'Fortnight for Freedom' begins with Mass to 'muster the troops'

By TARA CONNOLLY
Staff writer

"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," said Father Thomas Dailey while kicking off "Fortnight for Freedom" June 21 at St. Thomas More, Allentown.

Father Dailey is an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales; director of the Salesian Center for Faith and Culture, DeSales University, Center Valley; and associate chaplain of the diocesan St. Thomas More Society.

He delivered the homily before more than 200 faithful at a Mass that opened "Let Religious Freedom Ring," a 14-day period of prayer, education and action to support religious freedom.

Bishop John Barres presided at the Mass and Prayer Vigil of the Martyrs that sought their intercession on the eve of the feast day of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, who were beheaded because they refused to comply with a law designating King Henry VIII head of the church.

"I am so grateful for your presence tonight and for everyone in the Diocese of Allentown who are celebrating, promoting and defending our religious liberty," said Bishop Barres during the Introductory Rites.

In his homily, Father Dailey told the faithful to "make no mistake about it" and informed them that a persecution similar to the persecution in the first centuries of the church is occurring.

"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," he said.

The battle, which is steeped in the Affordable Care Act, involves the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) denouncing the act's Health and Human Service mandate which forces religious groups to pay for abortions and birth control drugs for their employees.

"It constitutes a threat for anyone and everyone who has faith in God," said Father Dailey.

"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."

Along with threats, Father Dailey explained, the church and its faithful face the possibility of mockery for standing for what may be misconstrued as an opposition to women or an obstacle to healthcare.

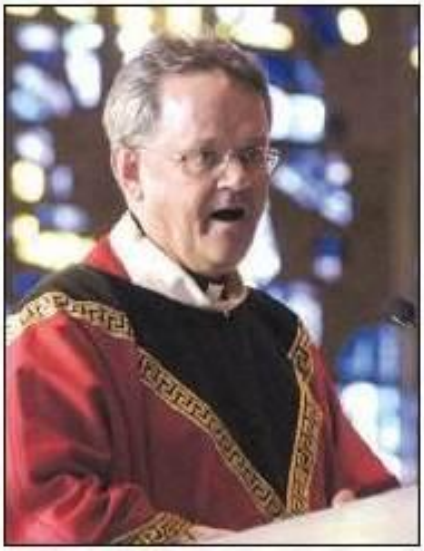
He steadfastly maintained "neither" is true, and said the church and its faithful are partly at fault for the nation arriving at the point where religious freedom is considered "unnecessary" and a danger to the good of society.

"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," he said.

Turning to the sacred Scriptures, he asked the faithful to look inwardly and suggested some key factors that may have led to the attitudes.

"It stems from a lack of evangelical confidence in our religion, a lack of faith in our faith. It derives from that complacency in to 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," said Father Dailey.

"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," he added.



Above, Bishop John Barres celebrates Mass June 21 before hundreds of faithful to kick off "Fortnight for Freedom." (Photos by John Smitz)

Left, Father Thomas Dailey urges faithful to speak up and act with words of prayers during "Let Religious Freedom Ring."

According to Father Dailey, if the faithful are worthy of God and take up their own crosses, the only question before them is: "Do we really 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 faith?"

Father Dailey said even though St. Tho-

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Above, faithful fill the pews at St. Thomas More to participate in the 14-day period of prayer, education and action in support of religious freedom.

Right, faithful show their support for religious freedom with applause after Father Dailey's homily.

Troops

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mas More was a martyr who championed the rightful authority of the church against a government's claim to jurisdiction over one's faith, he died for his love of God.

"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. St. Thomas More died because he loved God," noted Father Dailey.

Whether religious liberty will expand or contract, Father Dailey said, the mechanisms to preserve religious liberty work only when people care about their religion.

"Saving religious liberty means reminding people that they should love God. Thomas More taught us that we need religious liberty. More important, he taught us that loving God is worth dying for," he said.

"Fortunately for us, dying is not necessary today, at least not physically. 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," said Father Dailey.

Calling the fortnight a time to "muster the troops," he said it is time to take up arms against a foe bigger than any single person or either political party and a time to imitate St. Thomas More.

"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," said Father Dailey.

"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," he said.

Bishop Barres waits at the end of the processional of diocesan priests exiting the church after officially opening the national effort.