

This column was originally printed in the July/August issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.

## **Sacred Freedoms**

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At this time of year, Americans traditionally celebrate our nation's independence and the many blessings that have come to us as citizens of the United States. Certainly paramount among these is the hard-earned freedom that is sacred to all of us. But, the freedom we hold so dear did not come cheaply, and continues to be challenged even as we celebrate our nation's birthday.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution enshrines several necessary freedoms in our law, and the first of these is freedom of religion. Not freedom of worship, but freedom of religion. Many public figures have recently taken to reducing freedom of religion to freedom of worship, which is a much narrower and circumscribed category. Freedom of religion allows people of faith not only to worship but also to practice and live their faith in the public square. This "first freedom" allows believers to apply and live out their faith in their day-to-day activities, including their business and political activities. The freedom to worship is a precious freedom indeed, but in current parlance it implies a more privatized version of faith with greater limitations on public faith-based activity.

To profess faith and belief in God without putting it to practical effect in our ordinary actions and decisions is a very thin faith indeed, and even risks becoming hypocrisy. And yet, more and more do we hear voices raised against the public manifestation of religion with an insistence that it remain a merely private affair. Pope Francis recently stated that "religious freedom is not simply freedom of thought or private worship. It is freedom to live according to ethical principles, both privately *and* publicly."(Conference on International Religious Freedom, June 20, 2014)

Over the last few years, religious freedom has been on the minds of Catholics and other people of faith in the U.S. because of new federal mandates on employers to provide abortion, sterilization, and contraception services to their employees. Religious institutions like Catholic hospitals, universities, and charitable organizations are deemed "not religious enough" to be exempted, and so must cooperate in providing these objectionable services. And, business owners who object to such services are also required by the law to provide them, regardless of their religious beliefs and their conviction that such coercion is harmful to individuals and society.

Recently, however, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of certain private businesses and the families that run them, like Hobby Lobby, who argued that this mandate was a violation of their religious freedom and would force them to cooperate in actions they held to be immoral. The Court agreed and gave them the relief they sought. One would have expected that the Court's defense of religious freedom would be praised by people everywhere, but this was not the case. Many commentators were outraged that religion would interfere with the so-called right to have abortion, sterilization, and contraception paid for even by those who find these things morally repugnant. It seems that freedom of religion is admired by some only when it doesn't really protect people of faith from unjust laws.

It's truly sad and rather frightening that such a fundamental freedom could so easily be set aside, and that otherwise reasonable people would disparage the efforts of citizens to protect their rights to religious freedom and moral integrity. We are fortunate that the highest court in the land seems to understand, at least in this case, that religious freedom is still a right of all persons, and that government cannot lightly brush that freedom aside. There are still many other such cases pending before the courts, one involving the Little Sisters of the Poor, who seek out and serve the poorest and most frail of the elderly. They do this out of love for God and as a service to others. Their service is entirely rooted in their faith, and their homes for the elderly are admired and supported by people everywhere. But, they too are required by the new law to violate their deeply held religious beliefs and facilitate immoral acts. Rather than having the freedom to serve, they are being forced to cooperate with evil, and so they too have gone to court to defend their religious liberty. Hopefully the courts of this land will recognize the absurdity of such coercion and reaffirm the religious freedom that is so much at the heart of our nation's founding.

The freedom to practice our faith and live it in a public way isn't just a self-directed exercise. Ultimately, it gives us the opportunity to reach out and serve others, and to pursue our livelihoods in ways that will benefit others. This is true not only for churches, but also for religious institutions and private citizens who want only to carry on their activities in ways that are consistent with their faith. Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, President of the USCCB, said in a homily on Independence Day: "In the Catholic community we count it a great blessing and privilege to have made many contributions to civil society, particularly through our great ministries of service to the poor and the hungry, the sick and the dying...When religious freedom comes under threat, so do these ministries." And so do all of our other freedoms as well.

If there is a lesson in this, it is that we must never take our freedoms for granted, and this is especially true of the freedom of religion. If we want to keep that freedom, then we obviously will have to defend it. And even more immediately, if we expect others to respect our freedom to practice our religion, then we must do so in a way that is authentic and integral. If we routinely act against the very faith that we profess, then we give scandal to those around us, including those who make and interpret the laws of the land. We send an implicit message that religion is not all that important, and when push comes to shove, we'll just let it drop by the wayside. Remembering our Lord's words that "the truth will make you free," let us be sure to allow the truth of our faith to inform every action and decision that we make. Let us pray for our nation and give thanks for the freedom to practice our faith openly. And let us live that faith fully in service to God and to each other.