

Fortnight for Freedom: Opening Homily

Most Reverend William E. Lori - Archbishop of Baltimore

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption

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I. Introduction: The Martyrs of Tyburn Hill

A. A few years ago, due to inclement weather that grounded many international flights, I found myself stranded in London during the week just before Christmas. Worse things than that can happen to a traveler but the unexpected pleasure of a week in London enabled me to visit places I hadn't seen for many years – not Harrod's or even Windsor Castle, but places such as Tyburn Hill, where many English martyrs laid down their lives in witness to the Faith, including St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher.

B. I was deeply moved to stand on the spot where, in 1535, Thomas More and John Fisher were beheaded because they refused to comply with the Act of Supremacy, a law which made King Henry VIII Head of the Church and which broke ties of communion with the Roman Pontiff. I also visited the Parish Church in the Tower of London, St. Peter in Chains, and prayed in the crypt where St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher are buried.

I. The Feast Day of Thomas More and John Fisher

A. Tonight we have gathered here in *this* historic national basilica, the first Roman Catholic Cathedral in the United States of America and a monument to religious freedom. We have gathered on the eve of the feast of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, martyrs who laid down their lives rather than violate their consciences or their sacred principles. Their courageous witness of faith continues to stir the minds and hearts of people yearning for authentic freedom, and specifically, for religious freedom just as it inspired those who came to Maryland a century later in 1634, seeking not only to worship God freely but indeed to practice their faith publicly.

B. We do well to speak of St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher in the same breath, because each in his own way symbolizes two aspects of religious freedom we are striving to protect and foster as we begin a two week period of prayer and reflection known as the Fortnight for Freedom.

II. St. Thomas More

A. What does St. Thomas More teach us about protecting religious liberty?

Thomas More was a devout Catholic, a husband and a father, a learned and accomplished man, a lawyer by profession; his conscience was formed by principle and virtue at a time when both were routinely sacrificed for political expediency. Thomas More was chosen to serve in Parliament and rose to become the Chancellor of England in the days of King Henry VIII. When called upon by the King to betray his principles and his conscience, however, More chose instead to put everything at risk, including his own life. Throughout, he defended his cause brilliantly, but to no avail. He staved off martyrdom as long as he could, but when it came, More accepted it courageously.

B. Blessed Pope John Paul II wrote that

“...the life and martyrdom of St. Thomas More have been the source of a message which spans the centuries and which speaks to people everywhere of the inalienable dignity of the human conscience” He added: “. . . Whenever men or women heed the call of truth, their conscience then guides their actions reliably towards good. Precisely because of the witness which he bore, even at the price of his life, to the primacy of truth over power, St. Thomas More is an imperishable example of moral integrity.”

(Proclamation of Thomas More as Patron of Statesman, October 31, 2000, no. 1).

C. More’s witness enriches the Church’s teaching on the dignity of the human person.

For as the Book of Genesis teaches, we are created in God’s image to be participants in his wisdom and love.

Because we are created *in* love and *for* love, we are endowed by the Creator with inherent rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Though only a few could claim St. Thomas More’s influence and integrity, this great saint stands for the individual believer and citizen who seeks, in the words of United States Bishops, “[to] connect worship on Sunday to work on Monday” . . . “[to] carry the values of our faith into family life, the market place, and the public square.”

(U.S. Bishops, “Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice, Introduction, 1998)

- D. St. Thomas More could be said to represent that conscientious private employer or employee who, seeks to avoid doing or facilitating moral evil in course of daily work. while striving to live and work in accord with the demands of social justice. He stands for those who go about their daily work in accord with their faith (cf., DH, 13), and those who understand how dangerous it is to the common good to separate faith from life, the Gospel from culture (CL, 212).**
- E. Until now, it has been entirely possible under federal law for conscientious owners to conduct private businesses in accord with one’s conscience and the teachings of one’s faith. Until now, federal law has also accommodated businesses which are not church organizations but which are related to the mission of the Church, Examples include catholic publishing houses such as Our Sunday Visitor, Catholic insurers, Legatus, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic fraternal organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, just to name a few. The freedom of conscientious and like-minded individuals to conduct such businesses in accord with the teaching of the Church now hangs in the balance. On August 1st, less than six weeks from now, the Health and Human Services mandate will go into effect. This will force conscientious private employers to violate their consciences by funding and facilitating through their employee health insurance plans reproductive “services” that are morally objectionable. As the United States Bishops recently indicated, the HHS mandate violates the personal civil rights of those, who “in their daily lives, strive constantly to act in accordance with their faith and values**

(United for Freedom, March 14, 2012).

III. St. John Fisher

A. St. John Fisher may be less well-known than St. Thomas More, but his witness of faith was no less courageous.

Like St. Thomas More, he possessed great learning and virtue and was an able defender of the faith.

Both More and Fisher refused to sign the Act of Supremacy and both of them paid for their principled stand with their lives.

More, of course, was a layman and Fisher was a bishop.

Ordained a priest in 1491, Fisher would become the Bishop of Rochester in Kent.

B. In the House of Lords, he strongly opposed state interference in Church affairs.

At the same time, he led the Church in reforming itself first and foremost by his own spirit of learning and holiness in communion with the Holy Father, the Successor of Peter.

At length, St. John Fisher found himself at odds with King Henry VIII and with laws passed by the British Parliament which required him to take an oath repudiating papal authority and acknowledging the King as Head of the Church.

This pastor of souls and lover of the Church refused, saying:

“I cannot in anywise possibly take [the oath], except I should make shipwreck of my conscience, and then were I fit to serve neither God nor man.”

