

“THE RIGHT TO BE WRONG”: VATICAN II AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

We Americans love our freedom! We also abuse that freedom. A key tenet of the Vatican Council II's *Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae, 2)* issued on 7 Dec. 1965 holds that “the human person has a right to religious freedom.” This implies that **coercive state power** ought not be put behind the truth claims of any religious body. Of course, the problem lies in one's interpretation of religious freedom. Some **key principles** are at stake. May one pursue religious freedom when this leads away from the truth? Is there a “right” to be wrong? It is a **complicated** question, but one that the Vatican II fathers did not want to skirt and one that engendered the fiercest debate. Many bishops from traditionally Catholic countries wanted to **preserve** the ideals of **Christendom**, an era during which church and state were joined at the hip.

Provided that the necessary freedoms of religious association are maintained, the Church does not endorse any particular political model, be it a monarchy, democracy, or constitutional republic. That said, all people “are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it.” (DH #1) We cannot justify our **ignorance** to truth if we do not use our God-given gifts to discover it. Similarly, one can speak of freedom of conscience if understood properly as a freedom from **being coerced** into submission against one's will. In his 1888 letter *Libertas* (para. #34), Pope Leo XIII rightly noted, “it is contrary to reason that **error** and truth should have equal **rights**.” In neither case may these freedoms be seen as endorsements of a movement away from the truth, or our duty to be formed in the mind of the Church.

It is understandable that Vatican II's teaching on religious liberty was a **bitter pill** to swallow for many, especially since it could appear to contradict earlier doctrine. Was this a change in teaching or merely a development of it? This seminal document took up **two** thorny issues: one dealing with the right of individuals and groups to religious freedom; the other, concerning the duties of the State toward religion. Fundamentally, as human beings we know that we are free. I recall feeling it viscerally the first time I **drove a car** solo at age 16. Just “me and the open road,” and there was **no feeling** quite like it! But God also gives us tremendous freedom. He respects the dignity of the human person and **invites us** to union with Him. But He does not force it. The **free act** of faith, by its very nature cannot be compelled.

The State has a compelling interest to protect the rights of her citizens; it is government's fundamental duty. When citizens conclude that their government has failed them, they fire back and “throw the bums out!” Vatican II taught that the State was **obliged** to protect the right of religious freedom, but it also **denied** that civil government had the authority to **command or prohibit** religious acts. The money line: “It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.” (DH, 3) This is because religion, by its nature, consists of “voluntary and free acts” by which we direct ourselves towards God. Thus, “No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind.” (DH, 3)

Such development of doctrine was **too much** for Archbishop Marcel **Lefebvre**, who would later separate himself from ecclesial communion with the Church. The document was passed by a vote of **2,308 to 70**. Historians could better explain the reasons of the 70 who voted *non placet*. They had principled objections, including fears that **apparent reversals** might signal that all was up for grabs doctrinally speaking. But note that the document also taught that it is legitimate for the

constitutional order of society to give **special recognition** to one religious body such as the Catholic Church. That was **not forbidden** by the Council. Rather, it is with respect to the other direction that it innovates. **Nowhere** does it state that there is a “**right**” to be wrong! “Wherefore every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means.”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, beautifully summarizes Catholic doctrine, explaining: “The right to religious liberty is neither a moral license to adhere to error, nor a supposed right to error, but rather a natural right of the human person to civil liberty, i.e., immunity, within just limits, from external constraint in religious matters by political authorities.” (CCC # 2108) Almost all societies are religiously pluralist—Vatican II recognized that fact. The establishment of religion becomes the **exception** rather than the **rule**. We are living in challenging times and in a very divided country. This is especially felt **every other fall** at the beginning of November! As we approach election day, the fundamental **freedom** we possess both to **seek and follow the truth** and follow our **conscience** is held, not in contradiction, but in dynamic tension.

- In this month of the **holy souls**, we pray for our beloved dead. Each daily and Sunday Mass has an intention, read aloud at the beginning of Mass. Please consider **arranging** for a Mass intention on significant days in their lives, e.g., the anniversary of death or birthday. You may stop by or call the Parish office at 651.228.1766 to arrange Masses.
- It was **150 years** ago yesterday (5 Nov. 1872) that **Susan B. Anthony** voted in the U.S. presidential election, resulting in the re-election of Ulysses S. Grant. For this, she was **arrested** and fined \$100. Thus began the long **struggle** for **women’s suffrage**, culminating in the passing of 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920.
- “Praemonitus, praemunitus”— “forewarned is forearmed.” Just a heads up—I will be seeking your help with defraying the cost of **heating fuel**. So far, the warm weather has cooperated. We all know this won’t last. Special envelopes are in your packets. They will soon also be available in the pews.
- Do you know what “Tuesday after the first Monday in November in even-numbered years” means? That’s right, **Election Day**. The first unified **presidential** Election Day was November 7, 1848. As contained in Title 2 Chapter 1 § 7 of the United States Code, Congress set the formula for **all federal** elections in 1872, to take effect in 1876. It has **not wavered** since, falling between November 2 and 8.
- Thanks to our Cathedral Knights of Columbus for making available a supply of **Christmas wreaths** for purchase. See page 7 for details.
- Did you arrive early—an **hour early**— for Mass today? I **forgot** to remind you last Sunday, so if you did not remember the “fall back” clock change, feel free to **blame me!**

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector