

There are many battles the Church fights today, one of them, and it is one of the longest running battles, is what is meant by free will. God gave us free will, but what exactly does that mean and what is the proper exercise of our free will?

In our readings today Jesus seems to be inviting us to consider the consequences of our actions, our choices, and how open we are to correction. So lets talk about free will.

Back when she was the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi was asked in an interview about her dissent from the teachings of the Church, specifically the Church's teachings on abortion. Speaker Pelosi replied in part, “I practically mourn this difference of opinion because I feel what I was raised to believe is consistent with what I profess, and that we are all endowed with a free will and a responsibility to answer for our actions. And that women should have the opportunity to exercise their free will.”

Speaker Pelosi's response is an all too common misunderstanding of what the Church teaches about our human freedom. This misunderstanding is widespread within the Catholic Community and beyond.

I am sure you have heard the the argument to justify all sorts of actions that dissent from Church teaching, from abortion, to pornography, to same sex marriage. The argument is that we are called to act according to our informed conscience. That if we are well informed, we have the freedom to choose and that choice will be correct because it is dictated by our conscience.

That is a twisting of Church teaching worthy of the devil himself.

The Church does not speak of an informed conscience, it speaks of a well – formed conscience. It is true that the Church teaches that each of us is called to judge and direct his or her own actions. But the Church also teaches that, like any just judge, each conscience masters the law and listens to expert testimony about the law. This process is called the education and formation of the conscience. We are called to act according to our well-formed conscience, which is a conscience formed in the teaching of God given to us through His Church, directed by the Holy Spirit.

We almost always know what is the right thing to do, because the law of right and wrong is written on our hearts. Free will means we have the freedom to do the right thing or the wrong thing, but it does not mean that we are right when we choose the wrong thing.

When we live our lives rooted in love of God we will always choose the right thing. When we choose the wrong thing it is because something else has replaced our love for God. It is a love of self that puts our own wants and desires above everything else, even God. We see the result of that type of love all around us today. Emotions, not reason, rule. We see people who think that their free will allows them to determine their own morality or even their own reality.

But Truth and Goodness conforms to reality.

A free will that does not seek God is a will that clings to material things. But material things can be so easily taken from us. That has been made painfully clear in recent days with the widespread destruction and loss of property due to the hurricanes in the southeast. Those who choose evil are ruled by their passion and desire for the things of this world which every person can lose against his will.

One who chooses to do good on the other hand, ultimately gains everything because there is no danger of losing “things.” One who chooses to do good no longer has any attachment to material things. Those who become perfect could lose every material thing and still gain all precisely because they are trying to attain the perfect, which is wisdom. Wisdom cannot be lost as long as someone has good will.

So why would we ever choose evil? Humans always choose to do good, at least that's what we tell ourselves. But sometimes we choose a lesser “good” over a greater one. And we are masters at justifying our wrong choices for a lesser good. We choose evil when we choose to allow passions and desires to rule our soul. Passions and desires tend toward things of this world. Protecting the rights of women is a “good,” but it is a lesser good than protecting the life of an innocent.

We have a duty to determine good and evil based on truth and to have it rule one's life, with passion and desire subject to this life based on truth. When people are ruled by feelings it diminishes the dignity of the person.

Archbishop George Niederauer, who passed away just his past May, said this: “While we deeply respect the freedom of our fellow citizens, we nevertheless are profoundly convinced that free will cannot be cited as justification for society to allow moral choices that strike at the most fundamental rights of others. Such a choice is abortion, which constitutes the taking of an innocent human life, and cannot be justified by any Catholic notion of freedom.”

God wants us to use our freedom well, to become what He intended us to be. Christ's life, death and resurrection were all designed to help us do that by showing us the way and giving us the grace to overcome our selfish tendencies and desires.

The Church, like the Watchmen in today's First Reading and the disciples in today's Gospel, continues the mission of Jesus. The Church patiently and tirelessly warns us against the seductive dead-end roads and invites us to forge ahead on Christ's path of self-forgetful love.

The choices we make every day, in little things, in big things, matter, they matter a lot. Every choice we make can bring us closer to God and our true purpose, union with the Divine, or further away to an end of despair, wailing and grinding of teeth.

That is the essence of spiritual freedom and freedom of will. And how we use that freedom will determine how we live in the kingdom that is still to come.

When we pass from this life we will face two judgements. First there is the “particular judgment.” Immediately after we die, when our soul is temporarily separated from our physical body, we will go before the throne of Christ who will reveal to us the moral value of all of our thoughts, actions, and omissions. At that point we will no longer be able to hide from the uncomfortable truths about ourselves. The arguments we have created to justify our wrong choices will be swept away like so much dust. Jesus will also show us whether we are destined for Heaven or hell.

If we have died in friendship with Him we are destined for Heaven, even if we still need to purify some leftover selfishness in the fires of Purgatory.

Then, at the end of history, Jesus will return, the dead will be resurrected, reunited with their souls, and there will take place the last or Final Judgment.

This time we will see not only the moral value of our own deeds, but we will also see everyone else's. And only then, at the very end of history, will the long term effects of our good and evil actions be fully evident. All of our choices, good and bad, affect not only ourselves, but other people too, who then affect still more people, and so on.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: "The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life."

Every choice we make has a ripple effect, for good or for ill.

We will only see that full ripple effect when history is complete and the world we know is replaced with a new heaven and a new earth, at the Last Judgment.

That day will be full of surprises, but it will be up to each of us, and how we use our free will, to determine whether those surprises will be good or bad.