

Topic 7: Human Freedom

The Church sees freedom as an eminent sign of the divine image in man. Our participation in God's beatitude is such a great good and so desired by divine Love that God has willed to take the risk of human freedom. In the moral sense, freedom is not so much a natural property of the person as a conquest, the result of education, of the moral virtues possessed and of God's grace.

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1. God created man free

Sacred Scripture tells us that God created man as a free being. “It was he who created man in the beginning and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish. Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him.”^[1]

The Church sees freedom as “an exceptional sign of the divine image in man.”^[2] And at the same time it teaches us why and for what purpose freedom was given to us: “For God has willed that man remain under the control of his own decisions, so

that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to complete and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him.”^[3] By creating man in his own image and likeness, God fulfils his plan to create beings capable of sharing in his own divine life and entering into communion with Him.

To adhere freely to God, as *Gaudium et Spes* says, men and women need to be free, that is, to be able to know and autonomously choose the good. But since we are finite and fallible beings, this entails the sad possibility of misusing the freedom God has given us, rejecting the good and choosing evil. But if we were not truly free, we could not share in divine happiness, by coming to know and love the Supreme Good which is God Himself. The stars follow exactly the laws God has given them, but they cannot know and love, and therefore cannot share in God’s

happiness. As Saint Josemaría writes, “only we men (I am not referring now to the angels) can unite ourselves to the Creator by using our freedom.”^[4] Our sharing in divine beatitude is such a great good and so desired by divine Love that God wanted to take the risk of human freedom.

In order to understand all this better, we shall now consider the various senses in which freedom is spoken of, the essence of freedom, and then freedom seen from the viewpoint of salvation history.

2. Dimensions of human freedom

Human freedom has several dimensions. *Freedom from constraint* is the freedom enjoyed by the person who can do externally what he or she has decided to do, without imposition or hindrance from

external agents. This is how freedom is generally understood in the field of law and politics: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, etc. This means that no one can legitimately prevent people from expressing their thoughts or meeting with whomever they wish, within the limits set by law. Those in jail and prisoners of war, for example, do not have this freedom.

Freedom of choice or *psychological freedom* means the absence of internal necessity to choose one thing or another; it no longer refers to the possibility of *doing* something, but to the possibility of deciding autonomously, without being subject to an internal determinism, i.e. without an internal force other than the will necessarily leading to choosing one thing and preventing the choice of the other possible alternatives. Psychological freedom is the capacity for self-determination.

Certain acute mental illnesses, some drugs or a state of great agitation (in the face of a fire, for example) can totally or partially deprive a person of psychological freedom.

Moral freedom is the freedom enjoyed by a person who is not enslaved by evil passions, vices or sin. Understood in this sense, freedom is not so much a natural property of the person as a conquest, the result of education, of the moral virtues possessed and of God's grace. Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church often speak of freedom in this sense, saying that Christ sets us free.

3. Essence of freedom

In the three dimensions just explained, freedom is seen as the negation of something. Freedom points to the absence of external impediments to action, of internal

conditioning for choosing, and of moral obstacles to its right exercise. The absence of these impediments, conditions and obstacles is a requirement for a person to be free, but it does not manifest the positive essence of freedom. God is free, and His freedom cannot be the negation of external or internal conditioning which He neither has nor can have. Freedom must consist in something other than the mere absence of determining conditions.

Indeed, the essence of freedom (that which must necessarily exist for there to be freedom) and its proper act is autonomous adherence to the good, that is, love for the good, which is the act par excellence of freedom. Freedom and love are closely united: there is no true love that is not free, nor true freedom that is not exercised as love towards something or someone. The freedom of God, of Christ and of mankind is expressed

as recognition and love of the good as such, for the sole reason that it is good.

Autonomous adherence to the good, much more than the possibility of choosing between alternatives, expresses the essence of freedom. For a good mother, not loving her child is not a possible alternative, but that does not mean that loving her child is not a free choice. Nor does the sacrifice that this love can entail diminish her freedom. This is how Saint Josemaría puts it: “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.”^[5] —

Sacrifice and dedication to what one loves are an expression of freedom, because they are sacrifice and dedication born of love, and love cannot not be free. In the prayer in the Garden of Olives, Christ was in agony from the weight of human sins and facing his redemptive Passion, but He freely gave his life: “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down freely.”^[6] Moreover, the inclination to evil in us, due to original sin, can make our free adherence to the good more difficult. As Saint Josemaría said, “the opposition between freedom and self-giving is an unmistakable sign that love is hesitant, for in it lies freedom.”^[7] If there were no autonomous adherence to the good that requires sacrifice, if one did not truly love the good that entails sacrifice, then there would be an opposition between freedom and the

self-giving that this good entails. “I insist, and I would like to engrave this deep in your hearts, that freedom and self-giving 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.”^[8] —

4. Freedom in salvation history

Sacred Scripture considers human freedom from the perspective of the history of salvation. Because of the first fall, the freedom that man had received from God was subjected to the bondage of sin, although it was

not completely corrupted.^[9] Saint Paul states clearly, especially in the Letter to the Romans, that the sin introduced into the world as a result of Adam's sin is stronger than the human intellect and will, and even than the law of Moses, which taught what should be done but did not give the strength to always do it. Every human sin is a free act, otherwise it would not be a sin. But the strength of sin is seen in the fact that, in the long run, without Christ's grace we will not always be able to avoid sin, because our intellect is darkened and our will weakened. By his glorious Cross, foretold and prepared for in the Old Testament, "Christ obtained salvation for all men. He rescued them from the sin that held them in bondage."^[10] Through Christ's grace, it is possible to avoid sin, as is seen not only in the lives of canonised saints, but also in the lives of so many Christians who live in grace and avoid serious sins and even

almost always deliberate venial sins. By cooperating with the grace that God gives through Christ, we can enjoy full freedom in the moral sense: “For freedom Christ has set us free.”^[11] —

The possibility of sinning did not cause God to give up creating us free. Our need to be free in order to be happy leads God to take human freedom seriously and the consequences that our free acts have in time.^[12] The way in which Redemption has been accomplished through Christ’s blood^[13] shows how God values and respects human freedom. Our freedom is true freedom; its exercise has great value, positive or negative, and entails a great responsibility.

