



# The Catholic Church Accepting Freedom of Religion

On this day 57 years ago, on 7 December 1965, the Catholic Church finally accepted Freedom of Religion as official doctrine, at the 4th Session of the Second Vatican Council (with 70 votes against the motion). The "Declaration on Religious Freedom" they issued, is available in the Vatican Archive [1].

## 1 The Declaration

It is enlightening, and highly relevant, to briefly look at 2 paragraphs in this declaration from 1965

### 1.1 Article 10

**"10. It is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free: no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will.(8) This doctrine is contained in the word of God and it was constantly proclaimed by the Fathers of the Church.(7)" [2]**

This is quite a disingenuous paragraph. Both claims are false

- Their claim that "This doctrine is contained in the word of God" will be assessed in Section 2, below
- Their second claim that "This doctrine... was constantly proclaimed by the Fathers of the Church" will be assessed in Section 3, below.

### 1.2 Article 15

**"15. The fact is that men of the present day want to be able freely to profess their religion in private and in public. Indeed, religious freedom has already been declared to be a civil right in most constitutions, and it is solemnly recognized in international documents."**

Apart from the sexist formulation (which they may have moved away from to some extent by now), the start of this final paragraph clearly demonstrates how the Catholic Church is responding and adapting to a changing world (and the pressure of people's expectations), instead of leading the way based on their god's "revelation".



[Image credit: dreamstime]

## 2 Is the doctrine of Freedom of Religion “contained in the word of God”?

The majority of Christians today strongly support freedom of religion now that their political power is dwindling, and in most cases seem to think that it is a Biblical or Christian concept, partially because the Catholic Church and others, tell them that (like in this Declaration). It is not

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  - The Old Testament advocates exactly the opposite of freedom of religion, the compulsory worship of the “right” god punishable by death. Israelites who did not worship the right god (Yahweh), had to be killed without mercy, even by their own family (Deut 13: 6-10)
  - The prophets of Baal had to be killed (I Kings 18: 36-40)
  - Israelite men had to be killed if they participated in Moabite religious rituals (Num 25: 1-5)
  - It even made the 10 Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex 20: 3)
  - “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Ex 22:18)
- New Testament
  - Jesus and the New Testament are silent on freedom of religion, which is odd in itself, since god apparently completely changed his mind on this fundamental issue, without revealing that to anybody.

### 3 Did “the Fathers of the Church” constantly proclaim Freedom of Religion?

- Following the Bible, Christianity did not support freedom of religion for most of its history
  - In 380 Christianity became the official and compulsory State Religion of the Roman Empire with the Edict of Thessalonica. See this article for more detail:  
[Christianity becomes the Official Religion of the Roman Empire - The CSF](#)
  - The very next year in 381, at the First Council of Constantinople where the Trinity finally became official dogma with heavy state influence, they also outlawed heresies. See this article for more detail  
[The Trinity Dogma Finally Emerges - The CSF](#)
  - The first executions of heretics took place in 385, a mere 5 years after they became the state religion [3], and this persecution of heretics, pagans, witches, and even scientists continued for 1500 years. The last execution for heresy was in 1826. For most of their history it was not even good enough to believe in their god, people had to believe in the exact orthodoxy of the day under the threat of execution. See this CSF “Historic Moments” article for more details: [Christianity starts its 1,500 years of Persecution - The CSF](#)
  - While they had political power, the Catholic Church had no use for Freedom of Religion. They used coercion, and often violent coercion, for most of their history.

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*Memorial of The Patent of Toleration in modern day Czech Republic [Image credit: dreamstime].*

- In the Habsburg Empire the first steps towards Freedom of Religion in Catholic countries were introduced by Emperor Joseph II. He was a Catholic, a supporter of the Enlightenment and issued many edicts to reform the Catholic Church within his Empire [4] [5]
  - On 13 Oct 1781 he issued the **Patent of Toleration**, which gave Lutherans, Calvinists and the Orthodox Church the legal right to hold “private religious exercises”
  - On 17 October 1781 the Archbishop of Vienna sent a memorandum to the Emperor in which he stated that “the Edict was harmful and unnecessary”
  - Joseph II followed the 1781 Edict on 2 Jan 1782 with the **Edict of Toleration** for Jews, which extended religious liberties to them too and which also allowed them access to commercial professions and trades. Some discrimination remained
  - Pope Pius VI visited the Emperor in March 1782 to personally convey his opposition to these reforms
  - **It is important to note that these first steps towards Freedom of Religion in Catholic countries were the initiatives of the state and opposed by the Church and the Pope.**

