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## The Doctrinal Errors of Dignitatis Humanae

### Pastoral Letter by Bishop Mark A. Pivarunas, CMRI

February 2, 1995

Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin

Dearly beloved in Christ,

This new year of 1995 marks thirty years since the close of the Second Vatican Council, and without a doubt the confusion, division and loss of faith within the Catholic Church can be directly attributed to some of the decrees and declarations of this Council. Among such decrees, the most controversial during the Council, and the most destructive of the Catholic Faith after the Council, was the decree *Dignitatis Humanae* on Religious Liberty, promulgated by Paul VI on December 7, 1965.

The reason this decree was the most controversial and the most destructive is that it explicitly taught doctrines previously condemned by past Popes. And this was so blatant that many conservative Council Fathers opposed it to the very end; while even the liberal cardinals, bishops and theologians who promoted the teachings of *Dignitatis Humanae* had to confess their inability to reconcile this decree with the past condemnations of Popes. Let us examine the doctrinal errors of this decree on Religious Liberty to see what caused all this controversy during the Second Vatican Council.

At the very outset, let us consider the important principles involved in this matter. The first principle to consider is the term *right*. Right is defined as the moral power residing in a person — a power which all others are bound to respect — of doing, possessing, or requiring something. Right is founded on law. For the existence of a right in one person involves an obligation in all others of not impeding or violating that right. Now, it is only law that can impose such an obligation — whether it be natural law (in nature, God-given); or positive law, both of which are founded (as all true law) ultimately upon the Eternal Law of God. Hence, the ultimate basis of right is God's Eternal Law.

There are many people today who clamor for their "rights." Some claim to have the "right" to kill an unborn child in the womb; some claim the "right" to sell pornography; others claim the "right" to sell and promote contraceptives; still others claim the "right" to be assisted by a doctor in suicide. In this sense, these so-called "rights" are not true rights at all. They are against the laws of God: "Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not commit adultery." Man may have the *free will* to commit sin but he does not have the right — the moral power. This is the primary reason that society is presently is

such a sad state. This is the reason immorality is so rampant and the "moral fiber" of society is so torn. Man has departed from the laws of God and blindly follows after his own lusts and passions.

Now let us consider matters one step further. If man has not the "right" to disregard the laws of God, neither has he the "right" to be indifferent in his duties toward his Creator. As Catholics, we know that God has revealed to mankind one religion by which He is to be worshipped. This religion was divinely revealed by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Promised Messiah, the Redeemer. Jesus Christ fulfilled the prophecies concerning the Promised Messiah, claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of God, and publicly worked the most stupendous miracles (especially His Resurrection) to prove His claim. No other religion has this divine proof. Jesus Christ Himself founded a Church which we know from Sacred Scripture, Tradition and actual history to be the Catholic Church. To this Church, Jesus Christ gave His very own Divine Authority "to teach all nations":

"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (John 20:21).

"He who hears you, hears Me" (Luke 10:16).

"Go, therefore, and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you and behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" (Matt. 28:19).

"Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature... he who is baptized and believes shall be saved and he who does not believe shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

Pope Pius IX, in his encyclical *Singulari Quadam* (December 9, 1854), expressed man's necessity to have the true religion to guide him and heavenly grace to strengthen him:

Since it is certain that the light of reason has been dimmed, and that the human race has fallen miserably from its former state of justice and innocence because of original sin, which is communicated to all the descendants of Adam, can anyone still think that reason by itself is sufficient for the attainment of truth? If one is to avoid slipping and falling in the midst of such great dangers and in the face of such weakness, dare he deny that divine religion and heavenly grace are necessary for salvation?

To return to the point, can man be said to have the "right" to worship God in any manner he wishes? Can man be said to have the "right" to freely promote false teachings on religious matters in society and to spread promiscuously all manner of erroneous doctrines? Can man be said to possess the "right" — the moral power — to teach and proselytize the doctrines of Atheism, Agnosticism, Pantheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Protestantism? What about those who practice witchcraft or Satanism? Let us especially consider this in regard to Catholic countries where the religion of the country is Catholicism. Would Catholic governments be obliged to grant the "right" in civil law to propagate all forms of religion? Would Catholic governments be obliged to allow by civil right the spread of all manner of doctrines held by various religions. To answer these questions, let us review the teachings of the Popes, the Vicars of Christ on earth.

In regard to the term *right*, Pope Leo XIII taught in *Libertas* (June 20, 1888):

"Right is a moral faculty, and as We have said, and it cannot be too often repeated, it would be absurd to believe that it belongs naturally and without distinction to truth and to lies, to good and to evil."

And as for the matter of the obligations of governments, Pope Pius XII taught in his address to Catholic lawyers *Ci Riesce* (December 6, 1953):

"It must be clearly affirmed that no human authority, no State, no Community of States, of whatever religious character, can give a positive mandate or a positive authorization to teach or to do that which would be contrary to religious truth or moral good... Whatever does not respond to truth and the moral law has objectively no right to existence, nor to propaganda, nor to action."

