

THE MOST SUPERNATURAL REASON

At the beginning of his public life, in the synagogue at Nazareth, Our Lord read aloud a passage from Isaiah: *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 let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:18-19; Is 61:1-2)*. And rolling up the scroll He declared: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Lk 4:21)*.

By using these words, Jesus presents himself as a liberator—first and foremost from all that restricts inner freedom: the blindness of ignorance, captivity to sin, oppression by the devil. His preaching often makes reference to the freedom and liberation that those who follow Him will attain. *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (Jn 8:31)*.

The first Christians had a deep, joyful awareness of freedom. For them, Jesus was the Saviour. He had not freed them from one yoke just to lay another one on them. He had broken the shackles that prevented them from living life to the full. This new and fuller life was now reflected in the joy that overflowed in their lives. *Rejoice always, exhorts Saint Paul, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (I Thess 5:16-18)*.

In the beginning God created man as lord of all creation. “The best Artificer made our nature as it were a formation fit for the exercise of royalty, preparing it at once by superior advantages of soul, and by the very form of the body, to be such as to be adapted for royalty: for the soul immediately shows its royal and exalted character ... in that it owns no lord, and is self-governed, swayed autocratically by its own will; for to whom else does this belong than to a king?”¹

Through sin man was reduced to slavery, but God raised him up with the hope of future salvation (cf. *Gen 3:15*). This desire to redeem us is shown, for example, when He freed his people from the slavery of Egypt and promised them a land which, although they would have to fight for it, would be the Promised Land, God's gift, where they could worship Him in freedom. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Ex 20:2)*. And He continued: *You shall have no other gods before me (Ex 20:3)*. This is how God introduces the Ten Commandments to his people, as the condition for being truly free and not falling back into servitude. God does not seek to impose himself as a tyrant, but rather to enable his people to accept Him freely as Lord.

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” 4.

God stakes everything on our freedom. The first Commandment, on which, Christ says, the Law and the prophets depend, is the law of love: love for God above all things and for one's neighbour as oneself (cf. *Mt 22:37-40*). This is no ordinary law. Other things can be commanded, imposed through force and coercion. But not love. God asks for it, as a Lover, only after showing his great love for his people, his care and affection made clear in so many ways. True love can only be invited, after showing that one is worthy of it, since it can only be the fruit of freedom. And to discover and let oneself be caught up by this Love, it is essential to "foster interior freedom, which leads us to do things for love."²

The meaning of freedom

God has created us free precisely so that we may truly love Him. This is how He looks on us and delights in us. We find this hard to understand because we human beings are unable to create free beings. At the most we can produce robots that perform the tasks for which we designed them, or we imitate freedom by creating artefacts that operate in a random fashion. But we are incapable of producing something that can decide for itself. That is what God does in creating us and redeeming us from the sin that limited our freedom.

To be free is not primarily to be unrestrained by external conditions, but rather to be capable of answering for our actions and responses. Thus freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility. To be free is to be capable of taking responsibility, and to be answerable for our actions to other people and first of all to our Creator.

Freedom, then, is not something added on, a feature that we could dispense with and still be ourselves. The freedom that God wants for us is real freedom, rooted in the depths of our being. To recognize this is a great step forward for mankind's progress. "An ardent desire for freedom, the demand for it on the part of persons and peoples is a positive sign of our times. Acknowledging the freedom of each woman and man means acknowledging that they are persons; masters of their own acts and responsible for them, able to direct their own lives."³

God, who loves us as we are because He has created us, wants us to be free because He loves us for ourselves and He can only be satisfied when we freely and lovingly open up our heart to Him: *My son, give me your heart (Prov 23:2)*. Thus we can understand why Saint Josemaría said that "because I really want to"⁴ is the most supernatural reason for doing what is good. It is supernatural because it combines the mystery of God's creative and redemptive love with the genuine response of his beloved creature: recognizing God as our Father and trustingly accepting his Will, since He only wants what is good for his children.

God has placed our destiny in our own hands. Not in the sense that by our own efforts we can attain what He has prepared for us, but that we have the power to turn freely to Him, who is

² Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 8.

³ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 1.

⁴ Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 17.

the One who can make us happy.⁵ Realizing that we have the capacity to give our love freely to God can at first frighten us. Nevertheless, if we truly decide that we want to say Yes to Him, the conviction that we are free fills us with joy and hope. As God’s children, we feel secure in the measure to which we rely on Him. Hence we understand why Saint Josemaría, reflecting on his own vocation, exclaimed: “Doesn’t it make you very happy to see that fidelity depends to a great extent on us? I am excited at the thought that God loves me and has wanted his Work to depend on my response as well. And it makes me happy to be able to tell Him, freely, ‘Lord, I love you too; count on my littleness.’”⁶

Reflecting on our freedom helps us to base our life on the reality that we are God’s children. We are not mass-produced, identical units: our response is unique because we are each loved by God with a special love. But we can lose the awareness of our freedom if we fail to use it. Then we will naturally feel more and more constricted, conditioned and even coerced by our moods or surroundings. We may begin to doubt if we really are free and even if freedom is worthwhile or makes any sense.

