

## *DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ*— RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS

There have, understandably, been a number of objections raised to the theses set forth in the three articles published on this website criticising the Declaration on Religious Freedom of the Second Vatican Council. We deal here with the first of them, first setting out the critic's objections (which are cast in the third person) then offering our responses.

### THE OBJECTION

“1. First, he asserts that freedom (liberty) is of one of two types, natural liberty or moral liberty. And he complains that *Dignitatis Humanae* doesn't make clear which type of liberty it is talking about.

“In fact, the Council Fathers were so concerned to make clear what kind of 'liberty' they would be treating of in this document that they took the extraordinary step of giving it a sub-title spelling this out: 'On the right of persons and communities to *social and civil* liberty in religious matters'. (It seems [he] has ignored this subtitle altogether, even though no other Council document even *has* an official sub-title.)

“This kind of liberty is neither natural liberty (i.e., the possession of free will), nor moral liberty, both of which are internal, spiritual, realities, but simply the *absence of external coercion* - as when we talk about a 'free' man in contrast to a slave or a prisoner. Then, in the text itself, in the very first sentence of the document, *Dignitatis Humanae* makes clear that this freedom *from coercion* is what the Declaration will be about: people want to act, it says, *non coercitione commoti, sed officii conscientia ducti*. The second sentence then talks about the same kind of freedom, referring to the increasing demand for a 'juridical limitation of the public power' - i.e., limits on what *government* can do to forcibly restrict the activity of persons and groups.

“Then, in the key article 2, the Fathers formally spell out unambiguously what exactly they mean by 'liberty' in this document: again, it is neither natural liberty nor moral liberty, but 'immunity from coercion... [whether] on the part of individuals, social groups, or any human power whatever'.

“2. Because he doesn't understand that this document is only about 'liberty' in the sense of 'immunity from coercion' (above all, from *government* coercion), [he], compounding error upon error, seizes upon no. 15 of Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* and announces to his readers that as Catholics we are obliged in conscience to dissent from... *Dignitatis Humanae*. Why? Because it supposedly contradicts Pius IX's condemnation of the proposition that 'Each man is free to embrace and profess the religion that he, led by the light of reason, considers to be true' (DS 2915 = Dz 1715). But as every serious scholar who has duly studied this issue realizes, Pius IX was merely condemning the idea that 'each man' is *morally* free to reject the supernatural revelation of the one true religion, and depend purely on his own unaided reason in arriving at a 'faith' of his own choice.

“When the teaching of *Syllabus* no. 15 is read in its original context (a papal epistle of 1851 and an allocution of 1862, both referenced in Denzinger, and the *Syllabus*

itself), this becomes still clearer. But even without consulting those sources, one can readily see in the text itself that the ‘freedom’ condemned by Pius IX cannot possibly be the same thing Vatican II is declaring as a human right in *Dignitatis Humanae*. Condemned proposition #15 makes a claim, not about what *ought to be* the case, but what *is* the case, regarding the ‘freedom’ it refers to. It says, ‘Every man *is* free to embrace... (*liberum cuique homini est eam amplecti . . .*)’. Now, if ‘free’ in this proposition meant ‘immune from (i.e., unimpeded by) coercion’ - which is the kind of freedom Vatican II has in mind - [p]roposition 15 of the *Syllabus* would cease to be a *doctrinal* proposition, whether orthodox or heterodox, and become a mere statement of (supposed) empirical fact - and an erroneous one at that. It would then be saying that, ‘Every man *is* immune from coercion’ in embracing and professing the religion his reason prefers. That would obviously have been factually false, then and now, because a great many men on earth, far from enjoying *immunity* from government coercion in trying to practise their preferred religion, find themselves *subject* to a good deal of it. In order for #15 to be in contradiction with *Dignitatis Humanae*, one would need to amend it, replacing ‘*is* free’ by ‘*ought to be* free’. But since it in fact is worded ‘*is* free’, the word ‘free’ can only mean ‘*morally* free’. And by virtue of this meaning, the proposition is indeed a doctrinal one, and - as Pius X teaches - doctrinally *false*, because nobody is in fact *morally* free (i.e., has an objective moral right) to embrace and profess any religion other than the true one.

“One can also see the point clearly enough on surveying the division of the *Syllabus* and its sub-headings. To begin with, No. 15 doesn’t even mention the question of coercion and/or immunity from it. Also, it occurs in section III of the document (nos. 15-18), headed ‘*Indifferentismus, latitudinarismus*’. This section is clearly dedicated to purely spiritual and moral issues, especially whether other religions are as good and salvifically profitable as Catholicism. The question of the role of the State in repressing certain forms of religious activity is in no way being raised here in #15. Condemned propositions having to do with what the State should or should not do are placed in sections VI and X of the *Syllabus*, which denounce the errors of social and political liberalism. ...

“The truth is that, far from contradicting *Syllabus* #15, *Dignitatis Humanae* explicitly reaffirms what Pius IX taught there - except that the Council does so in positive affirmations rather than negatively (by condemning the opposing error). DH #1 says that ‘all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, **and to embrace and retain** (*amplecti ac servare*) **that truth** once it is found’. In the next paragraph, still in #1, it refers to the ‘**moral duty**’ of men and societies ‘to the true religion and the one Church of Christ’. Now, this is precisely what Pius IX taught in *Syllabus* #15: to **affirm** that we are (morally) bound to embrace and retain the *true* religion and be members of ‘the one Church of Christ’ is, logically, to **deny** that we are (morally) free to embrace other religions.”

