

Faith, Sexuality, and the Meaning of Freedom; Remarks, Panel Discussion: The Demands of Faith

I. Meaning of the Word “Demands”

A. Warmest thanks for the opportunity to be part of the broader discussion on faith, sexuality, and the meaning of freedom. At the moment we are focusing on one aspect of that discussion, namely, the “demands” of faith in a dynamic cultural setting.

B. A clarification of the word “demands” might be in order. I would suggest it can mean three things: First, it refers to conditions under which people of faith and their ministries flourish so as to accomplish what they see as their God-given mission, a mission that often includes proclamation, worship, education, charity, and advocacy. Second, it means the legitimate expectation of people of faith that they and their religious institutions will be fully accorded the protection of their God-given religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. At the very least this signals freedom from government coercion but I would say it also includes a certain encouragement for religious people to pursue the truth, grow in virtue, and make their contribution to human dignity and the common good. Third, the word “demand” does not imply a need or desire on the religious side to compromise the rights of others in fulfilling a religious mission; nor does it imply a right on the part of religious people and their institutions to endanger the common good of society. Rather, there is need to ensure that in our society there is ample “room” for people of faith, for their institutions, and for religious ideas. And, like everyone else we have the right to contribute to and shape the culture of which we are a part by participating in the marketplace of ideas. Let me add that not all these demands are of the practical order. Some are of philosophical, others legal, and still others, practical. Finally I would note that the mission is often carried out heroically when the foregoing conditions or demands are not met. Paradoxically, the Church’s

mission often flourishes best under the most adverse conditions. That said, I'd ask that you permit me briefly to expand upon these points.

II. Freedom for Mission

A. Generally speaking, proclamation, teaching, and worship is at the heart of religion but for many if not most religious traditions, the mission extends further. Word and Worship is meant to shape how people think and live and from Word and Worship there flows a mission of service not only to congregants but to the wider community. In a phrase, being loved by God means loving others in return and we believe that this experience illuminates human dignity and contributes to a society that is just, peaceful, and charitable.

B. In my Tradition, proclaiming God's Word, celebrating the Sacraments, and exercising the ministry of Charity are thoroughly interconnected and express the very "essence" of who and what the Church really is. So, a first demand is that government not delimit any church's mission by reducing freedom of religion to freedom of worship only. In passing, I note that the contribution of religion to society is enormous. That contribution extends to the most troubled neighborhoods in our nation, to the poorest and most oppressed countries around the globe, to the most vulnerable among us, to the service of life at every stage, and to the hard work of building up family life as the fabric of society. With God's help and mercy, and as Pope Francis often says, we strive to be "a field hospital" rather than a haven for the self-righteous.

III. Societal "Space" for Religion

Next I would like to describe further the "demand" for societal "space" for religion. I would suggest that this requirement includes several aspects:

A. First is respect for freedom of conscience as a prime expression of human dignity, and specifically the right of citizens to shape their way of life according to God's law both written and unwritten. Here I imply that conscience is a law perceiver rather than a law-giver. Consciences are to be properly formed in accord with the demands of truth.

B. Second is societal toleration for religion and religious teachings especially when they are seen as countercultural. Indeed the notion of “toleration” is incoherent when applied only to what is popular or commonly accepted. By contrast, religious teachings on sexuality and marriage often are countercultural. We understand these teachings to be consonant with the dignity of the human person created in God’s image, and called to love as God loves. Not everyone agrees. But such disagreement should not lead to the silencing or belittling of religious voices. Further, it is not enough merely to tolerate the countercultural views of individuals. For religion is more than one’s private spirituality; rather, it has three dimensions: “historical, public, and communal” (See Card. George, *Godly Humanism*, p. 131). Toleration should be extended to all three dimensions of the Church’s mission. Our institutions of service should not be penalized for following church teachings nor coerced by government to conform with the prevailing culture.

C. Third is civility. This is more than politeness but that’s a pretty good place to start. In the language of Pope Francis, we are to foster a culture of encounter which includes listening to one another, dialogue, a search for common ground and respect for one another’s identity and deeply held beliefs. It is averse to putting pejorative labels on persons and on deeply held convictions. Teachings such as the complementary relationship of man and woman should not be reduced to an “ism” or labelled as “bigotry”. Those who hold for marriage between one man and one woman ought not be equated with racial bigots. Conversely, those who disagree with the Church’s teaching on marriage should not be the objects of pejorative labels or epithets.

D. Fourth is respect for truth and a common desire to search for objective truth concerning the dignity of the human person and the common good of society. Dialogue is difficult without common ground rooted in objective truth about the dignity, rights, and responsibilities of the human person. A lack of commonly shared truth undermines the human solidarity necessary for a healthy society. Absent the sincere search for truth, the conversation morphs into a struggle for power and its exercise. What is needed is an examination of an emerging “fault line” in our democracy: a growing willingness to sacrifice objective truth for subjective freedom (Ibid., p. 137). A related “fault line” is reflected in the 2016 Civil Rights Commission Report, viz., a subordination of basic human freedoms to still-fluctuating and highly

individualized views of what constitutes discrimination.

E. Fifth is respect for healthy pluralism. Churches have a right not only to teach their congregants but also to advocate broadly for laws and policies that accord with human dignity and the common good. Not all schools and social service agencies need to be the same. Some can and should reflect their religious roots without fear of reprisal even as religious persons and institutions seek to build bridges wherever possible. When irreducible conflicts occur between government policy and church teaching, the government needs to extend to the church robust protection that respects the church's right to self-determination and the common good. Not surprisingly, differences of opinion also exist within religious traditions. These differences should not be settled by the government but by each religious tradition according to its own teachings and polity.

IV. Freedom and Responsibility

A. Along with the demands of freedom there are correlative responsibilities. First is to use language responsibly without compromising religious convictions. People of faith should be loath to label even as we loathe being labelled. Second, even as we wish religious freedom to be respected as a fundamental freedom, so too we should respect the fundamental freedoms and rights of others. Indeed, it is difficult to defend and define the very idea of human rights without affirming the transcendent dignity of the human person. For Catholics, human dignity and rights are known by reason and clarified by faith. These include the right to life, to life's necessities, to employment, and to healthcare. The Church can & does speak against human rights violations & unjust discrimination, recognizing that not all will agree on what constitutes unjust discrimination.

B. Further, most if not all faith communities have resources and tools, to help us all navigate through cultural complexity, whatever its sources. Perhaps the experience of engaging in robust ecumenical and interreligious dialogues can teach us how to go about strengthening the dialogue between faith and culture. Other resources and tools include the principles of cooperation, rules for discernment, the natural law tradition, and the respect of faith for reason. Most of all, of course, it requires a willingness on the part of all to come together in search of common ground rooted in

objective truth.

C. Pope Francis reminds us that the Church's social service agencies are not merely "a compassionate NGO", nor does the church only take positions on issues in society. Rather, the Church is on the ground, engaged in society, meeting needs, however imperfectly but with a rich understanding of the human person, who is not just material but also spiritual, not just body but also soul. The Church is immersed in the marketplace of ideas, the modern-day "areopagus" but has a right to be distinctive voice that lives its distinctive vision in a distinctive way.