Overcoming America’s profound confusion about freedom...



**Our nation’s survival lies not in limitless libertarianism,
but in laws and customs and habits that restrain selfish impulses.**

Casey Chalk

The Left, Republicans warned in this year’s election, hate liberty. “They want to steal your liberty, your freedom,” declared prominent former Fox News host Kimberly Guilfoyle during an August 24th speech at the Republican National Convention. Guilfoyle cited as an example liberal attempts to limit “what you see and think and believe.” Others, more articulately, pointed to oppressive and illogical restrictions on public worship in Democratic-controlled jurisdictions during the covid-19 crisis, or liberal media and academia’s aggressive narrowing of “allowable opinions.”

Yet, if you listen to the Left, it is Republicans who are the real freedom-haters. Democrats will cite pro-life attacks on “a woman’s right to choose.” They’ll accuse Republicans of trying to obstruct Americans from voting. They’ll point to the Right’s opposition to homosexual access to legal marriage and transgender access to the U.S military or the bathroom of their choice. They’ll warn, as the Washington Post and New York Times often have, that the Trump administration’s policies — especially during the year’s civil unrest — were nothing less than oppressive totalitarianism.

Who is correct? Trying to determine which political party and ideology represents freedom and which one represents authoritarianism is at the heart of contemporary political debates in America.

And, in truth, the debate obscures questions far more fundamental to American politics. These include: are all freedoms created equal? If not, which freedoms are more important, and why? And is freedom for anything?

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre diagnosed this problem — in which both parties think their ideological opponents are anti-liberty — almost forty years ago in his book After Virtue. “It is precisely because there is in our society no established way of deciding between these claims that moral argument appears to be necessarily interminable,” he observes. Conservatives and liberals have fundamentally different paradigmatic assumptions about the nature of liberty. Thus debate reduces to “pure assertion and counter-assertion,” that persuades no one but one’s ideological allies.

Catholics — whose intellectual tradition has much to say about these questions — need to be at the forefront of helping America answer these questions. This is because Catholicism’s long relationship with natural law — which draws upon pre-Christian and non-Christian sources like Plato, Aristote, Cicero, and Confucious — allows it to speak with authority and persuasion in a pluralist society that does not presume Christianity. Indeed, the Catholic tradition can help inform a revitalized conservatism that answers the most pressing political questions of the day.

Consider the first question mentioned above: are all freedoms created equal? The answer cannot be yes. A simple examination of recent legal fights in the United States makes this abundantly obvious. Many individuals and organizations — cake bakers, photographers, and religious organizations such as schools, adoption agencies, and hospitals — assert that their freedom of religion protects them from government interference. Many others disagree,

declaring that their sexual or gender identity, or reproductive health care needs, trumps religious freedom, and secures their right to purchase wedding cakes or photography services, to have access to any job, or receive whatever health-care services they desire.

The question ultimately comes down to what matters more — religious belief or something else, such as gender or sexual identity or "reproductive rights." The Catholic Church has answered this question. In his encyclical **Veritatis Splendor**, John Paul II wrote that "*the right to religious freedom and to respect for conscience on its journey towards the truth is increasingly perceived as the foundation of the cumulative rights of the person*
" (§31). Religious freedom is most fundamental because of what it communicates about the human person, namely, that he has an inherent dignity stemming from his transcendent origin and end. We can appreciate that in many ways, including, naturally, the fact that humans possess intellects and wills, qualities that differentiate them from the rest of creation.

If man has no transcendent origin or end, and nothing differentiates him from the rest of the natural order, then he has no real rights, and can be instrumentalized and exploited in the same way that we treat plants, animals, or any natural resource.

It's not just that not all freedoms are created equally. Some "freedoms" are dehumanizing, dangerous, and deadly. The "freedom" to abort a child has eliminated 60 million American citizens since Roe v. Wade. The freedom to consume pornography propels human-trafficking and addiction. The freedom of no-fault divorce damages children and levies huge sociological and financial burdens on our nation. Those are pretty tangible social and economic results of false freedoms. Yet if humans have a transcendent end, then the consequences are even graver.

This is because freedom is not for freedom in-and-of-itself. "I hold it to be an impious and detestable maxim that, politically speaking, the people have a right to do anything," argued Alexis de Tocqueville. Rather, our freedoms are oriented towards a greater transcendent good. To cite Veritatis Splendor once more, "the moral life has an essential "teleological" character, since it consists in the deliberate ordering of human acts to God, the supreme good and ultimate end (telos) of man" (§73). Legitimate political freedoms, then, are those that help man realize objective goods (e.g. health, virtue, worship) that help him achieve his supernatural end in God.

Our nation's survival lies not in limitless libertarianism, but in laws and customs and habits that

restrain selfish impulses. Catholics can help conservatives articulate and promote a vision of freedom that protects life and engenders human happiness — we can call it freedom to flourish. Of course this should include the protection of the unborn and infirm, and freedom to worship. It might also entail commonsense gun legislation or sustainable energy solutions that protect, respectively, citizens and our environment.

Alternatively, we can call the pseudo-freedoms typically promoted by the Left — among them reproductive rights and the supposed right for even children to change their gender identity — as freedoms of failure. They fail not only because they are destructive, but because they undermine human dignity and obscure man's natural and supernatural ends, and thus his happiness. As Augustine wrote: "The will is truly free when it is not the slave of vices and sins."

America is profoundly confused about freedom, sometimes manifested in absurdly hyperbolic polemics. I think of conservative radio host Sebastian Gorka's assertion at the 2019 CPAC that liberals "want to take away your hamburgers." Or, alternatively, liberal claims that Trump's supposedly bellicose, interventionist foreign policy would threaten international freedom (the president actually started no new wars).

Other times, the confusion is more serious and concerning. Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg in their recent dissents in Our Lady of Guadalupe v. Morrissey-Berru, St. James School v. Biel sought to limit the "ministerial exemption" of religious institutions. Incoming Democratic VP Kamala Harris attempted to impose a religious litmus test on a judicial nominee because of his association with the Knights of Columbus. If such political figures get their way, it would present an immediate, existential threat to the Catholic Church in America.

We require a robust, coherent political narrative to both rebut attacks on religious freedom and to clarify, rather than obscure what freedoms are authentic. The Catholic tradition can do this in a way that appeals to many outside it, because it appeals to truths that are not exclusive to the Catholic faith. It is a tradition aligned with Aristotle, Aquinas, Burke, and Kirk, all of whom understood freedom not in the language of radical autonomy but in that of final causality. Man's transcendent origin and telos limits his autonomy, while illuminating what allows him to flourish. If we cannot persuade Americans of this, our nation will most certainly fail.

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