“May it please Your Excellency” (Bishop Barres).

That expression, I’m told, is proper protocol for how to begin a sermon when the bishop is present and presiding. Given the august membership of the St. Thomas More Society also gathered here, I thought my next sentence should express a similar wish: “may it please Your Honors, Your Counselors, Your Attorneys” … and everyone else here, too!

However, I’m afraid that is not my purpose this evening. For, if the homily is to expound on the truth of the Sacred Scriptures we just heard, then speech that is “pleasing” must give way to talk about a “trial by fire” and the suffering presence of a "sword."

Personally, I would prefer to avoid images of violence altogether. But make no mistake about it … as there was in the first centuries of the Church, so there is now a persecution occurring among us. And as a result, this has become a time of conflict – a “battle” if you will … a battle for the soul of a nation, for the institutions which contribute so much to the common good, and for the freedom we Americans cherish. But this sort of “battle” need not imply belligerence in our hearts, nor does it demand bellicose words or deeds.

Still, the conflict of which I speak is real; it constitutes a threat for anyone and everyone who has faith in God. We are threatened by federal legislation with which the government seeks to compel actions contrary to our morality. We are threatened by false rhetoric in which the secular media accuses us of trying to impose our religious beliefs on others. We are threatened by financial sanctions by which the charitable works that fulfill our mission of caring for any and all persons in need may be put out of business.

That much you may already know by now. But no less daunting than these actual threats is the perceived threat that comes with taking on these issues in the public square. All of us face the possibility of derision in as much as what we stand for may be misconstrued as an opposition to women or an obstacle to healthcare – neither of which it is. I, myself, face the
risk of scorn that what I am saying and what I am about to say will not be very pleasing to you – though I still hope it is.

For the question I ask is ... how did we get here? What brought us to this point, where religious freedom is treated as something unnecessary, at best, and, at worst, an actual danger to the good of society?⁴

Some bemoan the liberal culture and secular society in which we live as the culprit that gave birth to these attitudes. But, as Blessed John Paul II would remind us, we are as much the parents of our culture as we are its children.⁵

Others claim that our current situation is the result of political forces or economic agendas far beyond our control. But, as Pope Benedict XVI tells us, “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 ....”⁶

The Sacred Scriptures this evening suggest that, instead of looking for a cause somewhere out there, we look inwardly, that we first reflect on our own lives in order to find an answer. As St. Peter writes in today's first reading, "it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God."

And so, in imitation of a saintly jurist from 16th century Savoy, I dare to say to you this evening that the trial we now face is our own fault, at least in part.⁷ It stems from a lack of evangelical confidence in our religion, a lack of faith in our faith. It derives from that complacency into which we have been lulled by having been for too long closed within the comfortable walls of our own household, content merely to believe in God, go to Church, love our family, and do some good.

That is the kind of “peace” against which Jesus brings his proverbial sword. With the cutting edge of His own words, and with the sacred love for humanity poured out on the cross, Jesus seeks to penetrate the indifference and eradicate the sloth that can drain the fervor from religious faith.
For if we are to be “worthy of” him, if we are to “follow after” him, if we are to “take up our (own) cross” and ultimately find our lives by doing so, then the only question before us is this ... Do we really love God? Do we love God more than all other loves, which of necessity are secondary to and enveloped in that divine love by which and for which we have been created? Do we love God enough that we will stand up for what God has given to us in the dignity of being human, namely our freedom and our faith?

In this evening’s vigil we come together to celebrate the memory of one who did love God in that way – the martyr THOMAS MORE. Yes, he represents the choice for conscience over the intrusive reach of secular power. Yes, he championed the rightful authority of the Church against a government’s claim to jurisdiction over one’s faith. But SIR THOMAS MORE died for something else, something at once bigger and deeper, something alone that could motivate a serene walk to the scaffold on which he would be beheaded. SAINT THOMAS MORE died because he loved God.

