

Fr. Tim Ralston – Homily for January 29, 2012

I have some very unbelievable, yet very real, news for you today: religious liberty in this country is now dead. Or if not dead, it's at least been condemned to death. I know, I was shocked when I first heard it too. But as surprising and confusing as that may seem, it's true.

And while we all know that our country has faced some pretty tough times over the last few years, with a divided people, with economic crises, and with natural disasters, I would be surprised if any of us here saw this coming. For our own government has decided to completely toss aside the First Amendment of the Constitution and try to mandate that Catholics, and Catholic organizations, deliberately violate the teachings of the faith, as well as their very consciences.

How, you may ask? Well, as a way to summarize, I'll read an excerpt from a letter sent out by our very own Archbishop, Dennis Schnurr.

He writes, "The US Department of Health and Human Services announced last week that almost all employers, *including Catholic employers*, will be *forced* to offer their employee's health coverage that includes sterilization, abortion-inducing drugs, and contraception. Almost all health insurers will be *forced* to include those "services" in the health policies they write. And almost all individuals will be *forced* to buy that coverage as a part of their policies.

In so ruling, the Administration has cast aside the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, denying to Catholics our Nation's first and most fundamental freedom, that of religious liberty. And as a result, unless the rule is overturned, we Catholics will be compelled to violate our consciences, or to drop health coverage for our employees (and suffer the penalties for doing so)." (end quote)

So, basically, Catholics and Catholic organizations will have to pay to provide sterilization, contraception, and abortion-inducing drugs for their employees, or face serious punishments from the government. Our Catholic schools, universities, nursing homes, hospitals, and social services would seemingly all be included in this group. And just so everyone is clear, sterilization, the use of contraception, and abortion are all serious sins that cannot be approved of. The dignity of every human person, born or unborn, the sanctity of marriage as a lifelong, faithful commitment between one man and one woman, which is open to life, and the fundamental role of the human family in building and sustaining a strong society, are too important, and too beautiful, to denigrate and destroy.

The Catholic Church has always held this and will always believe it. And throughout the history of this great country of ours, we've always had the freedom to allow these beliefs to guide how we live, not only as faithful disciples, but also as faithful citizens. However, that freedom to practice our religion, that freedom to live out our faith, as I said earlier, has been condemned to die. It's not quite dead yet, simply because our government did grant it a stay of execution for one year. This one year window is meant to help us figure out how to comply with the new mandate. But, as Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York put it, "In effect, the president is saying that we have a year to figure out how to violate our consciences."

And violating our consciences is something we cannot do. As Archbishop Schnurr so bluntly puts it in his letter, "We cannot – we will not – comply with this unjust law." Let me repeat that: "We cannot – we will not – comply with this unjust law." This is our Archbishop saying this. And he is being joined by bishops all around this country on this issue. They are standing united, providing clear and strong leadership for all of us. And they are speaking out with a sense of outrage, and a sense of urgency, but also, with a sense of hope.

After all, as Christians, everything we do should be done with a sense of hope. Even witnessing the potential death of religious freedom is not enough to make us despair. For at the center of our faith, is the idea of resurrection. We know that during His life on earth, Jesus raised people from the dead, including Lazarus. And then, He Himself, after dying a horrible, painful death on the cross, conquered death by His own rising from the dead. So Christ has conquered death and can bring our religious freedom back from the brink of death. And again, quoting Archbishop Schnurr, "Without God, we can do nothing; with God, nothing is impossible."

So, what can be done? Even if we have this hope that we can still fix this problem, what actions can we take to help this happen? First of all, we need to educate ourselves about this extremely serious matter. Read the letter that Archbishop Schnurr sent out. It is posted on our website here at St. Charles, as well as on the website for the Archdiocese. We will also print it in the bulletins next weekend. Also, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has great information on their website regarding all of this. I encourage you to check that out as well. We need to know what is at stake here.

Along with educating ourselves, the Bishops have asked us to "commit ourselves to prayer and fasting that wisdom and just may prevail, and religious liberty may be restored." Prayer and fasting – we won't get anywhere without these two things.

And finally, we need to let our elected officials know that we will not stand idly by and just watch our liberties taken away. So, again on the US Bishops website, there is information on how to contact Congress to encourage them to support legislation that will reverse this unjust mandate given to us by our current Administration.

Please, I beg of you, take this very seriously. Our country that has long been known as the land of the free is in danger of forfeiting that title. Our bishops have acted quickly in showing their leadership. But they don't want to stand alone. They are asking us to join them. I, for one, am choosing to do so. I hope you will too because this country that I still love, despite her flaws and weaknesses, is in trouble. Your country needs you.