

THE CHILDREN OF GOD AND THEIR LIBERTY IN THE CHURCH*

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As those who have already heard me know, and those who will hear me today will easily discover, I am not a theologian. I am a Christian who tries to think and to understand his faith. My intention, therefore, is not to give a theological lecture, but to provide you with a background of understanding concerning the meaning of "freedom", that of the expression "the Sons of God" and the meaning of the expression "in the Holy Spirit".

We live in a world that is fallen and spoiled, in which all our knowledge of God, our living and our thinking are, therefore, distorted. It is not strange, therefore, that notions of particular importance like that of freedom should be largely and widely misunderstood and misrepresented. When we ask what freedom means, we almost always get the answer that freedom is the capacity which a person has to make choices unhindered. This freedom of uncertainty, this freedom of indetermination, which was already analyzed and castigated by Descartes, and later by Gabriel Marcel, is a sign of our fallen

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state. To be able to hesitate between God and the power of darkness, between life and death, between God and the power of darkness, between life and death, between good and evil; not to be able to make unerringly a choice for what is life, what is God, what is good, is already a sign of a deep sickness of all our fallen being.

In a passage of the book of the Prophet Isaiah, which is read on the Eve of the Feast of the Nativity —of the Feast of Christmas— in the version which is taken from the Greek, the so-called Septuagint version, we read that the child who is to be the Saviour of the world will, before he can distinguish good from evil, have chosen good. This is the state of a completely healthy, normal, being that cannot err in choosing life, the good and God, against death, destruction and evil. Let us, therefore, leaving aside this false liberty of choice, this freedom of self-determination conditioned by our fall, reflect on the meaning of the words that signify the freedom of the creature as posited by God and as understood through the ages by the great saints and teachers of the Church. I should like to give a short sketch of the meaning of three words which, in different languages, convey the notion of freedom. The first is the Latin word, "*Libertas*", which gives us the French and the Spanish and the Italian derivatives. The second word is "*freedom*" (*Freiheit*) and the corresponding words of the Germanic languages. And, lastly, the Russian word "*svoboda*", signifying the same thing.

We have come through Revolutions, beginning with the French Revolution of 1789 and through the industrial and social revolutions of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. We think of liberty in terms of social, political and civic liberties and we define them, rightly so when we speak on those levels, as the freedom given to men, in their relation to other men, to live as fully as possible their whole life without oppression, without discrimination, without persecution for what they believe to be right, provided they, in truth, do not impinge on other men—on their dignity, their honour, their living conditions and on their lives. And yet, the Latin word, *libertas* has a very definite significance in Roman law. The *libertas* is the condition which a child, born free, in a free household, enjoys with regard to his family and to the social group to which the family itself belongs. But the condition of a child

born free, or of a man in his free estate, is given at the outset as a present of fortune —or of Providence— that must be conquered and possessed. It cannot endure unless the person born free acquires the ability to remain free. This situation of freedom results in social, human relationships which are apparently, seemingly paradoxical. The education of a man called to freedom is a strenuous, ruthless discipline that must lead him to complete mastery of self, so that he cannot be subdued either by fear or greed or hatred, either by external coercion or by his passions that would have the upper hand upon him.

Though it may seem strange to many who have not given sufficient thought to it, the corollary of the call to perfect human freedom —freedom before men, freedom before God, freedom before ones self— stands in the words: discipline, obedience, power and authority. On this I wish to dwell for a few moments. These words: discipline, obedience and authority, have also acquired, in our distorted and fallen world, distorted meanings. The word, discipline, does not denote what the army or the totalitarians movements would call “drilling in a man, making him a mechanic”. The word discipline defines that state of the discipline with regard to his guide and to his master. At the root of that relationship which is defined as discipline there is first of all the discovery and the choice of a guide, a teacher, a master. Then there is an act of trust, of confidence, by which we surrender to him our intellect, our heart, our will, our way of life, in order to be re-cast, re-moulded, redressed and renewed in the image of One greater even than our master; indeed, in the image of One who says He is the only Master and the only Lord. And so, at the very root of the relationship, there is trust. St. Thomas Aquinas says that if we wish to learn we must first of all trust our master. This relationship between the master and the disciple, whether the master is our spiritual father or the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God speaking to us in the Gospel, or the voice of the Holy Spirit resounding in the depths of our conscience, this relationship is one of obedience.

