell the Church how to run its parishes. And that proposal would have eliminated the bishop and the pastor from any role whatsoever in the administration of parishes.

Most Catholics in Connecticut were pretty upset about the proposed law; about 5,000 Catholics converged on the State Capitol to protest it; in fact, we shut down the state government for the better part of two days. The offending bill was withdrawn – but it was a real wake-up call for me. I realized that our religious freedom really was under attack. So I wrote a pastoral letter on the subject, and come to find out, other bishops and dioceses were experiencing similar threats to religious freedom. As a result the bishops' conference asked me to form a committee to help focus and promote efforts in defense of religious freedom – and that has a lot to do with my presence here tonight.

D. I want to say what an honor and privilege it is to be involved in the work of defending religious freedom, and for two reasons: First, this work has helped me see that religious freedom is one of God's most beautiful gifts. It's the gift by which he invites us to share his friendship. It's the gift without which we could not respond to him freely, in love. And second, in doing this work, I've had the privilege of meeting and working with some very loving and courageous people, including yourselves and your families; this evening I want to thank you for all that you are doing to defend our freedoms and to use your freedom to serve the needs of others – those in need of food in Cuba; those in need of medical care in Santo Domingo. I've also met and worked with courageous Christians from the Middle East – I think of Bishop Warda from Iraq who brought 300 young people to WYD in Poland. I think of the Archbishop of Aleppo whose people are suffering so gravely. Those of us who live in the U.S. have a lot to learn from people in Iraq and Syria and other places where ISIS is engaged in genocide – not just religious persecution – but a concert effort to uproot and eliminate the most ancient Christian communities in the world. When I meet and listen to people like Bishop Warda and Archbishop Jeanbart, then I know how important it is for all of us in the West to keep the flame of religious freedom burning brightly.

E. So, this evening, let me leave you with this. Even in this highly politicized season, let us not think of religious freedom as a political football. It should not be a partisan struggle. Rather, it is a profoundly human issue we should all care about. As you know, any society that tries to rob its citizens of religious freedom is a harsh and unforgiving place – and if the right to religious freedom goes away, so too our other rights will go away. So we shouldn't want the Little Sisters of the Poor to be forced

to include abortion-inducing drugs and sterilization in their employee healthcare insurance plans. We shouldn't want the head of the U.S. Civil Rights commission to condemn religion largely as a mask for bigotry. We shouldn't want Catholic hospitals in California to be forced to do abortions. Nor should we want people who uphold marriage as between a man and a woman to be forced to violate their consciences as they go about their daily work. So, I thank you for your support and for being ambassadors for religious freedom by living, defending, and spreading the faith of the Church and by engaging public officials on the subject of religious liberty at home and abroad. And I thank you for using this God-given freedom to serve the poor and the vulnerable through the works of charity for which the Order of Malta is so well regarded. Freedom is a beautiful gift but it is also fragile. Let us join together in cherishing it!

Thanks for listening and may God bless you and our loved ones!