

Sample Homily

**Solemnity of Saint John the Baptist
Sunday, 24 June 2012**

**Readings: Isaiah 49:1-6
 Acts 13:22-26
 Luke 1:57-66, 80**

Faith, Fortitude and the Fortnight for Freedom

He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30).

Those simple, direct words of St. John the Baptist, whose feast we celebrate today, summarize the life of the Christian disciple. In all things, we want Jesus to increase and our own will, our own desires, our own attachments, to decrease. In my heart, in my prayer, in my family, in my parish, in my work, in my study, in my leisure, in my entertainment – may the Lord Jesus increase!

In our common life together as Americans, in our civil society, in our politics – may the Lord Jesus increase! In the time of Jesus, the king decreased the space for the things of God; he did not want to hear the voice of religious truth, he did not want to permit the preachers the freedom to preach. St. John the Baptist refused to accede to the king's unjust demands. For his fidelity he was imprisoned and beheaded.

The Lord Jesus tells us that John the Baptist is the greatest of all born of woman (cf. Matthew 11:11). Perhaps his greatest virtue was his fortitude. He was truly fearless in his preaching. John the Baptist was martyred for speaking the truth about the king, and from him we have much to learn about fortitude in defence of our faith, and in defence of our freedoms.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States have declared a Fortnight for Freedom, asking Catholics to engage in a “great hymn of prayer for our country” and a “national campaign of teaching and witness for religious liberty”.¹ Our Bishops have asked us to look to the great saints of Catholic history whose courage we can emulate. The fortnight began on June 21, the vigil of the Feast of Saints John

¹ USCCB, Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty*, April 2012.

Fisher and Thomas More, who, like John the Baptist, were beheaded by a king who desired them not to speak the truth about the Church and the sacred bond of marriage. During this coming week we celebrate the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, who likewise were martyred by the Roman emperor for their preaching of Jesus Christ. And the fortnight concludes on July 4th, the day when we celebrate our American liberty.

Our first, most cherished liberty as Americans is religious freedom. It is the first freedom enumerated in the First Amendment. It is the foundation of all our freedoms, for if Americans are not free in their consciences, in their religious faith, in their corporal works of mercy, then all our freedoms are fragile. When the government commands us to do what God commands us not to do, the American heritage of freedom is imperilled. And the response of the Christian citizen, as we learned vividly in the example of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. is to refuse to obey an unjust law.

Our Bishops have identified several attacks on religious liberty. The mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services that all employers, including Catholic agencies, provide health insurance for contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs, is a national assault on religious liberty without precedent in our history. There are other worrying measures at the state and local level too, notably laws which prohibit the spiritual and charitable assistance given by the Church to undocumented immigrants.

When the government says that we must do what our faith forbids us to do, or when it says we cannot do what our faith mandates us to do – then we too might be called to have the courage of John the Baptist to refuse those unjust orders. It is a stark question that we face: Shall the government increase, and Jesus decrease?

The Fortnight for Freedom reminds us that our liberty is not something we have invented for ourselves, much less is it the largesse of the government. It is God's gift. We have been set free in Christ Jesus for freedom. The genius of the American experiment in ordered liberty is that it recognized this. As Catholics and Americans we insist again upon that recognition. We insist today as John the Baptist insisted before King Herod; we insist today as Peter and Paul insisted before the Emperor Nero; we insist today as Bishop John Fisher and Sir Thomas More insisted before King Henry VIII.

We pray then today, calling upon the intercession of John the Baptist, for all branches and levels of government, that our religious liberties be kept intact. More

urgent though, we pray that all Christian disciples may have the fortitude to stand up for our faith and our freedom. In standing fast for our faith, in standing fast for our freedom, we know that we may have to suffer and to sacrifice. Perhaps we may decrease. No matter. All that matters is that Jesus increase!

May it be so in this blessed land of liberty. Amen.

Prayer for Religious Liberty²

*Almighty God, Father of all nations,
For freedom you have set us free in Christ Jesus (Gal 5:1).
We praise and bless you for the gift of religious liberty,
the foundation of human rights, justice, and the common good.
Grant to our leaders the wisdom to protect and promote our liberties;
By your grace may we have the courage to defend them, for ourselves and for all
those who live in this blessed land.
We ask this through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, our patroness,
and in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
with whom you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

² From the conclusion of *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty*.

