

FREEDOM AND SACRIFICE IN A GOOD SOCIETY

Bishop Soto will explore the role of sacrifice and freedom in society. American Society often perceives freedom and sacrifice as opposites. He hopes to present the Catholic appreciation of their vital relationship for the formation of a good society.

In August of this year I made a pilgrimage to Tequila, Jalisco. Now, don't go jumping to conclusions. Yes, I did try some good tequila reposado and very smooth tequila añejo. That was later in the day and was not the primary objective of this journey. Little known to many of us, outside of the town of Tequila there is a significant religious site that is growing in prominence. A small group of pilgrims and I walked down into a deep ravine where the once pastor of Tequila, Fr. Toribio Romo, was killed by the government forces of then President Plutarco Elías Calles. He was hiding in a factory nestled deep in this ravine. There, he continued to minister to the people of his parish during the period of harsh religious persecution and the violent popular uprising we know today as the War of the Cristero.

About five in the morning on a Friday, February 28, 1928, the government troops discovered Fr. Toribio in his place of hiding. He was shot once while in bed. He stumbled out of the hut where he was sleeping and was shot again a few feet away. He died in the arms of his older sister who was in hiding with him. As she held Toribio in her arms she consoled her dying brother saying, "Courage, Father Toribio...merciful Christ, receive him! Long live Christ the King! (Viva Cristo Rey)"

We celebrated Mass at that site. A large chapel is now being built there. The altar and sanctuary where we offered the Mass was still provisional. Among the group of pilgrims with me, were members of the Romo family who now live in Sacramento. Our knowledge of Fr. Toribio was drawn from the oral stories passed down through the family and shared with us while we stood on the grounds nourished by the martyr's blood. During the mass other pilgrims wandered in. They had traveled from Los Angeles to visit this site.

Even with the sounds of construction laborers working away on the new chapel, the place provoked a silent reverence. The violence of that time still haunts that ravine. The courageous blood of Toribio still hallows it.

The visit made me uneasy. How could matters have become so explosive between the Church and State that Fr. Toribio was forced to hide as he did the ordinary work of the Church? Why were his pious endeavors such a threat to the powerful Calles government?

The troubled relationship of Church and State in Mexico that continues even today, should not be equated with our fractured and polarized circumstances in the United States. Still, as I stood in that deep ravine, the quiet, resolute courage of Toribio Romo gave me pause to ponder the widening chasm of the cultural tectonic plates of faith and culture. Please pause with me, as I reflect on this with you.

Mexican independence from Spain is celebrating its 200th anniversary this year. The Mexican revolution – perhaps more appropriately named a civil war – is also marking its 100th anniversary this year. Both of those bloody episodes drew more from a European influence than any influence of the American experiment in the North. The French revolution and the growing impact of the Enlightenment left a strong imprint on Mexican politics. This explains, in part, the difference of Church and State relations between there and here.

The United States made a very different accommodation with the role of religion in society. Strictly speaking, the US Constitution only regulated the role of government regarding religion, not the role of religion in society. The first amendment of the Constitution simply says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” That’s it. It does not limit or define the exercise of religion in public life. For many Americans that is still an “ah-ha” realization. We have come to understand the relationship of Church and State in a very different way today.

The role of faith in American society has always been more a matter of habit than a matter of law. We have achieved a much different arrangement than most of the modern societies in the world today. The common perception is there two options, either a secular society or a theocracy. In this false dichotomy we can fail to appreciate the cultural balance of American life. Our failure to see ourselves clearly risks undermining this unique social legacy.

The Holy Father, Benedict XVI, was very quick in recognizing the unique American insight during his last visit to the United States in April of 2008. During a historic presidential reception on the South Lawn of the White House, the Holy Father said, “The framers of this nation’s founding documents ... proclaimed the “self-evident truth” that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights grounded in the laws of nature and of nature’s God. The course of American history demonstrates the difficulties, the struggles, and the great intellectual and moral resolve which were demanded to shape a society which faithfully embodied these noble principles. In that process, which forged the soul of the nation, religious beliefs were a constant inspiration and driving force, as for example in the struggle against slavery and in the civil rights movement.” (Address on the South Lawn of the White House, April 16, 2008)

The Holy Father made these remarks mindful of his own struggles to redefine the role of Church in the secular societies of Europe, where its Christian roots now seem alien to its secular ambitions. His appreciation for this cultural achievement seems lost in a time when many have lauded the recent court ruling of Judge Vaughn Walker where he stated that, “the evidence shows conclusively that moral and religious views form the only basis” for the majority support of Proposition 8. (Perry vs. Schwarzenegger, p. 130, n.25-27) He creates a supposed separation between religious morality and reason. The judge re-engineered reason to create a rationale for overturning the decision of the California voters. He pushed religion further away from public discourse. One wonders whether Judge

