

My Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the most precious freedoms we have as Americans is the religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment to our Constitution. Concerned about increasing threats to that freedom, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2012 launched a Fortnight for Freedom observance from June 21, the vigil of the Feasts of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, to July 4, Independence Day. That observance continues in 2017 because religious liberty is still under siege – in this country and around the world.

This year's theme, "Freedom for Mission," highlights the important fact that our God-given and constitutionally protected religious liberty is not restricted to our own minds or to houses of worship, as some government entities in our country have redefined it. As Pope Francis said on the eve of the Fortnight in 2014, "Religious freedom is not simply freedom of thought or private worship. It is the freedom to live according to ethical principles, both privately and publicly, consequent to the truth one has found." That is exemplified in the 14 subthemes of this year's observance, one for each day of the Fortnight:

- Freedom to serve migrants and refugees;
- May we be God's servants first;
- Freedom to care for the sick;
- Freedom to bear witness to Truth;
- Freedom to serve God with our whole lives;
- Freedom to seek the Truth;
- For Christians in the Middle East;
- Freedom to serve our communities through education;
- For the freedom of the Church;
- Freedom to serve families seeing and children awaiting adoption;
- Freedom to serve the vulnerable;
- Freedom to build stronger communities;
- For our brothers and sisters in Mexico;
- Freedom to promote a culture of freedom for all.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, "declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom" (no.2). In other words, religious liberty is for everyone. It is not a gift of the state, nor should it ever be the subject of violence by anyone who disagrees with its tenets. Yet, some religious minorities in our nation, including Muslims and Jews, have felt increasingly targeted by hate crimes and under suspicion for their religious beliefs. In addition, local, state, and federal government actions have impinged on our Freedom for Mission in significant ways: Catholic foster care and adoption services have had to shut down because they refuse to comply with government rules that would force them to place children with same-sex couples or unmarried opposite-sex couples who cohabit. Bakers, florists, photographers, and wedding venues who declined to provide services to same-sex weddings for reasons of conscience have been fined or otherwise penalized. Charities have been forbidden by state immigration laws from offering material and pastoral care to undocumented immigrants.

Above all, many Christians and other people of faith around the world are in particular danger today – not only of losing their liberty, but of losing their lives. For example, within the past 12 months a French priest, Fr. Jacques Hamel, was brutally killed while celebrating Mass. More than 100 Coptic Christians were killed in separate attacks in Egypt. In Iraq and Syria, Christians who have lived peaceably with those of other faiths for centuries are now praying that extremists don't rob them of their future in the cradle of Christianity. These are just dramatic examples that have drawn the world's attention. Credible estimates put the number of Christians are killed for their faith globally *every year* at 100,000 or more. And Catholic historians believe the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced more Christian martyrs than the previous 19 put together.

In light of all this, what can you do to respond??

- Visit the USCCB's Fortnight for Freedom page and utilize many of the resources there: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/fortnight-for-freedom/index.cfm>
- Answer the "Call to Prayer for Life for Life, Marriage, and Religious Liberty" from the USCCB. The "Call to Prayer" asks that Catholics celebrate Eucharistic holy hours monthly, pray the rosary daily, fast, and abstain from meat on Fridays. There is a Facebook Page at <https://www.facebook.com/CallToPrayer>.
- Visit the "Preserve Religious Freedom!" page of the Archdiocesan website for links to these materials and other past, local resources on religious liberty issues: <http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/ministries-offices/catholic-social-action/calendar-events/preservereligiousfreedom/>
- During the Fortnight, attend any special prayer opportunities available in your parish, and participate in Mass on July 4, the culmination of the Fortnight. Prayer is powerful!

To highlight the international plight of Christians, the One Church of Mercy Committee, made up of Roman rite and Maronite rite Catholics in the Archdiocese, brought His Beatitude Bechara Peter Cardinal Rai, the Maronite Patriarch, to Cincinnati during the Fortnight for Freedom in 2016. This year, in conjunction with the visit of the Maronite Bishop Elias Zaidan of the Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles, the Committee will host a screening of the movie, "Our Last Stand" in Cincinnati, a documentary about Christians striving to maintain a presence in the Middle East. It will take place on the afternoon of Saturday, August 12. You can mark your calendars today, and please stay tuned for more details. Contact the Catholic Social Action Office at (513) 421-3131, ext. 2660 or [csa@catholiccincinnati.org](mailto:csa@catholiccincinnati.org) in the meantime for more information.

Thank you for all you do to help preserve and celebrate the Truth that Christ has revealed. May our efforts help freely spread God's love and mercy to our communities and to the ends of the Earth.

With prayerful best wishes, I am,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*+ Dennis M. Schnurr*

Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr  
Archbishop of Cincinnati