



## Rome Talk November 10, 2011 Chastity and the Gift of Self

It is a joy and an honor to be a part of this symposium and to have a chance to share with you some reflections on John Paul II's teaching that has transformed many lives, his theology of the body. The topic we're going to look at together is chastity and the gift of self. In order to arrive to this topic, we need to say a few initial words about freedom.

### **Introduction: "For Freedom Christ has set us free."**

"For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1). This ringing acclamation by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians lies at the heart of what chastity means for self-giving love. Paul's affirmation might tend to provoke in us the same response as the Jews gave to Christ, when he told them that the truth would make them free (cf. Jn 8:32). They retorted, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will be made free'?" (Jn 8:33).

Aren't we already free? And quite undeniably so? After all, we freely chose to attend this symposium on the theology of the body—some of us with much traveling to get to Rome in order to be here. And we freely chose to get out of bed this morning in order to attend. Every day we make hundreds of free choices—from the clothes we wear to the food we eat to whether or not we want to go jogging.

So, what does St. Paul really mean anyway when he says "For freedom Christ has set us free?" If we want to discover why the meaning of his assertion isn't immediately clear to us, we have to go back to a character from the High Middle Ages named William of Ockham. He conjured up a new idea of freedom that has become known as *freedom of indifference*. It stood in complete contrast to the notion of freedom which had prevailed in Western tradition and found its leading exponent in St. Thomas Aquinas. Servais Pinckaers, in his book *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, terms this once traditional view *freedom for excellence*.

### **What does freedom really mean anyway?**

Before William of Ockham, people understood something different by *freedom* than we generally do today. Ockham, who lived in the fourteenth century, initiated a revolution in our way of thinking about things, called nominalism, that would sweep through Western philosophy for the next six

centuries. In fact, its effects are still with us today. One of the things which got swept away was what we actually mean, at the deepest level, when we speak about freedom.

### **The nominalist revolution: freedom of indifference**

“For Ockham, freedom meant essentially the power to choose between contraries, independently of all other causes except freedom, or the will itself—whence the term *freedom of indifference*. ‘What I mean by freedom is the power I have to produce various effects, indifferently and in a contingent manner, in such a way that I can either cause an effect or not cause it without any change being produced outside of this power.’” (*Quodl.* I, q. 16)<sup>1</sup>

So we see that for Ockham, the very definition of freedom is the power to choose between contraries.<sup>2</sup> I am free to choose to do good, or to choose to do evil. My ability to do either one is essential to my freedom. I can choose between what reason dictates and its contrary. I can choose between willing and not willing, acting and not acting, between what the law prescribes and its contrary.

If this description of freedom seems pretty normal to us, if none of this seems very radical to us so far, it is precisely because our notion of freedom has been so heavily imbued with nominalist thinking. As Pinckaers puts it, freedom of indifference “is the most widespread concept today. It so fills the horizon of thought and experience that an approach to freedom for excellence necessitates a process of veritable rediscovery.”<sup>3</sup> We need to rediscover what freedom really means at its core.

Before attempting to rediscover the true meaning of freedom in freedom for excellence, we need to consider briefly the place of free will Ockham’s anthropology. Ockham viewed free will as a prime or originating faculty. He maintained that “free will *preceded* reason and will in such a way as to move them to their acts.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Freedom for Excellence: Growing in Freedom**

Things were far different for St. Thomas. In his anthropology, freedom *proceeded from* reason and will, which united to make the act of choice.<sup>5</sup> Free will was not a prime or originating faculty. It presupposed intelligence and will. Freedom was rooted in the natural inclinations of these two faculties to truth and goodness. In fact, the natural inclination of reason to universal truth and of the will to universal goodness constituted the very foundation of freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Servais Pinckaers, O.P. *The Sources of Christian ethics*, translated from the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition by Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1995), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 242.

<sup>3</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 331.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 331.

Why are we free precisely because of the “thirst for the infinite”<sup>6</sup> that constitute our reason and will? Because we yearn for infinite good, every particular good we encounter attracts and draws us to itself. We cannot be indifferent to any of them. But because our reason tends toward universal truth, it is able to perceive that the particular goods which attract us are also limited and disappoint us. They are not the Good, which irresistibly draws our will, but only limited goods, which we can choose to pursue or not.<sup>7</sup>

Pinckaers sums up St. Thomas’ anthropology regarding freedom: “For St. Thomas free will was rooted in the two spiritual faculties of intellect and will, which make the human person an image of God possessing freedom of action, particularly in regard to the natural inclination toward happiness and love and in the inclination to truth. It opened these faculties to the measure of divine infinity, beyond any created object and any created love. Thus the human person was free and in control of his actions, not in spite of, but because of this natural inclination to happiness and truth. The prime moral question, inscribed in our spiritual faculties was, then, what is true happiness? All moral theory was an answer to that question.”<sup>8</sup>

