

Freedom and Responsibility of Human Acts

Every July 4, we join with our fellow citizens throughout this great country to celebrate the freedom that we enjoy because of the vision and sacrifice of the Founders of our nation. We cherish our freedom. The idea of living anywhere else on this planet where our rights and human dignity would be restricted is for many of us unfathomable.

Throughout our nation's history, thousands of men and women have given what Abraham Lincoln called "the last full measure of devotion," by sacrificing their lives here and throughout the world, to ensure the quality of our democracy. Our democracy of the people clings tirelessly to the premise that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are the "inalienable rights" of every human person.

Our freedom is the very fabric of being citizens of these United States. On a secular level, we know that our freedom is not license to do whatever we want. The laws of our land exist so that we can live with one another in harmony, respecting others' rights to life and property. Our court system's goal is to judge when rights have been violated, punish the offender and bring justice to the one who has been wronged.

Operating on a very basic level, a person's choice to act rightly allows the person to escape punishment for doing wrong. In a further developed morality, a person obeys the law realizing that doing so brings about an ordered society. In both instances, a person realizes that total unlicensed freedom is not an option.

Through so many venues, we hear of the freedom of the individual. In our media, courts and various writings, we are bombarded with the message that individual freedom is the ultimate criterion for a free society. Each person is supposed to set personal morality based on individual needs and choices as long as those choices do not harm anyone. Hence, we hear phrases such as "victimless crimes" and "personal morality."

For people of faith, we realize that a morality based merely on individual needs and

feelings cannot be labeled a moral system. After the death of Pope John Paul II, in a homily to the Cardinals gathered to elect his successor, then-Cardinal Ratzinger spoke of the “dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.”

Since his election as Pope Benedict XVI, he has spoken many times about the tendency of our modern society to resist embracing the fact that we are given moral laws that bind us as a people to God and one another. In another way, in a college commencement address, Ted Koppel reminded the graduates that God gave to us the Ten Commandments and not the “Ten Suggestions.”

Here lies our challenge as followers of Jesus. We realize the freedom that is ours as citizens of the United States. We know the call of Jesus to live the Gospel message and the responsibility that he entrusts to us, His Church. How do we reconcile the freedom that is ours and the responsibility that comes with living that freedom? At times, it may seem impossible. But Jesus certainly does give us the way to live true freedom with responsibility for our actions.

The false notion of freedom that is license to “do what each one wants or feels” leads to an enslavement that finds a person trapped by his or her own feelings or desires. Jesus calls us to a morality that involves reflection, self-awareness and consciousness of the needs of others and the good of all. Our Faith calls us to live as a people who have meaning because of the Gospel and the freedom that Jesus gives to us in His own death and resurrection. It is not the freedom given to us by the world, but the responsible freedom that Jesus gives that allows us to live with meaning, happiness and purpose. True freedom always entails responsibility for our lives and the lives of others. It is the way Jesus lived and died, showing us the way to life forever with our God.

This is the second in a series of articles for the fall six-week session of Why Catholic?