

Celebrate freedom to live faith publicly, work to protect it, says bishop

ARLINGTON, Va. (CNS) – The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Religious Freedom Week June 22-29 is an opportunity for Catholics across the country to take a “stand for the freedom on which this country was founded: The freedom to live out our faith publicly,” said Arlington Bishop Michael F. Burbidge.

“This freedom includes the right to serve the common good, as our faith compels us, through various religious charities and ministries,” he said in a June 21 statement.

“All Americans, regardless of faith, enjoy countless blessings made possible by this freedom,” added Bishop Burbidge, who is a member of the USCCB Committee for Religious Liberty. He also is chairman of the bishops' Committee on Communications.

The weeklong observance always begins on the feast of two English martyrs who fought religious persecution, Sts. Thomas More and John Fisher, and ends with the feast of two apostles martyred in Rome – Sts. Peter and Paul.

Each day of the week focuses on different religious liberty topics of concern for the U.S. Catholic Church. Resources prepared by the USCCB for Catholics to “Pray – Reflect – Act” on the daily themes can be [found here](#).

“As we live out the theme of this year's celebration, ‘Solidarity in Freedom,’ may we call to mind the words of Pope Francis: ‘Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community,’” Bishop Burbidge said, quoting from *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis' 2020 encyclical.

During the coronavirus pandemic, he said, “thinking and acting in terms of community” has been on full display as Catholic agencies have tried to alleviate “the tremendous suffering” it has caused for nearly a year and a half.

“Hope arose in communities across the country as people of faith selflessly served those in need,” he said.

In the Diocese of Arlington alone, “Catholic Charities and parishes across our diocese delivered unprecedented amounts of food and emergency assistance to those experiencing financial difficulty,” he said. “A record number of families turned to Catholic Charities as they opened their homes to adoption.

“And, in the darkest days of the pandemic, our Catholic schools led the way in safely reopening so students could thrive with in-person learning. The impact within our communities is immeasurable, and, by the grace of God, it continues.”

Bishop Burbidge said Catholics “must remain steadfast in our commitment to live virtuously and carry out acts of service, despite the sad reality that real threats to religious freedom exist.”

One such threat is the proposed Equality Act, which would “remove the truth of human sexuality from the public square by redefining gender ... and silencing voices that disagree,” he said.

The measure, which has an uncertain future in Congress, would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

As written, it explicitly overrides the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act and removes conscience protections for physicians, counselors and others that allow them to opt out of procedures or treatments they object to on religious and/or moral grounds.

It also would harm vulnerable populations, such as women and girls seeking shelter in faith-based facilities, Bishop Burbidge explained. If the Equality Act were to become law, shelters for females only would have to accept transgender clients whose biology is not female, he said.

The Equality Act is the Religious Freedom Week's theme for June 24. Catholics are urged on that day to "pray that the dignity of all people will be respected in our country," including "people of faith."

"We have the truth, and we must be bold enough to stand up and proclaim it, no matter the cost. May Our Lord give us strength and wisdom for the work that lies ahead," Bishop Burbidge said.