

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (July 4, 2010)
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Last week I spoke about St. Paul's words to the Galatians about freedom—what it truly is and how it is to be truly lived. On this July 4 [weekend], when we celebrate our nation's birth in freedom, it seems only fitting to reflect a little further on what freedom is and what it is not as well as on what foundation freedom is to be based.

One of my main points last week was that genuine freedom is not absolute; it is not license to do whatever we want regardless of the consequences. About 100 years ago Pope Leo XIII made the important distinction between natural liberty (the power or ability to choose to do or not do something) and moral liberty (the opportunity to choose to act within the bounds of right reason and what is truly for our good and that of others). In other words, just because we have the power or ability to do wrong does not mean we have the moral right or freedom to do what is wrong; just because we can do something does not necessarily mean that we should do so. For example:

--we have the scientific ability to extract stem cells from living human embryos that would lead directly to their death, but should we do so?

--we have the technical ability to bring up pornographic material on our laptops and other computers, but should we participate in such direct assaults on human dignity?

--we have the verbal ability to ridicule others or trash their reputation by gossip and other backbiting, but is that the right thing to do?

I would hope that these and similar questions answer themselves. So what do we do? How do we act or respond to all the various situations and temptations that come our way on a daily basis? Fortunately, we are not left on our own: God has revealed to us the truth of what and who we are and what we (and He!) are all about. He has revealed to us the basis of authentic freedom through his Son and the Church he established—the ability to know what is true and good, and how to use wisely that freedom to make decisions in accord with the reality and truth God has given us. Our own power to choose wisely and correctly has been weakened by original sin; our own experiences in life have demonstrated that over and over again. And so, left to ourselves, we can confuse true freedom with license and we abuse the freedom God gives us—in other words, we fall into sin. It is in accepting Jesus Christ and living according to the gospel he gave us that we will come to know truth in its fullness and thus come to know what real freedom is all about. Remember what the Catechism says about human freedom as “a force for growth and maturity in truth in goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God.”

It may seem strange at first to talk about real freedom coming from obedience to the teachings of Christ and of the Church; many in fact consider these teachings or the Christian life in general as oppressive or enslaving. A little thought, however, reveals the opposite to be true—it is freedom as absolute license that can make one a slave of his own passions. Some, for example, act on an alleged ‘freedom’ or ‘choice’ to abuse drugs or alcohol—and how many of them end up addicted and enslaved by the need for an ever more intense ‘high’. What in the world is freeing about that? Others act on an alleged ‘freedom’ to pursue sexual pleasure before or outside of one's marriage in various ways—and how many end up with disease, broken hearts and relationships and alienation from God and others. Is that the kind of freedom for which God made us or upon which this country was founded? When we see so many lives wrecked by sinful or otherwise harmful pursuits under the guise of self-centered and false notions of freedom, the words of Jesus in John's gospel take on a special relevance and urgency: “If you remain in my word, you will...know the truth and the truth will set you free.” Our Catechism likewise reminds us that “the more one does what is good, the freer one becomes.”

To those who may still think that living the life and way of Christ limits our freedom or that living in freedom and living the truth contradict each other, consider this scenario. Let us say you are travelling

somewhere you have not been before. You do not know the way, so you follow the directions on a roadmap or you check out Mapquest on the internet. Does it enslave or oppress you; does it take away your freedom to follow those directions to get to your destination? Of course not! You could, of course, choose to go off in a different direction...but then you would not reach your goal, the place you really want to be. You could do that, but it seems to me to be a rather foolish way to use your freedom. Directions to a goal are not enslaving, unfair or oppressive. Rather, they enable you—they free you—to follow the right path in order to reach your desired goal.

You know where I am going with this, don't you? It is precisely the same with the gospel, the commandments, the teachings of Christ and of his Church; it is the same with Jesus Christ himself—they are the directions God has given us to travel in this earthly life so that we can reach heaven, our ultimate destination. If we really want to share in our heavenly Father's eternal joy, does it make any sense at all to ignore the directions he has given us out of some misguided or false notion of freedom? Jesus referred to himself as the way and the truth—the way to eternal joy and the truth that sets us free to reach that goal.

In today's second reading, St. Paul prayed that he would never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul knew that authentic freedom is founded on the person and the words of Jesus, he who is the truth that sets us free. Real freedom is not and cannot be limited to what I want, forgetting about God and everyone else. That is why Pope Benedict, when he visited our country in 2008, reminded us that the preservation of freedom depends on the pursuit of virtue, self-discipline, and sacrificing one's own desires for the common good and especially for those in most need. Our Holy Father was simply restating what the Father of our country, George Washington, said back in 1796 in his farewell address as he stepped down from being our first president: "Of all the...habits which lead to political prosperity [i.e. freedom], religion and morality are indispensable supports." John Adams, our second president, echoed that theme: "our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people." Neither, of course, was speaking about any specific religion or denomination, but they were speaking of those same general ideas of virtue and responsibility that the pope mentioned. If we as individuals and as a nation do not embrace and strive for those virtues and those goals, if we forget the necessary connection between freedom and the truth God has given us in his Son, then we are not truly free and we instead forfeit and squander the great blessing God has offered us—and what a tragedy that would be.

On the cover of today's bulletin you will find a beautiful and powerful prayer about genuine freedom. I suggest you attach it to your refrigerator door, bathroom mirror or wherever else you will regularly see it. It reads in part: "Dear Lord...Help us always to remember that freedom, true freedom, is being able to do what we ought to do...Give us the grace always to remember that true freedom makes us the people you wish us to be, the true freedom brings us closer to you and reshapes our world in the likeness of your kingdom." As we celebrate our nation's birthday this weekend, may we make this prayer our own—for ourselves personally and for this great nation we are privileged to call our home.