

# Let Freedom Ring: A Pastoral Letter on Religious Freedom

by Bishop William E. Lori

The Pastoral letter explores the two major themes of religious liberty as a God-given human right – not as a grant from the state – and the understanding of religion as a social good, and a contributor to a just and life-affirming social order.

Bishop Lori discusses recent challenges to the Church in Connecticut and concludes by urging all Catholics to reflect on the issues of the day with respect to Catholic social teaching. We encourage every Catholic to read these compelling thoughts.

## 1. A Question with Deep Roots in Connecticut

Ask the proverbial person on the street where the phrase "a wall of separation between Church and State" is found, and he or she might say that it's in the United States Constitution or the Bill of Rights. But those words appear nowhere in either document. Instead, that phrase was penned by Thomas Jefferson in response to a letter he received in 1801 from a group of Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut. The Baptists had written a respectful letter to the third President of the United States. They were aware of what he had done with respect to religious liberty. He had led the fight to disestablish the Anglican Church in Virginia and had written the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom adopted in 1786. In some ways this law was a model for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which ruled out established religions at the federal level.

Nonetheless some states, including Connecticut, continued to have "established" or "state" religions long after the ratification of the First Amendment in 1791. In fact, the Congregational Church remained the official state religion of Connecticut until 1818.

Perplexed by this state of affairs, the Danbury Baptists wrote to Jefferson. They stated that no one should suffer because of his or her religious views and that the legitimate power of civil government extends no further than punishing those who harm their neighbors. They also made it clear to President Jefferson that they remained second-class citizens. It wasn't that they were required to offer financial support for the established church (that ceased in 1729) or that they were forbidden to practice their faith. Their precise complaint was that the State granted them freedom of religion only as a special favor rather than recognizing it as an inalienable right. They objected to religious freedom as merely an act of toleration on the part of the State and insisted rather that it is granted by the Creator.

On January 1, 1802, Jefferson replied to the Danbury Baptists. "I contemplate with sovereign reverence," he wrote, "that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thereby building a wall of separation between Church and State." Thus originated a phrase which is sometimes used to marginalize or even exclude religion and religious values from the public square. However Jefferson himself may have understood the phrase "wall of separation", we might note that two days after he sent his reply to the Danbury Baptists, he attended Sunday worship services held in the U.S. House of Representatives and continued to do this for the next seven years. For their part, the Danbury Baptists continued to push for the disestablishment of the Congregational Church in Connecticut and for religious liberty, not as a favor granted by the State, but rather as a gift from the Creator and thus inherent to human dignity.

## 2. The Moral Foundations of Freedom

### A. Freedom, Truth, and Responsibility

The God-given freedoms recognized by our Founding Fathers are not the same thing as license, that is, the unbridled freedom to do whatever we want so long as we do not run afoul of the law. On the contrary, the freedoms upon which our country was established are rooted in an in-built sense of moral responsibility. We are free not merely to do what we like but rather to do what we ought. God created us free so that we could embrace the truth

in love and to do good for ourselves, our families and loved ones, and the larger society. Freedom and truth go together, as Pope John Paul II reminded us, just as freedom and responsibility also go together.

## **B. The Natural Law**

Yet, how are we guided in using our freedom responsibly? How can we know right from wrong? The answer to this question is the natural law. But what is the natural law? Briefly, the natural law is that sense of right and wrong, etched in the human heart by the Creator. Thankfully we are not unattached moral agents floating in the universe. Rather, our origin is from God, as the Declaration of Independence recognizes. So each person brings into life a sort of innate "memory" of whence we came, a "memory" of truths and goods for which human beings were created. This ingrained intuition is not a fully spelled-out moral code but it does give us an inherent sense that we should always seek to do what is good and avoid what is evil. In other words, since we are made in God's image, we participate in some way in the truth, goodness, and beauty of God's eternal law. Even though our participation in God's wisdom and love has been weakened by original sin and by our subsequent personal sins, it has not been eliminated or entirely destroyed. Even human reason unaided by faith can struggle toward truth and responsibility in exercising God-given freedoms. Moreover, religious faith, especially the moral teaching of the Church, helps to set in sharp relief what the natural law continually suggests to our consciences. The Church's moral teaching combined with the grace of the Holy Spirit helps us embrace what is true, good, and beautiful in a spirit of love epitomized by the Beatitudes. As Pope John Paul II once said, "Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth. One without the other becomes a destructive lie."