We have before us two sharply contrasting notions of freedom. Pinckaers names that of St. Thomas “*freedom for excellence* or perfection, since it tends spontaneously to the good and the true, to what is of highest quality in view of human perfection.”<sup>9</sup>

If the contrast between these two types of freedom doesn’t seem completely evident to us yet, let us look at one example: the question of the ability to do evil or to sin. For Ockham, the capacity to sin is an essential part of freedom, which, for him, as we have noted, is the ability to choose between contraries. St. Thomas couldn’t disagree more: “The ability of free will to choose between various things in conformity with the end shows the perfection of freedom; but to choose something not ordered to the end, that is, to sin, evinces a defect of freedom. Therefore the angels, who cannot sin, enjoy greater freedom of choice than we do, who can.”<sup>10</sup>

Why is the distinction between these two visions of freedom so critical? One of the reasons is that freedom of indifference represents an absolute freedom, a freedom that is given to us all at once. We are free to choose a cappuccino or a café latte for a nice Italian snack. No real effort is required.

Freedom for excellence, on the other hand, is a freedom given us as a capacity that must be developed. We need to grow in the exercise of this type of freedom. What are the chief aids that enable to grow in the exercise of freedom for excellence? They are what St. Thomas referred to as the *habitus* or virtues. “These are stable dispositions that develop the power of the faculties and render us capable

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<sup>6</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 394.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, pp. 393-394.

<sup>8</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 223.

<sup>9</sup> Pinckaers, p. 223. Emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q 62 a 8, ad 3). As cited in Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, p 389.

of performing actions of high quality. They are not to be confused with our ordinary understanding of habits—psychological mechanisms that diminish the moral commitment to an action. The *habitus* as St. Thomas intended it is a principle of progress and resourcefulness through full commitment. It is through these *habitus* or stable dispositions that we acquire mastery over our actions and become entirely free.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the *habitus* or virtues are “dynamic potentialities for carrying out noble actions.”<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely freedom for excellence that St. Paul refers to when he exclaims, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1). It is this same freedom for excellence that Christ himself invokes when he proclaims: “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32).

### **Freedom in the theology of the body**

That all may seem well and good, perhaps even intriguing. But the question might be insinuating itself in the back of our minds: “What does all this have to do with chastity and the gift of self?” Where does the theology of the body come into play?

John Paul II uses the word “freedom (*libertà*)” 93 times in his theology of the body.<sup>13</sup> It is a crucial term in his understanding of who we are as persons and what constitutes the meaning of our existence. Freedom culminates in what the Holy Father calls the “freedom of the gift (*libertà del dono, libertà di dono*).”<sup>14</sup> The capacity to give oneself entirely to another person reveals “the innermost point” of freedom (TOB 18, 5).

The fact that freedom possesses an “innermost point” already makes it clear that it is not a question of an absolute freedom of indifference, given to us all at once, but of a freedom that must be forged and developed, one that must be conquered through self-mastery and growth in virtue. John Paul II specifically defines what is denoted by his concept of freedom: “Here we mean freedom above all as *self-mastery* (self-dominion). Under this aspect, self-mastery is indispensable *in order for man to be able to “give himself,”* in order for him to become a gift...” (TOB 15, 2). Freedom in its true form as freedom for excellence underlies the entire theology of the body.

### **Original man: the freedom of the gift and the spousal meaning of the body**

In the first chapters of the book of Genesis, we catch a glimpse of the heights of freedom in God’s original plan for man and woman. Before sin, Adam and Eve are able to give their entire persons to one another in the act of sexual union. They are able to make a gift of themselves in perfect freedom

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<sup>11</sup> Pinckaers, p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, p. 224.

<sup>13</sup> TOB 14:6 • 15:1-3.5 • 16:3 • 17:2 • 18:5 • 19:1-2 • 27:2 • 32:6 • 33:1 • 39:2.5 • 41:3 • 43:6 • 45:2 • 46:4 • 48:3 • 49:2.6 • 51:1 • 52:5 • 53:1-3 • 57:2 • 58:4.6 • 69:6 • 70:7 • 72:4 • 80:5 • 86:1.3.8 • 99:5 • 101:5-6 • 110:9 • 117b:5 • 123:5 • 126:1 • 128:2-3 • 130:4 • 132:3.5.

<sup>14</sup> TOB 15:1-4.5 • 17:2 • 18:5 • 19:1-2 • 32:6 • 33:1 • 39:5 • 41:3 • 43:6 • 46:4 • 48:3 • 49:6 • 57:2 • 58:6 • 69:6 • 80:5 • 86:8 • 101:5 • 110:9 • 117b:5 • 123:5 • 128:2-3 • 130:4 • 132:3.5.

and receive the gift of the other with no reservations or self-interest, without the slightest taint of sensuality or utilitarianism, in which the other is treated as an object, rather than a person. This act of self-giving love is an incarnation of the gift of their entire lives, their very selves to one another.