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- As recently as 8 Dec 1864 Pope Pius IX officially issued “The Syllabus of Errors” in which he listed and condemned 80 heresies in a strong attack on the Enlightenment and Liberalism [6][7]
  - Let’s look at 4 of the heresies he condemned:
    - The heresy listed in Article 15 is claiming that “15. Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true”. This is almost verbatim calling Article 10 of the 1965 Declaration a heresy
    - And the heresy condemned in Article 21 is to claim that “21. The Church has not the power of defining dogmatically that the religion of the Catholic Church is the only true religion”
    - Article 55 lists the separation of church and state as another heresy
    - Liberalism is explicitly mentioned in Article 80, which lists the heresy of claiming that “The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization”
  - A few other relevant facts
    - “As the errors listed had already been condemned in allocutions, encyclicals, and other apostolic letters, the *Syllabus* said nothing new and so could not be contested. Its importance lay in the fact that it published to the world what had previously been preached in the main only to the bishops, and that it made general what had been previously specific denunciations concerned with particular events” [7]
    - Until about 40 years earlier they still executed people for heresy and blasphemy
    - Pope Pius IX was beautified by Pope John II in 2000
  - **This is an important historical fact, so let’s emphasize it clearly: on 8 Dec 1864 Pope Pius IX officially declared Freedom of Religion a heresy, in line with the Church’s views and actions up to that point.**

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- It’s not only Freedom of Religion which is not a Biblical or Christian value, none of the core values of Western Civilizations were introduced or promoted by Christianity (Freedom of Religion, Equality, Individual Liberty, Freedom of Speech and the Rule of Law). As a matter of fact they strongly resisted all these values, just like the Popes resisted Freedom of Religion. See this article in our Morality series for an in-depth investigation: [The CSF Morality Series, Part 4: The Supposed “Judeo-Christian” Foundation of Western Civilization - The CSF](#)

## 4 Conclusion

- The content of the Bible and historical facts clearly show that both claims in Clause 10 of the 1965 Declaration are completely false
- This serves as a good example how Christianity changes their position over time and then attempts to rewrite history. The Catholic Church is especially keen on rewriting their history, like they're doing here
- In my view there are several significant observations about this historic moment
  - The Catholic Church had no use for Freedom of Religion when they had full political power and only officially accepted this doctrine in 1965, in my own lifetime
    - After declaring it a heresy a mere 100 years earlier (and as an aside, it is astonishing that heresies, for which they used to execute people, could change so completely and so quickly)
    - After Christianity lost most of its political power
    - After a majority of Westerners already accepted the core Enlightenment values, like Freedom of Religion. They followed slowly, they did not lead
  - They felt obliged to make false statements about this doctrine in an attempt to rewrite history.

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### The next Historic Moments article:

"Darwin's Voyage" by JJ Brits (scheduled for 6 Jan 2023)

#### SOURCES:

[1] "DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ ON THE RIGHT OF THE PERSON AND OF COMMUNITIES TO SOCIAL AND CIVIL FREEDOM IN MATTERS RELIGIOUS PROMULGATED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PAUL VI ON DECEMBER 7, 1965"

Link:

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html)

[2] These footnotes ((7) and (8)) are not mine, they're contained in the Declaration

[3] A History of the Later Roman Empire AD284-641, by Mitchell, S. (Chapter 7: From Pagan to Christian)

[4] "Ideas of Religious Toleration at the Time of Joseph II. A Study of the Enlightenment among Catholics in Austria" by Charles H. O'Brien (Section III)

[5] [Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor](#)

[6] [The Syllabus Of Errors - Papal Encyclicals](#)

[7] [Pius IX - Ultramontanism](#)