

The Christian Notion of Freedom

Fr. John Sheets, SJ

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Author Biography

The Most Reverend John R. Sheets, SJ, Auxiliary Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend in Indiana, was an eminent Catholic theologian and author in the last half of the twentieth century (d. 2003). He was particularly esteemed for his scholarly and insightful works in the areas of Christian faith, morality and spirituality. Born September 21, 1922 in Omaha, Nebraska, Sheets grew up in the Catholic community of Omaha and entered the Society of Jesus in 1940. His preparation for the priesthood included studies for the bachelor's degree at St. Louis University and a licentiate in theology at St. Mary's College in Kansas. He was ordained a priest on June 17, 1953. In 1957, he obtained a doctorate in theology from the Gregorian University in Rome.

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Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

Cardinal Rigali Center • 20 Archbishop May Drive • Suite 3400-A • St. Louis, Missouri 63119 • USA
314.792.7220 • www.faithscience.org • E-mail: mariannepost@archstl.org

INTRODUCTION

I wish that someone had not spirited away the comics for tomorrow; it was on the desk, and there was something from “Dennis the Menace”, where Margaret was showing Dennis a large huge puzzle that she had put together out of about 500 pieces. It was Gainsborough’s “Blue Boy,” and Dennis said, “Why would any little boy dress up like that?”

And she said, “But it’s a remarkable painting.”

And he said, “Yeh, it must have been remarkable for him to paint all those 500 pieces and put it together.”

In a way, that’s the problem we have when we start talking about freedom. What I would like to do is give, in a sense, a global description of the Christian meaning of freedom. It’s a subject, as we know, that has many, many pieces. Yet what I would like to do in some way or other is get beneath the pieces.

There’s no discipline which doesn’t in some way or other have something to say about freedom, whether it’s philosophy, psychology, political science, sociology, jurisprudence and so on. Every literary person, of course, is embodying in his own concept of literature his own concept of freedom. So it is a very complex subject.

It poses many difficulties. The first difficulty is this: that our experience of freedom is one that cannot be isolated or objectified in the same sense as other experiences, for example, of heat and cold, which we can measure. Similarly it’s complicated by the fact that in our very discussion of freedom, our freedom is involved. In other words, our freedom is conditioning our listening, my presentation, my selection. Let’s take one of the models for the Church that was chosen this morning - the bureaucratic model. It’s interesting that that one would be chosen over other models like *spouse*, as we also have in Scripture; mother, the Church as *mother*, as *body*, and so on. In other words, even in our discussion of freedom, our freedom is involved, which of course makes it very difficult.

Putting all of this in another way, it’s simply saying: in a person’s notion of freedom we have brought to a focus the whole philosophy or world-view that a person has. Therefore freedom is not simply an isolated idea within a person’s philosophy or world view. Freedom becomes, as it were, the litmus paper for testing a person’s full view of reality. What we are talking about is not a will-of-the-wisp, something that we pursue and cannot find, but rather we are pursuing something which is a dimension, not only of what we pursue, but who pursues it, how we pursue it. It is the dimension of our whole existence.

What I would like to do this afternoon is trace the development of the Christian idea of freedom, first in the Scripture, the Old Testament and the New, and then give some of the characteristics of the Christian idea of freedom, and finally take up some of the implications of the Christian notion of freedom for our contemporary world.

I. THE BIBLICAL NOTION OF FREEDOM

So what I would like to do first is take up the Biblical idea of freedom. It’s simply an historical fact that the Judaeo-Christian notion of freedom has formed our idea of freedom in the Western world. Throughout the last 2000 years, or let’s say at least up until the last 200 years, the ideas that we have had about freedom in the Western world have been formed from sometimes a paralleling, sometimes an interacting, sometimes a confluence of Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christian experience.

Perhaps many - not only perhaps, but surely many - don’t accept the interpretation that the people of Israel gave to their own experiences. They don’t accept the interpretation that Christians give to Christ and their experience

of Him. But whether they share that faith experience of Israel or Christianity, as students of history, they simply have to admit that our views of freedom have been formed in large part by the Judaeo-Christian view of man. For the rest of this paper I'm going to be talking out of this basic faith experience; therefore, I'm taking as the coordinates for my description of freedom those that are given in revelation.

Revelation concerns freedom, not in a narrow sense, or merely political sense. Primarily it concerns freedom insofar as man is freed from the self-imposed alienation through sin and the consequences of sin. But he's freed for the freedom that leads to union, a mode of union which is a gift-freedom, a free gift of God. Revelation, therefore, discloses the depth-dynamics at work, dynamics which are gift-dynamics, dynamics that are not simply there as principles immanent in nature. Rather they are the dynamics that come from a special empowering, from God's special gift of the Spirit.

