

Faith and Religious Liberty

by The Most Reverend William G. Connare

Nothing could appear more simple or more direct that the title "Faith and Religious Liberty." Hidden, however, beneath these simple words is a complexity which staggers the minds of our brilliant theologians and challenges the art of our best polemists. It is a perfect example of how complex preaching can be, and how careful we must be in probing this complexity if we are to guide our hearers correctly.

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In The Declaration on Religious Freedom, under Article 10, the Vatican Council clearly states:

It is therefore completely in accord with the nature of faith that in matters religious every manner of coercion on the part of men should be excluded. In consequence, the principle of religious freedom makes no small contribution to the creation of an environment in which men can without hindrance be invited to the Christian faith, embrace it of their own free will, and profess it effectively in their whole manner of life.¹

The document adds a point under Article 11: "God calls men to serve Him in spirit and in truth, hence they are bound in conscience but they stand under no compulsion." and in a footnote to the document as it appears in the book, *The Documents of Vatican II*, by Father Abbot and Monsignor Gallagher, mention is made that the major purpose of *The Declaration* is "to show from the example and teaching of Christ Himself that coercion in matters of religion is alien to the spirit of the Gospel. The ways of God with men are not coercive. They are the ways of faithful love." 3

The basis for this point in The Declaration arises from its very purpose caught in the reference in its sub-title to "the Right of the Person." As Article 9 states, this right is founded "on dignity of the person, whose exigencies have come to be more adequately known to human reason through centuries of experience. What is more, this doctrine of freedom has roots in divine revelation, and for this reason Christians are bound to respect it all the more conscientiously." Furthermore, The Declaration states that while revelation does not affirm in so many words the right of man to immunity from external coercion in matters religious, it does disclose the dignity of the human person in his full dimensions. It gives evidence of the respect which Christ showed toward that freedom with which man is to believe in the word of God. In fact Article 11 quotes heavily from the Sacred Scripture, notably from the New Testament which shows the way Our Lord sought to win men.5 Note the points made: He is meek and humble of heart, He acts patiently. He intends to arouse faith in His bearers and "to confirm them in faith," as The Declaration says, "not to exert coercion upon them."6

Whenever Christ denounced unbelief, He left vengeance to God on the day of judgment.⁷ He bore witness constantly to the truth, but He steadfastly refused to impose the truth by force on those who spoke against it.⁸ In the spirit of the Lord's rebuke of His unbelieving disciples in John 6:44 *The Declaration* states: "Man redeemed by Christ cannot accept divine revelation, if on the one hand the Father does not draw him and second if he does not give a natural and free hearing to the faith." So it is clear that no one can be compelled to accept faith; and as long as anyone is invincibly convinced, he deserves respect, and his religious freedom is recognized and defended by the Church.

Perhaps this is the place to give a little bit of the background of the debates to understand the extent of the meanings of these statements. When Bishop De Smedt gave his *Relatio* on the text (the *textus re-emendatus*, or the third version to be discussed by the Conciliar Fathers), he made it clear that the document was not expected to deal completely with all problems that might be crammed under the heading "Religious Liberty". It proposed rather one limited aspect of the problem: the question of civil liberty in religious matters, or the extent to which individuals or groups should be free from coercion in religious matters. Really, the entire schema at that time was summarized in four basic propositions:

- (1) Every man had a natural right not to be compelled by others to act against his conscience in religious matters.
- (2) He had a right not to be prevented from acting according to his conscience, whether in private or in public.
- (3) Consequently, he should be free to express his religious convictions.
 - (4) His right was subject to certain limitations.

