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Washington rally gathers 2,000 in support of religious freedom

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People say the Pledge of Allegiance during a gathering organized by the Archdiocese of Washington on Sunday at George Washington University as part of the Fortnight for Freedom. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Rafael Crisostomo)

WASHINGTON -- In prayerful celebration, more than 2,000 Catholics from all regions of the Archdiocese of Washington gathered Sunday as part of the local church's "fortnight for freedom" campaign in support of the United States' "first and most cherished freedom" -- religious liberty.

The U.S. bishops dedicated June 21 to July 4 as days to encourage Catholics nationwide to focus on prayer, education and action in defense of religious freedom.

For the rally, held at George Washington University's Smith Center, Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl of Washington was joined by Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, the apostolic nuncio to the United States, Washington Auxiliary Bishop Barry C. Knestout, and dozens of priests, religious sisters and laity.

The event, which included prayers, patriotic and religious hymns, as well as videos highlighting the nation's strong Catholic heritage, concluded with solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

Speaking about the election of Blessed John Paul II as pope, Cardinal Wuerl recalled when he celebrated his first public Mass, the new pontiff called upon the faithful to open wide their hearts to Christ, to put aside fear and "be not afraid."

"The challenge, 'Be not afraid,' should move us to engage our culture, our neighbors, our family and our friends," said Cardinal Wuerl. "The call is not just for priests to preach, but for the laity to respond. The response is threefold: prayer, education and action. The most important is prayer."

Throughout the service, the more than 50-member St. Augustine Parish Choir led the congregation in rousing renditions of some of the country's most beloved anthems, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," as well religious hymns such as "I've Come This Far By Faith." Other hymns were led by the Schola of the Blessed John Paul II Seminary and the Sister Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matara.

Videos highlighted the Catholic Church's deep roots of religious freedom, its history and impact in the United

States from the nation's earliest days to the present.

A range of stirring images were seen, from American Catholic saints and heroes -- such as Archbishop John Carroll and St. Katharine Drexel -- to the waves of immigrants who built the nation to the 18th- and 19th-century anti-Catholic sentiment, to Catholics defending freedom in wars, to the church's staunch support of the civil rights movement, and concluding with the Catholic Church's present-day vital service in hospitals, schools and charities.

Father William Byrne, pastor of St. Peter Parish on Capitol Hill and archdiocesan secretary for pastoral ministry and social concerns, was master of ceremonies.

"We have much to celebrate. We celebrate that we live in a great country, a great land," he said. "We celebrate the vital contributions we've made and a call to faithful citizenship. We are proud to be Americans and faithful Catholics."

Father Byrne also praised the work of women religious, who, throughout American history, have been the "hands and heart of Christ, serving the poorest of the poor," founding thousands of hospitals and schools all over the nation.

"We serve others not because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic," said the priest.

At the conclusion of his address and prior to Benediction, Cardinal Wuerl said, "In the presence of our Lord, we will kneel. There is a time to be on one's knees. There is also a time when we need to stand -- to stand up. Today there are things that should mean enough to all of us, including our religious liberty, that we simply need to stand -- to stand up for what is right, to stand up for what is ours, to stand up for freedom of religion."

During the 90-minute rally, Catholics -- from elderly to young children -- listened intently, applauded and gave standing ovations in support of the church, the clergy, women religious and audience members who served in the armed forces.

Attendees interviewed by the Catholic Standard, Washington archdiocesan newspaper, said they appreciated the cardinal's message and his leadership. They also said they believe religious liberty in America is at stake at this moment in time and Catholics must speak out in its defense.

"Young people really do care about this issue. It's what our country was founded on," said Harlan Friddle, a University of Maryland student who came to the rally with about 15 of his classmates. "It's important because we shape the future and we have to teach our children what (religious freedom) means."

Charles Luckett, a third-year seminarian at The Catholic University of America's Theological College, said, "Our religious freedom is very important and is something that has been eroding for years. If we don't take a stand now, it will continue to collapse."

"This is a wonderful opportunity to be witnesses for our faith," said Patricia Kisicki, a parishioner at St. Patrick Parish in Rockville, Md. "It is very worrisome to think we could lose our freedom of religion."

Mary Beller, a parishioner of St. Bernadette Parish in Silver Spring, Md., said, "Our religious freedom means everything to us. This is what our mothers and fathers came to this country for and we need to preserve it for our children. We have to be united in this cause."

The closing Mass for the "fortnight for freedom" will be celebrated July 4 at 12:10 p.m. at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The main celebrant will be Cardinal Wuerl and the homilist will

be Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia.

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