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For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

-- These are appropriate words to hear right now, since this coming Thursday we celebrate the independence of our country. But, as we well know, freedom is a word that is often misunderstood.

-- True freedom, as St. Paul says, is not doing whatever feels good at the moment. Freedom allows us to serve one another in love, to care for one another's needs.

-- Freedom is necessary to be truly human. It's a part of human dignity. That is reflected in our Declaration of Independence which we remember this week. But it's also expressed in an important document from Vatican II, the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*. (1965)

-- In that document, the Church declared that the right of individuals to freely choose their religious beliefs is rooted in the inherent dignity of the human person.

-- This doesn't mean that one religious belief or opinion is as good as another. We have an obligation to seek the truth, but we must seek the truth in freedom, not by coercion.

-- When Jesus rebuked the disciples for wanting to destroy the Samaritans, he wasn't saying that he agreed with the all Samaritan beliefs and practices. After all, Jesus was a pretty observant Jew. But he still respected their dignity as people.

-- The right of religious freedom extends to religious groups and communities as well. This is not simply the right to worship as they believe they should. It also includes the right to teach their beliefs and educate their children according to those beliefs.

-- The Declaration pointed out that some governments don't really protect the religious freedom of their people in this sense. I'm sure the writers back then thought of Communist countries and other countries where religious groups faced many dangers.

-- Our country was founded on the right of people to practice their own religious beliefs. That right is enshrined in the first amendment to the constitution.

-- But challenges to true religious freedom have arisen in our history, and there are issues in our present day that could compromise this basic principle of religious freedom. Here are some examples:

-- Church adoption agencies have faced obstacles when, following their religious beliefs, they have refused to take adoption cases for same sex couples.

-- In some states, Churches which provide assistance to undocumented persons have been threatened with legal consequences simply for ministering to these people in charity.

-- And we are aware by now of the mandate to cover sterilizations and birth control in health care plans which has still not been fully resolved. Many of these issues affect not only Catholics but many other people of faith.

-- Religious freedom is not just freedom to worship. It means the freedom to live out our religious beliefs, as long as this does not harm others or disrupt the public order.

-- As we conclude these two weeks reflecting on religious freedom, I'd encourage as many of you as possible to read Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. It's not long (about 14 pages in my text) and can be found in any collection of the Vatican Council documents. You can even find it online on the Vatican website.

-- In the end, true freedom is found by following Christ faithfully. But we, as individuals and as a nation, must protect that freedom for all people.