

## "THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE"

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There seems to be no concept or reality more popular in the world of today than that of liberation or freedom, especially in the struggling countries of the Third World. More often than not, however, when these terms are used, they refer to social, political and economic realities and the main obstacles to their attainment seems to be perceived as purely external forces and structures. While I recognize the legitimacy of these concerns and dimensions of contemporary man's aspiration for this kind of freedom, I believe that there is another dimension to freedom which is often overlooked and which is ultimately at the rest of many of the socio-political and economic crises of our times. It is this other aspect of freedom and liberation that I would like to focus on this morning. In so doing, I will use the basic context of *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius which have as their primary goal the promotion of what is called "spiritual freedom." In St. Ignatius' own terms, this freedom is directed to the attainment of liberation from "inordinate attachments" that hinder us, in one way or another, from saying "Yes" to God in the course of our everyday life. Thus, for Ignatius and for us this morning, the freedom we will be concerned with will be our ability to say "Yes" to God in all things.

Perhaps during this shared reflection we can focus our imagination on the story of the "rich young man" of the Gospels who asked Jesus what he would have to do to attain eternal life. Once the matter of observing the commandments as the first pre-requisite was settled, with the young man assuring Jesus that he has observed them "from his youth" and Jesus responding to him with a look of love, Jesus went on to challenge him further: "If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow Me." I believe you all know what happened. At these words the heart of the rich young man sank and he walked away sad because his heart was inordinately attached to his great wealth. He said, "No" to Jesus. He was not free.

There are other examples throughout the Gospels of this kind of unfreedom as well as shining examples of authentically free men and women. We need only mention Abraham, ready to sacrifice his only son Isaac at God's command, or Mary with her unconditional "Yes" to God's call for her to be the mother of His Son, or the prayer of Jesus Himself in the Agony in the Garden when He prayed, "not My will but Yours be done." If these examples or others mean more to you, by all means reflect on them as we move along. To simplify my presentation, however, I will stick to the rich young man with whom I think we can

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all identify, not so much because we have such great wealth but because there are other things in our lives — physical comfort, leisure time, pet ideas, authority, need to keep up with the latest fashions, fear of what others might say or think, etc. — that keep us from following Christ more fully.

With regard to personal freedom, contemporary philosophers and theologians make a very important distinction that it might be worth our while to reflect on for a moment before going on. The first kind of freedom of which they speak is that which is most common to us and which consists of the capacity to choose between two or more alternatives, e.g., between *buko* and mango ice-cream, or between riding a jeepney and taking the car to school or work, or between wearing this dress or that pair of slacks. This kind of freedom is called the “freedom of indefinite choice.” The second and more important kind of freedom is called “freedom of definitive commitment.” This kind of freedom is exercised when we make serious commitments to pursue significant decisions that we have made. Some examples of this kind of freedom would be the capacity to make and carry out a life long commitment to a spouse in marriage and to live it out “for better, for worse; for richer for poorer, in sickness or in death” until death itself comes and “sets one free;” or the decision to go to the mountains and join the struggle-unto-death-for-freedom from various kinds of oppression and exploitation. It is this second kind of freedom that we will be talking about here. And it is precisely this kind of freedom that the rich young man of the Gospels lacked. He exercised his freedom of indefinite choice because Jesus left him free to say “Yes” or “No.” But he failed to take advantage of the opportunity to make that personal commitment to Christ that would have enabled him to become more alive and which would have satisfied his deepest need as a human being for greater intimacy with his God. It was for this reason that he went away sad. He kept his wealth but lost the chance to be truly happy. And all because he was not really free in the deeper sense of that word.

I am sure there is no one here who has not gone thru a similar experience for I am sure there is no one here who would deny that he or she is a sinner. And to the extent that each of us has tasted the bitter-sweet reality of moral rebellion, we also know that to say “No” to God in favor of some created reality that is incompatible with a more meaningful relationship with Him, is to become, as Sts. John and Paul tell us in their writings, slaves to whatever we serve, whether it be God or Sin. But we also know that there is a difference between serving Sin — or the “flesh”, as St. Paul terms it — and serving God. Serving Sin or the “flesh” leads to an experience of “death” — of emptiness, of unhappiness, of radical alienation from all that is good and beautiful in ourselves, in our neighbor, in our world and, above all, from the Goodness and Beauty of God Himself. Serving God, on the other hand, brings us Peace and Joy and the fulness of Life.

