We gather this evening to celebrate the Fortnight for Freedom and the Church’s commitment to religious freedom for all people. It is an honor to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

The Fortnight for Freedom is an annual event in the American Church, but this year’s theme – the freedom to bear witness -- is particularly important and timely. My message to you this evening is straightforward, and, if I am correct, deeply troubling:

We are living amidst a dramatic, worldwide decline in religious freedom, a decline that might reasonably be labeled a crisis. It has now reached our own beloved country. While the symptoms of the crisis vary, its common core is an unwillingness to value and protect religious freedom. That fundamental right derives from many sources, but it has achieved its fullest expression in America. If religious freedom is lost here, it is unlikely to be regained elsewhere.

Indeed, if religious freedom is “the first freedom,” as our nation historically has asserted, and as the Church teaches, the stakes involved in the worldwide crisis are extraordinary – for the United States, for the Church, and for international justice and peace.

In my view this means not only that we Catholics ought to have the freedom to bear witness, but that we have a responsibility to bear witness.

That responsibility derives first and foremost from our obligation to be faithful to the truth -- that is, the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church. Of course, we Catholics are also a hopeful people. We know that whatever happens in this fallen world, the ultimate victory has been won. And yet, we must also remember that our Lord, who has won that victory for us, asks us to live in and engage the world He created, to love His creatures, and to work for the common good. We must, as the Holy Father has urged, be a “field hospital” in the world.

In this sense, our responsibility also extends to our roles as Catholic citizens who love their country, and who have a profound duty to it as well.

**Three Propositions**

Let’s begin with a definition of religious freedom. What are we talking about here?

Religious liberty should be understood first of all as the right to believe, or not. If one believes, it means the right to act on that belief, individually and with others, both in private worship and in the public life of the nation. It means the right to bring my religious beliefs into my life as a citizen, including in my profession or business or non-profit. It means especially that I may,
indeed I must, bring my religious beliefs into the political life of my society. And it means that all religious ideas and actors should be treated equally under the law.

There are, of course, limits to religious freedom. For example, I cannot use religion as an excuse for violence, or to limit the fundamental rights of others. But, as our Founders understood quite well, those limits must be applied in a way that favors religion in public life, not the opposite.

So, based on that definition of religious freedom, let me give you three propositions that form the core of my argument tonight:

First, history, modern scholarship, and common sense converge in demonstrating that a robust system of religious liberty in both law and culture is indispensable to individual human dignity, and to the flourishing of all societies. Our society has traditionally expressed this view by labeling religious freedom “the first freedom.” Without it no society can achieve and sustain stable self-government, social harmony, economic growth, equality, and freedom. More broadly, the world cannot achieve justice, peace, or stability without religious freedom.

Second, notwithstanding its importance, religious liberty is under siege in most regions of the world. The consequences of this crisis for the world and the United States are staggering. They implicate the success or failure of struggling democracies, economic development, the defeat of religion-based terrorism, and justice and peace, both here and abroad. For all these reasons, addressing the global crisis of religious liberty ought to be a high priority for U.S. foreign policy and for the Roman Catholic Church.

Third, the proposition that religious freedom is necessary for all individuals and all societies is today fiercely contested in America and elsewhere. Although it may not always appear so, there is a “perfect storm” of opposition to religious freedom in virtually every region of the world, characterized variously by hostility, skepticism, fear, and deep moral confusion.

Outside the West, where religious belief and practice are for the most part widespread and growing, religious freedom in full has never existed. The very idea of religious liberty is highly suspect in most of these nations, including those with communist regimes such as China and Cuba; countries where religion supports authoritarianism, such as Russia; and virtually all Muslim-majority countries, including those struggling to adopt their own forms of democracy.

Although most of these nations have signed international covenants and enacted constitutional provisions committing them to guaranteeing religious liberty, in truth almost no nation has lived up to those commitments. And they certainly are not doing so now. The consequences for them, for their neighbors, and for the national security of the United States are highly negative.

