**HOMILY FOR THE FORTNIGHT OF FREEDOM MASS – JUNE 22, 2012**

My dear friends, we gather together this evening for one purpose and one purpose only and that is to spend these next fifteen hours in prayer and vigil, begging the Lord’s presence and power in this necessary effort to retain the freedoms we have experienced in this country since its inception. We seek this freedom solely to be about the work of building up the Kingdom of God as Jesus instructed us to do. This effort is not about partisan politics, nor seeking after any kind of special treatment, nor forcing others to believe or act as we Catholics do; rather it is a simple attempt to continue to enjoy the freedom of religion upon which this country was founded and has been consistently offered to religious groups throughout its history.

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”. The Bishops’ Conference has asked us to look to the great saints of Catholic history whose courage we can emulate. The fortnight began last night on June 21, and today we celebrate the beginning of our own diocesan time of prayer celebrating the feast of the great martyrs, John Fisher and Thomas More, who, like John the Baptist, our patron and whose feast we will celebrate on Sunday 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 a Roman emperor for their preaching the teachings of Jesus Christ. The fortnight will conclude 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 Bill of Rights. It is the foundation of all our freedoms, for if Americans are not free to follow their consciences in their religious faith, and in their corporal and spiritual works of mercy, then all our freedoms are fragile. The founders of our country came to this land to flee from oppression and to enjoy freedom, primarily religious freedom. When the government commands us to do what God commands us not to do, the American heritage of freedom is imperiled 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 cooperate with laws and mandates that are unjust.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has 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 in some states which prohibit the spiritual and charitable assistance given by the Church to undocumented immigrants. In one state, it is illegal for a Catholic priest to baptize, hear the confession of, celebrate the anointing of the sick with or preach the word with an undocumented person. Neither is it permissible under this same state’s current law to encourage these undocumented to attend Mass, scripture study groups, Sunday school classes or even recovery group meetings in a local Church.

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 offered by Catholic Charities. 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 religious. If we provide for the needs of the sick and the poor, but do not ask whether they are Catholic or teach them the Catholic faith – 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. 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 – that is what Catholics do in living out 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 life to liturgy and doctrine and that is not acceptable. This 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. 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.

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: obey the laws of the state or obey the laws of God.

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.

Dear friends, stay with us during these next two weeks: join in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament tonight in this very place. Process with us tomorrow morning as we walk with the very presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament to the Battery and implore God’s blessings and assistance with our mission.

Continue with that prayer for these weeks and let that prayer lead us to action to defend the liberty that our ancestors desired and fought for.

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 that our liberty be acknowledged and respected.