

# Cardinal urges prayer to protect religious rights on Religious Freedom Day

WASHINGTON (CNS) – Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York called on people to promote religious freedom as a treasured right for all Americans as the country commemorates Religious Freedom Day Jan. 16.

The cardinal, who chairs the U.S. bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, expressed particular concern that such rights are violated by rising incidents in recent years of vandalism at churches, where buildings have been damaged, statues toppled and other damage incurred.

One such incident occurred Dec. 5 when a marble statue of Our Lady of Fatima near the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington was vandalized. Mary's hands and nose were cut off, her face scratched and the cross on her crown broken off.

"Our great tradition of religious freedom has allowed beauty to flourish in our cities and across the American landscape," the cardinal said in a statement released by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Jan. 14. "Diverse religious communities have built beautiful houses of worship, adorned with stained glass, statues, and symbols of faith, in earthly reflection of the glory and majesty of God.

"In the midst of a popular culture that too often caters to our basest appetites, sacred art and architecture calls all of us to think about ultimate things. All Americans benefit from these religious displays," he added.

Lamenting attacks on houses of worship as assaulting the individual communities that gather in prayer, he also said the

vandalism is “an attack on the founding principle of America as a place where all people can practice their faith freely.”

“And it is an attack on the human spirit, which yearns to know the truth about God and how to act in light of the truth,” he said.

Religious art can serve to instruct and inspire, reminding people “that we live most fully when we direct our lives toward our Creator and our neighbors,” the cardinal said in his reflection.

“On the other hand, the defacement of such public symbols of the sacred degrades our life together and harms the common good,” he continued.

Cardinal Dolan also invited people “to resolve to promote religious freedom for all people, and to honor the place of the sacred both in our lives and our landscapes.”

A rosary will be prayed Jan. 16 in response to the vandalism outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Cardinal Dolan welcomed the faithful to join in “as we pray that all religious communities would be free to worship without fear and to continue to bless this great country.”