

Freedom - What it Means to be Catholic

The recent Dobbs decision from the Supreme Court has some lauding the Catholic Church for her consistent pro-life stance. Sadly, there have been many more who despise the Church and see Catholics as a major obstacle to their freedom. The principles of our faith have always been counter-cultural, and they will continue to be a stumbling block to some. The tension and division around this decision is also present in our Church. These tensions call us to reflect on two very important questions... The first is... What does it mean to be free? And the second is... What does it mean to be Catholic?

Let's consider freedom first... Freedom properly understood exists at two levels. The first or most basic is natural freedom, which is proper to all animals. It is the freedom to struggle against or resist restraint. The second is particular to the human person and is known as personal freedom. This is freedom is more sophisticated and allows the person to pursue excellence physically, socially, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. It is the ability to pursue ultimate goods as God desires. Freedom is the greatest gift God gives us. And to love properly one must be free. God gives us free will: to reason and act, or to reason and not act. Our ability to reason properly can be impaired by... One is ignorance and the other is our emotions. In as much as we are able, we have the capacity for deliberate actions by which we shape our very lives. Every choice we make has a consequence... some consequences are good, and others are not. There is no escaping the consequences that result from our choices. With free will comes the weight of responsibility. With great freedom comes great responsibility.

Now let's reflect briefly on what it means to be Catholic. As Catholics, we comprise a Church deeply rooted in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. We cannot live properly or exist without being connected to those roots. Those roots challenge us to make our free choices in a manner that is logical and consistent with what God has revealed to us through his Son. Those roots also call us to seek the ultimate good in our decisions and choices. Here again the logic of our decisions can be impaired by ignorance or emotion.

Behavior in recent weeks has shown a tendency for us to reduce Catholicism in two different ways... The first is: a lack of comprehension or understanding of what Catholicism is... Fulton Sheen observed "There are not one hundred people in the United States who hate the Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they wrongly perceive the Church to be." This is amplified by a culture where many have allowed or even encouraged anger and rage to replace reason and constructive dialogue. The second is: a flawed understanding of what Thomas Jefferson called the wall of separation

between the Church and the State. Jefferson rightly explains that the establishment clause in our Constitution prevents the instillation of a state religion and keeps the government from favoring one faith over another. It is a serious distortion of the truth to think that Jefferson's proverbial wall means that people of religious faith, or the Church's that exist to glorify God and sanctify humanity, should be denied a rightful voice in the public square. This is why when the Constitution was framed, Religious Freedom was not listed as the tenth or ninth or even the second amendment... it is first. If our Catholic faith is relegated to Mass on Sunday but is not allowed to leave these sacred walls impenetrating how we choose to live and act, then our faith becomes a series of empty words. Think of the lack of coherency in someone who holds the truths of our faith as sacred in their private life but will not propose those truths in the way they act and choose in their public life. Simply put: Religion is deeply personal, but it is not private.

So, given where our country is... What do we do now? As Catholics what do we freely choose? It is said that the Pro-Life movement must be about building a civilization of love. That is what Christ did and what he has commanded his followers to do. He never proposed that sin or gravely sinful acts were okay or acceptable. But he did meet every sinner with a love and compassion, that changed their hearts.

In today's Gospel each of the passers-by made choices. Two of the three passers-by failed to reason properly. Whether it was emotion or ignorance they failed to see the dignity of a person in need. The Samaritan saw that dignity. In seeing that dignity he was moved with "compassion." Compassion means "to suffer with." The Samaritan suffers with the man who fell victim to robbers. His act of charity cost him. His supplies, his comfort, his means of transportation, his money, but most importantly his time. The Samaritan chose to suffer with the suffering. This is what it means to love another... perhaps this is what we need to do now more than ever. Especially with those we disagree with.

St. John Paul II while visit Baltimore in October of 1995 had this insight regarding freedom... "It is important for America that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be passed on to each new generation," St. John Paul II said in his homily. "Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought." Therefore, the best use of our freedom is in choosing what God would choose, and making those choices with compassion, mercy, and love. That is the centerpiece of the message of Our Savior in the parable of the Good Samaritan... "Love one another." May God bless all that we say and do, and may our decisions and choices always be for the honor and glory of God.