In Europe, where the origins of religious freedom are buried deep in history, the decline of religion itself, especially Christianity, has dramatically reduced respect for any public expression of religion. The result has been the adoption of an understanding of religious liberty as a mere freedom to worship. This thin and impoverished view of what was once considered a
fundamental and universal human right serves the contemporary European need to remove religion, or at least religions with traditional moral teachings, from the public square. In our own country – notwithstanding the continued if diminishing vibrancy of religion, including Catholicism – the public expression of traditional religious values is under unrelenting assault. While there are many reasons for this development, the greatest single threat to religious freedom in the United States is same-sex “marriage.”

Last week’s 5-4 Supreme Court decision in Obergefell v. Hodges, authored by Justice Anthony Kennedy, swept aside our democratic process and imposed on our society a constitutional “right” for people of the same gender to marry. Most states had laws reflecting the millennia-old understanding of marriage as between one man and one woman, designed to nurture the conjugal relationship and well-being of children. Americans were engaged in a debate over whether those laws should be changed, but that debate is now declared to be over. Your voice, say five lawyers, no longer matters. As Chief Justice Roberts noted in dissent, five judges have simply imposed on our country their preference for same-sex marriage. The constitution, he wrote, does not support their action.

Beyond the damage to marriage itself, the implications of this decision for religious liberty and for American democracy are quite serious. It is highly likely that over time Catholic and other Christian institutions, including schools, private businesses, charitable agencies, and even the clergy, will come under legal and social pressure to abandon Christ’s teachings on marriage and sexuality. Indeed, this has already begun. And it has happened with startling speed.

Just twenty years ago our political leaders came together to pass, with overwhelming bipartisan support and the signature of President Clinton, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. RFRA said that government may not burden the religious freedom of its citizens without a “compelling” reason to do so. If such a reason exists, then freedom must be limited in the least restrictive way, or not at all.

In those twenty years, something dramatic has happened. Led by Justice Kennedy, many of our political elites have concluded that religious freedom is no longer the “first freedom” of our nation, but a front for hatred and bigotry. The teachings of the Catholic Church are now particularly onerous in the eyes of many. Citing the Church’s position on marriage, abortion and contraception, the ACLU has called on Congress to abolish legal protections for those who do not follow the new morality of sexual liberation.

Unfortunately, most of our political leaders seem incapable of defending religious freedom. The recent firestorm over Indiana’s passage of a state-level Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and the utter incapacity of its supporters to defend it, is profoundly troubling. The idea that religious freedom must take second place to the new sexual morality was long ago embraced by the Obama administration and is increasingly the view taken by the Democratic Party and significant elements within the Republican Party.

The implications of this phenomenon – the American abandonment of the “first freedom” – go far beyond America’s shores. The United States is the only country in the world with a statutory
requirement to advance international religious freedom in its foreign policy – the result of the 1998 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Act. This law, passed unanimously a scant 17 years ago and, like the RFRA signed by President Clinton, reflected America’s unique commitment to religious freedom for all. While other Western democracies are showing some interest in integrating this issue into their foreign policies, they are largely unequipped to carry out the task.

Like it or not, only the United States has the legal and cultural experience to convince other nations to move toward religious freedom. But U.S. IRF policy has had virtually no impact. There are several reasons for this failure. Perhaps the most important is the difficulty of trying to sell a product in which you no longer believe, especially to people who share your skepticism.

The stakes are high. If religious liberty is lost in America, where can it be retrieved? And if it is lost to the world, the implications for international peace and stability are significant.

As for the Catholic Church in America, I believe that some of our bishops and some of our Catholic institutions fully understand the dimensions of this threat. I highly recommend you read, if you have not already, statements by Archbishop Lori, Cardinal Wuerl, and Bishop Kurtz in the wake of the same-sex marriage decision. I have no doubt there are others who have made it clear to their flocks that the Church takes its teaching on marriage from Jesus himself, that it cannot and will not change, and that the faithful are called to bear witness to the truth in their public lives as citizens. This witness includes respectful criticism of the Court for getting it so wrong, and thereby doing an injustice to the whole society of which we Catholics are a part.

