

THE QUESTION OF “FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE” **DECLARATION** **OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VATICAN II**

INTRODUCTION: A Parable

Reception That Never Was

The skies grew dark, mid day turned night, the gale blew, the clouds broke loose and a deluge flooded the earth. The waters of the river swelled, the city became a lake, and people in a panic flew.

Then one of the citizens fell into the swirling waters he was getting drowned. Pitifully, he cried for help. People watched helplessly; no one could summon the courage to save him.

Then, all of a sudden, a courageous young man jumped into the turbulent waters. There was a hush among the bystanders.

The savior came close to the drowning man. Holding each other they strove to keep afloat. To their good luck, the current brought down a piece of wood. Both of them clung to it for dear life. People held their breath. Then, on the nick of time, the fire brigade reached the spot. With difficulty they managed to bring both men from sure death to life. As our men reached the bank, there was a sigh of relief and thunderous clap.

Some weeks later, the Mayor of the town arranged for a Civic Reception to honor the man who risked his life to save one of his fellow citizens. All the Corporators and other dignitaries were present at the reception. The Mayor gave a vibrant speech praising the courageous hero who displayed such great valor and love for his neighbor.

He then called him to the mike. Before garlanding him, the Mayor interviewed him before the large audience. “My dear friend”, he asked, “could you tell us what gave you the courage to jump into a sure death to save an unknown citizen?” The savior hesitated for a while and fumbling for words replied: “Sir, would you mind if honesty I tell the whole truth?” “Of course,” the Mayor said, “We shall be pleased to hear it”.

Then, the savior with a grimace in his face and in a sarcastic voice said: “Well, then, actually speaking, I did not jump into the water. Some bastard in the crowd pushed me from behind into the river.

“

Questioning ourselves:

Why was I baptized? Was I not pushed from the back into the water? Why do I go for mass, confession, communions, etc? Am I not pushed? Why am I Christian today?

Why am I doing what I do? Why? Why?

It is time for us to jump into the water on our own! It's time for us to start doing things on our own! To answer for ourselves, to be responsible, to take personal and sensible decisions

Are we not also pushing others from their backs? Our children? One another? Our pupils?
It is time to enable others to jump on their own, to use their hands. To teach them and help them how to be responsibly free.

We are made to be free: Dangers and opportunities of freedom:

- God made us to his own image and likeness: Intellect, love and free will.
- Only, that being limited and imperfect we can abuse our freedom and do wrong. God cannot!
- We can sin. We can do mistakes and “we do them”
- Freedom is an opportunity: It can be used , We can merit, we can please God, we can practice virtue, and holiness Heroism is possible...
- However, freedom is a danger: it can be misused... we can sin, crimes, injustices, wickedness are possible.
- By giving us freedom, God risked a lot! Yet, God wanted us to be his sons and daughters, not robots or creatures of instinct like the animals.
- We are free; therefore, we are answerable, responsible for our actions.
- Like God we have to let others free! We have to educate them to use their freedom, not to take their freedom away!
- We have to teach others how to walk on their own, not to push them from their backs.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE THE DECLARATION OF THE VATICAN II
ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

**The awareness of the dignity of the human person and his right to freedom of conscience
kept growing in the western world right from the inception of Christianity**

1. Jesus in his teachings and practice upheld the dignity of the Human person.
2. From the time the Gospel was preached, slowly, the idea of the worth and inviolability of the human person began taking roots in the conscience of society.
3. Later on, from the Renaissance, and much more after the French Revolution the socio-cultural values of the individuals and society quickly, shifted from:
 - The collectivity to the individual.
 - The absolute monarchy to democracy.
 - Centralism and regimentation to liberty.
 - Tolerance to acceptance.
 - Polemics to dialogue.
 - Privilege to equality
 - Law to conscience.
4. Finally the U.N. on Dec 10th 1948 adopted the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” based on the postulate of the dignity of the human person, and its right to be free.
5. The preamble to the declaration reads: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...”

6. The Catholic Church in the XX Century updated herself and wholeheartedly accepted the new shift of emphasis of modern culture about the dignity and freedom of the each human being.
7. At the Vatican II, the Church issued the Decree and Declaration on Religious Freedom. Namely, the right both, persons and communities have to be let free to follow their conscience in matters pertaining to religion.

BASIC IDEAS TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

FREEDOM

Freedom: What is it?

- Lack of constraints, restraints, restrictions, obstacles imposed on the way of acting of any human person.
- In a figurative way we could say no chains, no locks, no bars, no cages... A bird should not be encaged but free to fly.
- No force, violence, pressure, intimidation, threats should be imposed on any human person to make him act this way or that way.
- In a figurative way we could say no pushing, no kicking, and no flogging. The bird is neither forced to fly or not to fly.

Two Types of Freedom

PHYSICAL Freedom it is expressed by words like **I CAN. I AM ABLE.**
It implies **POSSIBLILITY, POTENCY. ABILITY.**

MORAL Freedom: It is expressed by words like: **I MAY, I AM ALLOWED, .**
It implies, **PERMISSION, AUTHORIZATION,** namely, No moral restraints,
It refers to the morality of the action, not to the capacity of the person to perform that action.

What freedom of Conscience is not

- ✓ Do as you wish, as you please, as you like.
- ✓ A free for all
- ✓ No moral constraints.
- ✓ Libertinage.
- ✓ Licentiousness.

