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Towards Freedom

Paradoxically, "by giving up our freedom for love we are able to love more and give ourselves more fully, and consequently we become more free." An article on Christian life.

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“There is nothing better than recognizing that Love has made us slaves of God. From the moment we recognise this we cease being slaves and become friends, sons and daughters. 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 (Gal 4:31).*” [1]

Paradoxically, freedom attains its fullness when it chooses to serve. And by contrast, the search for absolute freedom without constraints, independent of God and other people, leads to the worship of money, power, success or other idols which, however attractive at first, are fleeting and ultimately worthless.

“The freedom of a human being is the freedom of a limited being, and therefore is itself limited. We can possess it only as a shared freedom, in the communion of freedom: only if

we live in the right way, with one another and for one another, can freedom develop.” [2]

We need other people, not only because of what we receive from them, but also because we are created to give. There can be no personal growth independent of the needs of the people around us. A husband grows by serving his wife and children, and the same with a wife; lawyers practise their profession in order to serve their clients and the common good of citizens; sick people put themselves in the hands of their doctors, and doctors have to serve their patients... *Which is the greater, one who sits at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves .* [3]

The service that Christ asks of his disciples consists not just in giving something, but in giving themselves,

putting their own freedom on the line. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical: “My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift.” [4]

Giving myself completely, surrendering myself totally, is simply surrendering my freedom: giving it up for love. By giving up our freedom for love we are able to love more and give ourselves more fully, and consequently we become more free. That is what self-giving entails: giving without losing anything, and even gaining more by giving.

When our freedom is deposited entirely in God, with no other guarantee than our desire to seek

and do his will, what we gain is identification with Christ, and we regain our freedom at a deeper level: a deep filial freedom that no circumstance or power can inhibit.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ, and be found in him . [5]

Seeking Christ

“All men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life.” [6] Each can make of their own life a masterpiece of love, including successes and failures, which in the end don't matter. What does matter is not to lose sight of the beacon, the meaning of our life, the One in whom our heart rejoices, [7] who alone can fulfil our capacity for loving, to whom we want to direct our freedom whole and entire.

The particular choices we make, such as choosing and carrying out our

profession, setting a timetable, taking on a commitment, whether big or small, are all directed ultimately towards a good that is desired for its own sake and not in function of something else. This good, which we desire in an absolute way, is what defines our being more than anything else.

It gives ultimate meaning to our little everyday actions, guides our specific behavior, and is the touchstone for deciding, in case of doubt, what we should and shouldn't do. In short, as St Thomas said, commenting on St. Augustine, there are only two goods that we can take as absolutes, and as guides for the rest of our actions: the glory of God or our own self-esteem. "Just as in the love of God, God himself is the last end to which all the things that are rightly loved are ordered, so in the love of our own excellence we find another ultimate end to which all things are likewise

ordered; for he who seeks to abound in riches, knowledge, honors or any other good, seeks his own excellence in all of them.” [8]

Only God can give a truly unified meaning to our aims and occupations. “You have made us, O Lord, for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” [9] These words of St. Augustine reveal the origin and goal of created freedom, which is both a gift and a task. God has given us freedom so that we can attain the fullness of existence; and that fullness is the result of choosing God’s Love by seeking his will in our major decisions and in the little events of each day.

The Gospel episode of the rich young man shows how the direction of one’s life is the result of one’s personal choices. That young man is impelled by the questionings of his

heart to seek the path to genuine happiness. He doesn't want to settle for less, and so he asks the person who can give him a definitive answer: Jesus Christ. *Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?* [10]

Our Lord's answer is as radical as the question. First he points to the paths that are incompatible with what the young man is seeking: *Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother .* [11] Then he points out the road to true peace and joy: *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me .* [12]

These words show how secondary everything was that the young man had centered his concerns on up until then. His freedom had come up against an unforeseen alternative, a

call to widen the horizons in his life. It was not that he had been living an evil life; on the contrary, he had a high social and moral standing, and his parents and teachers were undoubtedly proud of him. But he felt dissatisfied and longed for something more, and therefore he went to the Teacher.

