

Sermon III Sunday after Easter by Msgr. Schmitz –

May 3, 2020 Maria Engelport, Germany

Dear Faithful,

*To obey or not to obey, that is the question!* In this way the well-known saying of Hamlet could be rephrased when one reflects on the situation in which we have found ourselves these past weeks and in which some find themselves still today. Do Christians have to obey the authorities and submit to their commandments and prohibitions? Which areas may secular and ecclesiastical authority regulate? Do we just have to accept any restriction on our freedom? Can we just bow to all coercive measures? The traditional teaching of the Church gives us a clear answer to these questions.

In his first letter, which we heard in the epistle today, the apostle Peter initially answered unequivocally: *Be subject to all human authority for the Lord's sake, whether it be the king as the chief or the governor as those sent by him are for the punishment of the evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.* (1 Peter 2: 13-14) He goes even further and says to the slaves of his time: *You slaves, submit in fear to your masters, not only the benevolent and kind, but also the severe.* (1 Peter 2:18) We find the same teaching in St. Paul's letter to the Romans: *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.* (Romans 13, 1) St. Paul rightly draws far-reaching conclusions from this principle, which has subsequently determined the relationship of Christians to the authorities: *Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is*

*good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.* (Romans 13, 2-4)

First of all, it is therefore clear that the authorities, whose authority ultimately comes from God, can expect obedience from us as Christians apart from any coercive measures they may employ. In his Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* of March 19, 1937 (No. 29 and 30) against Communism, Pope Pius XI explains this principle again: "But God has likewise destined man for civil society according to the dictates of his very nature. ... Man cannot be exempted from his divinely imposed obligations toward civil society, and the representatives of authority have the right to coerce him when he refuses without reason to do his duty." Because man is ordered by society through the divine law, he must willingly submit to authority. God has used this authority in society to order things for man's greater good. If man, whether Christian or not, refuses to follow this order, he withdraws from the will of God and harms himself and others.

But here is also the limit within which the authority over society can demand obedience. This obedience has its origins in the well-being of the individual and is intended to classify and promote the exercise of his freedom, which is also willed by God and necessary for salvation, in the whole of society. Pius XI says clearly with the entire ecclesiastical tradition: "Society is for man and not vice versa," because "only man, the human person, and not society in any form is endowed with reason and a morally free will." (Ibid. 29) This means that society and the authority within it must do everything to ensure that human freedom corresponds to its God-intended purpose. Nobody is allowed to abuse his freedom in a selfish manner to the detriment of others or the common good. Yet even less can this freedom be restricted in the name of any anonymous social collective. If the authority temporarily limits God-given rights of liberty, the reason can only

be a clear emergency or an individual's violation of the legal system ordained by God. Otherwise, these fundamental rights, which derive from the same legal system, such as the right to life, private property and freedom of religion, are always untouchable.

Therefore, Christian obedience to the authorities also finds clear limits, especially when those in power demand action very specifically against God's commandments. In such a case Peter and the Apostles said to the high council: *One must obey God more than men!* (Acts 5, 29) Abuse of power exists when the exercise of essential fundamental rights is prevented for arbitrary reasons. In that case courageous commitment to the laws of God and, in extreme cases, civil disobedience are necessary. "Society ... cannot defraud man of his God given rights ... Nor can society systematically void these rights by making their use impossible." (Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, 30).

This danger arises above all if the legal system in a society is separated from its foundation in natural law. Then law becomes a mere coercive order, in which arbitrarily exercised force replaces the inner foundation of law in human nature and its necessities. Then anything can become law through violence, and the clearly recognizable will of God, enclosed in human nature, is disregarded. Pope Benedict XVI in his speech to the German Bundestag once again pointed out the essential importance of natural law. But Pope Pius XI taught in his famous Encyclical, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, against Nazi ideology in Germany, on March 14, 1937, three days before his Encyclical against Communism was published: "It is in the light of the commands of this natural law, that all positive law, whoever be the lawgiver, can be gauged in its moral content, and hence, in the authority it wields over conscience."

The state's considerations of usefulness therefore have their clear limits in the personal rights of man, which are anchored in natural law.

In the light of this principle one must judge the axiom, that "right is common utility," a proposition which may be given a correct significance, it means that what is morally indefensible, can never contribute to the good of the people. But ancient paganism acknowledged that the axiom, to be entirely true, must be reversed and be made to say: "Nothing can be useful, if it is not at the same time morally good. And something is not morally good because it is useful, but it is useful because it is morally good." (Cicero, *De officiis*, 3, 30).

