

The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom should I fear?(Psalm 27, Responsorial today)

During Eastertide The Acts of the Apostles traces right from the very outset of Christianity a picture where the embryonic Church grows fast but not without strong controversy and even threat of extinction. It is a mortal struggle for religious freedom to proclaim and live the Good News that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Certainly the Lord predicted and promised that 1) what happened to Him in persecution would inevitably happen to his followers; yet 2) his Church would be a goad against evil forces: *The Gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* This gave rock-solid hope. Ironically “the blood of martyrs” – produced what was soon to be acclaimed “the seed of the Church” (Tertullian) Thus did the Church always grow and solidify through persecution. Even down to the present.

At stake in the developments of the earliest Church passages in Acts is the irreducible notion of ***Religious Freedom.***

Religious freedom – it springs from the very law of God written on our heart. Any law drawn contrary to God’s Law is a disservice to God, the ultimate law-giver. Such a law is not only a bad law, but must be seen as no law. The Apostles sensed that in what we just heard read. Most laws must not be judged or acted upon depending on the individual’s likes or fancies, predictions or assessments. We rely on and obey much of law because it is a convention we can all profit from, for the common good. How we drive, property rights, But it is a dangerous omen when a law chips away at the right to live, and to worship and freely express the tenets of God’s law as taught and practiced by faith bodies. It must be resisted, when these run counter to God’s law as planted on human conscience.

We must obey God rather than man. Father Leonard brought this out in his reflections yesterday. In particular he showed that it must apply first of all to the discipline of self in our behavior. But the call to obey God does not end there. As a society we are responsible for fostering God’s Law in for the greater common good as well. What holds law together will work only if it reflects His Wisdom. No sooner is the Holy Spirit’s Wisdom lavished on the Apostles at Pentecost than Peter starts putting it to work in his unhesitating public witness. Courage too. And the Church multiplies its members in thousands.

Much of the drama in the Acts of the Apostles unfolding before us is yet to be played out, but already we see a sketch of how the Lord’s promise is working. ***If they do this to me, so too they will treat you, who are not better than the Master. Opposition leading to severe persecution is the order of the day.***

It was largely the leaders who objected – the Sanhedrin for now, the Romans later – motivated by **jealousy, pride, obtuseness, blindness.** After all they could have assessed very easily the Apostles miracle of healing, but they were blinded by fear at losing their power instead. Instead of a Herod type of baby-killing they resorted to nip the Church in the bud. So God rescued them from jail. Back to WITNESSING again in the temple. So “Infuriated,” the Sanhedrin wanted to put the Apostles to death! Blind to **that** miracle too!

Let’s note that the Apostles never disparage their accusers, but simply state their faith with boldness. Today’s detail brings in Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the Law, whom Luke will later note in connection with Saul the persecutor, turned into the Apostle Paul. Here he soberly cautions the Sanhedrin, those *status quo* heads of state and religion, not to play

with fire, at least not the Fire of the Holy Spirit, though that was not exactly the way Gamaliel framed it. He is to be commended for his wisdom and sense. Nonetheless, they had the Apostles nevertheless flogged, despite their being advised that God might directing the Apostles' activity.

So now *both religious freedom and the person of the Apostles were dishonored*, and thus, the Church enters into the *first phase of persecution*. More than half of the first 300 years of the Christian growth in the Roman Empire was bloodied with torturous butchery and persecution. When England was in the throes of its own persecution under Henry VIII, *Saint Thomas More* went to his beheading with those famous words: *"I die the King's good servant, but God's first."* During the French Revolution, Carmelite sisters and others went to the guillotine, for holding firm to their faith. So have Catholics in nearly every land and in all centuries. While the Holy Spirit gives what is needed to say and do what is right: "Do not be concerned about what you will say in tribunals and courts. It will be given to you." And Peter led the way in this trust.

Of course *religious freedom* implies that individual consciences be formed from the teaching authority of faith and morals of the Church. We are not to act as if one's opinion is somehow to supersede the universal teaching handed down to us for our good.

Connected with this is *Conscientious objection* - a favorite and honored feature of principled behavior. The abolitionist movement against slavery in the nineteenth century and the non-violent civil disobedience of the Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King in mid-twentieth is reflected as honorable, even noble - though not necessarily from the outset. More recently, *Operation Rescue*

featured prayerful non-violence by blocking abortion doors and thereby "rescuing" - if only for hours - the child destined for elimination inside. All these paid a price - jail or fines.

