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Archbishop: 'Fortnight' about religious freedom, not politics

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A woman joins about 1,000 other people at a June 8 religious freedom rally at the Sandra Day O'Connor Federal Courthouse Building in Phoenix. (CNS/Catholic Sun/J.D. Long-Garcia)

ATLANTA -- Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore acknowledged Wednesday that the U.S. bishops' "fortnight for freedom" campaign has come under heavy criticism in the secular media, in the blogosphere and by some Catholics as being a partisan political effort.

But the two-week period is meant to be free of politics and will emphasize church teaching on religious freedom, the chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Freedom said in Atlanta.

"Already we realize that defending religious freedom is not a walk in the park," Lori said during the spring meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, saying politics plays no role in the effort.

"We've seen some reaction to our work that is sometimes hostile, sometimes unfair and inaccurate and sometimes derisive," he said.

The upcoming fortnight will be a period of prayer, education and action aimed at explaining how a federal health care contraceptive mandate violates religious principles. The mandate requires most religious employers to provide free health insurance coverage for contraceptives, abortion-inducing drugs and sterilizations.

The fortnight opens June 21 with Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Baltimore. It ends July 4 in Washington with Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and the tolling of bells at churches across the country at noon Eastern time.

Cautioning that derogatory comments can be discouraging, Lori encouraged his fellow bishops to maintain their focus on religious rights as established in the U.S. Constitution and to avoid choosing to "soft-pedal" the church's basic message.

"Instead I would say these things should prompt us to do exactly the opposite. They show how very great is the need for our teaching and our prayers both within our culture and within our church. It shows how far we have

fallen and how far we have to climb before we can rest assured religious freedom stands on firm footing," he said.

At a news conference following the afternoon session, Lori said the bishops' religious liberty campaign was funded by the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Malta, Our Sunday Visitor and "many other groups as well."

"[The Knights of Columbus] have been generous to a whole variety of causes including this one," he said.

"It is not just one group. It is not in any way partisan in its spirit or its funding. I will say once again that the generosity that we've experienced has been heartening," he added.

The archbishop also said the USCCB has begun to consider alternative actions should the U.S. Supreme Court uphold the health care law and should the dozen lawsuits challenging the contraceptive mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services fail to have the mandate overturned for religious institutions.

While not offering specifics, Lori said the bishops remain interested in meeting with officials from President Barack Obama's administration.

He also suggested that the bishops' conference may look toward a legislative remedy "even though that's pretty challenging at this particular time in our political history."

At the same afternoon session, the president of The Catholic University of America suggested that the decline in the religious practice across society seems to be playing a role in the growing indifference toward religious rights in the United States.

John Garvey said if fewer people are practicing religion, as census data and sociological studies indicate, people are less likely to understand that a government action infringes on religious freedom.

"Our society won't care about religious freedom if it doesn't care about God," Garvey said. "That's where reform is needed. We won't have, and we probably won't need, religious exemptions for nurses, doctors, teachers, social workers if no one is practicing religion."

Garvey said "the best way to protect religious freedom might be to remind people they should love God."

Garvey supported his claim by citing the findings of author Charles Murray in his book *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. Murray found, according to Garvey, that among white working-class Americans, those who profess no faith or attend a worship service only once a year has increased from 38 percent to 59 percent in the last 50 years.

The university president also quoted Murray's findings that point to a decline in marriage in the same demographic group from 84 percent to 48 percent and a seven-fold increase in out-of-wedlock births from 6 percent to 44 percent during the same period.

Garvey also said infringements on religious liberty such as the HHS mandate as well as a series of other decisions by federal and local governments pose serious threats to religious practice.

As part of his presentation to the bishops, Lori reviewed two documents explaining church teaching on religious freedom recently issued by the bishops.

One document, "United for Religious Freedom," which describes various threats to religious liberty in the United States, was adopted by the USCCB Administrative Committee in March.

The five-page statement explained that the bishops' concerns about the contraceptive mandate of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the health care law as well as its "new definition of who we are as people of faith and what constitutes our ministry."

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan moved that the full body of bishops adopt the statement as its own. His motion was approved unanimously.

Lori also discussed "Our First, Most Cherished Liberty," a statement on religious liberty issued by the ad hoc committee. He noted that the statement "recognizes that our religious freedom problems in the U.S. pale in comparison to those problems abroad."

Noting that at least 70 dioceses had planned events -- with more expected -- during the fortnight campaign, the archbishop thanked the bishops for their support.

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