Even a very incomplete and imperfect approach to moral truth and responsibility signals the dignity of each human person. Since the dawn of civilization the natural law has provided a basis for diverse peoples of many backgrounds to come together around a moral consensus – not agreement on everything, of course, but on the core truths and values necessary for a healthy society. As a result, the God-given freedoms recognized in the founding documents of our country were not meant to be an "empty space" to be filled up with whatever choices one cared to make or to refrain from making. Rather, our society is to respect basic truths, virtues, and values which make for a strong and enlightened citizenry.

Unfortunately, the natural law tradition is not taught as frequently as in the past in universities and law schools. It is not a specifically "Catholic" tradition but the Church continues to embrace it as part of her defense of reason's capacity for truth. While the natural law does not give detailed answers to social problems it does provide a sound framework for entering more vigorously into debates over cultural and legal challenges. We should familiarize ourselves with the natural law tradition so that we can more adequately grapple with the questions that confront us.

## **C. The Threat of Moral Relativism**

Today much of what is taught by natural law and clarified by moral teaching is deemed by at least some civic authorities as merely an outmoded construct. According to this way of thinking, morality is not rooted in human nature but rather in how we as moral agents decide things ought to be. Morality is said to have nothing to do with what our bodies are like or what was once thought to be rational moral speech. Some regard as outmoded the wisdom of those who went before us – philosophers, teachers, religious leaders, and statesmen who recognized and embraced the demands of the moral law. According to this view, morality is nothing more than what one says it is and our God-given freedoms are reduced merely to the freedom to choose. This is what we call moral relativism – 'my truth is not your truth and your truth is not mine, but we are both free to choose our respective truths so long as the law allows it.' Far from bringing about a just and tranquil society, moral relativism has led to division and rancor in our politics and chaos in the culture at large. It has also led to the imposition of the views of a few powerful people on the majority. This is what Pope Benedict XVI means when he speaks of "the dictatorship of relativism".

The Church plays a vital role in helping society arrive at those core truths which make for a just and peaceful society. It also plays a vital role in defending freedom of conscience for individuals and institutions and in the character formation of citizens. And our Catholic faith, with its respect for and defense of human reason's capacity for truth as well as its readiness for reasoned dialog, can greatly contribute to the recovery of core truths, virtues, and values in society. It is to these questions that I now turn.

## **3. The Public Role of Religion**

It wasn't long ago that American Catholics, after decades of overt anti-Catholicism stretching back to the 19th century, entered the mainstream of society. Gradually, anti-Catholic hiring practices and laws gave way as Catholics took their rightful places in public and professional life. This crescendo of confidence was symbolized by the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, the nation's first and only Catholic president. November 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of President Kennedy's election and thus it is an appropriate moment to recall his Inaugural Address in which he stated that the principle for which our founding fathers fought was the idea that our rights "come not from the generosity of the State but from the hand of God." And of these rights, religious liberty is mentioned first in the Bill of Rights, a priority that is not accidental.

About the same time as President Kennedy's election, Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., became well-known for his robust defense of the freedom of religion and his recognition of the practical importance of the separation of Church and State in the American form of constitutional government. What follows reflects in some measure the thought of Father Murray.

Through the centuries the freedom of the Church to govern its own affairs had to be won, even wrested, from kings and emperors. For example, in 1075 Pope Gregory VII stoutly condemned secular control over the selection and investiture of bishops. About a century later, Archbishop Thomas Becket would be murdered in his struggle with King Henry II, who asserted his claim of supremacy over the Church in England. It is reasonable for us to see these struggles as remotely clearing the path for the American experiment and its separation of Church and State. And not unlike the Danbury Baptists, on balance we should regard this separation as an advantage both to the Church and to the State.

