

**Homily for the Patronal Feast of
Sacred Heart Church of St. Katharine Drexel Parish
Springfield, Illinois
June 30, 2019**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

It is good for us to be here for this Mass honoring the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom this church is dedicated. The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was observed in the Middle Ages as a private devotion. It was recognized as a liturgical feast in 1675 following the apparitions of Our Lord to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque.

There is a two-fold aspect to the devotion to the Sacred Heart: first, we give thanks for the wonders of God's love poured out for us by Our Lord's death and resurrection; second, there is reparation, because we often respond so poorly to God's love. While it is true that we can never reciprocate God's love in equal measure, we often fail even to try to repay God's love to the extent that we are humanly capable of doing.¹ In this Eucharist, then, we give thanks for the depth of Christ's love for us, and we pray that we may be transformed in response to that love.

As I pray with you this evening, I would like to share with you some reflections on this past week that I spent in England as they relate to the practice of our faith and to how we are to respond to the love poured out for us by the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I made this pilgrimage with Father Christopher House, who serves as Chancellor and Vicar Judicial of our diocese and here as Rector of our Cathedral. This past Monday and Tuesday I presented two lectures at the University of Oxford in England.

My first lecture is titled "Confronting the Myths and Realities of Clerical Sexual Abuse of Minors in the Catholic Church." The second is titled "Doing as I Please or Pleasing as I Do: Constructive and Destructive Autonomy in Relation to Conscience, Freedom, and Obligation." In case you are interested, they are available online on our diocesan website at www.dio.org.

I would like to tell you more about my second lecture, on autonomy, conscience, freedom, and obligation, as we approach our nation's celebration of Independence Day on the Fourth of July.

First, regarding the word “autonomy”: I would say that autonomy could have either negative or positive implications. The word “autonomy” comes from the Greek words, “*auto*,” which means “self,” and “*nomos*,” which means law. Autonomy then means laws made for oneself. Autonomy is constructive when a person comports himself or herself, or a state governs itself, in a way that serves the common good and not just self-interest. Used in this way, the word “autonomy” can be understood in a positive sense, much like the word, “self-discipline.” Autonomy is destructive when it becomes self-serving for hedonistic reasons rather than self-regulating for altruistic purposes. The worst expression of destructive autonomy is a state of lawless anarchy where everyone does as he or she pleases with no regard for the negative impact of their behavior on others.

“Conscience” is also a word that means different things to different people. To some, following one’s conscience means to do as one pleases, as one sees fit; to others, following one’s conscience is to have the moral and political freedom to please God by what he or she does in life, to oneself and one’s neighbors, not simply as one might like or as one would prefer, but as one ought to do.

The word “conscience” comes from two Latin words, “co-” (which means “together” or “with”) and “science” (which means to have knowledge about something). Conscience means to share knowledge with someone else about what is right or wrong. It is to think with God. Conscience does not act in isolation, based on some sort of personal or individual intuition, disconnected from other people and from the truth. For a Catholic, a properly formed conscience means to share God’s knowledge and the Church’s teaching about right or wrong. So those who invoke “conscience” to justify their rejection of the natural moral law that we can know by reason or the divine law disclosed in revelation and taught by the Catholic Church are saying that they have chosen to follow the thinking, knowledge and values of someone or something other than the Catholic Church or from God, who embedded certain moral truths into the world and into us.

An unfortunate example of an erroneous understanding of conscience occurred just last week when Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis refused to adhere to a directive from Archbishop Charles Thompson to fire a teacher in a same-sex marriage. As a result, the Archbishop announced that the Archdiocese of Indianapolis

would no longer recognize the school as a Catholic institution as of June 21, 2019.²

In response, the school issued a statement saying, “After long and prayerful consideration, we determined that following the Archdiocese’s directive would not only violate our informed conscience on this particular matter, but also set a concerning precedent for future interference in the school’s operations and other governance matters that Brebeuf Jesuit leadership has historically had the sole right and privilege to address and decide.” Jesuit Father Brian Paulson, head of the Jesuits’ Midwest Province, stated that Brebeuf Jesuit “respects the primacy of an informed conscience of members of its community when making moral decisions.”³

If the leaders of this school are following their informed consciences, one must ask: informed by whom or what? Certainly not informed by the teaching of the Catholic Church, which teaches that homosexual activity is seriously sinful. If they reject that teaching, then they are heretical. If they reject the authority of their diocesan bishop, they are schismatic. If they are heretical and schismatic, then they are truly not a Catholic school. In the end, it is not sufficient for one’s conscience simply to be *informed*, it must also be *well-formed*, and not *under-formed* or *malformed*.

Ironically, an erroneous understanding of conscience is used increasingly to deny the religious freedom to exercise our properly formed consciences.

For example, a few years ago the State of Illinois forced Catholic Charities out of foster care and adoption services because we would not violate our consciences by giving in to the State's unreasonable and intolerant demands that would have required us to place foster children with adults living contrary to the moral law.

More recently, the law in Illinois now states that abortion is a fundamental right, so you can be sure that the next step will be to try to force Catholic hospitals to provide abortions, since refusing to do so in their view would be to deny the fundamental right to abortion. We must be vigilant and pray that the government will not drive us out of health care ministry.

The connection of conscience to freedom and obligation can be understood by quoting Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, who said, "Conscience has rights because it has duties." Similarly, in his homily at Baltimore during his 1995 visit to the United States, Pope St. John Paul II challenged all of us to a nobler notion of freedom when he said (echoing

Lord Acton), that “freedom is not a matter of doing what we like, but having the right to do what we ought.”

Returning to London after my Oxford lectures, Father House and I visited the cells of my patron saints, St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, at the Tower of London, where they were imprisoned prior to their execution by beheading in 1535 at the order of King Henry VIII for refusing to accede to the Act of Supremacy, which rejected papal authority and declared the monarch to be the supreme head of the Church of England.

Father House and I concluded our pilgrimage by celebrating Mass at the Rochester Cathedral, where St. John Fisher served as Bishop. In our prayers at these sites of Ss. John Fisher and Thomas More, we prayed for them to intercede for the clergy and faithful of our diocese, that we may live strong in our faith and be faithful in our lives.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God*, Daily Meditations, Volume Six, Special Feasts: January-June (London: Scepter Publications, Inc., 2012), pp. 311-312.

² “Archdiocese of Indianapolis, Brebeuf to split over teacher's same-sex marriage,” WISH-TV.COM, June 20, 2019, accessed online at <https://www.wishtv.com/news/local-news/archdiocese-of-indianapolis-brebeuf-to-split/2088178334>.

³ Catholic News Agency, “Indianapolis Archbishop Revokes Jesuit Prep School's Catholic Identity,” *National Catholic Register*, June 21, 2019, accessed online at <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/indianapolis-archbishop-revokes-jesuit-prep-schools-catholic-identity>.