Sample Homily

**Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, 1 July 2012**

**Readings: Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24
 II Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15
 Mark 5:21-43**

The Fruits of Faith and the Fortnight for Freedom

As you excel in every respect – may you excel in this gracious act also (II Corinthians 8:7).

Saint Paul urges the Corinthians to excel in faith! We desire the fullness of faith, not a mere facsimile. We desire to live our faith as an expansive embrace, not a cramped constraint. Our faith is for the altar and the sacristy, but also for the home and the school and the workplace and the public square.

The Bishops of the United States have dedicated these days to a “great hymn of prayer for our country” and a “national campaign of teaching and witness for religious liberty”.¹ They have called it the Fortnight for Freedom, and last Sunday we saw how the figure of John the Baptist inspires us to resist the unjust decrees of the government. Primary among those unjust decrees is the mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services, which requires employers, including Catholic institutions, to violate the moral law by providing contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs in their health plans.

Less noticed, but equally offensive to both Catholic doctrine and the constitution, is the determination by the government of what constitutes a religious institution. The HHS mandate grants an exemption to parishes, but it defines religious institutions in such a narrow way that it excludes, for example, Catholic universities, hospitals, food pantries, publishing houses, and social services. According to the HHS definition, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Knights of Columbus wouldn't qualify as religious institutions! Indeed, according to the federal rule, if we serve people who are not Catholic in our agencies, or educate them in our universities, or employ them in our institutions – we cease to be

¹ USCCB, Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty*, April 2012.

religious. If we provide for the needs of the sick and the poor, but don't ask whether they are Catholic or teach them catechism – we are not religious.

It is an absurd position and a clear violation of the Bill of Rights. Our first freedom is religious liberty, and the First Amendment explicitly forbids the government from establishing religion, which means that a government department doesn't get to decide what religion is, and what the proper work of the Church is.

In our second reading, Saint Paul gives us a picture of how the early Christians lived. Those who had abundance shared with those who were in need. The early Church lived this way because Jesus Himself, though He was rich, became poor for our sake. All of our vast charitable works, including health care, social services and education, exist because of our faith in Jesus Christ! They are not optional extras, but essential. As Catholics we care for the poor, the sick, the immigrant, the unemployed, the orphan, the expectant mother in distress, because of our faith. It is the necessary fruit of faith, and without it faith is dead (cf. James 2:26). The government has instead claimed the right to restrict our religious life to the liturgy and doctrine. That is what is at stake in this great battle for religious liberty.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, reminded us that the works of charity are as essential for the Church's mission as is preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.² The Catholic Church can no more abandon the sick in our hospitals or the immigrant at the border than she can set aside the Word of God, or the Holy Mass.

We cannot separate the fruits of faith from the faith itself. The tree that does not bear good fruit is condemned by Jesus (cf. Matthew 7:18-20). To definitively separate the fruit from the roots is to cut the tree down. In the garden of American liberty, the government may not cut down the tree of faith.

The early Christians lived as Saint Paul describes because they knew that Jesus would bless or condemn them based on their care for the least of the brethren (cf. Matthew 25). We pray in this Fortnight for Freedom to be faithful to the Gospel, and more fearful of the just judgment of Jesus than the flawed judgment of a government bureau.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 22: "The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word."

In our lives of faith we seek excellence, not mediocrity. That was the charge of Saint Paul to the Corinthians of the first century. It remains his charge to Americans of the twenty-first. The early Christians lived the fullness of the faith, bearing good fruit.

May it be so today in this blessed land of liberty. Amen.

Prayer for Religious Liberty³

*Almighty God, Father of all nations,
For freedom you have set us free in Christ Jesus (Gal 5:1).
We praise and bless you for the gift of religious liberty,
the foundation of human rights, justice, and the common good.
Grant to our leaders the wisdom to protect and promote our liberties;
By your grace may we have the courage to defend them, for ourselves and for all
those who live in this blessed land.
We ask this through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, our patroness,
and in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
with whom you live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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