

**Address by Bishop Joseph Binzer for the Rally for Religious Freedom  
June 8, 2012**

My heartfelt thanks to all of you gathered here today in this public square to remind our community and nation of the importance of religious liberty.

As we recognize the significance of religious freedom, I think it's important that we first keep in mind the millions of people of faith throughout the world, whether they be Christians, Muslims, Jews, or of any other religion, who struggle with their very lives to exercise this fundamental human right. Our prayerful solidarity extends to all these people who are persecuted for wanting to live out peacefully their religious convictions.

Thankfully, relatively few of us today have had to suffer such a fate. We are incredibly blessed to live in a nation whose founders included immigrants fleeing from persecutions elsewhere and seeking their own respect and dignity. They ensured that the right to religious liberty would be enshrined in our nation's most fundamental documents. Pope Benedict XVI recently applauded our nation for this "most cherished of American freedoms."

Although our own lives here might not be at stake as elsewhere, it is our religious and American duty to ensure that this freedom is not diluted by any measure. It is just and right for us to oppose any attempts to erode our religious liberty. This is not a partisan issue. This is a major human rights and constitutional issue for everyone.

There are a number of examples of how this freedom is under threat today. One major attack, of course, has been the U.S. Health and Human Services contraceptive mandate on religious institutions, which forces them to pay for contraceptives, sterilizations, and abortion-inducing drugs against their beliefs. The exemption provided for religious employers is so narrow that it fails to cover the vast majority of faith-based organizations, including Catholic hospitals, universities, and service organizations that help millions every year.

Whatever people may personally think about the contraceptive issue, what is at the heart of the matter is that the federal government is now dictating what counts as a religious institution and what doesn't. The HHS rule only defines those institutions worthy enough for an exemption to the mandate as those which evangelize their own faith, primarily employ persons who share

their religious tenets, and primarily serve people who share those same beliefs. Yet, to the contrary, our Catholic hospitals, universities, and service organizations exist to serve *everyone*, regardless of faith. In essence, the Administration's rule has declared that these institutions are not religious enough to fully operate by their moral principles.

As we oppose this unjust mandate that has stemmed from the Administration's implementation of the Affordable Care Act, I believe it's important to make clear that the Catholic Church continues to support universal access to affordable healthcare. The Catholic Church, along with many other religious leaders, firmly believes that the freedom to follow one's conscience and to have access to health care are both fundamental human rights. We will not be forced into a position of choosing between the two. However the mandate and Affordable Care Act get dealt with, we will continue our advocacy and prayer that the many uninsured, low-income people in our country will not be robbed of their human right to healthcare.

Sadly, threats to religious freedom do not end with the HHS mandate. Another example includes recent state laws, such as those in Alabama, which seek to limit the Church's ministry to undocumented immigrants. The law undermines our capacity to administer the sacraments to these children of God, to counsel them, to offer scripture study, or to provide for their most basic needs. These are ministries that are fundamental to the existence of our institutional Church and the consciences of those following Jesus' mission to everyone. We will not withhold the sacraments or basic charity to anyone who may be viewed as a stranger in our midst.

Other threats have included discrimination by the government against Catholic services for victims of human trafficking, because we don't refer for abortion services. Also, in certain states, Catholic Charities adoption services have been driven out of business because we don't place children with same-sex and unmarried, cohabitating couples.

Regardless of one's personal opinions on the circumstances of each of these examples, what is regrettable about all of these attacks is that they each represent an intolerance of our governments to allow us to minister to those in need based on our own values. By this logic, apparently, religious institutions are only allowed to run hospitals if we pay for employees' contraception. And in certain states, the government decides which human beings are worthy of our pastoral care, depending upon the documents that

they carry. Regardless of your faith, or what the issue at hand may be, these limitations on how our faith is allowed to operate in the public square erode every American's freedom.

Finally, as Archbishop Schnurr recently encouraged in a letter to all our priests, I hope that all of us can also renew our commitment to all the work that our faith communities contribute in the public square, which is protected by our religious liberty. This includes exercising selfless ministries of education, charity and social justice that serve all people, regardless of faith, economic position, or immigration status.

I thank you all again for your prophetic witness here today. May our civic officials hear our cry to preserve our religious liberty, our most cherished freedom. May God bless you all.