Revelation basically is simply disclosing the dynamics at work that you could not pick up by reason or any other source. At the same time, revelation discloses the anti-dynamics which we could not pick up from reason, the anti-dynamics of the human heart and the whole network of evil that opposes the freeing activity of God.

In Scripture, freedom is not seen as a goal. The human is not freed in order to be free. The human is freed in order to belong. To enter into union with God and with others in what is called the reign of God is, in Biblical terms, the meaning of freedom. The reign of God, on the other hand, is the societal expression of the freedom that God gives.

A. The Old Testament Idea of Freedom

I'd like to comment very briefly, then, on the Old Testament idea of freedom in particular. The word "freedom" is not used in the Old Testament, except in the sense of freedom on a social or economic level. But the experience of freedom is not limited, as we know, to the use of a word. "Freedom," in Israel, is first of all an experience of a liberation from a social enslavement, which they experienced in the Exodus.

But this freedom from a social enslavement became the paradigm for a freeing which would take place at a deeper level throughout the whole of their history.

The complex and rich experience of freedom of the people of Israel is described globally as the covenantal experience. They, along with their neighbors in the Near East, before this experience of God, had basically the same myths and basically the same cyclical view of history. But the experience of God freely erupting into their existence broke the illusion of the cyclical idea of history. It is from this experience, which was not limited simply to one peak experience, but continued throughout their history, that they became conscious of the freedom of God. At the same time, it was a revelation of their own freedom, a freedom to respond to God's overtures. They extrapolated backwards this experience of God as the Lord of History to the very beginning, to see Him also as the God who freely created, that is, as the Lord of Nature. But they go from the Lord of History to the Lord of Nature.

They experienced the free calling of themselves into being as a people. Their identity was not based on an ethnic identity - it was based on vocation, that is, "calling." Having experienced that free calling, which is called election, more and more their consciousness grew of the freedom of God acting in history. Their notion of history was completely changed from a cyclical view to one that saw history as having a beginning, a design, and a goal, all of which were the manifestation of God's freedom.

History, therefore, was seen as a drama or a dialogue, engaging their own freedom as a people and as individuals with the freedom of God. But for the Israelite, freedom was not seen as one attribute of God among

many. Rather, freedom was the living and the holy God, the living and holy God who did not act arbitrarily or out of necessity, or from whom the world did not emanate in any necessary way.

In God, freedom is the executor of His holiness. His own inner life, His own inner law, is His Holiness, a concept which many of us have leveled, have lost the meaning. But for the Israelite, holiness meant life brought to an intensity of incandescence. This is the holiness of God. Therefore, the very inner law, the inner life of God, His identity, was His holiness. But His holiness is manifested in His freedom, which is His freedom to unite, to call into a share of His holiness. God manifested His freedom, therefore, in election, but He chooses only to bless. Blessing, again in the Scriptural sense, means to communicate life. He blesses in order to send. These three notions tie in very intimately with the idea of freedom: election, blessing and mission. All of these show God as the Lord of history.

But the people of Israel were also given the score, or the scenario of their role in this dialogue. This was the Law, but not the Law in a narrow sense, but rather that beautiful description that you have of the Law in Psalm 119, where the law is described in every possible simile and analogy of things that are precious and things that are expansive: “You have opened a wide road for me, you have freed me.” It is an amazing thing, and again it is this paradox of freedom that they find they become more free in following the ways of God. We often think of freedom particularly if I have only one way to choose, as narrowing. They find their freedom in the fact that the Way has been revealed, and that is the Law. But the Law is the crystallization, in concrete ways, of the holiness of God. Even though the Law itself later can become formalized, and again leveled, made profane in a way, the basic notion of the Law was: the revelation of the ways of God’s holiness.

The Old Testament idea of freedom originated therefore, in event, God’s entrance into their history. In contrast with an idea of freedom that we would have in Greek philosophy, freedom for the Israelite is not simply something that is there, something to be unfolded through the immanent laws of human nature. Rather, freedom is a gift. It comes from being drawn into the very ways of God Himself in the Covenant. Their experience of freedom is eventful. It originates from events, and it is to manifest itself through the event which is the kingdom of God. It is not, therefore, immanentistic. It simply doesn’t unfold as human nature unfolds. It is not, as in the Greek notion, “harmony.” In the Stoical view of harmony, the free man is the one who lives in harmony with the laws of his being and the laws of the cosmos. It’s interesting that the Hebrews don’t even have a word for *cosmos*, the Greek word for *order*. They don’t have a word, because they see the order, not as an inbuilt thing, like, if you want, that of a clock. Rather, it is the order that comes from a relationship; it comes from belonging. The supreme order, therefore, is not the harmony of reason to law, but the harmony of the heart to God. Similarly, their idea of freedom is not seen in an individualistic way, or in terms of isolation. It comes from entering into a covenanted community. I think the Hebrew concept of freedom is beautifully expressed, though in terms now of someone in the New Testament, but speaking out of the Old, in the Canticle of Zachary, where he says, “You have *freed* us *from* our enemies *to* worship you without fear all the days of our life.”

