

On Ending Slavery

I, Henri-Baptiste Gregoire, am embarrassed for anyone who claims to be in favor of the Revolution, yet refuses to support the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue. No one in all of France can champion liberty and equality, essential ideas of the Revolution, while denying both of these rights to the fellow French speaking people of Saint-Domingue. The revolutionaries and Christendom have always been champions of these qualities. Therefore, the revolutionaries and all Christians, liberal and conservative alike, should be strongly supporting the abolition of slavery in the colony.

Rightfully so, some great modern thinkers have come to the conclusion that slavery cannot be morally justified since all men are naturally equal. Some of the ancient philosophers, such as Caligula and Grotius, thought men were unequal because they were not born equal; the great political philosopher Rousseau explained how while it is true that not all men are born equal, it is because they are born into slavery that they are unequal, not because they are naturally unequal and therefore should be slaves.¹ In simpler terms, while men may be born into slavery and are therefore not equal to those born with more power, they are not born as slaves because of an inferior nature, but rather are born slaves and have an inferior power position because of the social status of their birth. However, it is critical to understand that this situation is because of the way in which the powerful choose to exercise their power over those with less power. People often call this the ‘right of the strongest,’ though it is in fact no right at all. In response, Rousseau, writes “If force compels obedience, there is no need to invoke a duty to obey, and if force ceases to compel obedience, there is no longer any obligation. Thus the word

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1743), trans. Maurice Cranston (London: The Penguin Group: 1968), 51-52.

‘right’ adds nothing to what is said by ‘force’; it is meaningless.”² In other words, there is no such thing as the right of the strongest; ‘slavery’ and ‘right’ are contradictory words. Since the right of the strongest is in fact not a right, the only conclusion we can make is that no man has any sort of natural authority over another man.

Since no man holds any sort of natural authority over another man, all true authority must originate through covenants that men make between each other.³ However, slavery cannot be a covenant, since both parties have something to gain in a covenant, and through slavery the slave gains nothing.⁴ From the understanding of how slavery cannot be covenantal, we come to the conclusion that slavery fails to meet the standards of a covenant or contract, not only as between a single person and a master, but also between an entire people group and their master.

It seems that some “supporters” of the Revolution have opposed the end of slavery in the colony because they are too concerned with their own wealth generated from the plantations; they are an embarrassment and their behavior is contradictory to the nature of the Revolution. If one claims favor towards the Revolution but fails to support the end of slavery, they have failed to support some of the essential values of the Revolution. The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, one of the great revolutionary documents, states in Article 1, “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.”⁵ We can imply from this that anyone who denies that men are born free is not a true full-hearted revolutionary because they disagree with one of our key claims that separate us from the conservatives: we support equality for the people of France.

² Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 53.

³ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 53.

⁴ Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 58.

⁵ *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), in Popiel et al., ed., *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 120-123; quotation at 121.

However, it is not merely Article 1 that expresses concern for the liberty of all men, but the document as a whole. For instance, Article 2 reads “the aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man”; following, the article defines “resistance to oppression” as one of these rights.⁶ Later, the declaration mentions how liberty should be constrained when it injures another.⁷ Slavery is harmful to the slave and therefore, if we follow the logic of the declaration, slavery should be constrained or eliminated since it impedes on the liberty of the slave. Previously, I briefly mentioned how some French support slavery for their own personal financial gain. Even though Frenchmen are making money and products as a result from slavery, the individual rights of the slave are being compromised, which is unacceptable. If one is to support the Revolution, they should be opposed to slavery because it contradicts the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*.

While no supporter of the Revolution should be able to consciously support slavery because it is against the natural equality of all men, Christians too should support the end of slavery in the French colony. This includes both Christians supportive of the Revolution and those opposed to it. I find it imperative to mention that I write this not only as a revolutionary, but as a Catholic priest who cares about the well-being of his parish. I know that if members of my community were under the shackles of slavery, I would fight for the end of slavery day and night to end their suffering and oppression. It seems reasonable to me that Christians support the end of this moral crime because of the doctrines in both the Old and New Testaments, and because our Catholic Church has deliberately stood against it.⁸

⁶ *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), 121.

⁷ *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), 121.

⁸ Benedict XIV, *Immensa Pastorum Principis* [The Immense Chief Pastors], Vatican Website, December 22, 1741, accessed November 27, 2017, default_frontend&output=xml_no_dtd&proxystylesheet= default_frontend&sort=date%3AD%3AL%3Ad1&

Slavery stands in clear opposition to a key claim of Christianity from the creation story: all humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). This Bible does not say that some men are created in the image of God and others not, but rather that all men are created in the image of God. If all men are created in the image of God, no man is created better than another. Therefore, if a Christian is to be true to the teachings of the Bible, he should oppose slavery in Saint-Domingue because slavery promotes the idea that some men are created better than others.

Slavery is not only opposed by the doctrines of creation in the Old Testament, but also by the nature of the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament, highlighted by the book of Galatians. Christ was not just a sacrifice of salvation for the Jewish people, but for all peoples. This is why Paul writes “there is neither Jew nor Greek. . .” (Gal 3:28 *ESV*). All peoples are welcomed to partake in the blood of Christ, not just Jews, and not just anyone in particular, but everyone. According to Paul’s words in Galatians, even slaves should be encouraged to follow Christ since there is no distinction of peoples according to true Christianity. The invitational love of Christ, illustrated through Galatians, entails that all people are equal before the throne of God, just as in the creation story in which all men were created in the image of God, not just a few.

Perhaps of even greater importance, Christ himself would be standing against the slave owners if he were a modern Frenchman. I say this because Christ himself said that loving our neighbors is one of the most important command in the entire Hebrew scriptures (Mark 12:31). How are we to love our neighbors if we tie them in chains, treat them as property, and expect them to endlessly work for our benefit at the cost of their liberty? Slavery is unloving towards

our neighbors and therefore Christ would have opposed it. If Christ would have opposed it, so to should the Church built on him.

As Catholic Christians, in particular, we have a special obligation to stand against slavery because the official dogmas of our holy Roman Catholic Church do the same. All Catholics in favor of slavery for their own personal gains have completely forgotten about Pope Benedict XIV's *Immensa Pastorum Principis*, a papal bull from 1741 that opposed slavery.⁹ Catholics in favor of slavery are either inappropriately and irresponsibly ignoring the doctrines or are completely ignorant of the dogmas of our holy Church.

While I am particularly concerned about the freedom of the black slaves of Saint-Domingue, my argument stands valid against all forms of slavery in France: no revolutionary or Christian can support the unwillful subjection of one person under another. Therefore, my fellow Jacobians and I insist that any revolutionary or Christian who chooses to support slavery is acting in opposition to the very ideas they claim to support. Because of the Jacobian conviction against slavery, we will push for it to be placed on the agenda of the National Assembly as soon as possible.

⁹ Benedict XIV, *Immensa Pastorum Principis*.