Now, as Bishop De Smedt noted, all the problems that were arising in the discussions were based on the fact that the objectors did not understand what the schema was trying to do. They were attempting to confuse the civil right to freedom in religious matters with which it was concerned with all other kinds of freedom which were not within the scope of the document. This problem still pursues this declaration, and in considering it we must always be aware of the limitations that the Council set for itself.¹⁰ This is why very early in the statement under Article 1 the Fathers very carefully worded a statement on the question of human conscience:

This sacred Synod likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power. Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore, it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.¹¹

But at the same time, a footnote clearly states that *The Declaration* does not base the right to the free exercise of religion on "freedom of conscience." Nowhere does this phrase occur. It further states:

And *The Declaration* nowhere lends its authority to the theory for which the phrase frequently stands, namely, that I have the right to do what my conscience tells me to do, simply because my conscience tells me to do it. This is a perilous theory. Its particular evil is subjectivism,—the notion that, in the end, it is my conscience, and not the objective truth, which determines what is right or wrong, true of false.¹²

But conscience does play a part—a conscience that is responsibly formed which alone can bring man to his last end. And this too stems from the dignity of the person. Again *The Declaration* speaks of "personal responsibility—that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth". So even with an erroneous conscience a man fulfills God's role, for God Himself respects personal freedom so much that this is not destroyed by error.

In one of the original drafts of this section of *The Declaration* there was an attempt to eliminate this affirmation by two general arguments: the first was that there was only one truth which is God Himself. God's rights are absolute in every man who at all times owes submission to God's will. Second, God Himself requires of man, whom He created in His own image, free submission resting on the knowledge of God's will.¹⁴

This question obviously disturbed some of the Conciliar Fathers. Bishop Gasparri of Grosetto, Italy, was concerned that the text as it stood then would open the door to indifferentism, and his view was echoed by others. Archbishop Nicodemo of Bari wanted the text to be amended to show clearly that the Church had the authority to determine for the faithful the purpose and limits of liberty in religious matters. Otherwise, as he saw it, the document might be used to claim

a false freedom within the Church.¹⁵ But in preparing this draft, the Council was doing nothing else than defending the old scholastic position of the integrity of human moral acts, so called *actus humani*. In these acts, freedom is a constitutive element. No one can release man from this development in freedom, especially not from his decision for or against God. No human authority can take his place. However, absolute submission to God presupposes that a man seeks to know the will of God, that he uses all available means of information, and that regard is had for the rights of others. When these conditions obtain, if a man has done everything in his power to inform himself about the truth, but he misses it all the same, no human being, no human power has the right to usurp this, the place of this erroneous conscience, by exercising coercion.

In that original schema which was the parent of the present *Declaration*, it was stated:

The Catholic Church regards religious intolerance as in the highest degree abhorrent and as a violation of the human person. For by it, man is robbed of his freedom to follow the dictates of his conscience, which a man who is in good faith himself, perceives to be the highest and most directing principle. 16

As The Declaration clearly points out, no one is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will. There are a number of things to note about this. First, this statement echoes a statement of Pius XII in a celebrated speech given to officials and administrators of the Roman Rota on October 6, 1946.¹⁷ It also echoes Pius' encyclical, Mystici Corporis, of 1943.¹⁸ Further, it borrows heavily from the two famed encyclicals of John XXIII, Mater et Magistra (1961),¹⁹ and Pacem in Terris (1963).²⁰ Certainly The Declaration is not new doctrine. It quotes abundantly from sources indicating this doctrine has been held by the Church from the very beginning, by Lactantius, Saint Ambrose, Saint Augustine, and others, to mention but a few.²¹

The Declaration freely admits that while the People of God has made its pilgrimage through history, "there have at times appeared ways of acting which were less in accord with the spirit of the Gospel and even opposed to it." The note indicates here the intention to confess in a penitent spirit not only that Christian churchmen and princes at times used coercion in support of the supposed interests of faith, but that even the Church herself at times had institutions which

used a similar approach. Still *The Declaration* adds that these historical institutions are never to be justified and much less are they ever to be reinstated. *The Declaration* itself is a final renouncement and a repudiation by the Church of all means and measures of coercion in matters religious. Article 12 states flatly: "Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Church that no one is to be coerced into the faith has always stood firm."²³

Of course the argument that man should not be coerced in matters of religion was already developed by Saint Thomas who based his case on justice. However, it is equally clear that Saint Thomas in the context of his day in history would deny the right of heretics to life and the right of all unbelievers to practice their own form of worship.

