

**Commencement Address
Benedictine University**

May 19, 2012

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Dear Abbott Austin Murphy, Chancellor of the University; President Carroll, Reverend Clergy and consecrated religious, distinguished members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, honored guests, graduating class of 2012, and their families and friends, it is a great honor to be among you and to speak to you today at the conclusion of this academic year. As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, I am pleased that there is a Catholic university right here in Springfield and I am grateful to the Benedictine Monks of Saint Procopius Abbey for their sponsorship of Benedictine University at Springfield. I congratulate all of today's graduates and pray that your experience of Catholic higher education here will have provided you with the intellectual enrichment and spiritual nourishment that you will need for body, mind and soul throughout your lives.

THE SHELTERED CAMPUS

Dear graduates, a college campus may well be likened to the Shire of J. R. R. Tolkien's great work, *The Lord of the Rings*, one of my favorite pieces of literature. The Hobbits who lived in the Shire "were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it."¹ The same might be said of most college students today, for a college campus can be likened to the Shire in that so long as students remain on the campus they are often, like Hobbits, "quite content to ignore and be ignored by the world of the 'Big Folk.'"²

I say this not to be demeaning, but rather to recognize the reality of the world in which you have lived these past few years. It is of benefit to students that they are sheltered without remembering it so that their energies and efforts may be better attuned to their studies.

But there is also a disadvantage to this sheltering. As degrees are pursued, the outside world continues to plod along, often without being noticed by those whose lives are taken up in their studies. But now that the time of your studies has come to an end, it is time for you to leave the shelter of this campus.

The world to which you will soon return is different from when you began your studies a few years ago. Much as the growing power of Sauron threatened the life of the Shire, so, too, the growing power of secularism threatens the life of our Republic. And just as the Shire was saved through the efforts of simple and humble Hobbits, so, too, can the Republic be saved by the simple and humble efforts of its citizens, including yourselves.

For this reason, through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Ad Hoc* Committee for Religious Liberty, my brother Bishops and I have called the faithful of these United States of America to a Fortnight for Freedom. This two-week period, which begins on June 21st, the vigil of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More, and concludes on July 4th, Independence Day, is envisioned as "a great hymn of prayer for our country."³

WHAT IS AT STAKE

Over the past several years, the growing forces of secularism have continued to threaten the life of our Republic by threatening the first freedom on which this Republic was founded: that of religious liberty. Why is this issue so important?

His Eminence Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago, has expressed it well:

Human beings need religious liberty because they are created in the image and likeness of God, with rational souls and with free will. God has implanted in human beings a natural desire to seek and to know transcendent truths, not just empirical truths. Thus, the right to religious liberty exists prior to, and regardless of, its recognition by any civil authority. It is not reducible to a civil right. It is a human right, a natural right.⁴

This right “is the first freedom because if we are not free in our conscience and our practice of religion, all other freedoms are fragile.”⁵ If this freedom can be taken away, so can every other freedom.

The recent statement of the Bishops’ Committee for Religious Freedom, *Our First, Most Cherished Freedom*, noted six particular areas where religious liberty is currently threatened in our nation:

1. Through the mandate of the Department of Health and Human Services for contraception, sterilization, and abortion-inducing drugs, the federal government in an unprecedented way will force religious institutions to facilitate and fund products and practices contrary to their own moral teaching and purport to define which religious institutions are “religious enough” to merit protection of their religious liberty. As Archbishop

William Lori of Baltimore, Chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, testified to Congress: “This . . . is a matter of whether religious people and institutions may be *forced* by the government to provide coverage for contraception or sterilization, even if that violates their religious beliefs.”⁶