Walker would rule against the judgment of Lincoln who on assuming office for the second time dared to say, “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.” (Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865)

This ongoing skirmish in the public square has not been the only quarrel. There is the trench warfare over abortion. Certain proponents push the use of embryonic stem cells while most clinical advances are being achieved with adult stem cells. Others claim to use reason to give a reason for physician-assisted suicide. In each of these cases, there is a tendency to paint religion as fanatical, an improper and unreasonable intrusion into society. Even in some of the more controversial subjects of our day, the religious voice on immigration, health care, the death penalty and torture is demeaned and distorted. There has been much heat over the building of a mosque in lower Manhattan. Ask any bishop if our efforts to build a church are ever achieved these days without a fight in City Hall. In any of these cases, the words of Judge Walker can be cut and pasted in order to discount our voice, “the evidence shows conclusively that moral and religious views form the only basis”.

Is all this, just about religion? Is it simply about the belief in a transcendent God? Is religion simply an opinion with which one can agree or disagree? The broader debate about the role of faith in society goes much deeper than many of these issues reveal. At the

heart of much of this debate is the fundamental question of human freedom.

The exercise of freedom is at the heart of the American experiment. It is the value most often enunciated by Americans. It is the quality that most often attracts immigrants and refugees from nations all across the world. It is the reason most often evoked for those who risk their lives in faraway places, the defense of freedom.

Freedom is now the argument most often employed against religion. Religion in society is perceived as a threat to freedom. Some would even claim that freedom is a threat to religion and in this manner paint any religious position as equivalent to the Taliban. This state of affairs has confused and intimidated many religious people, even many Catholics. How could God be against freedom? Is not freedom an important part of human dignity?

The common notion of freedom today is defined by one individual as the idea that “each person has the right to live his life in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others.” (David Boas, *Libertarianism, A primer*, p.2, 1998) This is a very pervasive and persuasive understanding of American freedom. One could even say that it is a bipartisan idea with obviously partisan nuances. If you’re a Republican you should be free from government regulations and taxes. If you’re a democrat you should be free from government telling you what to do with your body or your lifestyle. These are

generalizations but you get the idea. There is an element of truth in this manner of thinking. Otherwise, it would not seem like common sense. Then again, if it is common sense, what is the sense that we all hold in common? Not much. “Live and let live.” “Go along to get along.” These become the denominator of the lowest common creed. “Give me liberty or give me death” is now simply defined as “leave me alone.” “Don’t tread on me” is now the more basic, “Don’t bother.”

Into this curious quagmire has also fallen the notion of love. Love is assumed to be most genuine when it comes freely. Freedom is necessary for true love. So to parachute the idea of love into the prevalent understanding of freedom, you get the idea that “each person has the right to love in any way he chooses so long as he respects the equal rights of others.” How did we get here? One simple explanation might blame the philosophical idea that the individual exists before society, a novel creation of the enlightenment. “I” exists before “we”. But then what happened to the “we” that made “me”? If everything and everyone is defined by “me first” then “Houston, we got a problem.”

It has become a challenge for Catholics to understand their faith in this context of freedom as a “free-for-all”. Even our appreciation for the dignity of the human person gets confused and conflicted in this sense of freedom that makes everyone an adversary, a contender for my piece of the pie. Another’s right to life is poised against my liberty and pursuit of happiness.”

The Catholic community has enjoyed the American experiment. We have thrived in an environment of liberty. Here we have successfully permeated American life and established a vibrant array of churches, schools, hospitals, and social services. We have not shied away from public discourse but have engaged it, changed it, and inspired it in significant ways. In the process, we have also been influenced by it, sometimes to the detriment of our own moral vision. Particularly with the language of freedom, our own voice gets compromise by the popular lexicon of personal liberty. We need to drink from our own well of wisdom so that we can better share that wisdom with American society.

The late Holy Father, John Paul II, reminded us that freedom, true freedom, is always at the service of truth. In his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, he said the most authentic expression of freedom is martyrdom, to give witness to the truth by the sacrifice of one's own life. (VS, n.87) Freedom does not exist for itself. We seek the truth and love the truth because freedom does not make truth. The truth makes us free.

Benedict XVI continues this reflection in his beautiful encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, (Charity in truth). Love desires the truth, the truth of the human person created by God. Truth, in turn, serves charity by helping the heart to find its true desire.

