

DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ
ON THE RIGHT OF THE PERSON AND OF COMMUNITIES
TO SOCIAL AND CIVIL FREEDOM IN MATTERS RELIGIOUS
Promulgated By His Holiness Pope Paul VI
On December 7, 1965

1. A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man,⁽¹⁾ and the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty. The demand is likewise made that constitutional limits should be set to the powers of government, in order that there may be no encroachment on the rightful freedom of the person and of associations. This demand for freedom in human society chiefly regards the quest for the values proper to the human spirit. It regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society. This Vatican Council takes careful note of these desires in the minds of men. It proposes to declare them to be greatly in accord with truth and justice. To this end, it searches into the sacred tradition and doctrine of the Church—the treasury out of which the Church continually brings forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old. First, the council professes its belief that God Himself has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve Him, and thus be saved in Christ and come to blessedness. We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men. Thus He spoke to the Apostles: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have enjoined upon you” (Matt. 28: 19-20). On their part, all men are bound to seek the truth, especially in what concerns God and His Church, and to embrace the truth they come to know, and to hold fast to it.

This Vatican Council likewise professes its belief that it is upon the human conscience that these obligations fall and exert their binding force. The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power.

Religious freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. Therefore it leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.

Over and above all this, the council intends to develop the doctrine of recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person and the constitutional order of society.

2. This Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.

12. Cf. Matt. 11:29.
13. Cf. Matt. 11:28-30; John 6:67-68.
14. Cf. Matt. 9:28-29; Mark 9:23-24; 6:5-6; Paul VI, encycl. "Ecclesiam Suam", Aug. 6, 1964: AAS 56 (1964), pp. 642-643.
15. Cf. Matt. 11:20-24; Rom. 12:19-20; 2 Thess. 1:8.
16. Cf. Matt. 13:30 and 40-42.
17. Cf. Matt. 4:8-10; John 6:15.
18. Cf. Is. 42:1-4.
19. Cf. John 18:37.
20. Cf. Matt. 26:51-53; John 18:36.
21. Cf. John 12:32.
22. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:3-5; 1 Thess. 2:3-5.
23. Cf. Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 8:9-13; 10:23-33.
24. Cf. Eph. 6:19-20.
25. Cf. Rom. 1:16.
26. Cf. 2 Cor. 10:4; 1 Thess. 5:8-9.
27. Cf. Eph. 6:11-17.
28. Cf. 2 Cor. 10:3-5.
29. Cf. 1 Pet. 2:13-17.
30. Cf. Acts 4: 19-20.
31. Cf. Leo XIII, letter "Officio Sanctissimo", Dec. 22 1887: AAS 20 (1887), p. 269; idem, letter "Ex Litteris", April 7 1887: AAS 19 (1886), p. 465.
32. Cf. Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:18-20, Pius XII, encycl. "Summi Pontificatus", Oct. 20, 1939: AAS 31 (1939). pp. 445-446.
33. Cf. Pius XI, letter "Firmissiman Constantiam", March 28, 1937: AAS 29 (1937), p. 196.
34. Cf. Pius XII, allocution, "Ci Riesce", Dec. 6, 1953: AAS 45 (1953), p. 802.
35. Cf. Pius XII, radio message, March 23, 1952: AAS 44 (1952) pp. 270-278.
36. Cf. Acts 4:29.
37. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963:AAS 55 (1963), pp. 299-300.
38. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963:AAS 55 (1963) pp. 295-296.

order established by God for human life, if the free exercise of religion is denied in society, provided just public order is observed.

There is a further consideration. The religious acts whereby men, in private and in public and out of a sense of personal conviction, direct their lives to God transcend by their very nature the order of terrestrial and temporal affairs. Government therefore ought indeed to take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor, since the function of government is to make provision for the common welfare. However, it would clearly transgress the limits set to its power, were it to presume to command or inhibit acts that are religious.

4. The freedom or immunity from coercion in matters religious which is the endowment of persons as individuals is also to be recognized as their right when they act in community. Religious communities are a requirement of the social nature both of man and of religion itself.

Provided the just demands of public order are observed, religious communities rightfully claim freedom in order that they may govern themselves according to their own norms, honor the Supreme Being in public worship, assist their members in the practice of the religious life, strengthen them by instruction, and promote institutions in which they may join together for the purpose of ordering their own lives in accordance with their religious principles.

Religious communities also have the right not to be hindered, either by legal measures or by administrative action on the part of government, in the selection, training, appointment, and transferral of their own ministers, in communicating with religious authorities and communities abroad, in erecting buildings for religious purposes, and in the acquisition and use of suitable funds or properties.

