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"Freedom grows with love"

In his 20 October general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on Saint Paul's Letter to the Galatians, speaking about the freedom of Christians.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In these days we are talking about the freedom of faith, listening to the Letter to the Galatians. But I was

reminded of what Jesus was saying about the spontaneity and freedom of children, when this child had the freedom to approach and move as if he were at home... And Jesus tells us: “You too, if you do not behave like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven”. The courage to approach the Lord, to be open to the Lord, not to be afraid of the Lord: I thank this child for the lesson he has given us all. And may the Lord help him in his limitation, in his growth because he has given this testimony that came from his heart. Children do not have an automatic translator from the heart to life: the heart takes the lead. Thank you.

The Apostle Paul, with his letter to the Galatians, gradually introduces us to the great novelty of faith. Slowly, step by step... that is the novelty of faith. It is truly a great novelty, because it does not merely renew a few aspects of life, but

rather it leads us into that “new life” that we have received with Baptism. There the greatest gift, that of being children of God, has been poured out upon us. Reborn in Christ, we have passed from a religiosity made up of precepts – we have moved on from a religiosity made up of precepts - to a living faith, which has its centre in communion with God and with our brothers and sisters, that is, in love. We have passed from the slavery of fear and sin to the freedom of God’s children. Here, again, is the word *freedom* ...

Today we will try to understand better what the heart of this freedom is for the Apostle, what the core of this is. Paul affirms that it is anything but an “opportunity for the flesh” (*Gal 5:13*): freedom, therefore, is not a libertine way of living, according to the flesh or following the instincts, individual desires or one’s own selfish impulses; no, on the

contrary, the freedom of Jesus leads us to be, the Apostle writes, “servants of one another” (*ibid.*). But is this slavery? Yes, freedom in Christ has an element of slavery, a dimension that leads us to service, to living for others. True freedom, in other words, is fully expressed in love. Yet again, we find ourselves faced with the paradox of the Gospel: we are freed by serving, not in doing whatever we want. We are free in serving, and freedom comes from there; we find ourselves fully to the extent to which we give ourselves. We find ourselves fully to the extent to which we give ourselves, to which we have the courage to give ourselves; we possess life if we lose it (cf. *Mk 8:35*). This is pure Gospel.

But how can this paradox be explained? Because it is a paradox! The Apostle’s answer is as simple as it is demanding: “through love” (*Gal 5:13*). There is no freedom without

love. The selfish freedom of doing what I want is not freedom, because it turns in on itself, it is not fruitful. Through love: it is Christ's love that has freed us and it is love that also frees us from the worst slavery, that of the self; therefore, freedom increases with love. But beware: not with self-centred love, with the love of a soap opera, not with the passion that simply looks for what we want and like: not with that, but with the love we see in Christ, charity – this is the love that is truly free and freeing. It is the love that shines out in gratuitous service, modelled on that of Jesus, who washes the feet of his disciples and says: “I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (*Jn 13:15*). Serving one another.

Therefore, for Paul freedom is not “doing what you want and what you like”: no. This type of freedom, without a goal and without points of

reference, would be an empty freedom, a freedom of the circus: it is not good. And indeed, it leaves emptiness within: how often, after following instinct alone, do we realise that we are left with a great emptiness inside and that we have used badly the treasure of our freedom, the beauty of being able to choose true goodness for ourselves and for others. True freedom always frees us, whereas when we exercise that freedom of what we like and don't like, we remain empty, in the end. Only this freedom is complete, genuine, and inserts us into real everyday life.

In another letter, the first to the Corinthians, the Apostle responds to those who support an incorrect idea of freedom. "All things are lawful!" Ah, all things are lawful, they can be done. No: it is a mistaken idea. "Yes, but not all things are helpful", would be the reply. "All things are lawful

but not all things are helpful!", Paul answers. "All things are lawful, yes, but not all things build up", retorts the Apostle. He then adds: "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour" (*1 Cor* 10:23-24). This is the rule for unmasking any type of selfish freedom. In addition, to those who are tempted to reduce freedom only to their own tastes, Paul puts before them the need for love. Freedom guided by love is the only one that sets others and ourselves free, that knows how to listen without imposing, that knows how to love without coercing, that builds and does not destroy, that does not exploit others for its own convenience and does good without seeking its own benefit. In short, if freedom is not at the service – this is the test – if freedom is not in the service of good, it runs the risk of being barren and not bearing fruit. If freedom is not in the service of good, it does not bear fruit. On the other

hand, freedom inspired by love leads towards the poor, recognising the face of Christ in their faces.

Therefore, this service to one another allows Paul, writing to the Galatians, to emphasise something that is by no means secondary: in this way, speaking of the freedom that the other Apostles gave him to evangelise, he underlines that they recommended only one thing: to remember the poor (cf. *Gal 2:10*). It is interesting, what the apostles said when after the ideological battle between Paul and the apostles, they agreed: “Go ahead, go ahead and do not forget the poor”, that is, may your freedom as a preacher be a freedom in the service of others, not for yourself, to do as you please.

We know, however, that one of the most widespread modern conceptions of freedom is this: “my freedom ends where yours begins”. But here the relationship is missing!

It is an individualistic vision. On the other hand, those who have received the gift of freedom brought about by Jesus cannot think that freedom consists in keeping away from others, as if they were a nuisance; the human being cannot be regarded as cooped up in alone, but always part of a community. The social dimension is fundamental for Christians, and it enables them to look to the common good and not to private interest.

Especially in this historic moment, we need to rediscover the communitarian, not individualistic, dimension of freedom: the pandemic has taught us that we need each other, but it is not enough to know this; we need to choose it in a tangible way, to decide on that path, every day. Let us say and believe that others are not an obstacle to my freedom, but rather they are the possibility to fully realise it. Because

our freedom is born from God's love
and grows in charity. Thank you.

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