2. Several states have recently passed laws that forbid what the government deems “harboring” of undocumented immigrants—and what the Church deems Christian charity and pastoral care to those immigrants.⁷
3. In its over-100-year history, the University of California Hastings College of Law has denied student organization status to only one group, the Christian Legal Society, because it required its leaders to be Christian and to abstain from sexual activity outside of marriage.
4. Boston, San Francisco, the District of Columbia, and the state of Illinois have driven local Catholic Charities out of the business of providing adoption or foster care services—by revoking their licenses, by ending their government contracts, or both—because those Charities refused to place children with same-sex couples or unmarried opposite-sex couples who cohabit.
5. New York City enacted a rule that barred the Bronx Household of Faith and sixty other churches from renting public schools on weekends for worship services even though non-religious groups could rent the same schools for scores of other uses. While this would not frequently affect Catholic parishes, which generally own their own buildings, it would be devastating to many smaller congregations. It is a simple case of discrimination against religious believers.
6. Notwithstanding years of excellent performance by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Migration and Refugee Services in administering contract services for victims of human trafficking, the federal government changed its contract specifications to require us to provide or refer for

contraceptive and abortion services in violation of Catholic teaching. Religious institutions should not be disqualified from a government contract based on religious belief, and they do not somehow lose their religious identity or liberty upon entering such contracts.

In the presence of such assaults, there are some who ask, “What’s the big deal? Why can’t you just be quiet and keep your religion to yourself?”

We cannot be quiet because, as Cardinal George has rightly observed, “This effort to eliminate the involvement of religion in public life is a nascent form of state tyranny.”⁸ We cannot be quiet when our civil liberties are threatened because “what is at stake is whether America will continue to have a free, creative, and robust civil society – or whether the state alone will determine who gets to contribute to the common good, and how they get to do it.”⁹ We cannot remain quiet because “restrictions of religious liberty are an attack on civil society and the American genius for voluntary associations.”¹⁰

We do not seek to impose our beliefs upon others, but only the freedom to live them ourselves. “What we ask is nothing more than that our God-given right to religious liberty be respected. We ask

nothing less than that the Constitution and laws of the United States, which recognize that right, be respected.”¹¹

We do not desire to make a sacred public square, but “a civil public square, where all citizens can make their contribution to the common good.”¹² Such a public square might be termed an authentically American public square.

“[T]his ought not to be a partisan issue. The Constitution is not for Democrats or Republicans or Independents. It is for all of us, and a great nonpartisan effort should be led by our elected representatives to ensure that it remains so.”¹³

IT FALLS TO YOU

From the beginning of this great country, Catholics “have been staunch defenders of religious liberty in the past” and “we have a solemn duty to discharge that duty today. We need, therefore to speak frankly with each other when our freedoms are threatened. Now is such a time.”¹⁴

Confronted with the growing shadow of the Dark Tower of Mordor, Frodo Baggins says to Gandalf the Grey, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.” In reply, Gandalf says, “So do I, and so

do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”¹⁵ Many of you may well be thinking along the same lines as Frodo when you look to what the future holds.

As you, dear graduates, stand today with your diploma in hand, what will you do with the education you have received? What will you do with the time that is given you? How will you help to build a true civilization of love?

The Church looks to you, with your energy, enthusiasm, and idealism, and asks you to step forward to defend the right to religious liberty, not only for Catholics but for all people of faith. My brother Bishops and I

seek to bring the light of the Gospel to our public life, but the work of politics is properly that of committed and courageous lay Catholics. [I] exhort [you] to be both engaged and articulate in insisting that as Catholics and as Americans we do not have to choose between the two. There is an urgent need for the faithful, in cooperation with all Christians, Jews, and others, to impress upon our elected representatives the

importance of continued protection of religious liberty in a free society.¹⁶

It will take people of great hope and conviction to face this arduous challenge. That should not be a reason to flee from it, but to embrace it. The great British Prime Minister during World War II, Winston Churchill, who helped Europe and America to defeat a lethal enemy, once said, “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”¹⁷

Carl A. Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of the Columbus, recently observed that

Every great religious renewal in America has led to an advance in civil rights – from the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights to the end of slavery and the pursuit of racial equality. But all of this has been achieved in the face of established power structures strongly and often violently opposed to these rights. So this is a time for choosing – choosing whether as Catholics we will stand together to keep open the doors of religious liberty.¹⁸

In his best-selling book published over twenty years ago, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey wrote of the importance of what he called the Character Ethic, which “is based on the fundamental idea that there are *principles* that govern human effectiveness—natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as ‘unchanging’ . . . as laws such as gravity are in the physical dimension.”¹⁹ To illustrate this point, he re-told this story published by Frank Koch in *Proceedings*, the magazine of the Naval Institute:

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing of the bridge reported, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain called out.

