

**LIFE IN CHRIST  
BY DEACON JAMES KEATING**

# RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

THE FREEDOM TO BE LOVED  
AND RECEIVE LOVE



Christ calls us to a freedom that flows from and ultimately rests in deep intimacy with Him and all the saints. This freedom is a participation in His divine life, which he shares willingly through the sacraments.

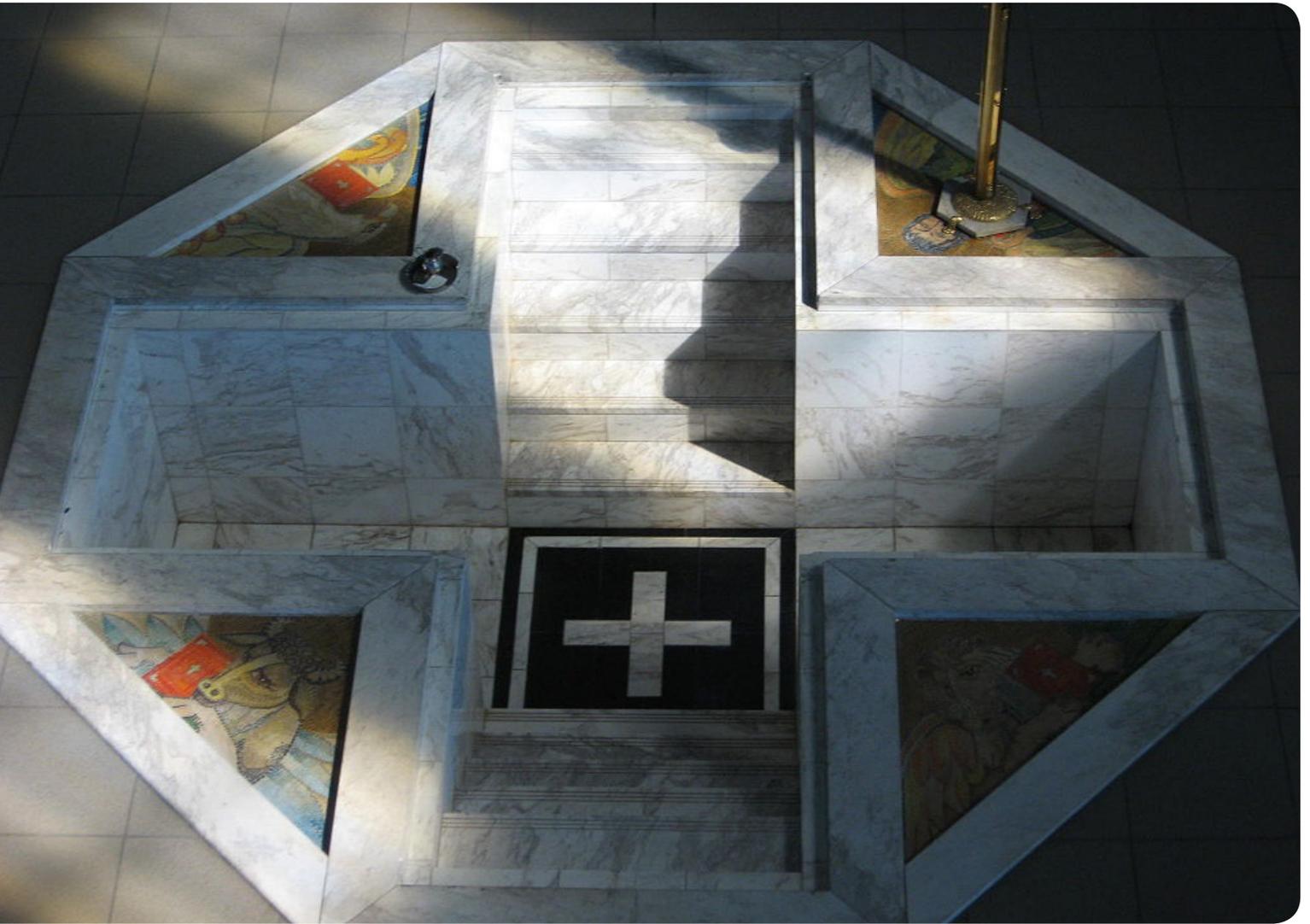
To be free is to be with Him and in Him.

To be free is to be bound to Him  
in a communion of love,  
in a reciprocal sharing of the self as gift.

