

Religious Freedom in the Year of Mercy

I. Introduction: The Year of Mercy

A. Pope Francis has set aside this year as a time of special grace, a Year of Mercy. It is not merely a special program meant to be implemented for twelve months and then forgotten. No, the Pope is using this Jubilee Year of Mercy to call our attention to something very fundamental in our lives of faith, indeed the lens through which believing disciples must see themselves, the Church, and the world. Nothing is more fundamental than God's mercy, indeed, mercy is God's Name.

B. With that in mind, you have asked me to speak about religious freedom in the Year of Mercy. Mercy and freedom are the same realities no matter when they are discussed but this Year of Mercy presents us with a graced opportunity to see the most fundamental of our freedoms, religious freedom, through the prism of God's mercy and compassion. What light does God's mercy shed upon our freedoms, especially religious freedom? How does divine mercy shed light on the exercise of our freedom as individuals? How does it illuminate the freedom that a just society should recognize as regards the Church's life of faith, worship, and service? How does mercy make clear the fundamental importance of intermediate structures in society, such as the family, churches, schools? And finally, where does mercy lead us as we strive to create a more just and peaceful world? Such are the questions I will deal with in the remarks that follow.

II. "The Face of God's Mercy"

A. Let us first spend a moment reflecting on the Year of Mercy itself. In the ministry of Pope Francis, joy and mercy go hand in hand. The joy of the Gospel is the proclamation of the Good News of God's mercy. Jesus Christ is the "face" of the Father's mercy – he reveals the tender mercies of the heart of God by his preaching, his miracles of healing, and above all, his death and resurrection. In Jesus, the Father who is 'rich in mercy' bends down in compassion to heal the wounds of

human existence caused by sin and injustice while lifting us up so that we might enjoy his friendship now and for all eternity.

B. Mercy has nothing to do with making good and evil interchangeable or merely a matter of opinion. Mercy is not cover for wrongdoing or a mere palliative for the conscience. In mercy truth and love travel together, they are inseparable. Mercy without truth is a cruel deception and mercy without love is a shadow of itself.

C. Nor is God's mercy an exercise in wishful thinking or self-deception; on the contrary, it is the most really real reality that lies at the heart of human existence and the redemption Christ won for us. It is accessed by the preaching of God's word which is not merely an exposition of ideas about God's word but rather a proclamation filled with the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit. It is accessed above all by the Sacraments of the Church, most especially the Sacrament of Mercy, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which always involves that moment of coming face to face with our sins, opening ourselves to the possibility of seeing ourselves, at least to some extent, as God sees us.

D. We are not merely on the receiving end of mercy. If God's mercy really finds a home in our hearts, then we will be not only recipients of mercy but also agents of mercy. We will be agents of reconciliation in a world marred by religious persecution, and agents of compassion in a world of broken relationships. Pope Francis is particularly insistent in calling upon all church institutions (such as parishes, schools, social service agencies) not to be inward looking (self-referential) but rather structures that see the world through the lens of God's mercy and thus place their resources at the service of the alienated and the needy. We see this in his request that every parish take in a Middle Eastern refugee family. We see it in his insistence that Catholic social service agencies not be mere NGO's but rather points of access of Christ's mercy through services delivered in a spirit of faith by those who share the faith precisely as witnesses to Christ's love and mercy. Pope Francis speaks about the family, especially in *Amoris Laetitia*, as a special sanctuary of God's mercy, a privileged place where mercy is received and mercy is shared under the watchful eye of faithful parents.

E. I will refer to these same points as I seek to show how the Year of Mercy sheds

light on the struggle to protect religious liberty. The dimensions of the Year of Mercy, as I have briefly outlined them, will help us better understand how we are to cherish and live our freedoms as individuals, as a church, a nation and a society.

III. Compassion for the Persecuted

A. Let us turn to the Year of Mercy and religious persecution around the world. Most people do not know that we live in an age of martyrs. The 20th century was history's bloodiest and many died for their faith. The 21st century is also very much a time of martyrdom. Let us never forget the Images of those young men who, because of their Christian faith, were about to be beheaded by ISIS. Let us keep in our minds and hearts the many Christians in the Middle East who have been dispossessed, uprooted, and herded off into exile, with their churches burned and their heritage all but destroyed. While some scholars try to sanitize the notion of jihad - reducing it to a holy struggle for self-improvement, there can be no doubt that adherents to radical Islam are committing monstrous crimes in the name of religion.

B. I had the privilege of meeting with the Melkite Archbishop of Aleppo, Archbishop Jean Clément Jeanbart, as well as bishops and priests who serve places like Mosul and Erbil. We cannot imagine the suffering that has been inflicted on some of the most ancient Christian communities of the world in Syria, Iran, and Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. It was only recently that the State Department was convinced, largely through the efforts of the Knights of Columbus, to declare the violence against these Christians as genocide.

