‘First freedom’ existed before the state

Over the past several years, many religious leaders in the United States, and most especially Catholic bishops, have spoken out about real threats to religious freedom in our country and around the world. Those threats continue, and we bishops have announced the observance of a second “Fortnight for Freedom,” June 21 to July 4.

Why do we continue to speak about this “first freedom”? In our country, faith enriches public life and always has. Not only do people of faith strive to live by a high standard of behavior and morality; they also contribute immeasurably to the stability of our nation through works of charity, volunteerism, civic involvement and patriotism.

Our founders recognized that, even though no religion should be established as the state religion, religion and religious people deserve a place at the table.

Threats against religious freedom are current, real and concrete. Many fear that such threats are only the current stretch of a long-term erosion of our country’s basic pledge to the freedom of religion and, just as seriously, a deliberate sidelining of religious beliefs and the contribution that people who hold them dear make to public conversation.

‘Immune from coercion’

This is not simply a Catholic concern — it is a concern of all religious traditions across the world.

The First Amendment to the United States 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 Declaration on Religious Freedom of the Second Vatican Council, “Dignitatis Humanae” (“Of Human Dignity”), includes this key passage: “… the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men and women are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups or of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others … “This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a human right has many implications.

As the founders of this country would put it, religious freedom is an “inalienable” right. It is a right that exists even before the state itself. Made in God’s image and likeness, every human person possesses God-given dignity which the state must respect. On the one hand, the state cannot compel one to believe; on the other hand, it cannot coerce one to act against his or her belief or against his or her conscience. Even God does not force our belief or our love!

Make concerns known

During this year’s Fortnight for Freedom, we bishops ask the people of our dioceses to educate themselves about threats to religious liberty here and abroad and make our concerns known to elected officials and community leaders. Specifically:

• We encourage Catholics around the country to stand together in support of religious liberty for all — our first freedom as Americans and as people made in the image of God.
• We want to draw attention to growing intrusions on religious liberty, such as the HHS mandate, that could force religious believers to violate deeply held beliefs. Moreover, the HHS mandate could harm the poor and those who serve them because it could force faith-based charities to pay steep fines for abiding by their religious principles, reducing their ability to serve the poor, the sick and the vulnerable. The mandate takes effect Aug. 1, making this year’s Fortnight especially important.
• We encourage everyone to educate themselves about the many facets of the issue by using the excellent resources found at www.Fortnight4Freedom.org.
• We encourage our legislators to support H.R. 940, the Health Care Conscience Rights Act.

The saints who are particularly remembered during the Fortnight for Freedom, St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, paid a great price for heroic public stands for their religious beliefs. They would not forget that faith makes a vital contribution to society, and when faith is fettered, society is also in chains.

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