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Baltimore Archbishop Lori hits highs and lows with editorial

Pat Perriello | Jun. 19, 2013 NCR Today

Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore continues to insist that the government is inhibiting the religious freedom of Catholics. In a strong editorial in *The Baltimore Sun* [1], Archbishop Lori makes his case for the threat we live under in the United States.

The editorial is well done, but a number of things need to be pointed out. First, the over-the-top headline: "Religious freedom under threat at home." Lori also adds that the threat to faith and religious liberty is growing, and he asserts the need to resist the erosion of religious liberty. These expressions go far beyond any legitimate disagreement the archbishop may have. They suggest some sort of attack on religious liberty that just doesn't exist. They also serve to dilute the value of whatever else he may say.

The bulk of his argument is well-reasoned and deserving of careful review, but his analysis still distorts the status of religious liberty in the United States. He talks about a number of issues that he says lessen the influence of religion in the marketplace. People don't want to talk about their faith anymore. Some may be discouraged from bringing their faith into the public square. It has become countercultural for believers to openly discuss their faith.

He may well be correct, though there are significant differences in the way believers behave in different regions of the country. In any case, these issues have little or nothing to do with an erosion of religious liberty. They are more related to a change in the culture and a lessening of the influence of religion within American society today. Society may be becoming more secular and Lori may decry that fact, but it is not the province of government to make the American people more religious.

He also makes a credible case for all the good that religion has done in society over the years, especially through Catholic Charities. I suspect few would question the generosity and value involved in such activities.

Where the archbishop makes his mistake is in assuming that such efforts somehow entitle the church to special privileges. He continues to see the concept of religious freedom as applying only to the Catholic church. For Lori, freedom of religion requires the government to permit the church to do whatever it wants, even when these practices infringe on the rights of others.

It may help the archbishop to recognize that the religious liberty clause in the Constitution has two sections. One allows everyone the free expression of their religion. The other forbids the government from making any law that establishes religion. This means that any law that shows favoritism or gives any church or denomination an advantage over the rest of society in any demonstrable way is unacceptable.

None of these issues is definitively settled precisely because they are complicated. Even the issue of contraceptive coverage in insurance plans is yet to be finalized. How these conflicting issues can and should be decided will need to work its way through legislative and judicial forums to an ultimate decision.

Thus, the church has every right to continue to advocate for its position and make the best case it can for what it

believe. That means, however, that it must play by the same rules as every other societal group. The usual church practice of stating a position and deciding it represents the only possible position because the church has a corner on the truth is not the way it works in a democracy. The church's narrow perspective leads it to see unwarranted attacks on religious freedom from every side. It needs to desist from the idea of the church as victim. It needs to stop believing that every time its position is not fully subscribed to, it's another attack on religion. As difficult as it will be, the archbishop will need to understand that in the give-and-take of democracy, he will not win every argument he puts forth.

While Archbishop Lori does a reasonable job of highlighting what he sees as the religious liberty issues for Catholics, or at least for the hierarchy, I would be more impressed if I could find him articulating the freedom of conscience and religious rights of others in the community. Advocating for the rights of workers, particularly non-Catholics at Catholic institutions, would be a good place to start. What about the rights of workers to a living wage and job protections? What about the rights of children to be free of abuse from the clergy that serves them? These are real tangible actions that too often impact the lives of individuals in a negative way.

Unfortunately, the church continues to seem concerned only with advancing its own interests, which are often not even the true interests of the church. The real interests of the church should be feeding the lambs, as Pope Francis would tell us. I would urge the good archbishop to focus the church in Baltimore more fully on such issues.

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