As John Garvey, a lawyer himself and now president of the Catholic University of America, recently said:

The tragedy of Thomas More was that he had to die because he loved God. He could not be both a good subject and a faithful Catholic. Our tragedy is different, though it is no less about the protection of religious liberty. The mechanisms to preserve religious liberty only work when people care about their religion. Religious liberty will expand or contract accordingly. Saving religious liberty means reminding people that they should love God. Thomas More taught us that we need religious liberty. More importantly, he taught us that loving God is worth dying for.8

Fortunately for us, dying is not necessary today, at least not physically. But if, as George Weigel warns, “what is at stake here is nothing less than the future of civil society in the United States,”9 then we, too, can expect to suffer. The current trial by fire may, in the short run, cost us financially as we defend our liberty, while in the long run it will most definitely cost us socially and politically if the arena of public dialogue closes its doors to religious thought and we all come to be disdained for being believers.
And so it is time to muster the troops, no matter how wounded they may be, time to take up arms against a foe bigger than any single person or either political party, time to breach the wall that not only separates church and state but blatantly excludes the former from any association with the latter.

*Let the Fortnight for Freedom begin!*

But let us enter this fortnight as only we can and as rightly we should. Yes, let us breach the walls of complacency that have surrounded our household of faith, but let us do so by learning more about what we believe. Yes, let us take up arms against the attacks on freedom, but let us do so in hope and with the civil dialogue that should characterize the democracy in which we live. Yes, let us rally the troops – ourselves and others – to speak up and to act, but let us do so first and foremost with words of prayer, as an expression of a genuine love of God and love of neighbor, even, or especially, toward those by whom we are being persecuted.

In this, too, we can imitate the shining example of St. THOMAS MORE, about whom it is reported that his final words were “that those looking on would pray to God for him on this side [of heaven], and he would pray for them on the other side. Then he begged them earnestly that they would pray to God for the king, that God would give him good counsel, protesting that he died the king’s good servant, and God’s first.”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, you who do love God, let us pray that the political and juridical leaders in our own time be given the good counsel to protect and promote our first, most cherished liberty. And for the next two weeks, may we all have the faith and courage to *Let Religious Freedom Ring* ... for it is a divine gift, one *too sacred for silence*.

ST. THOMAS MORE, pray for us.

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*LET RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RING.org*  
*America’s First Freedom. Too Sacred for Silence.*

Rev. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.  
Associate Chaplain  
St. Thomas More Society of the Diocese of Allentown
In his testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives (2/28/12), Bishop William Lori points out that with the HHS mandate “choice” suddenly means “force.” Cf. Mary Ann Glendon, “Why the Bishops Are Suing the U.S. Government,” Wall Street Journal, 5/21/12: “The main goal of the mandate is not, as HHS claimed, to protect women’s health. It is rather a move to conscript religious organizations into a political agenda, forcing them to facilitate and fund services that violate their beliefs, within their own institutions.”

In an editorial entitled “The Politics of Religion” (5/27/12), the New York Times claims that “The real threat to religious liberty comes from the effort to impose one church’s doctrine on everyone.”

Cf. Mary Ann Glendon, “Why the Bishops Are Suing the U.S. Government, Wall Street Journal, 5/21/12: “At the deepest level, we are witnessing an attack on the institutions of civil society that are essential to limited government and are important buffers between the citizen and the all-powerful state.”

In his address to the USCCB General Assembly (June 13, 2012), Thomas Farr, director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, cites this dual attitude as the root cause underlying the global crisis of religious liberty.

John Paul II, “Fides et Ratio,” no. 71: “All people are part of a culture, depend upon it and shape it. Human beings are both child and parent of the culture in which they are immersed.”

Pope Benedict XVI, address to U.S. Bishops, 1/19/12.


Cf. the statement on religious liberty by the ad hoc Committee on Religious Liberty of the USCCB (April 12, 2012).