Further reflection on our experience of inner freedom — or lack of it — leads us to the realization that more often than not our saying “No” to God is not totally a matter of our own doing. The classic description of this lack of inner freedom to say “Yes” to God is found in St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* where he speaks of his own tendency to “do the evil that I do not want to do and not to do the good that I prefer.” After describing this experience, he ends with a plaintive cry — — “Who shall deliver me from this body of death?” — — a

cry to which he responds with an exclamation of praise and thanksgiving to “God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is precisely this experience of deep spiritual unfreedom and eventual liberation that is at the heart of an Ignatian Retreat based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of which all of you have had at least some small taste in the past.

Before even starting an Ignatian Retreat, however, a potential retreatant is expected to have at least a basic understanding and acceptance of the fundamental truths contained in the so-called “Principle and Foundation.” This “Principle and Foundation” touches on the basic truths which define our human existential situation — the fact that we have been created freely by a merciful, faithful, and unconditionally loving God who has given to all of us, without exception, the whole of the created world, filled with countless opportunities and challenges, for us to show our love for Him and for each other and thus eventually share His love and life forever. It is this basic truth, as the key to the very purpose and meaning of our life, — the “need” to return love for Love, — that constitutes the fundamental basis for authentic human freedom, the freedom to make a “definitive commitment” to God as our Sovereign Lord and Master. To believe this truth and to live it every moment of our lives — in every situation we face, in every choice we make — is to be truly free with the freedom Jesus had in mind when He spoke to His disciples of “the truth that sets you free.”

To really live this truth, however, certain other truths must be considered, understood, and accepted. For example, it follows that if the very purpose and meaning of life is to love God and neighbor at all times, then we must freely choose to use created things such as money, food, sex, time, clothing, etc. only to the extent that in so doing their use is an effective expression of our desire to give honor and glory to Him at all times. Likewise it is clear that to the extent that the use of these same created realities prove a hindrance to this desire and intent we must abstain from using them. But in order to be able to act in this fashion, Ignatius continues, we must maintain a certain detachment or equilibrium with regard to all created things, i.e., to all that is not God, preferring neither riches, nor power, nor honor, nor even life itself to their opposites except insofar as God would be better glorified and served thereby. Indeed, Ignatius would say, the truly free and therefore fully happy and human person would be the one who loves God so much that his one and only desire is to choose whatever is the greatest expression of love for Him — AMDG.

Needless to say, the rich young man of our Gospel story did not fare too well in this matter. He kept the commandments maybe more for his own sake than for God’s but still, Jesus loved him. Perhaps it was this overriding concern for himself, even in his spiritual or moral life, rather than real love for God that accounts for his preference to keep his money, presumably honestly and justly earned, rather than give up all to follow Jesus. He was not detached. He was not indifferent. He was not free. He said “No” instead of “Yes” and went away sad instead of being happy.

Once a person has reflected on such matters and if he finds himself identifying with the rich young man but wanting to break out of that unfreedom and give himself more fully to God, then he is ready to enter into the *Exercises*. The first part or “Week” of the *Exercises* takes the retreatant deeper and deeper into

