

Archbishop Gomez: Religious freedom given by God, not government



“Freedom of religion means we are free not to believe what others believe – especially what the majority of our neighbors believe or what the government might want us to believe,” he said at Temple Beth El, a major Los Angeles synagogue Jan. 17.

“This also means we can never be forced to do things that violate our conscience.”

The archbishop opened his remarks at the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's 12th Annual Multi-faith Prayer Breakfast by reflecting on the prayer of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhyn asking God “what am I doing in this world of yours?”

Such ultimate questions are what every religion seeks to answer, said Archbishop Gomez. The founding fathers shared the Judeo-Christian belief, he recounted, that our lives are a gift from God.

“Rights...come, not from the generosity of government but from the hand of God...that’s why freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are so essential to the American idea of democracy,” he said.

He said the three components of religious freedom begin with the freedom to “seek God in our own way.” This means that persons are able to “establish institutions based on our beliefs and to run them without input or interference from the government,” including schools, hospitals, charities, and media outlets.

The second dimension of religious freedom, he said, is the liberty not to believe what our neighbors or government may try to impose on us, and the final aspect is the freedom to believe in no religion.

This right to religious liberty has made America “a beautiful diversity” of religion and culture, said the archbishop, and that religious believers in Los Angeles and elsewhere are central in charity and defending the vulnerable.

“Who can imagine Los Angeles without all the charities and ministries; all the hospitals, clinics and

schools, that are being run by people of faith? Who can imagine our institutions without devoted public servants who are motivated by their religious faith and their love for their neighbor,” he asked.

Archbishop Gomez warned of militant secularism which he says pressures believers “to keep our faith to ourselves and to live as if our beliefs don’t matter to how we work or carry out our duties as citizens.”

“Our religious institutions face new pressures to compromise and abandon our beliefs. Some of us are being asked to render unto Caesar what Caesar has no right to demand.”

The archbishop's appeal to his multi-faith audience was that “as believers in God we still stand fast and stand together.”

While there is a plurality of beliefs, he said the conviction is shared that “our faith matters” and that “we need to defend one another’s freedom – to hold our beliefs and to live according to those beliefs.”

American society, he said, needs religion and “needs to be inspired by people of faith. We need religion to break down the idols of our pride and self-satisfaction. To be our conscience.”

Archbishop Gomez concluded by his hope that believers of different faiths will collaborate ever more to improve life in Los Angeles, and in particular to “give justice” to all immigrants.

“We are here to serve God and to serve our neighbors in love and kindness. We are here to walk humbly with our God. So let’s ask our Good God to be with us and to guide us – as together we seek to build a city of truth and love.”

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