



The Christian sense of freedom

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Freedom is a relevant dimension of an individual's dignity, who justly, values and defends it, even at risk of their own life. "Freedom is priceless; it is worth dying for" (Xenophon). "True freedom is an eminent sign of image of God in man" (*Gaudium et Spes* 17). "Men never have such a keen sense of their freedom as today (Ib. 45, cf. *Humane Dignitatis*, 1). " At the beginning God created man and left him in the power of his own free will" (Eclo Keith. 15, 14). Man has the natural ability to choose how to conduct himself without depending on others, to decide to do this or that, to act in one way or another. It is true that in the exercise of free choice he must be released from internal and external threats that lurk against his freedom. Man has the daily mission of doing what is necessary to consolidate his freedom; I know what you are. Live up to your dignity. Because he is free, he is responsible before God, before himself and before others for his actions. God has created free man and respects his freedom; He wants to be served not by slaves but by free people. God himself has exposed himself to the use of man's freedom, which can distrust him and disobey him. (see Gen 3, 1 ss, 4, 7, Ez 18).

We assume in what I will say later the free will, which belongs to the human being, male and female, created by God in his image and likeness (Gen. 1, 27). Because of his condition of image of God, man is called to dominate over all the creatures under God, his Creator. Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI said in Santiago de Compostela: "It is a tragedy that in Europe, especially in the nineteenth century, the conviction that God is the antagonist of man and the



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*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

enemy of his freedom was affirmed and spread." Modern atheism claims that the free man is the end and sole demiurge of his history, excluding the recognition of God as the author and the end of all things (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 20).

1.- Freedom and the prodigal Son

From the above it is understood that the meaning of freedom is radically different if it is focused on the margin of God, or if it has the sacred mystery on which man is based and to which he refers. We, as the title of the conference indicates, treat the meaning of Christian freedom, that is, freedom considered in the light of the Word of God and received in communion with Jesus Christ our liberator. We do not stop at religious freedom or socio-political freedom.

The framework in which we develop the meaning of Christian freedom is the parable of the "prodigal son", named after the Vulgate; or of the "lost son", as the same evangelical text says (cf Lk 15, 24-32); or better yet, the parable of the "Good Father" or the "love of the Father" (J. Jeremias); the father occupies the central position and is the real protagonist who waits and welcomes the lost son, and goes out and tries to persuade the eldest son to enter the joyful celebration for the return of his brother. He is the father of the two; he wants to approach fraternally.

It is the masterpiece of all the parables of Jesus. It describes the three characters with strong and deeply human traits. With this parable and the two preceding ones, Jesus justifies the announcement of the Good News to the excluded in front of their accusers. It is the Gospel of those who are despised by the Scribes and Pharisees (cf Lk 15, 1-2). The behavior of the father, who never tires of waiting, who rejoices with the return of the lost son, and restores him in



the filial condition, supports the behavior of Jesus, who welcomes sinners and eats with them. The older brother found the forgiveness of the prodigal, who had squandered his inheritance and the magnificence of the party excessive. He thought he was irreproachable, he confronted his father and told him that he had not given him a kid to eat with his friends. He lived in the Father's house as a stranger and as a servant!

The contrast between the behavior of the two brothers, who reflect both Scribes and Pharisees on one side, and publicans and sinners on the other; and the kindness of the father who represents Jesus, shows the goodness of the Gospel. God is like that, He acts like that. God is unlimited mercy that overflows the reasonable calculations of the lost son, and the dutiful son. The Gospel announced, lived and personalized by Jesus is outlined in these contrasts. Not only in this beautiful parable but also in other evangelical places; the confrontation of two types of characters manifests the originality of the Gospel, which is Jesus in person. The following passages show this contrast: The parable of the two debtors (see Lk 7, 41-42, Mt 18, 21-35), that of the Pharisee and the publican (cf Lk 18, 9-14) , the parable of the two sons (cf Mt 21, 28-31), the discourse of the Beatitudes and warnings (cf Lk 6, 20-26), the final judgment (cf Mt 25, 31- 46).

