This Independence Day, Cherish and Use Your Freedoms

James Madison, the fourth President of the United States, doesn't get as much notoriety as, say, George Washington or Benjamin Franklin. But as one of the founding fathers and one of the biggest reasons the Bill of Rights came to be, one of the ways he can be under-appreciated is with respect to how strongly he felt to enshrining Freedom of Speech in our Constitution.

In an article that ran in "National Review" a few years ago, Jay Cost writes:

In Madison s view, a free republic depends ultimately upon public opinion. A Constitution could divide power this way and that, but in the end it is the people, and only the people, who rule. And for the people to rule wisely, they have to be able to communicate with one another — freely, without fear of reprisal. Thus, freedom of speech and press were not, for Madison, merely God-given rights. They were preconditions for self-government.

Mr. Cost concludes his article by stating: *"Madison s commitment to free speech should serve as a reminder that, while people say things that we might find personally offensive, we should never wish the state to squash their right to do so. Our First Amendment freedoms combined — freedom of religion, of assembly and petition, of press and speech — give us the right to think what we like and say what we please. And if we the people are to govern ourselves, we must have these rights, even if they are misused by a minority."*

Madison was of course joined by the other founders. George Washington said: ""If men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter, which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences that can invite the consideration of mankind, reason is of no use to us; the freedom of speech may be taken away, and dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter."

I think this is more important than ever, because we live in a time where certain very vocal groups want to stifle speech - including the State in some cases.

For one, we've seen it from some governments, who have actively tried to censor people online, or attack people for speech they've deemed "offensive" - such as speaking out on traditional marriage, on gender, and on the importance of defending the unborn, or having a legitimate criticism of the teachings of some religions. The Founders were very aware of the power of government to silence people, which is why they made sure this freedom was enshrined in the Constitution. That said, even in our own country this hasn't stopped government at all levels at times from trying to stifle speech.

This to me is scary stuff indeed, for it can allow the government to define morality, but it is also a major problem for society and human development in that we should not fear ideas - rather we should engage with thinking and arguing, disproving and arguing

against ideas that are inherently evil and wrong, rather than just covering our ears lest we be “offended.” I am so thankful every day for the Constitution.

This is also important to think about with respect to social media. No matter what your opinion of Mr. Elon Musk, I’ve really appreciated his commitment to making the platform he purchased, “X”, formerly “Twitter,” a place of free speech. Over the years the examples of censorship have been extremely disturbing that have taken place. A private company can of course have it’s own rules on speech - but I hope more and more social media will be used by Catholics to express our faith which will often challenge, and yes, offend, others when we speak about moral theology, helping one another to find true freedom in following God and His law.

I think as we celebrate Independence Day with fireworks (though please do not shoot them off all week in your yard - especially the “good ones” from Wisconsin because it really, really, scares Golden Retrievers and irritates their human friends), barbecues, hot dogs and get togethers, it’s worth thinking about our freedom. Catholics were only marginally tolerated at best at the time of the Constitution, but throughout US History Catholics have spoken out on many matters, from Civil Rights to abortion to marriage. It is disheartening to see that there are some out there who are not just comfortable in disagreeing or looking for an argument, but looking for a true fight or resorting to scare tactics to either change others views or force them to conform. The Catholic Church will always hold views that are not politically popular. But we as both Catholics and Americans should never live in fear of being labeled or offending someone. So what are we to do? The answer is to live out our freedom to speak, but do so wisely.

I think a few things to remember are first to try to listen to the other person. We may not agree with them, and we may never agree on certain issues. But listening affirms the dignity of the person, and can give us insight into where they are coming from.

Next, I think it’s good to affirm a person, but we then formulate an argument - to say “I can understand where you are coming from, but here is why I feel so strongly on this.” Remember arguing is different from shouting or just attacking or abuse. (See the classic Monty Python “Argument Clinic” sketch for more detail on the differences). This is why we need catechesis, to know what the Church teaches and why. When are argue, we formulate opinions based on facts or premises. For instance if conversing with someone who said one religion is good as all or I don’t have to go to Mass, I’d start by thanking them for conversing with me, and that it seems they are looking for deeper meaning in life. I wouldn’t jump to “you have to go to Mass” but talk about something such as love - a need we all have, and how when we love someone we get to know them better, and how when we are loved we are made better. I might move on to talking about how Mass and prayer make us better people and help us on our life long journeys. And I’d then try to talk about the Eucharist, which is the Bread of Life and does so much for us spiritually which is why Mass is so important. My hope would be the conversation would continue, but it would require patience.

Patience is also important. It can be very frustrating when people reject teachings of the Church. But as we heard two weeks ago at Mass, the mustard seeds take time to grow - so don't give up on people.

Tolerance is an important moral principle too. I can break bread with people from different political backgrounds. I can agree to disagree. And this is so very important for us not just as Americans but as humans. But while I will certainly tolerate a person, I will also not be fearful of never engaging them in dialogue or challenging them too. We are not called to keep our beliefs private behind the stained glass windows - we are called to bring them out into the world and to be a true evangelist.

And lastly, remember, fortitude is a wonderful virtue. We can't fear offending or standing up for the truth and what is right. Yes, we will at times be hated (Jesus said as much) but we also will save souls when we aren't afraid to testify to what it is we believe, both to people we know in conversations, but in the larger world.

So as we mark our country's birthday this weekend, lets remember Madison and the founders were onto something very important, which is why the worked so hard to defend it. Ideas may offend, that's a good thing, but an even better thing is getting someone to think rather than shout.

Happy Independence Day, and celebrate your freedom by exercising it every day, remember freedom comes from God, not a government.

Fr. Paul