



Fortnight for Freedom: Closing Homily
Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz- Archbishop of Louisville
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
July 4, 2014

Introduction

We are gathered to honor religious freedom in this great nation and to complete the celebration of the Fortnight for Freedom. Thank you, Cardinal Wuerl, and thank you each participant at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and those who join us via TV. The theme of this third annual celebration is “freedom to serve.”

We pray in gratitude for our freedom to serve

How right it is for us to gather at the Holy Eucharist to pray for our precious gift of religious freedom. From the beginning of our nation, people of faith have had a profound impact on the life of our nation precisely because we have used this freedom to serve others.

How right it is for us to hear the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah making it clear: a faith that does not show itself in acts of service to others – is a dead faith. A faith that leads to serving will be a light to shine in darkness!

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is very critical of certain religious leaders of his day precisely because they did not put their faith into action. How vivid is the image of one about to offer a gift in sacrifice to God who suddenly recalls that he has offended a brother? Leave the gift. Go and be reconciled, and then come back and offer that gift to God. Faith without action is a dead faith.

Over thirty years ago, St. John Paul II summarized this truth in his encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. Here is what he said: “Christ teaches us that the best use of freedom is charity, which takes concrete form in

self-giving and in service.” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 21) Yes, we are at our best when we are free to serve others.

Thank God for the Little Sisters of the Poor

Thousands of religious communities, Catholic Charities, Catholic hospitals and other organizations exemplify this faith in action. To illustrate, let me tell you of one sterling example of faith in action: the Little Sisters of the Poor. Founded over 175 years ago, this wonderful community of women religious has from the beginning sought to live out their faith. Their special gift (or charism) is one that the world easily understands. They show their love for God by seeking out and serving the poorest and most frail of the elderly. They have been doing so for all these decades in a very quiet way, but also in a very public way – so much so that you and I have come to know of them and their great ministry.

They serve within the shadows of this National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, and they serve in my home town – at St. Joseph Home in Louisville, Ky. Yes, their work is public. We all know of it. Everyone, and I mean everyone, loves the Little Sisters of the Poor. We know of their service so much that we want our mothers and fathers, our aunts and uncles to be served by the Little Sisters of the Poor and by their lay coworkers who share in that special charism of service. Their work is public not because they want to toot their own horn – just the opposite – but because as Isaiah said 2500 years ago, when you remove oppression from your midst and serve others, then light shall rise for you in the darkness.

To say that their work is public does not mean that it is impersonal or sterile. No, their acts of service are intimately personal. They are not a “vending machine” dispensing impersonal charity – without convictions, conscience and a sense of right and wrong. No, they are providing intimately personal care – a care that we deeply desire for our family members and for all people in need. Their work is an expression of their love of God and God’s love of others shining through their lives. We see light rising forth in the darkness and we like what we see.

Faith in action is good for America

This faith filled service is good for America. In my early days as a priest I had the privilege of serving in Catholic Charities. For more than two decades, I saw firsthand, as a social worker, the mission of faith turned into action. I saw people of all faiths being served. As Cardinal Hickey said many years ago, we

serve others not because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic. What was unique in this service is that it was done with integrity – always consistent with our Catholic faith. We served people of all backgrounds, but we did so without ever violating the core beliefs that motivated that service. Cardinal Dolan of New York has said it well: “America is at its best when religion has a place at the table.”

Real threats to this freedom to serve with charity and integrity of faith

There are real threats to religious freedom throughout the world and overseas; many people are suffering terribly for their faith. Please don't forget them. Please remember to pray for them. And even at our doorstep, the Little Sisters of the Poor have gone to court to protect their right to serve with charity and integrity of faith. They hate having to go to court. However, even more, they hate having to make a false choice. They cannot make a choice either to stop serving those in need or to compromise the faith that is their very reason and power to serve! And we need to protect their ability to serve with love and integrity. We cannot stand by and allow anyone to force us to separate our acts of service from the living faith that motivates these acts, and we cannot allow anyone to force us to facilitate immoral acts that go against our clearly demonstrated living faith.

This past week the Supreme Court of our land gave a very encouraging decision. It provided protection to certain private companies, and the families who run them, to conduct their businesses without violating their conscientious religious beliefs. We are encouraged. However, this decision does not address the plight of the Little Sisters of the Poor and so many others. We must re-double our efforts to support and defend them.

The stakes are high. Pope Francis has told us of the great dangers in too narrow an understanding of religious freedom. In his still new apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says this: “(a) healthy pluralism...does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual's conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 255)

We need a robust and healthy religious freedom in our nation. We need laws like the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act to protect people of deep faith convictions when their practice is threatened. This act rightly holds our government to high standards. It ensures that, when government authorities

would impose a practice that conflicts with the deeply held religious beliefs of some, the government must make a special showing to justify both the ends and the means. The government's ends must be compelling, and it must choose the means, among all those available, that is the least restrictive of religious exercise.

There are a number of threats to religious freedom in our nation deserving our attention. Let me mention two especially important ones. We are obliged by our faith to protect the precious gift of marriage as the permanent, faithful, fruitful union of one man and one woman. It is the gift upon which our society is built. And so we must remain free to affirm that uniquely valuable gift in a unique way, without risk of government sanction. We are also obliged by our faith to reach out to welcome, respect and serve immigrant children and families in our nation. And so again, we must remain free to serve these most vulnerable of our sisters and brothers, without risk of government sanction. Both are examples in which we have risen, and will continue to rise, to preserve religious freedom.

Conclusion

We Catholics gather in this National Shrine to the Immaculate Conception to proclaim that we seek only to be good citizens: good citizens of Heaven and of earth! Yes, we are free – free to serve. We have a right and responsibility to serve with all our hearts, with all the passion that comes from our love of God and from the deep and abiding convictions around which we build our lives. Our nation is built on this service and needs this service. Our faith requires it. Thank God for our freedom to serve and our passionate resolve to defend that right.