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, issued on December 7, 1965, affirmed one's right to worship in accord with one's conscience and also implied the advisability of separating Church and State, that is to say, that advisability of distinguishing between the political power of the State and the religious authority of the Church, and protecting the latter from the former. This Declaration went on to teach that "the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person," not "in the subjective disposition of the person but in his very nature" (*Dignitas Humanae*, no. 2). Nothing in the Vatican II Declaration endorses the notion that society should be free from religion or that religion should be marginalized as something irrational or dangerous. On the contrary, the Declaration on Religious Liberty affirms the natural right of individuals to be free from State coercion with regard to privately held religious convictions as well as the natural right to express those beliefs publicly. This public expression of faith takes the form of worship but includes more than worship: it includes education, and various forms of community service. Here we think of our parishes, our Catholic schools, after-school programs, religious education programs, as well as the array of services offered by Catholic Charities and Catholic hospitals. But we should also lay claim to our natural right to bring our religious convictions into the public square, to engage the culture in which we live, and to participate in debates and discussions which help to shape our character as a civic society. As George Washington said of religion, "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 pillars of human happiness."

#### **A. The Role of the Church in Protecting the Rights of Conscience**

Contrary to what some think, religion is not merely a private matter between God and oneself. Rather, it plays an important public role in society in helping to protect the rights of conscience of the people over against the powers of the government. The Danbury Baptists stated that "the legitimate Power of civil Government extends no further than to punish the man who works ill to his neighbor". We can take this a step further by asserting, in Father Murray's words, that religion stands "...between the body politic and the public power, not only limiting the reach of the power over the people, but also mobilizing the moral consensus of the people and bringing it to bear upon the power" (John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, p. 202).

One of the ways the Church limits the reach of government into our lives is by amplifying the voice of individual consciences so that it can be heard and respected in the public square. Thus we join with fellow citizens and believers as a community of faith and reason both to make our voices heard and also to resist encroachments by the governmental power on our consciences. After all, it is not the government which grants liberty of conscience or even guarantees it. Liberty of conscience is a natural right and organized religion mediates between individuals and the government in defending not only the freedom to worship but also the freedom to proclaim publicly one's

beliefs, to act upon them, and to bring them to bear upon the culture at large. The Church, then, is not merely a voluntary social service organization but rather an established pillar of society with an important public role.

### **B. The Role of the Church in Character Formation**

In addition, the Church and its members play an indispensable role in the formation of present and future generations of citizens even as it serves the poor and the marginalized. Indeed, the Catholic Church remains the largest non-governmental source of charitable, social, and educational services in Connecticut, not to mention the many pastoral services offered to families and individuals throughout the State. We should view with deep concern the increasing tendency of the State to play an over-arching role in the day-to-day life of its citizens by attempting to limit the role of families, churches, and other community organizations in forming young people and providing social services. Government has a duty to look after the welfare of its citizens, but in doing so, must respect their beliefs and partner with churches and other organizations that generously and effectively serve an array of societal needs.

Let's focus for a moment on the tendency of government to override the legitimate role and authority of parents and guardians. Connecticut is one of the few states that lack a notification law for minors seeking an abortion. A school nurse needs permission from a parent or guardian to provide an aspirin to a child, but that same child can procure an abortion without the knowledge or approval of anyone – parent, guardian, grandparent or adult sibling. Under current law minors can undergo an abortion at the hands of strangers without adequate information and without a system of support to deal with the aftermath of an abortion. Thus far the Select Committee on Children of the State Legislature has been unwilling even to grant a hearing for an adult notification law. No wonder abortion rates are falling throughout the country but have risen in the Constitution State.

