

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

understanding the basics ▪ defending a right

God's Gift, America's Heritage (1 of 7)

To the west of Nassau and Suffolk counties, a tower in lower Manhattan, rising ever-higher into the sky, bears the name of that which makes this nation great: freedom. America is synonymous with freedom. It is the hallmark of our republic.

Living in the land of the free, we inherit a legacy of liberty passed down from our founders. They put forth clearly and succinctly what freedom entails, enshrining the basic rights of every American in our nation's founding documents, most especially in the Bill of Rights. It was the genius of the American project to take what belongs to each person by virtue of their human dignity, their God-given liberties, and place these freedoms at the heart of a democratic society. In the United States, rights and freedoms were no longer the domain of rulers to parcel out. Here, those God-given rights were documented for all to see and none to snatch.

As believers, we hold especially dear our nation's guarantee to religious freedom and freedom of conscience. When the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1789, this freedom had the distinction of being the First Amendment. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," our founders wisely declared. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty's recent statement *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty* stresses the esteem with which those first citizens regarded this right.

"By the end of the 18th century, our nation's founders embraced freedom of religion as an essential condition of a free and democratic society. James Madison, often called the Father of the Constitution, described conscience as 'the most sacred of all property.' He wrote that 'the Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate.' George Washington wrote that 'the establishment of Civil and Religious Liberty was the Motive that induced me to the field of battle.'"

With this appreciation of religious liberty firmly in place alongside other freedoms, the founders and a new nation set out on a bold experiment. Over the centuries, injustices in the application of our fundamental rights were overcome despite resistance and because of courage: freedom would no longer be conditioned by color; suffrage would belong to all. Setbacks came with growth, most egregiously when the fundamental right to life was denied to our most vulnerable, the unborn. However, as our union strove to become more perfect, respect for our fundamental rights, including our right to religious liberty and freedom of conscience, seemed assured. That is, until recently.

"As a community of faith, we must commit ourselves to prayer and fasting that wisdom and justice may prevail and religious liberty may be restored."

BISHOP WILLIAM MURPHY

PRAYER

Almighty God, Father of all nations, for freedom you have set us free in Christ Jesus (Gal 5:1).

We praise and bless you for the gift of religious liberty, the foundation of human rights, justice, and the common good. Grant to our leaders the wisdom to protect and promote our liberties; By your grace may we have the courage to defend them, for ourselves and for all those who live in this blessed land.

We ask this through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, our patroness, and in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, with whom you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*First in a series of seven bulletin inserts.
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