C. In this Year of Mercy we commend these victims to the Lord. Their fundamental rights and freedoms have been flagrantly violated. We ask that the Lord protect them but we must also insist that our government do more to assist them, even as our Church reaches out to these communities and individuals. The Knights of Columbus have raised more than \$10 million dollars to assist; The USCCB and parishes around the United States have been generous and the Order of the Holy Sepulcher is working to preserve Christianity in the Middle East. Aid to the Church in Need, Caritas, CRS, CNEWA, and other church-relief agencies are present and active in the region, but as the refugee crisis in Europe painfully illustrates, the problems are massive.

D. Let us also pay close attention to the meaning of what we see. In the Middle East and elsewhere in the world, we glimpse what societies without religious freedom look like. We are witnessing in those places not only physical violence but also the inflicting of deep spiritual wounds upon communities and individuals. We see that once religious freedom disappears, that freedom which pertains to our first and highest relationship, viz., with God, how human dignity suffers and how communities disintegrate. It should be an object lesson for those of us in the West who by and large are complacent about the sometimes-subtle erosion of religious freedom. Without religious freedom, a merciless society emerges from the shadows. While in the West we may suffer from what Pope Francis calls “polite persecution”, carried out largely in courtrooms, boardrooms, legislatures, and government agencies, not to mention venues such as cocktail parties and dinner parties, we too are becoming a merciless society. It was well described by the late Francis Cardinal George of Chicago as “a society that permits everything but forgives nothing.”

E. Yet another point is apropos to the question of religious persecution and mercy. In the Gospel of Saint Matthew Jesus challenges us: “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors” (5:44). We should be outraged at the killing of the innocent because of their faith but not filled with the same kind of hatred which motivated such violence. We should be aware of the polite persecution that is underway in our culture and willing to call it, as Pope Francis did, by its proper name – but not filled with the same sort of intolerance that is directed our way. Rather, we who are recipients of a most radical mercy on the part of the God “who died for us while we were yet sinners” (Rom. 5:8) – we are called to love those who persecute us, both at home and abroad. The Year of Mercy is not akin to “the softer side” of the Church. It calls for us to engage in the difficult spiritual discipline of loving those we do not like, of loving those who hate us, aware as we are that in the end it is only Mercy that will triumph.

IV. Mercy and Wounded Freedom

A. Next, let us turn our attention to God’s mercy and our own wounded freedom. Indeed, salvation history itself is about the healing of our freedom. Here I would recall the teaching of the II Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*). It sees religious freedom as deeply rooted in human nature,

created in God's image and likeness and endowed with reason and free will (DH, 2). God created us so that we could freely accept his love and friendship and experience the fullness of joy by reflecting his love in our relationship with him and in our relationships with others. Further, God endowed us with the conscience, described elsewhere by the II Vatican Council as "man's most secret core, his sanctuary," wherein he discovers "a law which he has not laid upon himself but most obey." And indeed, the dignity of the human person lies in obeying that law. The Council Fathers go on to say: "Through loyalty to conscience Christians are joined to other persons in the search for truth and the right solution to so many moral problems which arise both in the life of individuals and social relationships" (GS, 16).

B. Alas, our freedom is wounded. Many church doctrines are constantly being called into question but one for which there is abundant empirical evidence is original sin! While God created us to be good and endowed us with his gifts, we are nonetheless also flawed at the core of our being. Introduced into our hearts is a propensity for evil, an attraction to wrongdoing, inner headwinds against embracing that which is coherent, true, good, and beautiful. If memory serves, I think we call this concupiscence! And this original wound in human existence is daily ratified, if I may say so, in countless acts, big and small, that constitute a misuse of our freedom, and thus a degradation of our dignity. No age cherishes freedom more and abuses it more than ours. Often we reduce our freedoms to "freedom of choice" – the nearly unfettered ability to do what we want so long as it's legal and so long as no one gets hurt (or seems to get hurt).

C. This includes religious freedom. While the United States remains by and large a believing society, a growing number of people are settling for a style of life that marginalizes God, a way of living in which God and the things of God don't really count. Some continue a cultural attachment to an organized religion but many others have opted to list themselves as "nones" – those who claim to be "spiritual but not religious" and who not to belong to a church and seldom if ever go to church. Indeed, we have seen weekly Mass attendance drop from an all-time high of about 75% of registered parishioners in 1958 to something in the neighborhood of 25% today. When asked why they don't attend Mass regularly, many rank church attendance lower than other things they deem to priorities, such as sporting events, work and school, and family activities. Others will say it's because they don't find

Mass meaningful and still others have issues with the Church and its leadership. Some researchers would classify Catholics on a continuum that includes 1) angry and disaffected Catholics; 2) occasional Catholics; 3) conflicted Catholics; 4) comfortable parishioners; 5) missionary disciples.

