

## Exercise Freedom by Embracing a Catholic Identity

If you were to survey people though about a word associated with Independence Day, my guess is most would say "freedom." It's the day that marks the point when the leaders of the colonies had had enough of tyranny and no voice, and so decided to do something about it. And while we celebrate today with parades, and fireworks, for a number of years after July 4, 1776, a number of the people who signed our Declaration of Independence had no room for celebration, for they had everything to lose in being publicly seen as traitors should the colonialists lose the war as many had predicted.

Among these included a many you might not have heard of, Charles Carroll of Carrollton. He was the only Roman Catholic to sign the document of the 56, which is a miracle in and of itself because Catholics were not exactly looked upon in a favorable light at that point in history.

Carroll came from an incredibly wealthy family, Irish in background, born in Maryland in 1737. He received an education in France and then studied law in London before returning to Maryland in 1765. His grandfather gave him Carrollton Manor, a large piece of land, and he would go on to become one of the wealthiest men in America. He had huge agricultural estates and became a money-man for financing other enterprises in the colonies.

At the same time, as a Catholic, he was the subject of discrimination. There was a 1704 act in Maryland that sought to "prevent the growth of Popery in this Province." But Carroll came to realize he could not just focus on his money or keep silent because of that. And so, in 1772, recognizing that some of the practices of the British against the colonialists were unfair, he started engaging in debates in anonymous newspaper letters, maintaining the right of the colonies to control their own taxes. His pseudonym was "First Citizen," and he also spoke out how it was unjust to have fees to support Protestant Clergy, something common in those days, and on the corruption of the governor of the colony. His opponent in the paper was Daniel Dulany, a lawyer, who used some very vile language; but Carroll restrained from fighting fire with fire. People were impressed with his rhetorical abilities and his points, and word soon got out about the real identity of the "First Citizen."

One might think that having so much wealth he would not want to be a potential target of the government, but Carroll would not back down. In the years that followed, he became an opponent of British rule, and was on various correspondence committees. He was an original tea party member, burning a ship that was carrying tea to Maryland on October 19, 1774 as part of the protests against unfair excise taxes. In 1775, despite his Catholic background, he was a member of the Committee of Safety in Annapolis, a pre-revolutionary group, and of the revolutionary government. In 1776, he was selected as a delegate to the Continental Congress. His first day in office was July 4th, where he arrived in time to sign the Declaration. By signing this, he was also re-affirming his public support for the rights of Catholics. As a Catholic, not only was he not supposed to be in office, but Catholics in colonies could not educate their children in the faith or

worship in public. The signing of the declaration ended all of that - sort of. We know how the war of independence ended, but religious freedom would be a long slog in achieving in the new country. Freedoms would have to be fought for. In the years that followed, he became known for his defense of freedom of conscience and his belief that the power to govern derived from the consent of the governed. He would also be instrumental in standing up for George Washington, when the Board of War considered replacing Washington with General Horatio Gates. Carroll would also use much of his money to support the war. As the Bill Gates of his time, he was seen as the one having the most to lose should the fight for freedom fail. For the next 20 years he'd serve in the Maryland State Senate, but would be the last man who signed the Declaration to die, passing on in November of 1832.

Most people today probably wouldn't know much at all about Carroll; a film buff might recognize him as being in the film "National Treasure," but most everyone probably associates the founding fathers with Franklin, Adams, or John Hancock with his huge signature. But when you look at what these people who signed the Declaration did, and realize not only would all of their property been seized but they would have been hung as traitors to the Crown for signing that document, the price they were willing to pay is incredible. And the reason they were willing to do this was because of freedom.

Freedom is given to us by God, not by a government. The Founders got this. So, how about us? How do we exercise freedom with a true Catholic identity?

For one, while freedom is to make our own choices, as we all know freedom can be abused. So we can look at our choices and while we may be free to do certain things that we shouldn't do that aren't illegal but maybe not good for us or setting a good example for others, we can strive to find true freedom, not being enslaved to passions and desires but break free of them through prayer, through reception of the sacraments, and through work.

Secondly, a bit about that example for others part. Charles Carroll worked hard for others and let his actions do a lot of the talking. When we as Catholics sacrifice for others, have a good work ethic, and help people in need, it sends a powerful message about our priorities.

And lastly, we testify to the faith through words and actions by not hiding our faith. We face many moral decisions as Catholics, and are also called to help others. As such, when we see someone making a poor choice, we speak up and try to help them. Or when we are aware that there is a Church teaching that can be very counter cultural, we look for ways to talk about it and exercise our freedom of religion and speech to be a beacon of truth in a world that suffers greatly from the darkness of original sin. People might be upset, and there is risk - but when we do these things we may very well save souls and turn people's lives around.

As in Carroll's time, anti-Catholicism is a very real thing. While most might not think much of someone saying they are Catholic, in an increasingly secular world where more

and more people don't see the importance of faith or a relationship with God, or have a warped view of what freedom is, and so often mistake evil for good, now more than ever we need to follow Charles Carroll's example and fear not living and proclaiming our faith through words and actions.

Have a wonderful Independence Day, and celebrate your freedom every day of the year!

God bless,

Fr. Paul