## THE RESPONSE

At the root of the errors in the Council Fathers’ teaching in *Dignitatis Humanae* and, indeed, of this criticism is the philosophical evil of subjectivism which confuses the real and the conceptual orders. The real distinction of human liberty is, as Leo XIII stated in *Libertas praestantissimum*, that between natural freedom and moral freedom. Where does freedom from coercion fit in?

Central to a correct understanding of the issues is the metaphysical doctrine of the proportionality between natures, powers, acts and ends. Every act of an hypostasis is specified by some power and this, in turn, is specified by the nature of the hypostasis. Man, the human person, is such an hypostasis. His nature gives him determinate powers including the power of free will. This power enables him to do determinate acts to attain the end for which he was created.

*Natural freedom* names two realities, the power of free will<sup>1</sup> and the acts of that power for, as St Thomas Aquinas teaches, “[a]lthough free will (*liberum arbitrium*) in its strict sense denotes an act, in the common manner of speaking we call free will that which is the principle of the act by which man judges freely.”<sup>2</sup>

*Freedom from coercion* names the same two realities but with a difference in emphasis. For whereas *natural freedom* refers primarily to the *power* of free will (“the principle of the act”), *freedom from coercion* refers primarily to the *act* of free will, for coercion does not affect the power, but its acts: a man under constraint retains his power of free will. Why is it not true to say that natural freedom identifies the *power*, and freedom from coercion the *acts* of the power, so that each expresses a distinct reality? Because each involves both power and act. *Natural freedom* connotes the exercise of the power in some act. *Freedom from coercion* connotes the power of which the act so freed is the exercise (free will, and not, e.g., intellect). Consistently with this, the Council Fathers do not restrict their claim merely to *acts* of free will of the human person, but include the *power*. This is implicit in their assertion that “the right to religious freedom has its foundation... in [the] very nature [of the human person]”<sup>3</sup>. Nor is it possible to make a claim in respect of the one without the other.

Hence *natural freedom* and *freedom from coercion* are not really distinct, but only conceptually so<sup>4</sup>, and the Council Fathers’ endeavour to accord *freedom from coercion* a unique reality is flawed.

Just as it is impossible for a man’s will to exist independently of his intellect (for the will is the appetite following upon intellect), so is it impossible that a man’s *natural freedom* be isolated from his *moral freedom*. In asserting a right to freedom from coercion in matters religious, then, the Council Fathers were asserting a *moral freedom* to choose one’s religion, or no religion.

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<sup>1</sup> And this is simply the will itself, for it belongs to the same power to will and to choose, as St Thomas teaches. *Summa Theologiae* I, 83, 4

<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I, 83, 2, resp. Act and power are really distinct from each other, as, e.g., the act of nutrition is distinct from the power of nutrition, the act of talking distinct from the power of speech; and so on.

<sup>3</sup> “[S]ed in ipsa eius natura ius ad libertatem religiosam fundatur.” *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 2. The power of free will is rooted in the nature of the person.

<sup>4</sup> St Thomas does not speak of ‘the free’ and ‘coercion’, but of ‘the voluntary’ and ‘the violent’. The *voluntary* is that which proceeds from an intrinsic principle with knowledge of end: the *violent*, that which proceeds from an extrinsic principle against the inclination of the subject.

Indeed, that *Dignitatis Humanae* teaches a *moral* freedom to choose one's religion is recognised by all the world. It is recognised by the Church's ministers; proved by Pope Paul VI's submission to the UN General Assembly in October 1965; by Pope John Paul's confirmation of this in 1979; and from the concerted actions of Popes and bishops in forsaking the Church's rightful position of eminence in the world.

The references of the critic to "juridical limitation of the public power" do not disturb the above analysis. Nor does the raising of the category "social or civil liberty", for this is simply natural freedom extended to society. His attempt, through linguistic analysis, to distinguish the terms in which Pius IX condemns, and *Dignitatis Humanae* endorses, religious freedom is artificial. Whether the one be expressed in terms of indication and the other of obligation matters not at all. What matters is *the reality* each is dealing with. His closing remarks in n. 2 have been addressed in an earlier paper. The appeals to Catholic teaching in one section of a document whose central thesis contradicts it is little more than window dressing.

### THE INSISTENCE

The critic has insisted that his analysis is correct:

"I can see no point in trying to argue further at this stage with someone who can make a categorical assertion as astonishingly and manifestly false as the following: *There is no such reality as freedom from coercion distinct from natural freedom. It is distinct only conceptually.* Try telling a man in prison or on his way to the gallows that there is no real distinction between being endowed by nature with free will and being free from coercion!"

### THE REPLY

The man in prison or on his way to the gallows, has the *power* of free will, the ground of natural freedom. What he lacks is its *exercise*<sup>5</sup>, the act of the power. It is *this* reality, the discrepancy between the power and its act, not the supposed distinction between natural freedom and freedom from coercion, to which the critic is appealing.

Michael Baker

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<sup>5</sup> Under some respect. He retains the exercise of freedom in other areas, such as whether he will eat, or not, express his indignation externally, or not, and so forth.