Any concessions would be based on mercy of justice.²⁴ Hence, the present doctrine on religious liberty is a far step forward for the Church, coalescing all past teaching and unequivocally stating once and for all the Church's position on the matter. No wonder that *The Declaration* says, rather nicely, I think, that in its quest for the doctrine on religious liberty, the Church "searches into the sacred tradition and doctrine of the Church—the treasury out of which the Church continually brings forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old".²⁵

For among the things that seemed new to many was the Church's concern for religious liberty for all, not just for Catholics. The debates in the Council were concerned with just that matter. This concern was augmented by the rise of the pluralistic state, the new benevolence with which the Church looks upon democratic forms of government, and the modern drive for legal separation of Church and State. The Council once for all laid to rest the old cliche that error has no rights. It also affirmed the liberty of all men to seek God and to worship Him in their own way, and even the right not to seek Him and not to worship Him.

Parenthetically it might be observed that a question has been raised as to whether another door has been opened of peculiar interest to some Catholics. Although *The Declaration on Religious Liberty* does not say this in so many words, corollaries drawn from it will necessarily develop concerning the religious liberty of Catholics. The argument runs: If the non-Catholic is allowed to follow his conscience, then so must the Catholic. Here obviously is the question of the Catholic dissenter, the apostate, the heretic. To my knowledge this implication of the teaching of *The Declaration* has not been thoroughly discussed,

but it is appearing on the horizon. It has been argued that the Council was looking in this direction when it indicated no desire to condemn doctrinal aberrations, when it allowed bold new lines of theological speculation, and when it looked with less and less happiness on the sanctions of excomunication. But I do believe that much remains to be said on the nature of conscience and its binding force in order to bring the traditional notion of the true and certain conscience in line with the modern demands of freedom.

Another point to be made is that the religious liberty in the Church as reflected in this document is quite different from the whole question of *freedom* which is now being so thoroughly discussed on every side within the Church. Witness the spate of books today about freedom and authority and freedom in the Church. All this does not fall within the purview of this article, which must be considered in its own light, and in another context. So let us move on to some practical application of the implications of the document on religious liberty and its connection with faith.

The Church's mission extends to all men and is not ever confined to those who are already her members. Pope Pius XII had already voiced the Church's anxiety for those outside her family that they be rescued from a state in which "they cannot be certain of their salvation." But he also stated this had to come about by the perfectly free choice of those concerned with no shadow of force or restraint. "Not only that these things would be wrong," he said, "they would be useless, for such people would not become real believers at all." In Mystici Corporis he stated, "That faith without which it is impossible to please God must be of a perfectly free homage of intellect and will." So it is always an important part of the Church's mission to win the affection of allegience of those outside her ranks.

But how is this to be done? Certainly not by any display of harshness, or pressure, or force. Saint Paul's advice was to preach and comfort and exhort, "with all the patience of a teacher." We must certainly admire the way Pope Saint Gregory the Great echoed Saint Paul's advice.

If it is a person's sincere intention to lead those outside the Christian religion to the true faith, he must take persuasive measures rather than harsh ones; for minds that might well be attracted to the truth by a reasoned statement of our case will simply be alienated by hostility.³⁰

In other words what we are saying is that not only are the principles good, but what is right in principle is also best in practice. There is only one thing necessary if the Church is to win those separated from her: that the face she presents to the world be known for the face of Christ.

The Church can never appear indecisive in this matter of faith and freedom, weakly anxious to make a good impression, eager to please, ready to water down her principles lest some of her children walk no more with her. Nobody would recognize Christ in a Church like that. Perhaps, then, this is an opportune place to talk about some kind of restraining forces in this matter of faith, or better the *constraints* imposed upon the individual Christian.