Few parents want their children simply to absorb the prevailing mores of secular culture; few want them to sink to the lowest common denominator. Parents are assisted by religious communities in their obligation to oversee what is taught to their children in school and what values or counter-values are being impressed upon them. Our families are supported by excellent Catholic schools, parish religious education programs, and youth groups as well as various events and programs for young people. These and other ministries and initiatives serve as a counterbalance and as a competing voice to the secularity of government-led schools and programs. Far from being something bad, this exercise of religious liberty is one of the glories of a free society and a source of strength for our State and our Republic. It helps to form and strengthen a moral consensus upon which a diverse but cohesive and humane society can be built. The State should welcome the moral and character formation of its citizens by families and by religion.

Unfortunately, Connecticut law currently does not provide even minimal support to Catholic and private schools. In fact, Connecticut provides much less assistance to children attending such schools than almost any other state in the Nation. Most states provide assistance with textbooks, technology, and funding for State-government mandates for schools – forms of assistance which the United States Supreme Court has found to be constitutional. Powerful self-interest groups working with legislators have thus far blocked children attending Catholic and private schools in Connecticut from receiving these forms of assistance. Legislative proposals to provide corporate tuition tax credits for support to be given to both public and private schools have also met with opposition. Current law stipulates that education majors, even in Catholic universities, cannot fulfill their student-teaching requirements in private schools. In these and other ways, State law currently tries to muffle the formative voice of Catholic and private schools in favor of a government-led monopoly on education.

## **4. Recent Challenges to Religious Liberty in Connecticut**

The Danbury Baptists from the early 19th century have much to say to us as we begin the second decade of the 21st century. There is a growing tendency in our State to view religious liberty as a grant to citizens by civil authorities coupled with a desire to regulate religion. There are also initiatives on the part of some governmental authorities to impose their will upon the consciences of individuals and religious institutions. And there is an increasing tendency to disregard reasoned moral discourse as irrelevant and even irrational. All this is part of a broader movement to sharply delimit religion's role in our culture.

Let us now briefly recall some of the challenges to religious liberty here in the State of Connecticut in recent years:

### **A. Bill 1098**

Many people remember the ill-fated attempt on the part of some members of the Judiciary Committee of the State Legislature to reorganize and thus to regulate the Catholic Church in Connecticut. Senate Bill 1098, which was targeted only at the Catholic Church, would have authorized the State to usurp the pastor's role of governance in Catholic parishes by assigning some of his administrative and pastoral responsibilities to elected committees. In other words, this bill sought to impose a governance structure much like that of the Congregational Church on the Catholic Church, in opposition to the latter's teaching and laws. The State should let Congregationalists be Congregationalists and let Catholics be Catholics. It has no business telling any church how to organize itself. By contrast, churches can inform the State how they are organized and seek to have their structures recognized in enabling legislation so that they can incorporate and transact business. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Hartford did precisely that in the mid-19th century. Other religious leaders have done the same thing. The preferred organizational structure of various religious communities continues to be recognized in Connecticut law. Indeed, the current statute needs no change.

Unconstitutional on its face, Senate Bill 1098 was met with vocal protests at a rally on the steps of the State Capitol led by The Most Reverend Henry J. Mansell, Archbishop of Hartford, and attended by thousands of Roman Catholics and many other people of good will. It was quickly withdrawn even though its authors continued to claim that they could see no difficulty in what they had proposed. While this legislation was in every way extreme, the mere fact that it could have been proposed should prompt us never to take our religious liberty for granted.

### **B. Investigation by the Office of State Ethics**

There was a sequel. A few weeks after the protest rally on the steps of the State Capitol took place, I received a letter from the Office of State Ethics informing me of an impending ethics investigation against the Diocese of Bridgeport. That Office, it seems, decided that many of the buses which brought citizens to the protest rally were from Fairfield County and concluded that the Diocese had spent more than \$2,000 to procure those buses. Thus the Diocese was suspected of violating State lobbying laws which require that any organization which spends more than \$2,000 to influence legislation must register as a lobbyist. Conscious that we were not lobbying but rather protesting a direct violation of our religious rights, the Diocese of Bridgeport sued the Office of State Ethics under the Federal Civil Rights Statute and the investigation promptly ground to a halt. This episode teaches that we can take neither freedom of speech nor freedom of religion for granted.

