

Freedom, A Gift From God

I have often reminded you of that moving scene in the Gospel where Jesus is in Peter's boat, from which he has been speaking to the people. The multitude following him has stirred the eagerness for souls which consumes his heart, and now the Divine Master wants his disciples to share his zeal. After telling them to launch out into the deep, *duc in altum!* he suggests to Peter that he let down his nets for a catch.

I am not going to linger now over the details of what happened, although there is much to be learned from them. What I would like you to consider with me is how the Prince of the Apostles reacts to the miracle he has just seen: 'Lord, depart from me,' he says, 'for I am a sinful man.' This is true and I am quite sure it applies perfectly to the personal situation of each one of us. Nevertheless, I assure you that having witnessed during my life so many marvellous works of divine grace performed through human hands, I feel moved, and more so each day, to shout out, 'Lord, do not depart from me, for without you I can do no good at all.'

Precisely because of this, I readily understand those words of St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, which ring out like a wonderful hymn to freedom, 'God who created you without you, will not save you without you.' Every single one of us, you and I as well, always has the possibility, the unfortunate possibility of rising up against God, of rejecting him (perhaps by our behaviour) or of crying out, 'we do not want this man to rule over us.'

We have learned with gratitude, because it makes us realise the happiness we are being called to, that all creatures have been created out of nothing by God and for God: both men, who are rational creatures, although we so often act unreasonably, and the



Sometimes I'm afraid of throwing myself into things in case I fail, like Peter when he was fishing on his own, but I think if I really trusted that God loves me no matter what, I'd have the courage to try anyway.

irrational beings who roam the surface of the earth, or burrow in its inmost recesses, or sail the azure skies – some soaring so high that they come face to face with the sun. But in all this wonderful variety, it is only we men (I am not referring now to the angels) who can unite ourselves to the Creator by using our freedom. We are in a position to give him, or deny him, the glory that is his due as the Author of everything that exists.

God never tests me or asks me to prove myself. His commandments are guidelines to help me choose what will really make me happy

This possibility makes up the light and shade of human freedom. Our Lord invites us, urges us to choose the good, so tenderly does he love us! 'See, today I set before you a choice between life and death, good and evil. If you pay heed to the commandments of Yahweh your God which I command you this day, by loving Yahweh 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.'



Ask yourself now (I too am examining my conscience) whether you are holding firmly and unshakeably to your choice of Life? When you hear the most lovable voice of God urging you on to holiness, do you freely answer 'Yes'? Let us turn our gaze once more to Jesus, as he speaks to the people in the towns and countryside of Palestine. He doesn't want to force himself upon us. 'If you have a mind to be perfect...', he says to the rich young man. The young man refused to take the hint, and the Gospel goes on to say: *abiit tristis*, he went away forlorn. That is why I have sometimes called him the 'sad lad.' He lost his happiness because he refused to hand over his freedom to God.

I know what it's like to "choose death" and feel sad and trapped in my weakness and the habits I know are bad for me (gossip, comparisons, laziness...). But willpower isn't enough to get me out of my sins. Jesus, help me with the vice I'm fighting now!

Consider now the sublime moment when the Archangel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary the plans of the Most High. Our Mother listens, and asks a question to understand better what the Lord is asking of her. Then she gives her firm reply: *Fiat!* Be it done unto me according to thy word! This is the fruit of the best freedom of all, **the freedom of deciding in favour of God.**

This hymn to freedom is echoed in all the mysteries of our Catholic faith. The Blessed Trinity draws the world and man out of nothing, in a free outpouring of love. The Word comes down from Heaven and takes on our flesh, an act which bears the splendid mark of freedom in submission: 'Behold I have come to do thy Will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' When God's appointed time comes to save mankind from the slavery of sin, we contemplate Jesus Christ in Gethsemani, suffering in agony to the point of sweating blood. He spontaneously and unconditionally accepts the sacrifice which the Father is asking of him: 'Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep standing dumb before its shearers.' He had already told his disciples that this was to happen, in one of those conversations where he would pour out his heart so that those who love him might know that he is the Way, the only way, to approach the Father. 'This is why my Father loves me, because I am laying down my life to take it up again afterwards. Nobody can rob me of it; I lay it down of my own accord. I am free to lay it down and free to take it up again.'