A single verse from the book of Genesis reflects this reality, letting it shine forth. John Paul II called it one of the most beautiful verses of the Bible: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gn 2:25). Why were they not ashamed? Because they were free with what the Holy Father named *the freedom of the gift*. They realized that God had created them male and female precisely to make a gift of themselves in love, to live a communion of love. They recognized in each other’s naked body, not an object to be used, but a person to be loved.

In a key audience, number fifteen, John Paul II explains the freedom of the gift, which lays the foundation for the central concept of the entire theology of the body: *the spousal meaning of the body*.

“One can say that, created by Love, that is, endowed in their being with masculinity and femininity, both are “naked,” because they are *free with the very freedom of the gift*. This freedom lies exactly at the basis of the spousal meaning of the body. The human body, with its sex—its masculinity and femininity—seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and of procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains ‘from the beginning’ the ‘spousal’ attribute, that is, *the power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift* and—through this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence” (TOB 15, 1).

### **Historical Man and the Ethos of the Redemption**

Well and good, we might think at this point. God’s original plan for man and woman certainly was a beautiful one—but aren’t we ourselves left out in the cold? After all, we do not form part of original man. We belong to historical man: tainted by sin, facing its ramifications in our thoughts and actions. The Holy Father affirms clearly: “In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ does not invite man to return to the state of original innocence, because humanity has left it irrevocably behind...” (TOB 49, 4). We form part of what John Paul II designates “the man of concupiscence.”

The Holy Father describes with no little realism the affects of this concupiscence. “The concupiscence of the body is a specific threat to the structure of self-possession and self-dominion through which the human person forms itself. And it also constitutes a specific challenge for the person. In any case, *the man of concupiscence does not rule his own body in the same way, with the same simplicity and ‘naturalness’ as the man of original innocence*. The structure of self-possession, which is essential for the person, is in some way shaken in him to its very foundations; he identifies himself anew with this structure in the degree to which he is ever ready to gain it by conquest” (TOB 28, 3).

So what should we do? Weep bitterly? Lament profusely at what might have been? No! By his death and resurrection Christ has redeemed us—not only in soul, but also in body. He calls us to a new ethos, the ethos of the redemption. He invites us to the challenge of conquering anew the freedom of the gift, of living once more the spousal meaning of the body.

## Chastity and the gift of self

And what is the virtue that enables us conquer ourselves anew so that we can make a gift of ourselves in love? It is precisely the virtue of chastity. As John Paul II has insightfully discerned, one cannot give what he doesn't first possess. It is through chastity that we achieve the complete possession of ourselves in order to give ourselves away in love.

The Catechism describes chastity with a language that is imbued with the theology of the body: "Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift."<sup>15</sup>

But it is not all just slugging it out and self-denial on our part to try and rise to such a high ideal. Christ does much more than challenge us. He calls us efficaciously, pouring out his Holy Spirit to justify us through faith and to become a living force within us. John Paul II declares, "This 'justification' by faith does not constitute simply a dimension of the divine plan of salvation and of man's sanctification, but according to St. Paul it is *an authentic force at work in man that reveals and affirms itself in his actions*" (51, 4).

## The spousal meaning of the body in consecrated life

Now everything seems wonderful—almost. A final thought that we are left out in the cold by the theology of the body could still occur to many of us here present, who are living the consecrated life. For if, as John Paul II so vigorously affirms, the spousal meaning of the body is the very center of our existence as persons, what happens to us who will never become spouses, but are vowed to consecrated virginity?

The first answer is that consecrated persons too live the gift of themselves in love, in a nonsexual way, in a universal self-giving to all persons they encounter throughout their life. But the second answer goes even deeper. Reflecting on Mark 12:25, "For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven," John Paul II paradoxically affirms that the ultimate meaning of marriage, its eternal meaning is fulfilled precisely in heaven.

With Christ as the bridegroom, and each member of the Church as a bride, the spiritual marriage with Christ will take place, in which he gives his whole person to us and receives the gift of our poor selves. So consecrated persons make present in a real way the eternal meaning of marriage, anticipating it, so to speak, on this earth. It is a true living out of the spousal meaning of the body that helps reveal the inner meaning of marriage between husband and wife and its call to spiritual fruitfulness.

## Conclusion: Entrust ourselves to joy

A beautiful quote from John Paul II, with which he concludes his theme of the redemption of the body, seems like the best way to bring to a close these few reflections.

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<sup>15</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2337.

“One thing, in fact, is the satisfaction of passions, quite another is the joy a person finds in possessing himself or herself more fully, thus being able to become more fully a true gift for another person.

The words Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount direct the human heart precisely toward such joy. To these words one needs to entrust oneself, one’s own thoughts, and one’s own actions, to find joy and to give it to others” (TOB 58,7).