

VERY HUMAN, VERY DIVINE (XVIII): Interior Freedom

Jesus' fame is spreading throughout Galilee. He is a teacher different than others. He speaks with authority, and his words have power even over the demons. After preaching in several places, *He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up (Lk 4:16)*. Saint Luke places this scene at the beginning of his public life. The scene is so packed with significance that it has even been called a "gospel within the gospel." In these few verses not only is our Lord's mission solemnly opened, but his entire life is summed up.¹ Jesus goes to the synagogue and stands up to read. They hand him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. *He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* After rolling up the scroll and sitting down, *the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* (Lk 4:17-21). Jesus presents his status as Messiah in unequivocal terms, doing so with a text that highlights the gift of freedom. This is what Jesus has come to give us. He has come to free us from the captivity and oppression of sin.

The first Christians were well aware that the gift of freedom was at the center of their faith, and therefore Saint Paul will make it a constant theme in his letters. Jesus frees us from the burden of sin and death, from the blind destiny holding sway in pagan religions, from disordered passions and everything that makes life wretched and inhuman on earth. However, freedom is not only a gift, but at the same time a task. As the Apostle to the Gentiles writes: *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1)*. Hence we need to safeguard our freedom, to live up to this gift, and not fall back into the easy life of slavery. The first Christians had this conviction deep in their hearts. But what about us? Many of us have been baptized when we were newborns. What do the words of Isaiah read by our Lord in Nazareth mean for us? And Saint Paul's call to live in freedom, to not submit ourselves again to a yoke of slavery?

If it were simply a matter of being able to choose

When we talk about freedom, we often think of a simple condition: I act freely when I can do what I want, without anyone forcing or coercing me. This is the experience of freedom that we have when we can choose for ourselves. Faced with a question such as "Do you want chocolate cake or fruit?", those who can choose either of the two options seem freer than those who are forced to choose only one. A diabetic person, for example, is forced to ask for fruit. In this restricted meaning of freedom, those who can choose more options are freer, for they have fewer

¹ Cf. Jose Maria Casciaro, "The Holy Spirit in the Synoptic Gospels," in Pedro Rodríguez et al. (eds.), *The Holy Spirit and the Church*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1999, 65.

restraints that limit them to one choice. That is why an abundance of money brings with it a strong sensation of freedom; many opportunities open up that are closed to those who lack financial resources.

Certainly, the absence of coercion is part of the meaning of freedom, but it does not exhaust it. For example, we can think of Saint Thomas More when imprisoned in the Tower of London. From the standpoint of being able to choose to be there, he was not free at all. And yet how freely he accepted his situation. The same is true of the first martyrs, and of more recent figures persecuted for their faith. Every form of persecution is an attempt to take away freedom. But there is no merely external way to do so. Jesus said: *Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (Mt 10:28)*. Freedom is not simply a lack of external restraint, but the ability to decide how to act or accept a situation in the deepest part of our soul, regardless of the circumstances we may face.

Moreover, the freedom that we experience in our specific choices tends to have a rather limited scope. When we think of people who have gone down in history for the way they have lived their freedom, that is not what usually stands out. We can mentally recall the names of three or four people – known to everyone or simply someone close to us – who we consider to be models of freedom. What stands out in their life? What makes them role models for us? Surely we don't admire them simply because they have always been able to choose what food they preferred, or because they never married so as not to restrict themselves to only one person. Rather we think of people who have freed themselves from everything that could tie them down, in order to give their life fully to a worthy cause or to a specific person. And they are examples of freedom precisely because they preserved that self-giving right to the end. If Thomas More had violated his conscience and sworn allegiance to Henry VIII, even if he had done so freely, he would not have gone down in history as an example of freedom. If Saint Paul, instead of striving with all his strength to make Christ known and giving his life for Him, had decided to abandon his call and become a tent weaver again, even if he had done so freely, he would not be for us a model of freedom. Hence to fully understand freedom, we need to go beyond merely the ability to choose.

A treasure worth giving one's life for

The Gospel tells us about a striking experience of freedom: *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it (Mt 13:44-46)*. The two persons in these brief parables exchange everything they have for what seems much more valuable to them. They commit themselves fully to what their heart longs for, without feeling they are throwing away their freedom. Rather they think they are doing the best thing possible with it. This is the experience of any lover. He doesn't care about not being able to go out

with other women. He has given everything for the woman he loves, and simply wants to love her more each day. And he doesn't see this as throwing away his freedom. On the contrary, he is sure he cannot do anything better with his freedom than to love that person, that treasure, that most valuable pearl.

