

JANUARY

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

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When we hear the song “America,” its lyrics “My country ‘tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty,” draw our minds and hearts to the ideals on which this nation was founded. Shamefully, we don’t always live up to those ideals, nor do many people have a clear understanding of their significance.

The very colony which became the state of Pennsylvania was forged from the strong belief in the freedom of religion. Yet long after this state and the nation’s independence was born, the founding church of the Augustinians in Philadelphia, known as the City of Brotherly Love, was burnt down in an anti-Catholic riot. Would that this were an aberration! Even a cursory glance at our history, as well as current headlines, reminds us that inviolable rights of the human person, with the protection of religious liberty, are not so.

Whether it be the controversy surrounding a 13-story Islamic community center planned for a site two blocks away from the National September 11 Memorial Museum — or the plight of a Kentucky clerk, jailed for refusing to issue marriage licenses to gay couples, despite a Supreme Court ruling that made same-sex unions legal nationwide — the natural tension which stems from the ill-defined relationship between church and state requires a strong conviction in the tremendous value of dialogue and respect for the dignity of each and every human being.

The Second Vatican Council’s declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, asserted that “...religious freedom has its foundation in the dignity of the person, whose exigencies have come to be fully known to human reason through centuries of experience. Religious freedom in society is entirely consonant with the freedom of the act of Christian faith.”

During his visit to the United States in 1987, Saint John Paul II reminded all Americans that: “The ultimate test of your greatness is the way you treat every human being, but especially the weakest and most defenseless ones” (Farewell Address, September 19, 1987).

Pope Francis, during his recent visit to Philadelphia, dedicated his talk at Independence Hall to that same issue, stating: “In this place which is symbolic of the American way, I would like to reflect with you on the right to religious freedom. It is a fundamental right, which shapes the way we interact socially and personally with our neighbors whose religious views differ from our own. The ideal of interreligious dialogue, where all men and women, from different religious traditions, can speak to one another without arguing, this is what religious freedom allows.”

The entire process of freedom, understood as liberation from sin and selfishness, is directed toward genuine



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communion, understood as unity in diversity, rather than uniformity. Religious freedom, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, calls us to respect one another and not place ourselves as the standard to judge others by. Religious freedom definitely does not mean: others are free to be like me, free to think as I do, free to believe what I believe, free to worship as I worship.

Faith can bring us closer to one another, and our freedom to practice our faith and follow our conscience is central to our ability to live in harmony. On January 16, Religious Freedom Day, let us pledge our constant support to all who struggle against religious oppression and rededicate ourselves to fostering peace with those whose beliefs differ from our own. In doing so, we reaffirm our common humanity and respect for all people with whom we share a brief moment on this Earth.