Consistent with efforts to drive religion out of the public square and to limit its influence on our culture, certain legislators still feel the need to regulate and thus to limit how bishops and priests can communicate with parishioners regarding the morality of legislative proposals. In the days ahead, I will ask your vigilance on this issue.

### **C. "Plan B"**

You may also remember the so-called "Plan B" law enacted several years ago. Aimed at Catholic hospitals, it forbade medical professionals from taking account of the results of an ovulation test before administering to victims of rape a powerful drug that could harm an unborn human life. The purpose of administering both a pregnancy test and an ovulation test is to help ensure that Catholic hospitals do not unwittingly perform an abortion. Catholic hospitals have always provided competent and compassionate medical care to victims of the heinous crime of rape and continue to do so. Indeed Catholic hospitals welcome people of all faiths and of none, and these institutions serve the poor with great generosity. Yet the State saw fit to interfere in a medical-moral issue in an effort to compromise Catholic teaching on abortion. It imposed its will as a limit on the moral consciences and the medical judgment of healthcare professionals. It also imposed its will on the institutional conscience of the Catholic facilities in which they serve.

### **D. Re-Definition of Marriage**

Among the most contentious issues in our society today is the movement to re-define marriage no longer as solely the union of a man and a woman ordered toward the procreation and education of children but rather as the union of any two people old enough to marry, including those of the same sex. In Connecticut this redefinition has already occurred not because its citizens voted for it but rather because four justices of the Supreme Court decided that traditional marriage between a man and a woman has "no rational basis" – and this without so much as a reference on the part of the High Court's majority to the role of husbands and wives in procreating and raising children. In

declaring that traditional marriage has "no rational basis" the Court is saying that it really is not a part of human nature but rather an outmoded social construct which the State can redefine as it sees fit.

The rational basis for traditional marriage, however, can indeed be found in natural law, that special guide written on the human heart of each person, a guide which gives rise to that morality which, in George Washington's words, 'leads to political prosperity.' The natural law is in no sense sectarian but rather is one's in-built sense of right and wrong, critical for one's integrity and social relationships.

Gravitating towards a view of life in which moral values confirmed and supported by religion are outmoded and unwelcome, the Connecticut Supreme Court decided for all our State's citizens that marriage has nothing to do with gender, sexuality, and children but only with adult feelings. In its turn, the Connecticut Legislature codified the Supreme Court's judicial "fiat", barely making room for our Catholic Church and other faiths not to be complicit in this wholesale redefinition of marriage and its morality. Practical matters, such as our Church's ability to hire those who accept and live its teaching, the exclusion of benefits to same-sex couples, and its ability to enter into social service contracts with the State had to be negotiated as this legislation moved toward enactment. Like the Danbury Baptists of old, one has the sense that the freedom to go about our mission of worship, education, and service according to the teaching of our Church has become a favor, a "carve out" accorded us by the State, rather than a God-given right. One also has the impression that our Church's teaching on marriage and family is increasingly regarded as discriminatory, and even as "hate-speech". As the Danbury Baptists would tell us, we should be on guard against being made to "suffer in Name, person or effects on account of [our] religious Opinions." Neither individual members of the Catholic Church nor the Church itself should be penalized for what it sincerely holds as a matter of reason and faith.

#### **E. Undue Liability**

Similarly, the Church struggles with undue burdens of liability imposed by the State of Connecticut. The current statute of limitations for civil claims of sexual abuse (the time allowed by law in which to sue) is 30 years past the age of 18. This means that a claim can be brought until one's 48th birthday. In addition, the statute is retroactive. Thus claims that were barred under the previous statute of limitations are now allowed. Even though this Diocese, like dioceses throughout the United States, has thoroughly addressed the ugly specter of sexual abuse, it continues to labor under laws that make it possible to bring forward even fraudulent claims dating back decades. Often the accused priest is dead and there are no witnesses. Indeed, the whole point of statutes of limitations is to ensure that there is sufficient evidence for claims and not to go so far back in time that it is no longer possible to determine the truthfulness and accuracy of allegations. As things now stand, however, claims can be asserted with little or no evidence while religious privileges often are denied by judges without any explanation. And even to defend against frivolous claims is a costly proposition.

