

HHS and Diocese of Des Moines by Bishop Pates

The following article by Bishop Pates was submitted and published in part by the *Des Moines Register* on Saturday, June 30th.

In 1911, the Diocese of Des Moines celebrated its 100th anniversary. Among the institutions that symbolized our Catholic expression of faith, i.e. faith in action, over the years are our Catholic hospitals, Catholic schools, Catholic charities.

In 1893, five Sisters of Mercy based on their religious convictions and motivated by a desire to be of genuine service to people without reference to status, ability to pay or religion founded Mercy Hospital.

Today from these humble origins, Mercy provides care in 40 locations, serving 1.7 million patients of all religious persuasion annually. The broad scope of Mercy's care includes more than \$34 million in services to those who are most vulnerable. Mercy Medical Center extends its services through a worker force of 6,900 employees and 800 physicians, who are from Catholic and non-Catholic backgrounds and knowingly accept and fully implement Mercy's Catholic Mission.

I once asked a very prominent civic leader why he was so faithful and generous to the Mercy operation. He told me that Mercy's remarkable religious sisters and all the employees beautifully and lovingly took care of his father suffering from the ravages of lung disease which was the aftermath of some forty years of work in Iowa's coal mines. Mercy did so over a long period of time for a poor family at little or no cost. No questions asked. Only love expressed.

The one consistent feature embedded in the evolution of Mercy Hospitals is that the faith of the five Mercy Sisters has remained fundamental to the operation. Mercy is Catholic in character. Oriented to service and first-class health care, it is governed by Catholic morals and values based on 2000 years of tradition. All who implement Mercy's mission as employees are fully aware of this and committed to it.

Another institution eliciting gratitude during the diocesan centennial is the ministry of Catholic Schools. Initiated in the Des Moines Diocese by courageous religious sisters, priests and laity this system today services 6,506 students in 23 counties of Southwest Iowa.

Motivated by faith in action and extending service beyond Church doors, these schools are committed to quality education guided by faith perspective in their mission. Educational quality persists. Four of the 17 diocesan schools have been designated by the federal government as "blue ribbon" schools. In standardized testing, Dowling Catholic High ranks first in competency based results of the some 360 high schools in the State of Iowa.

Our schools reach out to the poor – Holy Family School in Des Moines – serves the most diverse population in the State of Iowa. Because of numerous factors, many of its students are at great risk. Teachers, parents, Church representatives and generous philanthropists have formed a coalition to provide effective Catholic education for them.

Although non-Catholics are among the student body, staff and supporters of our Catholic Schools preserve the tradition of their founders in their Catholic identity.

Very much expressive of faith in action is the ministry of Catholic Charities. Not only does Catholic Charities serve individuals' immediate needs but its operations seek to open doors that can lead to quality of life and self-direction.

One of Catholic Charities long-standing initiatives is the settling of refugees. Wave after wave – Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao-Hmong, Sudanese, African, Iraqi, Eritrean, Hispanic and Burmese have passed through the doors of Catholic Charities on the way to a decent life as Americans. Not surprisingly, a great number of them have fled their homelands because of religious persecution.

Refugees being welcomed by Catholic Charities call to mind my service as Chair of the International Committee of Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. This work has taken me to countries such as Ivory Coast, Venezuela, Cuba, Israel/Palestine where in many cases religious persecution and denial of religious freedom are widespread. Reflecting on this global reality, the words of President John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address seem applicable, “the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”

A common feature of Catholic hospitals, schools and charities is that many of all faiths and backgrounds by choice benefit from their services rendered with quality. At the same time, the institutions themselves strive to remain faithful to their millennia long moral and faith-based value tradition.

Today, this Catholic tradition but also as it is universally applicable to people of all religious persuasions and values is being threatened.

How? This is occurring through government intrusion in the life of the institutions via various mandates and other governmental actions that violate the freedom of religion as guaranteed by the First Amendment.

The most prominent and well-known of these are mandates emanating from the federal government Department of Health and Human Services implementing the Affordable Care and Patient Act. These mandates, in the instance of the Catholic Church,

- 1) Require payment, either directly or indirectly, of services that in its moral teaching are immoral.

- 2) Define who is “religious” in being exempt from this mandate. Operations which are being essentially excluded are the hospitals, schools and Catholic Charities which are patently derived from institutional and personal faith.

In effect, government is requiring persons to act in violation of personal and institutional conscience and is defining who and what qualifies as “religious.” Most recently the U.S. Supreme Court in Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and school v. EEOC upheld the constitutional right of legitimate religious organizations to determine those who are integral to expression of faith in action.

The President of the University of Notre Dame, Father John Jenkins, capsulized the issue of religious freedom involved in his statement explaining why Notre Dame has filed a lawsuit regarding the HHS Mandates.

“We do not seek to impose our religious beliefs on others: we simply ask that the government not impose its values on the University when those values conflict with our religious teaching.

This filing is about the freedom of a religious organization to live its mission . . . For if we concede that the government can decide which organizations are sufficiently religious to be awarded the freedom to follow the principles that define their mission, then we have begun to walk down a path that ultimately leads to an undermining of those institutions. For if one presidential administration can override our religious purpose and religious organizations to advance policies that undercut our values, then surely another administration will do the same for another very different set of policies, each time invoking some concept of popular will or the public good, with the result that these religious organizations become mere tools for the exercise of government power, morally subservient to the state, and not free from its infringements. If that happens, it will be the end of genuinely religious organizations in all but name.”

In light of unprecedented threats to religious freedom and the First Amendment, the Catholic Church, with allies from all religious and ideological persuasions, has undertaken efforts to nullify these government intrusions through lawsuits, legislative action and negotiations with the current administration.

We know, however, that our precious freedoms rest in our own hands. As we approach the July 4th celebration of Independence, we are reminded of the brilliant founders of our country who bravely fought to institute a set of freedoms that despite human fragility have survived because of those who sacrificed much even their lives for this cause.

Each generation cannot be complacent about our freedoms and must resist threats from within and without. Martin Luther King Jr. in his historic “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” stated that he and his followers in pursuit of civil rights for all Americans “were in

reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

Responding to the responsibility for the preservation of freedoms in our age, the Diocese of Des Moines is sponsoring an “Independence Celebration Walk and Picnic” on Sunday, July 1st.

The walk begins at Noon on July 1st on Sixth Street beside St. Ambrose Cathedral. It will proceed to the East lawn of the Iowa State Capitol for the picnic. Those not wanting to walk are welcome to join the picnic on the East lawn of the State Capitol which will begin at 12:30 pm. Plenty of free parking is available. Picnickers can bring their own food or food will be available for purchase. Busses will return walkers to locations where they parked their cars.

The celebration will include song and other music, and short reflections on religious liberty. All who want to join the event in testimony to our freedoms, especially religious freedom, are welcome to join us.

While the religious affiliations would certainly be expanded in our day the words of Abraham Lincoln written in 1844 still ring true:

“That the guarantee of the rights of conscience as found in our Constitution, is most sacred and inviolable, and one that belongs no less to the Catholic, than to the Protestant; and that all attempts to abridge or interfere with these rights, either of the Catholic or Protestant, directly or indirectly . . . shall ever have our most effective opposition.”