Religious communities also have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching and witness to their faith, whether by the spoken or by the written word. However, in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or of a kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one's right and a violation of the right of others.

In addition, it comes within the meaning of religious freedom that religious communities should not be prohibited from freely undertaking to show the special value of their doctrine in what concerns the organization of society and the inspiration of the whole of human activity. Finally, the social nature of man and the very nature of religion afford the foundation of the right of men freely to hold meetings and to establish educational, cultural, charitable and social organizations, under the impulse of their own religious sense.

5. The family, since it is a society in its own original right, has the right freely to live its own domestic religious life under the guidance of parents. Parents, moreover, have the right to determine, in accordance with their own religious beliefs, the kind of religious education that their children are to receive. Government, in consequence, must acknowledge the right of parents to make a genuinely free choice of schools and of other means of education, and the use of this

This independence is precisely what the authorities of the Church claim in society.(34) At the same time, the Christian faithful, in common with all other men, possess the civil right not to be hindered in leading their lives in accordance with their consciences. Therefore, a harmony exists between the freedom of the Church and the religious freedom which is to be recognized as the right of all men and communities and sanctioned by constitutional law.

14. In order to be faithful to the divine command, “teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20), the Catholic Church must work with all urgency and concern “that the word of God be spread abroad and glorified” (2 Thess. 3:1). Hence the Church earnestly begs of its children that, “first of all, supplications, prayers, petitions, acts of thanksgiving be made for all men.... For this is good and agreeable in the sight of God our Savior, who wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:1-4). In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church.(35) For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origins in human nature itself. Furthermore, let Christians walk in wisdom in the face of those outside, “in the Holy Spirit, in unaffected love, in the word of truth” (2 Cor. 6:6-7), and let them be about their task of spreading the light of life with all confidence(36) and apostolic courage, even to the shedding of their blood.

The disciple is bound by a grave obligation toward Christ, his Master, ever more fully to understand the truth received from Him, faithfully to proclaim it, and vigorously to defend it, never-be it understood-having recourse to means that are incompatible with the spirit of the Gospel. At the same time, the charity of Christ urges him to love and have prudence and patience in his dealings with those who are in error or in ignorance with regard to the faith. (37) All is to be taken into account - the Christian duty to Christ, the life-giving word which must be proclaimed, the rights of the human person, and the measure of grace granted by God through Christ to men who are invited freely to accept and profess the faith.

15. The fact is that men of the present day want to be able freely to profess their religion in private and in public. Indeed, religious freedom has already been declared to be a civil right in most constitutions, and it is solemnly recognized in international documents. (38) The further fact is that forms of government still exist under which, even though freedom of religious worship receives constitutional recognition, the powers of government are engaged in the effort to deter citizens from the profession of religion and to make life very difficult and dangerous for religious communities.

This council greets with joy the first of these two facts as among the signs of the times. With sorrow, however, it denounces the other fact, as only to be deplored. The council exhorts Catholics, and it directs a plea to all men, most carefully to consider how greatly necessary religious freedom is, especially in the present condition of the human family. All nations are coming into even closer unity. Men of different cultures and religions are being brought together in closer relationships. There is a growing consciousness of the personal responsibility that every man has.

this protection. However, government is not to act in an arbitrary fashion or in an unfair spirit of partisanship. Its action is to be controlled by juridical norms which are in conformity with the objective moral order. These norms arise out of the need for the effective safeguard of the rights of all citizens and for the peaceful settlement of conflicts of rights, also out of the need for an adequate care of genuine public peace, which comes about when men live together in good order and in true justice, and finally out of the need for a proper guardianship of public morality.

These matters constitute the basic component of the common welfare: they are what is meant by public order. For the rest, the usages of society are to be the usages of freedom in their full range: that is, the freedom of man is to be respected as far as possible and is not to be curtailed except when and insofar as necessary.

8. Many pressures are brought to bear upon the men of our day, to the point where the danger arises lest they lose the possibility of acting on their own judgment. On the other hand, not a few can be found who seem inclined to use the name of freedom as the pretext for refusing to submit to authority and for making light of the duty of obedience. Wherefore this Vatican Council urges everyone, especially those who are charged with the task of educating others, to do their utmost to form men who, on the one hand, will respect the moral order and be obedient to lawful authority, and on the other hand, will be lovers of true freedom - men, in other words, who will come to decisions on their own judgment and in the light of truth, govern their activities with a sense of responsibility, and strive after what is true and right, willing always to join with others in cooperative effort.

