

The Mission of the Church in the World

As I begin this article, I must remind myself and all the readers that from our earliest days, Christians always prided themselves on the fact that they were good citizens of the countries in which they lived. They realized they were also citizens of the Kingdom of God, but they obeyed all the just laws of the land. Christians still wish to do this today! (Letter to Diognetus, First Century of A.D.)

The Church has been found embroiled in a controversy that has incredibly broad meaning and consequences. It is a controversy that never had to happen. Many have tried to limit the controversy to “birth control”. Birth control is not the issue. The real issue is much more foundational. There are two fundamental principles at work here. The first principle emanates from the Constitution itself; in fact, it comes from the First Amendment of the Original Bill of Rights.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” (Bill of Rights, 1st Amendment)

This is more commonly known as guaranteeing Religious Liberty or granting Freedom of Religion. For the last two years the present administration through its President and Secretary of State have not used the term “Freedom of Religion”. Rather they have used a much narrower and limiting term, “Freedom of Worship!”

There is a world of difference between these two. *Freedom of Worship* only grants a citizen the freedom to gather in a Church, synagogue, temple or other religious building to worship in the manner that reflects their beliefs and traditions.

Freedom of Religion, on the other hand, while including the freedom to gather and worship according to the community’s beliefs and traditions, **ALSO INCLUDES** the freedom to actually live that Faith. Freedom of Religion allows one to bring his beliefs to the market place, to the business practices, to the way education, health care and charity is provided. You can see how all encompassing Freedom of Religion actually is!

The second principle comes from the Bible in which the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) defines the way a good practicing Jew should live his life and the New Testament defines the way a good practicing Christian should live his life. For we who are Christian, the teachings of Jesus and the early Church’s understanding of this New Way of living, define not only our Worship Services, but also the actual way in which we should live to be known as a Christian.

Much has been reported in the media lately. Many have even called this controversy the Administration’s “War against Catholics”. Even those media that have traditionally not been very friendly to religion or to the Catholic Church in particular, have spoken to our defense. This is not just a Catholic issue.

From one observation, it appears that the present administration has chosen to either set aside the First Amendment guaranteeing Freedom of Religion or it has so defined its meaning as to eviscerate it of all its contents and significance!

From another observation, it appears that the President, in Napoleonic Fashion, has installed himself as the Bishop of Rome and has taken upon himself the right to define Christianity! A true follower of Jesus Christ is not constituted or defined by participation in a Worship Service only, but **MUST**, of its nature, include the Freedom to **LIVE** this Faith in all dimensions of the life of a human person! This is Christian witness which is part of being a follower of Jesus Christ.

The government cannot take it upon itself to define Christianity, or any other Faith. The government cannot restrict the essence of Christianity to Worship and neglect the all encompassing and important aspect of giving **WITNESS** to our Faith in the lives we live!

Christianity has always been associated with Education, Health Care and Charity; These apostolates or ministries are not appendages to the Gospel, they are not just good things to do, they are the essence of the Gospel. They have their roots in the Bible and in the Church of the apostolic era.

Scripture and Healing

In the Old Testament God reveals this: “And I will take sickness away from the midst of you. No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.” (Exodus 23:25)

Luke describes the healing ministry of Jesus. “Coming down the mountain with them, he stopped at a level stretch where there were many disciples...**people who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases.** Those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured; indeed, the whole crowd was trying to touch Him because power went out from Him which cured all.” (Lk 6-17-19)

The Transfiguration of Jesus St. Augustine imagines that as Jesus climbed the mountain sick people lined up on both sides of the path. They wanted to touch him and be healed. Those who were not close enough, He imagines that they think, ‘if only the shadow of his body would fall on me, I will be healed.’ Then Augustine adds:

“People are still climbing the mountain. **People still want to touch Jesus and be healed of their illnesses.** However, today they come to the Church, to the Community of believers. They want to touch Jesus. **They do this through the Body of Christ, which is the Church.**” (St. Augustine)

Jesus heals the Suffering. “Large crowds of people came to Him (Jesus) bringing with them cripples, the deformed, the blind, the mute and many others besides. The result was a great astonishment in the crowds as **they beheld the mute speaking, the deformed made sound, cripples walking about and the blind seeing.**” (Matt 15: 29-31)