Obedience is confused all too often with submission, submissiveness and subjection. It is conceived as a degradation. The word “obedience” proceeds from the Latin, “*ob audire*” which means “listen”, “listen intently”, “listen with all one’s being”, in order to learn what hitherto was unknown, to deve-

lop beyond the boundries of one's own knowledge and understanding, to widen one's heart and perception, to make one's will supple and vigorous, disentangled from passion, to make one's body capable of responding to the commands of one's mind, of one's heart and of one's will, enlightened and quickened by the power of the Living God.

If I may describe it a little further, it will begin with the admission that the master to whom we have come is greater than ourselves. But also, it begins with the admission that he is like a stainedglass window, conveying to us a light which is beyond him, which is the Light of God. It goes on with the readiness to break in one's self all that makes us incapable of understanding, of perception, of response and of life, according to the way this light will be revealed to us and transmitted to us.

Obedience implies that we are intently listening to the word which conveys us the truth, but also, that we are intent on understanding not only the formal words, but all the rich content of knowledge and of experience which they can convey to us. And beyond the intellectual vision it implies becoming sensitive to the total experience of the heart and to the total experience of life which is being conveyed to us. In this sense we can say with the Gospel, the Holy Scriptures, that Chris was perfectly obedient to the Father. We was not a slave but a son. He listened to the word unspoken and spoken. Being the Word Himself, He saw His Father at work, and He performed the deeds of God in history. He was perfectly obedient because all there was in the Father became an articulated, expressed reality in the Son and through the Son.

On the part of the disciple, therefore, obedience means perfect openness, transparency, surrender and flexibility. On the part of the master, it may be stern ruthlessness, a teaching through actio and through words, that breaks the self-will of the disciple, that disengages him from hi self, which makes him capale of being more than he actually is, yet still less than what he is called to be, because everyone is call to grow to the full stature of Christ. This may imply, and indeed it does, that we must renounce the anarchical, false freedom of our mind, of the passionate responses of our emotions and heart, of the wavering of our will, of the impulses of our flesh. It

implies that we will be commanded to do things which we do not yet understand, because it is only through the doing that we can acquire the understanding that will make us do the same thing from within. Christ has said, "If a man love me, he will fulfil my Commandments". It is not said that he will have theological vision, that he will have a burning heart or any kind of mystical experience, but that life begins in doing. And this doing, whether it is commanded us by Christ in the Gospel, whether we are prompted towards it by the Holy Spirit of God within us, whether it is conveyed to us by a human agency, will always be to the Old Adama, to the still uncomprehending man, absurdity and folly, indeed, the folly of the Cross. It is dying in order to live, which is the ultimate, incomprehensible absurdity for the unbeliever.

Obedience becomes healing when it comes to the point of accepting what the Old Man in me rejects as absurd and foolish, because obedience to man, obedience to expressed teaching, must make us capable of acting against ourselves as God wills. It is a training field, not toward the acceptance but also the fulfilment of commands of the Gospel, which are all folly from the point of view of the world, which are wisdom and salvation only for those who receive them in faith. That is, they are the certainty that God is right, against all the evidence of the history of group or individual.

I have already used the word "ruthless", speaking of the master. There is a passage in an early Christian writing, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, in which the Guardian Angel, speaking to the seer, says to him, "Be of good cheer, Hermas, God is merciful. He will not abandon you until he has broken either your heart or your bones". The mercy of God is paradoxical to our love of comfort. And again we touch here one of those ambiguities of our fallen world, which is not to be understood in terms of power but in terms of authority, not in terms of *potestas*, but in terms of *auctoritas*. I am using these words which are Latin because they have acquired a technical meaning in many of our Church discussions. *Potestas* means that one has the possibility to compel. *Auctoritas* means that one has words of truth that carry conviction. *Potestas* means: "I can". *Auctoritas* means that I can add a grain on the right side of the scales and tip the scales. *Auctoritas* comes from *augeo*, meaning "I add" a grain which is decisive. And this is why

the relationship between a spiritual father and his spiritual children and all ---without exception--- all the relationships of God with His creatures and between the two, all relationships between the members of the hierarchically-built Church, upwards and downwards, cannot be relationships of power, but only relationships of authority.