The message of Jesus is an announcement of salvation, on the other hand, it is a warning to those who refuse to receive Him, a warning to all. The Gospel calls the person to the conversion and warning them of the risk of eternal perishes. "The fundamental principle of God's relationship with the sinner is that God loves the sinner even in his sinful situation, even *before* of the conversion; what really makes conversion possible, is that Divine Love" (T. W. Manson And



Equipes Notre-Dame

**Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale**

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

Joseph A. Fitz Myer). God has taken the initiative and loved us first (cf. 1 Jn. 4, 9-10. 16). The conversion of a person is possible by the grace of the Gospel; individuals are also warned about the risk of doom, if they resist seeing with His eyes, to listen with His ears, and to understand with His Heart (cf. Mt. 13, 10-15). Only humbles understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God (cf. Lc. 10, 21-23). "The most important thing is to see with the heart". (*The Little Prince*).

The sense of freedom, according to according to the cycle of conferences of this Marriage Encounter, is to establish a connection with a verse in the parable of the Lost Son: "Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me " (Lc. 15, 12). The little boy makes the decision to flee from the paternal house. He wants to embark on a new venture; he is tired of life in the family. Freely orients his life by the ways of doom. We are free, but any concrete choice is not appropriate, since we can choose between life and death, blessing and curse (see Gen 2, 15-17, Deut 11, 26-28). Freedom can achieve the person if he chooses the good or spoil the person if he chooses evil. The exercise of freedom, truth and good should not be separated. The man with his choice does not determine what is good or bad, since the freedom of man supposes the will of God, and the order of creation.

It is not within the intention of the parable to raise the legal question of whether the son can demand from the father the part of his inheritance, and whether the father must agree to give it to him. Understanding the meaning of the parable does not necessarily require the collaboration of law. In that situation there were two ways of transferring the goods from father to son: By testament or by living donation (cf. Deut. 21, 17) (J. Jeremiah).



Without wanting to generalize the parable of the good Father and and lost son, or to blur the singularity of the Gospel of Jesus, we can discover in it basic and very eloquent aspects of human life and of the family, such as freedom and responsibility, adventure and deviation, alienation and depersonalization, nostalgia and return, the request for forgiveness and reconciliation, the pain of separation and the joy of reunion. The parable is a magnificent defense of the salvific message of Jesus; and contains very fine touches of human psychology in the characterization of the three characters. It clearly shows us a merciful God, a wretched man and a miserable man; it also shows us a mighty God, a degraded person and a ruthless man.

How many times under the name of freedom lies an oppressive slavery! Freedom is a gift, a path and a daily conquest; being free involves the liberation of many ties, and the disposition of one's own domain and the service of others. Capricious and arbitrary freedom is really a lack of freedom.

Human freedom integrates different perspectives and ingredients. It is first basic training of the human being, for their fulfillment as a person; human freedom is also historical, because through free actions it is purified, and strengthened. If individualism is refractory to sociality, person and community enrich each other. Freedom qualifies the unique and unrepeatable person, who can never be diluted in his selfishness and self-absorption, nor in the exteriority of the environment and technical mastery. Although the freedom of man is always conditioned and limited freedom by being a creature, nevertheless, the free person is not a means to something else; The inalienable dignity of the person is inseparable from the freedom that he cannot and should not abdicate.



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

In Christianity, freedom has new dimensions; because it is freedom granted by God to man created in his image, it is always a freedom, which in obedience to God does not deny itself but affirms itself; it is a hurt freedom, not nullified by sin; it is a freedom rescued by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Christian freedom is a freedom that man receives as a gift from the Lord. Together with God, his freedom can flourish in love. "Only from love / genuine freedom, / only from faith / they are growing wings" (liturgical hymn). The man who loves God is identified by love with the will of God and his commandments (Max Müller).

2.- Freedom of sin, of law and of death

Our vocation, way and dignity are to be free. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (GAL. 5, 1). " You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (GAL. 5, 13-14). The Jesus Christ' work, dead in Cross and risen, freeing man from the sin, from law and from death. Salvation means liberation, redemption, reconciliation and a new life. Israel who was liberated from the slavery of Egypt, who understood the return of Babylon's captivity as a new exodus, waited for the Messiah as the liberator promised by God.

