

12. We can choose to change



We are all given all the grace we need to do the will of God!

I. Choosing to heal our common home

Laudato Si' n. 105

‘There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means “an increase of ‘progress’ itself”, an advance in “security, usefulness, welfare and vigour; ... an assimilation of new values into the stream of culture”, as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such. The fact is that “contemporary man has not been trained to use power well”, because our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience. Each age tends to have only a meagre awareness of its own limitations.’

‘It is possible that we do not grasp the gravity of the challenges now before us. “The risk is growing day by day that man will not use his power as he should”; in effect, “power is never considered in terms of the responsibility of choice which is inherent in freedom” since its “only norms are taken from alleged necessity, from either utility or security”. But human beings are not completely autonomous. Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.’

‘Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours. No one has the right to take it from us.’

God's perfect
human Word,
symbol of the
Divine Word
of the Self-giving
Transcendent
God



Communion in the
Love-Spirit that
unites Jesus and God,
symbol of the
Divine Love-communion
of the
Self-giving
Transcendent
God

There is a necessary link between living a moral life and the exercise of freedom. Jesus does not praise the man who buried his talent for fear that he might lose it (Matthew 25:24-30). Jesus wants us to live and live to the full (John 10:10). We are to dare to live, and to learn to love through the exercise of our God-given freedom. Our freedom can be restricted by others. It can be restricted from within. Freedom is always an achievement – the fruit of a life of courageous decisions.

In John's Gospel we hear Jesus say: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free ... Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'(John 8:31-36).

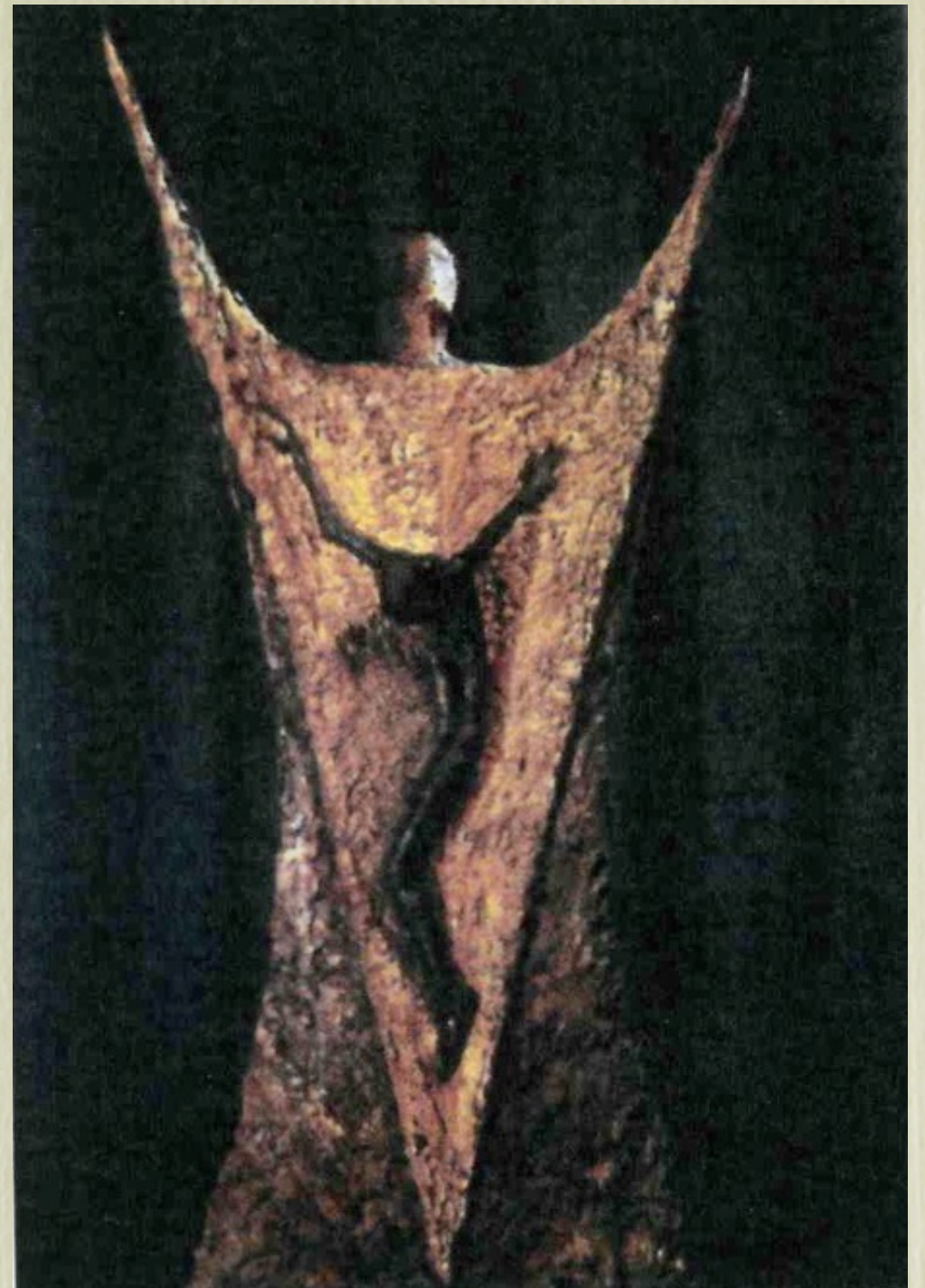
Paul reminds us that Jesus has set us free: free from all that would inhibit us from living life to the full, and free to live a beautiful, moral life, following Jesus' example and enabled by the gift of his Spirit – the Spirit that is experienced within the Christian community and in the heart of believers.

