

Kinds of Slavery

Image: Mr Frank Campbell, one of 272 slaves sold by the Jesuits in 1838 to keep Georgetown University afloat.

It is not uncommon to hear members of the Church's hierarchy using phrases such as "this is the constant teaching of the Church". It gives the impression of a rock steadiness, an unerring and unswerving direction, that sees the world timelessly in black and white. No need ever to review and reassess. But the reality is not always so. In his encyclical on Christian marriage in 1880, Pope Leo XIII (who later wrote a stirring instruction on social justice) solemnly proclaimed "The man is the ruler of the family, and the head of the woman." Yet a century later, John Paul II recognised that teachings such as St Paul's on submission of wives to husbands were culturally-conditioned and he proposed an equality, a 'mutual submission'. Reason tells us so. He was not a slave to the text.

In spite of the master in Jesus' Parable of the Talents criticising his servant for not investing money for interest, early Church Councils declared taking interest on a loan to be sinful. Yet with an emerging understanding of the nature of money and banks, it was largely not regarded as sinful by the sixteenth century – though Benedict XIV condemned it as sinful again as late as the mid-eighteenth century. However, the Vatican Bank, instituted in 1942, indicates on its last financial statement that it made €49m in interest in 2015 – so it would seem to be licit again! But there are still authors who claim the Church has never changed its position here – slipping in 'unjust' or 'extortionate' next to any mention of the word 'interest'. They are slaves to an unquestioning fidelity. The reality is, moral positions often develop. We should rejoice in that freedom.

Catholic Natural Law theory holds that moral principles are God-given and intuited, or written in the hearts of all human beings. But our grasp of them may change in time. They may evolve because when reason reflects on human experience, we appreciate more deeply what it is to be human. We understand more of the dignity and the rights of the human person. We learn more of human nature. We learn how better to act. Discerningly, and in good conscience, we might let laws lapse, or we amend them, when clearly such positions are caught in a time warp. Who would want to be forever locked into a law that says (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) you are to stone your unruly teenage son at the town gates if he doesn't mend his ways? No one. People, cultures and understanding of what is 'right' and 'just' can grow.

And what of slavery itself? The Church's position on this, in theory and in practice, is highly contested. And highly fluid. The Scriptures are somewhat ambiguous. Slavery is regulated in the Old Testament, but there is no sense that God disapproves of the institution. Jesus said nothing about it, yet it was all around him. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul makes the big call that 'in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female'. But elsewhere, he encourages slaves to love and obey their masters – even abusive ones. Paul's ambiguity limited later Church theologians from denouncing slavery outright. Some thought slavery to be simply a product of sin. Others just accepted it as part of the socio-economic structure of the time.

The crunch came with the threat of Islam in the fifteenth century. The Muslim warriors were taking thousands of Christians as slaves (often captured as children, "re-educated" and turned into slave-soldiers). In retaliation, for economic and military reasons, the Portuguese and Spanish began to take Muslim slaves. True, there was a strong papal edict forbidding slavery in the Canary Islands, but this was in Christian territory. Pope Nicholas authorised Portuguese King Alfonso to "capture ... and subdue all Saracens and other enemies of Christ ... and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery". Slavery was accepted as a means to an end – to avoid subjugation to the Ottoman empire. But it must also be

acknowledged that various Popes received slaves, gave slaves to others, and consigned them to their own papal galleys.

Thirty years after Britain became the first major power to permanently abolish the slave trade, a strong condemnation of slavery was issued by Gregory XVI in 1839, particularly referencing the New World. However, there was dispute about the wording. Did the Pope condemn enslavement, slave-trading *and* the ownership of slaves, or only the first two? Some argued there seemed no call for the emancipation of existing slaves. Most American bishops held this position, one even writing to the President's Secretary of State, explaining that the Pope did not condemn slavery itself, but only the slave trade.

In 1888, Leo XIII condemned slavery in more general terms and supported the anti-slavery movement. However, mixed signals were again given when, in the new Code of Canon Law promulgated by Benedict XV in 1918, selling a slave was prohibited, but not owning one! However, the final word was spoken at the Second Vatican Council in the document on *The Church in the Modern World*, where all violations of human rights were condemned, including slavery.

Paralleling those ambiguities of the Church in its teaching and practice, the Jesuits have a mixed history in this matter of slavery. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jesuit missionaries in eastern territories of South America established the settlements known as *reductions*, and were lauded for preserving the culture of the Indians, educating them, and protecting them from raids by the Portuguese slave-hunters. On occasions, they even armed the Indians for self-defence. But a darker period of history has been revealed in North America, known for some time, but surfacing more broadly in the media such as *The New York Times* recently. Over the centuries, many clergy and religious orders in the United States owned slaves. The record shows that in 1820, the Jesuits had nearly 400 slaves on their Maryland plantation. In 1838, in order to rescue Georgetown University from debt, its President, Fr Thomas Mulledy SJ, arranged for the sale of 272 men, women and children from their plantation. They were sold to two Catholic planters in Louisiana, to ensure that those slaves would still have a Catholic upbringing and culture. To both baptise and enslave a person would seem to require a curious line of moral rationalisation, but these were complex times.

Recently, a working group at Georgetown has delved into the records and identified the names of those sold off. They have found photos and other documents of them. They have traced many of their descendants and met with them. Ways are being explored to exercise restorative justice. Bursaries for descendants to attend Georgetown have been considered. A building named after Mulledy is to be renamed. The university has committed itself to greater research and teaching about slavery and its legacies.

The Georgetown story may shock us, but, in the end, may not surprise us. As a Church and as individuals, we are both graced and flawed. In this mix, we have a moral code, but ultimately we are not fundamentalists. Our Natural Law Theory takes the moral life seriously, but also respects the moral agent who acts with integrity. We have consciences and reason. Yes, we sometimes get it wrong. But we also grow.

And growth is the strongest sign of life.