Unfortunately, I fear that some of the faithful, and some of the clergy, discount the threat to the freedom of the Church to continue to perform its role as “salt and light” in American society. I must tell you that I heard nothing of the court’s decision, or anything else about religious liberty, from the pulpit of my own church last Sunday. I do not believe that the American Church -- clergy and lay -- are speaking with anything approximating a consensus about the growing threat to religious freedom and to the public witness of the Church. This must change.

We Catholics must affirm the duty, and seize the opportunity, to demonstrate to all Americans the intrinsic, irreplaceable value of religious freedom for them, whether they are religious or not, and for all people everywhere.

**Empirical Evidence of a Global Crisis**

Let me give you a brief overview of the empirical evidence for labeling the decline of religious freedom a global crisis. The Pew Research Center presents annual reports on every country in the world that measure government restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religion.

The latest report, issued early this year, confirmed a profoundly disturbing reality: some three quarters of the world’s population lives in countries in which religious freedom is highly or very highly restricted. That is three out of four human beings on the planet.
Most of those people live in about 70 countries. Of those most are either Muslim-majority nations, communist regimes, or large non-Muslim states such as India, China, and Russia.

The very highest restrictions on religious freedom tend to occur in Muslim nations, including the theocratic autocracies of Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also the nascent and struggling democracies such as Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Note that these are all countries whose fates are of great importance to the national interests of the United States. The last two – Afghanistan and Iraq -- are nations where America has spent its blood and treasure for more than a decade.

Overall, and not simply because of the Middle East, the Pew Reports demonstrate that the global trends are downward – the problem is steadily getting worse. Restrictions on religious freedom are increasing. Violent religious persecution, including by religion-related terrorist groups, is growing and spreading beyond the Middle East.

According to the Pew Reports, the religious minority most subject to harassment is Christians. Muslims come in a close second. Most Muslims are harassed in Muslim-majority countries, but also in India, China, Burma, and Russia.

An additional element of the global crisis is the troubling rise of anti-Semitism. This scourge is part of the landscape in the Middle East, where anti-Semitism is endemic. But we are now seeing a rapid rise of anti-Semitism in the nations of Europe – a sure sign of civilizational crisis.

I will return to Europe and the US shortly, but first let me put a few faces on these statistics.

**The Face of Violent Persecution Outside the West**

There are scores of millions of human beings outside the West affected by the spread of violent religious persecution and extremism.

In China, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Catholics and Protestants all face periodic and sometimes brutal crackdowns by a government that fears any religion it cannot control.

In India, the world’s largest democracy and the only Asian nation where religious freedom has existed in any significant way, the continued presence of Hindu extremism threatens religious freedom, especially the freedoms of India’s Christian and Muslim minorities.

In Russia, the continued ascendancy of despots like Vladimir Putin has unfortunately been abetted by the Russian Orthodox Church, which seems intent on cooperating with the regime in order to maintain a religious monopoly in Russia.

In these and other non-Muslim countries the threat to religious freedom comes either from a secular elite, or from a monopolist religious elite. The result is significant human suffering, as well as political and economic instability.
But the greatest threat to Christians and other minorities outside the West comes from violent Islamist extremism. Unfortunately, the extremists are aided and abetted by the routine practices of Muslim-majority states – in particular laws against blasphemy, apostasy, and defamation of Islam. These laws and the attitudes they reflect are a gateway to extremism. They are used to punish both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities. They ensure that the public discourse about Islam does not include liberal Muslim voices and is dominated by extremists.

Encouraged in part by this toxic political and social environment, Islamist terrorist groups are being incubated and spreading throughout the Muslim majority world. Although their motives and views vary, they share an understanding of Islam that boils down to this: if you offend Islam as we understand it you must be punished, including by torture and death. This is true if you are a non-Muslim. It is doubly true if you are a wrong-thinking Muslim.

Those who actively practice terrorist violence on this model include ISIS, which is most in the news these days. But it also includes a growing cadre of others, such as Al Qaeda, the Al Nusra Front, Boko Haram, Al Shabab, the Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah.