The arbitrary and permanent restriction of freedoms is neither good nor useful.

As devout Catholics, we have suffered in the past few weeks from the restrictions on our freedoms that affect the fundamental right to practice religion freely. Nobody doubts that some of these restrictions were necessary to protect the common good and the well-being of the individual. Everyone is obliged to protect himself and others from infections with dangerous diseases and, if necessary, to make sacrifices that partially and temporarily limit his own freedom. However, how many of these restrictions were really good and therefore useful in the sense of God's order is very controversial and will have to become clearer before the criticism of history.

Even the German Supreme Court in Karlsruhe, whose most recent decision on euthanasia shows no great respect for the natural law, in a decision made on Good Friday 2020 felt compelled to declare that the view that the ban on worship would be unconstitutional was not unfounded, but would "rather be open" to clarification. In another decision of April 10, the Supreme Court urged a strict examination of the proportionality to continue the ban on worship. It was to be examined whether the ban on worship could be relaxed "under possibly strict

conditions and possibly also regionally.” This easing is now slowly becoming a reality. The role of the church authorities is not always uniform and unambiguous. It is questionable whether their anticipatory obedience and silence towards “extremely serious interference” against religious freedom, as it was phrased by the German Constitution, has benefited the credibility of ecclesiastical authority in defending the divine order. It remains completely incomprehensible as the easing of the governmental restrictions has not yet led to the early reinstatement of public celebrations of Holy Mass everywhere. The Encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (16) said of the bishops: “It is part of their sacred obligations to do whatever is in their power to enforce respect for, and obedience to, the commandments of God, as these are the necessary foundation of all private life and public morality; to see that the rights of His Divine Majesty, His name and His word be not profaned; to put a stop to the blasphemies, which, in words and pictures, are multiplying like the sands of the desert; to encounter the obstinacy and provocations of those who deny, despise and hate God, by the never-failing reparatory prayers of the Faithful, hourly rising like incense to the All-Highest and staying His vengeance.”

These events teach us to be vigilant. What Pope Pius XI faced as the threat to religious freedom during the Nazi era, repeats itself before our eyes: “All efforts to remove from under morality and the moral order the granite foundation of faith and to substitute for it the shifting sands of human regulations, sooner or later lead these individuals or societies to moral degradation.” (Ibid. 29) This moral decline in our society already means that the basic rights of those who oppose it can easily be infringed. The Christian forces in our state are weakened, and the ecclesiastical authorities are more anxious. In such a situation, it is obvious how easy it would be for governmental executive orders to justify further and more permanent restrictions on religious life. Abortion and euthanasia are already tolerated by referring to alleged legal interests of the individual or society. In our

country, it is not the first time that we see how quickly the ban on the free practice of religion can become socially acceptable.

So let's stay vigilant! There are forces in the state and in the Church that have little respect for the law of God inscribed in our nature. There have been, and still are, forces that find any excuse to diminish religious freedom and its practice. Under the guise of the alleged common good, efforts will continue to be made to enforce greater control over individuals and to limit their rights. The right to life is already threatened and undermined in our society. Attempts will also be made to reduce our right to practice our faith freely. When freedom of faith is threatened, human freedom as a whole is at stake! We have to think carefully about what we can do to prevent such abuses and to preserve our Christian liberties!

*To obey or not to obey, that is the question!* We now know that obedience to the legitimate authorities as Christians has its limits. We cannot simply accept everything. We have to apply the standard of divine order to the decisions that are made about us. If it is clear that the authorities do not respect the godly order, we must and may act accordingly. The martyrs of all time, many confessors against tyranny, great holy popes like Gregory VII and John Paul II are examples of the fact that the law of God stands above all arbitrary rule and ultimately triumphs over it.

We therefore have to be vigilant, but not fearful. All time and every event is in God's hands. If our faithfulness continues to be tested, God will send us the grace of steadfastness. Should we have to fight for our religious freedom, He will send us saints to lead this fight. We are not afraid! On the contrary, today we share the conviction of faith in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, which bravely closes:

“Like other periods of the history of the Church, the present has ushered in a new ascension of interior purification, on the sole condition that the faithful show themselves proud enough in the confession of their faith in Christ, generous enough in suffering to face the oppressors of the Church with the strength of their faith and charity.”

Amen.