

REPAIR MY HOUSE:  
RENEWING THE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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I've known Greg Erlandson as a friend for many years. So I was glad to accept his invitation to join you tonight. And I'm very glad to speak on the theme of religious liberty because events in our country have made it an urgent concern. I can sum up my remarks tonight in five simple points.

*First, religious freedom is a cornerstone of the American experience.* This is so obvious that once upon a time, nobody needed to say it. But times have changed. So it's worth recalling that Madison, Adams, Washington, Hamilton, Franklin, Jefferson – in fact, nearly all the American Founders – saw religious faith as vital to the life of a free people. Liberty and happiness grow organically out of virtue. And virtue needs a grounding in religious faith.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, the historian, put it this way: The Founders knew that in a republic “virtue is intimately related to religion. However skeptical or deistic they may have been in their own beliefs, however determined they were to avoid anything like an established Church, they had no doubt that religion is an essential part of the social order because it is a vital part of the moral order.”<sup>1</sup>

Here's my second point: *Freedom of religion is more than freedom of worship.* The right to worship is a necessary but not sufficient part of religious liberty. Christian faith requires community. It begins in worship, but it also demands preaching, teaching and service. It's always personal but never private. And it involves more than prayer at home and Mass on Sunday – although these things are vitally important. Real faith always bears fruit in public witness and public action. Otherwise it's just empty words.

The Founders saw the value of publicly engaged religious faith because they experienced its influence themselves. They created a nation designed in advance to depend on the moral convictions of religious believers, and to welcome their active role in public life.

Here's my third point: *Threats against religious freedom in our country are not imaginary. They're happening right now. They're immediate, serious and real.* Earlier this year religious liberty advocates won a big Supreme Court victory in the 9-0 Hosanna-Tabor v EEOC decision. That's the good news. Here's the bad news. What's stunning in that case is the disregard for religious freedom shown by the government's arguments against the Lutheran church and school.

And Hosanna-Tabor is not an isolated case. It belongs to a pattern of government coercion that includes the current administration's HHS mandate; interfering with the conscience rights of medical providers and private employers, as well as individual citizens; and attacks on the policies, hiring practices and tax statuses of religious charities and ministries.

Why is this hostility happening? A lot of it links to Catholic teaching on the dignity of life and human sexuality. Catholic moral convictions about abortion, contraception, the purpose of sexuality and the nature of marriage are rooted not just in revelation, but also in reason and natural law. Human beings have a nature that's not just the product of accident or culture, but inherent, universal and rooted in permanent truths knowable to reason.

The problem, as Notre Dame law professor Gerry Bradley points out, is that critics of the Church reduce all these moral convictions to an expression of subjective religious beliefs. And if they're purely religious beliefs, then – so the critics argue – they can't be rationally defended. And because they're rationally indefensible, they should be treated as a form of prejudice. In effect, 2,000 years of moral tradition and religious belief become a species of bias. Opposing same-sex "marriage" thus amounts to religiously blessed homophobia.<sup>2</sup>

There's more though. When religious belief gets redefined downward to a kind of private bias, then the religious identity of institutional ministries has no public value -- other than the utility of getting credulous people to do good things. So exempting Catholic adoption agencies, for example, from placing kids with gay couples becomes a concession to private prejudice. And concessions to private prejudice feed bigotry and hurt the public. Or so the reasoning goes. This is how moral teaching and religious belief end up getting hounded as hate speech.

Here's my fourth point: *Unless we work hard to keep our religious liberty, we'll lose it.* It's already happening in other developed countries like Britain and Canada.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Constitution is a great document -- historically unique for its fusion of high ideals with the realism of very practical checks and balances. But in the end, it's just an elegant piece of paper. In practice, nothing guarantees our freedoms except our willingness to fight for them. That means fighting politically and through the courts, without tiring and without apologies. We need to realize that America's founding documents assume an implicitly religious anthropology – an idea of human nature, nature's God and natural rights that many of our leaders no longer really share. We ignore that unhappy fact at our own expense.

Here's my fifth and final point: *Politics and the courts are important. But our religious freedom ultimately depends on the vividness of our own Christian faith – in other words, how deeply we believe it, and how honestly we live it.* Religious liberty is an empty shell if the spiritual core of a people is weak. Or to put it more bluntly, if people don't believe

in God, religious liberty isn't a value. That's the heart of the matter. It's the reason Pope Benedict calls us to a Year of Faith this October. The worst enemies of religious freedom aren't "out there" among the legion of critics who hate Christ or the Gospel or the Church, or all three. The worst enemies are *in here*, with us – all of us, clergy, religious and lay – when we live our faith with tepidness, routine and hypocrisy.

Religious liberty isn't a privilege granted by the state. It's our birthright as children of God. And even the worst bigotry can't kill it in the face of a believing people. But if we value it and want to keep it, then we need to become people worthy of it. Which means we need to change the way we live – radically change, both as individual Catholics and as the Church. And that's where I'd like to turn for the rest of these brief remarks.

