

FREEDOM, A GIFT OF GOD

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I HAVE OFTEN reminded you of that moving scene from the Gospel in which Jesus speaks to the people from Peter's boat. The great crowd following him has stirred the eagerness for souls which consumes his heart, and the divine Master wants his disciples to begin to share that zeal. After telling them to set out into the deep—*duc in altum!* (1)—he tells Peter to let down the nets for a catch.

I am not now going to linger over the details of this scene which can teach us so much. I want you to consider with me the reaction of the Prince of the Apostles to the miracle he has just seen: "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man" (2). I have not the slightest doubt that this truth perfectly corresponds to everyone's situation. Nevertheless, I assure you that having witnessed during my life so many marvelous works of divine grace performed through human hands, I feel moved, and every day more so, to cry out: Lord, don't leave me, because without you I can do nothing that is good.

Precisely for this reason, I can very well understand those words of St. Augustine which sound like a magnificent tribute to freedom: "God, who made you without your help, will not save you without your cooperation" (3). All of us, you and I, to our sorrow, can rebel against God and reject him through our actions or by crying out: "We do not want this man to rule over us" (4).

Choose life

We have learned, with a grateful awareness of the happiness to which we are called, that all creatures have been created from nothing by God, and for God. He has made men rational creatures, though so frequently they become unreasonable. He made irrational beings that roam the face of the earth, dwell in the depths of the sea, or fly through the azure sky. But in the midst of this marvelous variety of creatures only we human beings—I am not now referring to the angels—unite ourselves to the Creator by exercising our freedom. We have the possibility of giving or denying him that glory which is due to him as the author of everything that exists.

This possibility makes up the bright and dark side of human freedom. The Lord invites us, and indeed moves us to choose the good, because he loves us with an indescribable love, "See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live....Choose life that you may live" (5).

Ask yourself, as I do, if you hold firmly and immutably to your choice of life. When you hear the most lovable voice of God moving you to sanctity, do you freely answer Yes? Let us turn our gaze to Jesus as he speaks to the people in the cities and countryside of Palestine. He doesn't try to impose

himself. "If you want to be perfect..." (6), he says to the rich young man. The young man rejected the suggestion, and the Gospel tells us that *abiit tristis*, "he went away sad" (7). That is why I have sometimes called him the "sad bird" (*ave triste*). He lost his happiness because he refused to surrender his freedom to God.

Consider now the sublime moment when the Archangel Gabriel announces to Mary the plan of the Most High. Our Lady listens and asks a question to understand better what the Lord is expecting from her. Then she gives her firm reply: "*Fiat*" (8), let it be done to me according to your word. This is the fruit of the best kind of freedom, the freedom of choosing God.

We can sense this tribute to freedom in all the mysteries of our Catholic faith. The Most Holy Trinity in a free torrent of love draws forth man and the world from nothingness. The Word descends from heaven and takes on our flesh with this wonderful seal of freedom in submission: "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God, as it is written of me in the roll of the book" (9). When the time appointed by God arrived to save mankind from slavery to sin, we contemplate Jesus in Gethsemani, suffering in agony to the point of sweating blood (10), accepting spontaneously and submissively the sacrifice that the Father asks of him: "Like a lamb that is lead to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb" (11). He had already foretold it to his followers in one of those conversations in which he poured out his heart so that those who love him might know that he is the Way, the only way, to approach the Father. "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and to take it up again" (12).

The meaning of freedom

We will never completely understand the freedom of Jesus which is as immense and infinite as his love. But the precious treasure of his generous holocaust should lead us to ask, Lord, why have you bestowed upon me this privilege, which I can use to follow in your footsteps but also to offend you? Thus we come to understand that freedom is used rightly when it is turned towards the good, and that it is misdirected when man is forgetful and turns away from the love of loves. That personal freedom, which I defend and will always defend with all my strength, leads me to ask with a great sense of security though I am well aware of my own weakness: What do you want from me, Lord, what do you want me freely to do?

Christ himself gives the answer: *veritas liberabit vos* (13); the truth will make you free. But what is the truth that both opens up and consummates the pathway of freedom throughout our life? With the joy and certainty that proceed from the relationship between God and his creatures, I will give you the answer in a few words; that truth is to know that we have come forth from the hands of God, that we are objects of the Most Holy Trinity's predilection, and that we are children of such a great Father. I ask God to help us resolve to be aware of this truth dwelling upon it day by day, for that way we will act as free persons. Do not forget

that the person who does not know he is a child of God is ignorant of the most intimate truth about his life and lacks in his actions the mastery and dominion characteristic of those who love the Lord above all things.