C. In the wake of St. John Fisher’s martyrdom,

churches, monasteries, and centers of learning were seized by royal power and were either destroyed or made to break their ties with the Roman Catholic Church.

The government interfered in the internal life of the Church with a cruel thoroughness John Fisher could not have imagined even a few years earlier.

He symbolizes for us our struggle to maintain religious freedom

for church institutions and ministries such as our schools and charities.

We surely are not facing the dire brutality that confronted St. John Fisher,

but our Church and her institutions do find themselves today in perilous waters.

For embedded in the HHS mandate is

a very narrow governmental definition of what constitutes a church;

and if it is not removed, it is likely to spread throughout federal law.

In the HHS mandate, the federal government now defines a church as a body which hires mostly its own members and serves mostly its own members, and which exists primarily to advance its own teachings.

In a word, so long as a church confines itself to the sacristy, then it is exempt from having to fund and facilitate in its health insurance plans government mandated services which are contrary to its own teachings.

But if a church steps beyond the narrow confines of this definition

by hiring those of other faiths and by serving the common good –

...then the government is telling us that such institutions aren't religious enough, that they don't deserve an exemption from funding and facilitating those things which violate the very teachings which inspired churches to establish their institutions in the first place.

D. Friends, we must never allow the government,

--any government, at any time, of any party--

to impose such a constrictive definition on our beloved Church or any church!

Our Church was sent forth by the Lord teach and baptize all the nations.

It was commissioned by our Savior to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

It was sent into the world to do the corporal works of love and mercy.

Don't we see this all around us – in inner-city Catholic schools, in Catholic hospitals, in the work of Catholic Charities so critical for the well being of local communities?

“The Word of God cannot be chained,” St. Paul wrote to Timothy,

and now it is up to us to defend the Church's freedom to fulfill her mission

to freely manifest the love of God by organized works of education and charity.

This is why the Church has engaged the Administration so earnestly,

this is why we are working for legislative protection from the Congress,

this is why, thankfully, so many have filed lawsuits in various parts of the country,

and this is why there is a Fortnight for Freedom—

. . . so that the Church would be free of that government interference

which St. John Fisher warned against in the British Parliament in the 16th century!

IV. Linking the Two Freedoms

A. As Americans, it comes naturally to us

to defend the rights of individuals to follow their consciences not only in their personal lives but also in the course of their daily work. And I know how deeply you value and support church institutions which do the corporal works of mercy on a grand scale. Inspired by St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, how important for us to defend both the religious freedom of individuals and the religious freedom of church institutions – for the two are inseparably linked. As the Second Vatican Council taught:

“. . . the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself” (DH, 2).

- B. In differing ways, both the Church’s teaching and our nation’s founding documents acknowledge that the Creator has endowed individuals with freedom of conscience. Such freedom goes to the heart of the dignity of the human person. Pope Benedict recently said that religious freedom is constitutive of human dignity because it pertains to the relationship of human beings to the God who created them. The Holy Father then reminds us of the grave consequences that follow when governments ignore this fundamental aspects of the human person:
- “To deny or arbitrarily restrict [religious] freedom is to foster a reductive vision of the human person; to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family”
- (Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace, 2010).

- C. Our churches and their institutions have freedom not only because they are made up of individual persons endowed with freedom, but because our institutions are like persons. In fact, we call them “moral persons” because they truly do possess some of the characteristics of persons. Like all of us, these institutions claim their identity and fulfill their mission based on the principles and convictions by which they are guided. Like individual persons, institutions also have rights and responsibilities which flow from their guiding principles and convictions,

and in the case of our institutions, these guiding principles and convictions are to be found in the teaching of Christ as conveyed through the Church. Religious freedom includes the freedom of individuals to act in accord with their faith but also the freedom of church institutions to act in according with their teachings and to serve as a buffer between the power of the state and the freedom of the individual conscience. If we fail to defend the rights of individuals, the freedom of institutions will be at risk and if we fail to defend the rights of our institutions, individual liberty will be at risk. More needs Fisher and Fisher needs More!

V. Conclusion

A. And we need them both more than ever.

Even if current threats like the HHS mandate were to be overcome, we would still have to face powerful forces which seek to prevent religious faith from exerting an appropriate & necessary influence within our culture. Some would even say that the Catholic Church is a primary obstacle that stands in the way of creating a completely secular culture in the United States. Let us remain united with our ecumenical & interfaith partners in being that obstacle! For love of country, let us bear constant witness, individually and collectively, to those moral truths and values which are the foundation of democracy and the basis for building a society that is just, peaceful, and charitable. By prayer, education, and by exercising our rights as citizens, let us never cease defending the only notion of freedom worthy of our dignity as persons and sturdy enough to support our democratic way of life and it's this: 'freedom is not the power of doing what we like but the right of being able to do what we ought.' For, as George Washington said in his Farewell Address, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

B. As you may know, only one Catholic signed the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the cousin of Archbishop John Carroll, who laid the cornerstone of this Basilica in 1806.

Like all Catholics, Charles Carroll was forbidden by Maryland colonial law from taking any part in political life, especially from holding office.

Carroll risked his life, family, and property by supporting the revolutionary cause but he did so, and I quote, “to obtain religious as well as civil liberty.” He added:

“God grant that this religious liberty may be preserved in these states to the end of time, and that all who believe in the religion of Christ may practice the leading principle of charity, the basis of every other virtue.”

- C. If freedom is a system based on courage and if the motive of democracy is love, then let us strive in God’s grace, throughout this Fortnight and beyond, to be men and women of courageous love for the glory of God, for the good of the Church and for love of country.**