

# Red Mass - Archdiocese of Baltimore

## **Our Need for the Holy Spirit's Guidance**

I stand before you as the U.S. bishops' point person on religious liberty; I lead a committee comprised of bishops & lay experts (including lawyers) that seeks to offer the Church's teaching on religious freedom in the context of a nation where that freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, while also pointing out current challenges to religious freedom. This isn't the time or place to describe those challenges in detail; suffice it to say that they include areas such as employment, licensure, accreditation, and even free speech and assembly. Yes, I'm glad to celebrate this Red Mass with you, because I need the Holy Spirit's help as much or more than you do - so please pray for me and my colleagues!

Indeed, dear friends, in one way or another, all of us are about defending freedom. You may or may not be directly involved in constitutional law but you carry out your daily work with the conviction that we are a nation of laws that guarantees the fundamental freedoms which many people take for granted. Thus, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we might ask the question: How should we understand the God-given gift of freedom? What is it for? And how should we use it? Let's first turn to Scripture for guidance.

## **"A New Heart and Spirit"**

In the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, God promises to give his people "a new heart & a new spirit." He promises to remove their "heart of stone" & give them instead "a heart of flesh." In place of hearts that are coldly indifferent to what is good and true, God pledges to renew his spirit within the hearts of his people so that they will freely obey his law and the good it embodies. This is how God helps his people to recover their humanity and their dignity. This is how God restores his people to their homeland, understood not as a geographic place, but as a space where the human spirit can soar.

In the reading from the Gospel according to St. John, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Usually we associate obedience to commands with

fear; but Jesus links love with obedience to his Word, his word of truth. It is as if he had said, 'Once you fall in love with me, you will willingly live as my disciples.' In his beautiful letter entitled *God Is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI taught that those who are in love come to "want the same thing and to reject the same thing": "the one becomes similar to the other, & this leads to a community of will & thought." The Trinity is, as it were, the original community of will and thought; and the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is the same Holy Spirit who enables us to see that falling in love with God is the highest and best use of our freedom. - Entering the orbit of God's life and love, we allow the Holy Spirit to bring our will into conformity with the divine will. Thus we will use our freedom to love God above all things and to love our neighbors as ourselves, wanting for them all that is true and good.

St. Paul takes this a step further in tonight's reading from Galatians by offering us a moral vision of what true freedom really is. It is freedom from the burdens brought upon us by the desires of the flesh, the captivity of a self-centered life, focused only on profit, power, and pleasure: It is freedom from sin - sin that always promises freedom and happiness but instead delivers servitude, loneliness, and bitterness. True freedom is living as Jesus' disciples in the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul describes this new life of freedom by listing the fruits of the Holy Spirit: 'Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'. Just to hear the enumeration of the fruits of the Holy Spirit stirs something deep in us, an inner voice that says, "*Yes, that is how I want to be! Yes, that is how I want to live!*"

### **Freedom of Indifference vs Freedom for Excellence**

Our Scripture readings, dear friends, give us a teaching on human freedom that is very different than the understanding of freedom in contemporary culture. Today many people regard freedom merely as 'freedom of choice' - "I am free to do whatever I want, so long as I don't bump up against the law." Some philosophers say that freedom is essentially formless; it is just the human power to choose one thing over another; sometimes this view is called "freedom of indifference". According to this account, freedom has no religious content and is bound by few if any fixed moral truths. Indeed, some believe that human freedom demands such moral relativism - and that those who claim otherwise are in fact the adversaries of freedom.

Not only is this view of human freedom dominant in popular culture, I am also told it tends to hold sway in the study and practice of constitutional law. Freedom of indifference coupled with moral relativism is thought to be the best way, and maybe the only way, to guarantee justice to all groups in society with their competing ideas, rights, and claims. Yet the law even in our diverse culture cannot long avoid the question of truth: the truth about who the human person is; what the source of human freedom is; and what brings about authentic human flourishing.

I mention all this in the fond hope and prayer that law and culture would not pursue moral relativism to such an extent that it ends up imposing it on churches, church institutions, families, and individuals. The state should not make it difficult for believers and their institutions of service to embrace and uphold fixed truths about human nature and dignity. Still less should it hamper them from proclaiming and living their faith in the workplace and in their service to the common good of the larger society.

Thus, in keeping with today's Scripture readings, another view of freedom emerges, sometimes termed "freedom for excellence". Returning to the prophet Ezekiel, we might say that our human hearts are meant for love, for friendship with God, a friendship in which we discover a way of life that is truly ennobling. In other words our freedom, though flawed, is naturally ordered toward God's love, and this puts us on a path of growing in excellence, that is, in all that is coherent, true, good, and indeed beautiful...in short, a life of virtue. At their best, church communities and sound families serve as a leaven to create a society where human dignity is respected & human flourishing fostered—what successive popes have called 'a civilization of truth and love.'

During Vatican II, as the text of the *Declaration on Religious Liberty* was debated, an Archbishop came from behind the Iron Curtain to proclaim these words: "Without truth there is no freedom." His name was Karol Wojtyla, the future St. John Paul II. In the end, he knew, moral relativism and indifference on the part of the state to certain fundamental truths about human nature and human dignity would inexorably lead to the abolition of freedom...not always through force but certainly by the imposition of the will of the stronger upon the weaker. Both St. John Paul II and President Abraham Lincoln would agree that "Freedom is not the right to do what

we want, but what we ought.” This is the enduring freedom, upon which our nation was founded, the enduring freedom that serves as a beacon of hope for the world.

### **Conclusion: Apostolate of Personal Influence**

This evening I proposed a theme and you’ve been very kind to give me a hearing. But what is the practical good of these ideas? If you are working on wills and titles every day or in corporate law or presiding over a courtroom – what can you do about any of this?

It’s not for me to say, except to propose a concluding thought: May I respectfully suggest that in your daily work you exercise what Blessed John Henry Newman called “the apostolate of personal influence”? This includes using your personal freedom for excellence, i.e., living the link between freedom and truth, freedom and moral responsibility. It includes advancing moral truth in your daily work on behalf of the law and supporting wholeheartedly those intermediate structures of society that are essential for defending human freedom and dignity: families, churches, and other institutions that serve the common good. With the quiet and courageous integrity of a St. Thomas More you can help influence your family members, colleagues, and friends to understand more deeply the God-given gift of religious liberty. Our country and our society will be better off for it! Thank you for listening! May God bless you and keep you always in His love.