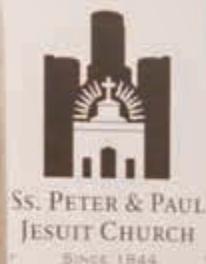




MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE



PROMOTING



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

“Religious freedom, including freedom of conscience, rooted in the dignity of the person, is the cornerstone of all other freedoms. It is a sacred and inalienable right.”

Common Declaration of His Holiness Francis and His Holiness Tawadros II, 4/28/17

The free exercise of one’s religious beliefs has been a longstanding and cherished right in America.

To highlight the importance of this liberty, Michigan Catholic Conference jointly sponsored an Interfaith Religious Freedom Conference with the J. Reuben Clark Law Society Detroit Chapter on November 7, 2017. The aim of the event, held at the University of Detroit Jesuit Law School and SS. Peter and Paul Jesuit Church in Detroit, was to promote greater understanding and awareness of the importance of religious freedom to all people, as well as ways individuals of different faiths could work together in support of this issue.

The event featured three separate sessions, including a panel for students and faith leaders called *Legislative and Legal Challenges*, an *Interfaith Dinner and Dialogue* for religious leaders and academics from over ten faith traditions, and a public session titled *The Importance of Religious Freedom in Society Today*. Over the course of the afternoon and evening, speakers provided greater understanding on the nature of religious freedom, why it matters, ongoing challenges in society hindering its practice, and practical measures to support its protection. Overall, the Interfaith Religious Freedom Conference strongly promoted religious freedom as a cornerstone value for all Americans and emphasized that defending the freedom of other faiths is critical to preserving the freedom for one’s own faith. ■

The following excerpts are from the keynote speech given by Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron, Archbishop of Detroit, at the Interfaith Religious Freedom Conference on November 7, 2017. They are reprinted in this publication with permission from the Archdiocese of Detroit.

Who possesses these liberties? Individuals certainly, but also communities.

The Council says that religious communities are a requirement by the very social nature of the human being and of religion itself. [Religion] is, in some sense of the word, private, insofar as it does not have anything to do with the State, but it is not private in the sense of all in one's head. By the very nature of relating to God, I act within the civil sphere, and we act together. And the Council says that religious liberty is especially important for that community which is the family.

“Religious liberty is not simply something that is enjoyed by a church, it is enjoyed by individuals, and that right needs to be protected...”

How does the Second Vatican Council describe [religious liberty]? It says that within the human sphere of being religious, religious liberty means to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups, and any human power...To be free from coercion in such ways that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others. Then [the Council] adds reasonably: **within due limits**. As one of the speakers said, this is not an absolute right, but it must find its harmony in a whole constellation of rights. So, what is this field within which people ought to be able to act without coercion? The Council says, *‘religious acts are those whereby men and women in private and in public and out of a sense of personal conviction, direct their lives to God.’*¹ It is a sphere in which people should be without coercion in order to perform *‘those internal voluntary and free acts, whereby the human being sets the course of life directly toward God.’* It is to be able to be without coercion in the acts by which my life is directed to God.

...What is the basis for religious liberty? The Council says it is ultimately conscience.

The basis for why we are free is that we have an obligation to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God. We also have an obligation to embrace the truth we come to know and to hold fast to it. This [process] is so essential, because of the dignity of our conscience in this sphere which is so primordial: our capacity to relate to God. Ultimately, the ground of religious liberty is the fact that we are responsible. We can **and should** be held accountable for the way we act. We should especially be held accountable for acts based on the truths that we come to be clear about in regard to God. To be a human being in full maturity is to be worthy of praise or blame for the things we freely choose. If we are not found praiseworthy or blameworthy for our important actions, then our dignity is impaired. We become only patients in that sense: objects, something that is just there like the wallpaper, not to be taken seriously...But it is because of our responsibility that religious liberty is so important. Ultimately this is grounded in the conviction that we are rational beings who can know the truth and can freely act on the truth we recognize...Borrowing a phrase from one of my philosophy mentors at Catholic University of America: *‘Religious liberty is grounded in the fact that you and I are agents of truth.’* Agents because we think, then let truth emerge and become clear to us, especially religious truth...We do not invent it, but we let the disclosure occur. And because we are those kinds of agents, we then can act as agents in the sense of performing works in the world, making **the world** different because of what we have seen in the world about God...And when people fail at [being agents of truth], they are worthy of blame and when they succeed, they are worthy of great praise.



Archbishop Allen Vigneron addresses a crowd of 300 at the Interfaith Religious Freedom Conference in Detroit (November 2017). Photo by Dave Frechette.

