

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

understanding the basics ▪ defending a right

Speaking for the Church: Our Shepherds (6 of 7)

Our Catholic faith is clear: Christ is present in his Church. What seems to many a mere institution is in fact a holy people. It is a mystical body that has Christ as its head. It is a pilgrim people that journeys to the Father. By baptism, it is us. And by Christ's design, it is hierarchically ordered. This order, like any good order, ensures unity, vitality, and growth. Out of love, the Lord Jesus gave us, his body, overseers to teach, govern, and sanctify. Striving to be faithful imitators of Christ the Good Shepherd, those overseers, the bishops, lay down their lives in service so that God's people may be built up and Christ proclaimed.

This basic teaching of our faith is important to remember amid the current conversation surrounding the HHS mandate. After all, there are many voices in the debate, even in the Catholic fold, and the tendency today is to treat the voice of the bishops as one among many. To do so though is to forget their Christ-given place among us. Bishop Murphy reminds us that the bishops speak for the Church. "There are many opinions among Catholics," he says, "but if you want to know what the Church teaches and what her faith demands, ask the bishops who, alone as the successors of the apostles in union with the pope, are the ones who can be trusted to offer, not an opinion, but the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church."

To assist them in their role as shepherds of the flock, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops formed an Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty in September 2011. The committee was charged with identifying threats made towards religious freedom and addressing the profound impact those threats would have on the faithful. Archbishop-designate William Lori of Baltimore was named as chair. Under his leadership, its members have worked closely with national organizations, charities, ecumenical and interreligious partners, and scholars to form a united and forceful front in defense of religious freedom for every American. Since January 2012 the committee has clearly articulated the specific ways in which the HHS mandate poses serious threats to America's heritage of religious freedom and has shown how the mandate's regulations impact Catholic institutions.

Recognizing the importance of educating the faithful in this matter, the committee has provided on its website various resources and legislative updates to help Catholics around the country stay informed. Most recently, the committee has issued a guiding document entitled *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty*. In that statement, the overall sentiment is made clear in the opening lines: "We are Catholics. We are Americans. We are proud to be both...To be Catholic and American should mean not having to choose one over the other."

"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.