So freedom is an entirely different view, if you want, than what we ordinarily associate with freedom. It’s freedom from their enemies, but not simply from the viewpoint of being liberated from Egypt, or Babylon. Rather it’s freedom from all of those powers which would be inimical or hostile or diminishing to worship. Therefore they are freed to worship.

B. The New Testament Idea of Freedom

1. The Freedom of Christ

The way that Israel experienced freedom was through, as I said, a religious experience. It didn’t come from a philosophy; it didn’t come from analyzing human nature, but from a faith-consciousness of a religious

experience interpreted through the prophets. Similarly, the Christian notion of freedom comes from the experience of an event, and the appropriation of that event, making one's own the meaning of that event, which is, of course, the liberating or redemptive event.

In Jesus Himself we find the paradigm of what the Christian would describe as freedom. In fact, Jesus describes the very event which liberated the world as coming from His freedom, as we read in John, 10: "The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again, and this is the command I have been given by my Father."

Again, you find in John, chapter 5: "As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to anyone He chooses."

Or in Matthew, 11: "No one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."

What is the nature of the freedom of Christ? We read much these days about the consciousness of Christ, and so on. This is something that often baffles me, as if we could catch the consciousness of Christ in the net of our little minds. If our own consciousness has roots of which we only experience the branches, what about the consciousness of Christ? Our own freedom is lost in mystery. Much more the freedom of Christ!

His freedom is basically an empowering that comes from His communion with the Father, a communion which empowers Him to fulfill the very law of His being. The basis of His freedom, therefore, is union, intimate union with the Father, not as we as creatures are united to God, but in that union which as we read in the prologue of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Therefore an intimacy, an identity, and at the same time, a distinction from the very ground, the very source of all freedom. In turn, His acts of freedom, as they arise from the deepest communion, create communion. This is the essence of the freedom of Christ. His acts arise out of communion in order to create communion. From the first moment of that creation of union, it is the overcoming of disunion.

The freedom of Christ, therefore, is a power arising from a vital union of oneness, the mutuality of life and love with the Father. This mutuality commits Him fully to the very law of His being, which in Scripture is called "mission." The accomplishment of His mission is the communication of His own freedom; the communication of His own freedom is the communication of Himself; and the communication of Himself is the communication of the relationship that He has with the Father. His supreme act of freedom, the paradigm, I say, of all human freedom, is at the same time paradoxically the supreme act of submission to the Father.

Therefore in Jesus freedom is not absolute but relative, relative to the Father and to mankind; not closed, but open, open to the Father, open to mankind. At the same time, the freedom of Jesus, as I said about the freedom of Israel, is not a freedom for itself, but a freedom that exists for the liberation of others. The supreme act of freedom is also the supreme act of free-ing.

It's interesting, and I'd like someday to talk to St. Paul and see how he penetrated into the mystery of Christ's freedom and liberation more than any of the disciples, so that it became thematic, as I'm sure you know, in his letters and in his oral teaching. It's an interesting thing.

What we've been saying about the freedom of Christ might sound very abstract, and yet it's most real. However, it might help if we, in a concrete way, show how this freedom manifested itself. It's a freedom which overspilled the social, religious and political categories of His time. One thing we could not do is categorize Jesus. We think we knew who He was, and suddenly He appears as another, in that sense kind of a protean being. When He

asked who did people think that He was, they came up with all of these ideas, John the Baptist, Elijah, and so on. How could we be so mixed up about one individual? The point is: he defied and broke all categories.

For example, to point out things we are aware of, it was contrary to the custom for any teacher to choose His own disciples. Gamaliel didn't go around picking students; students came to Gamaliel. Jesus, on the other hand, went around and picked His disciples. Not a very good pick, we might say. It was like Charlie Brown's baseball team. He limited their number to a number symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel.

His freedom is shown in the way that He treated women, not again in a way that this theme is often trivialized in extreme advocates of Women's Liberation. It's something that gets deeper than mere convention. Again we find the mystery of the freedom of Christ. We find it in His attitude towards the inveterate enemies of the Jews, the Samaritans. Again, we find it in His being at home with sinners, while at the same time speaking strongly against sin. Most unusually, he wasn't caught up with the Weltgeist, or whatever the Hebrew word for that would be, of the nationalistic and political movements of His day, which anyone interested in liberation would certainly take up. We'd be Zealots!

His own work was a work of demythologizing. He had to destroy and demythologize even their notion of the Messiah, their notion of the Kingdom of God, their notion as a people which was exclusive. He had to destroy their dreams in order to fulfill their hopes. As He said to the disciples on the way to Emmaus after the Resurrection, "Ought not the Christ to have suffered, and so to have entered into His Glory?" He destroyed their dreams, but He fulfilled their hopes.

