



Fortnight for Freedom: Closing Homily
His Eminence, Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
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Your Faith Is a Remedy for What Ails Our Society

Four years ago, I had the privilege and joy of participating in an event in southern Maryland that tells a story that we need to hear again today when we commemorate the Fourth of July, our nation's independence, and our freedom as citizens of this great country.

With pageantry and prayerful ceremony, hundreds of people gathered at the reconstructed 1667 brick chapel in historic St. Mary's City, Maryland, for an unusual event. The sheriff of St. Mary's County, using an exact reproduction of what is arguably the very key that his predecessor used to seal the chapel in 1704, unlocked its tall, sturdy wooden doors. Together with representatives of the Jesuit community in Maryland, I had the privilege of pushing open the doors.

The unlocking, while a symbolic or ceremonial event, carried with it great significance because it was a reminder that we are a free people and among the rights we celebrate are freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. But it also recalled that our own freedoms are fragile and easily compromised.

In 1634, when the *Ark* and the *Dove* [boats] arrived, carrying nearly 150 English settlers to what is now St. Mary's County, those brave women and men established the first settlement to guarantee religious liberty to all of the inhabitants. In effect, they constructed what would become known as the birthplace of religious freedom in America.

All of us, as spiritual descendants of those intrepid women and men, can rejoice and take pride in their vision and courage.

Unfortunately, in 1704, when those who did not share this foresight and Catholic perspective gained political control, they revoked the freedom of religion in the colony. They found it more convenient to silence the Church — even with force — than to live in peace with her and her Gospel message. The royal governor ordered the brick chapel locked and never again used for religious purposes. The Jesuits later dismantled the chapel and used its bricks to construct a manor house at the St. Inigoes Mission.

The story of the rebuilding of the brick chapel is an intriguing narrative in itself. Despite the efforts to silence the Church, the early Catholics in Maryland persevered. Three centuries later, we celebrated a

visible, tangible testimony to an inalienable right — our inherent human right to religious liberty and the blessing of freedom of conscience.

Today, we Catholics from all backgrounds and walks of life gather at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in our nation's capital for the closing Mass of the Fortnight for Freedom.

I can think of no better way for us to end our second nationwide Fortnight of Freedom than to come together, to stand together and to pray together in thanksgiving for our God-given gift of religious freedom, enshrined in the "First Freedom" in the United States Constitution's Bill of Rights.

On July 4, we mark Independence Day, our nation's birthday, a special time to remember and celebrate who we are as Americans. We recall that on this date in 1776 our founding charter, our Declaration of Independence, was signed. Here in our nation's capital, we can visit the National Archives and see this remarkable statement which includes the unforgettable phrase, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

From the beginning of our nation, the founders recognized our equality and liberty and that those rights were bestowed on us by God.

As our first reading today from the Book of Genesis tells us, God created all things and established the order of creation, including the unique role of human beings — men and women created in the image and likeness of God.

After the nation's bicentennial, a monument to the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence was dedicated near the Lincoln Memorial's reflecting pool. Carved in stone are replicas of each signature, along with the signer's name, occupation and hometown and state. These men represented all walks of life and backgrounds. They were lawyers, merchants, physicians, farm owners and surveyors. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania was a printer and scientist. Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Marylander and the only Catholic signer of the Declaration, was a merchant and farmer. Lyman Hall of Georgia was a physician and Congregationalist minister.

These signers professed many different faiths. They were Catholic, Congregationalist, Deist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Quaker and Unitarian. From many different backgrounds, representing many religions, they stood united for liberty.

Over the centuries, since that decision to lock the brick chapel, our struggle for liberty, the Declaration of Independence and our Revolutionary War, we have all recognized the importance of religious faith in a free and democratic society.

Even today, in the context of a secular world, the quiet, soft and gentle voice of the Spirit has not been stilled. It continues to speak to human hearts. Not by bread alone do we live.

The second reading for today, taken from the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, reminds us that we must not "grieve the Holy Spirit of God with which you were sealed."

We must always be open to the promptings of the Spirit. Our commitment to religious liberty, to human freedom, to our faith does not rest on our individual resolve or limited resources. The First Letter of St. Peter reminds us, “You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and the abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

The celebration of the unlocking of the brick chapel is the recognition of the place of values — moral, ethical and religious — in life and in the society of which we are a formative part.

As the key turned in the lock and the doors swung open, we were all provided an opportunity to reflect that, sadly, there are still those who think that the best way to deal with opposing opinions, differing views, moral perspectives and ethical imperatives is through force.

Closer to our day, we see another tactic. The Church is denounced as prejudiced, narrow-minded or even un-American simply because her teaching respects human life upholds marriage and calls for health care for the most needy in our country.