Lookout replied, “Steady, captain,” which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: We are on a collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees.”

Back came a signal, “Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees.”

The captain said, “Send, I’m a captain, change course 20 degrees.”

“I’m a seaman second class,” came the reply. “You had better change course 20 degrees.”

By that time, the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send, I’m a battleship. Change course 20 degrees.”

Back came the flashing light, “I’m a lighthouse.”
We changed course.²⁰

My dear graduates, in the course of your lives you will encounter many people who will throw their titles, power, prestige, influence and wealth at you demanding that you change course to suit their whims. Remember that the Church is a lighthouse that cannot change course from the path set out for us by the Lord. Remember that you became an integral part of this Church at your baptism, when you were entrusted with the light of Christ to be kept burning brightly. Remember that Jesus said, “You are the light of the world” (*Matthew* 5:14). Stay true to your principles and follow the beacon of Christ’s light that will lead you to His kingdom.

As you take up this challenge to defend the religious liberty of all people, there will be many who will oppose you, some in small ways and others with great force, but they are not to be feared; they are to be loved. In the face of such opposition, let us pray with Saint Thomas More:

...teach us to bear patiently and gently all injuries and snares treacherously set for us; not to smolder with anger, not to seek

revenge, not to give vent to our feelings by hurling back insults, not to find an empty pleasure in tripping up an enemy through some clever trick, but rather to set ourselves against deceitful injury with genuine courage, to conquer evil with good...²¹

If we defend our religious liberty and that of all people in this way, the Lord will see fit to grant us peace and all good.

In these efforts Saint Benedict of Nursia will prove to be a helpful and authentic example. It was he who urged his monks, saying:

Not to give way to anger. Not to nurse a grudge. Not to entertain deceit in one's heart. Not to give a false peace. Not to forsake charity... Not to return evil for evil. To do no wrong to anyone, and to bear patiently wrongs done to oneself. To love one's enemies. Not to curse those who curse us, but rather to bless them. To bear persecution for justice's sake... [And to] put one's hope in God.²²

It was the monks of Saint Benedict who, in no small fashion, gave stability to society as the Roman Empire crumbled in the west and who laid the foundation upon which European culture and

civilization would be built. A similar opportunity now awaits you. You can use the education you have received here at this distinguished university under the patronage of Saint Benedict to uncover and strengthen the foundation of religious liberty on which our nation has been built.

With these words of your heavenly patron, I now leave you, and I warmly congratulate each of you graduates on this day that is filled with relief and joy. Today your academic achievements are celebrated and a new horizon opens before you. Let us pray that it will be one in which the freedom of religion is protected and encouraged, and in which you will flourish and thrive.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

NOTES

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 5.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, source unknown.

³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Ad Hoc* Committee for Religious Liberty, *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement on Religious Liberty*.

⁴ Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., *God in Action: How Faith in God Can Address the Challenges of the World* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2011), 50.

⁵ *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty*.

⁶ Most Reverend William E. Lori, Chairman, USCCB *Ad Hoc* Committee on Religious Liberty, Oral Testimony Before the Judiciary Committee of the United States House of Representatives, February 28, 2012.

⁷ Most Reverend Thomas J. Rodi, Archbishop of Mobile, August 1, 2011.

⁸ Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., *God in Action*, 50.

⁹ *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *bid.*

¹³ *bid.*

¹⁴ *bid.*

¹⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 50.

¹⁶ *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty*.

¹⁷ Paul Johnson, *Churchill* (Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, LLC, 2009).

¹⁸ Carl A. Anderson, Supreme Knight, Address to the 8th Annual National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, April 19, 2012.

¹⁹ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: A Fireside Book, published by Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 32.

²⁰ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 33.

²¹ Saint Thomas More, "The Sadness, the Weariness, the Fear and the Prayer of Christ Before He Was Taken Prisoner: A Commentary on Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18." In *The Sadness of Christ and Final Prayers and Benedictions*. Gerard Wegemer, ed. Clarence Miller, trans. (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 1993), 72.

²² Saint Benedict of Nursia. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 4.22-41.