

# The many faces of freedom

I can do many things that God cannot, namely sins. I am not bragging that I can be blasphemous, while God cannot; it's actually an ignoble distinction. Rather, this reality illustrates an important point about freedom. God is perfectly free, yet He is unable to do any evil actions. Resolving this apparent contradiction reveals a lot about the true nature of freedom.

So, how do we square God's incapacity of doing certain actions with His absolute freedom? For many individuals, freedom is the ability to do as one pleases without any restrictions. Catholics have a narrower view of freedom, limiting it to the capacity to do what is right. God's inability to sin is, therefore, not a check on His freedom, but an integral aspect of it.

On a societal level, Catholics would insist that a free country is not based on a government without laws, but a government with good laws. For instance, a society that allows murderers to go unpunished is not free. Instead, a free society demands that murderers be punished for their transgressions. One can only imagine that a society without any rules would be chaotic, not liberating.

Doing as one pleases without thought of right or wrong is equally damaging for individuals. Instead of being guided by a moral compass, many people are controlled by short temporary urges. This form of motivation leads one to place physical gratification above goodness and is the cause of many people losing control of their lives to addictions, their wills completely subjected to whims and wants.

I recently read the story of a 21-year-old man from Florida who was addicted to an online video game. Living alone, he suffered from depression and had mental health issues. The video game soon trumped all aspects of his life: his family, his work, his friends, and even his desire to live; and soon he was playing the game for up to 12 hours a day. Possibly triggered by a mishap in the game, he took his life. His mother offered a profound remark: "It's like all addictions, either you die, go insane or you quit. My son died."

Addictions are everywhere. The traditional dependences on alcohol, drugs, food, and

sex are still prevalent, but new technologies – television, the internet, and smartphones – have enabled more impulsive behavior and provide dangerous avenues for addictions. According to one study, the average teen consumes 11 hours of media every day, barely leaving time for anything else but school and sleep. Psychologists in 2007 defined a new condition: FAD (Facebook Addiction Disorder), with current estimates projecting that 350 million people suffer from this disorder, and a disturbing report from the UK found a million children aged seven to 12 addicted to Facebook. Still more alarming, the University of Montreal attempted to compare men who watched pornography with those who did not, but they had to alter their study when they could not find any male college students who had never viewed pornography. These few anecdotes reveal that new phones, computers and tablets have a tight grip on their operators, making it hard for them to put their devices down and to not incessantly peek at the screen.

Oddly, in a society that prides itself on being free, so many individuals are enslaved to addictions. The problem stems from our society's enshrinement of a false freedom, sometimes referred to as license, which is the ability to do whatever one wants to do, forgetting certain actions are right and others are wrong.

With the church entangled in a very public debate on religious freedom, the concept is very much on everyone's mind. During the course of this dispute, Catholics must remember the distinction between freedom and license. The HHS mandate is not a violation of freedom because it limits the ability to do a certain religious action. If a faith practiced something morally wrong (think pre-Columbian human sacrifice), it would be right to prohibit that religious practice. When debating against the mandate, it would be very easy to win by appealing to license, as many Americans believe restrictions are inherently wrong, but Catholics should not concede the general debate on freedom in order to win one battle. Even though the struggle will be more difficult, we must discuss the rightness and wrongness of the services guaranteed by the mandate in addition to dealing with the question of freedom.

Another overlooked point is that the debate is not so much about freedom as the hierarchy of rights. The current dispute is not about the ability to use contraception or abortion-inducing drugs. The church lost that debate decades ago. Moreover, individuals can freely select where they work and if they do not like the insurance

plan, they can freely leave. The church's position in no way limits freedom, regardless of how it is defined. Thus, the argument does not position the freedom of one group (religious employers) versus another group (women employees), but it asks which right is more essential.

Modern society has witnessed a proliferation of new rights, many are welcome but some are absurd. In effect, the HHS mandate is asserting a new right, claiming that all women are entitled to free contraception paid for by their employer. The legitimacy of this right is a discussion for another time, but more pressing is the mandate's contention that this new right supersedes religious freedom, specifically, religious employers' right to follow their own moral teachings. I imagine every politician would be reluctant to publically endorse this new hierarchy of rights, placing religious freedom toward the bottom, thereby contradicting the fundamental principles of this country.

The HHS mandate and the current Fortnight of Freedom campaign provide Catholics with an opportunity to learn more about the meaning of freedom. It is important to know the terms of the debate to be a good representative of the church, but it is also an apt time to examine our lives. Are we truly free, or are we slaves to our impulses? How easily can we turn off the computer, silence the phone, or put down the bottle? Freedom is an essential element of the Bill of Rights and the current political debate, but it also has a religious dimension that is a vital part of our daily lives.