*Imagine that
level of generosity,
out of love
for us...
for me!!*

We will never fully understand Jesus' freedom. It is immense, infinite, as is his love. But the priceless treasure of his generous holocaust should move us to ask, 'Why, my Lord, have you granted me this privilege which I can use to follow in your footsteps, but also to offend you?' Thus we come to appreciate that freedom is used properly when it is directed towards the good; and that it is misused when men are forgetful and turn away from the Love of loves. Personal freedom, which I defend and will always defend with all my strength, leads me to ask with deep conviction, though I am well aware of my own weakness: 'What do you want from me, Lord, so that I may freely do it?'

Christ himself gives us the answer: *veritas liberabit vos*, the truth will set you free. How great a truth is this, which opens the way to freedom and gives it meaning throughout our lives. I will sum it up

for you, with the joy and certainty which flow from knowing there is a close relationship between God and his creatures. It is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks upon us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father. I ask my Lord to help us decide to take this truth to heart, to dwell upon it day by day; only then will we be acting as free men. Do not forget: anyone who does not realise that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself. When he acts he lacks the dominion and self-mastery we find in those who love Our Lord above all else.

*re-read this
a few times!!*



*I would have so
much less anxiety in
my life if the only
thing that really
mattered to me
were God's love*

Convince yourselves that to get to heaven we must commit ourselves freely, with a whole-hearted, constant and voluntary determination. By itself, however, freedom is insufficient: it needs a guide, a pole-star. 'The soul cannot proceed without someone to guide it; this is why it has been redeemed in order that it may have as its King, Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light (Matt 11:30), and not the devil, whose rule is oppressive.'

Reject the deception of those who appease themselves with the pathetic cry of 'Freedom! Freedom!' Their cry often masks a tragic enslavement, because choices that prefer error do not liberate. Christ alone sets us free, for He alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Let us ask ourselves once again, here in the presence of God: 'Lord, why have you given us this power? Why have you entrusted us with the faculty of choosing you or rejecting you? You want us to make good use of this power. Lord, what do you want me to do?' His reply is precise, crystal-clear: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind.'

*this is another way of saying, "launch out into the deep"...
what am I afraid of?*

Don't you see? Freedom finds its true meaning when it is put to the service of the truth which redeems, when it is spent in seeking

God's infinite Love which liberates us from all forms of slavery. Each passing day increases my yearning to proclaim to the four winds this inexhaustible treasure that belongs to Christianity: 'the glorious freedom of the children of God!' This is essentially what is meant by a 'good will,' which teaches us to pursue 'good, after having distinguished it from evil.'

I would like you to meditate on a fundamental point, which brings home to us the responsibility we have for our own consciences. Nobody else can choose for us: 'men's supreme dignity lies in this, that they are directed towards the good by themselves, and not by others.' Many of us have inherited the Catholic faith from our parents, and, by the grace of God, supernatural life began in our souls from the moment we were baptised as new-born infants. But we must renew throughout our lives, and every day of our lives, our determination to love God above all things. 'He is a Christian, a true Christian, who subjects himself to the rule of the one and only Word of God,' without laying down conditions to his obedience, and being ever ready to resist the devil's temptings by adopting the same attitude as Christ did: 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and serve none but Him.'

*Thank you, God,
for giving me the
desire to keep
growing in my faith*

God's love is a jealous love. He is not satisfied if we come to meet him with conditions. He longs for us to give ourselves completely, without keeping dark corners in our heart, where the joy and happiness of grace and the supernatural gifts cannot reach. Perhaps you are thinking, 'if I say "yes" to this exclusive Love might I not lose my freedom?'

There are still dark corners in my heart, but I don't want them

Aided and enlightened by Our Lord, who is presiding over us in this period of prayer, I trust that this question will become clearer for you and me. Each one of us has at some time or other experienced that serving Christ Our Lord involves suffering and hardship; to deny this would imply that we had not yet found God. A soul in love knows however that when such suffering comes it is

only a fleeting impression; the soul soon finds that the yoke is easy and the burden light, because Jesus is carrying it upon his shoulders as he embraced the wood of the Cross when our eternal happiness was at stake. But there are people who do not understand. They rebel against the Creator, in a sad, petty, impotent rebellion, and they blindly repeat the futile complaint recorded in the Psalms, 'let us break away from their bondage, rid ourselves of their toils.' They shrink from the hardship of fulfilling their daily task with heroic silence and naturalness, without show or complaint. They have not realised that even when God's Will seems painful and its demands wounding, it coincides perfectly with our freedom, which is only to be found in God and in his plans.