Be convinced that if we are to get to heaven, we must freely make an effort, with a full, constant and voluntary resolve. By itself, however, freedom is insufficient, for it lacks a North Star, a guide. "It is not possible for the soul to walk without someone to govern it; for this reason it has been redeemed so as to have Christ as its king, whose yoke is sweet and whose burden is light (Mt. 11:30), and not the devil, whose reign is harsh" (14).

Reject the deception of those who noisily proclaim: Freedom, freedom! This shout often hides a tragic slavery, because the choice that prefers error does not liberate. Christ is the only liberator, (15) because he is the Way, the Truth and the Life (16).

Let us ask again in the presence of God: Why, Lord, have you given us this power? Why have you entrusted us with the faculty of choosing or rejecting you? You want us to make good use of this power. Lord, what do you want me to do? (17) The answer is precise and as clear as day: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind" (18). Don't you see? Freedom acquires its true meaning when it is used in the service of redeeming truth, when it is consumed in seeking the infinite love of God, which liberates us from all slaveries. Each day I desire more to proclaim the unfathomable riches that belong to Christians, "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (19). That summarizes the "good will" which teaches us to pursue "good after having distinguished it from evil" (20).

I would like you to meditate on a fundamental point that makes us face the responsibility we have for our own conscience. Nobody else can make choices for us. "There is man's supreme dignity: that he is directed towards the good by himself and not by another" (21). Many of us have inherited the Catholic faith from our parents. By the grace of God, from the moment we were baptized as newborn infants, supernatural life began in our soul. Throughout our life, and every day of our life, we have to renew the resolution of loving God above all things. "He is a Christian, I mean a true Christian, who submits himself to the rule of the Word of God" (22), without placing limitations on his obedience, ready to resist diabolical temptation with the same attitude as Christ: "The Lord your God shall you adore, and him alone shall you serve" (23).

Freedom and dedication

God is a jealous lover. He is not satisfied if we come to meet him with conditions. He waits impatiently for us to give ourselves completely, without reserving hidden corners in our hearts where the joy of grace and the supernatural gifts cannot penetrate. But perhaps you may think that by saying Yes to this love exclusively, you will lose your freedom.

With the help and light of the Lord who presides over this time of prayer, I hope that this question will become clearer for you and for me. Each of us has seen that at one time or another the service of Christ our Lord involves suffering and weariness. To deny this

would mean that we really had never found God. A soul in love knows that when there is this suffering it is only temporary. It soon discovers that the burden is light and the yoke is sweet because Christ bears it on his shoulders, as he embraced the cross when our eternal happiness was at stake (24). But there are people who do not understand. They rebel against the Creator with a rebellion that is powerless, petty, sad; and they blindly repeat the useless complaint that the Psalmist records: "Let us break their bonds asunder and cast his yoke far from us" (55). They refuse to carry out the hard task of each day with heroic silence and naturalness, without fussing and complaining. They do not understand that even when the divine will brings with it suffering and unpleasant demands, it nevertheless coincides perfectly with freedom, which is only to be found in God and in his plans.

They are souls who barricade themselves behind their freedom. "My freedom! My freedom!" They have it but they don't use it. They set it up like a clay idol to be looked at by their petty minds. Is that really freedom? What good is this treasure without a serious commitment that gives purpose and direction to one's whole life? Such behavior is opposed to the dignity and the nobility of man. There is a lack of purpose, there is no clear path to follow on earth. You and I have known these souls. They will then allow themselves to be carried away by childish vanity, by selfish conceit, and sensuality.

Their freedom turns out to be sterile or else it produces fruits which even humanly speaking are ridiculous. The one who does not choose, with complete freedom, a correct course of conduct, sooner or later ends up being manipulated by others. He will live a life of indolence, like a parasite, subjected to what will always make up his mind for him. "These are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; trees in the fall, unfruitful, twice dead, uprooted" (26), even though they try to disguise their lack of character, of courage and of nobility with constant chatter and euphemisms.

