

US bishops launch religious freedom website

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has created a new website dedicated to encouraging education, prayer and public action to protect religious freedom at home and abroad.

As our first American freedom, religious liberty is “a founding principle of our country, protected by the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights,” said the U.S. bishops on their new website.

“It’s a fundamental human right, rooted in the dignity of every human person – people of any faith or no faith at all,” they added.

Launched just days before the Nov. 6 election, the new website, firstamericanfreedom.com, includes sections promoting education, prayer and action regarding the right to freedom of religion.

Religious liberty includes not only freedom of belief, speech and worship, but also freedom of action, “the freedom to serve the common good in accordance with your faith,” the bishops said.

This means that religious communities define their faith, not the government, they explained. It also means that believers should be able to live out the principles of their faith as they help the needy, work in business and participate fully in public life.

“In short, it means that nobody should be forced to act in a manner contrary to their own religious beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, unless it is necessary to keep public order,” they said.

“As Catholics, we’re called to live out our faith every day – not just Sunday,” explained a brochure posted on the website. It noted that Catholics “serve the poor and needy, protect life at all stages, welcome immigrants and fight for social justice.”

“Our service flows directly from our faith; the two cannot be separated,” it said, adding that these “are matters of conscience and principle, not subjects for political negotiation or compromise.”

This freedom has always been protected in America, and both major political parties have defended it for decades, the brochure noted.

“But now, all across America, our faith is being rewritten by the government,” it warned, giving examples of current threats to religious liberty at both the federal and local levels.

Chief among these threats is a federal mandate requiring employers – including religious schools, hospitable and charitable organizations – to provide health insurance plans covering contraception, sterilization and early abortion drugs.

In addition, the brochure noted, several states have proposed legislation that would prevent Catholics from offering food, shelter and medical aid to undocumented immigrants, and lawmakers in Connecticut recently proposed a bill that would let the state force the Church to change how it is structured and governed.

The brochure warned that if this pattern is allowed to continue, “being a Catholic in America will look very different in just a few years.”

To address these threats, the bishops are stressing the importance of prayer, recognizing that “With God, all things are possible; without God, we can do nothing.”

The new website offers a prayer for religious freedom and includes a section for prayerful reflections, including a recent one offered by Archbishop Lori during a rosary novena for life and liberty.

The bishops are also calling for action to protect religious freedom. The website offers information about an email and text message campaign run by the bishops’ conference to send out periodic updates and opportunities for further action.

Readers are asked to contact their elected officials and urge them to protect religious liberty. They are also encouraged to inform their friends and neighbors about the importance of this fundamental freedom by sharing the message on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

A resources section on the website offers additional materials, including a speech on international religious freedom delivered by Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, copies of several Congressional testimonies given by Archbishop Lori, a video on faithful citizenship and a religious freedom radio ad in both English and Spanish.

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