Hence freedom of choice, even though it is one dimension of freedom, is ordered to a deeper one: that of being able to love. We could call this deeper dimension the "freedom of self-giving." It is the freedom that we put into practice when we love, and that enables us to realize that "freedom and self-giving are not contradictory; they sustain one another."² By giving our entire life, we don't lose our freedom, but rather experience it with greater intensity. "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."³ When, after an intense day of work, we realize that we have not yet dedicated a special period of time to prayer at the end of the day, and we decide to do so instead of resting by watching the news, we are using our freedom in a way that strengthens our self-giving. The key here is once again love. Likewise, the mother of a family who with great freedom changes her plans in order to care for a sick child out of love, finds that this self-giving brings a joy she would never have obtained by doing what she originally wanted to do.

When we give our entire life for a cause or a person that we think deserves our love, that love shapes us and leads us to become ever more fully "ourselves": a unique person, with a name and surname. For example, Teresa of Calcutta. We could imagine for a moment that someone offered her a nice chalet to spend the last years of her life in peace, and an NGO to take over her care for the poor. What would she have answered? The great freedom in her life came from putting her whole heart in Christ, present in the poorest of the poor, and giving up everything else that might hinder that ideal.

We could easily find similar examples in the lives of many other holy men and women. What moved them was the desire to be faithful to the Love for which they had given everything; to respond to the call they had discovered in the middle of the world, with a mission that gave shape to their lives. We can recall here, for example, Saint Josemaría's words from 1932: "Two paths are open to me: that I study, gain a university professorship and become learned. I would like to do all this and I see it as feasible. Second: that I sacrifice my ambition, and even the noble desire for knowledge, happy with being discreet, although not ignorant. My path is the second: God wants me to be holy, and he wants me for his Work."⁴ This is what could be called "interior freedom." It is the source that explains why my actions are not the response to a momentary whim, nor to external directives or cold objectives, but to the hidden treasure for which I have given everything: the Love who has come in search of me and calls me to follow Him. This call is what explains the

² Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 31.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Saint Josemaría, *Intimate Notes*, no. 678, cit. in *The Way, Critical-Historical Edition*.

“mad excesses” of the saints, whose life was not merely the fulfilment of a series of external obligations.

Acting with interior freedom does not mean that we don’t find some things difficult. In the context of our ordinary life, the Father has frequently reminded us of something that Saint Josemaría stressed: “we shouldn’t think that the only work we can do joyfully is what we find pleasing.”⁵ “We can carry out joyfully – and not reluctantly – what we find hard, what doesn’t please us, if we do it for and with love, and therefore freely.”⁶ We work with full freedom, because our efforts stem from the love we carry in our heart. Perhaps on a given day we don’t feel like doing something, and don’t really understand why we have to do it. But I do it because I know it is part of the love that I have embraced with my whole life, and therefore I find it possible to love doing it. When I act in this way, I don’t do something automatically or simply because “it has to be done.” Rather I do it “for and with love,” with an ever-renewed willingness. Over time, what I do now in going against the grain, moved by the Love I have given my whole life for, will take on its deepest meaning. “Seeing one’s own vocation as a gift from God (and not as a mere list of obligations), even when we suffer, is also a sign of freedom of spirit.”⁷

Freedom as a response

Many people today, in their conception of freedom, often fail to see beyond the ability to choose at every moment what they want without any external coercion or limitation. And if this ability to choose is put into question, freedom for them seems to vanish. But in fact choosing one thing often means giving up others, and wanting something doesn’t necessarily mean being able to attain it. Christian anthropology offers a much more harmonious and serene view of freedom, seeing it as both a *gift* and a *call*. We have been *called to freedom* (*Gal 5:13*); and not to a vague or senseless freedom, but to *the glorious freedom of the children of God* (*Rom 8:21*). The truth of our divine filiation is what makes us free (cf. *Jn 8:31-32*). Therefore our freedom is not a spontaneous choice that has no grounding outside our own will. In its deepest dimension, our freedom is a *response* to the Love that precedes us. That is why Saint Josemaría could describe the interior life, insofar as it involves struggle, as acting “*because we feel like . . . responding to God’s grace.*”⁸ We freely embrace the will of the one who “loved us first” (cf. *1 Jn 4:19*), and we strive with all our strength to respond to that love. For example, faced with the many choices we make every day, we can ask ourselves: “Where is this going to lead me? Is it in accord with God’s love, with my condition as a son or daughter of God?”

⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Letter 13*, no. 106.

⁶ Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 9 January 2018, no. 6.

⁷ Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 9 January 2018, no. 7.

⁸ Saint Josemaría, *Letter 2*, no. 45.

When we accept our freedom as a response, we discover that there is no more powerful driving force in our life than keeping alive the memory of the Love who has called us. This is also true on the human level: there is no greater spur for any person than the awareness of being loved. *My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land"* (Song 2:8-11). Those who know they are loved by God like this, called to enkindle the whole world with his Love, are willing to do whatever is needed. Everything seems little to them in comparison with what they have received. Saint Josemaría's words seem obvious to them: "How little a life is to offer to God!"⁹ "Realizing that God is waiting for us in each person (cf. Mt 25:40), and that He wants to make himself present in their lives also through us, leads us to strive to share abundantly with others what we have received. And in our lives, my daughters and sons, we have received and we receive a lot of love. Giving love to God and to others is the most proper act of freedom. Love *fulfills* freedom, it redeems it. Love enables freedom to discover its origin and goal in God's Love."¹⁰

No fear or external mandate can move a heart as strongly as the force of a freedom that identifies itself with its Love, down to the smallest details. As Saint Paul said, with the conviction of someone who has lived it to the full: *For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom 8:38-39). But for the Love of God to acquire this force in us, we need to foster a deep intimacy with Him, first of all in our prayer. There, in contemplating our Lord, we learn the path to freedom, and we also open our hearts to the transforming action of the Holy Spirit.

True freedom takes on the form of a response, of a great "yes." This is connected with part of the inheritance Saint Josemaría wanted to leave his children in the human sphere: good humor.¹¹ More than simply a personality trait, this is a true strength – *virtus* – of freedom. If Christian life were based merely on an ethical decision, on the struggle to carry out a program, it would lead almost inevitably to exhaustion, discouragement and frustration. But the reality is very different, since authentic Christian life has its source in the encounter with a Person who has come looking for us.¹² This source is what sustains us while we strive to attain the goal with all our strength, however weak we might see ourselves: *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own* (Phil 3:12). It is He who has taken hold of our life, who has noticed us, who has believed in us. Hence if we sense our own smallness, our misery, the clay – *humus* – of which we are made, our response will be both humble and filled with good humor. Our vision of the world deepens "and we learn

⁹ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 420.

¹⁰ Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 9 January 2018, no. 4.

¹¹ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Letter 24*, no. 22.

¹² Cf. Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus caritas est*, no. 1.

to grasp the positive – and, sometimes, amusing – side of things and situations.”¹³ Certainly we are made of clay, and if we have aspired to great things it is not because we have lost sight of this reality, but because Someone who knows us better than we know ourselves has invited us to do so.

The dialogue that the prophet Jeremiah enters into with the Lord (cf. *Jer* 1:5-8) is very beautiful. Few prophets suffered as much as he did in striving to make God’s word present in the midst of his people. It was God himself who had taken the initiative: *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.* But Jeremiah only seems to see his own inadequacy: *Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”* But God does not give up: *Do not say, “I am only a youth”; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak.* And where will the prophet find the strength to do so? What will be his security? More than the mandate he has received, it will be the Lord’s promise: *Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.* Sometimes we ourselves are the worst enemy of our own freedom, especially when we lose sight of the true foundation of our existence.

In the end, what is surprising is not that we are weak and sometimes fall, but that nevertheless we keep getting up again. May our hearts continue to harbor room to dream God’s dreams. He counts on both our freedom and our clay. It is a matter of looking more closely at Him, and less at our own inadequacies. Intimacy with God, trusting in Him fully: from there arises the strength and agility we need to live in the middle of the world at the heights of God’s children. “A writer has said that angels can fly because they don’t take themselves too seriously. And maybe we could fly a bit better if we didn’t give ourselves so much importance.”¹⁴

¹³ Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 9 January 2018, no. 6.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Interview in Castelgandolfo, 5 August 2006.