The intellectual “godfathers” of these groups include Saudi Wahhabism and certain strains of the Muslim Brotherhood. The extremist Shiite Iranian government actively supports Islamist terrorists in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere. Those who actively support a nuclear agreement between the United States and Iran should keep this in mind.

All of these groups bear responsibility for the rise in religion-based terrorist violence against Christians and other minorities in the greater Middle East and Africa.

Stories of Islamist violence and terror emerge almost daily. A recent example occurred on Holy Thursday in Kenya’s Garissa College. Four al-Shabab terrorists entered the campus and began a systematic slaughter of non-Muslim students. When they discovered a Christian prayer group, they threw grenades into the chapel.

Then the terrorists moved to a women's dormitory. Women who could prove they were Muslim by reciting the shahada, the Islamic profession of faith, were freed. Christians were either shot or their throats were slit. By nightfall, 148 students and staff had been slaughtered.

It would be tragic enough if this were an isolated episode. But it is not. It is part of a growing Islamist crusade against Christians, and against Muslims and others who do not measure up to the religious standards the terrorists believe are required by their god.

We recently passed the first anniversary of Boko Haram’s kidnapping of 219 Nigerian schoolgirls, most of them Christians. Boko Haram, citing their religious obligations, have burned Christian schoolboys alive, forced Christian men to convert, destroyed churches, and terrorized anyone who opposes them.
In March of this year in Pakistan, the Taliban blew up two churches, one Catholic and one Protestant, both filled with worshipers. Fourteen died.

In Syria in March ISIS attacked 33 Assyrian Christian villages. The 5,000 defenseless residents were driven into exile, abducted, or killed.

In February ISIS beheaded 21 Coptic Christians on the shores of the Mediterranean. Later it executed dozens of Ethiopians, whom the terrorists condemned as “worshippers of the cross.”

In Iraq, ISIS imposed its convert-or-die policy on the 2,000-year-old Christian community of Ninevah. Christians were deported or killed, and their homes marked with an "N" for "Nazarene." More than 100,000 of them now survive on international aid in Kurdistan. Their ancient churches and monasteries are being systematically blown up or desecrated.

Pope Francis has said that Christians are being persecuted in numbers exceeding those martyred during the Roman Empire. He has also condemned the world's "complicit silence."

The Pope is right. The media reports the facts, but many refuse to acknowledge the religious nature of this crisis. The same is true of the current American administration. When the Coptic Christians were savagely decapitated by ISIS terrorists, many with the name of Jesus on their lips as they died, the Obama administration refused to call them Christians. Why is this?

Why is it that the administration actively denies what the terrorists tell us is the motive for their actions – that they must serve God and defend Islam by violence, that this is their religious obligation? What is the explanation for our motives here, especially given the broad agreement that the terrorists threaten our fundamental national interests? Can you defeat any enemy if you willfully mischaracterize its goals and what is driving it?

In order to try and answer this question, and in order to explore more fully the Church’s proper role in this crisis, let’s turn to the dimensions of the crisis in the West.

**The West: Rising Religious Persecution in Europe**

The Pew Reports mentioned earlier show that both government restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religion are rising in Europe and the United States.

In Europe and America, violent religious persecution is not the norm, and, please God, will never be. But in Europe we have witnessed over the decades a sustained, devastating march through culture, politics, and law by an aggressive secularism that permits Catholics to attend mass, but does not permit them to bring Church teachings into public life, in businesses, charitable organizations, or into the democratic process of determining laws and policies.

A couple of years ago our Georgetown Religious Freedom Project held a conference at Magdalen College, Oxford, to examine the rising tensions between religious liberty and assertions of equality for homosexuals. In his keynote address, Philip Tartaglia -- then the
Catholic bishop of Paisley, Scotland and now the archbishop of Glasgow -- noted that one of his priests had expressed fear after having watched a popular television program with audience participation. The audience was of one mind – once same sex marriage becomes law in the UK, they said, any dissenter should be “pursued by the law.”