But when Jesus reveals a whole new panorama to him he is silent. He knows that the “good Teacher” is right, still more after hearing the mysterious words in which Jesus lets his divinity be glimpsed: *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone* . [13] Despite all this, he doesn't have the freedom needed to put himself completely at our Lord's disposal. Human prudence, the fear of losing something valuable and perhaps a need for security, lead him to hold on to what he already has, in the vain hope that he might perhaps find happiness without aspiring as

high as Jesus asks, without risking his position, his good name, his money, in short, his very self.

If we try to do good but don't have much love, it is hard to find the right path. In the words of St. John of the Cross, "Those who seek God while holding on to their own preferences seek him in darkness, and in darkness they will not find him." [14] Our mind becomes complicated with "false excuses," [15] and we fail to do something good, or put it off for later. If our love is weak, our struggle becomes sluggish and indecisive, bogged down by many small attachments. When our love is not strong enough to make us want to do what God wants, many excuses are easily found for not doing it.

The young man's heart was left unsatisfied, since no human heart can be content with half-measures. And he *went away sorrowful* . [16]

Returning to Christ

Perseverance in love doesn't mean a tense struggle to never fail. Sailing ships normally don't follow a straight line to reach the harbor, but make use of whatever wind is blowing and change direction to get back on course.

What matters is to know where we want to go, and to stay watchful. We need to surrender our freedom repeatedly, especially if we realize that we have begun to serve “other masters.” [17] If we don't want to get lost we need to examine our behavior in the light of our vocation: the divine “lighthouse,” as it were, that guides our freedom. “Therefore, we must be ready to begin again, to find again—in new situations—the light and the stimulus of our first conversion. And that is why we must prepare with a deep examination of conscience, asking our Lord for his

help, so that we'll know him and ourselves better. If we want to be converted again, there's no other way." [18]

A lack of joy is one of the signposts warning us when our will is losing its orientation towards God. With the light of the Holy Spirit we will be able to discover what we have set our heart on, and correct whatever needs correcting.

The parable of the prodigal son is an authentic guide along the path to conversion. The starting point is the moment when the son realizes his material poverty, and especially his spiritual poverty—his lack of joy. Confronting the fact that he has abused his filial freedom, he begins to examine his situation objectively. He looks into his own heart: "*in se autem reversus,*" *he came to himself,* [19] unafraid to recognize the hard truth.

The panorama before him is one of hunger, loneliness, sadness and lack of love. How has he reached this situation, he asks himself. He might have blamed his bad luck, or the famine the region was experiencing. Instead he has the courage to take responsibility for his own actions. He is the one who has freely exchanged faithfulness to his father for an illusory happiness. He has fallen prey to the idea that the property due to him—his father's bequest—would satisfy his desires for a good life and personal fulfilment. His will has become set on his own little treasures: his ambitions, his entertainment, his time, his sensuality, his laziness.

It is the vivid perception of his poverty that makes him react, seeing how helpless he is on his own, how without his father he is doomed to cruel servitude. *How many hired servants in my father's house have*

bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! [20] My father's house: the holy Church of God, the "small portion" of the Church that is Opus Dei... He has lost his fear of calling things by their name, and contact with the truth about himself sets him on the path to freedom: *the truth will make you free* . [21]

Facing the reality of his situation, a longing for his Father's love begins to grow in him, and he sets off on the journey home. We have to return home again and again in life, because it is there that we find ourselves again, and rediscover that we are God's children. "Home" is also our conscience, our inner sanctuary. And the prodigal son, who had insisted on claiming his rights, now sees the naked truth about himself and renounces all his rights: *"I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him: 'Father, I have sinned*

against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.” And he arose and came to his father . [22]

The journey home brings with it the joy of conversion. Repentance opens the door to hope, and the decision to go back redirects our freedom to its true end: love. The encounter with the Father surpasses all expectations. Our poor human heart, humiliated by its falls, finds itself filled to overflowing with the infinite mercy of Love. *While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him . [23]*

Freedom comes to maturity with love for God. Filial freedom is not measured by a list of errors and successes. Our errors turn into successes, into opportunities to love more, when we correct them and ask

for forgiveness, trusting fully in God's mercy.

