

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité

The Christian Reformed of Western Michigan have been known to throw out their Christmas trees on Christmas afternoon lest the pagan symbolism contaminate their Calvinistic purity any longer than necessary. They would doubtless disapprove of our traditions, which see the Christmas season lasting forty days – i.e., until the Feast of the Encounter of the Lord (elsewhere known as Candlemas); this means that Ukrainian carols have been known to extend into February. Among those carols I can think of at least one which places in our mouths the song of the angels in Bethlehem: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to people who enjoy his favor!(ISV)”

I write these words in Paris, where the wounds of terrorist attacks throughout the city remain very fresh and painful indeed. Parisians are not alone in freaking out, however: reports of even more so-called “humanitarian convoys” coming east into the Donbas are joined by news of attacks and suffering throughout the world. Caught up in this avalanche of “man's inhumanity to man”, the dream of peace seems less and less likely to come true any time soon. The promise of peace served as a lullabye to the Christ Child; may it serve as a comforting balm to us as we confront a world where violence lurks at every turn – even at home. BTW: how many were murdered last year in Chicago? St. Louis? LA?

As so often, I find inspiration on France-Culture radio. A commentator, joining the rest of us in trying to make sense of the senseless, decided to wrestle with the whole idea of peace. His eventual definition: peace is like a self-fulfilling prophecy; it is a life context created by and for people and societies, and it flows in and out of lives which are allowed and even encouraged to flourish, to reach their fullest potential. It seems to me that the motto of the French republic, serving as title of this article, might provide ingredients necessary to any recipe for peace – namely, freedom, equality, and “brotherhood” - the latter of which would not be considered by the French to exclude the “sisters”.

Some misguided people think that freedom means being able to do whatever they want, however they want, regardless of the impact upon anyone or anything else; in other words, freedom from constraint of any kind; doesn't “Throw off your chains!” sound like a slogan brandished not only by Marxists of old, but also by rightist extremists like the Minutemen? Of course, such people will protest that their actions are justified because, in their eyes, their aims are good; moral theologians, aware that “the ends do not justify the means”, will shake their heads in disbelief. Indeed, aren't the groups mentioned above the first to protest that their own rights are being infringed upon by others claiming the same rights? Sigh!

What, then, is freedom? In the immortal words offered by Harry Byrne, op in one of my courses in pastoral care: “Freedom is having good options”. These options may not be the first to come to mind, nor are they necessarily the easiest to carry out, but then where is it written that easiest is best? Not in my life, that's for sure!

This brings us to the “brotherhood” thing, the communitarian concept. Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky remind us of a concept too often forgotten in our cutthroat society:

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they choose the term “commonwealth” to identify themselves. Commonwealth: the well-being of one contributes to the well-being of all concerned – and we are all concerned, whether we know it or like it. The three musketeers would summarize this by shouting together “All for one and one for all!” The poet John Donne waxes more eloquent:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Such, believe it or not, is the social teaching of the Catholic Church; methinks some Catholics need a refresher course!

As for equality, I am reminded of a silly statement made by former French President Valéry Giscard D'Estaing: underlining the equality of all French citizens, Giscard said that the garbage crew and the President of the Republic were the same. Some may snicker, finding another opportunity to impugn politicians. I, of course, being a Dominican, feel the need to parse words. There is a necessary distinction between being equal and being the same. (If you don't believe it, imagine the ruckus this confused foreigner raised by choosing the wrong bathroom option in Oberammergau!) Instead, let us see what St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord. There are varieties of results, but it is the same God who produces all the results in everyone. To each person has been given the ability to manifest the Spirit for the common good. To one has been given a message of wisdom by the Spirit; to another the ability to speak with knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit; to another miraculous results; to another prophecy; to another the ability to distinguish between spirits; to another various kinds of languages; and to another the interpretation of languages. But one and the same Spirit produces all these results and gives what he wants to each person.(11:4-12)

In short, with all our differences, there is a place for each of us, and that place is together.

When all else fails, ask Jesus. He said: “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is exactly like it: ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.(Mt. 22:37-40)” Notice that both

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these commandments are fundamental, indeed complementary. St. John tells us that “Whoever says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother is a liar. The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love the God whom he has not seen.(1 John 4:20)” How like the Golden Rule! Words to be prattled or a lifestyle to be embraced? I can only choose for myself..