In March, just across town, we witnessed an example of the new intolerance, the new form of locking doors. At George Washington University, an effort was made to silence the Catholic chaplain and to “lock out” his ministry to Catholic students and faculty just because he taught those who freely came to Mass what Jesus said about marriage.

And so, here we are.

The idea that the pastor of a parish today or the chaplain of a religious community or campus ministry today should simply be silenced because he faithfully announces the Gospel of Jesus Christ — that he should not be allowed to engage in dialogue with our culture, even in a place that is dedicated to the free and diverse expression of ideas — may seem somewhat radical today, but you have to remember there have always been those who try to force their views on all of us. There have always been those who want to lock doors so the voice of the Gospel cannot be heard.

When we talk about marriage, when we speak about the dignity of human life, when we teach about the natural moral order, we are lifting up elements that we find deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Just because someone wants to change all of that today does not mean that the rest of us no longer have a place in this society.

Remember, after someone says you cannot speak here, then comes the sentence, “And you do not belong here.” Our response must be the response of Jesus Christ, the response of his Church, a response rooted in love.

The Gospel chosen for today reminds us that Jesus calls us to follow his invitation to love one another and to accept this challenge as the norm for our way of living.

When others use force, there will always be the temptation to respond in kind. But we must respond out of who we are. We are followers of Jesus Christ. We speak the truth in love.

Again, in the second reading, St. Paul tells us, “So be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love.”

To speak out against any form of discrimination, social injustice or the redefinition of marriage, marital relations or threats to the dignity of life is not to force values upon our society, but, rather, to call our society to its own long-accepted moral principles and commitment to defend basic human rights.

The celebration at historic St. Mary's City was a tribute to the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and the ultimate victory of truth. But it was also a reminder that there are always those with a key ready to close us out of the public forum and our rightful and legitimate place in the debates over what is good public policy.

The beautiful fall afternoon ceremony of the unlocking of the brick chapel was not just a revisiting of history but, in fact, a study of current events.

In January 2012, Pope Benedict XVI explained to United States bishops in Rome the challenge to our culture of a "radical secularism which finds increasing expression in the political and cultural spheres." He went on to highlight "of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. ... The seriousness of these threats needs to be clearly appreciated at every level of ecclesial life."

The Holy Father's answer to this "radical secularism" and "denial of rights" is, as he explained, "an engaged, articulate and well-formed Catholic laity endowed with a strong critical sense vis-à-vis the dominant culture and with the courage to counter a reductive secularism." And here you are!

Your faith is a remedy for what ails our society. The mission of all of us, but particularly of the laity, is to engage the culture with the Good News that only comes from Jesus Christ.

This may seem daunting, but, remember, we are a people of hope. It is why Blessed John Paul II called for the New Evangelization and why Pope Benedict XVI carried this call into the new millennium and why Pope Francis is such an example of living faith with courage and serenity. We know that while we must still defend our freedom, Christ has already won the final victory.

In a moment, we will celebrate holy Mass. At each Mass, we remember and celebrate who we are as Catholics. We gather around the table of the Lord to receive the gift of the Eucharist, just as the apostles gathered around Jesus at the Last Supper. The paschal mystery of Jesus' suffering, death on the cross and resurrection is made real to us, here and now, and then we go out to the world to share that gift of Jesus' new life and his love.

That new life in Christ, that living out of our faith, is reflected not only in our worship and in our personal acts of charity, but in our Church's educational, health care and social-ministry outreach. Those works, those acts of faith, are threatened whenever our religious freedom is eroded.

Before I elevate the consecrated Host and the chalice of Jesus' blood, we are all on our knees together. Let us thank Our Lord for the gift of life and for the freedom to love and worship our God. Pray that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we may be his witnesses.

In the presence of Our Lord, we will kneel. There is a time to be on one's knees. There is also a time when we need to stand — to stand up.

Some time ago, I was invited to give an invocation at a public event attended by hundreds and hundreds of people. The prayer was to follow the presentation of the flag and the singing of the *Star-Spangled Banner*.

From behind the curtain on stage where I stood, I could see the young man who sat with a console on his lap controlling the light and sound mechanisms for the hall. He also had in his hand the script to tell him when to dim the lights and what microphones to turn on.

As the flag was brought in and the singer intoned the *Star-Spangled Banner*, all of the people in the audience stood. Behind the curtain and seen by no one but me, the young man, trying to balance the console, the lights, the sound system and his script, attempted to stand. Clearly, even though no one saw him, the national anthem meant enough to him that he wanted to stand up.

Pray also for the courage boldly and joyfully to stand in protection of our freedom, so that we may continue to live out our faith and transform the world in which we live.

Today there are things that should mean enough to all of us, including our religious liberty, that we simply need to stand — to stand up for what is right, to stand up for what is ours, to stand up for freedom of religion.

Let us thank God for the call, the freedom and the courage to stand up for religious liberty.