



THEOLOGY CORNER

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*Theological Reflections by Paul
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“What is the Catholic Concept of Freedom?”

As we make preparations for the Fourth of July, the term “freedom” is often thrown around since it is the virtue of which the vast majority of Americans are most proud. However, the concept of freedom is one that varies from person to person. The question of consideration today is: *What is the Catholic concept of freedom?* Paragraph 1731 of the Catechism says that freedom is “the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility.” For most people, this definition is uncontroversial. It is the general understanding that to be free means to have the freedom to perform actions of your own will, without being forced or coerced by another. In America, we have many of these freedoms: free exercise of religion, free speech, free press, fair trial, freedom to have private property, freedom to bear arms, and so on. These rights are essential if we are to be able to live freely, but it is not the whole story. An American Catholic should say, “We love our freedom in our country, but these freedoms have only to do with *means*, whereas freedom also has to do with *ends*. In other words, we are free for a purpose. The question remains: what are we free *for*?”

We know that God created the world as an act of love, and specifically created the human person in his image with an intellect and will so that we can be free to love him. God did not create us as robots who simply do whatever he wills. No. He created us to enter into relationship with him. Freedom is an awesome gift from God. We have a great power as human beings, but as with any power, it is one which comes with a great deal of responsibility. That is to say, if we have the power to choose between right and wrong, we should use this power *well*. In Catholic teaching, the truth always lies in the middle of two extremes — some philosophers have called this the “golden mean” or the “middle way.” In reference to freedom, there are two extremes: a consideration of freedom *only* with regard to freedom to do what we please, and a consideration of freedom *only* with regard to freedom to do what we must. As Catholics, we understand freedom as the freedom to do what we ought. It is a blessing to live in a country where we are not deprived of free choice, but is freedom to be merely understood as a negative — simply to lack restraint? No! There is also a positive aspect of freedom — how can we use this freedom of choice *well*? Some in the Catholic tradition call this the freedom for excellence or better yet, the freedom to be a saint! What enslaves us and therefore prevents this kind of freedom for excellence? Sin.

In speaking of the effect of baptismal grace as a result of Christ’s death on the cross, St. Paul says to the Romans, “...our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin.” (Rom 6:20). This is what Christianity is all about: liberation from sin. It is ultimately sin which prevents us from attaining our perfection. This is why the term for sin in Greek is “ἁμαρτία” (transliterated: ha-mar-tia) which means to be in error or to miss the mark. When we act in a way that is inconsistent with our nature, we act imperfectly. Our nature is also broken due to original sin, but the grace of Christ heals. This is why St. Paul says to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ set us free, so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” (Gal 5:1). The Catechism says, “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes...the choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to slavery of sin.” (CCC, 1733). We have been given freedom of the will by God, and if a government is just, we are also afforded freedom from constraint of various kinds. But we must not *abuse* this freedom as an “opportunity for the flesh” but to serve one another through love.” (Gal 5:13).

This brings up another point about freedom: if we need to be free from constraint to pursue a freedom for excellence, does this mean that we are less free when we live under laws? Recall the Catechism quote about when one does good, they become more free. The problem is that, as human beings, we often lose sight of the *true* goods and fall into pursuing merely *apparent* goods. This is why we need laws (*just* laws, of course) to serve as guides. St. Thomas Aquinas defined law as an “ordering of reason for the common good.” (ST I-II, q. 90, a. 4). This is, after all, the purpose of the Decalogue (i.e., the Ten Commandments) — to guide us in knowing the truth about how we should interact with God and our neighbor. It is not as if this is something that we cannot figure out ourselves by reason, but these laws act as a tutor in guiding us toward the truth.

I often use the example of traffic laws to illustrate the law/freedom dichotomy. There is a restriction of freedom (from constraint) when you are mandated to stop at a red light, and the law in some sense coerces you into driving forward at a green light. Some might view these traffic laws as oppressive rules put in place in order for the local government to control you. But others might look at these laws as they relate to the common good of society to see that these laws actually contribute to the flourishing of society as regards the free flowing of traffic. Imagine entirely shutting off all traffic lights and/or stop signs at the busiest intersection in town in the middle of lunch hour. It would be chaos! The same is true for a society or a people without laws. Just as traffic laws facilitate for a free flowing traffic, so too do other laws whether they be civil or divine, facilitate for the freedom for excellence in a flourishing society. The Church teaches that we are free in the law because God reveals his will to us in the form of laws to guide us in the truth. The Church does not mandate that we attend Mass on Sundays in order to control our lives. She does this in order to guide us toward the freedom to which we are called — which comes about primarily through a right ordering of our worship to God in justice.

As you can see, freedom is a very nuanced topic, but it is a topic that is of great importance. We have much for which to be grateful, yet this also calls for us to maintain a high level of prudence in our actions as we discern the right action to choose in any given scenario. Luckily, we are not alone! We have Scripture and Tradition to guide us in matters of faith and morals, and we have the Holy Spirit as our advocate to help guide our hearts and minds in following the truth as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

This coming month, let us not only work to be grateful for the freedoms we are afforded as American citizens, but also work to be grateful for the freedom from sin that comes through Jesus Christ for our justification. Let us work towards the attainment of this freedom through sanctification which can be had by continually accepting the healing grace of Christ, and turning away from sin and always doing what is right and just. As Christ says, if we remain in him, we will be his disciples — we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. (Jn 8:31-32). Therefore, let us all follow the truth of Christ, live according to God’s will, so that we may be set free from slavery to sin (i.e., anything that detaches us from God) and be led into deeper union with God on earth until our perfect union with him in heaven.