

Fortnight for Religious Freedom – June 21 to July 4, 2012
Holy Hour Homily

Many people have been asking what we are going to be doing in our diocese in regard to the ongoing discussion of religious freedom. In particular, there are many who want to know what kind of action is going to occur.

There is likely to be a need for action on various levels, including especially the involvement of the laity in speaking up on the Church's teaching about the issues involved in regard to religious liberty. It is especially the role of the laity according to their vocation to get involved.

First, I want to express how pleased I am that the Fortnight for Religious Freedom which we are observing in our country in these days leading up to July 4th, is especially a time for prayer. It has always been part of our Catholic tradition to engage in prayer, serious prayer, in times of great challenge.

That's why I am so pleased that we are gathered here. More important, we are reminded by St. Paul that such a gathering in prayer is pleasing to God.

I would like to tell you about a person who has helped me to understand why we should gather here for this Holy Hour in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and why we should pray for religious freedom during these days.

In May of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI, publicly initiated the formal process for the beatification of Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan who was born in Hue, Viet Nam on April 17, 1928, and died in Rome, Italy on September 16, 2002.

Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was a priest, a bishop, and Pope John Paul II made him a cardinal during the Jubilee Year of 2000.

Cardinal Thuan is one of the persons who inspired me to choose the saying, "Christ our hope of glory" as my motto when I was named bishop. He is an expert on hope, and he is an expert on what it means for us to pray for religious freedom before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

When the communists took control of South Viet Nam in 1975, Bishop Thuan was arrested and he spent more than 13 years in prison without ever having had a formal hearing or a trial in court. He spent 9 of those 13 years in solitary confinement.

When he was released from prison, he was allowed to leave Viet Nam, but he was never allowed to return to his country to carry out his pastoral duties where he was appointed as Archbishop of Saigon.

Less than a year before he died from cancer, Cardinal Thuan was invited to speak at a conference in Los Angeles, California where he offered some reflections on freedom, and religious freedom in particular. This is some of what he shared.

“All prisoners, myself included, constantly wait to be let go. I decided then and there that my captivity would not be merely a time of resignation but a turning point in my life. I decided I would not wait. I would live the present moment and fill it with love.”

People often asked Cardinal Thuan the question, “Were you able to celebrate Mass in prison?” When he answered, “Yes”, the next question was always, “How did you get the bread and wine?”

Cardinal Thuan explained, “I was taken to prison empty-handed. Later on, I was allowed to request the strict necessities like clothing, toothpaste, etc. I wrote home asking them to send some wine as medication for stomach pains.”

“They understood what I meant. So, they sent me a little bottle of wine, with a label reading *medication for stomach pains*, as well as some hosts broken into small pieces.”

Cardinal Thuan said, “I will never be able to express the joy that was mine: each day, with three drops of wine, a drop of water in the palm of my hand, I celebrated Mass.” Then he described how Mass was celebrated before he was in solitary confinement.

There were 6 Catholics in his group of 50 prisoners. Every evening when the guards turned off the lights, Cardinal Thuan knelt beside his bed and celebrated Mass by barely whispering the prayers which he had memorized. He placed the hosts inside a tiny bag made from rice paper which was passed among the Catholics so that they could receive Holy Communion.

He always saved one small piece of the host, so after Mass, Cardinal Thuan and each of the Catholic prisoners would take turns kneeling beside their bed for silent Eucharistic adoration. Cardinal Thuan explained that “the Blessed Sacrament

helped tremendously. Even Buddhists and other non-Christians were converted because of our prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament because the strength of the love of Jesus is irresistible.”

Cardinal Thuan explained that he was in no position to criticize or debate with the guards at the prison, especially when he was placed in solitary confinement, so he engaged in what he called a dialogue in truth and love.

He explained, he went about this work, first, by showing gladness and by smiling. He would tell the prison guards some stories about his journeys in countries where people live in freedom and without fear of their rights being abused. That stimulated their curiosity and they asked many questions. The guards wanted to learn foreign languages, so Cardinal Thuan would teach them.

One of the guards who watched him in solitary confinement actually helped Cardinal Thuan to make a cross out of small pieces of wood. The guard even provided some wire that they used to make a chain so Cardinal Thuan could wear the cross around his neck.

Cardinal Thuan explained that his cross and chain are not simply a souvenir of his captivity. He said, “They were a constant reminder that only Christian charity can bring about a change of heart.”

Cardinal Thuan said that it was very hard for the prison guards to understand when he spoke about loving our enemies, or about reconciliation and forgiveness.

The guards would ask him, "Do you really love us?" "Yes, I really love you," he replied. And they asked, “Do you love us even when we cause you pain, or when you suffer because you are in prison without a trial?"

Cardinal Thuan would smile and tell them, “Of course, I love you! I will continue to love you even if you wish to kill me." "But why?" they asked.

And he gave them the reason that underlies everything that we do as Christians. He said, "Because Jesus taught us to love always; if we don't, we are no longer worthy to be called Christians."

Cardinal Thuan finished his reflection on religious freedom by explaining that he does not take credit for what happened during those 13 years in prison. He simply

said, all of those experiences are proof of the liberating power of the love of Jesus.”

That’s his story. That’s why I am convinced the Cardinal Thuan is an expert on religious freedom. He knows how important it is for us to gather here in prayer before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

During this Holy Hour and during the days of this Fortnight for Freedom, we are reminded that religious freedom is not just an issue that challenges us in our country because of a mandate from the federal government concerning health care coverage.

Religious freedom has been and continues to be restricted or denied in places all over the world. Religious freedom is not simply about contraception. There are a number of basic principles of Church teaching that we should stop to think about as we reflect on and pray about religious freedom. Let me highlight just a few of them.