The Holy Father gives us these words in this regard, "Truth needs to be sought, found and expressed within the "economy" of

charity, but charity in its turn needs to be understood, confirmed and practised in the light of truth.” (CV, n.2)

Love, then, is an integral expression of the heart, mind and will seeking and serving the goodness of truth, especially the truth revealed in the goodness and beauty of the human person. Love begins with the ecstasy of desire and finds its most authentic fulfillment in the exodus of giving oneself freely to another. In the history of the Church, the tradition of martyrdom points us to the most authentic expression of *caritas in veritate*, charity in the service of truth.

This turns the common notion of freedom on its head. Or maybe better said, puts the notion of freedom aright. My freedom is for others. It is not for me. For the follower of Jesus, freedom is not all about me. It is all about the “we” of communion where charity and truth prevail.

We are witnesses to this in every Eucharist. We are instructed in the sacrificial nature of freedom by the ritual drama of the Mass. “Take and eat this is my body. ... Take this and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood ... shed for you.” The narration of the second Eucharistic prayer makes it even more clear for us, “Before he was given up to death, a death he freely accepted.”

With humble desire and holy joy we approach the altar because the freely offered sacrifice of Christ reveals the glorious truth and generous charity of the Father. Divine love flows freely from the wounded side of Jesus and becomes the “cup of eternal salvation”.

The moment of glory in John's passion narrative is the Lord Jesus revealing his divinity through the generous freedom of his humanity. Death had no hold on him. Shaken by what he saw, the Roman soldier in the gospel of Mark, declared, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk. 15.39)

It is important that we remember the sacrifice, in the sacrifice of the Mass. The profound theological metaphors of the meal, the heavenly banquet feast, to which we are all invited have helped to enlighten the participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Mass. Sometimes this has been done to the detriment of our understanding of the sacrificial intention that unites us to the table of the cross as well as the Upper Room. We are present to the one intention that unites into one gesture of freedom the generosity of table and the total offering of the cross: "Take and eat. Take and drink." Once we have stood with the centurion at the cross stunned by the clarity of Calvary, we will never see freedom the same way again.

Hoping to re-engage American Society about freedom, we come into the public forum convinced that freedom is not about "me." Freedom is about the "we" of communion. My life is part of a communion of life. This communion is not the product of a convenient comingling of mutual consents, go along to get along. It is forged from the conviction that there is a common good and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the common good.

This should not strike us as a far-fetched idea. This is what we do best. The Catholic exercise of the freedom of worship and the freedom of association has wrought powerful organizations of goodwill in this country and effective institutions that have foster the common welfare.

In 1727 the Ursuline Sisters opened up a Catholic orphanage in New Orleans. The first formal Catholic charitable organization in the country.

In 1845 the St. Vincent de Paul Society was established in the United States in St. Louis.

By 1900, 800 Catholic Institutions were already providing care to children, the aged, disabled, and the ill.

Catholic Charities USA just celebrated 100 years as a national organization. 1,600 local agencies and organizations make up the Catholic Charities network and served over 9 million people last year.

There are 615 Catholic hospitals in the United States. Over 15% of all hospital admissions are to Catholic hospitals.

Catholic Relief Services reaches out to more than 100 million people in over 100 countries on all five continents.

I have not touched on the extraordinary network of Catholic parochial schools, high schools, colleges, and universities.

This is a breathtaking accomplishment achieved in the relatively short 234 year history of this country. This is the work of freedom. It

is what freedom does best, allowing us to sacrifice ourselves for others. We were created to do this work so that this sacrificial sense of freedom may make shine the truth of God's wisdom before others. As Jesus told us in Matthew's gospel, "They may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." (Matt. 5.16)

Maybe we should admit we have lost sight of that which seemed so clear to our predecessors. Freedom is exercised for the common good, not as a good in itself. Freedom helps the human person find oneself as part of society and not as a reason to remain separate and distinct from society as the popular notions would claim. So that freedom can do this job well and find its happy purpose it must serve both charity and truth. Otherwise the only freedom we will really have is the freedom to be peculiar.

Just a few days ago, we celebrated the feast of St. Francis. Probably the most well-known and widely revered Catholic saint. His freedom was found in stripping himself of his family's wealth and bonding himself closely to Christ. So close, Francis bore the wounds of the Lord's sacrifice on his own body.

Freedom, in this manner, brings us together instead of tearing us apart. Liberty's sacrifice for charity and truth bring us into harmony with the one who created us for himself. He placed within our hearts a restless freedom knowing, we will only be free when we rest in thee, O Lord.