Once again, to answer the above questions on religious liberty, the real issue is this: **error** and **false** religions cannot be the object of a natural right. (By natural is meant in nature, God-given!) When societies grant promiscuously the right to freedom of all religions, the natural outcome is religious indifferentism — the false notion that one religion is as good as another. Let us continue our study of the Papal teachings on this matter.

*Letter to the Bishop of Troyes* by Pope Pius VII (1814):

"Our heart is even more deeply afflicted by a new cause of sorrow which, We admit, torments Us, and gives rise to profound dejection and extreme anguish: it is Article 22 of the Constitution. Not only does it permit the liberty of cults and of conscience, to cite the very terms of the article, but it promises support and protection to this liberty and, moreover, to the ministers of what are terms the cults....

"This law does more than establish liberty for all cults without distinction, it mingles truth with error and places heretical sects and even Judaism on equal terms with the holy and immaculate Bride of Christ outside which there can be no salvation. In addition to this, in promising favor and support to heretical sects and their ministers it is not simply their persons but their errors which are favored and tolerated. This is implicitly the disastrous and ever to be deplored heresy which St. Augustine describes in these terms: 'It claims that all heretics are on the right path and speak the truth. This is so monstrous an absurdity that I cannot believe that any sect could really profess it.'"

*Mirari Vos* by Pope Gregory XVI (August 15, 1832):

"We come now to another cause, alas! all too fruitful of the deplorable ills which today afflict the Church. We mean indifferentism, or that widespread and dangerous opinion sown by the perfidy of the wicked, according to which it is possible, by the profession of some sort of faith, to procure the soul's salvation, provided that one's morals conform to the norms of justice and probity. From this poisoned source of indifferentism springs that false and absurd maxim, better termed the insanity (*deliramentum*), that liberty of conscience must be obtained and guaranteed for everyone. This is the most contagious of errors, which prepares the way for that absolute and totally unrestrained liberty of opinions which, for the ruin of Church and State, is spreading everywhere and which certain men, through an excess of impudence, do not fear to put forward as advantageous to religion. Ah, 'what more disastrous death for souls than the liberty of error,' said St. Augustine."

*Quanta Cura* by Pope Pius IX (December 8, 1864):

"Contrary to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, of the Church, and of the holy Fathers, these persons do not hesitate to assert that 'the best condition of human society is that wherein no duty is recognized by the government of correcting, by enacted penalties, the violators of the Catholic religion, except when the maintenance of the public peace requires it.' From this totally false notion of social government, they fear not to uphold that erroneous opinion most pernicious to the Catholic Church, and to the salvation of souls, which was called by Our Predecessor, Gregory XVI (lately quoted) the insanity (*deliramentum*): namely, 'that the liberty of conscience and of

worship is the peculiar (or inalienable) right of every man, which should be proclaimed by law, and that citizens have the right to all kinds of liberty, to be restrained by no law, whether ecclesiastical or civil, by which they may be enabled to manifest openly and publicly their ideas, by word of mouth, through the press, or by any other means.”

The following propositions were condemned by Pope Pius IX in the *Syllabus of Errors* (December 8, 1864):

“15. Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true.”

“55. The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church.”

“77. In the present day, it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship.”

“79. Moreover, it is false that the civil liberty of every form of worship, and the full power, given to all, of overtly and publicly manifesting any opinions whatsoever and thoughts, conduce more easily to corrupt the morals and minds of the people, and to propagate the pest of indifferentism.”

*Libertas* by Pope Leo XIII (June 20, 1888):

“...Civil society must acknowledge God as its Founder and Parent, and must obey and reverence His power and authority. Justice therefore forbids, and reason itself forbids, the State to be godless; or to adopt a line of action which would end in godlessness — namely, to treat the various religions (as they call them) alike, and to bestow upon them promiscuously equal rights and privileges.”

From these papal teachings, it is obvious that Catholic governments would be obligated to legislate against the promiscuous “right” of all religions to spread their errors in a Catholic society. The only exception would be *toleration* of these religions in areas where they have already been established, and that toleration would be for a higher good to be achieved. This is the teaching of Pope Leo XIII in *Libertas*:

“While not conceding any right to anything save what is true and honest, she (the Catholic Church) does not forbid public authority to tolerate what is at variance with truth and justice, for the sake of avoiding some greater evil, or of obtaining or preserving some greater good.”

These papal teachings are very beautifully reflected in the Concordat between the Holy See and Spain. The 1953 Concordat upholds the Spaniard’s Charter of July 13, 1945, which states:

*Article 6 of the Spanish Charter:*

“1) The profession and practice of the Catholic religion, which is that of the Spanish State, will enjoy official protection.