We all know that the right to religious freedom is explicitly mentioned in the 1st amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. It says that Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion.

Many people think that religious freedom is something that is given to us by the government and that it is to be understood in whatever way it is interpreted by the government.

The Church teaches us very plainly that the right to religious freedom or freedom of religion is God-given; it is a natural right that needs to be understood according to the teachings of Christ and the Church (CCC 2108).

This God-given right to religious freedom comes from the nature; from the very dignity of the human person; for we are all made in the image and likeness of God; and like God, we have free will (CCC 2106).

Just as God does not force us or coerce us into accepting his love,

- no person should be forced to act against his/her religious convictions or beliefs;
- and no person should be restrained from acting in accordance with his/her religious convictions/beliefs,
 - whether in private or in public,

- or whether that person wishes to act alone or in association with others as we do as members of the Church (CCC 2106).

It is a fundamental principle of law, that for every right there are corresponding obligations/duties, and for every duty there are corresponding rights.

With regard to religious freedom, it has been revealed to us by God that each one of us has the obligation to make known our faith in Jesus Christ; to make known his Gospel and everything that the Gospel of Christ means (CCC 2105; Mt. 5:14-16; Mk 16:15).

Christians have a social duty (that means not just individually, but together as God's people) to respect and awaken in each person the love of the true and the good (CCC 2105).

Cardinal Thuan awakened in the prison guards the true and the good when he reassured them that there is only one way for him to think of them. He could only think of them or relate to them with love,

- even when they offended his God-given human dignity;
- even when they mistreated him, tortured him;
- and even when they took away his freedom, including his God-given right to religious freedom by denying him the right to live and practice his faith in public.

But that did not stop him.

Cardinal Thuan awakened in other prisoners the love of the true and the good which is manifested in the Holy Eucharist. He said, "At night, the Catholic prisoners took turns and spent time in adoration. The Blessed Sacrament helped tremendously. Even Buddhists and other non-Christians were converted, because the strength of the love of Jesus is irresistible."

Pope Benedict XVI has often stated that people are drawn almost like a magnet to prayer and adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. The Holy Father observes that this attraction is because they can feel the love of God pouring out on them, and this is especially true for young people who are often struck with awe and are not able to find words to explain how powerful that experience can be.

As Cardinal Thuan said, "The strength of the love of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is irresistible." That's why I was convinced it is appropriate for our

diocesan prayer during this Fortnight for Religious Freedom to be in the form of a Holy Hour with prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Cardinal Thuan explained that Buddhists and other non-Christians were converted because of this kind of prayer that he could only celebrate secretly and quietly in the darkness of night. He also explained that the irresistible love of Christ that he experienced in the Holy Eucharist melted the hearts of the prison guards who became his students.

Cardinal Thuan's experience of fulfilling his obligation to preach the Gospel and to awaken the true and good in others occurred in a situation where the Communist government was atheist. In that place and time, some religions were barely tolerated and others were persecuted.

I know of other places in the world today such as Iraq or Sudan, where religious freedom is not respected or safeguarded. Christians are intimidated or coerced into professing the dominant religion of that place, or they must flee their homes and their country or being terrorized, tortured, and killed.

Cardinal Thuan did not hate his persecutors. Instead, he chose to love them; and in loving them he slowly and carefully introduced them to what is ultimately true and good: the irresistible love of Jesus Christ, which is manifested in the Blessed Sacrament.

He was doing exactly what St. Paul tells us in the first letter to Timothy; that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone; for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity.

St. Paul says that this is good and pleasing to God our savior who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.

According to the teachings of Christ and the Church, it is wrong for anyone to dictate what we are to believe and how we are to practice our faith. It is wrong for anyone to redefine what our Catholic religion is all about.

Religion cannot be reduced to prayers and worship that takes place behind the closed doors of our churches or in our homes.

- We have a sacred duty to announce to others what God has revealed to us in Christ Jesus,

- We have a sacred duty to do what we can to help them to know the truth.
- We have a sacred duty to perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy for the good of everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs.
- We have a sacred duty to love one another as Christ has loved us.

I cannot imagine what it would be like to be imprisoned simply because of what I believe. I cannot imagine what it would be like to be in danger of death for preaching the Gospel. But I can tell you one thing, Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was right in saying that in this Blessed Sacrament we are shown the strength of the irresistible love of Jesus Christ.

Who knows what bumps are going to be in the road ahead as people in our country awaken to the true and the good that is found in the right to religious freedom.

But even if that right is not safeguarded as it should, we should not be discouraged or afraid of the consequences of acting according to our duty and our vocation to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

It is good for us to be here in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament to offer supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings for those in authority in our country, even if they don't know or acknowledge the Church's teaching on religious freedom. What we are doing here is good and pleasing to God who wants everyone to be saved and to know the truth.

We have been awakened to the reality that we cannot take religious freedom for granted. Who would have thought that we should have to be concerned about respecting and safeguarding this God-given right in our country? We may need to be vigilant in defending the right to religious freedom for some time.

In order to be effective, and in order for us not to be discouraged or distracted, I want to ask you especially to keep on doing what St. Paul tells us we should do.

Every time you pass a church or enter a church and genuflect or bow before the tabernacle, say a prayer for those in authority that they may be enlightened and motivated to do what is necessary to safeguard religious freedom in our country and throughout the world.

Nothing, not even all of the debate and discussion of religious freedom, can overcome the strength of God's saving love that comes to us in Christ Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Every time you pass a church or enter a church and genuflect or bow before the tabernacle, think of the words of Cardinal Thuan who reminds us that the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament, contains the strength of the irresistible love of Jesus Christ.

May you, and our country, and our whole world, know the strength of this irresistible love.