



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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THE MOST CHERISHED OF AMERICAN FREEDOMS Past and Present

In 1634, a mix of Catholic and Protestant settlers arrived in Southern Maryland from England aboard the *Ark* and the *Dove*. They had come at the invitation of the Catholic Lord Baltimore, who had been granted the land by the Protestant King Charles I of England. While Catholics and Protestants were killing each other in Europe, Lord Baltimore imagined Maryland as a society where people of different faiths could live together peacefully. This vision was soon codified in Maryland's 1649 Act Concerning Religion (also called the "Toleration Act"), which was the first law in our nation's history to protect an individual's right to freedom of conscience.

Maryland's early history teaches us that, like any freedom, **religious liberty requires constant vigilance and protection, or it will disappear.** Maryland's experiment in religious toleration ended within a few decades. The colony was placed under royal control and the Church of England became the established religion. Discriminatory laws, including the loss of political rights, were enacted against those who refused to conform. Catholic chapels were closed and Catholics were restricted to practicing their faith in their homes. The Catholic community lived under this coercion until the American Revolution.

By the end of the 18th century our nation's founders embraced freedom of religion as an essential condition of a

free and democratic society. So when the Bill of Rights was ratified, religious freedom had the distinction of being the First Amendment. Religious liberty is indeed the first liberty.

This is our American heritage, our most cherished freedom. **If we are not free in our conscience and our practice of religion, all other freedoms are fragile.** If our obligations and duties to God are impeded, or even worse, contradicted by the government, then we can no longer claim to be a land of the free.

Is our most cherished freedom truly under threat?

Among many current challenges, consider the recent Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate requiring almost all private health plans to cover contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. For the first time in our history, the federal government will force religious institutions to facilitate drugs and procedures contrary to our moral teaching, and purport to define which religious institutions are "religious enough" to merit an exemption. This is not a matter of whether contraception may be prohibited by the government. It is not even a matter of whether contraception may be supported by the government. **It is a matter of whether religious people and institutions may be forced by the government to provide coverage for contraception and sterilization, even when it violates our religious beliefs.**

What can you do to ensure the protection of religious freedom?

To learn more about our first freedom, and to send your message to HHS and Congress telling them to stand up for religious liberty and conscience rights, go to www.usccb.org/conscience today! Thank you for joining the effort to end this unprecedented government coercion of conscience and intrusion in religious affairs.