Father Karl Rahner has pointed out:

We acknowledge fearlessly and unambiguously that man is subject to a sacred order, a will that is not of himself or of any earthly collective, but is the will of God; the binding force of an objective, universal, valid, essential moral law, which is written in the nature of man, in his heart. . . . [In addition] We acknowledge an historic revelation of the living God in Jesus Christ, which is binding on man and hence a formulated religion which is not simply the expression of vague, imminent religious feeling, but which includes commandment, formula, law, authority and order.³¹

I echo completely Father Rahner's conclusion that we must say "I am not ashamed of the Gospel", even though its message of constraint may be foolishness to some and to others a religious scandal.

In this context, we who will preach Christianity must show forth the true freedom in our lives. We must preach that a man becomes free by committing his life to a purpose, to an end, to an eternal truth, to a divine law. So if we proclaim religious liberty as a condition for man where there is no room for force, we must also proclaim that there is a sacred Ought and Must and that only by the categorical imperatives of duty and love is man still truly free.

On the other hand the Church can never persuade a stranger that she is the Church of Christ, if she leads him to see behind her a vicious God, a God whose only purpose is "to subjugate and enslave", as the philosopher Gabriel Marcel has put it.³² We point, for example, to Mary Tudor, Bloody Mary as history remembers her. She meant well, but her methods were so ruthless that many generations learned to distrust and hate the Church she intended to serve. Rather look at the

policy of Pope Saint Gregory the Great expressed when the Jewish community at Naples complained that a proposed law would restrict their ancient freedom of worship. This is what the Pope wrote to the Bishop of Naples:

If it is a person's sincere intention to lead those outside the Christian religion to the true faith, he must take *persuasive* measures rather than harsh ones, for minds that well might be attracted to the truth by a reasoned statement of our case, will simply be alienated by hostility. If he pleads some such "sincere intention" as his excuse for acting otherwise and putting an end to the customary Jewish worship, he stands revealed as seeking his own ends rather than God's. . . . What is the point of abolishing a freedom which these people have long enjoyed when such action would do nothing to help their conversion to the faith? Why dictate to Jewish people about their religious practice if this makes it impossible for us to win them? Our line of action should be by way of reason and by kindness to make them want to follow us not flee from us, to point to their own Scriptures for the evidences of what we say, and in this way with God's help to convert them to the Church, our Mother.³³

By way of reason and kindness, make them want to follow us, not flee from us.

The famous Father Daniel Berrigan said something like this in another context when he wrote:

Origen realized, as Newman would realize, that conversion depends not only on the openness of the seeker, but on the sympathy and welcome which the Church is ready to offer him.

It depends not only on a pagan preparation for the Church, but on the Church's will to prepare for him. The Church is not to receive man, Origen implies, as though he were a beggar, or as though his love of truth had brought him nothing in the course of bringing him to her.³⁴

In our own day this same attitude is evident in the writing of men like the Jesuit Father John L. McKenzie. In his recent volume, Authority in the Church, 35 he sees the gospel as a proclamation of a person and an event, a personal response to the person and to the event. Metanoia or conversion was a turning to Christ. The gospel did not depend upon Greek or Jewish learning either in those who proclaimed or heard the word. The response was the demand of faith, not knowledge or understanding. To this day the gospel must still be proclaimed equally to the learned and to the unlearned. Learning is not a prerequisite for faith, either in its beginning or in its fulfillment. The

Church asks of her members only the degree of knowledge of which they are capable. In some instances this is not much, but even these with limited capacity can be full members of the Church. The uninstructed can still have insights into the faith which escape the learned.

Father McKenzie wants a clear distinction between faith and doctrine. Faith is a response to revelation; doctrine is a product of theology, and understanding and an application of the faith. The Church must have both. Doctrine will be more secure as it more closely adheres to the sources of faith. Doctrine which does not interpret faith in the light of learning is not doctrine. Doctrine has to be subsidiary to faith, but we must never get away from the ideal that the first office is to proclaim the gospel. The gospel proclaims a new way of life; it institutes a moral revolution. Indeed, according to Father McKenzie the New Testament contains more material which could be classified as moral than dogmatic.