Nevertheless, we Christians know that freedom does have a meaning. It is not just that we are free from bonds, with the power to make our own decisions. There is not much point in setting someone free and telling them they can go wherever they want, if there is nowhere for them to go, or if they have no idea how to get there. But God not only grants us the ability to throw off what limits and imprisons us; He also opens up to us an unlimited horizon to fulfil our deepest desires. For the One who created our freedom in no way limits its unfolding. He opens to us the possibility of limitless growth, for this is how we free creatures imitate God. And He offers us, in union with his Only-begotten Son, the possibility of developing our personality to the full.

True freedom

Saint Josemaría saw his work as “aimed at helping each person to face up to all the demands of their life and to discover what God wants from them in particular – without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed responsibility which are the features of a Christian conscience. This way of acting and this spirit are based on respect for the transcendence of revealed truth and love for the freedom of the human person. I might add that they are also based on a realization that history is undetermined and open to a variety of human options – all of which God respects.”⁷

This helps us see why someone who does not know Christ can find God by beginning to take their own freedom seriously. A search is begun that brings to light the possibilities of our

⁵ “But [nature] did give man free-will, with which he can turn to God, that God may make him happy. ‘For what we do by means of our friends, is done, in a sense, by ourselves’.” Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 5 a. 5 ad 1.

⁶ Saint Josemaría, *Alone with God*, no. 324.

⁷ *Christ is Passing By*, no. 99.

human condition together with its obvious limitations. And those who already love God are enabled to put their relationship with Him on a deeper and truer footing, by going more deeply into the reality of their freedom led by His hand.

The only attitude that accords with the dignity of God's children is to feel as "free as the birds"⁸ to do what we truly want, even when, like Christ, what we want requires humiliation and self-surrender for love. It is not just a matter of acting as if we were free. If we really want to follow Jesus, we have to search within ourselves for the source of true freedom—the reality that we are God's children—and act accordingly. Then we will attain the freedom of spirit that "is the capacity and habitual attitude to act out of love, especially in the effort to follow what God is asking of us in each circumstance."⁹

Taking our freedom seriously leads to spontaneity and initiative. In contrast, the lack of freedom is often revealed by a tendency to act out of fear. Theologians give the name "servile fear" to the fear of punishment that can stop people from sinning. This fear can be the start of a return to God, but Christian life cannot be built only on servile fear. For *there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18)*, and we have to *act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty (Jas 2:12)*.

Fear can appear in many areas of our life. People who are afraid, even though they want the good, are really driven by the evil they seek to escape. So when fear is the driving force of our actions, we easily turn in on ourselves and get complicated, to the point of losing sight of the true motives for our actions and the good things we want to achieve. But if we love God, if we truly want to love Him, He will free us from fear, because for those who love God everything works together for the good (cf. *Rom 8:28*). This conviction drives away our needless fears and enables us to enjoy the full freedom of God's children, acting cheerfully and responsibly.

It is true that we do not say Yes to God once and for all. We are creatures whose lives unfold in time, and we have to renew and strengthen our response over time. Moreover, since we are called to respond freely, Our Lord wants from us a progressively more genuine response. Sometimes He even seems to hide his face from us, so that our loyalty to Him will become ever freer and fuller. He wants to purify us from external and secondary motives, so that we act not out of fear, but love. He is inviting us to a more genuine fidelity, which is not merely a matter of preserving something already achieved, but rather of joyfully renewing, in the most varied circumstances, our generous self-giving to God. The desire to be faithful leads us to strive to make our initial Yes ever more complete, building our interior life on it, grounded on God's grace and our free response.

It is good to remind ourselves often that we are not machines, nor animals living merely by instincts, but free beings. Our future is completely open, and depends on our own initiative. Thus we are helped to escape anonymity and to live facing God and other people with a free and

⁸ Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 14 September 1951, no. 38.

⁹ Fernando Ocariz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 5.

personal response, accompanied by a sense of responsibility. Then we will be able to open up a genuine dialogue with God, in a personal relationship that gives rise to a true and deep friendship. And the fruit of our friendship with God will be the burning desire to bring God's Love and the accompanying sense of freedom to everyone. Our friendship with others will be a great help here: "Friendship is itself apostolate; friendship is itself a dialogue in which we give and receive light. In friendship plans are forged and we mutually open up new horizons. In friendship we rejoice in what is good and support one another in what is difficult; we have a good time with one another, since God wants us to be happy."¹⁰

¹⁰ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 14.