

**13<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (June 27, 2010)**  
**Fr. Jerry Kopacek**

Today we are presented with one of those happy coincidences: next Sunday is July 4, the day we celebrate the 234<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our independence and freedom as a nation. And in our second reading today, almost as if to help us truly prepare for this national holiday, we hear St. Paul telling the Galatians what freedom is really all about. The Galatians had come to believe in Christ, but some thought they still needed to follow the law of Moses in all its detail. Thus Paul had to urge them not to take the ‘yoke of slavery’ on themselves once again—that part of the law which was now obsolete. Instead, they were to live in freedom since now “for freedom Christ set us free.”

The reason we celebrate every year the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and our nation’s origin is our own dedication to freedom. The American colonists fought for freedom from British rule and it became a reality—but only after much struggle and bloodshed. Freedom continues to be highly prized; it is why so many people from around the world have come here in the past and continue to do so. It is why people continue to fight for freedom around the world, e.g. Christians in Pakistan and India striving for freedom to practice their faith in the face of militant and at times violent opposition.

The desire and the struggle for freedom is a constant theme in human history. But what is it that is so precious about freedom? What is freedom—what is it for, what is its purpose? These are critically important questions, especially when some seem to think that freedom is absolute, an end in itself and having no reference to any standards or limitations. Some have even made a ‘god’ out of freedom—during the French Revolution over 200 years ago, for example, the monarchy was overthrown and freedom (‘liberte’) was the great rallying cry. It reached the point where a woman, dressed with the flag of revolution draped around her as a ‘goddess of liberty’, was enthroned on the high altar of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in what can only be described as an act of utter blasphemy. Now, there was certainly a need for great reform in the French monarchy and yes, the Church as well—elements of both had become in many ways too worldly and uncaring about the plight of the poor. But it soon became apparent that this new ‘freedom’ was only a cruel hoax. The Church was ferociously and violently attacked, and many priests, religious and other Catholic faithful who refused to renounce the Church and their loyalty to the pope were killed and the falling of the guillotine blade became an all-too-familiar sight and sound. Freedom and liberty, in other words, extended only so far as those in power allowed it.

Again the question: what is freedom for? What is its purpose? Does it mean we can do whatever we want? Some seem to think so. In recent years there has been no shortage of movies, plays and even TV shows that have mocked and ridiculed our Catholic faith—even to the point of presenting Jesus himself in ways that we can truly describe as satanically obscene. I have read about many of them; they are so crude that I cannot speak of any details in this time and place. When challenged, these so-called ‘artists’ always wrap themselves in the cloak of ‘artistic freedom’ as if that excuses anything and everything. Or consider when Planned Parenthood and other abortion advocates talk about a woman’s absolute freedom or right to do what she wants with her body while completely ignoring the body, the personhood of the unborn child or even the child in the process of being born in the case of partial-birth abortion.

But it is crystal clear that real freedom cannot possibly mean license to do whatever we want. We surely know this in everyday life. For example, I am not free to drive down Kimball Ave. at 65 mph, to throw rocks through the windows of neighbor’s homes, or to force our parish staff to work seven days a week without pay. If I try to do those things, if I abuse my freedom in other words, there will surely be serious consequences, and rightly so. I’ll be picked up for speeding, I’ll be arrested, and I won’t have a parish staff anymore!

Genuine freedom cannot mean no restraints at all; it is not an end in itself. It must involve a sense of responsibility as well—especially moral responsibility. Beyond that: freedom's ultimate purpose, the reason God gives us freedom—free will—is to pursue and attain truth, to live as God intends us to live, to do what is right and good. St. Paul said it so well: “you were called for freedom...But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.” In other words, freedom is not absolute license; it is not an end in itself. Back for a moment to the scandal of legal abortion: I really cringe every time I hear the phrase ‘pro-choice’. We know why the abortion advocates have latched onto that phrase—‘choice’ sounds so much like ‘freedom’; in fact, it sounds so American. But ‘choice’ is not some abstract reality; it is always connected with specific decisions and specific actions. And we are not free to choose what is evil, what is wrong—like deliberately taking the life of an innocent human being, born or unborn. “Pro-choice”, no matter what kind of ‘choice’ we are talking about, is based on the lie that the act of choosing has no connection or grounding in any standards or guidelines other than what I want, what I demand.

Again, common sense and our own experience of life affirm the reality that choice and freedom are not and cannot be abstract ideas alone, they are realized in real-life situations. And freedom is not unlimited, it is not an end in itself—and it cannot be. As our Catechism puts it, there is no true freedom other than in service of what is good and just; it comes to perfection when it is directed to God. Our own Declaration of Independence reminds us that freedom is one of those ‘certain inalienable rights’ that comes to us from God our Creator—and we cannot divorce freedom from its divine origin. After all, if our freedom and our rights do not come from God, then they come from man. Then we are in really big trouble...for what human authority can give, it can surely take away. And that is not just a hypothetical possibility: remember the deadly legacy of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union, and Mao Tse-Tung's China. I keep telling you how important history is and why I refer to it with some regularity; we need to learn and remember from the past what mistakes were made so we can avoid them now and in the future. As the poet George Santayana said about 100 years ago, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

There are a few more things I want to say about freedom and its necessary connection to God who is the creator and foundation of true freedom; I will wait for next weekend to do so—on the weekend of July 4 itself. For now, let me close with a reference to Pope Benedict. When he visited this country two years ago, he spoke about true freedom being understood in two ways: 1) as liberation **from** the limitations of sin, and 2) liberation **for** ‘an authentic and fulfilling life. Genuine human freedom, he said, comes to its fulfillment only “in generosity and fidelity to the truth.” We are blessed to know that truth, and it is the person of Jesus Christ who referred to himself as the way, the truth and the life and who said that knowing the truth would set us free. As we prepare to celebrate our nation's birthday next weekend, may we be thankful for the freedom in which God has created us and may we resolve to use ever more wisely the freedom for which Christ has set us free.