

The Christian Meaning of Freedom

I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. ~ Philemon, verse 14

ONE TOPIC that is frequently on the minds of people today is freedom.

What is freedom? There are many different kinds of freedom we could consider, such as political freedom; freedom from religious persecution, violence, war, drugs, or racism; or freedom of career choices and education. However, here we examine the most basic kind of freedom: the nature of human freedom as it relates to living the moral life.

Almighty God created us with the ability to know and understand (intellect) and the ability to choose (will). It is because we have an intellect and a will that we are able to make free choices, and thus able to love. Because we are able to make free choices, each of us literally determines our own eternal destiny. Since so much is at stake, it is very important to understand what true freedom is all about.

What is the nature of real human freedom? Though certainly not true of everyone, it does seem that many people today would define human freedom in a rather self-centered way: being able to do whatever I want, whenever I want, as much as I want. Though probably few people have thought about it enough to articulate in this way, if they heard this definition many would agree with it. Such a view of human freedom, however, has problems.

Moral Relativism

First, this view of freedom



Christ going to the Mount of Olives at night, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

tends to deny that there is such a thing as real right and wrong. It tends to equate whatever one likes with being right and good, and whatever one doesn't like with being wrong and bad. How on earth did we get such an idea of human freedom? To answer this question, we must turn to consider what kind of morality lies behind this understanding of human freedom.

We live in a society today that in many ways has lost its moral bearings. The technical term that describes the dominating view of morality these days is "moral relativism." Moral relativism says that there is nothing

that is really and always right or wrong, without exception. In other words, it says that moral absolutes do not exist. Moral relativism says "what's true for you is true for you, and what's true for me is true for me." According to moral relativism, morality is determined by what I like, want, feel, need, think, or desire at the moment. Its slogan could very well be, "If I like it, do it."

Though the relativist approach to morality is the most common today, most people are inconsistent in the way they apply it. In other words, in some areas of morality they tend to see right and wrong clearly, while in other areas they tend to see things in a relative way. So, for example, the same person who thinks child abuse is always wrong might think that having an adulterous affair is morally acceptable. In fact, the two areas where many people most

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show their relativist approach to morality are the areas involving personal pleasure or personal gain.

However, many people who have bought into this view of morality and human freedom still have a sense that they should try to live a good life. Exactly what this means, though, would be answered differently by each person. They might say “do whatever you like,” but would be quick to add “as long as you don’t hurt anybody.” But who decides what hurts others? Such ideas are especially common with regard to sexual issues. In fact, it seems that sexuality has come to be seen as somehow beyond the need for moral norms.

But Sacred Scripture tells us that sin always hurts others. First, sin offends the Lord — he hates sin. *Sin is not primarily breaking God’s commandments, but breaking our relationship with him.* A relationship of love is a relationship in which both seek only to please the other. When we sin, we grieve the heart of God, who desires our true happiness. His commandments are given to us to help us to be happy, not to confine us so tightly that we cannot enjoy life and the gifts he has given us. The commandments are our charter of freedom, not a set of chains.

Second, sin harms those against whom we sin. This is true of whether others are aware of this hurt or not. Every sin, however secret we believe it to be, harms the Body of Christ. St. Paul exhorts us *“to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love”* (Eph 4:15-16). By weakening the Body of Christ, we make it harder to “work properly.” Those who are hurt are angry, or are themselves led into sin, while the sinner becomes less attached to the community of believers and, indeed, to the human family.

Third, sin harms the sinner. When we sin, we

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act against our true nature. Sin harms us deep within our souls. Sacred Scripture says that the person who lives a life of sin becomes the slave of sin (see Rom 6:6). We are often fooled because we can’t always see with our eyes the damage caused by sin. However, the damage is real and, sooner or later, it will be seen in a person’s life. Jesus tells us that *“no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own*

fruit....The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil” (Lk 6:43-45). Nothing unholy can exist in the presence of God (see Rv 21:27). It would be destroyed by the burning fire of God’s perfect love and holiness. Only a life lived in friendship with God can make us happy, and sin wounds or breaks this friendship.

The Truth about Human Nature

A correct understanding of human freedom must be firmly grounded in the truth about human nature. This is critically important. Even a casual glance at the horrors prevalent in human history (or in the daily headlines) will reveal that something has gone terribly wrong in the world. Alongside all of the good things, there is much selfishness, hatred, violence, greed, exploitation of others, and on and on. Why?

The answer lies at the dawn of human history. Sacred Scripture tells us that Adam and Eve, our first parents, rebelled against the Lord and, by choosing to follow the words of the serpent rather than the Word of God, they sinned against God (see Gn 3:1-13). They tried to live contrary to his plan and commandments, and in doing so they separated themselves from the very source of their own spiritual life and happiness. They fell from God’s grace and friendship (see Gn 3:22-24) and, in them, so did we.

