

June 26, 2016 3:00 p.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Diocesan Observance of “Fortnight for Freedom”

Eucharistic Holy Hour: “Witnesses to Freedom”

(Eph. 6:10-20; Mt. 5: 13-16)

Let me extend to you a very sincere welcome to our Cathedral on this beautiful warm June Sunday afternoon. While there are many other important things going on a great summer day like this, we, who have taken the time to come here for this Eucharistic Holy Hour in the midst of this Fortnight for Freedom, are doing something equally important.

What is the “Fortnight for Freedom”? Over the last several years, there has been an increased pressure being brought to bear on religion----a growing effort-- --thru the culture as well as thru the legislative and judicial processes of our country----to “sideline” religion; or to put it another way, to separate religion and religious values from the “day-to-day life of our society”.

At first it was subtle; then it got a bit more direct; and I think we would all agree that it is becoming more blatant and obvious.

A few years ago, the Bishops in the United States decided that we should focus special attention on this “crisis” during this “fortnight”---these two weeks in the middle of the summer that leads up to our most precious national holiday---the 4th of July/Independence Day/the Day we celebrate our treasured Freedoms, including the freedom that this country was established on, Religious Freedom. During these two weeks, the Bishops urge us to find our own unique and special ways to reflect on the many saints and Martyrs who are celebrated during this two week period----and to recognize them as “Witnesses to Freedom”.

On the 2nd day of this Fortnight---this past Wednesday, June 22nd ----we celebrated the lives of two great “witnesses to Freedom”, St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, who both were martyred by King Henry VIII for standing up for Religious Freedom. On Friday June 24th we celebrated the Birth of John the Baptist whose whole life mission was to prepare the way for the Lord, and who was martyred by Herod for standing up for the Truth. In a few days, this coming Wednesday, June 29th, we will celebrate the lives of the two great heroes of our Church, Sts. Peter and Paul---the great Apostles who began the mission of the Church entrusted to them by Jesus.

It's good to think about the Saints as long as we think about them in real lives. Sometimes we think about Saints as though they were made of "plastic" and lived their lives 24/7 in a constant state of holiness. But for most saints, that's not true; they were people just like us, living in the midst of the challenges and crises and difficulties of their time in history, and who were called to let their "light" shine out in the midst of the "darkness" of their time.

That's why today's Gospel passage is so important----Jesus gives us the basic definition of what it means to live "holy" lives. At the very beginning of Jesus' most important teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, right after teaching the Beatitudes, Jesus told His disciples that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Salt in a shaker does no good in and of itself. Salt has no real purpose by itself; it must be blended with other things to bring out the true flavor and zest. Light is similar. That's why Jesus went out to caution the disciples to "let their light shine" and to not hide it "under a bushel basket".

That is the definition of holiness, and that is what the Saints did----and the Martyrs did it to the extreme point of giving their lives. By reflecting on the lives of the Saints and Martyrs, and other Heroes of our country's Independence, we readily see that Freedom always comes with a huge price, and we also see that Freedom is about much more than personal pleasure.

In the 2nd Reading for today's Sunday Mass, we heard St. Paul teach us in his Letter to the Galatians: *"For freedom Christ set us free....But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather serve one another through love."* There are constant struggles within the hearts of each of us between the "flesh" and the "spirit". We---humanity----has been caught up in a conflict with the forces of darkness since the beginning of time. And as long as we live in this world, we always will be.

As we look around our world, we see the presence of terrorism, secularism, materialism, and all the awful effects of those, and many other "isms". These are demonstrations of "the flesh"----"darkness"---in our world.

We are witnessing violent religious persecutions in many parts of the world----we are once again living in the "age of the martyrs" in many parts of the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe.

The “persecutions” here in our country are less violent; more subtle---at least for now. Pope Francis recently referred to what is going on here in the West as “polite persecutions”.

When we as Christians/Catholics stand up for the teachings of our faith, which includes speaking out against abortion rights, euthanasia, same-sex legalized marriage, and protesting being forced to provide contraceptives in our health care programs----we are now labeled as “intolerant” and we are accused of “hate speech”.

We may not yet be called upon to shed our blood or give up our lives, but we are certainly being forced to limit our ministries, and being told to keep “our Light” under the bushel basket or within the walls of our churches, not shining it where others have to see it. Well, that’s pretty clearly not what Jesus told us to do.

And so, what do we do? Surely we must pray very earnestly for those who are being murdered, killed, mutilated, and driven from their homelands because of their religious affiliations. We must also demand, through our legislative and judicial processes, that our government leaders do more to protect people conscience and religious rights. And we have to stand up for ourselves----if the government won’t protect it, then we have to fight for it.

In today’s Second Reading, St. Paul made it very clear and very realistic that we must fight, and how we are to fight---though we never submit to retaliation; our “fight” is spiritual and it is non-violent. Just as the primordial battle between good and evil has been going on since the beginning of time, we must enter into the battle in our own day and time. As St. Paul said, we need to *“draw our strength from the Lord and His mighty power”*. And since anyone going into battle needs to wear protective armor, St. Paul tells us that our faith gives us all we need:

- “put on the armor of God”
- “gird your loins with God’s truth”
- “have as your breastplate God’s righteousness”
- “wear on your feet the Gospel of Peace”
- have faith as your “shield”
- wear “salvation” as your helmet,
- use as your sword the Word of God

And, as St. Paul concludes, we prepare ourselves for the battle in these spiritual clothes so that *“I may have the courage to speak as I must.”*

But we do more than “fight” with words, and actions; we must also resort to the power of prayer, fasting and self-denial.

We do all this so that we protect and defend the freedom of practicing our religion; we must make sure that we’re truly putting our faith into action, here in this world, for the purpose of advancing the Kingdom of God.

When all is said and done, we must pray that we can be faithful to the mission that we were first given on the day of our Baptism: to seek first the Kingdom of God above all else and live righteously, and He will give you everything else that you will need. (Mt. 6:33)

God bless you all. And God bless America!