It is also important to note that public institutions such as boards of education (responsible for the education of most of this State's children) and juvenile detention centers are virtually immune from these kinds of lawsuits, even though incidences of the sexual abuse of minors in public institutions is much greater than that which occurred in the Catholic Church. For example, since 1992, 112 public school teachers and coaches lost their licenses due to sexual misconduct with students. In the same period, three priests throughout Connecticut were accused of such behavior. Thus the State refuses to hold itself responsible for sexual abuse while at the same time imposing vast retroactive liability on the Church and other non-governmental organizations.

The Church has worked hard to root out offenders, to create a safe environment for children and young people, and to assist those harmed by sexual abuse. A point has been reached, however, when punitive retroactive laws aimed mostly at the Catholic Church need to be revised. This should be done for at least two reasons: first, to protect the integrity of the judicial process, and second, to enable the Church to continue serving its members and to fulfill its role in society.

### **5. What Can We Do?**

After reading through this letter, I hope you are asking the question: "What can I do?" After all, we are free to voice our concerns both publicly and privately and to exert our influence through discussion, debate, communication with elected officials, and the ballot box. So what steps might we all take to recoup and defend religious liberty here in Fairfield County, in our State, and in our Nation?

## **A. Prayer for Government Officials**

First, we should pray for civil authorities. St. Paul exhorts: "...I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity" (I Timothy 2:1). It is appropriate that the General Intercessions at Sunday Mass include petitions for those in civil authority. It is also incumbent upon us all to pray for our political leaders whether or not we voted for them or support their policies. In asking the Holy Spirit to guide them in the ways of truth, wisdom, and love, we are looking to the common good and expressing thanks to God for the freedom and opportunities our country provides.

## **B. Be Well-Informed and Ready to Bear Witness to the Truth**

Second, it is important for us as believers and citizens to be well-informed. As Catholics we need to know what the Church actually believes and teaches. All too often the Church's teaching is ridiculed, as in the monologues of late-night comedians. Sometimes the Church's teaching is mischaracterized in legislative debates, in the courts, and even in the text books used in public schools. At other times religious speech in general is portrayed as irrational and dangerous – in the famous words of Karl Marx, "the opiate of the people." Even people we love and trust may have misapprehensions about the Church's teaching. Thus we need to know the teaching of the faith just as well as we know any other area of life we deem important – such as the knowledge and skill we bring to our professional life.

In particular, we need to study the Church's social teaching which most recently has been restated and further developed by Pope Benedict XVI in his beautiful encyclical, *Charity in Truth*. If you are a committed Catholic, you will be asked about the Church and its teaching, even at cocktail parties and dinners or around the water cooler. At times, our defense of religious liberty and of the Church itself will take place in venues such as family discussions, as well as in your contacts with friends, acquaintances and co-workers. We should always be ready to respond with accuracy, faithfulness, hope, and love.

In his encyclical *The Splendor of Truth*, the Servant of God Pope John Paul II wrote about the importance of our being courageous witnesses to moral truth. He cited the example of holy men and women throughout Scripture who preferred even death to complicity with falsehood and evil. He holds up for our edification holy men and women in the history of the Church who bore witness to the centrality of their faith and to moral truth and human dignity by shedding their blood. Pope John Paul II added: "This witness makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to warding off, in civil society and within ecclesial communities themselves, a headlong plunge into the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: the confusion between good and evil, which makes it impossible to build up and to preserve the moral order of individuals and communities (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 92).

In this connection, we rightly think of military personnel and others who have given their lives in defense of our liberties, including religious liberty. We note also the wisdom of those who are not Christians but who nonetheless recognize the importance of standing up for moral truth. In the words of the Latin poet Juvenal: "Consider it the greatest of crimes to prefer survival to honor and, out of love of physical life, to lose the very reason for living" (cited in *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 92). You and I are called to be witnesses to truth by holiness of life, by personal integrity, and by our readiness to defend the truth even when it is unpopular or politically inexpedient. We are called to struggle against evil with the weapons of love and moral authority and, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, to practice "that charity which evangelizes."

