

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

Our 'First, Most Cherished Liberty' in danger

As Lord Chancellor of England in the 16th century, Thomas More had a particularly close relationship with Henry VIII, who admired and counted on him. More's faith, values, intellect, education and conscience had shaped him into a man of integrity, integrity which in its own way reflected positively — and thus usefully — on the king.

As Lord Chancellor of England, More was no puppet, and when demanded by the king to do something he considered unethical, he responded, in so many words, "I cannot."

More spent the last 15 months of his life imprisoned in the Tower of London for refusing to sanction Henry's divorce from Queen Catherine of Aragon and for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy. Alone in the drafty Bell Tower, he was permitted infrequent and painfully brief visits from his family and was increasingly deprived even of the books he loved to read.

The loneliness of those 15 months must have been torture for this active family man, this man of deep faith, this man of conviction.

More turned his place of confinement into a cell of prayer; and much of what he wrote during that time were prayers or meditations on the faith. He found himself strung on the cross because of his faith and conscience and asked God to help him remain faithful.

'Stand up again'

Amidst the bewildering political battles and legal semantics of 16th century England, More came to the realization that the only solution was not compromise, but the cross. He believed that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus everything had been resolved. He would cling to the cross, for in so doing he was clinging to Jesus.

More shares his feast day, June 22, with St. John Fisher. Both were beheaded in 1535, Fisher on June 22 and More on July 6. Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, had also resisted the king's pressure to approve the divorce and refused to sign Henry's Act of Succession. Twice imprisoned for his resistance, his execution came after 10 difficult months in the Tower of London.



ARCHBISHOP
J. PETER
SARTAIN

From prison, More wrote to his daughter, Margaret:

"I will not mistrust him (God), Meg, though I shall

feel myself weakening and on the verge of being overcome with fear. I shall remember how St. Peter at a blast of wind began to sink because of his lack of faith, and I shall do as he did: call upon Christ and pray to him for help. And then I trust he shall place his holy hand on me and in the stormy seas hold me up from drowning.

"And if he permits me to play St. Peter further and to fall to the ground and swear and forswear (in denial of Christ), may God our Lord in his tender mercy keep me from this, and let me lose if it so happen, and never win thereby! Still, if this should happen, afterward I trust that in his goodness he will look on me with pity as he did upon St. Peter, and make me stand up again and confess the truth of my conscience afresh and endure here the shame and harm of my own fault."

Basic human right

More and Fisher refused to act against their faith and conscience, and they paid the ultimate price. They are among those we remember during this "Fortnight for Freedom," June 21–July 4, an observance encouraged by the bishops of the U.S.

Sadly, we live at a time when our treasured religious freedom — our "First Freedom" — is in serious danger.

Chief among the freedoms for which our American forbears fought was religious freedom. Recent events here and abroad have convinced us of the need to highlight this, "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty," and call upon Catholics to reflect on it and do all in our power to preserve it.

The First Amendment to the Constitution reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

The First Amendment both ensures that there will never be an established religion in this country and protects the God-given right of every citizen to live his or her religion freely, fully, and with respect. This basic human right has many implications.

The threat to religious freedom exists in many parts of the world, however, and we bishops also wish to draw attention to all who experience profound suffering as their right to religious freedom is denied or savagely attacked.

Home and abroad

We recall violence against Coptic Christians in Egypt; the Christmas Eve bombings of churches in Nigeria as well as recent violence against Christians there; the October 2010 attack on worshippers at a Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad; and the oppression of Christians in Indonesia and Pakistan — just to mention a few instances.

The world often looks to America to uphold and preserve the high value of religious

freedom, a right spelled out beautifully in the groundbreaking document of Vatican II, "Dignitatis Humanae." An American Jesuit priest, John Courtney Murray, was highly influential in the development of that document.

Our "Fortnight for Freedom," then, gives us the opportunity to reflect on a precious part of our American heritage, threats to religious freedom at home and abroad, and the heroism and holiness of those who would not act against their faith in God and all it implies for them.

We Catholics have every right to be proud of our American heritage, every right to be patriotic. St. Thomas More loved his country, loved the king. But quoting More's renowned last words, we say in our own way that we, too, are "the King's good servant, but God's first."

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