His resurrection from the dead and His ascension to the right hand of the Father are not some kind of a Gnostic space trip. Rather His resurrection and exaltation mean that the whole Being of Christ becomes the embodiment of the very freedom of God, and the sacrament of liberation for man. In His resurrection and exaltation His freedom takes on that limitlessness of God's own freedom, not in the sense of infinity, but in the sense of the limitlessness of God's power to communicate His Being. Therefore His whole being is turned to the world, in a sense nothing reserved for Himself. That is perfect freedom, when he can put his whole being into his gift.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews expresses this very well when he sees Christ's whole being simply as a being forever, but a being forever to intercede for us. As we read in Hebrews, chapter 7, "it follows then, that as his power to save is utterly certain, since he is living forever to intercede for all who come to God through him." In other words, the limited nature of our freedom comes from many aspects: we can't attend to things as we ought; we might be driving and fall asleep. We can't attend the ones we love, even though our intention is to love; we can't attend very often, completely. But the author of the letter to the Hebrews says Christ attends completely. Now this is His freedom.

The liberating power of Christ is given to the Church through the gift of His Spirit; the very first gift that Christ gives as he breathes on the disciples after the Resurrection is the power to unite. It is the Power to free: "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained." Therefore the Church carries out the work of liberation throughout history, not by teaching a set of principles, like Buddha or Confucius, but by drawing men into the relationship that Christ has with the Father.

Those are a few brief remarks, then, about the freedom of Christ.

2. The Freedom of the Christian

I'd like to speak briefly about the freedom of the Christian, particularly as we have it described in John and in Paul. In the Gospel of John, we read in chapter 8: "To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said: 'If you make

my word your home, you will indeed be my disciples; you will learn the truth, and the truth will make you free.’ They answered, ‘We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone; what do you mean, ‘You will be made free’? Jesus replied: ‘I tell you most solemnly, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. Now the slave’s place in the house is not assured, but the son’s place is assured. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.’”

Therefore freedom means being perfectly at home. In a more sophisticated way it is what the philosophers speak of as self-possession, or as being present to oneself. But in a Scriptural sense, it is relational. It is to be at home, in the relationship for which we are made. Outside of this relationship the human is in Hell. Christ says we are perfectly free when we share His own at-homeness with the Father. This takes place when we allow His word, which is the extension of Himself, to make its home in us. If He is at home in us through faith, we are in turn at home in Him, in perfect freedom. What he says, then, is that when one opens his heart to the Word, a liberation takes place, a liberation which is the experience of going from darkness to light, from death to life. When I was thinking about this, the example of the life of Helen Keller came to mind. You remember she was blind, deaf, mute; there was no way of communicating except through the sense of touch. And then her teacher took water, one day, and wrote on Helen’s hand the word “water.” Suddenly the whole world opened up, because of a word.

In a sense, I say, you have an analogy, that when one opens oneself to the Word of God, it has opened a whole world. It’s drawn a person into a relationship that is a gift relationship, the relationship that Christ has with the Father, and to the world.

More than any other New Testament author, Paul expresses the Christian message in terms of freedom. This didn’t come about because he was interested in freedom, as a philosopher, but rather he stressed freedom because he knew what slavery meant. Most of us don’t know what health is, unless we’ve been sick. We don’t know what it means to have money unless we’ve been poor. We don’t know what Christianity means unless we know what it means to be saved.

The people of Israel, who had experienced slavery, knew what freedom meant. Paul, as Saul, thought he had been free, as a Pharisee, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a student of Gamaliel - and he found out he was a slave. He knew what freedom meant because he experienced a transition. He experienced a metamorphosis from slavery to freedom. This is why freedom is thematic in Paul. Just as Israel experienced a transition, Paul experienced a transition in his own life. This is why he speaks so strongly: as the prophets spoke about Israel returning to the slavery of the Baals, the fertility gods, and so on, so Paul speaks of returning to anything that is pre-Christ, that is before Christ, because that is return to slavery. Paul knew that no one rules himself, as if we were completely autonomous; rather, a person’s dignity or loss of dignity depends on what we allow to rule us. Paul is saying that, if a person is ruled by anything or anyone less than Christ and His Word, he is a slave. Hence, to be ruled by the Torah, which has been superseded, is to be a slave. To be ruled by the powers of evil, human powers of evil or superhuman, is to be a slave. To be ruled by the consequences of evil; namely, death, that is slavery.

Paul preached so much about freedom that, as usually happens with our human nature, his listeners would take it as an excuse for false liberty. He was forced to remind them that genuine liberty was not license. As he told the Galatians, “Brothers, you have been summoned to liberty; only do not turn that freedom into license for the flesh.”