The Mission of Jesus is summarized in the words of the prophet Isaiah (61, 1-2): " The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

our God, to comfort all who mourn, "(Lk. 4, 18-19). Giving thanks to the Lord, Paul will sing: " For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1, 13-14). Jesus Christ is the "true lamb who took away the sin from the world, dying destroyed our death, and resurrecting restored our life" (Paschal preface). With the cross lifted, in the middle of the Christian assembly, we can sing: Because of the tree of paradise we are slaves, because of the tree of the cross we are free ("*Per lignum servi, per te, Lignum, Liberi*"). These are words of a hymn at the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

"Freedom in the New Testament is understood as the freedom of sin (Rom. 6, 18-23; Jn. 8, 31-36), of the Law (Rom. 7, 3 S.; 8, 2; Gal. 2, 4; 4, 21-31; 5, 1. 13) and death (Rom. 6, 21 S; 8, 21)" (H. Schlier). The freedom that Christ gives us, announced by proclamation of the Gospel, re-affirmed by the Holy Spirit, and received through faith and baptism, frees us from those three powers that tend to enslave us: Sin, law and death. The three powers are linked together and exercise their dominance by oppressing. Certainly, a careful anthropological explanation is necessary to be properly understood in our Personal existence and in our culture. The same letters from Paul, who widely expose sin, law and death, both in the enslavement of man and in the liberation performed by Christ, require a careful reading. The richness of content and the complexity in their understanding go together. Here we can only outline a few brief considerations.

The liberation of the law is not synonymous with antinomianism¹ or open to caprice, it is not support of a disembodied subjectivism or cession to the inclination of the moment (cf. Rom. 3, 8; 6, 1.15). Freedom given by Jesus Christ

¹ Note to translators: ANTINOMISMO is the belief that Christians are liberated from observing the moral laws, when the grace of God is active.



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

is not a license to sin or debauchery (cf. Gal. 5, 13; 1 Ped. 2, 16; 2 Ped. 2, 19; Judas 4). The Christian is free and has been liberated by Christ; he is not a libertine who defends and lives without law. According to what we have read in the letter to the Galatians, we can understand the meaning of the liberation of the law, in connection with love. In love is incorporated and assumed the intent of the law, which tends to summarize the will of God. The one who loves God and his brother meets the law (cf. Mc. 12, 28-34). "Who does not Love is Captive/ and oblivious to freedom. " "You were the freedom / Of our great Captivity "(St. Teresa of Jesus, *Poetry* 18). For example, the husband who loves his spouse does not need to review the list of his marital obligations daily; we can even say that it is not the most convenient in marriage, if they must resort to defending their rights before a judge. Love lies at the root of the dynamism of law enforcement. The more authentic the love, the better the marriage obligations are kept; the more vivid the spirit, the more perfectly the letter of the law is fulfilled. In this sense we can understand that saying: "*Dilige et quod vis fac*" ("Love and do what you want"). Love does not lead to harm or to betray the spouse but to love dearly and give up life for him. Therefore, we can say that Freedom culminates in love and It makes us servants of others (cf. 1 Cor. 9, 1-19; 10, 23 ff.).

Christian freedom, action of the spirit, law of Christ, Gospel, Baptism Love... are realities that in their intimate connection, help us to understand liberation in all its scope. To fulfill the Divine law with its prescriptions and prohibitions, the Christian follows the "Law of Christ" (GAL. 6, 2; cf. 1 Cor. 9, 21); or the "Law of Faith" (Rom. 3, 27), which acts for charity (cf. Gal. 5, 6), which is the "Law of the Spirit" (cf. Rom. 8, 2). We must act as those who will be judged by "a Law of Freedom" (Sant. 2, 12). Christians have not received a slave spirit to relapse into fear but a spirit of children of God to live in filial freedom (cf. Rom.