the depth of his unfreedom. But it does so always in the light of God's ever abiding, faithful, and unconditional love. For it is only within the context of God's love that the ugliness and repulsiveness of sin — our unlovingness — can be appreciated. The purpose of the deep probing considerations which make up this part of an Ignatian Retreat considerations which range from a meditation on the "cosmic" dimension of sin in the Fall of the Angels and of our First Parents thru a meditation of the sins of other men and women who have rebelled against the all-loving God but who, unlike us, are now suffering the full consequences of their infidelities — is to liberate us from the deceptive attraction and false promises of happiness that are at the heart of every temptation to say "No" to God. Once again, it is an experience of liberating truth, of the truth that truly sets us free. Meditating on Sin, Death, Judgment, and Hell in the presence of the crucified Christ who hangs upon His cross of shame, broken and bloodied *by my sins and for my sins*, is meant to draw us gradually away from the chains of our sinfulness and selfishness by leading us deeper and deeper into a liberating love for Jesus Christ as our loving and merciful Lord and Saviour. At the end of this "Purgative" period one is expected to have arrived at a sufficient level of spiritual freedom to be able to make or deepen significantly his fundamental exercises of freedom-as-definitive-commitment to God in Jesus Christ. To help him formulate or express this commitment, St. Ignatius invites him to kneel at the foot of the Cross and answer these three questions:

What have I done for Christ (in comparison to what He has done for me)?

What am I doing now for Christ (in comparison to what He is doing for me)?

What ought I do for Christ (in the light of all that He surely wills and desires to do for me)?

Perhaps it might be good for us to digress a moment and make clear that although the primary stress during this "First Week" is on the personal sinfulness of the retreatant and the need for him to seek and use effective means for achieving personal liberation from all "inordinate attachments," the *Exercises* as given today also acknowledge the reality of the sinful socio-political and economic structures within which and under whose influence the sinful individual is struggling to become fully and authentically free. He is thus confronted with the need to do something to change those structures, a challenge that is never far from his consciousness as he pursues his desire to obtain that maximum level of Christian freedom necessary to commit himself totally and radically to his Lord and Saviour. He also comes to a deeper realization of the fact that unless one is personally liberated from selfishness, inordinate ambition, and greed the best he can hope to do is replace one set of sinful and oppressive structures with another, never really achieving that "freedom and justice for all" that is so passionately sought for by so many today, especially in Third World countries like our own.

With that said, let us return to our main consideration of the basic flow and structure of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Once the retreatant has made his basic choice between the attraction of sin and God's creative and redemptive love for him and answered the three questions posed for prayer at the foot of the Cross, Ignatius presents him with the picture of Christ, no longer hanging on that Cross

but standing before him as Lord and King of the Universe now asking him, the sinful retreatant of the First Week now liberated and transformed by His redemptive love, to join Him in the task of working for the liberation of other men and women, thus enabling them to share in the experience of peace, joy, and authentic freedom that he, the retreatant, has just discovered. Christ makes it clear that it is a task that often calls for great sacrifice, heavy labors, painful suffering, and perhaps, even death. The only consolation Christ offers is that the retreatant will not be alone — Christ will always be there with him — and that ultimate victory is certain, leading the retreatant to a full share in His own Glory. If the retreatant feels drawn to follow Christ on this mission and is ready to say "Yes" — even if it means giving up "great wealth" to follow Him — then he is ready for the Second Week of the *Exercises*.

The heart of the Second Week is a series of contemplations on the earthly life of Christ, starting with the Annunciation/Incarnation and ending with the Joyful Entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Throughout these contemplations, the retreatant strives, with the help of God's grace, to become a vital and active participant in each event or "Mystery" presented asking continually along the way for the specific grace of "knowing Jesus more intimately, in order to love Him more ardently and thus follow Him more closely." The main point of these contemplations is not so much to present Jesus as a model of freedom or source of inspiration for the retreatant as it is to deepen the fundamental bond of grace between the retreatant and Jesus Himself as the instrument of one's freedom, thus enabling him to say "Yes" to God and the Father and "No" to self when the latter tries to replace God in his life.

