

Fortnight for Freedom 10th Sunday

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I. Introduction

Dear friends, for but a moment let us enter the scene described for us in the Gospel passage that was just proclaimed. Let us take our place with the disciples. If we do so, we will enter the presence of Jesus absorbed in prayer, in prayer to His heavenly Father. No one knows the content of that prayer but it is not hard for us to imagine that Jesus is praying for His disciples, praying that their faith may be strong, that their faith may not fail. Perhaps too Jesus is in deepest conversation with His Father about His impending death for the salvation of the world.

Rising from prayer, He engages us in conversation, a conversation that has a contemporary ring to it. In a sense, He asks His disciples for a sampling of public opinion. “Who do the crowds say that I am?” “What are they saying about me?” And well within the margin of error, the disciples reported the people’s opinions: “John the Baptist; others Elijah; still others, one of the ancient prophets...”

Then Jesus calls the question: “Who do *you* say that I am?” Now He isn’t looking for a sampling of public opinion but rather for a confession of faith, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Peter’s faith did not fail. “You are the Christ of God,” he said, ‘His only Son, His anointed, the Messiah, He who is to come.’ Peter could say this not because he read it in a book but because he had met Christ ... and, while he had a long way to go, Christ had already changed His life.

In this passage, Jesus does not praise Peter for giving the correct answer. On the contrary, He rebuked the disciples and then foretold that He would die on a cross and be raised from the dead ... and in the same breath told his disciples that if they wished to follow Him they must take up their cross daily and following in His footsteps. This is what Jesus said to Peter and His disciples. This is what Jesus is saying to us tonight.

II. The Venue and the Cross

Dear friends, this Church is now the venue where, through the Holy Spirit, we are

caught up in the love of the Father & the Son. This Church is now the venue where like St. Peter we confess the Christ of God to be our only Redeemer, the Savior of the World. Here in this place set apart, upon the altar, the Cross and Resurrection, the Paschal Mystery is re-enacted, so that you and I might share in all that He did to save us and to save the world. And it is here, this very morning that Christ challenges us anew, not only to confess His Name by words but to take up our Cross daily.

But in what form does the Cross appear in our lives? Sometimes it is illness, sometimes financial worries or the death of a loved one, sometimes it is uncertainty or the sum of the burdens we find ourselves carrying ... and so many forms of personal suffering that are part of the human experience. But the Cross can assert itself in other ways, in those moments when we are called to bear explicit, public witness to Christ, to defend our religion, our faith, to defend human dignity in ways we Americans may find surprising or even distressing.

Our Mass this morning takes place during what is called the Fortnight for Freedom, a two-week period leading up to the 4th of July set aside to pray for the preservation of religious freedom, to reflect on what it means, and to consider ways we might act to defend and preserve our liberties. Some threats to religious freedom are just below the surface of our culture and others are out in the open. In fact, we are facing a perfect storm. Fewer people are practicing their faith while attacks on religion and on people of faith are accelerating, whether in the media or on college campuses or in social gatherings, to name a few. Sooner rather than later these attitudes are finding their way in laws and policies that seek to limit religious freedom only to freedom of worship. In effect, segments of our government more and more are saying to us, you can worship however you wish but when you serve the needs of the poor or educate young people, you need to check certain parts of your faith at the door.

But any true follower of Christ knows that loving God entails loving one's neighbor. As members of the Church, we follow Christ and fulfill His mission in three ways: proclaiming His Word, celebrating His sacraments, and exercising a ministry of charity. Works of education, healthcare, and charity are not a sideline ... they are an integral part of the Church's mission because they are an extension of Jesus'

ministry when He walked the earth.

This is precisely what is at stake in the HHS mandate controversy. Health and Human Services has said to parishes and like institutions that they are exempt from covering in their health insurance plans medications and procedures that are contrary to the teachings of the Church. But Catholic charities, universities, and hospitals are not exempt. They are “accommodated” but the accommodation is inadequate because it still implicates Catholic charities, hospitals, and universities in providing for so-called “services” at odds with the Church’s teaching – such as abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, and reproductive counseling contrary to the Church’s teaching and extending even to underage family members of church employees.

III. The Need to Take a Stand

It may seem odd to us that the Cross has asserted itself in something so arcane as a bureaucratic government rule. Yet isn’t it often the case that the devil is in the details? In its rule-making process, a federal agency is chipping away at the religious freedoms, which, until now, private citizens and church institutions have enjoyed. So, there is need to bear witness to our God-given right to confess the name of Christ not only in Word and Worship but also in the way in which we exercise ministries of education and charity.

If we think it unlikely that we are called to bear witness to Christ over a federal rule, consider St. Thomas More & St. John Fisher whose feast occurred yesterday. These martyrs laid down their lives rather than violate their consciences. The issue before them was the annulment of King Henry VIII and his declaration that he was the head of the Church of England. There was enormous pressure on More & Fisher to go along with the King’s wishes. After all, it was good for England and it was best not to rock the boat too much. St. Thomas More, a prominent layman and Chancellor of England, held fast and paid for his principled stand with his life. St. John Fisher was the Bishop of Rochester, in Kent, and was a great reformer of the Church and a man of great holiness. He too took his stand with Christ, the only bishop to resist the King’s wishes. Both More and Fisher were beheaded on Tyburn Hill in London in 1535. That is how they confessed Jesus to be the Christ of God. That is how they picked up their Cross and followed in His footsteps. We too are called to confess

Christ and take up our Cross in defending the rights of believers to profess and practice their faith and to bring the truths and values that flow from faith to bear on public life.

IV. Conclusion: New Evangelization

Even as we courageously resist attacks on religious freedom, so too we must take the step of revitalizing the faith. Successive popes have called us to the New Evangelization – to a fresh proclamation of the Person of Jesus Christ such that the people of our times can encounter Him anew and find joy in professing His truth and in sharing His love.

If we truly want to defend religious freedom, then we must live the true freedom of the Gospel, by praying, by falling in love with Christ ever more deeply, by knowing our faith, by growing in virtue and holiness, by serving the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the newly arrived and defending human life from the moment of conception until natural death, by reaching out in concern to people, not just Christians, who are persecuted for their faith in places, like Iran, Iraq, China & Nigeria. If we truly want to defend religious freedom, then we must open the doors of our hearts and of our churches to all who seek God, and to those who have left the Church for whatever reason.

Today, let us now enter more deeply into the presence of the Christ of God. Let us share in His prayer to the heavenly Father, confess him to our Savior, and find in the Eucharist the strength we need to pick up our Cross and to be His witnesses before the world. May God bless us and keep us always in His love!