The basis for Paul’s teaching of freedom is not found in a philosophy or a concept of man or a concept of will, but it is from the experience that Christian existence is a new mode of being, a new mode of being related, from which follows a new pattern of life. As he says, the Christian is a new creation, literally, just as the first person who came from God. “If then any man is in Christ, he is new, completely new. Wonderful to tell, he has been made over absolutely new,” as he says in 2nd Corinthians, chapter 5, or Romans, 6, putting it very strongly - he

couldn't put it more strongly - "Consider yourselves dead men brought back to life."

The new mode of being related is described as adoptive sonship, so that we can boldly say, "Abba." And this takes place through the Spirit who is poured in our hearts (Rm 8.11, 14). All of this involves a whole new pattern of life as we read in Romans, 12: "Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modelled by your new mind" (Rm 12.2). For Paul, then, freedom is a process of transpersonalization, where our human personality takes on the very being of Christ's person. "I live now not I but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2. 20).

Let us sum up, then, the biblical notion of freedom. It is an experience which originates in event; it does not come from philosophy or introspection. The event in which it originates is God's entrance into history, in a preliminary way in the Old Testament and then in an inconceivable way in the enmeshment of the Son of God in the New Testament. The experience has many aspects: first, the experience of God's own gracious freedom in His election, fidelity and blessing; second, it is the experience of our own slippery hold on this freedom, our fragility, our tendency to fall back into slavery. St. Paul was conscious of this when he said, "Pray for me, lest after having preached to others I become a castaway." There is the consciousness that we do not have a hold on this in the sense that it's simply all settled. We are in constant need of the attitude so beautifully expressed in the prayer of Kierkegaard where he said in speaking about God's having loved us first - I'm paraphrasing: "We often think that as God having loved us first once and for all. But God loves us first at every moment. When we get up in the morning God has loved us first. When we turn to God in prayer He has first loved us". Therefore, the firstness of God's love is always anticipating.

Thirdly, freedom comes from a commitment, a commitment to open ourselves to God's will, a decision to follow His ways. In the New Testament, freedom is seen first of all in Christ, in His identity with the Father and His existence for man. His existence with the Father gives Him the power to direct His whole being to bring about the return of all things to the Father in His redemptive act. The Christian is free to the extent that he becomes someone new. In the New Testament this image of newness is contrasted with that of the "old man". To the extent that someone becomes completely new and his actions flow from this newness which comes from his incorporation into Christ, to that extent he is free. It is evident how far the Christian notion of freedom is from that of any other religion or philosophy. Time, however, does not let us make this type of comparison and contrast.

II. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

From our reflections on the biblical notion of freedom, I would like to draw some theological and philosophical implications. There are ten characteristics I would like to single out.

1. In the first place, it is important to note that freedom brings the whole person into play; his past, future and present in all the complexity of his relationship to God, the world and himself. Freedom cannot be atomized and spoken of only in terms of isolated acts. Freedom is in the first place a *mode of being*. This is an insight expressed first in St. Paul and later in writers like Augustine, Kierkegaard, Buber and Heschel. Freedom is that mode of being that characterizes a person. Particular acts of freedom give an existential shape to the whole being, for good or for evil.

2. The mystery of freedom is, therefore, the mystery of *personhood*. Man is in a limited way what God is in an unlimited way. In scriptural terms the human is the *imago Dei*. But what does this mean? We obviously do not mean image in terms of a little cameo representing God. Rather image is a dynamic idea. This is a mystery of the power to bring about union and to enter into union in a way that resembles God's own creative activity. In the Old Testament the idea of the image of God is that the human becomes God's vicegerent on earth. To kill a

person is to kill God's vicegerent on earth. That's why the blood of Abel cried out, because it is as if Cain had killed God. The blood cries out to heaven. In the New Testament, the human is the *imago Christi*, i.e., one putting on the mind of Christ. It is the power to be on earth what Christ is in heaven, the power to liberate by uniting. On the purely human level - I'm not implying that anything ever happens on the purely human level this creativity is the source of the various levels of union, those of culture, of technology, of society. On the level of grace (union), it is the source of the continued freshness of God in the world. It is like spring which constantly reasserts itself within the entropy of our world.

3. Man's freedom has, as it were, *three moments or stages*. First, there is what is called transcendental freedom, i.e., the very basis of freedom is located in God Himself, the ultimate ground of freedom. The second aspect of freedom is transcendent freedom which is the power to distance oneself from individual objects that are presented for choice, a certain equipoise that comes from the fact that the human by his spiritual nature shares in some way in God's own transcendence; thirdly, the power to choose or not to choose, or to choose among alternatives. The debates concerning determinism or indeterminism are sometimes based on a false notion of motivation. Surely we are motivated in our choices. The mystery of freedom lies in the fact that we allow ourselves to be motivated by one alternative rather than another. As St. Augustine said: "Each one is moved by his own pleasure. Show me your pleasure, and I shall show you what moves you." This is not only being attracted in the sense of final causality. Freedom is that mystery of our power to tip the balance to one attraction or another. It is the mysterious power of decision, a mysterious power to create or destroy. There is no neutral act of freedom. It brings about unity or disunity.