Yet they obstinately repeat that no one is forcing them. No one? Everybody impinges upon their illusory freedom, which will not take the risk of accepting with responsibility the consequences of free, personal action. Where the love of God is lacking, a vacuum of individual freedom and personal responsibility results. Then, in spite of appearances to the contrary, there exists only coercion. The indecisive and irresolute person is like putty in the hands of circumstances. He can be molded by anyone's whim, above all by the passions and vile tendencies of his own nature wounded by sin.

Remember the parable of the talents. The servant who received the one talent could have used it well, like his colleagues, seeing to it that it made a profit, and applying his qualities to the task. But how does he reason? He is afraid of losing it. Fine. But then he goes and buries it! (27) It does not bear fruit.

Let's not forget this case of a sickly fear of nobly making use of one's capacity to work, fear of using his mind, his will and his whole being. The poor fellow seems to be telling us: I will bury it, but I keep my freedom. No. He has bent his freedom towards something very concrete, towards the poorest and most barren aridity. He took sides because he

could not avoid choosing. But he made a bad choice.

There is nothing falsier than setting freedom in opposition to dedication, because dedication is the consequence of the use of freedom. When a mother sacrifices herself for her children, she makes a choice. She shows her freedom by the measure of her love. If her love is great, freedom will be fruitful. The children benefit from that blessed freedom, which presupposes dedication and comes from that blessed dedication which is precisely freedom.

But you might ask if it isn't true that freedom will have disappeared when we possess what we love with our whole heart and no longer have to seek it? I assure you that then it is more operative than ever. Love is dissatisfied with routine fulfillment. It is incompatible with tedium or with apathy. To love means to begin to serve again each day with deeds of affection.

I would like to impress this truth deeply upon you. Freedom and dedication are not contradictory; they sustain one another. Freedom can only be given up for love. I cannot conceive of any other kind of surrender. This is not a play on words, more or less to the point. In that voluntary self-surrender, in each instant of that dedication, freedom renews love. To be renewed that way is to be always young, generous, capable of great ideals and of great sacrifices. I remember how happy I was when I learned that the Portuguese call young people *os novos* (the new ones). That is what they are. I tell you this anecdote because, although I am along in years, when I pray at the foot of the altar "to God who gives joy to my youth" (28) I feel very young and I know that I will never consider myself old. For if I remain faithful to my God, love will constantly enliven me, I will be rejuvenated like the eagle (29).

We bind ourselves out of love for freedom. Only pride regards those bonds as a weighty chain. True humility, which the Lord who is meek and humble of heart teaches us, shows us that his yoke is sweet and his burden light (30). The yoke is freedom. The yoke is love. The yoke is unity. The yoke is life which he gained for us on the cross.

Freedom of consciences

As a priest, for years I not only have preached personal freedom, I have shouted it. I have noticed then that some respond with a look of mistrust as if they suspect that to defend freedom could be dangerous for the faith. Those fainthearted souls can rest easy. Faith can only be threatened by a mistaken interpretation of freedom: a freedom without purpose, without an objective norm, without law and without responsibility. In short, by license. Unfortunately that is what some advocate and their claim, in fact, constitutes a threat to faith.

For this reason it is not correct to speak of a "freedom of conscience," which means that it is morally acceptable for man to reject God. We have already seen, that although we ought not to do so, we are capable of opposing God's plan for salvation. If one were to deliberately adopt that position he would sin by transgressing the first, fundamental commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (31).

I defend with all my strength the *freedom of consciences* (32), which means that no one

can licitly keep a person from worshiping God. The legitimate desire for truth must be respected. Man has the serious obligation of seeking the Lord and of knowing and of worshiping him, but no one should impose on another the practice of a faith which the other does not have. In the same way no one can claim the right of harming the person who has received faith from God.

Our holy mother the Church has always spoken out on behalf of freedom. She has rejected determinisms, old and new. She teaches that each soul is master of its own destiny, for good or for evil: "Those who have done good shall go into eternal life, while those who have done evil shall go into eternal fire" (33). We will always be impressed by this tremendous capacity that you and I, that we all have, which at the same time is the sign of our nobility. "Sin is such a voluntary evil that there would be no sin unless it began in the will. This statement is so evident that it is agreed upon both by those few in the world who are wise and by the many ignorant" (34).