I could not help recalling the anti-Catholic penal laws enacted by the English in Scotland in the late 18th century – laws that criminalized the very existence of priests and the mass, let alone the public expression of Catholic teachings. I am not suggesting that Scotland is returning to the 18th century, but it would be foolish to assume that the growing intolerance of Catholicism in Europe cannot devolve into persecutory laws and practices. Bishop Tartaglia said that he expected one day to be standing before a judge because of his public defense of Catholic teachings.

In short, religion in Europe is no longer seen as intrinsic to human dignity and social flourishing. It is generally understood as merely an opinion, and, as a species, a dangerous opinion at that. While it is fine to practice your religion in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, democracy requires that you keep it there. To bring it into public life endangers society.

Is the United States on this path as well?

**The Decline of Religious Freedom in the United States**

The malevolent idea that political expressions of religious ideas threaten democracy was most famously championed by the American political philosopher John Rawls, and has gained considerable purchase in our own country. It has contributed to the idea, most recently on display in Indiana and the Supreme Court, that religious arguments concerning marriage or other public moral issues constitute hatred – or, in the words of Justice Kennedy in the 2012 Windsor case -- “malice,” “a desire to harm,” “a desire to injure.”

Religious liberty, in short, is a front for bigotry – an illegitimate claim of privilege by Christians.

The Catholic writer Mary Eberstadt has dubbed this attitude “the new intolerance.” Its goal is to silence those who would resist the new public moral consensus in favor of “expressive individualism.” This is the understanding of freedom as a right to follow one’s appetites so long as the quest is consensual and does not restrict the freedom of another. Those whose moral or religious compunctions move in different directions are not to be tolerated.

Let me give one example among many of how this new intolerance affects human lives and, at the same time, American democracy.

Mrs. Barronelle Stutzman is a 70 year old mother of eight and grandmother of 23. She has for years worked as a florist in Washington state. Her flower shop serves anyone who comes into it, including gay people. But when a homosexual couple she had served for years asked her to participate in their wedding, she told them she could not do so, that she was a Christian who accepted Christ’s definition of marriage as between one man and one woman.
The ACLU sued on grounds of discrimination, asking the state of Washington to coerce Mrs. Stuzman to comply. In an example of social coercion backed by the threat of state coercion, the ACLU offered a “settlement” of the suit if Mrs. Stuzman publicly recanted, donated $5000 to a local LGBT youth center, and agreed to serve in LGBT ceremonies. She refused.

Then Washington state’s attorney general decided to sue Mrs. Stuzman under the state’s Consumer Protection Act. This case too would have settled if Mrs. Stuzman had been willing to pay several thousand dollars and issue a public recantation of her sin. Ms. Stutzman responded that she could not and would not comply, citing the state’s constitutional guarantee of “freedom of conscience in all matters of religious sentiment.”

That guarantee seems now to have no meaning. In January of this year a Superior Court Judge ruled Mrs. Stuzman was personally liable, and that she must provide full wedding support for same-sex ceremonies, including custom design work to decorate the ceremony, delivery to the forum, staying at the ceremony to touch up arrangements, and assisting the wedding party.

Consider what is happening to this gentle 70-year-old Christian woman. She is being hounded by private ideologues and the state to renounce the teachings of Jesus on marriage, and to demonstrate publicly, by actively supporting a same-sex “marriage,” that she has repented.

What is happening to Baronelle Stuzman is occurring with increasing frequency elsewhere in America. This kind of social and state coercion is becoming the norm for ordinary people of faith who seek to live their lives in accordance with their religious beliefs about marriage and sexuality. As such, it portends a dangerous turn in American law and culture. It constitutes a step toward the destruction of religious liberty and the embrace of tyranny.

At a minimum, it suggests that a new moral consensus in the United States is following the European path: those who support the ideology of sexual liberation are determined to remove all counter-arguments, especially those of the Catholic Church, from the public square. And those who are ill equipped or unwilling to fight the ideologues of sexual freedom will, like the Governor of Indiana or some of our Catholic universities, simply capitulate.

The early Christians who refused to burn incense to the Roman gods were given the choice of compliance or death. Contemporary Middle Eastern Christians are being given the choice of conversion to Islam or death. American Christians who refuse to capitulate may well be given Mrs. Stuzman’s choice: comply or be punished, including the loss of livelihood and wearing the scarlet letter “B,” sanctioned by Justice Kennedy and the Supreme Court, for bigot.

