

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO CUBA, TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AND VISIT TO THE UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

(19-28 SEPTEMBER 2015)

MEETING FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY
WITH THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY AND OTHER IMMIGRANTS
ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Independence Mall, Philadelphia

Saturday, 26 September 2015

[Multimedia]

Dear Friends,

Good afternoon. One of the highlights of my visit is to stand here, before Independence Hall, the birthplace of the United States of America. It was here that the freedoms which define this country were first proclaimed. The Declaration of Independence stated that all men and women are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that governments exist to protect and defend those rights. Those ringing words continue to inspire us today, even as they have inspired peoples throughout the world to fight for the freedom to live in accordance with their dignity.

History also shows that these or any truths must constantly be reaffirmed, re-appropriated and defended. The history of this nation is also the tale of a constant effort, lasting to our own day, to embody those lofty principles in social and political life. We remember the great struggles which led to the abolition of slavery, the extension of voting rights, the growth of the labor movement, and the gradual effort to eliminate every kind of racism and prejudice directed at further waves of new Americans. This shows that, when a country is determined to remain true to its principles, those founding principles based on respect for human dignity, it is strengthened and renewed. When a country is mindful of its roots, it keeps growing, it is renewed and it continues to embrace newcomers, new individuals and new peoples.

All of us benefit from remembering our past. A people which remembers does not repeat past errors; instead, it looks with confidence to the challenges of the present and the future. Remembrance saves a people's soul from whatever or whoever would attempt to dominate it or to use it for their own interests. When individuals and communities are guaranteed the effective exercise of their rights, they are not only free to realize their potential, they also, through their talents

and their hard work, contribute to the welfare and enrichment of society as a whole.

In this place which is symbolic of the American way, I would like to reflect with you on the right to religious freedom. It is a fundamental right which shapes the way we interact socially and personally with our neighbors whose religious views differ from our own. The ideal of interreligious dialogue, where all men and women, from different religious traditions, can speak to one another without arguing. This is what religious freedom allows.

Religious freedom certainly means the right to worship God, individually and in community, as our consciences dictate. But religious liberty, by its nature, transcends places of worship and the private sphere of individuals and families. Because religion itself, the religious dimension, is not a subculture; it is part of the culture of every people and every nation.

Our various religious traditions serve society primarily by the message they proclaim. They call individuals and communities to worship God, the source of all life, liberty and happiness. They remind us of the transcendent dimension of human existence and our irreducible freedom in the face of any claim to absolute power. We need but look at history – we always benefit from looking at history – especially the history of the last century, to see the atrocities perpetrated by systems which claimed to build one or another “earthly paradise” by dominating peoples, subjecting them to apparently indisputable principles and denying them any kind of rights. Our rich religious traditions seek to offer meaning and direction, “they have an enduring power to open new horizons, to stimulate thought, to expand the mind and heart” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 256). They call to conversion, reconciliation, concern for the future of society, self-sacrifice in the service of the common good, and compassion for those in need. At the heart of their spiritual mission is the proclamation of the truth and dignity of the human person and all human rights.

Our religious traditions remind us that, as human beings, we are called to acknowledge an Other, who reveals our relational identity in the face of every effort to impose “a uniformity to which the egotism of the powerful, the conformism of the weak, or the ideology of the utopian would seek to impose on us” (M. de Certeau).

In a world where various forms of modern tyranny seek to suppress religious freedom, or, as I said earlier, to try to reduce it to a subculture without right to a

voice in the public square, or to use religion as a pretext for hatred and brutality, it is imperative that the followers of the various religious traditions join their voices in calling for peace, tolerance and respect for the dignity and the rights of others.

We live in an age subject to the “globalization of the technocratic paradigm” (Laudato Si', 106), which consciously aims at a one-dimensional uniformity and seeks to eliminate all differences and traditions in a superficial quest for unity. The religions thus have the right and the duty to make clear that it is possible to build a society where “a healthy pluralism which respects differences and values them as such” (Evangeliu Gaudium, 255) is a “precious ally in the commitment to defending human dignity... and a path to peace in our world”, wounded as it is by wars (ibid., 257).

The Quakers who founded Philadelphia were inspired by a profound evangelical sense of the dignity of each individual and the ideal of a community united by brotherly love. This conviction led them to found a colony which would be a haven of religious freedom and tolerance. That sense of fraternal concern for the dignity of all, especially the weak and the vulnerable, became an essential part of the American spirit. During his visit to the United States in 1987, Saint John Paul II paid moving homage to this, reminding all Americans that: “The ultimate test of your greatness is the way you treat every human being, but especially the weakest and most defenseless ones” (Farewell Address, 19 September 1987, 3).

I take this opportunity to thank all those, of whatever religion, who have sought to serve God, the God of peace, by building cities of brotherly love, by caring for our neighbors in need, by defending the dignity of God’s gift, the gift of life in all its stages, and by defending the cause of the poor and the immigrant. All too often, those most in need of our help, everywhere, are unable to be heard. You are their voice, and many of you – men and women – have faithfully made their cry heard. In this witness, which frequently encounters powerful resistance, you remind American democracy of the ideals for which it was founded, and that society is weakened whenever and wherever injustice prevails.

Just now I spoke of the trend towards globalization. Globalization is not evil. On the contrary, the tendency to become globalized is good; it brings us together. What can be evil is how it happens. If a certain kind of globalization claims to make everyone uniform, to level everyone out, that globalization destroys the rich gifts and uniqueness of each person and each people. But a globalization which attempts to bring everyone together while respecting the uniqueness and

gifts of each person or people is a good globalization; it helps all of us to grow, and it brings peace. I like to use a geometrical image for this. If globalization is a sphere, where every point is equidistant from the center, it cancels everything out; it is not good. But if globalization is like a polyhedron, where everything is united but each element keeps its own identity, then it is good; it causes a people to grow, it bestows dignity and it grants rights to all.

Among us today are members of America's large Hispanic population, as well as representatives of recent immigrants to the United States. Many of you have emigrated (I greet you warmly!) to this country at great personal cost, in the hope of building a new life. Do not be discouraged by whatever hardships you face. I ask you not to forget that, like those who came here before you, you bring many gifts to this nation. Please, you should never be ashamed of your traditions. Do not forget the lessons you learned from your elders, which are something you can bring to enrich the life of this American land. I repeat, do not be ashamed of what is part of you, your life blood. You are also called to be responsible citizens, and to contribute fruitfully – as those who came before you did with such fortitude – to the life of the communities in which you live. I think in particular of the vibrant faith which so many of you possess, the deep sense of family life and all those other values which you have inherited. By contributing your gifts, you will not only find your place here, you will help to renew society from within. Do not forget what took place here over two centuries ago. Do not forget that Declaration which proclaimed that all men and women are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights and that governments exist in order to protect and defend those rights.

Dear friends, I thank you for your warm welcome and for joining me here today. Let us preserve freedom. Let us cherish freedom. Freedom of conscience, religious freedom, the freedom of each person, each family, each people, which is what gives rise to rights. May this country and each of you be renewed in gratitude for the many blessings and freedoms that you enjoy. And may you defend these rights, especially your religious freedom, for it has been given to you by God himself. May he bless you all. I ask you, please, say a little prayer for me. Thank you.