

FRATERNITY & FREEDOM

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In the Epistle to the Galatians, a letter praising the riches of the faith, St Paul tells us that the Christians should live with the freedom which Christ has won for us¹. This was the message of Jesus to the first Christians, and it will continue to be the same throughout the centuries: it is an announcement of liberation from misery and anguish. History is not subject to blind forces nor is it the result of chance, but the expression of the mercies of God our Father. The thoughts of God are far above ours, says the Scripture². Thus, to trust in the Lord means to have faith in spite of everything, going beyond the appearances of things. The charity of God, who loves us eternally, lies beyond each event, even though at times it may be difficult for us to appreciate it.

When the Christian lives with faith (a faith which is not merely lip-service, but is expressed in genuine personal prayer) the sureness of divine love shows itself in joy, in interior freedom. Those knots which sometimes tie up the heart, those heavy weights which oppress the soul, are broken and removed. 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'³. A son of God, a Christian who lives by faith, can suffer and weep; he can have reasons for sorrow, but none for dejection.

Fraternity: a clear expression of freedom

Christian freedom comes from within, from the heart, from faith. It is not something merely individual, it expresses itself externally in social behaviour. One of its more characteristic features is seen in the lives of the first Christians: fraternity. Faith—that great gift of God—has reduced the divergencies, the barriers, so that they have disappeared 'and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female'⁴. To know that we are brothers, to love one another as such—over and above differences of race, social condition, culture or ideology—belongs to the essence of Christianity.

There are no dogmas in temporal affairs. It is not in accordance with the dignity of man to try to fix absolute truths in questions where necessarily each one will look at things from his own point of view, according to his particular interests, his cultural preferences, his own personal experience. To try to impose dogmas in temporal affairs leads inevitably to the forcing of other people's consciences, to lack of respect for one's neighbour.

Love for pluralism: God in creating us has run the risk and the adventure of our freedom

I do not say that the Christian should be indifferent or apathetic to temporal affairs. Definitely not. I think, however, that a Christian has to make his civic and social aspirations compatible with an awareness of the limitation of his own opinions, respecting the opinion of others and loving genuine pluralism. A person who does not know how to live like this has not reached the full depth of the Christian message. It is indeed not easy to reach that far, and in a certain sense one never gets there, because our tendency to selfishness and pride never dies. That is why we are all obliged to examine ourselves as sinners, constantly seeing our actions in the light of Christ, recognising ourselves and being ready to make a fresh start. It is not easy but we have to try hard.

In creating us God has run the risk and the adventure of our freedom. He has wanted a history which would be a true one, the product of genuine decisions, not mere fiction or some sort of game. Each man has to experience his own personal autonomy with all that it implies: trial and error, guesswork and, sometimes, uncertainty. We cannot forget that God who has given us the security of faith has not revealed to us the meaning of all human events. Aside from the things which for a Christian are absolutely clear and certain, there are other matters, very many, in which only opinion is possible, that is to say, he can reach a kind of knowledge of what can be true and useful, but he cannot affirm it to be so in a completely certain way: for it is not only possible that I may be wrong, but even if I am right, others can be right also. An object which for some people is concave seems convex to those who have a different perspective.

Freedom: a condition for harmony

The awareness of the limitation of human judgment leads us to recognise freedom as a condition of living together. But it is not everything, it is not even the most important consideration; respect for freedom finds its source in love. If other people think differently from me, is that a reason to regard them as enemies? The only real reason for doing so would be selfishness, or the intellectual limitation of those who think that politics and industry are the only real values. A Christian knows that this is not so, because each person has an infinite value, an eternal destiny in God; Jesus Christ has died for each one of us.

We are Christians when we are capable not only of loving humanity in the abstract but also each person who comes our way. It is a sign of maturity to feel responsible for those tasks on which the prosperity of future generations depends but that fact cannot lead us to be careless about dedication and service in the most ordinary day to day affairs—being kind in a practical way towards the people who work with us, having a genuine friendship with our colleagues, having concern for those who are needy, even though their misery may seem unimportant in comparison with the high ideals which we are pursuing.

Freedom: one of the greatest riches of the faith

To speak of freedom, of love for freedom, is to place before us a difficult ideal. It is to speak of one of the greatest riches of the faith. For—let us not fool ourselves—life is not like a romantic novel. Christian fraternity is not something which comes from heaven once and for all for everyone; on the contrary, it has to be built up each day, and this has to be done in a life which is not easy, with its conflicts of interest, tensions and struggles, with daily contact with narrow-mindedness in others and in ourselves.

But if this panorama discourages us, if we allow ourselves to be conquered by our selfishness, or if we fall into the sceptical attitude of the person who shrugs his shoulders, it means that we need to deepen our faith, to contemplate Christ more. Because this school of contemplation is the only one in which the Christian learns to know himself, and to know others, to live in such a way that he is Christ present to men.

REFERENCES

(1) Cf 4:3 (2) Cf Is 55:8; Rom 11:33 (3) 1 Cor 8:31 (4) Gal 3:28.

This is a slightly abridged translation of an article published in *ABC*, a Madrid daily.