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Opinion



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It's a word that comes up all the time when the national conversation turns to wearing masks (or not), opening restaurants and retail stores, or going back to church: freedom.

In May, USA Today counted more than 1,300 state and federal lawsuits that had been filed in response to the pandemic, most of which had to do with "legal challenges to stay-at-home orders and business closures." Many people who have resisted restrictive measures meant to slow the spread of the coronavirus object to what they see as government overreach, causing an unjust curtailing of essential freedoms. These objections persist even as we slowly begin to open the country back up.

As a Catholic committed to the common good, these arguments drive me crazy. To me, it's pretty straightforward: stay home as much as possible, wear a mask and practice social distancing to protect the lives of those who are most vulnerable to the virus. Keep doing this until there's a vaccine. But there is an opportunity here for the church to do some much-needed catechesis around the concept of freedom in a Catholic context. (Franciscan Fr. Casey Cole made a fantastic YouTube video on just this subject.)

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Here are three points rooted in Catholic thought about what true freedom entails.

Freedom isn't doing whatever you want.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a lovely section on human freedom, believe it or not.

"The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes," reads paragraph 1733. "There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just."

That word "just" at the end of the passage catches my eye. Justice is all about strong, positive relationships between individual people and communities. Or, as philosopher and theologian Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in

public." Choices that show love for others — especially those who are most vulnerable — are instances of real freedom. On the other hand, choices rooted in a desire to do what I want, when I want it, without regard for how my decisions might impact others are not what freedom looks like. As paragraph 1738 of the catechism puts it, "Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings."

Parables like the good Samaritan or the prodigal son, which hinge on important choices made by the stories' respective protagonists, are powerful images of what freedom looks like to Jesus. Thought of this way, the simple act of wearing a mask in public can be a profound act of freedom oriented toward the good of others. With this sort of Gospel vision, what feels like a burden can be transformed into an opportunity for blessing.



People wear masks as Pope Francis celebrates Mass marking the feast of Corpus Christi in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 14. (CNS/Reuters pool/Tiziana Fabi)

This definition of freedom doesn't jive all that well with the common American understanding. And that's compelling!

The Catholic vision of freedom is countercultural in our individualistic, consumerist society. And it often feels like we cede the concept to those who argue that freedom is the liberty to do what you want. I think we should be proud of our own vision and proclaim it more boldly. It's a compelling invitation to faith: God gave us this beautiful gift of free will and we have the privilege to use it to make the world better. It's demanding of people, yes, but the sort of demand makes life meaningful. I've always been energized by this David Foster Wallace quote on freedom, which captures the Catholic vision of the concept so well (despite coming from a not-Catholic speaker):

> [T]he so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving. ... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.

That doesn't sound easy, but it sounds like something worth devoting my life to.

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The grace of Christ can help us to grow in freedom, especially in difficult times.

One final passage from the catechism section on freedom seems so timely: "[T]he more docile we are to the promptings of grace, the more we grow in inner freedom and confidence during trials, such as those we face in the pressures and constraints

of the outer world" (paragraph 1742).

These times are certainly pressure-packed and constraining. Plus isolating, frustrating, confusing, sad, dangerous and exhausting. I understand the temptation to try and go back to some sense of normal, to throw the mask in the garbage and just go sit at a restaurant, for Pete's sake. But we are called to persevere in exercising true freedom, buoyed by the abundant grace of God.

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