



**EPARCHY OF SAINT MARON OF BROOKLYN
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Dear Brother Priests, Deacons/Subdeacons, Monks, Sisters and Lay Faithful:

As you know from the entries on my blog at www.stmaron.org, since January there has been a concerted Catholic effort to address the very troubling Health and Human Services (HHS) coercive mandate requiring almost all private health plans to cover contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. For the first time in our nation's history, the federal government will force religious institutions to facilitate drugs and procedures contrary to our moral teaching. And this will purport to define which religious institutions are "religious enough" to merit an exemption.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops www.usccb.org responded to many urgent situations with the Administration, Congress and now the Judiciary. We now need the help and support of all Catholics to address a wide range of issues from our concerns over religious liberty to the Church's teaching on sexuality and openness to new human life. Some of these efforts will be catechetical and others will encourage parishioners to take some needed action.

Our focus should be on "Religious Liberty, the Most Cherished of American Freedoms." (See the enclosed bulletin inserts and flyers). Parishioners are encouraged to send messages to the President, Members of Congress and the HHS, during this limited comment period.

Lastly, I ask you to join me and all Catholics throughout the country in a 14 day prayer vigil from June 21, 2012, the Feast of Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, until July 4, 2012. I ask every parishioner to offer a decade of rosary each of these 14 days. Likewise, I ask every pastor to add a special intention during each liturgy of those 14 days for religious liberty and the good of our country. Let freedom ring! And may the radiant beauty of Catholic teaching ring!

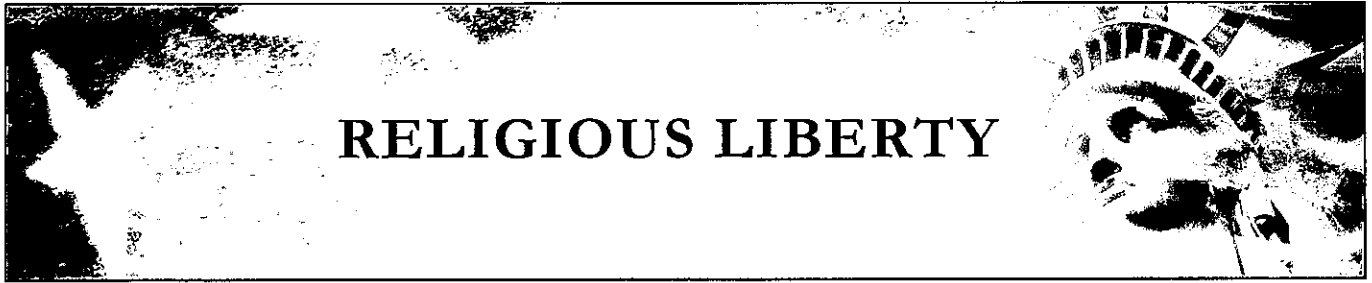
With prayerful best wishes, I remain,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Gregory

+Gregory John Mansour

GJM/cm
Enclosures



USCCB Nationwide Bulletin Insert

April-May 2012

THE MOST CHERISHED OF AMERICAN FREEDOMS Past and Present

In 1634, a mix of Catholic and Protestant settlers arrived in Southern Maryland from England aboard the *Ark* and the *Dove*. They had come at the invitation of the Catholic Lord Baltimore, who had been granted the land by the Protestant King Charles I of England. While Catholics and Protestants were killing each other in Europe, Lord Baltimore imagined Maryland as a society where people of different faiths could live together peacefully. This vision was soon codified in Maryland's 1649 Act Concerning Religion (also called the "Toleration Act"), which was the first law in our nation's history to protect an individual's right to freedom of conscience.

Maryland's early history teaches us that, like any freedom, **religious liberty requires constant vigilance and protection, or it will disappear.** Maryland's experiment in religious toleration ended within a few decades. The colony was placed under royal control and the Church of England became the established religion. Discriminatory laws, including the loss of political rights, were enacted against those who refused to conform. Catholic chapels were closed and Catholics were restricted to practicing their faith in their homes. The Catholic community lived under this coercion until the American Revolution.

By the end of the 18th century our nation's founders embraced freedom of religion as an essential condition of a

free and democratic society. So when the Bill of Rights was ratified, religious freedom had the distinction of being the First Amendment. Religious liberty is indeed the first liberty.

This is our American heritage, our most cherished freedom. **If we are not free in our conscience and our practice of religion, all other freedoms are fragile.** If our obligations and duties to God are impeded, or even worse, contradicted by the government, then we can no longer claim to be a land of the free.

Is our most cherished freedom truly under threat?

Among many current challenges, consider the recent Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate requiring almost all private health plans to cover contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. For the first time in our history, the federal government will force religious institutions to facilitate drugs and procedures contrary to our moral teaching, and purport to define which religious institutions are "religious enough" to merit an exemption. This is not a matter of whether contraception may be prohibited by the government. It is not even a matter of whether contraception may be supported by the government. **It is a matter of whether religious people and institutions may be forced by the government to provide coverage for contraception and sterilization, even when it violates our religious beliefs.**

What can you do to ensure the protection of religious freedom?

To learn more about our first freedom, and to send your message to HHS and Congress telling them to stand up for religious liberty and conscience rights, go to www.usccb.org/conscience today! Thank you for joining the effort to end this unprecedented government coercion of conscience and intrusion in religious affairs.