

Homily – Father Joe Mele
July 4th 2020

I remember being in the huge audience on September 24, 2015 on the lawn of the United States Capitol Building when Pope Francis spoke from the west front balcony to an adoring audience of tens of thousands of Americans. I stood along-side of our young diocesan seminarians and hundreds of young families when the Holy Father explained that “shared commitments to certain truths about the human person and human community” are necessary for democracy to be sustained. He was reminding all Americans that Biblical wisdom, moral truths and moral reasoning must remain a part of the universal dialogue today. He then roused the predominantly young crowd by practically shouting a popular quote of Saint Pope John Paul II, “Every generation of Americans need to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the moral freedom to do what we ought.”

Morality teaches that there are various kinds and degrees of human liberty. The first is a physical or bodily freedom, which makes you capable of moving from place to place, and which enabled you to come today to celebrate this Mass as we pray for America with all its strengths along with **its collective flaws**. We know many in the world are deprived of bodily freedom, especially our sick and frail elderly, particularly those at highest risk right now of the dangerous coronavirus. Pastoral Council members are asking for us to do a better job in our Grouping of reaching out to our parishioners confined to nursing homes in this lonely time for them.

The second kind of liberty is civil liberty, that invests you with the privilege of voting for the candidate of your choice, and of exercising other prerogatives of an American citizen. This kind of liberty is what we are nationally celebrating as part of our Independence Day.

The Bishops of the United States are calling on all of us to reflect and safeguard the third kind of liberty which is called religious liberty or freedom of religion. The first colonists established the blessing of civil and religious freedom on America’s soil. We can all be proud that Catholic Maryland peacefully and happily laid assured these rights for all, long before any other colony or state. Under the kind mildness of Lord Baltimore, a dreary wilderness was soon transformed with swarming life and activity of diverse, prosperous settlements. There Catholics who were oppressed by the laws of former mother lands led the way for our country to find a peaceful asylum in the quiet harbors of the Chesapeake, and pioneering a history of benevolence, gratitude, and toleration for all.

The freedom, however, I wish to preach about on this our national Independence Day, is the next kind of liberty; namely – moral freedom, the virtue by which you and I can select between good and evil, righteousness or vice. We can blaspheme or praise our Creator, keep the commandments, or violate them. It is of this last form of freedom that I wish to reflect upon, in the light of the Scriptures we have just heard proclaimed. **This fourth freedom is a right of every human being because we have free will. We used to call it our human dignity.** Free will is a gift that distinguishes you and I from brute creation; for the human person is the only creature that enjoys moral freedom. The history of civilization proves over and over again that not only an individual citizen but a nation itself is as honorable and noble, able to endure every crisis and challenge **only in direct proportion** to its regard and protection of moral freedom in its collective conscience... and in its elected officials on very level of government. What a tremendous responsibility is attached to this perilous gift.

Implied in Jesus’ words this morning is a calling to the prophetic, one which our Jewish ancestors understood. If moral freedom is righteously employed, it becomes an instrument of

unending bliss for the entire household, if abused, it becomes an engine of endless destruction and rebellion. If the human person, society, and government keep within the bounds of the moral law, truth will always be revealed. Then the conduct of a state becomes a heavenly stream, enriching all citizens with fruits of grace and benediction. If moral freedom is allowed to leap its legitimate barriers, it covers the earth with ruin and desolation; depriving a government's very own children from flourishing and thriving; first among the disadvantaged and most vulnerable, but eventually and unfortunately usually through anarchy, for even the powerful and most secure.

But this Fourth of July, I wish to pose for another moment the question "but whose moral freedom"? I borrow this inquiry from the writing of Alasdair MacIntyre and his book *After Virtue* and its follow up *Whose Morality, Which Rationality?* As Americans, we live in a democracy that celebrates its diversity and plurality. We exist in a time of a huge array of traditions; no longer guided by one metanarrative. But these are all fragmented by the loss of memory. Today even the Judeo-Christian story upon which America was founded can rarely be told by even one citizen in its totality. As a community, even we in this Church, at this Mass, must admit not one single one of us lives the full story in all its detail any longer. We practice bits and pieces of it without sometimes realizing exactly to what extent we do that or even how little of the story that we live. Thus, Saint John Paul's challenge for a New Evangelization.

If this reality be so, and I strongly defend that it is, we must admit this is an age not only of fragmented traditions but competing value systems. Whose values, which virtues, what story, or national narrative shall keep us free and upon what principle is liberty truly able to last?

In the words inspired by the Holy Spirit, Saint Peter answers the question. We should be "as free" and "not as making liberty a cloak for malice, but as the servants of God", whom to serve is to reign. Saint Peter warns against false promises of freedom from teachers who have become corrupted by a failing system that only politicizes. Earlier in his epistle, Saint Peter acknowledged that only God can give humanity divine power and raise up leaders and teachers to live lives that are holy, free from corruption and sin. These teachers are distinguished by not only by their words but can inspire a people to greatness.

Is not that what our own Declaration of Independence claims?

America has always wanted to be a land of the free. Today, the challenge facing America is to find freedom's fulfillment in the truth: the truth that is intrinsic to human life created in God's image and likeness, the truth that is written on the human heart, the truth that can be known by reason and can therefore form the basis of a profound and universal dialogue among people about the direction they must give to their lives and carry out by their activities.

Pope Francis said on the front porch of the Capitol, "as Catholics we are compelled to contribute to that universal dialogue surrounding the question "but whose moral freedom? not by mere human rhetoric but by heralding, witnessing, and living the moral freedom of a son or daughter of God; called to be prophets in the land for the sake of all who dwell in that land. Christ teaches us in the Gospel this morning, "If the Son of God makes you free, you will be free indeed"

We Catholics do not have to ask anyone to tell us about freedom. We profess that the only freedom that can save our nation and our world is moral freedom. Where the Spirit of God is, there liberty for all will endure.

There is the glorious liberty of the citizens of God.