In view of this we must try to discover faith as treated in the New Testament. There we see faith as a movement of a spiritual creature, a surrender, an offering to the living God. This relationship unites us with God in the person of Christ. Faith is a free gift of God leaving the recipient of this favor free to accept or reject. It moves the recipient to love God intelligently and to offer service commensurate with this love. In all this reasoning the fundamental idea is consistent with The Declaration on Religious Liberty. We must treat each one of our hearers as a person; wherever possible preaching should be a personal preaching. We must always realize that our preaching is an instrument in God's hands. Faith is not the result of merely imparting knowledge: it is beyond every other category of knowledge. It does not rest in the conscious awareness of others. It cannot be reduced to elements that are perceived by the senses. As Father Augustine Leonard writes in Freedom of Faith and Civil Toleration there has to be an insistence in preaching on the transcendence of faith. It is a mistake to try to base faith entirely or principally on social and political considerations. As he says so well, "It is by presenting her teaching as something separate from its human environment, something not of this world, but of God, that the Church can best offer herself to the freedom that is now awaking in all its supernatural newness."36

Note, too, that before the believer-to-be can accept all the Church's judicial and disciplinary teaching, he must first believe in the Church's mission. This of course begins with believing in Chrst as a person.

Since therefore we are talking about the freedom or liberty of the individual believer which is based on personality, obviously our preaching has to be based on the personality of Him Who makes God live among us—the Incarnate Son.

I know it is not good taste these days to speak of terms that we learned in our seminary days in basic apologetics. Yet there we used to talk about the "preamble" to the act of faith. Wise men have taught us that as important for the acquisition of knowledge in the matter of faith are the virtues of humility and the desire of the good. There are very few men who consider the evidence for Christianity completely impartially. There are always personal considerations, unconscious prejudices, environment and heredity, the milieu in which a man lives. There is the natural fear that if he submits to God's demands, he must give up his inalienable right of reason and private judgment. Consequently, in our preaching we must concentrate on that preamble to the act of faith, on the dispositions which will lead a man to be able simply to make the statement, "My God and my All," to lead him to the recognition of the person of Christ.³⁷

In our preaching too, we must consider what the basic problem is that faces the man who is being challenged by faith. It is the same problem that faces all who exist in the human condition. It is essential to recognize as deeply as possible that human situations continually confront us with a choice. Choice and decision are the prerogatives of free men, and Christianity is the religion of free men. We must stress that every thought, word, and action of Our Lord's life were deliberate in His plan to encourage us to choose Him. This is not a choice centered on doing something here and now, but a choice that fully commits the person for life. It is a choice that totally affects the person in his being.

This choice is twofold. First, it is existential, to use an overworked word these days. That is, it is not simply a choice between this or that act; it is a choice rather about becoming a new sort of being. The Lord spoke of being born anew. We must not think of this as being for or against Christ in a kind of legal way, as though it is a matter simply of keeping the Commandments. No, our Lord demands a transformed personality, an interior renewal of being itself. Second, the choice is immediate. That is to say, it does have a quality of the here and now. Although the person's whole existence is to be transformed, this does not happen in some vague and abstract act. It begins here and now with a concrete choice. Our Lord was continually calling people to an im-

mediate response; the story of the rich young man, for example, is a perfect illustration. Each immediate choice, however, each immediate decision taken in relation to it is not the whole of a man's life, but it is symbolic of his whole life. Each choice occasions a renewal or a remaking. Of course, these choices are especially made in the framework of charity fired by faith. Charity is the solvent in which each person enters into a new relationship with Christ and with his fellow men. The life of charity makes all one in Christ.

In the communications media there is an old cliche, "If you want to send a message, wrap it up in a person." Person to person contact gives greater clarity to the message, providing the trust and authority so necessary for effective communication. Too many sermons are vague and discursive, they do not leave the individual with suggestive specific responses that can be made.

We need not to be arrogant, but firm. We need patience; we need to be sure of our ground. But above all, we must be conscious that the grace of God moves in mysterious ways. The final judgment as to whether this or that person is to become a Catholic is between God and the individual. This is the kind of faith which begets true religious liberty, the liberty canonized by the Second Vatican Council. Let *The Declaration* have the last word. Article 14 reminds us that "the charity of Christ urges the disciple of Christ to act lovingly, prudently and patiently in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith." And as if it were speaking directly to us who preach the word—as indeed it is, it says, "All is to be taken into account—the Christian duty to Christ, the life-giving Word which must be proclaimed, the rights of the human person, and the measure of grace granted by God through Christ to men who are invited freely to accept and profess the faith." 38

FOOTNOTES

¹ All quotations from the *Declaration* are from the English text as translated by Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., Angelus Book edition, (N.Y. 1966), hereinafter called *Abbott. For* quotation above, see p. 690. Note that all other texts were translated by Msgr. Joseph Gallagher, save the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. In the preface, Msgr. Gallagher states that Fr. Murray was responsible for the translation of that one document, p. XI.

² Ibid

³ The footnotes are presented in the *Abbott* edition as an important part of the original Latin text. Fr. Murray, often called one of the architects of *The Declaration*, was probably responsible for them. See *Abbott*, footnote 30, p. 690.

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- 4 Ibid., p. 688
- ⁵ Article 11, passim. Footnotes 31-43. Abbott, pp. 690-691.
- 6 Ibid., p. 690.
- ⁷ Mt. 9:28; Mk. 9:23.
- ⁸ Jn. 18:37; Mt. 26:51.
- ⁹ Abbott, p. 689.
- ¹⁰ For a resume of this debate on the *Declaration*, see Xavier Rynne, *The Fourth Session* (N.Y., 1966), pp. 31-50.
 - ¹¹ Abbott, p. 677.
 - ¹² See Declaration footnote 5, Abbott, p. 679.
 - 13 Declaration, Article 2, Abbott, p. 679.
- ¹⁴ Herder Correspondence, "The Council and the Problem of Religious Freedom," I (1964), p. 203.
 - 15 X. Rynne, The Fourth Session, p. 43.
 - 16 Herder Correspondence, I, p. 204.
 - ¹⁷ Allocution, 6 Oct. 1946: AAS 38 (1946), p. 394.
 - Pius XII, encyclical "Mystici Corporis," 29 June 1943; AAS, (1943), p. 243.
 John XXIII, encyclical "Mater et Magistra," 15 May 1961; AAS, 53 (1961),
- ¹⁹ John XXIII, encyclical "Mater et Magistra," 15 May 1961; AAS, 53 (1961) p. 417.
- ²⁰ John XXIII, encyclical "Pacem in Terris," 11 April 1963; AAS, 55 (1963), p. 265.
 - ²¹ Cf. Declaration footnote 27, Abbott, p. 689.
 - ²² Abbott, p. 692. See also also footnote 51, ibid.
 - ²³ Abbott, p. 692.
 - ²⁴ Cf. Eric D'Arcy, Conscience and Its Right to Freedom, (N.Y., 1961) p. 156.
 - 25 Abbott, p. 676.
- ²⁶ Encyclical, Mystici Corporis, Catholic Truth Society edition, (London, 1943), p. 62.
 - 27 Ibid.
 - 28 Ibid.
 - 29 2 Tim. 4:2.
 - 30 Gregory, Epist. XIII, Ad Paschasium, Episc., Neapol. 12, (PL, 77, 1267).
 - 31 Karl Rahner, Theology for Renewal, (N.Y., 1964), p. 99.
 - ³² Quoted by E. D'Arcy, Conscience and Its Right to Freedom, p. 275.
 - 33 Gregory, Epist. XIII, Ad Paschasium. See Note 30.
 - ³⁴ Daniel Berrigan, S.J., The Bow in the Clouds, (N.Y. 1961), p. 190.
- ³⁵ John L. McKenzie, S.J., Authority in the Church, (N.Y. 1966), pp. 123-136. ³⁶ Augustin Leonard, O.P., "Freedom of Faith and Civil Toleration," in Tolerance and the Catholic, (N.Y. 1955), p. 111.
 - ³⁷ Cf. M. C. D'Arcy, S.J., The Nature of Belief, (Herder, 1958), pp. 208-236.
 - 38 Abbott, p. 695.