



Our First, Most Cherished Liberty

A Statement on Religious Liberty by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty

We are Catholics. We are Americans. We are proud to be both, grateful for the gift of faith which is ours as Christian disciples, and grateful for the gift of liberty which is ours as American citizens. To be Catholic and American should mean not having to choose one over the other. Our allegiances are distinct, but they need not be contradictory, and should instead be complementary. That is the teaching of our Catholic faith, which obliges us to work together with fellow citizens for the common good of all who live in this land. That is the vision of our founding and our Constitution, which guarantees citizens of all religious faiths the right to contribute to our common life together.

Freedom is not only for Americans, but we think of it as something of our special inheritance, fought for at a great price, and a heritage to be guarded now. We are stewards of this gift, not only for ourselves but for all nations and peoples who yearn to be free. Catholics in America have discharged this duty of guarding freedom admirably for many generations.

In 1887, when the archbishop of Baltimore, James Gibbons, was made the second American cardinal, he defended the American heritage of religious liberty during his visit to Rome to receive the red hat. Speaking of the great progress the Catholic Church had made in the United States, he attributed it to the "civil liberty we enjoy in our enlightened republic." Indeed, he made a bolder claim, namely that "in the genial atmosphere of liberty [the Church] blossoms like a rose."^{[1](#)}

From well before Cardinal Gibbons, Catholics in America have been advocates for religious liberty, and the landmark teaching of the Second Vatican Council on religious liberty was influenced by the American experience. It is among the proudest boasts of the Church on these shores. We have been staunch defenders of religious liberty in the past. We have a solemn duty to discharge that duty today.

We need, therefore, to speak frankly with each other when our freedoms are threatened. Now is such a time. As Catholic bishops and American citizens, we address an urgent summons to our fellow Catholics and fellow Americans to be on guard, for religious liberty is under attack, both at home and abroad.

This has been noticed both near and far. 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.^{[2](#)}

1. Cardinal James Gibbons, Address upon taking possession of Santa Maria in Trastevere, March 25, 1887.

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

Now and at the Hour of Our Death

Third Edition



Instructions for My
Medical Treatment,
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It is never too late to plan ahead. Preparing for your own death removes a great burden from your loved ones who will be suffering deep sadness upon your death.

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Have you talked with
those close to you
about your final wishes?

What are you
waiting for?

Now and at the Hour of Our Death

For Catholics, death is not an end, but a continuation of our life with God—for those who have gone before us in faith and the entire communion of saints. We pray for the dead and we prepare for death whenever it comes.

Guided by Catholic teaching and faith, this resource will help you make informed decisions and preparations about your death, funeral, and burial. On the pages provided, record your wishes and the steps you have taken, and use this booklet as an opportunity to talk with your family about your Catholic faith and wishes.

This booklet presents an opportunity for you to learn about some of the important sacramental, liturgical, medical, financial, and legal issues that surround death, and to reflect on those issues in light of your Catholic faith. Additional information is included about advanced directives, living wills, donations of organs and body, making a will, and leaving information on personal records.

We believe that it is God's desire for us to live in eternal happiness with him. The efforts you make in preparation for the end of your life will be an act of kindness and a gift to your family, friends, and your parish community.

"Now and at the Hour of Our Death is a beautiful and complete resource for Catholic families. All too often we do not take the time to face our mortality and express our wishes to family members. This resource covers all the expected and unexpected aspects of funeral preparation while remaining true to our Catholic identity."

— Paula Patterson
Parishioner, Holy Spirit Catholic Church
Overland Park, KS

"This publication . . . is a most thoughtful, generous, and compassionate gift to those loved ones left behind. It will surely lighten the load of their responsibilities and allow them more easily to grieve in peace—a genuine act of kindness that lives beyond the grave."

— Tom Ruhf
Parishioner, St. Agnes Catholic Church
Shepherdstown, WV



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