

Thomas Paine once said, "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it." While this quote is not the most lighthearted sentiment that has ever been said about American freedom, I believe it is the most truthful. The freedom that we have here in the United States is absolutely a blessing, but it is not guaranteed to continue forever if we don't work to preserve it. As Americans, we must make an effort to further this freedom by protecting the principle of the freedom of the individual through each generation. Furthermore, as Catholics, we must take care of the First Amendment Right to the Freedom of Religion with a special enthusiasm.

The right to practice religion freely in America, as dictated in the First Amendment, means that there must be a separation of church and state, and also that every individual must have the right to practice their own religion. This right is fundamental, because to restrict someone from practicing their religion is to repress what is most important to them — our religion is our identity, because who or what we worship dictates not only how we act, but serves as the "why" behind every decision we make. Recognizing this, the authors of the Constitution stated this freedom in the First Amendment as such: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." In a sense, this excerpt from the Constitution expresses the philosophy of "do no harm." The government's role is established to be one that does not endorse any one religion, but also must not interfere with the worship

of any one religion. However, in practice, this is not as simple as it sounds, because the question arises of: "What is considered worship?" As Catholics, we are called to worship God in a myriad of ways. We worship Him not just by going to Mass on Sundays, but by leading our lives every day with the goal of pleasing Him and following His commandments. This is why, for Catholics, the First Amendment protects our right to support the Church's stance on ethical issues.

The First Amendment preserves the right of Catholic medical practitioners to worship God through expressing their pro-life beliefs. In advocating for life, there are three legalized practices we oppose: abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. As Catholics, we believe that life begins at conception, and that abortion is a grave sin. It is our duty to use the right to freedom of religion that we have to advocate for the rights of the unborn, whose value and intrinsic rights are not recognized by the U.S. law. Today, Catholic physicians can often face pressure to perform abortions or advise the termination of a pregnancy to their patients, and it is in these situations that they must assert their First Amendment right to not being required to do either of these actions. By the same token, all Catholics are called to support women who face unplanned pregnancies so that they may successfully bring their babies to term. We must challenge the throwaway culture that has become established in modern society, where the lives of the unborn are cast aside as worthless. It is our moral responsibility to protest the killing of an innocent lives before they have even had the chance to be born and to bring others' attention to this vital matter.

The second pro-life issue we utilize our First Amendment rights to oppose is that of physician-assisted suicide. The Church's stance on this controversial issue can seem cold or emphatic, when truly, it is quite the opposite - the Church cares immensely about relieving the burdens of the suffering. Jesus himself said, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Matthew 11:28-30). We love and serve a merciful and loving Lord, who has a plan for each of us that is far greater than any suffering we could endure. It is important for us to remember that Jesus suffered for the redemption of our sins and even sacrificed His life for us on the Cross. When we are struggling, even if our burdens seem far too great to bear, we can pray for God to give us the strength to endure our suffering with hope, and remember that God often gives the toughest battles to his strongest soldiers. But, we must steadfastly oppose using euthanasia as a method to end suffering. Since we are all created in God's image and likeness, it is not up to us to decide to end a fellow human life, which is still as precious near its end as it is in its beginning. Christian doctors have the right to express their disagreement with physician-assisted suicide, and refuse to administer or suggest euthanasia to any patient. By standing firm in their beliefs, Christian doctors are worshipping God through their career. Moreover, they are truly doing His work by healing the sick and showing His love to the people they treat, but in a way that is in accordance with His law.

In terms of the death penalty, Catholics are called to oppose this practice for the same reason that we oppose abortion and euthanasia - the respect of human life. The dignity of the human life is not something that can be lost, no matter how serious of an offense is committed. Additionally, we will never be able comprehend or fully understand the extent of God's mercy, and therefore we cannot determine if a soul is doomed to go to Hell. It is God, and only Him, who can make just judgements and determine when someone's life is to end. We know that God is a perfectly just judge, and that he will account for the true state of everyone's soul - we do not need to seek out vengeance on criminals or attempt to achieve "an eye for an eye." For Catholic judges, there is additional controversy over whether or not it is ethical for them to sit in death penalty cases. In the study, "Catholic Judges in Capital Cases," John H. Garvey and Amy Coney Barrett of the University of Notre Dame Law School, after studying the catechism, drew the following conclusion about judges' decision making responsibilities: "Judges cannot - nor should they try to - align our legal system with the Church's moral teaching whenever the two diverge. They should, however, conform their own behavior to the Church's standard."

In addition to allowing us to live out the Church's teachings on pro-life matters, the First Amendment also gives us the right to support the Catholic teachings on human sexuality. The current political reality is that same-sex marriage is legal under the law, so today, Catholics are often labeled as being hateful or intolerant of people who identify as homosexual. However, the Church does not believe that homosexual individuals are somehow evil, or even that being gay is a choice. Rather, the Church

teaches that having homosexual attractions is not a sin in and of itself, unless, of course, these attractions are acted upon. It is directly stated in the Catechism that people who experience these attractions are just as much sons and daughters of God as the rest of us, and that they are called to live holy lives. Like Catholics who do not struggle with homosexual attractions are called to live chastely, the Catechism states, "homosexual persons are called to chastity" (DeBernado). However, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church names "homosexual acts" as "intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law" (DeBernado), the Church has the right to refuse to marry homosexual couples. Similarly, because of the First Amendment right to the freedom of religion, Catholic medical practitioners have the right to refuse to perform procedures to help people who identify as transexual to "transition," or change genders.

As Catholics, it is our duty to worship God through the lifestyle we embody. We are called to serve others, and one important way that we do so is by exercising our First Amendment right to do just that - to worship God by fighting for the rights of the unborn and the dignity of all human lives. We exercise our freedom of religion by supporting the Church's stance on human sexuality, acknowledging that her beliefs on this topic are rooted in love. Although, as Catholics, we must confront challenges to our faith on a continually increasing basis, we can take courage in knowing not only that we have every right to do so by the First Amendment, but also that we will be given the strength to persevere by our Heavenly Father.

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