But to give in means to abandon Catholic teachings on marriage and sexuality and their necessary role in creating a just society. To flee from this fight means abandoning the historic American commitment to religious freedom as the first freedom of the human soul, and to jettison the sacred principle that the democratic state may not coerce the religious conscience.

To give in means, in the words of Princeton Professor Robert George, to proclaim oneself “ashamed of the gospel.”

If we give up this fight we will endanger American democracy precisely by undermining the norm of equality that the ideologues of sexual freedom purport to defend. And, of course, our capitulation will place at risk libertas ecclesiae - the right and the duty of the Catholic Church to teach and to evangelize in the public life of the nation.
The Individual and Social Value of Religious Freedom: A Cause for Hope

It is a great irony but also a cause for hope that at the very moment when religious liberty is under sustained international pressure, contemporary scholarship is demonstrating yet again what our founding generation firmly understood: religious freedom is utterly necessary for individuals and societies if they are to flourish.

The concept of religious freedom has deep roots in the Catholic tradition and in Western history. Jesus Himself taught that we must render unto Caesar only what is due to Caesar, but not what is due to God. Early Christian thinkers elaborated this idea, as did the 5th century Pope Gelasius. Catholic canonists of the Middle Ages began to develop the idea of the sacredness of conscience. 800 years ago this year, the idea of libertas ecclesiae, the freedom of the Church from secular authority, was given political expression in the Magna Carta. And 50 years ago this year, the Catholic Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae, declared that every person has a right to freedom from coercion by any human agent, especially the state, in matters of religion. It declared that the state must not cordon religion out of public life but should “show it favor.” The Church must be free to make its claims in civil society, as must all other religious traditions.

Modern scholarship is rediscovering these truths deeply rooted in history. Today the work of our Religious Freedom Project scholars is showing with empirical data how religious freedom contributes to the consolidation, stability, and longevity of democracy, and to other goods such as economic development or the absence of violent religious extremism.

The American experience shows that these ideas are not new. For example, William Penn, the great American Quaker, argued in the 18th century that merchants should move to Pennsylvania because its protections for religious liberty were good for commerce. Today the empirical data confirm Penn’s argument. Imagine if we could convince China or Egypt that moving toward religious freedom would help sustain economic growth.

As for the relationship between religious freedom and stable democracy, Founding Fathers such as Madison and Washington well understood that a healthy democracy required a vibrant civil society to limit the power of government, including religious associations such as churches and synagogues, but also faith-based schools and charitable institutions.

Religious associations limit government by providing services that might otherwise fall to the state, and by positing an authority higher than the state. Madison wrote in his 1785 Memorial and Remonstrance that religious freedom is not a freedom for license but a freedom to do what is right and good. Religion, he wrote, “is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to Him. This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society.” In order to carry out this duty, he continued, men must have freedom from state coercion.
President Washington in his second farewell address told the nation that religious ideas in public life were “necessary for political prosperity.”

In sum, the American experience helps illuminate the empirical data showing the necessity of religious freedom to the consolidation and stability of democracy. Imagine if we could employ these data and explanations to persuade Iraq or Pakistan that they need religious freedom to achieve their own goals of lasting and stable self-government.

Perhaps the most important relationship we are studying is religious freedom and religion-related terrorism. Several of our RFP scholars have explored this link, as have others. In a paper published last year, two professors from the State University of New York provided a data analysis that appears to confirm causation: less religious freedom means more religious terrorism. More religious freedom means less religious terrorism.

**Conclusion: the Role of US Foreign Policy and the Catholic Church in America**

Let me conclude with a few thoughts on the role of the United States, and of the American Catholic Church, in addressing the global crisis of religious freedom.

The core of my argument has been that the decline of religious freedom in the United States is harming American democracy and the Catholic Church, and, at the same time, reducing our capacity to perform a task that is vital to international peace and security, one that only the United States can perform adequately: the task of convincing other nations – especially Muslim nations -- that it is in their interests to move toward religious freedom.