4. Man's freedom is both *unconditioned* and *conditioned*. A strict determinism sees freedom as caught within the vectors of existence, and in some way as simply a resultant of those vectors. If we could sort out the vectors we could explain a person's choice. In the Christian sense, on the other hand, our freedom has its base in our spiritual being and in this sense is unconditioned. In the concrete, however, our freedom is conditioned by many factors of temperament, circumstances, habits. There is also the limitation that comes from personal and original sin, which create a certain spiritual inertia disposing a person to being at home with choices that fit this inertia.

5. Man's freedom, therefore, needs to be *healed* from the inside-out through God's grace in order that his choices develop the sureness, spontaneity and consistency of a freedom that is healthy. No culture, no civilization, nothing from merely outside can heal that which has to be healed from the very roots up through the trunk and the branches. This healing takes place both immediately through God's grace as well as mediately through the sacraments. It is the primary object of the prayer of petition: "A clean heart create in me, Lord." This is a prayer for freedom. Christianity rejects the extremes of Pelagianism which extols the healthiness of man's will, or a Stoic type of character, as well as the extremes of a theology which diminishes freedom to the point where there is no genuine freedom. It is important to realize that in spite of our talk about freedom, there is a deep-rooted fear of genuine freedom, because freedom is honesty, authenticity, responsibility. "We love the truth when it illumines itself; we hate it when it illumines us," as Augustine says. There is a deep-seated collusion with any theory which diminishes our responsibility, like the masks that people hide behind during the Mardi Gras. We prefer illusion if it flatters rather than truth if it hurts. The first act of freedom, therefore, is to say, "I have sinned." Note that in the Watergate affair no one did anything wrong, but many made mistakes in judgment. But that's not peculiar only to Watergate. We all do it. Look at Adam's statement, "The woman you gave me gave me to eat." In other words, it was God's responsibility: you gave me the woman and she gave me to eat. Then the woman says: "The serpent deceived me" and you created the serpent. So it's God's fault anyway. I say there's nothing we fear like freedom though we talk so much about it. Ultimately freedom is responsibility.

6. The Christian idea of freedom can be called *three-dimensional*. It is related, as was said, to God as the ground of freedom. It finds its relations *to God*, however, in and through relationship to an *event* which is both historical and transhistorical, the redemptive event of Christ, which both liberates us from unfreedom and unites

us to Christ. It is *societal*. It originates in a person situated at a particular point in the continuum of history, and comes to fruition by reaching out into that continuum of history. In the terminology of Teilhard de Chardin, there is a *radial* aspect (interiority, or consciousness), and a *tangential* aspect (complexification, the unification brought about among things and peoples through our freedom). The radial and tangential in Teilhard are reciprocal; they grow in unison. As we deepen the tangential (our freedom entering into history) there is also a process of greater interiorization.

This means, when I speak of a three-dimensional aspect of freedom (to God, to event and to society), that freedom is summed up by the term “self-commitment.” In a sense, this is paradoxical. It’s like Kierkegaard’s three stages of freedom, of which you are aware: the esthetic, the ethical and the religious. Within the religious we look particularly to the Christian aspect. Let us look first at the esthetic stage where we seem to be so free. We can go anywhere and do anything we want. We’re the dilettante, the esthete, i.e., we have no commitment. Kierkegaard maintains that that is not genuine freedom because there is no commitment. He then moves on to a stage of commitment, but it’s a commitment to law. Kierkegaard here uses the image of marriage. That seems to be limiting, but it’s really a stage of freeing because it’s a commitment. He moves finally to the stage of religion, where he finds the greatest freedom in a commitment to Christ. Therefore, paradoxically, what seems to limit most becomes the most freeing.

7. In the seventh place, the more and the less of freedom should not be confused with the quantity of the objects to be chosen, the more or less of the number of things I have to choose from. As a matter of fact, our freedom does not depend on the quantity of objects but on the quality of the object. My freedom is not, for example, expressed by the fact that I have a hundred books in my library compared to your having one. This is especially true if the one you have is more liberating than my one hundred. Therefore, the degree of freedom among objects, the freedom that an object has to liberate, depends on its power to mediate either the spirit of man or the spirit of God. A great classic could liberate me, whereas a hundred trivial paperbacks could enslave me. In fact there is usually an inverse relationship between freedom and the quantity of objects. This is why Scripture speaks so often about money enslaving; not because money in itself is evil, but because money multiplies our alternatives without giving us any depth. Objects are free to the extent that they mediate freedom. Therefore, the word of God is the most mediating.

