

A Hibernian Priest's View of Catholic Freedom – Fr Timothy Harris, T.O.R.

As I am winding down my time as Deputy National Chaplain, I am reflecting a little about the great gift of salvation that Christ won for us through His cross and resurrection. I have been thinking and praying about how Jesus sacrificed all for us, and that He sacrificed it for the Church as well. The word for church that we find in the original Greek of the New Testament is the word ἐκκλησία (ecclesia). This word does not mean the four walls and the roof of the building in which we worship. Ecclesia literally means the assembly, the congregants. It truly means the people of God.

I bring this up because it is important for us to realize that our salvation from Christ is not a singular thing. We are called to salvation through the body of Christ, His Holy Church. Through Baptism, which is one of the beautiful sacraments of initiation, we become a member of the body of Christ, grafted into the life of the Church. And as Christians, we are commissioned to evangelize the world by sharing the Good News of Christ. That is the mission of all Christians. We are all called to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed.

Now it is important to understand something about me. I am not a political person. It may be strange to hear this from an Irishman, but it really is not who I am. I have never been registered to a political party in my life. Before I entered the Franciscans, I lost out on many opportunities because of my aversion to politics in the work place. I simply have no stomach for it. But when I hear a politician who claims to be a Christian, make a derogatory comment about Christians in general, especially at an official breakfast for Christians, I feel the need to speak up, to witness to our faith as a baptized Christian. The president and his administration, has gone to extreme lengths to make sure that no official comment is made that connects terrorist actions with Islam. Despite the fact that Muslims from around the world, including leaders like the president of Egypt, have no problem naming members of ISIS as Islamist extremists and terrorists. Yet at the Easter prayer breakfast at the White House on April 7th, the president stated in the middle of his remarks the following: “And I have to say that sometimes when I listen to less than loving expressions by Christians, I get concerned.” (www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office, Accessed 5/2/15)

Apparently this administration has no problem naming Christians as unloving, as the president has alluded to many times in his multiple references to their malevolence during the crusades and the Inquisition from hundreds of years ago, yet will not recognize the reality of the Islamist terrorists killing many, especially Christians, with great arrogance and hatred. I bring this up because it is long past time for Hibernians to remember the history of our Order, which in its early forms in Ireland defended the faith by protecting priests and the Mass against unjust oppression. Christians today are being persecuted and killed throughout the world and are being persecuted in subtle, and not so subtle, ways right here in the United States of America. Let us never forget the words attributed to the Irish statesman and member of the English Parliament Edmund Burke: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing.” As Hibernians, we all need to fulfill our baptismal mission to share and defend the Gospel in Love, in word and deed.

My Hibernian brothers, as I offered the intention for Mass this Sunday at Franciscan University of Steubenville for our beloved United States of America, I reminded the congregation of the need to continue to stand for what is true and right, and what is guaranteed by the very first part of our first amendment of the Constitution.

We are the land of freedom founded on the most precious freedom, the freedom to exercise our religious faith. This is not only a freedom from oppression, that is an oppression from being able to practice our faith, but it is a freedom for excellence, to live in the dignity of being sons and daughters of the Father Most High.

I reminded them that, at a time when our current government leaders (including the judiciary) are moving towards limiting our ability to live out our religious faith, we must witness to what we believe, for eternal vigilance is the price of true freedom. As Hibernians, I pray that each of us will continue to have the courage to witness to our Irish Catholic Faith in our homes, work places, cities and nation.

I pray that we will continue to grow in the dignity of excellence that God implanted in each of us when He created us in His Divine Image. And I pray that we will all stand true to our calling to be disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming the truth of the Gospel in Words and Deeds, manifesting true love for all. And by our commitment, we will help to lead our nation once again to be one nation, under God.