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The ongoing struggle for religious liberty

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On July 4, our nation once again celebrated its independence. It was an occasion for all of us to thank God for the many blessings he has showered upon us, and it was a time to recommit ourselves to the high ideals of justice and freedom held by our founders.

One of those ideals is religious liberty, the freedom to practice our religious faith without government interference or coercion. This is often called the “first freedom,” because it is enshrined in a preeminent way in the First Amendment to the Constitution. In fact, George Washington himself wrote that “the establishment of Civil and Religious Liberty was the motive that induced me to the field of battle.”

As is well known, this right to religious liberty is threatened in the United States. For several years now, people of faith, especially the leaders and members of the Catholic Church, have fought against the unjust mandate of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to require provisions for abortion, sterilization, and contraceptive services, even though these practices run contrary to our long-held moral beliefs. Catholic dioceses, hospitals, universities, schools and even religious groups like the Little Sisters of the Poor, are being forced under the threat of crippling fines to participate in actions that violate our religious beliefs. A few weeks ago, the Supreme Court seemed to give a reprieve to the Little Sisters and several other plaintiffs by vacating lower court decisions on this issue. But the issue remains, and there is no certainty that the government will relent in its unjust and, frankly, absurd demand that Catholic institutions should have to participate in the provision of such immoral practices.

But there are other threats as well. The same federal government recently upheld a California regulation that requires all health plans in the state to provide coverage for elective abortions. No exception was granted to religious institutions, as had been the usual practice in the past. So once again, our government, which exists to protect and defend our rights, is content to ignore current law and even strike down the religious rights of those they serve.

And the challenges don't come only from government officials. Recently in Colorado Springs, religious advertisements on city buses, paid for like any other ads, were challenged by individuals who found them offensive. They sought to ban all religious advertising in public spaces, thus challenging the constitutional rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Fortunately, the city officials recognized the blatant discrimination of such a ban and rejected the proposal.

Nevertheless, it is very clear that some influential and zealous people in our nation would like nothing more than to sideline all religious expression and practice, and will work very hard to bend religion to the agenda of secular ideology. We should not be naïve about their intentions. As people of faith, we have a responsibility to work for and fight for the right to religious practice in our communities and in our nation. That right is, quite simply, under attack, and if we become complacent or apathetic, we risk losing the rights that our founders fought for in the establishment of our nation. Whether this happens will largely depend today on how committed we are as citizens to preserving this right given to us by God and acknowledged by our founders.

There are many who lament the state of politics in our nation, especially as we draw closer to this year's presidential election. But we should keep in mind that we all have an important part to play in the formation of that political landscape. And in a particular way, our participation in the political process will determine whether or not our freedom of religion is preserved and protected. How we make our choices and cast our votes will decide the fate of religious liberty in this land for decades to come.

We must also acknowledge that we are still very blessed to live in this great nation, where religious liberty still has a foothold. It is estimated that 75% of the world's population live in countries that suffer from religious oppression, or where freedom of religion is tightly restricted. Many Christians live in constant danger of violence or even death because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. We must

admit that we don't even come close to such challenges – yet. But if we truly value these rights, then we must be willing to fight for them and avoid any sign of complacency.

Last September, during his visit to the United States, I was privileged to hear Pope Francis speak powerfully on the subject of religious freedom on the steps of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the very cradle of our nation. He said: “Religious freedom is a fundamental right which shapes the way we interact socially and personally with our neighbors.... Religious freedom certainly means the right to worship God, individually and in community, as our consciences dictate. But religious liberty, by its nature, transcends places of worship and the private sphere of individuals and families. Because religion itself, the religious dimension, is not a subculture; it is part of the culture of every people and every nation.... Let us preserve freedom. Let us cherish freedom. Freedom of conscience, religious freedom, the freedom of each person, each family, each people, which is what gives rise to rights.... And may you defend these rights, especially your religious freedom, for it has been given to you by God himself.”

As Pope Francis says, religious freedom is not a right that can be given by a government and then taken away. It is given to us by God himself. And the best way we can stand up for this freedom of religion is to live our faith openly, joyfully, generously and courageously. May God bless our nation, and may he give us the grace to be true and faithful witnesses of his Son.