

Flat Objection

May 16, 2009

A friend has just reminded me of the classic objection to the teaching of the true Catholic Church on religious liberty, outlined here last week. Here is the objection: Major: To force anyone's belief is absurd, because belief is not something that can be forced. Minor: But to refuse people's religious liberty is to force their beliefs. Conclusion: Therefore to refuse religious liberty is absurd.

The Major here is true. What someone does or does not believe in matters of religion is the choice of his inner free-will, which either cannot be gotten at from outside of him, and/or – especially in the case of the Catholic Faith – should not be gotten at from outside, because “Nemo nolens credit” (St. Augustine), i.e. nobody can believe against his will. So outer forcing of Catholic belief is either impossible or wrong.

The problem lies in the Minor of the objection. The Traditional Church doctrine that a Catholic State should not grant to its citizens religious liberty does not mean that the State should force anyone's private belief, nor does it mean that the State should force anyone to act in public in accordance with Catholic belief. What it does mean is that a Catholic State has the right to prevent the public practice of any religion contrary to Catholic belief, and if the prohibition will do more good than harm, it has the duty to prohibit such practice. This is because every State made up of human beings comes from God as do they, and it has from God a corresponding duty to provide temporally (i.e. to do what it can in time, here below on earth) for the eternal welfare of its citizens (i.e. their salvation in Heaven). Citizens are normally influenced by everything going on in the State around them, so their eternal salvation is normally hindered by the public practice of false religions.

Thus the Catholic Church teaches that religious liberty must be denied 1) only in the case of false religions, 2) only in their public practice, and 3) only where it will do more good than harm to prohibit such practice. This used to mean only in Catholic States, because where there is little or no Catholic Faith, such a prohibition makes little to no sense. Today it means in hardly any States at all, because the citizens of all modern States are so steeped in liberalism (the quasi-religion of liberty) that even in supposedly Catholic States today such a prohibition would outrage people's worship of freedom and so it would do more harm than good.

However, of these three conditions, the first is the key. If I do not grasp that Catholicism is the one and only completely true religion, I shall never conceive why all other religions should ever be blocked in public. Contrariwise, if I grasp that Catholicism alone (accepted at least implicitly) can send souls to Heaven, and that all other religions, as such, repeat, as such, send souls to Hell, then it follows automatically that their public practice should, where reasonable, be blocked. It comes down to a question of Faith. "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief" (Mk.IX, 23).

Kyrie eleison.