

# *Dignitatis humanae*

## The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty

On December 7, 1965, the Second Vatican Council approved *Dignitatis humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty. The Declaration addresses a question that comes up in every generation: how do we understand freedom, truth, and the relationship between church and state?

Religious freedom includes two important aspects – freedom from and freedom for. “Freedom from” is probably familiar and what most of us think of as freedom. It means that we are to be free from coercion. The state is not an all-powerful institution that can force people to act against their consciences.

The right to be free from coercion limits the power of the state. But this freedom must be paired with a “freedom for,” a positive orientation to seeking and acting in accordance with the truth. People have both a right and a duty to seek religious truth. Freedom from coercion allows the space for the pursuit of religious truth. Religious freedom requires that a society both refrain from preventing people from living out their religion and help to create the conditions for religious expression to flourish. A free society, then, is one where people actively seek religious truth and fully live out that truth in public and private. As Pope Francis recently said in Cuba, the Church must have “the freedom and all the means needed to bring the proclamation of the Kingdom to the existential peripheries of society.”

Human beings are social creatures. Religious freedom means that not only individuals but also families, communities, and institutions enjoy the space to live out religious convictions. Parents

have a fundamental right to teach their children their faith. Companies that seek to contribute to the common good by their responsible business practices should be encouraged. Religious freedom belongs to groups as well as individuals.

This social dimension of religious freedom entails that religious freedom includes the freedom to practice our faith in public. In our culture, some tend to think that religious liberty means only that individuals can worship without interference from the government. This understanding is inadequate. Religious schools, hospitals, and charities should be able to operate in accordance with their faith. Indeed, the work of these organizations is part and parcel of their faith. They are expressions of religious mission, and religions must have the space to live out their missions.

As the title of the Declaration suggests, human dignity is central to *Dignitatis humanae*. A most precious aspect of being human is the two-fold capacity to exercise reason and to respond to found truth. It is natural to ask, How do I live a good life? Who created this wonderful world, and how should I respond to this Creator? Why is there suffering, and how should I alleviate it? Religious traditions offer answers to these deeply human questions. It is imperative for the sake of human dignity that people are free to pursue these questions. The pursuit of truth involves an ability to listen, for God has made us with a capacity to hear his Word. Religious freedom is the cornerstone of a society that promotes human dignity. It is a fundamental human right, for it follows on the duty of all people to seek the truth about God.



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