Sometimes I find the burden pretty heavy, when it's hard to fight my bad reactions, or people laugh at me for being Catholic. But the closer I get to God, the more I find joy in everything, even the hard parts

Such people barricade themselves behind their freedom. 'My freedom! My freedom!' they cry. They have their freedom, but they don't use it. They look at it, they set it up, a clay idol for their petty minds to worship. Is this freedom? What use is this treasure to them, if there is no commitment guiding their whole lives? Such behaviour goes against their very dignity and nobility as human beings. They are left aimless, with no clear path to guide their footsteps on this earth. You and I have met such people. They then let themselves be carried away by childish vanity, by selfish conceit, by sensuality.

If I can just remember this next time I want to choose the comfortable path instead of serving God!!

Their freedom turns out to be barren, or produces fruits which even humanly speaking are ridiculous. A person who does not choose, with complete freedom, an upright code of conduct, sooner or later ends up being manipulated by others. He will lead a lazy, parasitic existence, at the mercy of what others decide. He will let himself be blown to and fro by any wind whatsoever, and it will always be others who make up his mind for him. 'These are waterless clouds, carried hither and thither by the winds, autumn trees that bear no fruit, doubly dead and rootless,' even though they may try to disguise their lack of character, courage and

honesty behind a smoke-screen of constant chatter and excuses.

'No one is forcing me!' they obstinately repeat. No one? Everyone is coercing their make-believe freedom which will not run the risk of accepting responsibility for the consequences of its own free actions. Where there is no love of God, the individual and responsible use of personal freedom becomes impossible. There, despite appearances to the contrary, the individual is coerced at every turn. The indecisive and irresolute person is like plasticine at the mercy of circumstances. Anyone and anything can mould him according to its whim, and especially his passions and the worst tendencies of his own nature wounded by sin.

Remember the parable of the talents. The servant who received one talent could have put it to good use, as his fellow servants did. He could have set to work with his own abilities. He could have made sure that his talent bore fruit. Instead, what is on his mind? He is worried about losing his talent. Fair enough. But, then? He goes and buries it! The talent he received bears no fruit.

Let us not forget this man's sickly fear of putting to honest use his capacity for work, his mind, his will, his whole being. 'I'll bury it,' the poor fellow seems to be saying, 'but my freedom is safe!' Not so. He has turned his freedom towards something very definite, towards the most miserable and arid barrenness. He has taken sides, because he had no alternative. He had to choose, but he has chosen badly.

What am I afraid of? Do my fears stop me from doing the things I know will make me happy?

It is utterly false to oppose freedom and self-surrender, because self-surrender is a consequence of freedom. Look, when a mother sacrifices herself for love of her children, she has made a choice, and the more she loves the greater will be her freedom. If her love is great, her freedom will bear much fruit. Her children's good derives from her blessed freedom, which presupposes self-surrender, and from her blessed self-surrender, which is precisely freedom.

But, you might say, when we have attained our heart's desire, our search will be over. Does freedom vanish then? I assure you that it will then be more active than ever, because love is not content with a routine fulfilment of duty. Love is incompatible with boredom or apathy. To love means to renew our dedication every day, with loving deeds of service.

Love that you don't put into practice goes cold, and I never want that to happen with God or any of the people I care for.

I insist, and I would like to engrave this deep in your hearts, that freedom and self-surrender are not contradictory. They sustain one another. Freedom can only be given up for love; I cannot conceive any other reason for surrendering it. And I am not just playing with words or phrases. When people give themselves freely, at every moment of their self-surrender, freedom renews their love; to be renewed in that way is to be always young, generous, capable of high ideals and great sacrifices. I remember how pleased I was when I was told that the Portuguese term for young people is *os novos*, the new ones. That is just what they are. I tell you this because, although I have been around a good many years, when I pray at the foot of the altar 'to God who gives joy to my youth,' I feel young and I know that I will never consider myself old. If I keep true to my God, Love will constantly vivify me. My youth will be renewed like that of the eagle.

It's because we love freedom that we tie ourselves down. Only pride sees such bonds as a heavy chain. True humility, which is taught us by the One who is meek and humble of heart, shows that his yoke is easy and his burden light: his yoke is freedom and love and unity; his yoke is the Life which he won for us on the Cross.

Throughout my years as a priest, whenever I have spoken, or rather shouted, about my love for personal freedom, I have noticed some people reacting with distrust, as if they suspected that my defence of freedom could endanger the faith. Such faint-hearted people can rest assured. The only freedom that can assail the faith is a misinterpreted freedom, an aimless freedom, one

without objective principles, one that is lawless and irresponsible. In a word, licence. Unfortunately, this is what some people are advocating, and their claim does indeed constitute a threat to the faith.