D. Various factors are at play in this emerging pastoral situation. As pastors we have to take responsibility for a goodly part of this situation the conditions for which has been created by scandal, poor preaching, and lack of engagement with parishioners and their needs – thus Pope Francis’ famous saying that priests and bishops should acquire “the smell of the sheep.” As fewer people practice the faith, the culture becomes more secular and as the culture becomes more secular still fewer people are inclined to practice their faith precisely because it is counter-cultural. As the phenomenon continues to feed on itself, religious freedom begins to take a back seat to other so-called freedoms, and religious freedom is rendered politically and judicially vulnerable. Among the most significant of those so-called freedoms is sexual freedom. When people lose interest in the Church or claim to have issues with the Church, it oftentimes has to do with the Church’s teachings on sex and marriage: contraception, sterilization, abortion, same-sex marriage, LGBT issues. Some have walked away in protest but many have just faded away without a real understanding of what the Church actually teaches and why. In such matters, silence has not been golden.

E. Opting for a life that is increasingly devoid of an active relationship with God and lacking participation in the life of the Church – evinces a wounded freedom. Opting for addictions to drugs and pornography or illicit sexual relationships in order to fill that “hole” in the depth of being – evinces a wounded freedom. Allowing one’s life of faith just to fade away without any conscious decision while substituting other activities, good in themselves, evinces a wounded freedom. Pope Francis teaching on mercy avoids scolding us for such things but he does invite us to consider the depth of God’s love for us and the healing power of that love in our lives and relationships. He invites us to open our hearts to Christ, “the face of the Father’s mercy” and speaks of all the many ways God’s gentle but effective mercy is available to us. He urges us not to be afraid of God’s mercy or imagine that our sins will frighten God. Instead, surrounded by merciful love, we are enabled to face our ourselves as we truly are. Pope Francis encourages us to go against the grain of a culture that often

is anything but merciful, especially toward the poor, sick, and vulnerable. “It is time to return to the basics,” he writes, “and to bear the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters. “Mercy,” he adds, “is the force that awakens us to new life and instills in us the courage to look to the future with hope” (MV, 10).

F. It is God’s mercy that heals our wounded freedom by which we choose anyone and anything except his friendship, whether it’s an outright rejection of God or a long-term attitude of indifference. Mercy gives us the courage to respond freely to God’s offer of love and to do so not merely privately but publicly and in the company of others. Indeed, it is the reconciling power of God’s love that enables us to exercise not freedom of indifference but freedom for excellence, to use the phrase of a renowned moral theologian, Fr. Servais Pinkaers, or, in the words of II Vatican, to claim “the excellence of freedom”. The excellence of freedom of religion is exercised by a sincere search for God and by seeking to attain the fullness of God’s love in one’s life. Our dignity requires us to be driven by blind impulses or by external constraint. Rather, we gain our dignity when, “ridding [ourselves] of all slavery to the passions, [we press] forward toward [our] goal by willfully choosing what is good...” (GS, 16). “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1), St. Paul wrote, and this is the indispensable condition for experiencing ‘the joy of the Gospel’. Let me add that we should not look upon the Church’s teachings as unmerciful, including and especially those that pertain to human sexuality. As we survey the results of the sexual revolution all around us, we see that the widespread rejection of biblical and natural law teachings on sexuality has not reaped a harvest of happiness and joy; instead, we have reaped the whirlwind (cf. Hos. 8:7). The Year of Mercy is a time to allow God in his compassion through the Sacrament of Mercy to heal our wounded freedom. Indeed without taking this step we will be less credible witnesses to the importance of religious freedom at home and abroad.

G. Freedom, of course, is wounded not only by one’s personal sin but also by what is called “structural sin” or “structures of sin” – Always the cumulative result of personal sins, these structures of sin are social situations and institutions that are contrary to God’s goodness and lead their victims to commit evil (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1869; U.S. Catechism for Adults, p. 331). Massive peer pressure via the social media that affects the thinking and decisions of young people, the more localized disapproval of our sophisticated friends, broad cultural

disapproval of religion, especially non-deconstructed Christianity, the exclusion of faith from almost all public institutions, including schools, laws, court decisions, and policies that seek to manage and put limits on religion... these constitute in a free society what Pope Francis calls “polite persecution”. They create social situations and shape the life of our institutions in which it is more likely that we will de-value religious freedom or exercise this fundamental freedom wrongly. Just because this polite persecution is bloodless, we should not imagine that it is victimless. These structures of sin contribute to the inflicting of deep spiritual wounds in the hearts and minds of many people, maybe even ourselves!