“2) No one shall be disturbed for his religious beliefs nor the private exercise of his religion. There is no authorization for external ceremonies or manifestations of other than those of the Catholic religion.”

After this review of the consistent teachings of the Pope and the practical example of the Concordat between Spain and the Vatican on this matter, let us consider the Vatican II Decree on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*: There are two distinct aspects of Religious Liberty that are very subtly intertwined, which may lead one to consider the Religious Liberty taught in the Decree as consistent with past teachings of the Catholic Church. These two distinct aspects are man’s freedom *from* coercion and man’s freedom *to* publicly promulgate his religion.

In the beginning of the decree, the first aspect is stressed:

"It follows that he (man) 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."

This first aspect is in accord with what the Catholic Church has always held — that no one can be forced to accept the true religion. Pope Leo XIII in *Immortale Dei* (November 1, 1885) taught:

"The Church is wont to take earnest heed that no one shall be forced to embrace the Catholic Faith against his will, for, as St. Augustine wisely reminds us, 'Man cannot believe otherwise than of his own free will.'"

Up to this point, there is no problem with *Dignitatis Humanae*. However, from this first aspect of man's freedom from coercion, there comes the false notion that man has the *right* of religious freedom to *publicly* promote and to proselytize his own religious beliefs, even if he does not live up to his obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it.

*Dignitatis Humanae*:

"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 obligations of seeking the truth and adhering to it.

"Religious communities also have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching and witness to their faith, whether by the spoken or written word.

"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.

"This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed; thus it is to become a civil right."

Let us note well that *Dignitatis Humanae* explicitly states:

1) **"The right to religious freedom has its foundation, not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature."**

In other words, this decree teaches that this right is a natural right, God-given.

2) **"In consequence, the right to their immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligations of seeking the truth and adhering to it."**

Consequently, *Dignitatis Humanae* teaches that those in error still have the right to promote their error publicly.

3) **"Religious communities also have the right not to be hindered in their public teaching and witness to their faith, whether by the spoken or written word... is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed; thus it is to become a civil act."**

Furthermore, *Dignitatis Humanae* teaches that this right to promote their false beliefs is to be recognized by governments in their civil law.

Perhaps all this seems to be just a number of theological technicalities. But to see the consequences of this decree on Religious Liberty, let us look at its effects in Spain.

Shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council, there arose the necessity to update the Concordat between Spain and the Vatican. The following is an excerpt of the new preamble attached to the Concordat:

"The fundamental law of 17 May 1958, in virtue of which Spanish legislation must take its inspiration from the doctrine of the Catholic Church, forms the basis of the present law. Now, as is known, the Second Vatican Council approved the Declaration on Religious Freedom on 7 December 1965, stating in Article 2: '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. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed. Thus it is to become a civil right.' After this declaration of the Council, the necessity arose of modifying Article 6 of the Spaniard's Charter in virtue of the aforementioned principle of the Spanish State. This is why the organic law of the State dated 10 January 1967 has modified the aforementioned Article 6 as follows: 'The profession and practice of the Catholic religion, which is that of the Spanish State, enjoys official protection. The State guarantees the protection of religious liberty, which shall be guaranteed by an effective juridical provision which will safeguard morals and public order.'"

What was the outcome of this change in the Concordat? From the date of the change, any religious sect was free to proselytize in Catholic Spain. And what followed? With the circulation of all manner of opinions and beliefs, Spain eventually legalized pornography, contraceptives, divorce, sodomy, and abortion.

This example is by no means just limited to Spain. Other Catholic countries with constitutions and concordats which once prohibited proselytism by religious sects had to change their laws to grant religious freedom to all religions. In Brazil, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops acknowledges that each year approximately 600,000 Catholics leave the Church to join false religions. And why? The answer is found in the encyclical *Mirari Vos* by Pope Gregory XVI:

"This is the most contagious of errors, which prepares the way for that absolute and totally unrestrained liberty of opinions which, for the ruin of Church and State, is spreading everywhere and which certain men, through an excess of impudence, do not fear to put forward as advantageous to religion. Ah, 'What more disastrous death for souls than the liberty of error,' said St. Augustine. In seeing thus the removal from men of every restraint capable of keeping them on the paths of truth, led as they already are to their ruin by a natural inclination to evil, We state in truth that the pit of hell is opened from which St. John depicted a smoke which obscured the sun and from which locusts emerged to devastate the earth. This is the cause of the lack of intellectual stability; this is the cause of the continually increasing corruption of young people; this is what causes people to despise sacred rights, the most holy objects and laws. This is the cause, in a word, of the most deadly flail which could ravage states; for experience proves, and the most remote antiquity teaches us, that in order to bring about the destruction of the richest, the most powerful, the most glorious, and the most flourishing states, nothing is necessary beyond unrestricted liberty of opinion, that freedom of public expression, that infatuation with novelty."

In Christo Jesu et Maria Immaculata,  
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