Religious freedom therefore ought to have this further purpose and aim, namely, that men may come to act with greater responsibility in fulfilling their duties in community life.

9. The declaration of this Vatican Council on the right of man to religious freedom has its foundation in the dignity of the person, whose exigencies have come to be are fully known to human reason through centuries of experience. What is more, this doctrine of freedom has roots in divine revelation, and for this reason Christians are bound to respect it all the more conscientiously. Revelation does not indeed affirm in so many words the right of man to immunity from external coercion in matters religious. It does, however, disclose the dignity of the human person in its full dimensions. It gives evidence of the respect which Christ showed toward the freedom with which man is to fulfill his duty of belief in the word of God and it gives us lessons in the spirit which disciples of such a Master ought to adopt and continually follow. Thus further light is cast upon the general principles upon which the doctrine of this declaration on religious freedom is based. In particular, religious freedom in society is entirely consonant with the freedom of the act of Christian faith.

10. It is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free: no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will. (8) This doctrine is contained in the word of God and it was constantly proclaimed by the Fathers of the Church. (7) The act of faith is of its very nature a free act. Man, redeemed by Christ the Savior and through Christ Jesus called to be God's adopted son,(9) cannot give his adherence to God revealing Himself unless, under the drawing of the Father,(10) he offers to God the reasonable

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. (2) This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.

It is in accordance with their dignity as persons - that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility - that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth. However, men cannot discharge these obligations in a manner in keeping with their own nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom. Therefore the right to religious freedom has its foundation not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, the right to this immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it and the exercise of this right is not to be impeded, provided that just public order be observed.

3. Further light is shed on the subject if one considers that the highest norm of human life is the divine law - eternal, objective and universal - whereby God orders, directs and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community by a plan conceived in wisdom and love. Man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that, under the gentle disposition of divine Providence, he can come to perceive ever more fully the truth that is unchanging. Wherefore every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means.

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.

Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it.

On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious. The reason is that the exercise of religion, of its very nature, consists before all else in those internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind. (3) The social nature of man, however, itself requires that he should give external expression to his internal acts of religion: that he should share with others in matters religious; that he should profess his religion in community. Injury therefore is done to the human person and to the very

freedom of choice is not to be made a reason for imposing unjust burdens on parents, whether directly or indirectly. Besides, the right of parents are violated, if their children are forced to attend lessons or instructions which are not in agreement with their religious beliefs, or if a single system of education, from which all religious formation is excluded, is imposed upon all.

6. Since the common welfare of society consists in the entirety of those conditions of social life under which men enjoy the possibility of achieving their own perfection in a certain fullness of measure and also with some relative ease, it chiefly consists in the protection of the rights, and in the performance of the duties, of the human person.⁽⁴⁾ Therefore the care of the right to religious freedom devolves upon the whole citizenry, upon social groups, upon government, and upon the Church and other religious communities, in virtue of the duty of all toward the common welfare, and in the manner proper to each.

The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man ranks among the essential duties of government. (5) Therefore government is to assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all its citizens, in an effective manner, by just laws and by other appropriate means.

Government is also to help create conditions favorable to the fostering of religious life, in order that the people may be truly enabled to exercise their religious rights and to fulfill their religious duties, and also in order that society itself may profit by the moral qualities of justice and peace which have their origin in men's faithfulness to God and to His holy will. (6)

If, in view of peculiar circumstances obtaining among peoples, special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional order of society, it is at the same time imperative that the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom should be recognized and made effective in practice.

Finally, government is to see to it that equality of citizens before the law, which is itself an element of the common good, is never violated, whether openly or covertly, for religious reasons. Nor is there to be discrimination among citizens.

It follows that a wrong is done when government imposes upon its people, by force or fear or other means, the profession or repudiation of any religion, or when it hinders men from joining or leaving a religious community. All the more is it a violation of the will of God and of the sacred rights of the person and the family of nations when force is brought to bear in any way in order to destroy or repress religion, either in the whole of mankind or in a particular country or in a definite community.

7. The right to religious freedom is exercised in human society: hence its exercise is subject to certain regulatory norms. In the use of all freedoms the moral principle of personal and social responsibility is to be observed. In the exercise of their rights, individual men and social groups are bound by the moral law to have respect both for the rights of others and for their own duties toward others and for the common welfare of all. Men are to deal with their fellows in justice and civility.