We need to learn to begin again, led by St. Josemaría's hand: "You know in your hearts, as I do in mine, that the struggle is never-ending. You will have noticed too, when making your examination of conscience just as I do (excuse these personal references, but even as I am speaking to you I am going over the needs of my own soul with our Lord) that you often experience little setbacks, which at times perhaps may seem to you enormous, revealing as they do an evident lack of love, of self-surrender to God, of a spirit of sacrifice, of refinement. Well, strengthen your yearning for reparation, with a sincere act of contrition, but please do not lose your peace of mind." [24]

"Please do not lose your peace of mind": this moving, fatherly plea is united with a call to contrition,

which is the most important part of our examination of conscience. St. Josemaría opened his soul to us to pass on to his own experience of being a child of God.

Now he experiences the joy of heaven, and his sharing in God's fatherhood is more intense. Let us go to his intercession to attain serene, filial contrition, asking him to teach us to make a contrite examination of conscience that won't take away our peace but rather strengthens it. Every act of contrition is a new beginning. What peace it gives us to know that in this life even defeats can be an occasion for victory!

Living in Christ

In the Apocalypse, St. John describes a countless multitude standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm-branches in their hands. [25] The palm is the symbol of joy and victory:

the joy of worshipping God, and the victory of those who give him glory forever. Using the same image, we could say that the “palm” of freedom is found in orientating it towards God until it gains the final victory of holiness.

How can we gain this supreme victory? The Second Vatican Council teaches: “Since man’s freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God’s grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower.” [26]

That is why God sent his Son, who has come to our aid to make us sharers in his victory on the Cross and to enable us to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our freedom was achieved on Calvary. “‘For freedom Christ has set us free.’ In him we have communion with the ‘truth that makes us free.’ The Holy Spirit has been given to us and, as the Apostle

teaches, ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.’ Already we glory in the ‘liberty of the children of God.’” [27]

God had promised his Chosen People a new life-principle, a law written on their hearts that would not only point out the way but also give them the strength to follow the path of God’s love. *A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances .* [28]

This promise has been fulfilled with the sending of the Holy Spirit: *God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us .* [29] Only by drawing on this new life-principle can we build a life that is freed from the slavery of

selfishness: the life of free sons and daughters. *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God . [30]*

Our will needs to rest on the supernatural rock of our divine filiation, and not on the shifting sands of our own strength. Then we can rise above our own limitations, overcoming the obstacles on the foundation of humility, with God's strength. A will that is supernaturally good takes on a good divinization, seeking to do God's Will in everything.

How can we achieve this? By forgetting about ourselves, with Christ's power. *I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses , says St. Paul, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong . [31]*

The sense of our divine filiation is a realistic foundation for our freedom. It teaches us to begin again from the truth of our own littleness, which is at the same time the greatness of being a dearly loved child of God, and brings serenity and optimism to our struggle. As God's children, we feel sustained by the omnipotence of a Father who loves us with our defects, while helping us to fight against them and impelling us towards freedom.

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Footnotes:

[1] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God* , 35.

[2] Benedict XVI, *Homily* , 8
December 2005.

[3] Luke 22:27.

[4] Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* , 34.

[5] Phil 3:8-9.

[6] John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* , 4 April 1999, 2.

[7] Cf. Ps 33[32]:21.

[8] St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo* , q. 8, a. 2, c.

[9] St. Augustine, *Confessions* , 1, 1, 1.

[10] Lk 18:18.

[11] Lk 18:20.

[12] Mt 19:21.

[13] Lk 18:19.

[14] St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* , 3, 3.

[15] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God* , 37.

[16] Mt 19:22.

[17] Cf. Lk 16:13.

[18] St. Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By* , 58.

[19] Lk 15:17.

[20] Lk 15:17.

[21] Jn 8:32.

[22] Lk 15:18-20.

[23] Lk 15:20.

[24] St. Josemaria, *Friends of God* , 13.

[25] Cf. Rev 7:9-10.

[26] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* , 17.

[27] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* , 1741. Gal 5:1; Jn 8:32; 2 Cor 3:17; and Rom 8:21.

[28] Ezek 36:26-27.

[29] Rom 5:5.

[30] Rom 8:14

[31] 2 Cor 12:9-10.

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