

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

How to promote religious liberty

By Sister Constance Veit, LSP

The Fortnight for Freedom, which we've been celebrating each year at the end of June and beginning of July has recently been reconfigured. Beginning this year, Religious Freedom Week is to be held annually June 22–29. The observance is a bit shorter, but no less important. This year's theme is *Serving Others in God's Love*.

With our Supreme Court lawsuit over the HHS Contraceptive Mandate, we Little Sisters of the Poor have been at the center of this issue. I've always suspected that at the root of the religious liberty controversies of the last few years is an inherent distrust or even disrespect for traditional religious beliefs.

My suspicion was confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision in the case of a Colorado baker who declined to create a cake for the wedding of two gay men. The baker prevailed before the Supreme Court because the Justices felt that the State's treatment of his case demonstrated "elements of a clear and impermissible hostility toward the sincere religious beliefs that motivated his rejection."

The Court's majority opinion called for the resolution of such cases with tolerance and due respect to sincere religious beliefs, but they also indicated that this must be done without subjecting gay persons to public humiliation.

The Supreme Court Justices got it right – in a pluralistic society like ours all parties should be treated respectfully and with dignity. It seems so simple. 'Why can't we just all get along?' I sometimes wonder.

Why is religious liberty so fragile today? I believe it is indeed because of the hostility toward sincere religious beliefs that hides just below the surface in so much of our public discourse. But ours is not the first generation in our nation's history where religion – or specific faiths – has been held in contempt.

This year my religious congregation of Little Sisters of the Poor is celebrating the 150th anniversary of our arrival in the United States. In the years before our Sisters came to America, our country had seen a violent wave of anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic rhetoric. The Know-Nothing Party launched a frenzy that led to mob violence, the burning of Catholic property – including a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts – and the killing of Catholics. This violence was fed by claims that Catholics were destroying the culture of the United States.

The influence of the Know-Nothings eventually waned ... due to the Civil War and the difficult period of Reconstruction — probably the ugliest period of our nation's history. This is the environment into which seven Little Sisters of the Poor, none of whom spoke English, set foot in Brooklyn, NY on September 13, 1868.

Incredibly, despite their strange black mantles and foreign ways, our Little Sisters never faced discrimination. Quite the contrary – they were embraced and supported by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. An excerpt from a letter written by a priest who was assisting them to the superiors back in France attests to this: “The public appeared delighted to see that the Little Sisters of the Poor are willing to work for the poor; that they ask no endowment; that they desire to trust in Providence and in the generosity of the public.”

Several years later one of the most popular secular newspapers in the country published a feature story on the Little Sisters that included this endorsement: “This charity is entitled to the heartfelt support of a benevolent public. It asks but the simplest assistance and guarantees the largest good. The Order is founded upon a very broad sentiment, and the ministrations of the Petites Soeurs (Little Sisters) invest their lives with a beauty that can arise only from unswerving devotion to a Christian duty.”

Within four years the Congregation had established 13 homes for the elderly – and that was only the beginning. What was the secret of their success? Baltimore’s Archbishop Martin Spalding hit the nail on the head: “The Little Sisters of the Poor are called to do a great deal of good in America,” he said, “not only among the poor, but also among the rich; for words no longer suffice – works are necessary.”

Our first Little Sisters in America opened hearts and doors not with words, but through the eloquent witness of their charitable works. Our Sisters have made a lasting difference in America by *Serving Others in God’s Love*, and I believe that this is how we too can make a difference. This is how we will bridge the gap that exists today between people of faith and our secularized society. It is our acts of love that will overcome the obvious hostility toward sincere religious beliefs that threatens peace and unity in our pluralistic society.

So, let’s get busy *Serving Others in God’s Love!*

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