8. In the eighth place, the final goal of freedom, as well as its source, is communion that completely fulfill the human heart. In theology, it is called the beatific vision, that is a union where one sees completely because one loves completely. Freedom in this life is the fragile, tentative, seeking, failing power to enter into that communion and to make it one’s own but in a way that is conditioned by the uncertainties of time and our own frailties.

9. Freedom radically is the power to *relocate my whole center of gravity* by putting myself within the orbit of God’s love. It is allowing oneself to be loved as the Father loves the Son, and responding as the Son does to the Father with complete trust. Hence, Christian freedom is related to hope and trust. It is not the freedom to move mountains, but that mysterious power to move my whole world, in order to set it in tune with the will of the Father. Though we may not all be priests, in this sense we all have the power of transubstantiation, to move our being into the being of God. This is, of course, what the Eucharist symbolizes and effects.

10. Finally, how could we describe Christian freedom? It is the capacity of the human to respond through self-determination to that which fulfill him as a person. Revelation unfolds the nature of that self-determination, as well as the trajectory of that path which fulfill the human as a person. Put very simply the source, model, goal, inner law is Christ: “I am the way, the truth and life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14. 6). Romano Guardini put this very well: “Because Christ enters into me, lives in me, I am finally able to be myself, the self which God has in mind when He created me and there awoke in me my power of initiative, decision and self-development” (*Grace, Freedom, Destiny* , p. 73). The mystery of freedom as self-realization drops even

deeper into mystery when the self-realization is the acceptance of what seems to be a self-diminishment through humiliation, suffering and death. In other words, it is the mystery of how the deepest communion with God can convert even self-diminishment into freedom and liberation. What appears to be diminishment, Teilhard de Chardin in *The Divine Milieu* speaks of as the divinization of our passivities. How is this possible: to become greater by becoming less? We have a law of our being that comes to fulfillment when we're touched by grace.

III. SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN NOTION OF FREEDOM IN RELATIONSHIP TO OUR CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

In this last section I'd like to talk about some of the implications of the Christian notion of freedom, and, perhaps try to tie in with some of the things we talked about last evening and this morning.

The rapid journey we have just made through the biblical and theological notion of Christian freedom will strike people differently depending on their own world views. For some it might sound like a trip with Alice through an imaginativewonderland. Others might find it "mystical," but hardly relevant to our modern world. Still others, like the pagan Celsus in the second century, will accuse Christians of unbounded arrogance for making such claims, when they are in fact (in his language) like maggots on a dunghill. Here we're talking about freedom and about sharing the freedom of Christ and yet we realize in our lives what a wounded, fragile, inconsistent freedom this is. It's because of this that the Church exists for sinners.

I would like to propose the thesis that the particular mission of the Church today and for the unforeseeable future is to provide the light and leaven of freedom for the world. At first sight, this may sound obvious or trite. But perhaps if we reflect, we shall find that it is neither trite nor obvious, nor in a liberation theology narrowly conceived.

Historically, the Christian notion of freedom entered into the world like a tiny seed blown up to a rocky ledge that found its way into a crevice in the rock. Humanly speaking it could not survive against the hostile elements. It was surrounded by fatalistic philosophies, skepticism, mystery religions, incipient gnosticism glorifying the divine spark in man, and a situation of moral decadence. But the tiny seed took root, grew, and eventually split the mountain into rocks that became the fertile soil in which our concept of freedom grew.

In many respects we find ourselves today in the same situation as Christianity in its beginnings. It is true, of course, that our consciousness of man's dignity, of justice, human rights, etc., has been raised over the past 1900 years. On the other hand, there has been a regression to positions which existed when Christianity first came on the scene. We are living in what many call a post-Christian world. As Gilson said, however, what is post-Christian is really pre-Christian. Under different names we find ourselves back in the philosophies of fatalism, skepticism, gnosticism, and of moral decadence. We have witnessed the secularization of the Christian notion of freedom. We have taken the fruit and cut down the tree. As I see it, this is the greatest diabolical *tour de force* that has been witnessed in history.

