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What is Real Freedom?

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What is true freedom for human beings? Where and how do we find it? Does it consist in abandoning the “constraints” of religious and social principles and embracing a radically autonomous existence? Or does such setting aside of our obligations towards God and our neighbor diminish the value and dignity of our human life? Does real freedom flourish in loving, trusting relationships with others – above all with God?

Either Freedom or God?

From the seventeenth century through to the start of the twenty-first century, many writers encouraged the idea that God limits human freedom. Typically they understood freedom as choice – a choice between constraints imposed by God and the authentic autonomy of free human beings. This meant seeing God as competing with human beings for the control of their lives. The choice then became either God or freedom.

Many factors have played their part in encouraging such a view of human freedom. First, dramatic changes have taken place in homes. In the past, innumerable mothers and fathers succeeded in making families effective schools of affection and loyalty, places in which children could trust that their true interests were being promoted by their parents and the rules of the home. Nowadays in many parts of the world, the unparalleled influence of the family (especially as an authentic nursery of mature freedom) has gone. Dysfunctional families, broken families, and single-parent homes do not generally provide a healthy and effective environment for learning mature freedom and its exercise. Children who grow up in such settings find it much

harder to trust God and appreciate that the divine commands serve their highest good. If authority is eroded at home, why believe that our heavenly Father constantly cares for our true interests with infinite love and power? Children who emerge from broken or desperately imperfect homes are pre-set to see life as fighting for themselves and their own individual interests.

Second, the widespread decline of local communities and of local parishes (with their atmosphere of mutual support and trust) has brought the loss of social roots. Perhaps the most revolutionary change in the twentieth-century world was the shift around the globe from village life to urban life. Our huge cities often leave millions of people in great isolation, as they struggle for survival in situations of terrible need and fierce competitiveness. Relationships can be limited and guided by the principle, "I will look after your interests if you look after mine." The dis-values of the autonomous self can quietly reign supreme.

Wherever they live, millions have suffered a deep erosion in their sense of social and religious belonging. To be sure, there are many new or revitalized parishes. Moreover, "base communities", and other new (or renewed) movements have allowed believers to share together their journey of faith and come to a deeper relationship with God and with one another. The Focolare movement, the Neocatechumenal Way, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the San Egidio Community and numerous other movements have fostered true fellowship and deep religious experience in which genuine Christian and human freedom can grow and mature. Beyond question, there are many signs of hope around the world. Nevertheless, widespread erosion in the ways people can "belong" to one another has made it increasingly harder to "belong" to God with mature and confident freedom.

A third factor which has contributed to the misunderstanding of the nature and exercise of human freedom is philosophical, but none the less important for that. Whatever his intentions, René Descartes (1596-1650) pushed much philosophy in the direction of individualism with his starting point "cogito ergo sum; I think, therefore I am" and its development. Rationality rather than any relationship e.g. "amor ergo sum, I am loved, therefore I am" characterized both the starting point and the development of Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas." The intellectual ground was laid for the birth and spread of the Enlight-

enment, that movement which resisted authority and tradition and defended human rights and (more or less autonomous) freedom.

After the time of Descartes, others like John Locke (1632-1704) and his successors developed the theme of “persons” as conscious, autonomous selves. Nowadays the heirs of Descartes and Locke, in various ways, picture persons as self-sufficient centers of consciousness and free activity, or even as self-absorbed individuals. Those who aspire to live as self-contained subjects and even as isolated individuals (who are “autonomous” almost in the sense of being a law unto themselves) leave us with the question: Does such a policy of shunning serious relationships and faithful interdependence contribute to their lasting human growth and well-being? We will come back to this issue below.

Freedom Through God

The prophets and other spiritual leaders of the ancient Israelites would have been astonished to be presented with the alternative “God or freedom.” Two stirring and ancient songs of praise celebrated the deliverance of the people which God had effected in bringing them out of Egypt and through the waters (Exod 15: 1-21). The author(s) of these songs used the ancient Near Eastern metaphor of the Divine Warrior to portray God’s saving action on behalf of Israel. God overcame the hostile powers to set his chosen people free. For them it was a matter of God and freedom.

