

Message on Religious Liberty for Crossing the Bridge for Life
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Pope Francis stated to us in his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, “[N]o one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society.” (EG, no.183)

The freedom to discern the light that the one true God shines for our paths to Him, and to peaceably share that journey with others in the public square, is one of our most important human rights. Yet in the news, we read and hear with depressing regularity about victims across our world who have even sacrificed their lives for this right. They include Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, among so many others, and we must consistently stand in solidarity with them and demand the protection of their lives and dignities.

Thankfully, in the United States, we have enshrined the right to religious freedom in our Constitution, and it protects us from much of the religious violence that plagues other parts of the world. Yet, there are still times when we must stand up for that right in our own country, because the governments that represent us can fail even to tolerate some of our deeply held values. So, when we are blessed in a democracy to have the ability to oppose such infringements on our consciences, we must not remain silent. If we don’t push back, then we threaten to erase from our nation’s character the constitutionally protected diversity that has made us great since our country’s beginning.

Today, there are numerous examples of threats to religious liberty. In some states, for instance, draconian immigration laws prohibit faith communities from serving those who come to their door steps based on their documented status. In other states, there have been proposals to force houses of worship to allow guns on their properties, unless they pay for signs forbidding it. But most prominent is, of course, the horrible Health and Human Services mandate that forces religious institutions, like those of the Little Sisters of the Poor, to facilitate or fund through their health insurance plans contraception, including abortifacient drugs, which we see as direct threats to human life. HHS has only granted a narrow exemption to houses of worship and other certain faith associations, which it has unilaterally defined.

And, this is what's at the heart to the threat to our religious freedom . Whatever others may think about certain faith communities' beliefs on contraception and abortion, what is fundamentally troubling for our country with this mandate is that the federal government has decided which institutions are religious enough to get to follow their own beliefs. For instance, while HHS says that the Archdiocese of Cincinnati itself, my employer, may not be subject to the mandate, the wonderful ministries of the Little Sisters of the Poor, who serve the neediest elderly of every race and religion, are. Thus, for the Sisters to offer their employees the fundamental right to healthcare, they now must betray their consciences to protect human life. The immediate issue isn't even if employees would have access to these services, but that the Sisters have to proactively facilitate access to them! This mandate sets a dangerous precedent for any religious institution which may find itself in a position of having values that, within reason, challenge that of the state. It's not the place of any government to determine which communities of faith get to live out their legitimate beliefs and which don't.

Because of the prophetic witness of the Sisters and many others threatened to violate their beliefs on this mandate, a number of temporary court injunctions have thankfully been granted to stop the mandate from being enforced upon them. Ultimately, the final solution to this issue may rest on the courts, and so we continue to ask for your prayers and your consistent advocacy that all our elected and appointed officials can stand up for religious liberty. Today, let's give thanks for the prophetic example that the Sisters have given to all of us, showing how we can follow God's call to compassionately serve the poor and vulnerable and protect all human life. Thank you.