Once again I raise my heart in thanks to God, my Lord, because nothing prevented him from creating us incapable of committing sin, moved irresistibly to seek the good, however, "he judged that his servants would be better if they served him freely" (35). What great love and mercy is that of our Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Just think that the Almighty, whose providence governs the whole universe, does not want forced slaves. He prefers free sons. Although we are born inclined to sin, due to the fall of Adam and Eve, he has placed in our souls a spark of his infinite intelligence, an attraction towards what is good, and a hunger for lasting peace. He leads us to realize that truth, happiness and freedom are achieved when we strive to foster the growth of the seed of divine life within us.

To respond No to God and to reject that source of a new and lasting happiness remains in the hands of man. But if he acts like this, he stops being a son to become a slave. "Everything is what corresponds to it by its nature. Accordingly, when it seeks something foreign to it, it does not act according to its proper mode of being, but according to a foreign impulse; and this is servile. Man is rational by nature. When he acts according to reason, he proceeds according to his own movement, as what he is: and this is proper to freedom. When he sins, he acts against reason, and thus he lets himself be led by the impulse of another, subject to external constraints, and for this reason the one who accepts sin is the slave of sin (Jn 8:34)" (36).

I would like to insist further on this point. It is very clear, as we can frequently see in ourselves or in others, that no one can be free of some form of servitude. Some prostrate themselves before money. Others adore power. Some love the relative tranquility of scepticism. Others discover in sensuality their golden calf. The same happens in noble things. We give ourselves to our work, to some undertaking whether large or small, to a scientific, artistic, literary or spiritual endeavor. Where there is effort and real passion, in giving oneself, one becomes a slave.

One joyfully dedicates himself to serve the purpose of his task.

Whether we like it or not, it is part of our human condition that we must serve. And when it comes to choosing between types of servitude, there is nothing better than knowing that out of love one is a slave of God. Because then we cease being slaves and become friends and sons. The difference lies in this: we approach the noble occupations of the world just as passionately and just as intensely as others, but with peace deep in our hearts. We have serenity and joy, even in the midst of difficulties. We do not place our confidence in anything transitory but in what lasts forever. "We are not children of the slave woman, but of the free" (37).

Where does this freedom come from? From Christ, our Lord. This is the freedom with which he has redeemed us (38). That is why he teaches: "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (39). We Christians do not have to ask anyone to teach us the true meaning of this gift, since only Christian freedom can save man.

I like to speak of the adventure of freedom, because that is how your life and mine develops. We follow the path the Lord has marked out for us, freely, as sons—I insist—and not as slaves. We enjoy this freedom of action as God's gift.

I opt for God because I want to, freely, without any compulsion. I commit myself to serve, converting my existence into a life of dedication to others, out of love for my Lord Jesus. It is this freedom which moves me to cry out that nothing on earth can separate me from the love of Christ (40).

"God made man in the beginning and left him in the hands of his free will (Ecc 15:14). This would not be the case if we did not have the freedom to choose" (41). We are responsible to God for all the actions we freely perform. There is no room here for anonymity. One finds himself face to face with his Lord and it lies in his will to decide to live as a friend or an enemy. This is the beginning of the path of interior struggle which is a lifetime undertaking. As long as we live on earth no one of us achieves the fullness of his freedom.

Our Christian faith also leads us to guarantee an environment of freedom for everyone, beginning with the rejection of any sort of deceitful compulsion in presenting the faith. "If we are dragged to Christ, we believe without wanting to. That is a case of violence, not freedom. One can enter the Church without wanting to. Without wanting to one can approach the altar. One can receive the Sacrament without wanting to. But one can only believe if he wants to" (42). It is obvious that when one has reached the age of reason, personal freedom is necessary to enter the Church and to correspond to the continual calls that the Lord addresses to us.

In the parable of the wedding feast, when the householder learns that some of those who had been invited have made unreasonable excuses, he commands his servant: "Go out to the highways and hedges and—*compelle intrare*—compel people to come in" (43). Is this not coercion? Is this not to do violence to the legitimate freedom of conscience.

If we meditate on the Gospel and reflect on the teaching of Jesus we will not confuse this order with coercion. See how Christ always makes suggestions: "If you want to be

perfect.... if anyone wishes to follow me...." This *compelle intrare*, compel them to come in, does not entail violence, either physical or moral. It is a reflection of the forcefulness of Christian example, which shows in its way of acting the power of God: "See how the Father attracts: he delights by teaching, not by imposing necessity. Thus he draws man to himself" (44).

