

We have come here today to express our support for religious liberty for the right of individuals, for right of a Church to follow their conscience and the Church's teachings in providing coverage for medical treatments.

The immediate reason for our rally is that the new HHS mandate. For those of us who are Catholics and for some others of faith these regulations would require us to pay for sterilizations, abortifacients and other medical procedures that violate our conscience and the teachings of our Church. Others see that if the HHS regulations are an attack on anyone's religious freedom these regulations are an attack on all religious freedom. We are here because the Administration lectured the US Conference of Bishops that the Bishop's should have a more enlightened view of Catholic Church teaching. Is that freedom from governmental interference with religion?

We live in a country that is increasingly polarized and divided. People speak past each other. Patrick Henry said that I have no lamp to judge the future except the past. American History provides the answer. American history and the framers can enlighten us as to what we mean by religious liberty.

The Pilgrims fled Europe to be able to freely exercise their faith in Massachusetts. Maryland was established in part as a refuge for Catholics and Pennsylvania in part as a refuge for Quakers. But in some ways the Baptist theologian, Roger Williams, who fled Massachusetts in 1636 to found Connecticut as a haven for religious minorities established the American way. Separate Church from state and state from Church. Each person is entitled to practice their religion according to their conscience and dictates.

As James Madison would say early in the development of our Constitutional thought on religious freedom:

We hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, that religion, or the duty we owe our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence. The religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right.

Madison was not alone in his views. In George Washington's Farewell address at the end of his presidential term stated:

"And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

The Founding Fathers recognized that the free exercise of religion provides both a God given right and a necessary check and balance to the excesses that would otherwise come into society. If the Founding Fathers recognized the importance of religious freedom to maintaining a moral society, then why does the HHS mandate ignore that fundamental right now?

If I believe that abortion is the taking of a human life why should I be forced to pay for abortifacients? During the 1940's, the United States was under attack. Men were required to defend the country, yet 12,000 men, Mennonites, Quakers and others were granted conscientious objector status. If religious conscience is recognized in times of national crisis then why does not the HHS regulation recognize a conscience clause now?

The ink on the Constitution was barely dry and the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights had not yet been adopted when representatives of various religious denominations asked George Washington, newly elected as president, questions about freedom of religion. Washington wrote letters to Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians and even Catholics to express friendship and a common sense of faith. But it was in a letter Washington wrote most directly to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport Rhode Island in which he stated most clearly and emphatically in speaking of religious freedom that this country gives bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance. In another part of this letter Washington uses the phrase "everyman shall have his fig tree or vine". Some think that this is a poetic statement and it is that. But it is much more than poetry. George Washington is quoting I Kings 5. Solomon is king and this phrase is part of a litany, a litany of all the good that has come to Israel because the king is ruling wisely

and obediently to God. Perhaps Washington is signaling that he will rule obediently to God.

Thomas Jefferson said it best in a letter to the Danbury Connecticut Baptists. He stated that our legislature should make no law respecting the establishment of or the free exercise of religion. This letter has been recognized as stating so clearly the concept of religious freedom from government interference that it is often cited by the Supreme Court. Some even think this is the language in the First Amendment. If Madison, Jefferson and Washington had a consistent view of religious freedom why does the HHS regulation not recognize that right now?

Some who support the HHS regulations argue that we should not talk about religious freedom or freedom of conscience but about freedom of worship. We will not interfere with what happens in the sanctuary. If you look at the HHS regulations which became final last week, that seems to be the interpretation that the Administration is taking. You can exempt workers who are members of your church and in activities that only deal with members of your faith. IS that how we define a religion?

This narrow interpretation of freedom of worship is not consistent with Madison's comments on the individual's right to exercise religion as they see fit or Jefferson who said that there should be no law regarding the free exercise of religion.

Religion may be a matter of individual conscience and action in a Protestant tradition or informed by the Torah in the Jewish tradition or by Church teaching in the Catholic tradition but it has never been limited to prayer in a sanctuary. It has never been limited to only caring for members of one's own faith. In the Book of Ruth, Boaz showed kindness to Ruth a Moabite. Christ used the example of the Good Samaritan to demonstrate that love and charity should be shown to all.

In Matthew 25 Christ teaches that we, that nations, will be judged on one and only one measure; how we care for the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the prisoner and the stranger. Christ never said but only those who are members of your faith and only if you care for them in your Church. Freedom of religion is not limited to how we pray. Freedom of religion is how we take our faith into the

world not just how we pray. As Cardinal George and other bishops have said, the HHS rules require the Church to make an inappropriate choice. The Churches founded the very first hospitals and schools. Do we maintain these institutions and serve all comers as Christ has commanded or violate our conscience and follow these regulations?

The challenge today is to the Catholic Church and others with similar views on sterilizations and abortifacients. Tomorrow the challenge could be to kosher laws or Quaker pacifists or any of a thousand examples of how the fabric of our country is enriched and strengthened by the individual right to follow our conscience and practice our religious faith free of government interference. We must use every legal avenue to protect religious freedom; continued discussion with the administration, legislative appeal and judicial action.

Perhaps more importantly we should look around us. There is a sickness in society. People feel lost and disconnected they are anxious about the future. We have a great nation with abundant resources and a rich and diverse population. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights were unique. These documents, these men who fought and risked everything to give us freedom recognize that ultimately we have a duty to our Creator, a duty to act in good conscience and in good faith. Today is the anniversary of Patrick Henry's great speech. Give me liberty or give me death. Patrick Henry said "A vitiated state of morals, a corrupted public conscience is incompatible with freedom." And again "...Virtue, morality and religion. This is armor, my friend, that renders us invincible."

God bless you because you see my religious conscience, my faith teaches me that I am to bring God's love to each of you whether you are of my faith or not.