1. Dignitatis Humanae, Pope Paul VI, 12/7/1965, <https://goo.gl/bgSGS>
2. Washington's Farewell Address, 1796, The Avalon Project, accessed 3/21/18: <https://goo.gl/To00>

...What is the worth of religious liberty?

I would offer three points:

One: It serves a very practical purpose...We bishops in the United States have adopted a communication slogan: *Free to Serve*.

We hope that by showing people what our religious freedom permits us to do—to serve the common good—our religious liberties will be respected. We speak about our work of education, of health care, and of the other kinds of social services, works of mercy, and good works that we are able to perform as part of our religion to build up our community. If we do not have religious liberty, we, like other religious communities, will not be able to do these acts that make our community better. Religious liberty ought never to be collapsed into freedom of worship because our relationship with God extends beyond worship. [This relationship] must involve not only love of God, but love of neighbor, and indeed it is by loving our neighbor very often that we show that we love God.

Two: Religious liberty permits individual believers, and permits us, to build up for ourselves and for our community, goods which are truly human.

It permits realities without which it would be impossible to live together in peace and harmony and human flourishing. Religious liberty is important for the next generation to learn the virtues that make human existence possible. To learn those convictions about duty, self-sacrifice, honesty, and the other sorts of virtues indispensable for a life that is truly happy. [Religious liberty] is important for communicating the sentiments which are so important to moral life – aspirations – all of the things that are truly human goods. And as a witness for this important basis or worth of religious liberty, I would invoke President Washington, who in his farewell address said this:

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense

of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? 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 natural morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles.”²

Let our synagogues, our churches, our mosques, and our temples be free so that we can live a sound ethical life as a people.



Pictured (left to right): Imam Mohammad Elahi and keynote speakers Elder Von G. Keetch and Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron speak about the importance of interfaith collaboration and religious liberty after the event. Photo by The Mormon Newsroom.

Three: Religious liberty serves as a ground for all other liberties.

This point is often made by saying that religious liberty is the first of our freedoms, because this securing of a field for the seeking and finding and acting on ultimate truth ensures that all other liberties are not mistaken as grants of the State or some other power. Our liberties come to us not from a majority opinion, but because—whether we do it or do not do it—we are the kind of beings who live in a field whereby we can search conscience and have ultimate truth. This field is a solemn relationship, higher and more sacred than anything the State could ever establish. Religious liberty secures the primacy of what is truly human and says that these goods—like solidarity and

empathy—are more important than money, or food, or any other material reality. Religious liberty liberates us from the tyranny of the technological. There is a sphere that is more important than simply manipulating nature, and it enshrines that we as individuals have not only the right but the duty to be responsible.

...One of the most important challenges that religious liberty faces today is that religion is not recognized as a specific sphere,

and so religious liberty is often simply reduced to the right to free association or the right of free speech. If religion is not valued, then religious liberty will not be valued in itself. I think what we all have to do is show that religious liberty is a good for our community. We have to communicate better about that... But what seems to be most effective is to speak about religious liberty through the lens of the individual, telling stories about how important it is for religious liberty to be protected... We also have to make our case that religious liberty is important for parents as they seek to do their task of sharing what they know to be right and wrong, good and bad, with their children. Because while providing shelter and food and clothing for children is an important parental responsibility, the most important parental responsibility is to teach about the truth and what is truly good, truly bad, truly a failure, and truly a success.

Last, I wonder if we should not make a better case for standing up for religious liberty as an act of patriotism.

We are patriots. We love our country, and defending religious liberty is a great act by which we seek to make our country better. We can sometimes be seen as—but I do not think it is the truth—invoking religious liberty for the sake of our own self-aggrandizement. But when we stand up for the liberty of others, we make the case more powerfully that we are seeking to build a better America. ■



Pictured (left to right): Faith leaders in the Antiochian Orthodox, Catholic, and Sikh traditions converse at the Interfaith Dinner and Dialogue. Photo by the Mormon Newsroom.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

- Learn more about religious freedom at usccb.org/freedom.
- Be a respectful and loving example of your faith to others, so they can see from your life the value of that faith.
- Defend the freedom of religion for all people, not just fellow Catholics—including those with whom you may disagree.
- Connect with individuals and groups of other faiths in your community and find areas of common concern related to religious liberty. Examine how you can work collaboratively to highlight these issues.
- Share *Freedom to Serve* videos (CatholicsServe.com) to demonstrate the important role Catholic individuals and organizations have in local communities for all those in need.
- Sign up for the Catholic Advocacy Network, an email platform that stays updated on issues impacting the common good, including religious liberty: micatholic.org/can. The Network also allows members to easily contact their elected officials on these issues. ■

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For additional free copies of this

focus, please contact us at:

Phone: (800) 395-5565

Email: kmay@micatholic.org

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