

A MISUNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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When the Vatican Council issued its *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, perhaps it was inevitable that the meaning of the *Declaration* would be misunderstood. And this in spite of the very clear description given by the Council itself at the beginning of the document: "This (religious) freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups or of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits."

Religious freedom, therefore, concerns coercion with regard to *acts*. It is not directly about beliefs because the principle that these are immune from external constraint has never been a subject of dispute in the Catholic Church. In this regard the Council says: "The doctrine of the Church that no one is to be coerced into faith has always stood firm." (12)

Therefore it should be clear what the Vatican Council meant by religious freedom. Nevertheless the term has been misunderstood, and one misunderstanding has arisen within the Church itself, among Catholics, some of whom apparently think that they are free to accept or reject the Church's teaching and guidance.

The Council anticipated this danger and gave certain principles to meet it. First of all the *Declaration* states that men are not free to reject the dictates of conscience. Secondly they are not interiorly free

to refuse to seek religious truth or to reject it when found. And finally they are not free, when it is recognized, to live in a manner at variance with it. (1)

Now, in the case of Catholics the quest is already completed, in the sense that they have found religious truth in the Catholic Church. They do not know everything, but they know where to turn. The Council does not hesitate to say that it is here, in the Catholic Church, that the truth resides: "We believe that this one true religion (Christ's) subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men." (1) Therefore Catholics are no longer simply seekers, and upon them devolves the duty of filling out their knowledge from the treasury of the Church, and of forming their lives on her teaching and guidance.

Someone may object that there is a contradiction here. Are not Catholics like all men bound to follow their conscience? How then can they be bound to follow the Church? There is no conflict. Conscience is and must remain the final judge but this conscience is formed in the light of the Church's teaching. It is a matter of conscience for Catholics to follow the Church's authoritative guidance. A Catholic conscience which proceeds in disregard of the Church is a conscience at variance with itself.

We may take an example precisely from the question of religious freedom. Many will not see the intrinsic force of the argumentation in the *Declaration*. Their tradition and education make the reasoning inconclusive to them. Therefore from sheer internal evidence — if that were all they need regard — they would have no obligation to grant religious freedom to others. Would they then be free to withhold religious freedom, because they have no mandate of "conscience" to grant it? As Catholics their conscience has a source other than intrinsic evidence to draw upon — namely, the teaching of the Church, which Catholics are bound to follow.

Vatican II in another place says this most clearly: "In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give ut-

terance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order, which have their origin in human nature itself." (14)

The last sentence touches our example very nearly because religious freedom is a conclusion from natural reasoning. Some have questioned the Church's competence in declaring principles of natural reason, but the Council is very clear in affirming it: "It is her duty . . . to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in nature itself." (14)

It is true — and the Council is very clear on this point — that the measure of assent to various statements will vary with the intention of the teaching authority. This is not for reasons of religious freedom but because the Magisterium commits itself in different degrees in different utterances. It would seem clear that the Council's commitment to the basic notion of religious freedom as immunity from coercion, is much more categorical than its commitment, for example, to the proposition that "the demand for freedom in human society . . . regards *in the first place* the free exercise of religion." This is a hope rather than an affirmation of what is; most people of the world could not care less. Therefore the Council gives warning that the statements of the Pope (and this principle is valid for the Magisterium in general) are to be adhered to "according to his manifest mind and will." (*Lumen Gentium* 25)

Hence those Catholics who think they find support in the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* for an attitude of independence with regard to the Church's authoritative teaching and directives are finding something that is not there. The Church authorities are entirely within the spirit of the *Declaration* when they continue to issue doctrine and directives, when they commission ministers to communicate these in their name, and finally when they exact from the faithful conformity with them.

Actually to maintain anything else is to assert the absurdity that the Church has been denatured by the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. She is by her very character qualified to state what is true and good, and to require belief and compliance. Where she speaks as teacher and

guide she does not make final appeal to the intrinsic persuasiveness of the propositions she is communicating. She is not a religious *tindera* exposing her wares to the passerby in the hope that what she offers may strike his fancy. She does not have to be a good debater to gain adherence to her teachings; her children are to accept her guidance. "In matters of faith and morals the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with religious assent of soul." (*Lumen Gentium* 25)

While the *Declaration* does not directly discuss the possibility of modifications in a Catholic's relation with his Church's authorities, nevertheless, the limitations of civil authority in matters religious having been thoroughly ventilated, it is inevitable that men's minds will turn to analogous relations: between priest and bishop, religious freedom, human dignity, is operative here also and is receiving new emphasis in all human affairs. Murray in an introduction to the *Declaration* says: "Though the *Declaration* deals only with the minor issue of religious freedom in the technical secular sense, it does affirm a principle of wider import — that the dignity of man consists in his responsible use of freedom. Some of the conciliar Fathers — not least those who opposed the *Declaration* — perceived that a certain indivisibility attaches to the notion of freedom. The word and the thing have wrought wonders in the modern world; they have also wrought havoc. The Conciliar affirmation of the principle of freedom was narrowly limited — in the text. But the text itself was flung into a pool whose shores are wide as the universal Church. The ripples will run far."

The Council has foreseen this wider freedom and in fact promoted it. To take an example from the *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*, superiors are enjoined to govern their subjects "with regard for their human personality", to encourage them "to . . . an active and responsible obedience", to "listen willingly" and to "encourage them to make a personal contribution to the welfare of community and Church."

This is but an application of that emphasis on human dignity which in another connection gives birth to religious freedom. Because of it superiors are to deal with their subjects — in religion, in the diocese, in the parish — more as with persons, to make their role more responsible

and creative. There will be a greater measure of consultation; a wider autonomy in the lower echelons. Nevertheless this enlarged role of the subject must leave authority intact. The *Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life*, to take one example, says: "However the superior's authority is not to be weakened to decide what must be done and to require the doing of it." (14).

Hence in conclusion, the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* has not in any measure released Catholics from their duty of submission to the Church's authority. When the Hierarchy speaks with authority Catholics must accept what is said, and those engaged in communicating the Church's message must transmit it faithfully. They do not speak in their own name. For example, the Church lately issued certain prescriptions about fasting. To say that these are violations of religious freedom is fantastic. Another example: the Pope has spoken on celibacy. Perhaps the arguments of the encyclical do not strike all with equal force. Nevertheless all must accept the wisdom of the decision for our times. The Bishops of the United States said precisely this in their recent long doctrinal pastoral. "This the new insistence by Paul VI upon the requirement of priestly celibacy in the Western Church... should be seen by the clergy from being a curtailment of freedom, this is a consecration of Christian freedom." Obedience "freely given within a community subject to an authority recognized as authentic, indeed as the instrument of God," is an expression "of Christian freedom."