A year ago I was serving happily in Denver, laughing at rumors I was getting moved anywhere. That turned out to be a mistake. Since then I've been asked many times how I like Philadelphia. The answer is pretty simple. I don't "like" it. I love it – or rather, I love the people and clergy of Philadelphia because they're easy to love. They're now my family, an intimate part of my life. And I hope that each passing year will draw me deeper into the life of the community because Philadelphia is really more than just a great city. It's the birthplace of our country and a jewel in our national legacy. It's also an icon of the American Catholic experience. So it's a joy and a blessing to serve there as bishop.

"Joy" may seem like an odd word to use, given events in Philadelphia over the past 16 months. Obviously the abuse tragedy has burdened the life of the local Church in a very painful way. Our laypeople are angry, and they should be. Their frustration shows in the pews. In Denver about 40 percent of registered Catholics attended Mass weekly. In Philadelphia, barely 18 percent do. The scandal has caused terrible suffering for victims, demoralized many of our clergy, crippled the witness of the Church and humiliated the whole Catholic community.

That's the bad news -- or at least some of it -- and it's not simply "bad," but bitter and damaging for everyone involved, beginning with victims and their families, but rippling throughout the community. As a bishop, the only honest way I can talk about the abuse tragedy is to start by apologizing for the failure of the Church and her leaders -- apologizing to victims, and apologizing to the Catholic community. And I do that again here, today.

There is also good news. Even now, after all the challenges of the past decade, the Church in Philadelphia plays a very large role in the life of the region, and in many quarters, she still draws -- and still earns -- great respect. I think the staff Cardinal Rigali assembled last year after the second grand jury report to reach out to victims and prevent abuse in the future is strong by any professional standard. And from what I've experienced over the past 10 months, the Church in Philadelphia today has a much deeper understanding of the gravity of sexual abuse and a sincere zeal for rooting it out of the life of the Church and helping anyone hurt in the past.

One reason the Church has survived at all in the current crisis is the extraordinary reservoir of good will and fidelity among the clergy and people of the diocese. Pennsylvania remains a largely faith-friendly environment. Our people have strong pro-life and pro-family instincts, respect for religious ministries and a history of saints and excellent Catholic education. The habits of Catholic culture run very deep in the Philadelphia region. Our Catholic health and social services, and our Catholic school system, are among the largest and best in the United States. The Church contributes in a substantial way to the welfare of the general public, and most people on some level understand that.

But the abuse crisis, as grave as it is, masks other problems that also run very deep, and they belong to the same troubled Catholic culture. They began building decades ago. And while they may be especially sharp in Philadelphia, I'd wager that some version of these problems touches many of the dioceses across our country.

Here's an example. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia is currently owed about \$60 million by our own parishes for insurance premiums, assessments and other expenses shared by the whole local Church. Much of this can't be recovered because the parishes simply don't have the money. More than two-thirds of our 267 parishes have operating deficits. About 100 are in some form of financial distress. More than 90 parishes minister to fewer than 400 families. And the archdiocese itself has struggled with frequent budget deficits for many years. We've reached a point where – if we did nothing to fix the problem – the gap between our projected expenses and our projected income in Fiscal 2013 would exceed \$17 million.

That won't happen. That will end. The Church is finally a family. No family can survive for long if it spends more than it takes in. In the first nine months of Fiscal 2012, the archdiocese spent more than \$10 million on legal and other professional fees. But as crushing as that sounds – and it is – the real problems of the Church in Philadelphia are more subtle than money and more chronic than a habit of bad budgets. They're not even financial. And they're not at all unique to Philadelphia.

We need to look honestly at the arc of Catholic history in our country. The lessons may not be comforting. American Catholics began as an unwelcome minority. The Church built her credibility by defending and serving her people. She developed her influence with the resources her people entrusted to her. A vast amount of good was done in the process. We need to honor that. But two other things also happened. The Church in the United States became powerful and secure. And Catholics became less and less invested in the Church that their own parents and grandparents helped to build.

I think it's fair, in part, to blame Church leaders for a spirit of complacency and inertia, clericalism, even arrogance, and for operating off a model of the Church – often for well-intentioned reasons -- rooted in the past and out of touch with reality. But there's plenty of blame to go around. Too many ordinary Catholics have been greedy to lose

themselves in America's culture of consumerism and success. Too many have been complicit in the dullness -- the acedia -- that has seeped into Church life, and the cynicism and resentment that naturally follow it.

These problems kill a Christian love of poverty and zeal. They choke off a real life of faith. They create the shadows that hide institutional and personal sins. And they encourage a paralysis that can burrow itself into every heart and every layer of the Church, right down to individual Catholics in the pews. The result is that Philadelphia, like so much of the Church in the rest of our country, is now really mission territory – again; for the second time.

My point is this. We live in a world of illusions when we lose sight of who Jesus Christ really is, and what he asks from each of us as disciples. One of novelist Ray Bradbury's characters once said, "I wonder if God recognizes his own son the way we've dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He's a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar crystal and saccharine."<sup>4</sup> Father John Hugo, a friend and counselor to Dorothy Day, put it even more forcefully when he wrote of our "falsified picture of Jesus [with his] eyes perpetually raised to heaven, soft, even girlish in beauty, [the] very incarnation of impotence."