To be free is to have all of one's decisions, thoughts  
and actions flow from interior communion with  
His salvific, healing mystery.



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Such freedom characterizes those who have suffered the coming of Christ; it marks him or her as being Christ's! To be so marked is to be one who is appropriating the grace of the sacramental life as one's oxygen. This way of being configured interiorly, however, is not meant to simply give a Catholic inner consolation. Rather, such a powerful relationship with the Son of God has public effects as well. The first public effect of receiving the Love of Christ is the altered moral character with which such love gifts a person as a result of his or her receptivity to the paschal mystery. Such character is not private but displays itself always, wherever one is present. This public effect of receiving divine love is the first movement of evangelization. Such a moral character will radiate many dispositions, attitudes and virtues—giving birth then to the most public of all Catholic attributes—visible moral actions. These actions give witness to a person's commitment to Christ. In these public moral actions, which are given birth to in the grace-filled conscience, one expresses the glory of the human being.

For freedom to be secured in a society it is vital that others respect public expressions of religious commitment. If this respect is absent in society then it becomes impossible for Catholics to have their deepest religious convictions become enfolded.

“The basic question before a democratic society is: “How ought we to live together?” Can the biblical wisdom, which played such a formative part in the very founding of one’s country, be excluded from that debate? Would not doing so mean that tens of millions of Americans could no longer offer the contribution of their deepest convictions to the formation of public policy?” (John Paul II, Homily in Camden Yard, 1995).

Of course to have a citizenry support the expression of religious conviction, they must first embrace the truth of religious liberty. According to Catholic teachings such liberty is not to be narrowly confined to formal worship alone but instead fans out to include public expressions of the love of God arising from the obedient conscience. Such expressions are better known as moral acts. To reverence the liberty of conscience as it is tethered to the truth which God reveals and reason discerns assures society that it is anchored securely. Without such respect for the freedom of conscience, a freedom that follows the truth born in love, one allows the social square to be ruled only by those who hold the most power. Love, then, is silenced; leaving only relativized and expedient values to fill the void.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes:

Nobody may be forced to act against his convictions, nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others, within due limits. This right is based on the very nature of the human person, whose dignity enables him freely to assent to the divine truth which transcends the temporal order. (CCC §2106)

To receive the love of God involves the whole person. God gifts the lover with a fuller and richer life. To love God in Christ will inevitably lead to “life and life to the full” (Jn 10:10), and love is diffusive, generating more life and more love. Since then this is the nature of love, when one loves God a space opens up in public to contain and express that love. No one who loves murmurs about his beloved in isolation. Instead, one publicly witnesses in the town square that this person whom I have gazed upon and whose gaze I have received permanently alters my identity. This transfigured person now posits himself in the public pathways of culture. Those who may be threatened by the public nature of love might wish to reduce such a transfiguration to ONLY a “private”, self-enclosed “experience” of the heart. Authentic love resists this isolation. It has been consistent in Western culture that the public effects of being loved by Christ will be afforded space within the public square. Until now such love by God has been embraced as a social good, as has a person’s love of God in return (acts that flow from the conscience, the moral life).

There are secular moral codes or systems of ethics—purely philosophical musings on right and wrong. These bear conclusions that flow from reason or logic alone in a strictly scientific way. The Catholic ethic possesses a more generous understanding of reason as Benedict XVI has noted recently (“Meeting with representatives of science”, University of Regensburg, 2006), generous enough to allow love to affect reason. Will there be a place in society for this kind of reasoning, this kind of ethic? In other words will citizens always make room for religious liberty, not simply freedom of worship, but the freedom to fall fully in love with God and have God possess the mind, affect and will in a dramatic movement toward public witness? If not there can be no lay life, no evangelization, no public meaning to the effects of

participating in the Eucharist. To ban such love from the public square is not to force it to disappear but to drive it to fidelity’s deepest expression: suffering for the name of Christ. To receive the love of Christ and to love Christ in return means to follow him to the cross—a very public place Calvary is, very public.

The Catholic moral life begins and ends with one question: Do we have the courage to let Christ be the light of our conscience, to no longer hide in the darkness of sin? The pastoral, sacramental, and spiritual power of the Church, that is Christ’s own power made manifest through the mystery of the Bride and the Bridegroom, provides all the assistance needed to embark upon the pilgrimage of moral conversion. If we entrust ourselves to the power of the Paschal Mystery, the moral life will not be a burden but will become one’s whole life, one led entirely in Christ.

