

EMBRACE THE YEAR OF MERCY

True Hero of Conscience: The Incredible Witness of Armando Valladares

Deeply concerned about the growing repression against the freedom to act according to one's religious beliefs and conscience, the U.S. Bishops have called us to celebrate a "Fortnight for Freedom" once again this year (June 21-July 4).

But it is a huge challenge to get people engaged in the midst of summer, especially since the defense of religious freedom against a wave of White House mandates, court decisions and mainstream media propaganda can seem overwhelming.



Perhaps the case of former Cuban political prisoner Armando Valladares can energize us and help us to see what is at stake. He was named the 2016 recipient of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty's Canterbury Medal. At the

May 12 award reception, Valladares, who was initially an ally of Fidel Castro, had this to say:

"When I was 23 years old I refused to do something that at the time seemed very small. I refused to say a few words, 'I'm with Fidel.' First I refused the sign on my desk at the postal office that said that, and after years of torture and watching many fellow fighters die, either in body or in spirit, I still refused to say those words. If I just said those three words, I would have been released from prison."

For his defiance, Valladares spent the next 22 years in Castro's gulag (pictured behind bars in a wheelchair, after torture left him temporarily paralyzed).

"I was in communist prisons for 8,000 days. I was hungry, beaten, overworked to the point of exhaustion. I endured hunger, total darkness, filth, disease, sweltering heat, hard labor and solitary confinement. I was there when my friends

and colleagues were executed by firing squad at which all would yell out '¡Viva Cristo Rey!' ('Long live Christ the King!') when they were killed."

"My faith was what kept me alive all of those 22 years in Castro's prisons. My story is proof that a small act of defiance can mean everything for the friends of liberty. Even though my body was in prison and being tortured, my soul was free and it flourished. My jailers



Please Join Bishop William Patrick Callahan in a Holy Hour for Religious Freedom on June 21, 2016 at 6:30 pm at Blessed Sacrament Church in La Crosse – or join in a corresponding Holy Hour in your parish or deanery.

*Let us begin humbly
on our knees.*

May there be a great wave of prayer at this crucial moment in our nation and the world.

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DIocese of LA CROSSE, WI

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took everything away from me, but they could not take away my conscience or my faith.

Valladares then pointed to the nuns from the Little Sisters of the Poor attending his talk, nuns whose order has been fighting the Obamacare HHS Mandate that attempts to force them to facilitate employee insurance coverage of contraception and abortion-inducing drugs.

Valladares said of the nuns, “They know this. They may be called the Little Sisters of the Poor, and yet they are rich in that they live out their conscience, which no government bureaucrat can invade. They know what my body knows after 22 years of cruel torture: that if they sign the form the government demands they will be violating their conscience and would commit spiritual suicide. If they did this they would forfeit the true and only wealth they have in abandoning the castle of their consciences. And so I salute the Little Sisters of the Poor for their seemingly small act of defiance!”

Let’s ask God daily to give us the courage of Armando Valladares – and the Little Sisters of the Poor – to speak out and to defend our freedom of religion and conscience. Visit the diocesan website to learn more about the issues in the U.S. and around the world, to access prayer and other resources, and for ideas on what you can do to stand up for religious liberty (www.diolc.org/freedom). Above all, PRAY, and participate in Bishop Callahan’s Holy Hour for Religious Freedom on Tuesday, June 21, at 6:30 pm, wherever you are.

Why do we need another Fortnight for Freedom? Here are just a few of the reasons:

- In Illinois, a bill recently passed by the state legislature and sent to the governor for his signature requires all providers who do not perform abortion to refer, transfer or provide in writing a list of facilities where the provider “reasonably believes” a patient who desires an abortion will be able to obtain one. The same requirement holds for pro-life pregnancy centers. In other words, every doctor, pharmacist and pro-life pregnancy center in the state will have to facilitate a woman’s effort to obtain an abortion whenever asked. To simply say, “we don’t do abortions here” will not be enough.

- In California, the state’s Department of Managed Health Care has required since 2014 that churches’ employee health insurance plans cover all legal abortions, including elective abortions, as part of “basic health care services.” Several churches filed a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Civil Rights a month after the abortion mandate went into effect, asking it to enforce the federal Hyde-Weldon Amendment which makes exemptions for religious employers. The Obama Administration promised to investigate the California order but, despite the repeated urging of pro-life lawmakers and religious groups in California to act on that promise, the administration appears to be doing nothing and the mandate continues in force.

- In 2014 the New York State Division of Human Rights (DHR) ruled that the Catholic owners of an Albany-area farm violated the civil rights of a lesbian couple when they declined to host the couple’s same-sex marriage ceremony in 2012. Robert and Cynthia Gifford, who own and operate Liberty Ridge Farm, argued that weddings on the farm take place in and around their home, where they are raising their two children, and that to participate in solemnizing a same-sex union on their own property violated their deeply held religious beliefs and consciences. They were ordered to pay \$10,000 in fines to the state and an additional \$3,000 in damages to the lesbian couple for “mental pain and suffering.” The Giffords were also ordered to provide sensitivity training to their staff and to prominently display a poster highlighting state anti-discrimination laws. They appealed to the New York Supreme Court, which ruled against them on January 14, 2016.

**Learn more and take action:
Visit www.diolc.org/freedom.**

For more information contact:

Parish Name:

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Ph: