

Religious freedom: How Catholic faith is represented through acts of charity

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One of the deepest yearnings of the human heart is to be free. The desire to live freely is an expression of our personal dignity created in the image and likeness of God and made for a relationship with him. Human freedom is the power to become who we, as spiritual and bodily beings, have been created to be.

The Catholic Church cares not only for Christians' freedom, but also for the protection and cultivation of responsible human freedom in a just society. A hallmark of a just society is the right of people to religious liberty. Throughout human history, men and women have risked enormous danger to worship freely and live out their faith, without persecution. Our nation's founders embraced freedom of religion as an essential condition of a free and democratic society. So when the Bill of Rights was ratified, religious freedom had the distinction of being part of the First Amendment. For Americans, religious liberty — the ability to live out our faith in a public way — is indeed the first freedom.

In his pastoral letter, "Disciples of the Lord: Sharing the Vision," Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington writes, "While it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior...Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel."

Secularism, which includes the privatization of religion, has two aspects: personal and social. Personal secularism is the thinking that, “What I do on Sunday is a private matter and has no influence on the way I live my life or the decisions I make throughout the rest of the week.” Simple public expressions of faith are suppressed, such as praying before meals when dining out, discussing faith as it intersects with public policy, even when it enriches that discussion, and inviting friends and neighbors to events at church.

In a more radical way, a private faith diminishes the moral responsibility one has to God and neighbor. By giving witness to what their faith teaches, people of faith make great contributions to society through ministries such as food pantries and soup kitchens which serve the needy and vulnerable, clinics and hospitals ministering to those who cannot afford to pay, and schools educating young people who would otherwise attend schools that do not adequately meet their needs. Faith in the public square raises our awareness and concern for those in need, both at home and abroad. It helps to build community and promote the common good, enriching our lives and our communities and nation.

The social form of secularism is expressed in not-so-subtle forms of religious indifference. Religious indifference acts as though there is nothing transcendent in human beings.

Catholics are wary of the privatization of our own faith and the negative impact on society for all people of faith if we can no longer give public witness to what we believe. Our religious liberty gives us the freedom to live our faith in a public way, which we do -- not just through acts of worship, but also through loving, charitable service to others, which contributes to the common good . We serve not just Catholics, but everyone in need. This is part of what it means to be Catholic, and when our religious liberty is suppressed, this service to others – a very public expression of our faith – suffers.