This is why it is inaccurate to speak of freedom of conscience, thereby implying that it may be morally right for someone to reject God. We have already seen that it is in our power to oppose God's plans for salvation. It is in our power, but we should not do so. If someone adopted this attitude deliberately, he would be sinning, by breaking the first and most important of the commandments: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.'

I defend with all my strength the freedom of consciences, which means that no one can licitly prevent a man from worshipping God. The legitimate hunger for truth must be respected. Man has a grave obligation to seek God, to know him and worship him, but no one on earth is permitted to impose on his neighbour the practice of a faith he lacks; just as no one can claim the right to harm those who have received the faith from God.

It's up to me to make it easier for other people to come to God, through my joy, honesty, goodness, openness to others, etc.

Our Holy Mother the Church has always spoken out in favour of freedom and has always rejected fatalism, both in its ancient and more modern versions. She has pointed out that each soul is master of its own destiny, for good or ill: 'and those who have been true to the good will go to eternal life; those who have committed evil, to eternal fire.' I have always been impressed by this awesome capacity which you and I have, which all of us have, a capacity which indeed reveals the nobility of our state. 'So true is it that sin is a voluntary evil, that in no way would it be sin if it did not have its origin in the will. This affirmation is so evident that the few wise men and the many fools who inhabit the earth are agreed upon it.'

Once again I raise my heart in thanksgiving to my God and Lord, because there was nothing to stop him from creating us impeccable, irresistibly drawn towards the good. Nevertheless, 'he judged that his servants would be better if they served him freely.' How great is the love, the mercy of our Father! Whenever I think of his divine extravagance for us his children, I wish I had a thousand tongues, a thousand hearts and more, with which to be constantly praising God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Just think: the Almighty, who through his Providence rules the whole universe, does not want the forced service of slaves; he prefers to have children who are free. Although we are born *proni ad peccatum*, inclined to sin, due to the fall of our first parents, he has placed in the soul of each and every one of us a spark of his infinite intelligence, an attraction towards the good, a yearning for everlasting peace. And he brings us to understand that we will attain truth, happiness and freedom if we strive to make this seed of eternal life grow in our hearts.

And through my free good actions, I make that attraction towards the good stronger and become freer

But we can still say 'no' to God, rejecting this source of new and permanent happiness. Anyone who does so stops being a son and becomes a slave. 'Each thing is that which it is fitted to be according to its nature; hence, when it goes in search of something alien to its nature, it is not acting according to its own manner of being, but under an alien impulse; and this is to act in a servile manner. Man is rational by nature. When he acts according to reason, he proceeds by his own movement, according to what he is: and this is proper to freedom. When he sins, he works against reason, and then he is allowing himself to be led by the impulse of another, he is subject to limitations imposed by another and so anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34).'

or grades, followers, amazing trips, health, or good looks

Allow me to insist on this point. It is quite evident, as we can see in ourselves and in others, that everybody is a slave in some form or other. Some stoop before riches; others worship power; some, the relative tranquillity of scepticism, and there are those who

discover in sensuality their golden calf. The same happens in noble things. We put effort into a job of work, into an undertaking, large or small, into scientific, artistic, literary or spiritual activities. Wherever there is commitment and real passion, the person involved lives enslaved, joyfully devoting himself to fulfilling his task.

We will be slaves either way. Since we must serve anyway, for whether we like it or not this is our lot as men, then there is nothing better than recognising that Love has made us slaves of God. From the moment we recognise this we cease being slaves and become friends, sons. Then we see the difference: we find ourselves tackling the honest occupations of the world just as passionately and just as enthusiastically as others do, but **with peace in the depth of our hearts**. We are happy and calm, even in the midst of difficulties, for we are not putting our trust in passing things, but in what lasts for ever. We are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Where does our freedom come from? It comes from Christ Our Lord. This is the freedom with which he has ransomed us. That is why he teaches, 'if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.' We Christians do not have to ask anyone to tell us the true meaning of this gift, because the only freedom that can save man is Christian freedom.



I like to speak of the adventure of freedom, because that is how your lives and mine unfold. I insist that it is freely, as children and not as slaves, that we follow the path which Our Lord has marked out for each one of us. We relish our freedom of action as a gift from God.

I opt for God because I want to, freely, without compulsion of any kind. And I undertake to serve, to convert my whole life into a means of serving 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.

"God created man in the beginning and he left him in the power of his own free will" (Sir 15:14). This could not be so unless man had freedom of choice.' We are answerable to God for all the actions we freely perform. There is no room here for anonymity. Each one finds himself face to face with his Lord, and he can decide to live as God's friend or as his enemy. This is the beginning of the path of the interior struggle which is a lifelong undertaking because, as long as we are on this earth, we will never achieve complete freedom.