The first set of contemplations starts with the Trinity's compassionate decision to reach out to sinful men, without distinction, in an attempt to deliver them from the spiritual blindness and enslavement leading them along the road to eternal damnation. The free response of the Son to the Father's bidding, and of His earthly mother Mary to the call of the Annunciation, introduces the retreatant into the gradual unfolding of what it will mean for him to live out his response to Christ the King. He will discover in prayer how God goes about establishing His Kingdom of Love and Freedom — in poverty, simplicity, kindness, and total obedience born of an unconditional love for God and neighbor, with love for God predominating over every other love as it did over Jesus' love for Mary and Joseph. As the mystery of Christian freedom unfolds little by little, the retreatant is asked to consider three possible ways of responding to concrete changes in his own life that his decision to follow Christ entails. He can just say "yes, I'll change," but not do anything; or he can decide to do everything and anything except what he needs to do; or he can decide right here and now to do what clearly needs to be done to attain the freedom he is seeking. This consideration which is one of the key exercises in an Ignatian Retreat is called a consideration on the "Three Classes of Men," each class exemplifying one of the three modes of response.

With the beginning of the Public Life, i.e. from the Baptism to the events of Palm Sunday, the exercitant enters into the second set of the contemplations proper to the Second Week. With the help of another key exercise, the so-called consideration of "The Two Standards," he is invited to contemplate the reality of following Jesus as a sharing-unto-death in the radical conflict between good

and evil taking place in the world around him, not in the abstract but in the concrete. He learns in prayer that every choice he makes is a concrete choice between Satan and Christ. He is helped to see that the former plays on our inordinate desire for material or even spiritual possessions, for earthly fame and glory and for radical independence from God's rightful authority over us. He comes to realize that this is the way Satan tries to lead us all to every other form of spiritual enslavement. In the case of Christ, however, he discovers a strategy and goal that are radically different for Jesus comes to set us free along the path of poverty — both spiritual and material, humiliation and that radical humility that enables us to submit totally in loving obedience to the Father's every wish. This conflict is further concretized in Jesus' own experience of the three temptations in the desert which followed His baptism. From there the retreatant moves to a kind of "repetition" of the Kingdom meditation by contemplating the call of the Apostles and then discovers more and more about his King thru subsequent contemplations of His teachings, and miracles and the decisions-amidst-conflict that constitute the life of a true disciple.

By the end of the Second Week, the retreatant is expected to have made some radical decisions about those fundamental changes he realizes he must undergo if he is to be faithful to the living out of his commitments. In so doing, he will have learned how to apply the Ignatian "Rules for Discernment" that are a necessary tool for an enlightened attempt to labor with Christ for the liberation of the world. As the retreatant prepares to enter into the Third Week of the *Exercises*, during which he will be asked to contemplate the Passion and Death of his Lord, he is given time to reflect on three basic levels of "spiritual freedom" or what have been traditionally called the "Three Degrees of Humility." In the development of this consideration there is a marked progression from the realm of "logic" in the first two degrees to the "folly of love" in the third. The first degree helps the retreatant to test the extent to which he has been freed from the attraction of serious sin which directly threatens his salvation; the second degree tests whether he is basically free to resist the attraction of less serious sins which might weaken his ability to reject totally the one reality that can destroy him forever, serious sin; the third degree goes far beyond any consideration of sin and its attraction for the focus shifts to the person of Christ with whom the retreatant is invited to identify in all kinds of humiliation, not because his salvation is in the balance but simply because Christ underwent them. To reach this level of attachment to Christ is to be truly free, for then, nothing can turn the retreatant from his definitive commitment to God, his Father and Lord.

The Third Week, which concretizes the basic issues reflected on in the consideration of the three degrees of humility, covers the period of Christ's life from the Last Supper to the burial, i.e., the period of His Passion and death. During this time the exercitant is directed to pray intensely for the grace to "enter into a deep sense of sorrow and shame as I stay with Christ in His sufferings on my behalf and for my sins." After a prolonged period of prayerful encounter with Jesus, who though He was God, "hid His Divinity so that He could suffer more intensely for me in His humanity," it is hoped that whatever sinful and disordered attachments and selfishness may still have over him might be rooted out and replaced by a growing attachment to his laboring and suffering Lord, thus

growing also in that spiritual freedom he is seeking.

