

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Catholics everywhere have been appalled at the spectacle of Christians being persecuted for their faith in the Middle East perhaps most, notably the 21 Coptic men beheaded on the beaches of Libya earlier this year. However, the vast scale of Christian martyrdom in this century is not generally appreciated. The International Society for Human Rights estimates that some 150,000 Christians are killed for their faith *every year*.

As American Catholics, we can and should be grateful that our freedom of religion – and everyone else’s freedom of religion – is protected from government incursion by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Today, however, that freedom is being rapidly eroded. That is why for the fourth consecutive year the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is celebrating a Fortnight for Freedom, June 21 to July 4, 2015. These dates encompass the feast days of several great martyrs who were murdered by the state – St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, St. John the Baptist, SS. Peter and Paul, and the First Martyrs of the Church of Rome.

The word “martyr” means “witness” in Greek. The theme of this year’s Fortnight is “Freedom to Bear Witness.” Freedom of religion is being redefined by the federal government to mean only freedom to worship, thus limiting our ability to witness to our faith by our actions. That is wrong. As Pope Francis said last year on the eve of the third Fortnight for Freedom, “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.”

The best-known instance of government incursion on religious liberty is the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate for sterilization, contraception, and abortion-inducing drugs under the Affordable Care Act. This rule forces religious institutions to facilitate and/or fund products and services contrary to their own moral teaching. Further, the federal government tries to define which religious institutions are “religious enough” to merit protection of their religious liberty. Private businesses whose owners have religious objections to the mandate are also affected. Fortunately, the Supreme Court has acted six times so far to block implementation of the mandate. This is very encouraging, but the fight goes on.

Equally serious threats to religious liberty include:

- Catholic foster care and adoption services having 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.
- State immigration laws that forbid charity and pastoral care to undocumented immigrants.
- Penalties levied by courts on bakers, florists, and photographers who declined to provide services to same-sex weddings for reasons of conscience.

And now a new concern has arisen. During oral arguments last month before the U.S. Supreme Court on cases related to same-sex marriage, Justice Samuel Alito asked U.S. Solicitor General Donald B. Verrill Jr., arguing for same-sex couples, whether a university or college opposing same-sex marriage could lose its tax-exempt status. Mr. Verrill replied that “it’s certainly going to be an issue. I don’t deny that. I don’t deny that, Justice Alito. It is going to be an issue.” If Catholic institutions lose their tax-exempt status, that will greatly reduce their ability to bear witness to the Gospel through the corporal works of mercy.

So what can you do to observe the Fortnight for Freedom?

- Stay informed. Go to www.CatholicCincinnati.org and click on “Preserve Religious Freedom” on the lower right. There you will find up-to-date information and links to the USCCB website.
- Answer the “Call to Prayer 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>.
- In addition, 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!
- Display the Preserve Religious Freedom yard sign. You may have one from previous years. If not, a limited number will be available through *The Catholic Telegraph* at a price of two for \$1. Although shipping cannot be offered, the *CT* will arrange pickup points in both Dayton and Cincinnati for those interested. They can be ordered through strosley@catholiccincinnati.org or ghartman@catholiccincinnati.org until June 10.

The ability of our Catholic ministries of education, health care, and charity to bear witness to the Gospel by our service to all people regardless of faith, economic position, or immigration status is endangered by the serious threats to our religious freedom. Please join again this summer with our fellow Catholics, and with people of other faiths, to preserve our God-given and Constitutionally-protected “freedom to bear witness.”

With prayerful best wishes, I am,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Dennis M. Schnurr

Most Reverend Dennis M. Schnurr
Archbishop of Cincinnati