Some slogans summarising what true freedom means:

One ting is what I can do, and quite another what I am allowed to do.
I may not be allowed, all I can.
What I do is limited by what I may do.
I am supposed to do only what I may.
Possibility does not equate morality.

CONSCIENCE:

Coscience, What is it?

Conscience is an inner INCLINATION, A CALL, A VOICE, within us that acts both:

AS A GUIDE:

Before we act, it tells us **what we may do and what we may not do.**

What we are allowed to do and what we are not allowed to do.

AS A JUDGE:

After we acted it tells us **whether we did what was morally right or wrong.**

It approves our actions or condemns them.

Types of conscience:

Good Conscience If we, in all honesty, act according to the voice of our conscience.

Bad Conscience If we act against the voice of our conscience.

Right Conscience When, what our conscience tells us to do, is truly the right thing to do.

Mistaken Conscience: When what our conscience tells us to do, is not the right thing to do.

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE:

- We have to be let free to do what our conscience tells us to do.
- No one may force us to do what our conscience tells us not to do, or stop us doing what our conscience tells us to do.
- We have to let others free to do what their conscience tells them to do even if we think that they are mistaken.
- Freedom of conscience presupposes that people act in good conscience.
- *(Jesus said: Judge not and you will not be judged*
- Freedom of conscience does not mean that we may do whatever we wish. It is just the opposite: Freedom of conscience means that we are always morally bound to do what our conscience tells us to do, no matter the consequences.

Limits of Freedom of Conscience.

- We may not do what impinges on people's rights, or on the good of others – The common good curtails our freedom.
- The highest of all moral imperatives is to love God and neighbor.
- Whatever goes against love goes against conscience.

Consequences:

1. We have always to do, not what we like but, but only what is right
2. What's right or wrong is finally revealed to us by our conscience.
3. God will judge us according to the conscience we had at the moment we acted.
4. We should always act in good conscience, never in bad conscience.
5. We might be acting on a mistaken conscience, yet God will never make it a sin for us.
6. In our actions and in our dealings with God the most important thing is **honesty to Him and to ourselves** - *To yourself be true.*
7. In the last instance, our relationship with God will always depend on how honest we have been to our conscience.
8. No one on earth, parents, government or any authority **may force us to do** anything against our conscience, nor **stop us doing what** our conscience tells us is the right thing to do.
9. We have to trust our conscience and have the courage to act on our own even at the risk of doing mistakes.
10. God wants us to use our intellect and our judgment in our decisions and actions.
11. We have, however, the obligation to find out what is right and what is wrong; thus, we have to question ourselves, ask others, study and reflect.
12. "Culpable ignorance" is no excuse for doing wrong..

Practical applications of the Doctrine of The Freedom of Conscience.

We have to be let free in all matters

1. Conversion
2. Evangelization
3. Salvation outside the church
4. Moral judgments on medical and marriage ethics.
5. Threats, punishments, discipline in upbringing our children.
6. Choice of Vocation. Ourselves and our Children.
7. Choice of partner in life.
8. Religious practices.
9. Reception of sacraments.
10. Non compliance with the laws of the Church and of government.
11. Religious, cultural pluralism.
12. Dialogue with other religions.
13. Education for "responsible freedom".
14. Relationships between Parents and children.
15. Relationships between authority and obedience.
16. "Conscientious objectors"
17. Dissent within existing structures. Church, Social and political.
18. Obligation to grow responsible, to search, to take decisions.
19. Freedom to make mistakes.
20. Courage to take responsibility of one's own life
21. Giving up manipulative practices in human relationships.
22. Acceptance of others, not just tolerance
23. Responsible freedom in all we do,

24. Away from compulsions and fears.
25. Ability to live in peace amidst ambiguity and doubt.
26. Taking responsibility for all we do.
27. No excuses, no rationalizations but, naked sincerity.

QUESTIONS OFTEN RAISED TODAY

1. We were baptized, confirmed, made to pray and go for Mass and confession without our consent when we were not yet able to use our freedom, so we could question, how free are we now regarding our religious affiliation and practices?
2. Parents and children relationships.
In keeping with our parental responsibilities how far are parents justified in deciding what their children should study, what profession to take, what their marriage partners should be, whether they should go for Sunday Mass, stopping them from marrying a non-Christian partner, etc. etc?
3. Many sects, cults, religious denominations and man-made Christian groups declare; that all those who do not join them are wrong and likely to be lost. . What are we to say about this “evangelization zeal”? Are they right or wrong? So they impinge on others’ rights?
4. Should we make converts? How? Should we preach the gospel? How? Why?

Appendix

Excerpts of The Declaration on Freedom of Conscience of Vatican II

. This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself.(2) This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.

It is in accordance with their dignity as persons—that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility—that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to this immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it and the exercise of this right is not to be impeded, provided that just public order be observed.

The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man ranks among the essential duties of government.⁽⁵⁾ Therefore government is to assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all its citizens, in an effective manner, by just laws and by other appropriate means.

Government is also to help create conditions favorable to the fostering of religious life, in order that the people may be truly enabled to exercise their religious rights and to fulfill their religious duties, and also in order that society itself may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men's faithfulness to God and to His holy will. ⁽⁶⁾

If, in view of peculiar circumstances obtaining among peoples, special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional order of society, it is at the same time imperative that the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom should be recognized and made effective in practice.

Finally, government is to see to it that equality of citizens before the law, which is itself an element of the common good, is never violated, whether openly or covertly, for religious reasons. Nor is there to be discrimination among citizens.

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