Ever since then, humanity has been in bondage to the power of sin and in the grip of the devil. Because of the fallen human nature that we all receive from

Adam and Eve, we each have darkened intellects, weakened wills, and disordered desires. Any notion of human freedom that does not take the fact of original sin into account is in serious trouble.

Truth is central to true freedom. When people's minds are filled with wrong ideas about God, themselves, other people, and the meaning of life, they live in spiritual darkness. Our ideas shape the way we think and live. This is why St. Paul tells us that we must be transformed by the renewal of our minds (see Rom 12:2). As our minds become filled with the truth of God's Word, this will show itself in our lives. We will live rightly, because we will be living according to the truth. Jesus says to all that would follow him, "you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

The key point is that morality and human freedom cannot be separated from truth. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (Jn 14:6). Only in Christ will we find the true meaning of human freedom.

True Freedom in Christ

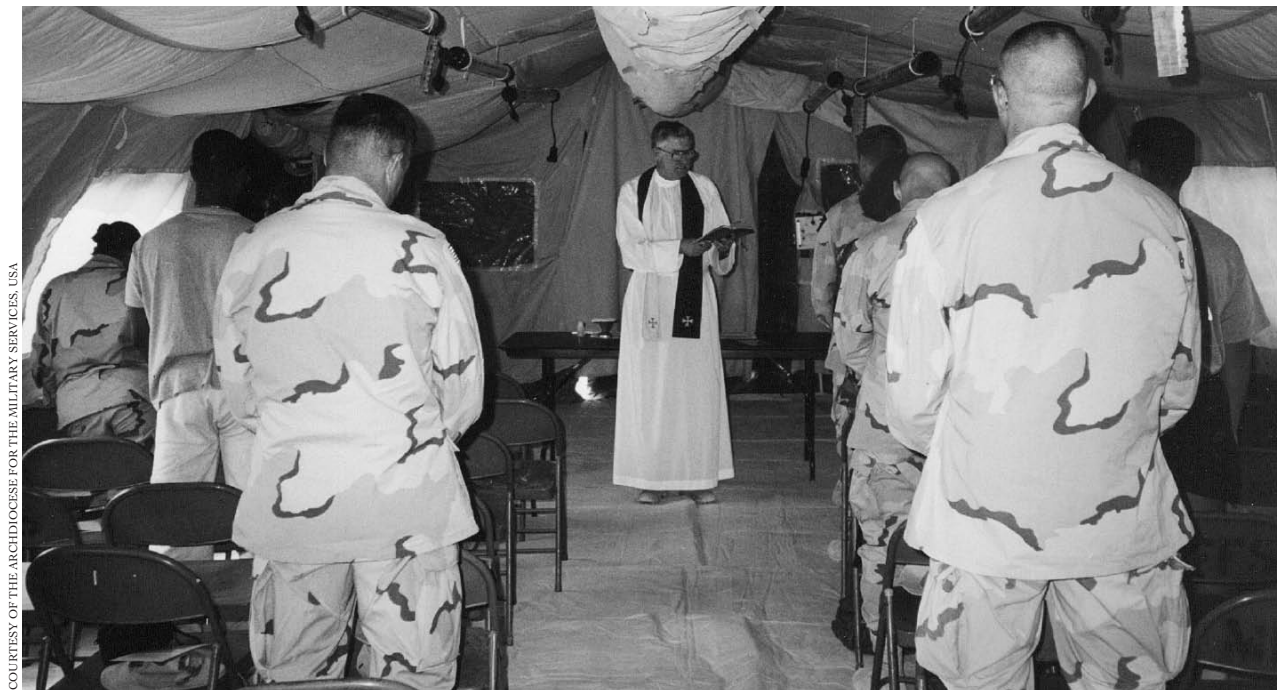
True freedom is not to be found in doing whatever we like. Trying to live apart from God only leads to death. As Sacred Scripture says, "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23).

True freedom is having the power to overcome the reign of sin in ourselves and to be set free from

the grip of the devil. In other words, true freedom is having the power to live a holy life. St. Paul says, "for freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1). Not only does Christ set us free from sin and death but also he heals our freedom and perfects it. Therefore, true freedom is not simply freedom *from something* but freedom *for something*. It is a freedom that allows us to obtain the essential end or goal of life. That goal is happiness with God. And in Christ we are given the grace of the Holy Spirit to obtain it. This means that Jesus came to free us from the bondage of sin so that we could have the ability to live a holy life, a life pleasing to God.

Because of the death and Resurrection of Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit, a Christian is brought into friendship with God. Through Baptism, we are made sons and daughters of God by the power of Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord begins to dwell within the soul of the baptized person as his temple, and as St. Paul says, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). The presence and power of the Holy Spirit within us enables us to begin the process of mastering our own tendencies toward selfishness. In this way, as we grow in self-control and the other fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit, we gradually come to think, act, and love like Jesus. This is the only true and everlasting freedom — the glorious freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

(CCC 1731-1742)



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A Mass held in a tent for soldiers serving in a combat zone