The United States is the only nation that can accomplish such a goal precisely because the United States is the only nation that has historically embraced the public role of religion. Given Islam’s intrinsically political nature, only an argument that invites Islam into public life stands a chance of convincing Muslim-majority nations to support religious freedom for all their citizens.

Should US foreign policy leaders choose to do so, they could draw on America’s own history, as well as emerging scholarship that shows the value of religious freedom to all nations, in making arguments to the Muslim world.

Ironically and tragically, it is the public aspects of religious freedom that are now under siege in the United States. It is here that the Church – and especially the American Church – can play a vital role in re-presenting the case for religious freedom.

As I noted earlier, in 1998 Congress passed the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Act, mandating that the United States advance religious freedom in its foreign policy. The law created an office in the State Department, headed by an ambassador at large, to achieve that goal. It also created an advisory IRF Commission, on which several Catholic bishops have served.

Since the passage of that law some modest progress has been achieved. Unfortunately, it is difficult to argue that US policy has had much impact on the status of religious freedom anywhere in the world. Having served under both Presidents Clinton and Bush, and having
written critically of both, I can say that all three administrations are responsible. But US policy has reached new lows under the current administration. For over half this President’s tenure the position of IRF ambassador was vacant. Until recently, the person who filled the position briefly was unqualified and denied authority or resources.

Meanwhile the President refuses to discuss religion as part of our national security strategy to undermine Islamist terrorism. The National Security Strategy of the United States reads as if religious freedom had no role to play in international affairs. Since the administration began in 2008, the State Department has spent far more diplomatic energy and resources on the advancement of international LGBT rights than it has international religious freedom.

Religious freedom, in short, has become at best an afterthought for our elites. At worst, many of them consider it cultural imperialism. This is the US foreign policy counterpart of the domestic view that religious freedom is a front for bigotry.

What can the Church – bishops, priests, religious, and lay Catholics -- do to address this crisis at home and abroad? How can we help reconvince Americans of the value of religious freedom for all our citizens? How can we help our foreign policy elites understand that it is in our national interests to promote religious freedom abroad with vigor and effectiveness?

First, we can present anew to our foreign policy elites, and to the American public, the Catholic case for universal religious freedom, namely, the fundamental dignity and equality of every person in the eyes of God. Grounded in this theistic premise, the Catholic Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae, demands an immunity from coercion in civil society for all persons, believers or not, and all religious groups on the basis of full equality under the law.

We should emphasize to skeptics and non-believers how this argument protects them, in particular how it has staying power, precisely because it begins with God. I must protect your religious freedom even if you are a non-believer because it is my religious obligation to do so. I believe that the state does not create this right but that the state must acknowledge and protect it.

On the other hand, if religious freedom is a right created by the state, it can be removed by the state – as the ACLU and other radical groups are now seeking to do. This understanding endangers your right not to believe, as well as my right to believe, because it remains fragile, its status dependent entirely on the preferences of those with power.

We should acknowledge that this understanding of religious freedom did not take modern form until the promulgation of Dignitatis in 1965. The Church had earlier asserted that the state must privilege Catholic teachings, although it always held that individual faith must be free, not coerced. Now it demands only the freedom of the Church to present its teachings within civil society, on a basis of full equality with others, religious and not. That the Supreme Court has now in effect rejected that demand will harm American democracy.

We should remind the skeptics that the Church’s centuries-old demand for libertas ecclesiae helped develop the idea and practice of limited government and created the very possibility of
social pluralism. Its modern, successful struggle to embrace democracy, including equality for all religious institutions in civil society and law, provides a model for other religions, especially Islam, to learn similar lessons from history and experience.

We should point out to our foreign policy leaders the national security imperative of convincing Muslim leaders that democracy cannot consolidate and remain stable without full equality among all religious groups, and that democracy need not place religion at the margins of political life.

Most in the Muslim world, when they hear the phrase “religious freedom” do not think of such a “religion-friendly” understanding of the role of government. They are far more familiar with the French model of privatization -- moving religion to the margins of public life. It is a tragic irony that the United States, which has traditionally invited religion into public life, has begun to abandon the American model for the French.

