



DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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**Personal Liberty and the Common Good**

The Catholic faith is the sanest religion in the world. It holds in a dynamic balance opposite tendencies that, if left unchecked, would lead to the dominance of one tendency and the elimination or crippling of the other, with the result of severe harm to human beings.

A prime example of Catholic sanity is its balance between affirming the right to personal liberty and insisting on the obligation to promote the common good. This balance is possible because Catholic anthropology – the Church’s understanding of human nature – recognizes the dignity of the human person as a creature made in God’s image and likeness and situated firmly within the human community. No dimension of the person’s being is left out.

As an example of how this balance is achieved within the liturgy of the Mass, all Catholics must accept that Jesus Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. That faith fosters the common good of Catholic believers, for it expresses and builds up their unity of faith in the Lord’s promise to give himself personally to them as food. But the Church also affirms the individual Catholic’s right to freely choose how to receive the Eucharist, either on the tongue or in the hand, in both cases reverently. Every Catholic should respect how others receive the Eucharist. In this way St. Augustine’s formula is fulfilled: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Another example is from daily life. We enjoy our right to get in our cars and drive where we want. We relish our personal liberty to do so. But we also know we should obey the traffic laws, stopping at red lights, observing speed limits and pulling over to allow emergency vehicles to pass. Those laws reflect a concern for the common good. They create order on our streets and prevent accidents. Catholic sanity says: drive your car but obey the traffic laws.

Maintaining the balance between personal liberty and the common good is not easy. This leads some individuals and groups to seek to dissolve the tension between personal freedom and social wellbeing by imposing one or the other on everyone. Totalitarian governments greatly restrict the exercise of personal freedom. Vietnam is a good example. According to friends who have traveled there, the Communist government requires the Church, like other religions, to be registered and avoid criticism of the government. Catholics may worship and teach their faith but are not allowed to operate schools beyond preschool and kindergarten. Local government officials have to approve applicants to the seminary and the ordination of new priests. The Church may engage in some charitable activities, especially health care, but they are always subject to government supervision. Vietnamese Catholics acting alone or together find their personal liberty of action restricted by a government that wants to maintain power and impose its distorted version of social welfare on the people in contrast to the true common good.

It can also come about that personal liberty can be widened to such an extent that the common good is threatened or truly damaged. In response to the lowering of the voting age in 1971 from 21 to 18, many states lowered the drinking age to 18 as well. The result was a dramatic increase in traffic accidents

associated with alcohol consumption in the 18 to 21 age group. Seeing that teenage drinking caused many fatalities and injuries on the road, Congress passed the Minimum Drinking Age Act in 1984, withholding some federal highway funds from states that kept the drinking age at 18. By 1988, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had raised the drinking age to 21 and the number of teenage deaths and injuries owing to drunk driving began to fall significantly. If the pendulum swings too far toward personal liberty, the good not only of individuals but of society as a whole can be seriously harmed.

To avoid allowing either personal liberty or the obligation to promote the common good (especially if wrongly conceived) go to extremes, it is important to remember that freedom is not simply *from* but also *for*. We should be free *from* unreasonable restrictions so that we can use our freedom *for* worthy purposes. That understanding of personal liberty can then contribute to the common good. Because each person is free to choose his or her path in life – what we call a vocation, coming ultimately from God – many people choose to marry and raise families, some in our Church choose to accept a calling to the priesthood or diaconate or consecrated life, while individuals and groups choose to help their neighbor through pantries, pregnancy resource centers, advocacy for justice and a variety of educational and cultural activities that enhance public life. In these ways, the exercise of personal liberty is not only not in conflict with the common good but powerfully promotes it.

Conceiving the common good properly will protect personal liberty, for it recognizes that human beings, while sharing a common nature, are distinct persons with attributes and interests that differ from one another and whose expression should be allowed and encouraged, as long as the exercise of their personal liberty does not injure the common good. This understanding of the common good trusts that, like the bits of glass in a mosaic, the various ways in which human beings pursue their interests and use their talents will result, more often than not, in greater good and beauty than would a monotonous uniformity. Thus, the good order and beauty God put in His creation are made more manifest. When the balance is endangered, people of good will and good sense will work to restore it, because the good of all matters.

I offer these thoughts to you, believing that they reflect the sanity of the Catholic approach to our common life. There are many issues in our society and in our Church – gun possession and use, school vaccination policies, taxation, personal piety and social justice, the old Latin Mass and the Mass in English – where the inevitable tension between personal liberty and the common good can be felt. We must seek the right balance between the two, so that the good that each of them enshrines is preserved, serving both the individual person and society. We trust the Holy Spirit to guide us to strike that balance, for, as Jesus said: *When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth* [John 16:13]. While distinguishing essential things from non-essentials, let us observe St. Augustine’s last phrase: “in all things, charity.”

Sincerely in Christ,



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