These modern movements have their prototypes in Scripture. Well before the Apostles' courage, we find them in the historical accounts of the Old Testament too - valiant Jews who resisted tyranny, for instance as described in the Book of Maccabees, were gladly and proudly willing to die for their faith, in that case being scourged to death rather than eating meats forbidden by their Law. And the prophets were persecuted. *They too must obey God rather than man.*

Religious freedom. Our Founding Fathers made sure, in drafting the Constitution, that the *federal government* was specifically forbidden to define or interpret or interject or interfere or coerce what religious tenets one person or group should or should not hold, nor how its beliefs should play out or be winked at. *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*

There are two concerns here - *establishment clause* AND *free exercise clause*. Comparatively, the Apostles insisted on both freedom of *worship* and freedom to *promote* the faith and baptize and teach - come what may!

The earliest Christian *worship* in their homes is recorded in Acts of the Apostles and their movement out into the public square is what drew the attention of the Jewish leaders, as soon as they were rescued from jail. It took centuries to guarantee both aspects of religious freedom, well beyond the demise of the Roman Empire's persecutions. That is why nations have honored a conscience clause as a result of taking the fruit of Christianity throughout the ebb and flow of persecution. It

would be an immense tragedy if civilization lost the gumption to insist that this freedom, so long and hard fought, once again is eclipsed because of indifference, agnostic neo-think, or sheer complacency.

Let's take a moment even here to prayerfully respond as Peter and the Apostles would in **obeying God** rather than obeying a bad law or mandate or an unconstitutional prohibition against the free exercise of religion....

With the legislative passing of Obamacare (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) and its enormous shift in health care particularly in the HHS Mandate that has been in contention for over a year, Churches and even commercial businesses have been threatened crippling penalties should they not capitulate to the new law which redefines without conscience clause or necessity healthcare benefits.

1) religious freedom is seriously infringed upon by the government as the Mandate demands insurance policies of church employees to provide for contraceptives and/or abortifacients.

2) the attempt to sideline this feature to a third party, the insurance company, simply shifts the blame. In either case the Church is forced to allow participation as a gateway to what it deems **gravely sinful**.

3) The provision that a Church has a year to comply with the change, now until August 2014, is another way of saying "we'll allow you a year to change your principles." No need to wait: **"We must obey God rather than man."** In the case of Priests For Life there was not even the year exemption granted.

In explaining its own suit against the Mandate Father Pavone, National Director of *Priests*

for Life indicated: This issue is not primarily about the Catholic Church; nor even limited to Churches and church institutions. But is primarily about America, and whether or not freedom of conscience will be respected and protected by the law of the land. The HHS mandate affects virtually every employer across the nation. Only a fraction of them are religious employers, and an even smaller fraction of those are Catholic.

What is happening here is a clash of worldviews. The Obama administration and other powerful forces on the other side of this battle see contraception, abortion, and sterilization as supposed goods to which all should -- indeed must -- have access. For the like-minded, it is the most natural that these "services" be mandated. And then even without a conscience exemption -- a first in legal execution and a dangerous precedent. So much for freedom of choice!

We as Catholics and other Churches do not serve others because of **their** beliefs; we serve them because of **our** beliefs . As clearly dramatized in the unfolding of Acts of the Apostles, Living the faith means spreading the faith and having a mission to all as Jesus commanded. But this mandate puts an undue burden on this. It does not make room for **conscientious objection** and that is even more dangerous to the future of freedom.

Moreover, the government should not be defining who is religious enough to qualify as a religious entity. Priests for Life was one of the first organizations to file a lawsuit against the HHS mandate. Yesterday there was an important hearing in Brooklyn and we ask for your prayers for a favorable outcome. You can catch information on **catholic.org** where you can find updates and a tribute to a here and now courage in action. ***We must obey God rather than men.***

Please pray daily for the prevention of government oppression against the free exercise of religion in our land.

This morning's Gospel says the Apostles **“rejoiced that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the Name.”** It was a badge of honor to suffer dishonor for the Lord. In obedience to His own suffering, of which they were falling in love to proclaim. For **“All day long they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Christ, Jesus.”** That was the work of the Holy Spirit, Fire of Life, the Lord, the Giver of Life!

May He dwell in you to fire your heart to defend and promote the right to full religious freedom and the protection of conscience to observe, decide and act upon what is right and just.