

Samuel Rodriguez Calls for 21st-Century Renewal

Faith is transparent, transcendent and transformational. Faith equips us to cross over obstacles, shout down walls, break through crowds and walk on the impossible, even in the midst of storms.

Faith encourages us to survive the fires of life, overcome the den of lions, silence the serpents and outwit the fox. Faith empowers us to see the invisible, embrace the impossible and hope for the incredible.

Faith exhorts us to care for the poor, speak for the marginalized and welcome the stranger, all while doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly before God.

It is faith, as the author of Hebrews 11 contextualizes, that serves as the nexus of hope and conviction—the very force that enables us to praise beyond our problems, give beyond our needs and love beyond our own.

Yet we live in a time where the very freedom to express our respective faith narratives stands threatened. In essence, we've never been down this road before. From the **HHS mandate** that requires religious organizations to sacrifice conviction on the altar of political expediency to businesses such as Hobby Lobby, which are required to abandon conscience or suffer the consequences of continued litigation, **freedom of religion** in America can best be characterized in the year 2013 as nothing other than an "endangered species."

For that matter, we must embrace one simple truth: As people of faith, we cannot be silent while our sacred liberty lies threatened. We cannot be silent while Billy and Franklin Graham suffer the wrath of Uncle Sam via the conduit of an IRS audit for the simple act of articulating biblical truth. We

cannot be silent while our Catholic brothers and sisters pay the penalty of noncompliance with a health care mandate obligating the rendering of services that run counter to the very ethos centered around the sacredness of life in and out of the womb.

Silence is not an option. For with conviction and compassion, we understand that a posture of complacency today will result in a position of captivity tomorrow. Thus, as people of faith, for the sake of our children and our children's children, we gather today to issue a clarion call reminding our fellow Americans that this nation emerged from the womb of religious liberty.

From the womb of religious freedom, our Founding Fathers relinquished the shackles of political tyranny by vociferously declaring that we are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights—amongst these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

From the womb of **religious freedom**, Abraham Lincoln confronted the sin of slavery, framed the optics of emancipation and then offered a reconciliatory prescription by declaring, "With malice towards none and charity towards all."

From the womb of religious freedom, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. brought an end to segregation and laid out a vision where, as Americans, the day would come where we would be judged not by the color of our skin but rather by the content of our character.

For to silence faith is to silence the moral conscience of our nation. To obstruct **religious liberty** is to obstruct the forces that reconcile righteousness with justice, covenant with community, sanctification with service and faith with action. To oppress religious freedom is to deny the prophetic while granting amnesty to the pathetic.

Our Founding Fathers, whether deists or Christians, inscribed

a faith narrative that cannot be denied. From the beginning, as we have seen, faith, spirituality and the actual practice of religion have affected public discourse, elections, politics and foreign affairs, not usually as the centerpiece of policy but almost always as one of the elements that shapes the norms and mores by which policy is written. One cannot extract from our ethos the spiritual thread woven into the American genome.

While France and other European nations treat religion as a historical artifact and have stripped even the vestiges of spirituality from public life, and while Iran and a score of other countries actively persecute religious minorities, our nation thrives through religious pluralism and tolerance.

Consequently, our greatest export may not be technology, popular culture or our brand of democracy, but rather a commitment to religious pluralism, diversity and tolerance—a commitment that stems directly from our Judeo-Christian value system, a system that encourages us to propose while prohibiting us from imposing our religious worldview.

For at the end of the day, religious freedom and freedom of conscience serve as the facilitative platform from which all other liberties flow. This is what truly makes us exceptional. We are not exceptional because of our military prowess, economic wherewithal or political fortitude. American exceptionalism stems from the revolutionary idea, one which Marc Nuttle defines as “God over man and man over government.”

In other words, our freedoms stem not from the legislative, executive or judicial branches. Our freedoms come from our Creator, from whom all blessings flow. Moreover, our nation’s greatest gift to the world lies embedded in a 200-year demonstration of two simple truths: The antidote to religious totalitarianism is religious pluralism, and religious freedom serves as the proverbial firewall against secular tyranny.

Our relationship with God demands constant vigilance. We have been worrying about our potential to fall away from the very beginning. George Washington said the following of his fellow citizens after acknowledging the “divine interposition” in American affairs: “I should be pained to believe that they have forgotten that agency, which was so often manifested during our Revolution, or that they failed to consider the omnipotence of that God who is alone able to protect them.”

If we deviate from the premise that in America God is over man and man is over government, we will not last long as a nation. The rejection of this catalytic framework will surely result in chaos, angst and the potential termination of our noble experiment.

Finally, I’m reminded of a program I watched on a nature channel. A lion returning from the wild seeking additional foods for his little ones stood ambushed. The narrator stated that the lion suffered what seemed to be mortal wounds. He had no strength, not even enough to raise his claws, lift his head or open his eyes.

At that precise time, the cameras captured the images of a band of predators aiming toward the lion’s position. They came with the intention not of finishing off the lion, whom they assumed powerless, but instead advanced with the purpose of attacking the descendants, the little ones, his most precious possessions.

Yet at the precise moment when the enemies of the lion approached the camp and threatened his offspring, the wounded lion—who did not have the ability to raise his head or claws—released the last resource available: his roar. Immediately and without exception, all the enemies threatening the lion’s offspring and most cherished possessions fled. The narrator stated the following: “Why did the enemies of the lion flee? Simple. His enemies know very well that as long as the lion roars, they cannot take away what belongs to him.”

It's time to emerge as vertical lambs and horizontal lions. It's time to pray, but it's time to release a collective faith-filled roar. For as a Christian, as an evangelical, I understand that defending religious freedom stems not from the agenda of the donkey or the elephant but rather from the agenda of the Lamb.

Therefore, rise up and protect religious liberty. Rise up and speak truth to power. Rise up with civility and grace, and remind our great uncle of the the following: "Uncle Sam, you may be our earthly uncle, but you are not and never will you ever be our heavenly Father!"

Editor's Note: *This is a revised version of a speech Samuel Rodriguez delivered as a keynote address at the Ethics and Public Policy Center's 2013 National Religious Freedom Conference last week. [Click here to see the video.](#)*

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