When one breathes this air of freedom one understands clearly that to do evil is not a liberation but enslavement. "He who sins against God preserves his free will with regard to freedom from coercion, but he has lost it with regard to freedom from guilt" (45). He shows perhaps that he has acted according to his personal preference, but he does not manage to speak in the voice of true freedom, because he has become the slave of that to which he has delivered himself, he has chosen the worst, the absence of God, and there freedom is not to be found.

Once again I repeat to you: I accept no other slavery than that of the love of God. This is because, as I have said to you on other occasions, religion is the greatest rebellion of the man who refuses to live as a beast, who is not satisfied, who does not rest until he knows the Creator and deals personally with him. I want you to be rebels, free from all chains, because I want you to be—it is Christ who wants it—children of God. Slavery or divine filiation, this is the dilemma of our life. Either we live as children of God or we become slaves of our pride, of our sensuality, of that miserable self-centeredness which seems to afflict so many souls.

The love of God marks out the way of truth, of justice, of goodness. When we make up our minds to say to our Lord: "My freedom is for you," we will find ourselves freed from all the chains that had tied us down to insignificant things, to silly worries, to petty ambitions. Then we will use our freedom—priceless treasure, precious pearl, that would be sad to cast before swine (46)—in learning how to do good (47).

This is the glorious freedom of the children of God. Those Christians who are frightened, inhibited or jealous, by the license of those who have not accepted the Word of God show that they have a poor idea of the faith. If we truly fulfill the law of Christ—if we make the effort to do so, because we shall not always fulfill it—we will find ourselves endowed with a gallant spirit which doesn't have to look elsewhere for the fullest meaning of human dignity.

Our faith is not a burden, nor is it a limitation. What a poor idea of Christian truth one has who reasons that way. When we make our decision for God we do not lose anything, we gain everything: he who at the

cost of his soul "finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it" (48).

We have drawn the winning card, the first prize. When something keeps us from seeing this clearly, let us examine the interior of our soul. Perhaps our faith is weak, or there is little personal contact with God, a scanty life of prayer. We must ask the Lord, invoking his Mother who is also our Mother, to increase his love in us, to grant us a taste of the sweetness of his presence. Only when we love do we achieve the fullest freedom: the freedom of not wanting ever to abandon, for all eternity, the object of our love.

NOTES

- (1) Lk 5:4.
- (2) Lk 5:8.
- (3) St. Augustine, *Sermo*, 169, 11, 13.
- (4) Lk 19:14.
- (5) Deut 30:15-16; 19.
- (6) Mt 19:21.
- (7) Mt 19:22.
- (8) Lk 1:38.
- (9) Heb 10:7.
- (10) Cf. Lk 22:44.
- (11) Is 53:7.
- (12) Jn 10:17-18.
- (13) Jn 8:32.
- (14) Origen, *In Romanos comentarii*, 5, 6.
- (15) Cf. Gal 4:31.
- (16) Cf. Jn 14:6.
- (17) Cf. Acts 9:6.
- (18) Mt 22:37.
- (19) Rom 8:21.
- (20) St. Maxim Confessor, *Capita de caritate*, 2, 32.
- (21) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistulas S. Pauli lectura*, (Turin: Marietti, 1953, pp. 38-39).
- (22) Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 8, 36.
- (23) Mt 4:10.
- (24) Cf. Mt 11:30.
- (25) Ps 2:3.
- (26) Jude 12.
- (27) Cf. Mt 25:18.
- (28) Ps 42:4.
- (29) Cf. Ps 102:5.
- (30) Cf. Mt 11:29-30.
- (31) Deut 6:5.
- (32) Leo XIII, Encyclical *Libertas praestantissimum*, AAS, 20 (1888), p. 606.
- (33) Athanasian Creed.
- (34) St. Augustine, *De vera religione*, 14, 27.
- (35) St. Augustine, *Ibid*.
- (36) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae. De malo*, q. VI, a. 1.
- (37) Gal 4:30.
- (38) Cf. Gal 4:31.
- (39) Jn 8:36.
- (40) Cf. Rom 8:39.
- (41) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Ibid*.
- (42) St. Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 26, 2.
- (43) Lk 14:23.
- (44) St. Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 26, 7.
- (45) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Ibid*.
- (46) Cf. Mt 7:6.
- (47) Cf. Is 1:17.
- (48) Mt 10:39.