H. One of the places where the structures of sin are most active is in the destruction, marginalization, or overturning of what are called “intermediate” structures in contemporary society. These are those structures that stand between the power of the state and the individual conscience. They include above all the family which should be the first school of goodness, virtue, prayer, and mercy; but also many smaller, community based organizations such as parishes, schools, Christian clubs in universities and charities. The principle of subsidiarity teaches and experience confirms that these institutions are vital for human flourishing. It is in these smaller, more local settings and institutions that our freedoms are exercised, that virtue is gained, and that people find their own dignity and, if you will, their niche in life. Yet it is these same institutions that are under assault today. We have only to think about the arbitrary redefinition of marriage and family or anti-family welfare and relief policies. As these intermediate structures either disappear or come under the direct control of the government, our society becomes less merciful and more impersonal, less apt to be a setting for human flourishing.

I. So, fighting to defend religious liberty is not merely a matter of policy and law; it is, rather, part of the struggle to create those conditions in which the mercy of God can touch the inmost hearts of people who are being carried along by the rapid current of contemporary culture. Defending religious freedom is indeed “a work of mercy”.

V. Freedom for a Church of Mercy

A. As movingly as Pope Francis writes about our personal need for mercy, he also

teaches quite clearly that for God's mercy to hit home, to have a real place in our hearts and a healing effect in our lives, we must be not only the recipients of mercy but also its agents. Even as we plead for mercy, we must be willing to extend God's mercy to others, certainly in our relationship with family, loved ones, and colleagues, but also in our attitude toward the poor and the needy. Having received God's mercy, we are obliged to share his mercy with others. This we do in ways that are very personal, especially through practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Yet, from the beginning, as Pope Benedict XVI demonstrated in *Deus Caritas Est*, the Church has been an agent of mercy through its organized charity; it has sought to engage in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy writ large.

B. In almost every diocese, Catholic Charities is the largest source of charitable and social services. Think too of the Catholic schools that serve devastated urban neighborhoods, Catholic hospitals which continue to provide massive sums of uncompensated care, and a host of other charitable services at the parish level. Indeed, the Church and her ministries are "Exhibit A" when it comes to those intermediate structures that stand between the power of government and the individual conscience. And while, like any institution, church institutions are not perfect, the Church nonetheless remains and is called to be more a beacon of mercy... or to use the Pope's memorable phrase "a field hospital". In that same vein, the Pope has called upon Church charities not to be mere NGO's - private extensions of governmental programs. Instead we are called to bring the mercy and compassion of Christ to all these ministries that seek to care for the most vulnerable among us.

C. A prime example of such ministries is the Little Sisters of the Poor. As you know, they serve the elderly poor in some twenty-six homes spread throughout the United States, including Baltimore. Founded 175 years ago by St. Jean Jugan, they trust radically in Providence of God and root their care for the poor, the sick, and the dying in their unwavering hope for eternal life. If you want to go to God with every reason to hope in your salvation, you can't do better than to be surrounded by the Little Sisters at the hour of death.

D. Yet it is these very institutions which, at the present time, are experiencing the severest threats to their religious liberty. This is illustrated by the struggle of the Little Sisters of the Poor against the HHS mandate to include in their employee

health insurance plans so-called “services” at odds with Catholic teaching, including abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization, contraception, and reproductive counseling for young daughters of their employees. The current accommodation requires them to sign a form indicating their objections, a form which also functions as authorization for the government to hijack their benefits plan to make it the delivery vehicle for the very things they object to. And you wondered what all the fuss is about!

E. Let us be clear what religious freedom means. It does not merely mean the freedom to escape cooperation with evil by the skin of one’s teeth – but rather the space necessary to create in our institutions a culture of life, a culture that respects the teachings of the faith that inspires and shapes the charitable, social, and educational services we are providing. The teachings themselves, to repeat, embody the mercy of a Savior who came to bring us a truth that would set us free; the institutions that are under challenge are places of mercy that seek to bring the healing balm of truth, love, and human skill to the spiritual, emotional, and physical wounds of human existence, to be indeed the “field hospital” amid a culture where many are wounded daily. Were we merely to collapse under the weight of the pressure we face and allow our institutions ‘to go along to get along’ ... we would not be serving the cause of mercy but quite the opposite.

VI. Conclusion

A. So let me conclude by thanking all of you who carry forward the mission of the Institute for Psychological Services. You effectively address deep emotional and psychological wounds with a well-formed sense of human dignity both natural and supernatural and you seek to form professionals who will restore in those they serve a true sense of freedom that opens them in love to God and to others. Your work has improved the lives of many individuals and families but also priests as well as religious sisters and brothers. For this I thank you for yours is a work at the service of both freedom and mercy.

B. I am therefore humbled to have had the privilege of offering a few thoughts on the relationship of religious freedom to the Year of Mercy and I ask God to bless us all and keep us always in his love. Thank you!