Further liberated from the shallow, empty and deceitful allure of earthly things and of all forms of self-indulgence, the exercitant is now invited to contemplate the Risen and Victorious Christ in all His splendour and glory. Not content with savoring His own conquest over the forces of evil that tried to destroy Him in His Passion and Death, He is seen going around to bring comfort and strength to His disciples — and the retreatant — who were so deeply shattered and crushed by His apparent defeat on Calvary. With the labors and sufferings so much a part of the task of bringing the Father's Kingdom to light in this world now behind Him, Jesus shows the retreatant the victory and glory that is in store for him only, he remains faithful to his commitment to labor with Christ for the promotion of justice and faith which the Kingdom entails. It is thus the Risen Christ, the totally "liberated Man," who further liberates the retreatant from any fear and timidity that might still be lurking in the dark corners of his mind and heart. As the retreatant's faith, hope, and love for the Risen Christ deepen, he himself becomes more truly free.

At this point St. Ignatius presents an opportunity for the exercitant to, as it were, synthesize all his retreat experiences in what is called the "Contemplation for Attaining Divine Love." He begins this part of the *Exercises*, which is meant to prepare him for re-entry into the realities of daily life, by pointing out two basic elements in all true love. The first is that love consists of deeds rather than words. The second is that in true love, the lover desires to share all his riches with the beloved. Those points made, he then proposes a consideration of all the ways in which God has manifested His love for the retreatant in the countless gifts of nature and grace that he now enjoys, both those that he shares with his fellow men and fellow Christians and those that have been given to him alone. He is then directed to reflect on how God is present and active in all of these gifts and on how these gifts are merely a shadow of all that God still desires to bestow on him, when at last they meet face to face in glory. Once again, the basic theme is love, that Divine Love which precedes all human love and which liberates us from the enslaving clutches of worldliness and self-centeredness so that we can at last "live for Him Who died for us." It is this total readiness to live for Him — in the world and in our neighbor — that constitutes the radical freedom that is God's great gift to all who believe in Him. It is the freedom that is proclaimed in the Gospels in the words of Jesus and elsewhere in the New Testament. It is the freedom we commemorate in the fourth Eucharistic Acclamation where we pray "Lord, by Your Cross and Resurrection, You have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world."

This, then, is a brief summary of St. Ignatius' perception of "the truth that sets us free" from all our petty self-seeking, and oppressive lust, greed, and ambition. This is the liberating truth which, when experienced in prayer, enables us to make our own definitive commitment to be His faithful friends and disciples forever. As this truth penetrates deeper and deeper into our consciousness through silent hours of prayer and contemplation all the chains that tie us to the earth and enslave us are broken and we are at last free to say "Yes" to God, a "Yes" that involves a "Yes" also to all that life itself will bring to us of joy and sorrow, of pleasure and pain, a "Yes" to be lived out in love for all our brothers and sisters but especially those among the poor and the oppressed. For this is

what it means to be truly free.

True, this is not a once and for all liberation, but it is an effective beginning of a long, lifetime struggle to grow in the "freedom of the sons of God" that we need to become more fully human ourselves and to work for the creation of a more truly human and humanizing world. Our daily spiritual life is a necessary part of the process for without it the chains that we have shed will begin to reappear in very subtle and almost imperceptible ways. Daily prayer, but especially a daily "review of life," will preserve and deepen the fruits of the retreat experience.

Such is the vision that motivates and drives the "Sons of St. Ignatius" and all those countless priests, religious, and lay persons who have been blessed enough to have had the chance to share the religious experience that made St. Ignatius such a great saint. Such are the realities out of which was born the Society of Jesus and all of its works, one to which you yourselves have been called by God to share with us. Hopefully, someday, many, if not all of you, will get a chance to make a real Ignatian Retreat. In the meantime, let us ask St. Ignatius to obtain for us a share in his spirit of zeal for God's greater glory. Let us ask him to teach us to continue striving to grow, to do better, to learn more, to love deeper, to serve more unselfishly all those entrusted to our care. And let us do that by saying together his beautiful "Prayer for Generosity" which is just another word for Christian Freedom:

Lord, teach me to be generous:

To give and not to count the cost,

To fight and not to heed the wounds,

To toil and not to seek for rest,

To labor and not ask for any reward

Except that of knowing that I am doing Your holy will.