We might reflect on the following words from Paul to the communities Galatia: Galatians 1:3-5 perhaps the earliest words of the New Testament!).

‘*Grace* to you and *peace* from God our Father and the *Lord* Jesus Christ,

who *gave himself* for our sins *to set us free* from the present evil age,

according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.’



Paul's core experience was of being loved by Christ
(**'he gave himself'** 1:4),

Only God's love, the love of Christ poured into our hearts by his Spirit, has the power to transform the world.

‘Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’(Galatians 4:6).

‘For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’(Galatians 5:1).

‘In Christ Jesus ... the only thing that counts is faith working through love’(Galatians 5:6).

‘You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’(Galatians 5:13-14).

‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’(2Corinthians 3:17).

‘Your sanctification is the fruit of your having been freed from sin and enslaved to God’(Romans 6:22).

‘Thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness’(Romans 6:17-18).

‘The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death’(Romans 8:2).

‘You have been set free from bondage to decay to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’(Romans 8:21).

‘Those who look into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in all they do’(James 1:25).

‘As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honour everyone. Love the family of believers’(1Peter 2:16-17).

‘These false prophets promise freedom but they are themselves slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them’(2Peter 2:19).

Pope John-Paul II has some reflections on freedom in his encyclical “The Splendour of Truth”. He writes:

‘Only the freedom which submits to the Truth leads the human person to his or her true good. The good of the person is to be in the Truth and to do the Truth’(n. 84).

‘Freedom itself needs to be set free. It is Christ who sets it free: he has set us free, for freedom’ (n. 86).

‘Freedom is acquired in love, that is, in the gift of self’(n. 87).

In his *Seeds of Contemplation* (page 91), Thomas Merton writes of:

‘freedom from domination, freedom to live one’s own spiritual life, freedom to seek the highest truth, unabashed by any human pressure or any collective demand, the ability to say one’s own Yes and one’s own No and not merely to echo the Yes and the No of state, party, corporation, army or system. This is inseparable from authentic religion. It is one of the deepest and most fundamental of human needs, perhaps the deepest and most crucial need of the human person as such.

Seeds of Contemplation continued

‘For without recognising the challenge of this need no one can truly be a person, and therefore without it we cannot truly be human either. The frustration of this deep need by irreligion, by secular and political pseudo-religion, by the mystiques and superstitions of totalitarianism, have made us humans sick in the very depths of our being. They have wounded and corrupted our freedom, they have filled our love with rottenness, decayed it into hatred. They have made us a machine geared for our own destruction.’

In his *The Christian Response* (page 64), Michel Quoist writes:

‘If you are not free for something, you are not really free, for you will find yourself the plaything of indecision, instability and anxiety. Once you have become detached and are master of yourself, real freedom is the possibility that you have of choosing the good and of resolutely keeping to your choice. Real freedom comes to fulfilment in obedience to God whose will is mediated to us through the Church, those who have a legitimate authority in our regard, our daily obligations, and the ordinary circumstances of our lives. Genuine obedience presupposes genuine freedom, but genuine freedom is created by repeated acts of obedience.’

Let us conclude this reflection on freedom with a statement from Saint John Eudes (died 1680) in his *The Admirable Heart of Jesus*. It is quoted in the Catechism n. 1698, and links us back to the first point made in this chapter: the freedom we long to experience is the freedom of the Heart of Jesus given to us by his Spirit:

‘I ask you to reflect on the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ is your true head, and that you are one of his members. All that is his is yours: his Spirit, his heart, his body and soul, and all his faculties. You must use all these as your own, to serve, praise, love, and give glory to God. You belong to Christ as members belong to their head. And so he longs for you to use all that is in you as your own, for the service and glory of the Father.’

II. What can we do?

Bernard Lonergan SJ *Philosophy of God and Theology* 1973

The person does not come first.
What comes first is the community.

It is within community
through the way persons relate
that the individual person emerges.

Since persons are the products of community,
and since the strongest and best of communities is based on love,
religious experience and the emergence of personality
go hand in hand.

Laudato Si' n. 93

‘Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.”

‘The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property. Saint John Paul II forcefully reaffirmed this teaching, stating that “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, *without excluding or favouring anyone*”.⁷² These are strong words. He noted that “a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples – would not be really worthy of man”. He clearly explained that “the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, but she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them”.

‘Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment”(GS 26).’

‘In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world’s goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,¹²³ it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good,’

‘Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment. There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices.’

- Read 'Lighting up India's slums (Care for our Common Home, by Bill Huebsch with Trish Hindmarsh (Garratt publishing 2015, page 18).
- Read 'Ecological Education in Catholic Schools (ib. page 29).