Has the truth been set free?

Patrick Riordan SJ

Did the Church's adoption of the Declaration on Religious Liberty, the sixtieth anniversary of which Patrick Riordan SJ is marking with a series of articles, mean an abandonment of the truth? This was the fear of the council fathers who opposed the commitment to religious liberty enshrined in *Dignitatis humanae*, and it has been echoed ever since by those who blame Vatican II for the various crises experienced by the Church. Is that fear justified?

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Part of the motivation for the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, which was promulgated on 7 December 1965, was embarrassment arising from previously taught doctrine, since critics of the Catholic Church identified a contradiction, if not hypocrisy, in that teaching. Where the Catholic community was a minority in a state, the Church demanded religious freedom for itself, and for its adherents to be allowed to practise their faith and gather for public worship. But where the Catholic community dominated in any state, the Church did not consider herself obliged to advocate religious liberty for the adherents of other faiths or other Christian communities. Critics pointed out this apparent inconsistency, and reminded everyone of the argument made by John Locke in his letters on toleration that you should not tolerate those who, if they came to power, would not tolerate you.

The Church's traditional response to this criticism was to appeal to the truth, of which she was the guardian. Any privileges claimed were on behalf of the truth of her gospel message, whether speaking as a minority or as a majority in any state. Other positions not in accord with the teaching of the Catholic Church were in error and could not be entitled to comparable privileges. This argument from the truth of her position did not persuade, since the critics could assert that the non-Catholic groups were just as convinced of the truth of their positions as were the Catholics of theirs. A philosophical clarification of two different meanings of truth here – distinguishing between the objective meaning (what is claimed is actually the case) and the subjective meaning (what is claimed is believed to be the case) – didn't help much, since demands for criteria to establish the former could not be met.

Did the Church abandon her commitment to truth when she embraced the value of religious liberty? This was the issue at the heart of the debate in the council. It was a genuine anxiety of many present, and the debate led to an enriched clarification.

Instead of opting for either truth or freedom as the ground for respecting religious liberty, the council rooted its teaching in an affirmation of human dignity. This situated the Church's teaching apart from the standard liberal position on the freedom of religion. But did it compromise the commitment to truth?

The liberal argument for religious liberty could also appeal to human dignity, but based on the principle of ethical independence. Autonomy, freedom, control of one's own life – these are key formulations of a central value in liberal political regimes. But the Church places alongside the value of ethical independence or autonomy the values corresponding to human intellect and reason, the quest for truth. It is not necessary to opt for one or the other: both values, freedom and truth, can be foundational for an understanding of human dignity and then, in turn, for a grounding of rights.

We should not underestimate the radical shift accomplished by the Catholic Church via its Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae* (DH). The significant development in the Second Vatican Council was the acknowledgment of the dignity of conscience, which deserved respect, even when its judgement was erroneous. In other words, the Church moved from a position encapsulated in the slogan that 'error has no rights' to a position focused on the person, whose dignity and entitlement to respect was not diminished by mistaken judgements. However, the ground of that dignity is declared to be the nature of the human, characterised as possessing the capacities to seek and know the truth, and to choose freely the preferred way of life. Both knowledge and freedom are the values at the heart of this attributed dignity.

The philosophical arguments provided for the affirmation of human dignity are compatible with revealed truth about the human person as created in the image of God, *imago Dei*. The reasons given for the position point to the dual capacities of the human person to know the truth and to choose what is right. Once acknowledged, respect for these capacities requires that no one ought to be coerced but be permitted freedom to follow their own conscience, with the proviso that the goods of public order not be jeopardised.

Even where a person would be mistaken or misguided in their religious convictions, respect for their dignity requires that they be allowed to act on their own judgement, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion (DH §1). This teaching marked a significant development. While abandoning neither the claims of the Church to truth, nor the assertion of the duty of all to seek the truth and the true Church, the council acknowledged that even an erroneous conscience possessed dignity and ought to be respected.

Incorporation of respect for freedom was a development of church teaching, but it did not mean an abandonment of the value of truth. This became very clear later when the emphasis on liberty in secular culture was in danger of eclipsing the other foundational value, the search for truth. With the growing popularity of post-modernist rejections of grand narratives, Pope John Paul II found it necessary to argue for the capacity of human reason to pursue and attain truth. In a pair of encyclicals, *Veritatis splendor* (VS, 1993) and *Fides et ratio* (FR, 1998), the philosopher-pope, supported by the theologian Cardinal Ratzinger, spoke up for the integrity and powers of human reason. He defends the human capacity to know what is truly good and worthwhile, a capacity called into doubt by the general scepticism associated with the increasingly popular idea that truth could not be determined but that each person should choose for themselves the vision of the good according to which they would live. He is also concerned about the possibility of finding common ground in pluralist contexts, where Catholic Christians are challenged to find a basis for moral, social and political cooperation with those who do not share their faith. Human reason should be a common basis for dialogue and collaboration, and from the Catholic's perspective it is one which can provide reliable guidance for living and acting. Hence the pope's motivation to write in defence of human reason.