Furthermore, society has the right to defend itself against possible abuses committed on the pretext of freedom of religion. It is the special duty of government to provide

All this is evident. Consequently, in order that relationships of peace and harmony be established and maintained within the whole of mankind, it is necessary that religious freedom be everywhere provided with an effective constitutional guarantee and that respect be shown for the high duty and right of man freely to lead his religious life in society.

May the God and Father of all grant that the human family, through careful observance of the principle of religious freedom in society, may be brought by the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to the sublime and unending and "glorious freedom of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:21).

NOTES

1. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963: AAS 55 (1963) p. 279; *ibid.*, p. 265; Pius XII, radio message, Dec. 24, 1944: AAS 37 (1945), p. 14.
2. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963: AAS 55 (1963), pp. 260-261; Pius XII, radio message, Dec. 24, 1942: AAS 35 (1943), p. 19; Pius XI, encycl. "Mit Brennender Sorge", March 14, 1937: AAS 29 (1937), p. 160; Leo XIII, encycl. "Libertas Praestantissimum", June 20, 1888: Acts of Leo XIII 8 (1888), p. 237-238.
3. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963: AAS 55 (1963), p. 270; Paul VI, radio message, Dec. 22, 1964: AAS 57 (1965), pp. 181-182.
4. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Mater et Magistra", May 15, 1961: AAS 53 (1961), p. 417; *idem*, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963: AAS 55 (1963), p. 273.
5. Cf. John XXIII, encycl. "Pacem in Terris", April 11, 1963: AAS 55 (1963), pp. 273-274; Pius XII, radio message, June 1 1941: AAS 33 (1941), p. 200.
6. Cf. Leo XIII, encycl. "Immortale Dei", Nov. 1, 1885: AAS 18 (1885) p. 161.
7. Cf. Lactantius "Divinarum Institutionum", Book V, 19: CSEL 19, pp. 463-464, 465: PL 6, 614 and 616 (ch. 20); St. Ambrose, "Epistola ad Valentianum Imp.", Letter 21: PL 16, 1005; St. Augustine, "Contra Litteras Petilianum", Book II, ch. 83: CSEL 52 p. 112: PL 43, 315; cf. C. 23, q. 5, c. 33, (ed. Friedberg, col. 939); *idem*, Letter 23: PL 33, 98, *idem*, Letter 34: PL 33, 132; *idem*, Letter 35: PL 33, 135; St. Gregory the Great, "Epistola ad Virgilium et Theodorum Episcopos Massiliae Galliarum, Register of Letters I, 45: MGH Ep. 1, p. 72: PL 77, 510-511 (Book I, ep. 47); *idem*, "Epistola ad Johannem Episcopum Constantinopolitanum", Register of Letters, III, 52: MGH Letter 1, p. 210: PL 77, 649 (Book III, Letter 53); cf. D. 45, c. 1 (ed. Friedberg, col. 160); Council of Toledo IV, c. 57: Mansi 10, 633; cf. D. 45, c. 5 (ed. Friedberg, col. 161-162); Clement III: X., V, 6, 9: ed. Friedberg, col. 774; Innocent III, "Epistola ad Arelatensem Archiepiscopum", X., III, 42, 3: Friedberg, col. 646.
8. Cf. CIC, c. 1351; Pius XII, allocution to prelate auditors and other officials and administrators of the tribune of the Holy Roman Rota, Oct. 6, 1946: AAS 38 (1946), p. 394; *idem*. Encycl. *Mystici Corporis*", June 29, 1943: AAS (1943) p. 243.
9. Cf. Eph. 1:5.
10. Cf. John 6:44.
11. Cf. John 13:13.

and free submission of faith. It is therefore completely in accord with the nature of faith that in matters religious every manner of coercion on the part of men should be excluded. In consequence, the principle of religious freedom makes no small contribution to the creation of an environment in which men can without hindrance be invited to the Christian faith, embrace it of their own free will, and profess it effectively in their whole manner of life.