The real Jesus, in Hugo's words, "did not hesitate to condemn the rich, to warn the powerful, to denounce in vehement language the very leaders of the people. His love and goodness were chiefly for the poor, the simple, the needy. And his love for them was not a limp, indulgent love, like that of a silly, frivolous mother. To his friends he preached poverty of spirit, detachment, the carrying the cross. No more did the kindness of Jesus spare his followers, than the kindness of God the father spared his son. We are to drink of the same chalice that he drank of."<sup>5</sup>

That's our vocation. That's the life of honesty, heroism and sacrifice God calls us to as a Church and as individual believers. And in our eagerness to escape it, to tame it, to reshape it in the mold of our own willful ideas, we've failed not only to convert our culture, but also to pass along the faith to many of our own children.

Emerging American adults – in other words, young people in the 18-23 age cohort – are not only skeptical of organized religion in general and Christianity in particular, but they often lack the vocabulary to engage in, or even identify, issues that require basic moral reasoning. As a group they have unusually high rates of intoxication, loneliness and sexual alienation. They also, contrary to popular belief, have very little interest in public affairs or political engagement, and a lopsided focus on materialistic consumption and financial security as the guiding stars of their lives.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, tens of thousands of exceptions to what I just said are walking around right now. We all know some of them. These are young adults of faith and strong moral character, determined to do something worthy with their lives. Just this week Our Sunday Visitor did a portrait of Catholic young adults who live the Gospel with really

wonderful passion and joy.<sup>7</sup> Their lives will touch hundreds of other lives. And that should give us enormous hope. God never abandons his Church or his people.

But their good witness only brings us back to the conversion that you and I and the whole Church in the United States need to undergo.

Notre Dame scholar Christian Smith and his colleagues, whose research on emerging adults is so compelling, wrote that “most of the problems in the lives of youth have their origin in the larger adult world into which youth are being socialized . . . [One] way or the other, adults and the adult world are almost always complicit in the troubles, suffering and misguided living of youth, if not the direct source of them. The more adults can recognize and admit that fact, [the] sooner we will be able to address some of young people’s problems more constructively.”<sup>8</sup>

I suppose that’s obvious. But if it’s really so obvious, then who let it happen? And what are we going to do about it?

We’re becoming a nation where, as Ross Douhat describes it, “a growing number [of us] are inventing [our] own versions of what Christianity means, abandoning the nuances of traditional theology in favor of religions that stroke [our] egos and indulge, or even celebrate, [our] own worst impulses.”<sup>9</sup> And it’s happening at a time when the Church is compromised by her own leaders and people from within, and pushed to the margins or attacked by critics without.

Tomorrow we start the Fortnight for Freedom. It’s a moment for each of us to be grateful to our bishops for doing the right thing – the *important and urgent* thing – at the right time. If we don’t press now and vigorously for our religious liberty in the public arena, *we will lose it*. Not overnight and not with a thunderclap, but step by step, inexorably. And each of you as a Catholic media professional plays a key role, a really vital role, in that effort because our prestige news media, with very few exceptions, simply will not cover this issue in a fair and comprehensive way.<sup>10</sup>

But we also need to remember with Pope Benedict that resistance is “part of the task of the Church,”<sup>11</sup> and with Henri de Lubac that it’s “not our mission to make truth triumph, but to testify for it.”<sup>12</sup>

Scripture says, “*Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well*” (Mt 6:33). We work best for religious freedom by first opening our hearts to God’s will instead of our own; and loving our country and our Church; and renewing the witness of the Church with the zeal and purity and obedience of our own lives. That freedom, that joy, no one can ever take from us.

From the cross at San Damiano, Jesus said to Francis: *Repair my house, which is falling into ruin*. Those same words fill this room tonight. How we respond is up to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999, p. 85

<sup>2</sup> Gerard V. Bradley, "What's Behind the HHS Mandate?", *The Public Discourse* ([www.thepublicdiscourse.com](http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com)), June 5, 2012

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1951, 1995, p. 77

<sup>5</sup> David Scott and Mike Aquila, editors, *Weapons of the Spirit: Living a Holy Life in Unholy Times; Selected Writings of Father John Hugo*, Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington, IN, 1997, p. 108-109

<sup>6</sup> Christian Smith, et al, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Emily Stimpson, "The Next Generation," *OSV Newsweekly*, June 17, 2012, p. 9-12

<sup>8</sup> Smith, p. 11

<sup>9</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Free Press, New York, 2012, p. 4

<sup>10</sup> The website [www.getreligion.org](http://www.getreligion.org) has done several analyses of the lopsided mainstream news coverage of the HHS mandate and related religious liberty disputes. See for example Mollie Hemingway, "Grading coverage of religious liberty," May 4, 2012, and "Plotting about 'religious liberty,'" May 30, 2012, among others

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2002, p. 357

<sup>12</sup> Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Paradoxes of Faith*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987, p.72