

Freedom and Conscience

Homily by Fr. Max Cappabianca OP – KSG Berlin 26 June 2022

How can Christian freedom be understood without being used as a pretext for "anything goes"? The key is conscience, says father Max in his homily in the International Mass at KSG Berlin.

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today we heard a very beautiful reading with a wonderful message: **For freedom Christ set us free!** For me personally this message is the very heart of the Good news of the Gospel.

That's why I always tell people, that the sense of freedom they experience within a religious community can be considered as *the main criteria* to judge if this community is on a right way or not, if they really are on the path of Jesus Christ!

Of course there can be misunderstandings. We could consider the freedom in Christ as something which allows us to do whatever we want – "anything goes". And these misunderstandings happen in history!

Already in the times of Saint Paul these misunderstandings occurred, as we can see. He is warning us: „*Do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.*“ Flesh in his vocabulary means all behaviours and attitudes which are selfish and with a negative power. It is not meant to blame our human body.

In the wording of Saint Paul the opposite of freedom is slavery. Later on he will specify and give examples like hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and so on.

According to Saint Paul, and here he is quoting the old Testament: „For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*“

And he is right, when he says: *If you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.*“

But who judges our freedom? How can we discern and give a judgement? Is only freedom the rule to follow? Where can be found criterias how to use our freedom?

Just yesterday I spoke to a student in Berlin who is honestly seeing God. He wants to take the Catholic faith seriously. He doesn't see faith as a self-service shop and he doesn't just want to pick and choose what suits him. For him the message of Jesus is not only a "softened" feel-good message, but something that also provokes controversy.

He spends a lot of time online and listens to "Catholic" podcasts and YouTube videos, which often tell you „the truth“. And above all, if you don't think like them, they deny you being Catholic.

But the student from Berlin feels unwell. He experiences a kind of paternalism and lack of freedom. At the same time, however, he has a guilty conscience because he is wondering: Am I really take faith and the church seriously?

I had the chance to preach this Morning in the KSG in Halle, celebrating their Patron. Last week it was the feast of Saint Thomas More. Maybe you know his story: He was Lord chancellor, and very close to King Henry VIII. But when Henry wanted to divorce, and when Rome did not allow it, he split off and founded what we call now the Anglican Church with the King (or the Queen) as Head, instead of the Pope.

Henry VIII tried to force Thomas More to accept the supremacy act, denying his catholic faith. Thomas More did not and was therefore tortured and murdered. That's why we celebrate him as Martyr of faith and Patron of Politicians.

What was his motivation? Why was he so intransigent?

A passage in a letter that Thomas wrote to his daughter Margret from prison, explains the motivation for his behavior towards:

“My daughter Margret, we have discussed these things more than once or twice. . . . Each time I explained to you that no man would have sworn the oath with more joy than I, if I saw a

way of doing the king's will without offending God at the same time. But I still have to follow my conscience, which is why I have no other course of action open to me."

But I still have to follow my conscience! That's the key!

We can truly understand what freedom means, if we consider the role of conscience. I would like to quote Second Vatican Council: The conscience is *"the most intimate centre and sanctuary of a person, in which he or she is alone with God, whose voice echoes within them"* (Gaudium et Spes, 16).

If we do anything to form and educate our conscience - which is needed because otherwise our conscience degenerates and has no direction – and if we understand our conscience as a sanctuary, where God's voice can be heard, then our freedom cannot be abused.

Christian freedom is kind of a bounded freedom.

I would like to give you a current example, where our christian freedom has to be applied. And i promise you: It's not easy!

Last week, on the same day, two major abortion-related decisions hit the headlines: In the US, the Supreme Court overturned a nearly 50-year-old decision *Wade vs. Rose* ruling that legalized abortion nationwide. On the one hand, there is a huge outcry from those who see women's right to self-determination at risk. On the other hand, the triumph of those who have worked for decades to end what they see as legal murder.

On the same day, Paragraph 219a in Germany, which prohibited "advertising" for abortions for economic reasons and in a "grossly offensive manner", was abolished in Germany. In practice, this law had led doctors who had informed about abortions being sentenced for it.

Again very different reactions: On the one hand, those who celebrate this as a victory for human rights, especially women's right . On the other hand, those who see a dam breach in it.

What would Thomas More have done? How to use our christian freedom?

I am sure that some of you will say: Of course he will have welcomed the verdict in the USA and regretted the change in the law in Germany, because after all the church clearly teaches what is to be thought of abortion and what is not.

But is it really like that? What if Thomas More's conscience had said otherwise? Would he then have ignored his conscience just because the church said so?

The question is not theoretical. Because there are people, including Catholics, who are – of course within certain limits – conscientiously in favor of abortion rights.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not advocating randomness here. The question of truth is not irrelevant in ethical questions. And something cannot be true and untrue at the same time. But who determines what is to be recognized as true and untrue?

The last authority for you personally can only ever be your conscience. That is also the message of St. Thomas More to us today: Let's follow - to the best of our knowledge! – always our conscience! And let us not abuse our freedom. Our christian freedom is bound by the law of love!

And let's learn to endure that sometimes it's not so easy to track down the truth: to understand what is ethically right and necessary! Especially when various positive goods compete with each other, such as the right of every woman to self-determination and the right to life of the unborn child, which cannot easily be reconciled.

We have to walk together, and especially if we are going to talk about difficult ethical questions like abortion or euthanasia. Let's consider what Saint Paul says. *„If you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.“*

Christian freedom is not always easy! But on the other hand, christian freedom is the most beautiful gift of our faith.

Let us preserve it paying attention to what our conscience is saying to us, and trying to listen the whisper of God's loving Word. Amen.