“And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. **Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid hands on him and healed him.**” (Acts 28:8) (cf. Note 1)

Scripture and Teaching

Jesus the Teacher

“On another Sabbath He came to teach in a synagogue...” (Lk 6:1; Mk 1:21-22)

Jesus’ great Commission of the Apostles. (Jesus came forward and said:) “Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations... **Teach them to carry out everything I have command you.**” (Matt 28:18b-20a)

The Church, since its earliest days saw its divine mission as this: To TEACH, to Govern and to Sanctify.

The catechism of the Catholic Church clearly emphasizes this in its teaching regarding Marriage. The aim of Sacramental Marriage is for the man and woman to create a community of life in which children are born and the parents have the obligation to educate their children, both in the secular sciences and in the Faith.” (cf. Note 2)

Scripture and Practical Charity

Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21)

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." (Matthew 25:35)

The Church and Charity

“Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community. As a community, the Church must practice love.”(Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #20)

St. Luke in describing the early Church describes its defining elements in Acts. “They remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, to the Community Life, to the Breaking-of-the-Bread and to the Prayers.” (Acts 2:42) This community life or *koinonia* has as its essence or fundamental core this tenant, “within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life.” (DCE, # 20)

Pope Benedict XVI made this point crystal clear in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. He writes: “As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, **the exercise of Charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the Sacraments and the Proclamation of the Word:** love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the Sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. **The Church cannot neglect the service of Charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.**” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, #22)

In fact this was institutionalized in the Book of Acts of the Apostles with the very institution of the Office of Deacon. The deacon’s traditional ministries include:

- **Ministry of the Altar (assisting the priests in the celebration of the sacraments)**

- **Ministry of the Word (Preaching and Teaching)**
- **Ministry of Charity (coordinating the care for the poor and needy) (cf. Note 3)**

Finally and very clearly stated in Acts of the Apostles, neither the Apostles, nor any Pope, not even the Church in Council created the reality of Christian witness. It was Jesus Himself who mandated Christian Witness in His final instruction to the Apostles before He ascended into heaven.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

We, my baptized brothers and sisters, received the Holy Spirit when we were baptized. The Spirit strengthened us even more for witnessing when we were confirmed in our Faith. We are Jesus’ witnesses, not in Jerusalem or Judea or Samaria, but here in the United States. This is essential for the Evangelization of the world which is an essential element of being Christian.

As I wrote this article, unbeknownst to me, the military chaplains were told to disobey their archbishop’s instruction to read a pastoral letter at all Sunday Masses on Jan 28-29. A statement from the Military Ordinate said that the Archbishop stands “firm in the belief, based on legal precedent,” that the Army defied his rights to free speech and free exercise of religion. It now appears that not only is Religious Liberty being limited, but so is “Free Speech” also guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Constitution. God help us in this hour!

✠ Most Reverend Patrick J. Zurek, Bishop of Amarillo, Article for the West Texas Catholic, February 5, 2012

1. **"For I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds," says the Lord.** (Jeremiah 30:17)

"O Lord my God, I cried out to You, and **You have healed me.**" (Psalm 30:2)

Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee ... "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. **He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,** to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:14,18)

- Cure of the paralytic (Matt 9:1-8)
- The cure of the woman with the hemorrhage...she only touches the tassel of His cloak. (Matt 9:18-26)
- The cure of the two blind men. (Matt 9: 27-31)

"Now Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and **healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of diseases among the people.**" (Matthew 4:23)

The Church continues the healing ministry

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"And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice came out of many who were possessed; and **many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.**" (Acts 8:6)

2. "Shortly afterward (after the Call of the Apostles) they came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath **He entered the synagogue and began to teach.**" (Mark 1:21-22)

"He then went down to Capernaum, a town of Galilee, **where He began instructing them on the Sabbath day. They were spellbound by His teaching,** for His words had authority." (Lk 4:31-32)

3. "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings." (Paul, Acts 24:17)

"On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." (Romans 12:20)

"For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." (Romans 15:26)

"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." (Galatians 2:10)