

Fortnight for Freedom

Parish Diary
Fr. Peter Daly
June 28, 2012

Fr. Peter Daly discusses on lesson from his parish teach-in on religious liberty.

Our parish is doing a “teach-in” on religious liberty. Back in the 1960s, during the days of the Vietnam War, universities did “teach-ins” to discuss the war as a way of learning what we should do. We are following that pattern on religious liberty.

Knowledge of history is important. Intellectual honesty is necessary. Consistency is good.

As a Church, we will do ourselves and our society a favor if we are historically accurate, intellectually honest, and philosophically consistent in our approach to religious liberty. If we demand religious liberty for ourselves, we should support it for everyone, even non-Christians like Moslems and for non-believers.

Our teach-in has shown us that the Roman Catholic Church has not always been a defender of religious liberty. In fact, until 1965, our official position was opposed to religious liberty. That is why non-Catholics were nervous about electing a Catholic as president in 1960. John Kennedy had to go to Houston to allay the fears of Baptist ministers that a Catholic President would take away their religious freedom.

For centuries before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Catholic Church was opposed to religious liberty. We said that that “error has no rights.” Therefore all erroneous religions (i.e., any “non-Catholic religion”) had no rights. The Church thought that just governments would “institute” Catholicism as the official religion of any nation, if Catholics were the dominant group in the population. We also said that government should stamp out false (non-Catholic) religions.

This view was expressed most clearly in the Syllabus of Errors (Latin title: *Quanta Cura*), promulgated by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1864.

The Pope listed 80 “errors” of the modern age. Among the “errors” condemned by Pius IX was error number 15, which said that it was an error to think that “Every man is free to embrace and profess the religion he shall believe true, guided by the light of reason.”

In error # 55, the Pope said it was wrong to say that “The Church ought to be separated from the State and the State from the Church.” Error 77 said it was wrong to think that “In the present day, it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion shall be held as the only religion of the state, to the exclusion of other modes of worship.” Pius IX further said that non Catholic religions should not be permitted to worship freely in Catholic countries. (Error #78.)

It was not until 1965 in the Declaration on Religious Liberty of Vatican II (*Dignitatis Humanae*) that the Catholic Church official recognized religious liberty was a human right.

Dignitatis Humanae said, “The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power, so that within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions on religious matters... .” (D.H. #2.)

The Declaration was mostly drafted by John Courtney Murray, S.J., a Maryland Jesuit. Murray’s idea of religious liberty was 180 degree change in policy for the Church. It is the most important American contribution to the teaching of the universal church.

Dignitatis Humanae was the last document promulgated by Vatican II before it adjourned. It almost did not get adopted because of bitter opposition by ecclesiastical conservatives like Archbishop Marcel Lefevre, who left the Church largely over his disagreement on religious liberty.

An honest reading of history teaches us the importance of religious liberty to humanity. An honest reading of Church history teaches us to be a humble in our lecturing others on religious liberty.