Intellectually, morally, and spiritually equipped as citizens and believers, we need to bring into the public square a keen awareness of our rights to assert and bear witness to that moral truth which protects human dignity and makes for a just and peaceful society. Thomas Jefferson may have spoken of "a wall of separation" between Church and State, yet both intersect in our individual lives. It is crucial for us to have a fully developed understanding of religious liberty not as freedom from religion but rather as freedom to practice one's faith and to influence the culture around us. And that understanding should be coupled with vigilance. A Massachusetts abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, famously said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

Thus it is important for us to stay informed of the legislation that is proposed in Hartford and the directions in which our courts are taking us. One way of doing this is by joining the Legislative Network of the Connecticut Catholic Public Affairs Conference ([www.ctcatholic.org](http://www.ctcatholic.org)). We should also pay attention to what our children are being taught

in school and what attitudes are being communicated about our Church and its teaching. There is no substitute for being informed and staying involved.

### **C. Communicate**

Recent history has portrayed for us the importance of uniting in concerted action when religious liberty is threatened. Had nearly 4,000 people not gathered on the steps of the State Capitol in Hartford in March 2009, it is entirely possible that Bill 1098 might have passed. Without your intervention during the last legislative session, the Church might have been burdened with unlimited retroactive liability. Nor should we imagine that past victories in these matters spell the end to the threats we face. They are ongoing and so must be our vigilance.

Again, through the Connecticut Catholic Conference's Legislative Network it is easy to communicate with legislators by email or phone. We can write letters or send electronic communications both to elected and appointed officials as well as the media. Indeed, I take this occasion to thank so many of you who have written, emailed, or called the State Capitol to oppose flawed legislation and to support beneficial legislation. Let me add my warm thanks for the leadership of so many priests who have brought important issues to the attention of their parishes and motivated parishioners to act. Allow me to offer heartfelt encouragement to clergy and laity alike – to continue to do this in the future.

### **D. Vote**

It is our glory and our responsibility as citizens to conscientiously exercise our right to vote. Candidates for public office should be looked at not only on questions such as taxes, jobs, transportation, and the like – vital as these issues are – but also on their records and positions with regard to religious liberty. We need to ask our candidates where they stand on the issues discussed in this letter as well as other issues illumined by the Church's social teaching. And we need to challenge our public officials to respect and protect religious liberty and also to listen to the wisdom which religious faith affords. The Church refrains from partisan politics, that is, from supporting one political party or candidate over another. But the Church has every right to say where it stands on the issues of the day.

### **E. Participation in Public Life**

It is also important that good men and women – with skills, virtues, and values – run for public office. Edmund Burke famously said that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." It is not easy to run for public office nor is it easy to be an elected official. Nonetheless, as more and more people of faith and reason enter the political arena, the possibility exists to recoup the moral consensus which is the necessary pre-condition for the healthy exercise of liberty. A great need exists for those who understand how to bring the truths, virtues, and values that flow from faith and reason into public life while respecting the legitimate freedom of all citizens. The political process itself suffers when candidates and elected officials abandon their convictions in favor of political expediency or proclaim themselves "personally opposed" to some great evil such as abortion, even while supporting it politically.

## **6. The Constitution State**

All of which brings us back to the Danbury Baptists. Their defense of freedom is a treasured part of our common heritage which we should not allow to fade away. It is up to us to defend religious liberty. Indeed, Connecticut calls itself "the Constitution State" because its Constitution is thought to be the first written document of its kind and thus it provided something of a model for the Federal Constitution. How important that our beloved State of Connecticut live up to its name. How important that freedom—religious freedom—ring loud and clear in every corner of Fairfield County and beyond!

Thank you for reading this letter. May God bless you and your loved ones and may God bless and protect the Church in Fairfield County!