

**Homily for the 13th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Year C
Sunday, June 26, 2016**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, IL**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: just a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to celebrate the Rite of Admission to Candidacy for one of our seminarians, Michael Berndt, as he prepares to continue his formation for the priesthood at the Pontifical North American College in Rome. It has been a practice for more than 150 years for dioceses in the United States to send some of their men to experience the cultural and intellectual gifts that Rome has to offer. In fact, for centuries, countries from throughout the world have been sending men to Rome to prepare for the priesthood.

The reasons for starting these colleges in the Eternal City have not always been the same. For example, the Venerable English College was established in Rome in 1579 when it became illegal to study for the Catholic priesthood in England. The Catholic Church had been undergoing severe persecution, stemming from the decision in 1534 of King Henry VIII to

separate himself and his country from the Roman Catholic Church and declare himself the supreme head of the Church of England.

Men who decided to study for the priesthood quietly left the country and found their way to seminaries elsewhere in Europe, including Rome. Upon the completion of their studies and ordination to the priesthood, they returned home to England. Each of the men understood the risk of going back, for it meant that, if found out, they would certainly be persecuted, and, in many cases, martyred.

While it is no longer illegal for Catholic seminarians to study for the priesthood in England, the Venerable English College is still in operation. And while the men who are ordained there do not face the same threat of martyrdom upon their return home, the legacy of these witnesses continues to shine brightly for Catholics, not just in England, but throughout the world.

During this year's observance of the Fortnight for Freedom, the bishops of the United States have chosen for the theme: Witnesses to Freedom. During this two-week period culminating on our nation's Independence Day, we are being encouraged to look to some key figures in Church history who courageously stood up for religious freedom as it was

being challenged in various ways. Just this past week, for example, we celebrated the Feast of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More, two English martyrs who were executed for their refusal to sign the Oath of Supremacy which would recognize King Henry VIII as having sovereign power over English Christians, a power which allowed him to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, despite the refusal of the Pope.

We also celebrated the Solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, who was also killed by a king, King Herod, for telling the King that it was wrong for him to have divorced his wife so he could marry his brother's wife (cf. Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9). These three saints, along with several others who witnessed to their faith in the face of religious persecution, offer encouragement for us not to back down in the face of pressures which threaten to compromise our faith and the common good.

While we draw inspiration from the supreme acts of courage offered in the name of religious freedom, we must also recognize that these actions were rooted in another sort of freedom, an interior, spiritual freedom which enabled these witnesses to choose freely what was right and what was true.

In our Gospel for today, we hear the challenging response of Jesus to those who place conditions on their response to follow Him. To the one who wants first to say goodbye to his family, Jesus responds by saying: “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 51:62). Jesus is not saying that it is wrong to love our families, but He is stressing the fact that to follow Him means to follow Him with one’s whole heart. We must detach ourselves from the things of this world, even our relationships with our loved ones, if they hold us back from responding to His call completely. This is what it means to be a disciple, that is, a follower of the Lord, who gives himself completely to God. As long as our hearts are divided, we will not be free in our following of Jesus.

We can look to the example of the saints to show how they lived this type of freedom. While being held in the Tower of London, St. Thomas More’s family tried to convince him to sign the Oath of Supremacy, telling him that he did not have to believe what he was signing. In doing so, he could save his life. While More loved his family very much, he loved God first. He was detached from the pressure of his family to persuade him to go against the truth, and he remained firm. In a letter to his daughter,

Meg, More demonstrated this interior freedom of trusting completely in the Lord and His care for him as he wrote the following:

And, therefore, my own good daughter, do not let your mind be troubled over anything that shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best.¹

This interior, spiritual freedom is something that is available to all of God's faithful people. Every saint can be said to have possessed this gift, for the saints are those who freely choose to do the will of God above everything else. St. Paul reminds us of this universal call to freedom in his Letter to the Galatians where he tells us: "For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

Returning to the Gospel, Jesus' call of His followers is even more demanding than the Prophet Elijah's call of Elisha to follow him. Jesus calls us to experience the joy that comes from freely following Him with an undivided heart. We are invited to be like St. Thomas More, to trust that even if it may *seem* like detaching from good things like family will be hard, what will come as a result of following Him will be for the best.

At the heart of arriving at such an attitude of interior freedom is our coming to appreciate the dignity that is ours as beloved children of God. Today, June 26th, is normally celebrated as the feast day of St. Josémaria Escriva, founder of Opus Dei. Although the Sunday liturgy supersedes the memorial of a saint, it still behooves us to recall the life of St. Josémaria as a model of the freely-chosen discipleship that we heard about in today's scripture readings. St. Josémaria was tireless in his insistence of the centrality of embracing our identity as children, an identity which leads us to true freedom. Drawing upon the words of Jesus that "the truth will make you free" (John 8:32), St. Josémaria said that the truth that makes us free "is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks on us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father."²

As we consider the conditions that we place on following Jesus in our lives, it is helpful for us to keep this idea of our divine filiation in mind. There may be things or people in our lives which seem almost impossible to detach from, but we are invited to have that childlike trust in the goodness of God our Father to provide for all that we need. With that awareness, we will more easily step away from the things that keep us

enslaved so that we can “share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

When we are able to make this shift to trusting totally in God and in His care for us as children, we will be like the saints, capable of doing whatever is asked of us, as we echo the words of St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

To summarize this dynamic, I would like to conclude with a reflection from the writings of St. Josémaría as it offers a helpful way of looking at how Our Lord is calling each of us to this freedom which is so essential to our becoming who we were meant to be – saints. He writes the following:

Allow me to insist on this point. It is quite evident, as we can see in ourselves and in others, that everybody is a slave in some form or other. Some stoop before riches; others worship power; some, the relative tranquillity of scepticism, and there are those who discover in sensuality their golden calf. The same happens in noble things. We put effort into a job of work, into an undertaking, large or small, into scientific, artistic, literary or spiritual activities. Wherever there is

commitment and real passion, the person involved lives enslaved, joyfully devoting himself to fulfilling his task. We will be slaves either way. Since we must serve anyway, for whether we like it or not this is our lot as men, then there is nothing better than recognizing that Love has made us slaves of God. From the moment we recognize this we cease being slaves and become friends, sons. Then we see the difference: we find ourselves tackling the honest occupations of the world just as passionately and just as enthusiastically as others do, but with peace in the depth of our hearts. We are happy and calm, even in the midst of difficulties, for we are not putting our trust in passing things, but in what lasts forever. We are not children of the slave but of the free woman.³

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, let us thank God for the gift of the saints, who provide a compelling witness of freedom, totally dedicated to live as disciples of our Lord. May we strive daily to embrace the freedom that belongs to us as God's beloved children, so that, in our own way, in whatever state of life to which the Lord has called us, we too can be witnesses to freedom, answering God's call to follow Him unreservedly. May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From a letter written in prison to his daughter Margaret by Saint Thomas More (*The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, London, 1557, p. 1454).

² St. Josémaria Escriva, *Friends of God*, 26.

³ St. Josémaria Escriva, *Friends of God*, 34-35.