

FORTNIGHT FOR FREEDOM

[This is not a homily on the Documents of Vatican II, but is a companion piece to the previous homily on Dignitatis Humanae.]

As we gather for Mass today, we are still in the midst of the Fortnight for Freedom – a two-week period ending with the Fourth of July, during which the bishops of our country are asking us to reflect on the importance of religious freedom, and to commit ourselves to work and pray for the maintenance of religious freedom in this country – so that we, as Catholics – will remain able to take full part in the civil life of our nation without being compelled to act against our religious or moral principles.

We are in the midst of the Fortnight for Freedom, so naturally, my attention was drawn to Second Reading of today's Mass, where St Paul talks about freedom.

There is one sentence in that reading that many of our fellow citizens today would hardly be able to understand.
It is this:

*For you were called for freedom, brothers and sisters.
But do not use this freedom
as an opportunity for the flesh . . .*

“What are you saying?

Don't use freedom as an opportunity for the flesh?

Then what's it for?

That's exactly why we want freedom . . . so that we can indulge our appetites!”

Apparently, the Christian vision of freedom is somewhat different from that of our culture.

So what do we mean by freedom . . . if it doesn't mean the ability to satisfy my appetites at will?

At the beginning of the same reading, St Paul also says this:

*Brothers and sisters:
For freedom Christ set us free;
so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.*

We call Jesus “the Lord.”

We believe that we must listen to His voice and obey him.

What does it mean to say that Christ has set us free?

And how would someone take upon himself the yoke of slavery?

Our traditional understanding of this point comes from a word of Jesus in the Gospels:

“Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. – John 8:34

Many of us in church today have experienced how this works: a sin becomes habitual and a vice, and we are no longer entirely free . . . that vice has us in its power; we are no longer free; we are a slave to it.

To be free, for a Christian, means to have a will that is not impaired by bad habits and vices. It means being able to do what we want to do at our best . . . to do the good we aspire to do.

There a passing reference to this at the end of today’s epistle as well, where St. Paul says:

*For the flesh has desires against the Spirit,
and the Spirit against the flesh . . .
so that you may not do what you want.*

When we sin, we risk becoming “slaves of sin.”

But someone who has a vice . . . or even a couple . . . might still be living a reasonably ordered life, falling down in one or another particular area.

That can be bad.

But today, we see something far, far worse.

Today we see people who do not just have a vice or two, but who have almost no “impulse control.”

Such people are unable to do anything they don’t feel like doing at any given moment.

They are unable to say no to any impulse, any appetite, any emotion that comes at any given moment.

Living that way is a good way to go to jail; or to get shot.

The fact is: that kind of “freedom” is just not sustainable;
It will get you jailed or killed.

So maybe that isn’t exactly what freedom means.

Maybe St. Paul and the Lord and the Church have something to teach us about freedom.

And one more point.

in our time, we actually see a very poor understanding of freedom carried even further –

the notion that I should not only be free to do whatever I want,

but that I should be free of the consequences of my actions.

This is what is at stake in “Plan B” and in many sins against life.

And there was an outstanding example of this attitude toward consequences in the news a couple of weeks ago.

A man named Orlando Shaw from Nashville, TN.

You probably don’t remember the name, but you might remember the story.

He has fathered 22 children by 14 women, and is supporting none of them.

He says, “I love my kids and I could (not) care less what anybody else thinks about it.”

There it is!

“I am going to satisfy my appetites when and how I like. No one has any right to say anything about it, and I can’t be held responsible for the consequences.

I can’t be made to support those children because I don’t have any money.”

A few generations ago, Mr Shaw couldn’t have got away with that . . .

After doing that to a couple of young women, the father or brother of one of them would have shot him!

Today, fathers and brothers are not so outraged . . . in part, because the children (the poor children! It’s not their fault!) become wards of the State.

So the consequences of Mr Shaw’s actions don’t come crashing down on him. The State takes up the slack.

But the consequences don’t go away.

The consequences will come crashing down.

As far as I can see, the system itself will come crashing down.

That vision of what freedom means is just not sustainable over time.

No society is rich enough to subsidize that attitude for long.

And that system shouldn’t be sustainable . . .

. . . because the life that it produces is not really one worthy of a human being.

To do as our appetites urge . . .

To do as we please at any moment and be free of the consequences . . .

this is not what a Christian means by freedom.

So what does freedom mean for us?

Let’s go back for a moment to those words of St Paul:

For freedom Christ set us free,

What does that mean exactly . . . beyond our not being slaves of sin?

In the first place, St Paul is talking about our being freed from the Old Law, the Law of Moses.

We no longer need to be obsessed with hundreds of ritual prescriptions. The New Law that Christ has given us is quite simple:

Love God above all things;
And love your neighbor as yourself.

As long as you are loving God by trying to obey His will, and loving your neighbor as yourself – trying to do what is good for others as eagerly as you do what is good for yourself – you have a great freedom to do as you like. You may use your own creativity and talents to do any kind of good thing for the glory of God and the good of others.

Also, in the ancient context, St Paul was speaking about Christians being freed from fear.

There is a famous passage about this in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

[Christ came to] destroy the one who has the power of death . . . and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life. – Hb 2:14-15

In the ancient world, it was not so uncommon to live as a slave of fear:

fear of fate . . .
fear of vengeful gods . . .

That's no so much our problem today . . .
Not many people feel themselves to be slaves of fear.

But people do feel like slaves, I think.

Many people live with the feeling that demands are put on them from every side

The boss demands this . . .
The cops are after me about some problem on my vehicle . . .
I owe back taxes because of this other problem . . .
The girlfriend is hassling me to do that . . .

I just have demands coming at me from every direction, and I'm just tired of being hassled to do everything that everyone else is demanding.

So how does a Christian avoid feeling like a slave in the midst of all the demands of modern life?

The answer is found back in those two Great Commandments:

Love God above all things, and your neighbor as yourself.

I am capable of working very, very hard without complaint . . .
And without feeling like a slave . . . ***if I am doing it for love.***

What mother doesn't work hard to take care of her children? . . . seeing to
their endless needs.

What good father doesn't work hard to support his family?
But mothers and fathers are doing that for love, and they do not resent it.
They are happy that they are able to do it.

That is freedom.

That is what freedom means to us as Christians:
the ability to do the right thing, for love.

That does not make me feel like a slave; that brings me joy.

This is the freedom for which the Church stands.

But that is something that is just not understood in our culture.

Go out on the street and ask ten people here in Madison . . .
I wouldn't be surprised if half of them will say that the Catholic Church is the
greatest enemy of freedom in our country today.

Nothing could be further from the truth.
That is the opposite of the truth.

The Church is one of the last voices speaking in favor of the ordered liberty
with makes freedom sustainable.

When we Catholics insist on religious liberty –
on the freedom from coercion so that we may act in accord with our religious
and moral convictions –
we're not just doing that for our own sake.
We believe that we are doing a great service to all our fellow citizens.

We are pointing to a vision of freedom that would allow this country – which
we love – to survive.

Msgr Kevin Holmes
Cathedral Parish
Madison, Wisconsin

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