8, 15). "I will give you a new heart, and I will instill a new spirit, and I will give you a heart of flesh. I will instill my spirit, and make you walk according to my precepts and comply my mandates "(Ez. 36, 26-27). Life in freedom runs by walking "according to the Spirit", life in freedom goes on walking "according to the Spirit", which is the new field and as the motor of believing existence, facing life "according to the flesh" which means the fragile human nature as far from God. The two opposite principles--the spirit and the flesh--produce contrary fruits, which manifest if the person is free and walks in freedom or lives in slavery (cf. Gal. 5, 16 SS.).

There are realities that threaten to dominate the person and enslave them. Some are named in the New Testament, others in our time, have acquired a devastating power. We cannot serve God and money (cf. Mt. 6,24), since greed is an idolatry (cf. Col. 3.6); pleasures sometimes exert a despotic domain (cf. gal. 5, 19-21). Today we could allude to drug addictions, and to the game. The more man yields to those powers, the more they will enslave, humiliate, and degrade him. Man is seen as attracted by the good that he would like to do, but evil is imposed on him (cf. Rom. 7,15-25).

For the renewal of the baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil, the priest asks the faithful: "Do you renounce sin to live in the freedom of the children of God?" On that holy night, animated by the Spirit of Jesus, the conqueror of death, the baptized promise solemnly to live as children of light, love and freedom.

Sin pays with death (cf. Rom. 6, 20-23). Separated from God, which is the beginning of life, we are inwardly dead. With a dense expression that includes the oppressive realities from which our Lord Jesus Christ frees us, Paul wrote:



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

"The sting of death is sin, and the force of sin is the law" (Cf. 1 Cor. 15, 56. 5). Death, which inexorably has a prior knowledge of each person, exerts on human life an influence in the form of fear, darkness and oppression. Without integrating death into the existence of man, he walks on a horizon of enslaving limitation and no matter how much he wants to avoid the prospect of death with the somber power it exerts over life; no matter how hard man tries to escape this influx by looking elsewhere or distracting himself, it is impossible the thought of death inevitably imposes itself on him. This has been already clearly perceived in Hellenism: "To become free means first and foremost to be rid of the fear of Death" (H. Schlier), the letter to the Hebrews formulates it in the Christian perspective: "Jesus took part in our flesh and blood, to annihilate by death the Lord of death, i.e., the devil, and to liberate those who, for fear of death, spent their whole lives as slaves (14-15). It is an assertion as profound as it is accurate.

The freedom of the children of God has already broken into the present of the Christian, but we expect his glorious fullness (cf. Rom. 8, 14 ff.). The Holy Spirit daily rescues us from the inclination to the Slavery because "where is the spirit of the Lord, there is Freedom" (2 Cor. 3, 17). The Spirit is at the same time the principle of freedom, love and unity in the life of the Christian, of the family and of the Church, which is the Body of Christ.

3.-Christian Freedom and family

Paul and John are the great masters of Christian freedom in the New Testament; after having stopped in the letters of Paul, let's pick up some fundamental teachings of the evangelist John. In one of the speeches which include polemics and were addressed to the Jews, he asks them about true



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

freedom. "Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in Him: If you remain in my word, you will be truly my disciples; you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free "(John 8, 31-32). The truth that liberates man is the revelation of God by Jesus Christ in His Spirit; it is not enough, as Judaism said: "The Torah is truth and its study liberate man", none the less the liberation that the zealots thought rebelling against Rome through violence. The permanence in the truth heralded by Jesus is the inexhaustible source of freedom. Truth and freedom should not be splitting, as they would destroy each other. Freedom without truth is deceptive; Christian freedom is true, consistent and authentic. Truth, freedom, faith and following Jesus as disciples interact. Freedom is not a hollow formal principle; we can freely choose evil, thereby destroying life; and freely we can choose the true good, realizing in this way life in its authenticity.

Let me briefly recall the concept of freedom and its way of living it in the stoicism, which sometimes had resonances in groups and orientations of Christianity. To be free means that man in the tumult of the world takes refuge in his interior. The keyword is ataraxia, which means living in quiet, controlling the affections, even the fear of death. The Stoics aspire to live with equanimity, imperturbability, "according to nature," appeasing the passions with the force of reason. Freedom will say Epictetus, is "atarasia" or "apazeia". That freedom would be the basis of your happiness.