There are differences, of course, between our present situation in the 20th century and that of the 19th. The complexities of the interlinking of the various factors that govern our existence have grown enormously. As Teilhard de Chardin described it: we are the cards, the stakes, and the players. One factor however which is significantly present in the modern world is the Promethean instinct that has stolen, not fire from the gods, but *techne*, skill, the source of technology, and given man a great sense of power. That was not present in the Roman or Greek world into which Christianity came. Rather, there was a sense of despair, of powerlessness. Christianity could respond to this powerlessness, but today we have a substitute sense of power, even though this also has been shaken very much in the past five or six years. Even though a person may not have a philosophy of determinism, nonetheless, in our lives, there is an operational deterministic attitude. Someone this

morning adverted to Goethe's poem, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* : we have awakened what was supposed to be our servant, and it has become our master. We have become reabsorbed into the rhythms of nature. In the experience of Israel, there was, first of all, an experience of distinction. The God of Israel was not a nature god. The people of Israel were not simply bound into the rhythms of nature. We have once again become reabsorbed into the rhythms of nature, which is something Nietzsche went back to deliberately in his philosophy, i.e., to the cyclic notion of history. Strangely enough, even with the sense of power, there is a prevailing sense of determinism among many scientists. Even though this prevailing tone has been challenged by such men as Rollo May and Victor Frankl the attitude still prevails.

One of the most obvious examples of the secularization of the Christian notion of freedom is seen in the field of jurisprudence in this country. It is ironical that we are celebrating the bicentennial of what no longer exists. Only the initiates realize that the concept of freedom upon which the country was founded is no longer accepted by the experts. The philosophy of John Locke upon which Jefferson drew for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution founded the freedom on the law of God as it is in the natural law. This is a concept which most authorities of jurisprudence would no longer accept. It is a "religious" concept, and law is based on what is rationally acceptable to the greatest number. '17herefore, when we speak about freedom as the power of self-determination and self-commitment to that which fulfill the inner law of our being, we are asked what that law is.

Is there such a law? If so, what is it?

Let me mention myth here. Christianity is basically anti-mythical. By myth I mean an imaginative construct which can be expressed on four levels. First, it can be an imaginative construct expressed as a search for meaning. 'nus Eliade speaks of myth as the philosophy of the primitive. It involves such questions as: how did death come into the world? What's the origin of the world? T'hat kind of myth is the product of the search for meaning. Another type of myth is the product of fantasy and exists for entertainment. A third type is an expression of the beautiful in poetry. The fourth type is a product of our fear of freedom. That type of myth is illusion which serves as a buffer between us and reality.

When Christianity entered into the world it was anti-mythical. When Paul preached to the Athenians, they listened to him attentively until he came to the resurrection. Had he spoken about the mythical idea of resurrection, there would have been no problem because that notion belonged to their mystery religion. But he spoke about an historical person, existing at an historical time, who died and who has been brought back to life and who will judge the living and the dead. That is anti-mythical.

The Gospels were written to create the difference between the apocryphal or mythical gospels and the Christ of the Christian experience. How could they explain the God of Christianity in a polytheistic world? They chose again myth. They preached a God of being, not the mythical gods. Tertuffian said that Christ declared Himself to be truth, not custom. This morning the question of truth arose. So often we're afraid of truth because were afraid of freedom. The words 'freedom' and "truth" are abused in terms of tolerance. That is why one is content to speak out of his tradition and another out of another. I'd much rather have someone tell me: "I disagree with you. I think you're wrong." I have a great respect for Anthony Blum, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in exile in London. There was a question whether Roman Catholics in the Ukraine and elsewhere could receive communion from Russian Orthodox priests. In a sermon he allowed the practice but went on to say that the Russian Orthodox Church is the only true Church of Christ and that the Roman Catholic Church is in error. I would personally rather hear that than "I will speak out of my tradition and you speak out of yours," if the speaker is truly con- vinced that there is a truth that has to be manifested.

In the history of Christianity, the Christian community has often come to forks in the road. The choice has been between alternatives which were irreconcilable, whether, for example, Jesus was God and man, or merely a

creature. These alternatives were not between irreconcilable myths, but between irreconcilable judgments. Such doctrinal declarations characterized all of the ecumenical councils of the Church. At those forks in the road - Christianity throughout history has come to them - which do you choose? This is the question of authority to declare the inner law of our being. As a Roman Catholic, in -my own act of faith, I feel that that power has been sacramentalized in the Church, particularly in those who succeed the Apostles, especially in the successor to Peter. Not only has word and redemptive event been sacramentalized, but also the prophetic power of Christ has been sacramentalized. Had we no way to tell which fork in the road to take, we would be in worse condition than in Old Testament times. I see this prophetic power of Christ in the Church.

In the past these forks in the road were doctrinal: whether Christ is God, or simply human, and so forth. The forks in the road now are moral. We have to do now with the development of what it means to be a human person. Or, if you wish, we are facing the distortion of what it means to be human. Who will tell us what fork to take? The sociologist? The Psychologist? The political scientist? The lawyer? The theologian? For me, I know that we are not left orphans. Someday, perhaps, the seeds of Christian freedom will again split the rock, although the odds against it today are as heavy as they were two thousand years ago. Yet I believe with all my heart that the words of the Lord Jesus, "I shall be with you until the end of history" are simply another way of saying that His power to liberate will be here until He comes again.