11. God calls men to serve Him in spirit and in truth, hence they are bound in conscience but they stand under no compulsion. God has regard for the dignity of the human person whom He Himself created and man is to be guided by his own judgment and he is to enjoy freedom. This truth appears at its height in Christ Jesus, in whom God manifested Himself and His ways with men. Christ is at once our Master and our Lord(11) and also meek and humble of heart.(12) In attracting and inviting His disciples He used patience.(13) He wrought miracles to illuminate His teaching and to establish its truth, but His intention was to rouse faith in His hearers and to confirm them in faith, not to exert coercion upon them.(14) He did indeed denounce the unbelief of some who listened to Him, but He left vengeance to God in expectation of the day of judgment.(15) When He sent His Apostles into the world, He said to them: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved. He who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). But He Himself, noting that the cockle had been sown amid the wheat, gave orders that both should be allowed to grow until the harvest time, which will come at the end of the world. (16) He refused to be a political messiah, ruling by force :(17) He preferred to call Himself the Son of Man, who came “to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many” (Mark 10:45). He showed Himself the perfect servant of God, (18) who “does not break the bruised reed nor extinguish the smoking flax” (Matt. 12:20).

He acknowledged the power of government and its rights, when He commanded that tribute be given to Caesar: but He gave clear warning that the higher rights of God are to be kept inviolate: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). In the end, when He completed on the cross the work of redemption whereby He achieved salvation and true freedom for men, He brought His revelation to completion. For He bore witness to the truth, (19) but He refused to impose the truth by force on those who spoke against it. Not by force of blows does His rule assert its claims.(20) It is established by witnessing to the truth and by hearing the truth, and it extends its dominion by the love whereby Christ, lifted up on the cross, draws all men to Himself.(21)

Taught by the word and example of Christ, the Apostles followed the same way. From the very origins of the Church the disciples of Christ strove to convert men to faith in Christ as the Lord; not, however, by the use of coercion or of devices unworthy of the Gospel, but by the power, above all, of the word of God. (22) Steadfastly they proclaimed to all the plan of God our Savior, “who wills that all men should be saved and come to the acknowledgment of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). At the same time, however, they showed respect for those of weaker stuff, even though they were in error, and thus they made it plain that “each one of us is to render to God an account of himself” (Romans 14:12),(23) and for that reason is bound to obey his conscience. Like Christ Himself, the Apostles were unceasingly bent upon bearing witness to the truth of God, and they showed the fullest measure of boldness in “speaking the word with confidence” (Acts 4:31) (24) before the people and their

rulers. With a firm faith they held that the Gospel is indeed the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.(25) Therefore they rejected all “carnal weapons:(26) they followed the example of the gentleness and respectfulness of Christ and they preached the word of God in the full confidence that there was resident in this word itself a divine power able to destroy all the forces arrayed against God(27) and bring men to faith in Christ and to His service.(28) As the Master, so too the Apostles recognized legitimate civil authority. “For there is no power except from God”, the Apostle teaches, and thereafter commands: “Let everyone be subject to higher authorities.... He who resists authority resists God’s ordinance” (Romans 13:1-5). (29) At the same time, however, they did not hesitate to speak out against governing powers which set themselves in opposition to the holy will of God: “It is necessary to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).(30) This is the way along which the martyrs and other faithful have walked through all ages and over all the earth.

12. In faithfulness therefore to the truth of the Gospel, the Church is following the way of Christ and the apostles when she recognizes and gives support to the principle of religious freedom as befitting the dignity of man and as being in accord with divine revelation. Throughout the ages the Church has kept safe and handed on the doctrine received from the Master and from the apostles. In the life of the People of God, as it has made its pilgrim way through the vicissitudes of human history, there has at times appeared a way of acting that was hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel or even opposed to it. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Church that no one is to be coerced into faith has always stood firm.

Thus the leaven of the Gospel has long been about its quiet work in the minds of men, and to it is due in great measure the fact that in the course of time men have come more widely to recognize their dignity as persons, and the conviction has grown stronger that the person in society is to be kept free from all manner of coercion in matters religious.

13. Among the things that concern the good of the Church and indeed the welfare of society here on earth - things therefore that are always and everywhere to be kept secure and defended against all injury - this certainly is preeminent, namely, that the Church should enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires. (31) This is a sacred freedom, because the only-begotten Son endowed with it the Church which He purchased with His blood. Indeed it is so much the property of the Church that to act against it is to act against the will of God. The freedom of the Church is the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and governments and the whole civil order.

In human society and in the face of government the Church claims freedom for herself in her character as a spiritual authority, established by Christ the Lord, upon which there rests, by divine mandate, the duty of going out into the whole world and preaching the Gospel to every creature. (32) The Church also claims freedom for herself in her character as a society of men who have the right to live in society in accordance with the precepts of the Christian faith. (33)

In turn, where the principle of religious freedom is not only proclaimed in words or simply incorporated in law but also given sincere and practical application, there the Church succeeds in achieving a stable situation of right as well as of fact and the independence which is necessary for the fulfillment of her divine mission.