For those who worship during Holy Week and at Easter, the liturgy is at its most powerful when the Paschal Candle is lit and the deacon or priest sings the “Exultet” or Easter Proclamation. Brilliantly evoking the story of the original liberation of the Jewish people from the slavery of Egypt, the “Exultet” praises Christ for the victory he has won through his death and resurrection. “Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor, radiant in the brightness of your King! Christ has conquered!” Then, using phrases which echo traditional language about the descent to the dead or “the harrowing of hell,” the “Exultet” proclaims: “This is the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.” From the start of Christianity, believers

have interpreted the message of the resurrection in the light of the original exodus from Egypt – as a deliverance coming through victorious combat over evil. God delivers us from slavery and brings our freedom, rather than taking it away.

In the exodus story, the Israelites reach Mount Sinai where they encounter God in a dramatic scenario of thunder, lightning, smoke and blasts of trumpets. Through the mediation of Moses they receive the Ten Commandments, the epitome of duties towards God and neighbor (Exod 19: 16 – 20: 17). These commandments begin by warning against idolizing false gods. Thousands of years later these gods have not disappeared. They have taken other forms which can enslave and even dominate their worshipers. We repeatedly see how such idols as the drive for possessions, success and power can take over the lives of people and become the shrine at which they worship. These idols take the place of God; it is all too easy to submit to such “gods” which rob us of our freedom and keep us in permanent slavery.

Or else a bondage to sin, which masquerades as “freedom,” may show up as “inner demons,” various compulsions and addictions that take over the lives of innumerable persons. Locked into patterns of destructive behavior, they can become helplessly dependent on alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity. Such compulsions override what reason and rational decisions propose. As if possessed by these cravings, people can seem helpless in the face of unmanageable forces, lose control of their existence and suffer the tragic results of their compulsive and addictive behavior. More victims than perpetrators of evil, they see their lives spiraling out of control and feel themselves powerless to break the destructive patterns that engulf and enslave them. Such inner demons can take the form of haunting fears or a consuming bitterness that broods over the past. Injuries and failures that we have suffered can fill our minds. Or else the prospect of coming death can turn into a horrifying threat that dominates our waking hours. We can become obsessively concerned with security and maintaining at all costs our good health.

Moses is represented as warning the Israelites against the temptation of self-sufficiency (Deut 8: 1-20). He presents them with the radical choice between life coming through obedience to God or death coming through bondage to evil and sin – the

blessing of obedience and the curse of disobedience (Deut 11: 26-28). In short, the commandments are for our “well-being” (Deut 10: 13), not for our diminishment and loss.

Grace and Freedom

The “well-being” or flourishing of human beings who live in loving obedience to God depends on the interior empowering of divine grace to make it possible. Some major prophets in the Old Testament already promised that the covenant would be inscribed on the hearts of the people (Jer 31: 31-34), or that a new heart would be created by God’s spirit (Ezek 36: 26-27). The full flowering of the doctrine of such divine indwelling and action came only in the light of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Grace has been understood as the gratuitous self-communication of the tripersonal God, which elevates human beings and makes possible their new loving relationship with God and a share of the divine life. An adequate Christian view of grace rules out any sense of God competing with human beings for the control of their lives.

Apropos of divine grace and human freedom, it is simply wrong to take them as opposed or in inverse proportion, as if “more” grace entailed less freedom. The truth is quite the opposite. Free self-determination grows in direct proportion with nearness and graced union with God. Karl Rahner (d. 1984), perhaps the most distinguished theologian of the twentieth century, firmly insisted on this direct proportion¹. Centuries earlier in a sonnet “Batter my heart” a great poet, John Donne (d. 1631), prayed for deliverance. He recognized that ideally human beings should freely choose to give themselves totally to the tripersonal God who has created them and blessed them with freedom. Donne knew, however, his own weakness; he could too easily submit himself to sin and Satan. He would not remain truly free unless God kept him “enthralled” or enslaved in the divine service. The teaching of St Paul about the two slaveries stood behind this language. Salvation brings freedom from sin and a new “slavery” to God; those who have been “slaves to

¹ See “Grace and Freedom,” in K. Rahner et al. (eds.), *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 2 (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), pp. 424-27.

sin” are liberated and become “slaves of righteousness” (Rom 6: 15-25).

