

THE REAL DRAMA

The Church's freedom is under attack and she cheers on her enemies

ECCLESIA

12_05_2020



**Stefano
Fontana**



Regarding the suspension of public Masses for COVID-19 public health ordinances, a fundamental issue emerges: the *Libertas Ecclesiae*, that is, the Church's religious freedom. The agreement signed in Italy by the state and the national Catholic Bishops'

Conference to regulate the liturgy perfectly illustrates the problem. And It is not the only case. This is what has already happened and is ongoing in several other countries around the world.

In terms of regulating the altar, this is an inviolable space. The state should not enter here. If it does and the Church accepts their governance, then it is all but over for her *Libertas Ecclesiae*. If the Church is not free to act as she wants in its most sacred spaces, then she is not free in any part of her holy mission. In our own day and age, therefore, it is pivotal that we fight once again for *Libertas Ecclesiae*, as had been done in several chapters of human history successfully. However, in the past it was the Church who led the way in this tense battle. Yet, today it is no longer so.

In the fight for *Libertas Ecclesiae*, new religious orders, like the Cluny fathers, were founded. Because of *Libertas Ecclesiae* Hildebrand of Soana (Gregory VII) excommunicated the Emperor and later received him as a penitent in Canossa. For *Libertas Ecclesiae*, Boniface VIII anticipated the hard **slap** he received in Anagni by delegates from Philip IV's army with his papal bull *Unam Sanctam*. Because of *Libertas Ecclesiae*, St. Catherine of Siena insisted popes return from Avignon to Rome. For *Libertas Ecclesiae*, the French **Vendean**s rebels took up arms and many Catholic priests suffered bloodshed rather than accept secular France's **Civil Constitution of the Clergy**. On account of *Libertas Ecclesiae*, Pius IX excommunicated the Italian state from his Church after the Battle of Porta Pia. He considered himself a prisoner while he issued his *Non Expedit*. For *Libertas Ecclesiae*, the Polish Church fights against atheist communist regimes. They made hard sacrifices, while Cardinal Wyszynski languished in prison and John Paul II worked to promote a Christian Europe. Because of *Libertas Ecclesiae*, Cardinal Zen is still defending the true and suffering Chinese Catholic Church.

The Augsburg Declaration (*cuius regio eius religio*) denied *Libertas Ecclesiae*, but it was Protestant, not a Catholic problem, as were all the other **Peace of Westphalia** treaties. Austrian Josephinism was tolerated but never fully accepted by the Catholic Church, while she stood tall against the new Italian state which began banishing religious orders, confiscating her properties, suppressing her charitable institutions, and conditioning her episcopal appointments with an *exequatur*.

The Church's freedom is based on the fact she is a divinely founded institution. Christ founded the Church. Christ sent the Holy Spirit to guide and sustain her. Christ taught her and made the Church an administrator of His grace. Christ gave his Church a hierarchy and mission. Christ taught His Church how to worship Him through the liturgy. Christ taught his Church how to pray to Him and allowed her to be part of a

"supernatural motherhood." Christ told His Church to respect earthly authorities whose powers are rooted in natural law. But Christ taught His Church that God is the Author of all Creation, and thus we must obey Him before anyone else.

The Church's freedom implies her right to absolute independence as the fruit of her equally absolute submission to God's Will. The Church's rights are based on God's laws not on civil religious freedom laws. The Church is the sovereign guardian of divinely revealed truths and of natural moral law. She is sovereign in her determination of how to organize her liturgy because God has to be worshipped in the way He determines not as mankind would prefer. The Church is sovereign in how she educates children and youth because education is an extension of God's creation. The Church is sovereign in her establishment and support of the holy institutions of marriage and the family. Lastly, she is sovereign in her works of charity as a direct participation in the life of God.

Modern states, which are essentially atheistic, have gradually taken away the Church's sovereignty over education (with its monopoly of public schools), marriage (with civil marriage and divorce), and charity (with bureaucratic welfare). Today's state has managed to do even more: it has deprived the Church of her sovereignty over doctrine and morality, preventing her from disseminating teachings contrary to "new rights" created by governments. The state, in the meantime, is leveraging the pandemic to undermine the Church's sovereignty over her liturgy, governing the Church's altars with its own decrees.

Is the erosion of Libertas Ecclesiae opposed today by at least one form of resistance? If not, is a counter-offensive being organized? No, because the loss of liberty, resisted and fought hard for by the Church in past centuries, is ironically happening today because of the Church's very consent. The Church herself is asking for her freedom to be taken away, even considering it a duty of the Gospel to disappear in service of the world and abandon her mission as it relates the powers of God to men. The Church does not protest because Catholics must teach children what the state wants them to be taught. She does she complain because civil legislation has killed marriage. She believes the plurality of choice is acceptable and good. No one complains, because the Church's own charity depends ever more on the state. So today, no one within the Church will grumble should governments tell priests they may only hold and distribute the Eucharist with gloves on.

The bottom line is that while the Church of Gregory VII fought hard for her freedom, today's Church, however, seems content with its lack of freedom. Neither is she eager to increase it. The Church even appears to praise those who take it away from

her.