The pressure I feel sometimes, when I feel like I'm not 100% free, usually comes from performing for other people, trying to live up to their expectations or worrying what they think of me, instead of what God thinks

Moreover, our Christian faith tells us to ensure that everyone enjoys a climate of freedom, the first step for this being to remove any element of insidious compulsion in the manner of presenting the faith. 'If we are brought to Christ by force, we believe without wanting to; this is violence, not freedom. We can enter the Church unwillingly. We can approach the altar unwillingly. We can even receive the Sacrament unwillingly. But we can only believe if we want to.' It is clear also that, when one reaches the use of reason, personal freedom is required to enter the Church, and to correspond to the continual calls which Our Lord makes to us.

In the parable of the wedding feast, when the master of the house finds out that some guests have declined his invitation with poor excuses, he tells his servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedgerows and compel – *compelle intrare* – people to come in.' Surely this is coercion, an act of violence against the legitimate freedom of each individual conscience?

If we meditate on the Gospel and reflect on the teachings of Jesus, we will not mistake these commands for coercion. See how gently Christ invites: 'If you have a mind to be perfect... If any man would come after me...' His *compelle intrare* implies no violence, either

physical or moral. Rather, it reflects the power of attraction of Christian example, which shows in its way of acting the power of God: 'See how the Father attracts. He delights in teaching, and not in imposing necessity on men. That is how he attracts men towards himself.'

*When I'm happy living with God, other people see it
We all want to be happy*

When we breathe this air of freedom we see clearly that evil is an enslavement, not a liberation. 'He who sins against God keeps the freedom of his will to the extent that he is free from coercion, but he has lost it in that he is no longer free from blame.' Such a person may show that he has acted according to his preferences, but he does not speak with the voice of true freedom, because he has become the slave of his decision and he has decided for the worst, for the absence of God, where there is no freedom to be found.

I tell you once again: I accept no slavery other than that of God's Love. This is because, as I have told you on other occasions, religion is the greatest rebellion of men, who refuse to live like animals, who are dissatisfied and restless until they know their Creator and are on intimate terms with him. I want you to be rebels, free and unfettered, because I want you – it is Christ who wants us! – to be children of God. Slavery or divine sonship, this is the dilemma we face. Children of God or slaves to pride, to sensuality, to the fretful selfishness which seems to afflict so many souls.

Love of God marks out the way of truth, justice and goodness. When we make up our minds to tell Our Lord, 'I put my freedom in your hands,' we find ourselves loosed from the many chains that were binding us to insignificant things, ridiculous cares or petty ambitions. Then our freedom, which is a treasure beyond price, a wonderful pearl that it would be a tragedy to cast before swine, will be used by us entirely to learn how to do good.

This is the glorious freedom of the children of God. Christians who

let themselves be browbeaten or become inhibited or envious in the face of the licentious behaviour of those who have not accepted the Word of God, show that they have a very poor idea of the faith. If we truly fulfil the law of Christ – that is if we make the effort to do so, because we will not always fully succeed – we will find ourselves endowed with a wonderful gallantry of spirit that does not need to look elsewhere to discover the full meaning of human dignity.

Our faith is not in any way a burden or a limitation. What a poor idea of Christianity one would have if one thought that way! When we decide for God we lose nothing, and we gain everything. He who at the expense of his soul 'secures his own life, will lose it; it is the man who loses his life for my sake that will secure it.'



We have drawn the winning card, the first prize. If anything prevents us from seeing this clearly, let us look inside our own soul. We may find that our faith is weak, that we have little personal contact with God, that our life of prayer is impoverished. We must beg Our Lord, through his Mother who is our Mother too, to increase his love in us, to grant us a taste of the sweetness of his presence. Only when we love do we attain the fullest freedom: the freedom of not wanting ever to abandon, for all eternity, the object of our love.

So real freedom = loving God with everything I have, not holding anything back. It's scary to give Him control, but I'm realizing I'm already controlled by so many silly things (what people think, my bad habits, fear...). With God, I'm choosing to hold on to Someone who loves me and wants me to be happy forever.

I don't have to be perfect. I just have to keep choosing Him, every day, in the small things. What am I afraid of? What would I do if I really believed I was totally, unconditionally loved?

"Lord, do not depart from me, for without you I can do no good at all."

*"Freedom, A Gift From God" from Friends of God by St. Josemaria
Annotated by Althea Lim*