



Vince Stango Remarks
2026 Liberty Medal
Honoring Pope Leo XIV

Just steps from where we gather today, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed to the world a revolutionary idea: that all people are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights. A decade later, the Constitution established a framework for self-government unlike any the world had seen. And in the First Amendment, Americans embraced a profound principle that continues to distinguish our constitutional tradition: that government should neither establish religion nor prohibit its free exercise, protecting the freedom of every individual to worship, believe, question, seek, and live according to the dictates of their own conscience.

As someone who has spent much of my professional life helping steward an institution dedicated to constitutional education and civil dialogue, I never cease to be struck by how extraordinary that achievement was. We often take religious liberty for granted because it is woven so deeply into the fabric of American life. But the idea that people of different faiths and beliefs could live together as equal citizens under a shared constitutional order remains one of the most remarkable and consequential contributions of the American experiment.

That commitment to religious liberty has never been merely a constitutional provision. It has been a source of civic vitality throughout our nation's history.

From the Revolution to the abolitionist movement to the struggle for civil rights, Americans motivated by faith have called upon and challenged our nation to more fully realize its highest ideals.

In one of the most remarkable statements of religious liberty in our nation's history, George Washington wrote to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island that the United States would give "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." More than two centuries later, those words remain both a promise and a challenge: a vision of a society where human dignity is respected, conscience is protected, and people of different faiths can live together in freedom and mutual respect.



It is that vision, and the ongoing work of advancing it, that brings us together today. As America commemorates its 250th anniversary, it is especially meaningful that we gather to honor the first U.S.-born pope in the history of the Catholic Church.

There is something deeply resonant about that milestone occurring at this moment in history. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were among America's earliest exports to the world, demonstrating that a free people could govern themselves. Those ideas traveled far beyond our shores and inspired democratic movements across generations and continents.

Now, in a different but equally meaningful way, America has offered another gift to the world: a spiritual leader shaped by a nation founded on religious liberty, constitutional self-government, and the dignity of every individual.

And for Philadelphians, there is an additional point of pride. Just as this city gave birth to the Declaration and the Constitution, Philadelphia also helped shape the life and ministry of Pope Leo XIV. His years of study and service at Villanova University formed part of the journey that would ultimately lead him to the Vatican and to a position of global leadership.

Today, we honor Pope Leo XIV not only for his historic role, but for a ministry that has embodied some of the highest aspirations of both faith and democracy. Through both word and deed, he has demonstrated how faith can inspire compassion, solidarity, and service, affirming the dignity of every person, strengthening the bonds that unite communities, and reminding us that freedom finds its highest purpose when joined with moral responsibility and a commitment to the flourishing of others.

Those ideals helped launch the American experiment 250 years ago. They continue to sustain it today. And they remain among our nation's most important gifts to the world and to posterity.

May we meet that responsibility with wisdom, courage, and humility, preserving these freedoms not only for ourselves, but for those who will inherit this nation after us. And may future generations look back on this moment and say that we honored the promise of liberty, strengthened the bonds of civic friendship, and



carried forward the enduring ideals that have inspired Americans, and so many around the world, for 250 years.

Thank you.