5. Freedom and the moral good

As has been said, freedom is directed towards the moral good. Attaining this good makes the human person happy. To help recognise and adhere to this good, we have the assistance of the moral law; this helps us to discern what is good and what is bad according to God's plans, which are always good. Human laws also lead us to the good when they are in harmony with the moral law.

Nevertheless, some people view the law as restricting their freedom, as though freedom begins where the law ends and vice versa.

The reality is that free behaviour is regulated by each person according to their knowledge of good and evil: they freely do what they know to be good and freely avoid what they see as evil. The moral law is like a light to

facilitate the choice of what is good and to avoid what is evil.

This is why it is sin, not freedom, that is opposed to the moral law. The law certainly shows the need to correct the desires for sinful actions that a person may experience: desires for revenge, violence, stealing, etc. But this moral indication does not oppose freedom, which always aims at the person's free adherence to the good; nor does it imply a coercion of freedom, which always preserves the sad possibility of sinning. "When we breathe this air of freedom we see clearly that evil is an enslavement, not a liberation ... 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."^[14] —

A separate question is the fact that human laws and regulations, because of the generality and conciseness of the terms in which they are expressed, may not in some particular case be a faithful indicator of what a given person ought to do. A person with a well-formed conscience knows that in those particular cases they must do what they know with certainty to be good.
[15] But it is never right to perform intrinsically evil actions, i.e. actions forbidden by the negative precepts of the natural moral law or the divine-positive law (adultery, deliberate murder, etc.).^[16]

As has been said above, we can misuse our freedom, because both our knowledge and will are fallible. Sometimes the moral conscience errs, and considers as good what is in fact evil, or as evil what is in fact not evil. Therefore the right use of freedom and acting according to

one's conscience are not always the same thing, because of the possible error of one's conscience. Hence the importance of forming it well, so that it is possible to avoid the errors of judgement which are often made by people who have little moral formation or, even more so, by those whose convictions are distorted by vice, ignorance or superficiality.

6. Respect for freedom

Hence freedom is a great gift of God, which carries with it an enormous personal responsibility. Moreover, human, civil and ecclesiastical authorities must not limit it beyond what is required by justice and by the clear imperatives of the common good of civil and ecclesiastical society. As Saint Josemaría wrote: “We have to love freedom. Avoid an abuse that seems to be spreading in our times (it is evident and continues to manifest itself in countries

throughout the world). That is, the desire, contrary to the human person's lawful independence, to force everyone to form a single group in what is open to opinion, to create dogmas out of temporal viewpoints. And then to defend this false criterion with efforts and propaganda of a scandalous nature, aimed at those who have the nobility not to submit... We must defend freedom. The freedom of the members, but forming one Mystical Body with Christ, who is the Head, and with his Vicar on earth.”^[17]

All interpersonal relationships need to be governed by respect for freedom and the capacity to understand different points of view. And this same style needs to be the style of a Christian's apostolate. “We love, first of all, the freedom of those we are trying to help come closer to our Lord, in the apostolate of friendship and trust which Saint

Josemaria invites us to carry out by our witness and word . . . True friendship entails sincere mutual affection, which is the true protection of the reciprocal freedom and intimacy that exists between friends.”^[18] —

Respect for other people’s freedom does not mean thinking that everything they freely do is good. The right exercise of freedom requires knowledge of what is good for each person. Reminding or teaching others what is truly good is not an attack on their freedom. A free person who sets forth the truth to another equally free person, explaining the reasons for it, is always doing something good. What can never be done is to impose the truth by physical or psychological violence. Only legitimate authority can use coercion in the cases and in the ways provided for by just laws.

Basic bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church,
1730-1748.

Saint Josemaría, homily *Freedom, a Gift from God*, in *Friends of God*,
23-38.

Recommended reading

Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter,
January 9, 2018.

^[1] Sir 15:14-18. See also Deut 30:15-19.

^[2] *Gaudium et spes*, 17; cf. Catechism,
1731.

^[3] *Gaudium et spes*, 17.

^[4] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 24.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 30.

^[6] Jn 10:17-18.

^[7] Saint Josemaría, June 1972, quoted by Don Javier, Letter 14 February 1997, 15.

^[8] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, 31.

^[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1739-1740.

^[10] *Ibid*, 1741.

^[11] Gal 5:1; cf. *Catechism*, 1742.

^[12] As cited above, “Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him” (Sir 15:18).

^[13] Cf. Eph 1:7-8.

^[14] Saint Josemaría, “Freedom, a Gift of God,” in *Friends of God*, 37.

^[15] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 96, a. 6 and II-II, q. 120.

^[16] Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, 76, 80, 81 and 82.

^[17] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 9 January 1932*, 1-2, in Josemaría Escrivá, *Collected Letters*, Volume I, Scepter, London 2022.

^[18] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter 9 January 2018, 14.