Conviction is that which makes us accept the truth of the Gospel, not the intrusion of a divine overlord. "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the way". But this implies a relationship of mutual love in which the guide so loves as to be prepared to pour himself out to him who is being guided. And the one who is guided is so perfectly open and surrendered that he can receive whatever is given him from God. The first is made very clear in the vision of Christ given in Philippians, the Son of God who divests Himself of all divine glory to become one of us. And the opposite is made clear in the Christian notion of humility which I wish to define in just a few words. Usually humility is described almost in terms of a caricature. But "humility" comes from the Latin word, *humus*, the fertile ground. The image is clear. The ground is always there, always forgotten, always taken for granted, and, yet, never failing us. The ground is open to man, to God and to the beasts. The ground is capable of receiving the rain, the sunshine, the seed and the refuse which we cast on it. It receives the refuse, makes it its own and grows rich by it. It receives the seed and clothes it with new life. It is renewed by rain and by sunshine, and it bears fruit. This is the meaning of humility and the ultimate attitude of a disciple in front of a master who loves him. And the love of a master, however ruthless, however stern it may appear, is an act of love that gives eternal life. If you want a quotation, here is one from Gabriel Marcel, "To tell a man, 'I love you', is tantamount to telling him, 'You will never die'".

This leads me to a very short remark on the word "freedom" (*Freiheit*). Both the English and the German proceed from the Sanskrit word *proya* which in its active verbal form means "to love", in its passive form "to be loved" and, as a noun, "the beloved". One who is free is one who is loved and loves. He is the beloved one of him who loves. Remember all the passages of the Old and New Testaments concerning the love of God for his creatures and you will understand what

the word freedom means. It is a relationship between God and those whom He has created, a love so perfect, so definitive, that nothing ever was able either to darken or suppress it—a love that began in the joy of creation, culminated in the Sacrifice of the Cross and will lead us into that eternal life which nothing can take away from us. It is only then, only within this mystery of *libertas*, of liberty of discipleship, of obedience, of authority, of freedom understood in its basic meaning that we can truly become ourselves. And this is the meaning of the Russian word *svoboda* which is made of two roots which mean “to be/self”. That can be achieved only in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

Only by becoming one with Christ can we transcend the metaphorical meaning of being the children of God, a meaning devoid of real sonship. It is only in the only-begotten Son, by becoming one with Him, through faith, through Baptism, by the Power of God, that we truly become the children, the sons of the Living God. And to use the extraordinarily daring expression of St. Irenaeus of Lyon, “In the only-begotten Son we are called to be the only-begotten Son, when the *totus Christus*, the total Christ, will be revealed at the end of time”. We are called not only to become “sons” (in the plural) but in oneness with Him and between ourselves to become the only-begotten Son of God, the *totus Christus* fully revealed.

A last word: this is effected in us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Given to the whole Church, as seen in John 20, it holds it together, it quickens it, it makes it gradually to grow into that *totus Christus* which we are all called to become. But also this indwelling fulfils each of us, as seen in Acts 2, in his uniqueness, makes each of us unrepeatably himself, beyond compare, unique. This Spirit is the Spirit of Sonship. This is the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Love.

In the world in which we live, we must ever remember that we are grafted onto the whole Christ, not only onto His Resurrection, His Ascension and His glorious Sitting on the Right Hand of the Father. We are also grafted onto the Christ of history. And the same Spirit who led Our Lord after His Baptism on the banks of the Jordan into the wilderness to fast and to be tempted and to conquer, the same Spirit who led him into the Garden of Gethsemane to face the vicarious death

which he had to endure in order to save men, the same Spirit who is a mysterious way abandoned Him when He was on the Cross and cried the ultimate cry of the abandoned, derelict, godless mankind, "My God, my God, why didst thou forsake me?", the same Spirit has taken hold of us and is leading us step by step if we accept Christ as the path, Christ as the way, into the wilderness to face temptation. He leads us into the world of men, to face love, truth, faith where men have lost faith in themselves, hope when hope is dying, and He makes us partake of the dread mysteries of the Mount of Olives and the Cross, the ultimate dereliction of Him Who accepted the loss not only of His human life but even of God in order to save man.

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