St Paul himself exhibited the truth of the claim that grace and real freedom grow together.

When Christ made Paul “his own” (Phil 3: 12), the Apostle lost nothing of his vivid, strong personality. Paul’s letters, and in a special way the Letter to the Philippians, reveal his exceptional courage and joy in the face of persecution and the threat of death, as well as his happy and close relationship with the community of Philippi, the first church he established on European soil. In our day, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John XXIII and other shining examples of Christian life also illustrate how closeness to God through grace, so far from diminishing their personalities, provided a situation that favored their growth in human excellence.

The supreme example of this principle (more grace, more human flourishing) was Jesus of Nazareth himself. In his case, the personal assumption of a complete human nature by the second person of the Trinity constituted a unique divine self-communication, the closest possible union between God and a human being. The created humanity through which Christ lived out his loving union with the Father was supernaturally graced by the Holy Spirit to perfect his human activity, bring it to participate in the divine life, and enhance its freedom in line with his unique nearness to God.

The Gospels show us how richly fascinating Jesus was for the thousands of people who met him during his earthly ministry. If ever anyone deserved to be called a “magnetic personality,” he did. There was no hint that his divine identity and his graced union with the God whom he called “Abba” worked at the expense of his human freedom and his human development. In a word, his being divine was not in competition with his being human. Quite the opposite; his divinity uniquely enhanced his human life and freedom.

Authentic Personhood

In his earthly story Jesus transposed to the human level his eternal relationship with the Father through the Holy Spirit. The unique example of Jesus demonstrates supremely how authen-

tic personhood and its exercise do not flourish in an existence centered on self.

True personhood is given and received within relationships. To be a person is to be an interpersonal subject, sharing love and giving oneself in love. True personal individuality comes by existing in and for other persons. We need each other in order to be ourselves. Being a person does not precede interpersonal relationships, as if we were first persons and only then in relationship. A newborn baby (and even more an unborn baby) never exists without being related to its mother, father, and others.

Recently various groups and individuals celebrated the centenary of the birth of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80). Famously (or notoriously?) he claimed that other people are “hell.” Surely the truth is the opposite? Attempts to be a person by myself and simply for myself lead to a terrible form of “nothingness” – the hell of myself alone, cut off from others, and unable (or unwilling) to love anyone else.

The Blessed Trinity sets the standard for our personal freedom, understood as going beyond oneself in love. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit live together in an infinite ecstasy of love, a communion of life in which their unity is not maintained at the expense of their personal distinction. Their uniquely close relationship means a supremely intense and blissful mutual presence, a reciprocal participation in each other that does not, however, entail the three persons being swallowed up by each other or disappearing into each other.

The Trinity’s infinitely happy communion of love presents itself as the ultimate example and goal of all our freely accepted relations-in-communion. In a world where sharing and community have often tragically broken down, the loving union between Father, Son and Holy Spirit invites us to live in communion with each other and with our God. The divine life is one of total self-giving and unconditional sharing. Since we are made in the divine image and likeness (Gen 1: 26), we are invited to exist in a free communion and loving solidarity with each other and with the divine persons. Wherever human beings struggle to preserve the unity of families and communities and the unity between societies and nations and do so in a way that does not suppress personal distinction, they are in fact transcribing the Trinity’s life into their moral commitment.

Here we reach the final answer to our opening question. Real freedom is found in love and in all trusting relationships

Holy Trinity

that image forth the God from whom we came and to whom we will return. The inner life of the Holy Trinity provides the unparalleled pattern and standard of what it is to be loving and what it is to be free.

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