

Our First, Our Most Cherished Liberty

Statement from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
April 12, 2012

Study Guide, developed by the Archdiocese of Louisville

Preparation: All members should have read the document *Our First, Our Most Cherished Liberty*, available electronically from:

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/our-first-most-cherished-liberty.cfm>

Booklets of this document also may be ordered from USCCB:

<http://www.usccbpublishing.org/productdetails.cfm?sku=7-334>

All members should be provided a copy of the study guide.

Prayer for Religious Liberty

Begin by praying together:

Almighty God, Father of all nations, for freedom you have set us free in Christ Jesus (Gal 5:1).

We praise and bless you for the gift of religious liberty, the foundation of human rights, justice, and the common good.

Grant to our leaders the wisdom to protect and promote our liberties; by your grace may we have the courage to defend them, for ourselves and for all those who live in this blessed land.

We ask this through the intercession of Mary Immaculate, our patroness, and in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, with whom you live and reign, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Reflection

The leader invites the group to read—individually or together—this reflection:

Pope Benedict XVI recently spoke about his worry that religious liberty in the United States is being weakened. He called it the "most cherished of American freedoms"—and indeed it is. All the more reason to heed the warning of the Holy Father, a friend of America and an ally in the defense of freedom, in his recent address to American bishops:

Of particular concern are certain attempts being made to limit that most cherished of American freedoms, the freedom of religion. Many of you have pointed out that concerted efforts have been made to deny the right of conscientious objection on the part of Catholic individuals and institutions with regard to cooperation in intrinsically evil practices. Others have spoken to me of a worrying tendency to

reduce religious freedom to mere freedom of worship without guarantees of respect for freedom of conscience.

Here once more we see the need for an engaged, articulate and well-formed Catholic laity endowed with a strong critical sense vis-à-vis the dominant culture and with the courage to counter a reductive secularism which would delegitimize the Church's participation in public debate about the issues which are determining the future of American society.¹

Discussion Questions

1. What phrase, sentence, or thought particularly struck you in *Our First, Our Most Cherished Liberty*? What surprised you? What challenged you? What inspired you?
2. What does the term “religious liberty” mean to you?
3. Review the concrete examples provided in this statement (see “Religious Liberty Under Attack – Concrete Examples”). Do these examples disturb you? If so, discuss how. If not, why?
4. In the statement under the section, “Our Christian Teaching” it states, “As Catholics, we are obliged to defend the right to religious liberty for ourselves and for others. We are happily joined in this by our fellow Christians and believers of other faiths.” How significant is it for you that this issue involves both fellow Christians and believers of other faiths? How could this be a unifying effort for people of all faith traditions?
5. After reading this statement, do you feel compelled to write or email those holding public offices? How would you frame your message to elected officials?
6. The statement makes this plea, “To all our fellow Catholics, we urge an intensification of your prayers and fasting for a new birth of freedom in our beloved country. We invite you to join us in an urgent prayer for religious liberty.” How might you encourage others to pray and fast, with a special emphasis on the “Fortnight for Freedom” from June 21 to July 4? What do you see to be the particular role of parishioners in this effort?

¹ Benedict XVI, *Ad limina* address to bishops of the United States, January 19, 2012.