Then Jesus asserts to the Jews, reaffirming his previous words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave. The slave does not stay in the house forever, the son stays forever. And if the Son makes you free, you will be truly free "(Jn.8, 34-36). Jesus, being the revealer of the Father as an incarnate Son, is also the mediator of authentic freedom. There is a mutual



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

implication: between Son and freedom, son and house-family. Jesus alludes to how Abraham dismissed the slave Hagar and her son (see Gen. 20:10, Gal.4, 30-31). Christians are descendants of Abraham for Sara the free woman and for Isaac, the son of the promise. We are children in the Son, and therefore dwellers in his house. "Christ, as Son, is at the head of the family of God; and that family is us "(Heb 3, 6).

From this connection between son and house, we can look again at the prodigal son who fled from his father's house, abandoning his father and despising family life. He preferred to live far away to live in the house. He chose slavery instead of family. He did not suspect that outside the home there was a lot of loneliness and people lived without the protection of the family.

To the destructive descent of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (cf Mt 5:38) which leads all one-eyed or toothless, Jesus opposes: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who slander you "(Lc.6,27-28). Hatred for hate intensifies the chain of hatred; responding violently strengthens the spiral of violence. On the other hand, the authentically strong person is the one who can break the chain of hatred. If love does not break the dynamism of selfishness and arrogance, we end up being victims of our pride, which does not bend, and our stubbornness reinforced by vengeful passion.

Sometimes we insist on not correcting the false path undertaken. A resentment that oppresses us seizes us; only with the strongest power of love, forgiveness and reconciliation, we can give the arm to twist, leaving our thoughts that are nourished by our torn and destructive interior. The flight of the prodigal



son to a distant country can be reproduced by each of us in our history, and in our own way.

Before finishing it seems to me opportune, in this Encounter of Teams of Our Lady to remember the magnificent Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. I refer to the fourth chapter, which Pope Francis himself considers the heart of the document, entitled "Love in marriage." Love is a very used and often disfigured word. Saint Teresa of Jesus lamented that some realities had stolen her name. It is necessary in our culture to rescue the excellence of this word and its precious content. The chapter applies to the family, to the spouses among themselves with their children, the so-called hymn of charity of 1 Cor. 13. With beautiful and suggestive nuances, it explains the characteristics of Christian love, which finds in Jesus his perfect incarnation and must illuminate the existence of his disciples. Love is the synthesis, the concentration, the strength and the "soul" of the commandments of the Law of God. "Every law reaches its fullness in the precept you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (see Gal.5,14). This must be done in every marriage; the spouses have in the love of Jesus Christ a mirror to contemplate the greatness and beauty of their love. The exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* is very rich in teachings, suggestions and exhortations. Love is reciprocal, mutual acceptance and respect, patience and service, humility and forgiveness. "Clothe yourselves with endearing compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. Bear with each other and forgive when one has complaints against the other. The Lord has forgiven you, do the same. And above all this, love, is the link of the perfect unity" (Col. 3, 12-14; cf. Ef. 4, 1-2.32). "Love can go beyond justice and free overflowing" without expecting anything in return "(Lk. 6, 35), until reaching the greatest love, which is to give life for others "(Jn. 15,13) (*Amoris Laetitia* 102). These precepts are widely and generously fulfilled by love.



Equipes Notre-Dame

*Rassemblement International – International Gathering – Encuentro
Internacional - Encontro Internacional – Raduno Internazionale*

Fátima 2018

16-21 Juillet – July 16th-21th – 16-21 de Julio – 16-21 Julho – 16-21 Luglio

"The impulse of the Grace Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace " (Amoris Laetitia 134). This form of freedom to love is victory over law and sin. Christian love, whose incessant source is the Spirit of Jesus Christ given for us, and alive forever, imprints its originality in Christian marriage (cf Eph 5, 21 ff.). Families are also called to evangelize exercising the precious service of being luminous references for those who miss the family because they have lost it, because they have never had it, or because they are preparing to build their own family.

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