The pursuit of an illusory freedom unconnected with truth is the target of *Veritatis splendor*. While the search for knowledge in all fields thrives, the search for the meaning of life is said to be neglected (VS §1). The council's hope for dialogue with contemporaries and their cultures is frustrated when reason's potential to answer the ultimate questions is denied (VS §36). The encyclical speaks of a 'crisis of truth' insofar as the exaltation of freedom and the affirmation of the dignity of conscience has been coupled with a disregard for the criteria of good and evil. Individual conscience is accepted as the arbiter of good and evil, but then each individual is deemed to have her own truth, different from the truth of others. This would deprive dialogue of its point and must ultimately undermine acceptance of universal moral truths, such as could ground human rights or provide the foundation for a genuine democracy (VS §§96, 101).

Five years after *Veritatis splendor*, Pope John Paul II published *Fides et ratio*, dealing with some of the same concerns. It bemoans the fact that contemporary trends in philosophy and in post-modern culture militate against any raising of ultimate questions about the nature of the human and its destiny, and the nature of reality and of truth itself. Seeing the mission of the Church as service of humankind through engagement together in the search for truth, the pope attempts to secure the cultural and intellectual conditions which would make that dialogue possible. Scepticism, relativism and an undifferentiated pluralism threaten those conditions (FR §5; also §§50, 69, 80).

Widespread scepticism would seem to deprive the proclamation of universal human rights rooted in human dignity of any rational foundation (FR §56). This has political implications also, since the denial of the possibility of discovering rational foundations deprives democracy of its grounding (FR §89). The anxiety is that without a solid moral foundation for human rights, their formulation may become malleable to the influence of the politically powerful.

A major study by philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum provides support for the Church's emphasis on the value of truth from an unexpected quarter. Nussbaum recovers the background to the American Constitution's endorsement of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. Her argument, neatly summarised in the following quotation, is for effective recognition of liberty of conscience, which is worthy of respect because of the significance of the search for truth in anyone's life.

> The idea that we are all solitary travelers, searching for light in a dark wilderness, led to the thought that this search, this striving of conscience, is what is more precious about the journey of human life – and that each person – Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, or pagan – must be permitted to conduct it in his or her own way, without interference either from the state or from orthodox religion.[1]

This interpretation of religious conviction is intellectualist. The search for meaning which lends intelligibility and a narrative structure to life is the reason why liberty must be fostered, not so much because the exercise of autonomy is fundamental to the living of a dignified life, but because no meaning or set of beliefs can serve the relevant function unless they are grasped and affirmed by people themselves. At stake is the search for an adequate meaning which can comprehend all of life. For the sake of this search, and for the implementation of its results in the living of a life, freedom must be protected. In this sense, Nussbaum's promotion of respect for autonomy is different. On her account, autonomy is not the basic value, but instead serves the more ultimate end of the answers which articulate the truth about the reality of human existence.

At both the beginning and end of her book, Nussbaum quotes the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain as upholding the search for truth as foundational for the understanding of human dignity and human rights:

> 'There is a real and genuine tolerance only when a man is firmly and absolutely convinced of a truth, or of what he holds to be a truth, and when he at the same time recognizes the right of those who deny this truth to exist, and to contradict him, and to speak their own mind, not because they are free from truth but because they seek truth in their own way, and because he respects in them human nature and human dignity and those very resources and living springs of the intellect and of conscience which make them potentially capable of attaining the truth he loves.'[2]

For the Catholic intellectual tradition, human dignity is grounded not only in the autonomy of humans but also in the human capacity to search for and find truth. This is a counter-cultural stance in a world in which autonomy is prioritised and the human capacity to know is denigrated. Following the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, which represented a shift in the direction of increased respect for human freedom, Pope John Paul II saw the need to uphold the capacities of human reason. The centrality of freedom is linked with the search for truth and the human capacity for judgement. On this account, then, the aspect of human dignity of particular relevance to religious liberty is the human capacity to enquire, to wonder, to seek to understand. It is an openness to the most ultimate and comprehensive explanation of reality, whatever it turns out to be. There is no abandonment of truth in the Church's commitment to religious liberty.

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[1] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 37.
[2] Jacques Maritain, *On the Use of Philosophy* (1961), cited in Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, p. 23.