Partly as a consequence, our policy is viewed by Muslims as designed to remove Islam from political life. While you or I might have sympathy with such a goal, we must recognize that it is utterly unrealistic.

Precisely for that reason it is crucial to remind ourselves that religious freedom is not an unlimited right. It does not constitute the political or civic right to do what I want simply because my conscience or my religion says I must do it.

In the Muslim-majority world, the most important limit on religious freedom would be the principle of equality under the law for all religious ideas and actors. This principle would undermine the anti-blasphemy laws that provide a gateway to violent extremism.

But America cannot persuade the Muslim world, or anyone else, that religious freedom is of value if it is prepared to set aside religious freedom in favor of sexual liberation.

This brings us back to the profound question with which we began. What is our responsibility as Catholics amid the worldwide crisis of religious freedom? Let me end by citing one aspect of the Holy Father’s signal theme – God’s love for us, and our need to respond in love to Him, by making the Church a “field hospital” in this fallen world.

My mind moves to the beautiful passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “Eye has not seen and ear has not heard, nor has the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Pause on that last phrase. What does it mean to love God in public life in these trying times?

High in the catalogue of answers must be this: to love God, to be workers in His field hospital, is to live His truth in our own lives and to advocate for those truths in public life. We must love our fellow citizens enough to tell them the truth about the beauty of sexuality and of lifelong, faithful marriage. We must also never forget that our own heritage of religious freedom in this wonderful nation has privileged us Catholics in a way that is surely part of God’s love and mercy.
In communicating these truths, of course, we must remind our fellow citizens that our religion is for everyone. Even those who are not Christian benefit from our devotion to them – our Catholic charitable institutions, homes for the aged, soup kitchens, hospitals, schools, relief agencies, immigration services, serve everyone. Why? Because we believe God created each of us, and that Christ was incarnated, lived, suffered, died and was resurrected for everyone.

In his response to the Supreme Court decision on same-sex “marriage,” Cardinal Donald Wuerl emphasized that the Church will continue to welcome those with same-sex attraction. He noted, correctly, that if the Church banned sinners it would be empty. It certainly would not be a field hospital. But the Cardinal also noted that the beautiful Catholic view on marriage and sexuality cannot and will not change. In his words, we must continue to love the sinner and hate the sin.

I would simply add that if we Catholics allow anyone to believe that the Church will change its view of marriage as conjugal, permanent, and monogamous, that is, if we allow anyone to believe that the Church is indifferent to the teachings of Jesus on these subjects, we are practicing a form of cruelty and deceit that is the farthest thing from running a field hospital, or dispensing mercy, or loving our brothers and sisters.

Recall what Jesus said to a crowd in the parable of the sower as recorded in Mark chapter 4. A man sows seeds of grain in four places: a path where birds quickly devour it; shallow soil where it grows quickly but then withers; among thorns which quickly choke the emerging grain; and in good soil, which yields abundant grain.

When the crowd leaves, the disciples come to Jesus and say, Lord, what in the world are you talking about? (I love the disciples when they do that.) So Jesus spells it out: The seed is the Word. It’s me, Jesus, and my teachings!

In the first example, it is Satan who devours the seed. In the second, the shallow soil represents those who hear the word and “receive it with joy,” but “when persecution arises on account of the word,” they head for the tall grass (Jesus didn’t put it that way, but you get my point).

In the third example, the thorns represent those who hear the word but their “delight in riches, and the desire for other things” chokes the word. These people too head for the tall grass.

Let us take hope, and courage, from Jesus’ final example, the good soil that is fruitful. This is the field hospital. When we contemplate how we are to love the Lord, let us exercise that religious freedom which is given by Him and cannot be set aside by any court. Let us share His truths with our fellow citizens– winsomely, with love, courage, and clarity.

Let us, in short, stay out of the tall grass, an area that is already too crowded.

If we do act with courage and love, we can fulfill our responsibility to our fellow citizens and our country, and – we can hope – to the millions of Christians around the world who suffer grievously because they too love the Lord. ..... Thank you.