

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

understanding the basics • defending a right

Safeguarding America's Foundation (5 of 7)

One of the greatest characteristics that defines our nation's heritage is the religious freedom that is granted to all Americans as a fundamental right by the Constitution of the United States. That right, as Professor Mary Ann Glendon points out, has served as the hallmark of a democratic society and "enabled this nation's diverse religions to flourish and coexist in relative harmony." Expressing the implications of this freedom, Thomas Jefferson said it best when he assured the Ursuline Sisters of Louisiana in the early 1800s (who ran hospitals, orphanages, and schools) that the principles of the Constitution were a "sure guarantee" that their ministry – which served not only Catholics but people of all faith traditions – would always be "free to govern itself according to its own voluntary rules, without interference of civil authority."

This fundamental freedom, clearly articulated by President Jefferson, has been our country's lifeblood. It has supported and nourished the foundation of who we are as a nation. It has enabled all believers to bring the experience of their Sabbath into the daily life of the nation. In short, it has allowed all to practice what they believe. It has enabled Catholics over the centuries to be about the works of charity our faith demands and minister to Christ in the least of our brothers and sister, regardless of their creed. This work continues today.

Catholic hospitals bring healing to countless people, including the poor, the marginalized, and the disadvantaged.

Catholic Relief Services aids millions of people in this country and abroad in the worst moments of their lives.

Catholic Charities works tirelessly in trying to reduce poverty, respond to the needs of the poor, and to build up healthy communities.

All of this, of course, was made possible because of our nation's understanding of religious liberty. As Professor Glendon points out, even non-believers admit this fact. Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher and atheist, says in *An Awareness of what is Missing: faith and reason in a post secular age*: "Among the modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human." Society, it is clear, must be open to faith, as our nation has been since its inception. The HHS mandate issued by the Obama Administration marginalizes religion and reduces religious liberty. In doing so, it also threatens to shatter the bedrock that enables every citizen – of every faith – to pursue life, liberty, and happiness according to the moral convictions prescribed by their faith. Defending our religious liberty means safeguarding America's foundation.

"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.