

Pope religious liberty talk falls short, amid list of issues

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On a stage set for a blockbuster papal endorsement of the American bishops' religious liberty battle, Pope Francis didn't deliver. He side-stepped the bishops' most burning religious freedom issue — marriage — and spent more time greeting immigrants.

With Independence Hall as his backdrop, where the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were signed, the pope spoke of religious liberty among a very long list of concerns including tyranny, racism, immigration, compassion for the needy and a plea to cheering Latinos in the audience to have pride in their heritage.

Francis did echo one of the central concerns for the bishops, about the right for church-affiliated charities, hospitals and schools to hire, fire and set policy according to Catholic teaching. The pope said, "religious freedom certainly means the right to worship God, individually and in community," but "it transcends places of worship and the private sphere of individuals and families."

Bishops are worried, for example, that Catholic agencies will be compelled by the government to recognize the same-sex spouses of employee or provide adoption services to gay couples.

"That's exactly what the bishops have been saying: let our ministries do their good work for social welfare in a way that is true to our Catholic

specializes in religious freedom. "Our institutions are here to serve, but it is unjust and unnecessary to demand that they secularize as a condition."

Still, at a moment in the Philadelphia speech Saturday when it appeared the pope was about to land a strong point related to the American debate over conscience protections for religious objectors, he pivoted to other matters,