

January 26, 2014

Sunday before the Lord's Presentation in the Temple

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Two Aspects of Freedom

With respect to the life in Christ it is important to keep in mind two aspects of freedom:

First, a correct concept of freedom disinclines us to reduce it to the mere ability to make choices. Thus reduced, indeed, freedom looks more like a potential than a reality. Freedom is counted, after all, as a great human blessing.

But how can the mere capacity for choice be a blessing? Is that man to be called blessed who *chooses* to fling himself into a fire? Is freedom truly a blessing if someone deliberately enslaves himself? If freedom is to be counted a blessing, choice must in some measure be qualified by its object.

This is why we sensibly refuse to let a man throw himself under a train, for instance; we recognize that this act must be the result of some inner compulsion in the man's psyche. We assume such a person is deluded; he is acting under the impulse of an untruth. That is to say, we recognize that freedom has something to do with *truth*. It is appropriately directed to *truth*. If it is not directed to truth, it is not really freedom.

We should be slow to identify freedom as simply the ability to choose. The ability to choose is better thought of as *potential* for freedom. Freedom is not a static thing; our choices make us either more free or less free. When—to mention the obvious example—Adam and Eve chose to disobey the Lord, they became *less* free. The freedom of a human act, in other words, is also related to the quality, the truth component, of its *object*.

If freedom truly is a *good*, then what is chosen must be a *good*. The choice of something bad is hardly an exercise of freedom; it is simply the exercise of a choice. By bad choices freedom is degraded; pushed in that direction, it comes to compulsion and slavery.

Freedom, then, is not something that I simply *have*. It is, rather, a gift I receive in the obedience of faith. It is a good conferred on me in my act of choosing the *good*. If I *choose* to be a slave, this choice does *not* make me free. If I choose to sin, I am not exercising freedom; I am putting myself in spiritual and moral bondage. An evil choice is not a liberating choice.

This is pretty common teaching in Holy Scripture. We may start with the words of our Savior: “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . . Amen, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. . . . Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:32-36).

According to the ironical perspective of the Apostle Paul, we become free by enslaving ourselves to the Liberator! He writes, “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are his slaves whom you obey, whether of sin unto death or of obedience unto righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, who were slaves of sin, obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. . . . For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of rebellion unto more rebellion, so now present your members *as slaves of* righteousness unto holiness (Romans 6:16-19).

God did not give us the ability to choose simply for the sake of choice. He gave us choice in order that we should choose to obey Him. Our fundamental ability to choose is really a *potential for obedience*; only in obedience to God does a human being arrive at freedom as an act. We will be completely free, only when we are no longer able to sin.

Second, freedom pertains, not only to the human will, but, and more especially, to human nature itself. Viewed under the aspect of freedom, my human nature is not something in which I am confined. Nor is it something by which—ultimately—by which I am defined. Human nature itself is marked by a *potential for obedience*. The human being can become something *more* than a human being. Through the obedience of faith, man’s nature has the capacity to be transfigured and transformed. Human nature makes man *capax Dei*. By the grace we have in Christ we become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4); we share—insofar as creatures, through divine grace, may—in the very life of God. We are

reborn—born again—as children of the Father of Jesus Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. None of this would be possible unless human existence had the potential for being more than itself.

The *potential for obedience* inherent in human nature—the quality, that is, of a human being which renders him available to God’s summons and persuasion—is a faint mirror, as it were, of the freedom of God. Here we touch upon a profound mystery. God is not “confined,” so to speak, by the divine nature. If He were, there could have been no Incarnation (*sarkosis*). God was able to become something that He was not by reason of the divine nature; He was able to become flesh and dwell among us. The truth of the Incarnation demonstrates God’s mysterious *openness* to what His hands have fashioned. The fact of the Incarnation proves that there is in the divine nature an archetype of freedom. God’s openness to man is the root cause of man’s availability to God.

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