

O B E D I E N C E A N D F R E E D O M

OUR Blessed Lord said to His disciples: *Now I call you not servants . . . but I have called you friends.* And to the Jews He said: *You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*

St. Paul wrote to the Galatians of the *freedom wherewith Christ hath made us free*; and told them: *Stand, and be not holden in again with the yoke of servitude.*

The cry of freedom is one to which men have always, throughout their history, rallied. That cry of freedom, in particular, which is in the New Testament has been sounded again and again by the Church throughout its history; so that, as Pope Leo XIII declared, whenever men 'have attacked the liberty of man, the Church has defended it and protected this noble possession from destruction.' 'The powerful influence of the Church,' he said again, 'has ever been manifested in the custody and protection of the civil and political liberty of the people.'¹

But what is liberty? It is possible to rally to a battle-cry only to find it an ambiguity; to die for a cause which eventually is seen to be a wrong cause.

Our Blessed Lord also said: *You are my friends, if you do the things that I command you.* And He told us that we should know the truth that makes us free only if, abiding in His word, we became His disciples indeed.

St. Paul also said: *Whereas I was free of all, I made myself the servant of all.* And saying that *we are not under the law but under grace*, he yet said also *I was not, without the law of God, but was in the law of Christ.* But the explanation is in his further words, that *love is the fullness of the law.*

¹ Cf. *Libertas Praestantissimum.*

So St. Augustine wrote: 'It is one thing to be in the law, another to be under the law. Whoso is in the law acteth according to the law; whoso is under the law is acted upon according to the law. The former, therefore, is free, the latter is a slave.' And further: 'The service of the Lord is free, a service of freedom, when not necessity but charity serveth . . . Let charity make thee a slave, since Truth maketh thee free.'

There is to-day a conception of liberty which sets it over against obedience, as incompatible with obedience, and defines it simply in terms of 'absence of restraint.' There is a conception of law which is not unlike that hebrew conception which St. Paul contrasted with the liberty of the sons of God; which regards it as an external imposition, alien to the freedom of the human personality, and to be obeyed, if at all, only from motives of fear, or perhaps the greed of reward. We are the inheritors, still, of the Cartesian and Kantian legacy: it was Descartes who defined the object of his search, the new wisdom which should supersede the old, as a 'practical philosophy by means of which . . . we can . . . render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature'; it was Kant who affirmed that reason can know reality only as fashioned by the human mind. The perennial wisdom is certainly no enemy to the practical; but its approach is not in pride, but in humility; a still bride, not a boisterous captain of industry; not, primarily, the forming of reality by mind, but the forming, in-forming, of mind by reality; so that the first and last words of the wise man are those of St. Thomas's hymn, as one version has it, *adoro te devote, latens veritas*—O hidden Truth, devoutly I adore Thee. 'To Him,' said St. Augustine in one of his letters, 'I would that thou submit thyself with all thy piety, and that thou prepare for thyself no other way of seizing and preserving the truth than that which has been prepared by Him who as God has seen the infirmity of our courses. But that way is firstly humility, secondly humility, and

thirdly humility.' Wordsworth wrote the history of our post-Renaissance world when he described the fading in man of the 'visionary gleam': the trailing clouds of glory are not wholly dispelled, for there is still much that is Christian, there are still remnants of the vision of unity, to fleck the dull materialism of our mechanical world; yet the shades of the prison-house closed upon Europe—the prison-house of a man-centred earth, of the rationalism which later deposed even Nature's priest, of the materialism which threw aside even reason's partial and impoverished vision, of the commercial competition which robbed us of even our natural human solidarity; and the disillusioned manhood of our present age has seen the final stage at which the vision fades into the light of common day.

If we think of liberty in terms of an 'absence of restraint' and nothing more, it is because we have inherited and are inhabiting a world in which to a great extent not merely man, but the individual man, is the measure of all things.

We have inherited a double diminution. By attempting to see and to explain the universe apart from the One whose 'centre is everywhere and His circumference nowhere,' the One 'in whom, and by whom, and through whom' all things have their being, we condemn ourselves to division, to disintegration; the things of common sight are no longer apparell'd in celestial light; the *Benedicite*, the *Laudes Creaturarum* of St. Francis, as affirmations of unity, are unintelligible:

Tree you are,
Moss you are,
You are violets with wind above them.
A child—so high—you are,
And all this is folly to the world.

Pagan humanism begets social atomism: if we set ourselves apart from Him in whom we are one, we set ourselves apart from one another. Brotherhood in its turn

becomes unintelligible; and the serving of the brotherhood in its turn is folly to the world. Wisdom, the vision of unity, can only be given to the humble mind; happiness, the living of unity, can only be given to the humble heart, the heart that loves and therefore serves.

Of these two, wise humility and happy serving, is freedom begotten. Freedom is not the absence of restraint. 'The true liberty of human society,' wrote Leo XIII, 'does not consist in every man doing what he pleases, for this would simply end in turmoil and confusion, and bring on the overthrow of the State.' And if we view the individual quite apart from society, still freedom is not the absence of restraint in the sense of a refusal to acknowledge the existence and validity of law; since law is, on the contrary, precisely the pattern of freedom. Pope Leo XIII, in the encyclical letter already quoted, *Libertas praestantissimum*, forcefully demonstrated the fact that law is not something external to human nature. He quotes the words of St. Thomas, that when a thing 'acts through a power outside itself, it does not act of itself, but through another—that is, as a slave. But man is by nature rational. When, therefore, he acts according to reason, he acts of himself and according to his free-will; and this is liberty. Whereas when he sins, he acts in opposition to reason, is moved by another, and is the victim of foreign misapprehensions. Therefore, *Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin*'; and he adds: 'Even the heathen philosophers clearly recognized this truth, especially they who held that the wise man alone is free; and by the term 'wise man' was meant, as is well known, the man trained to live in accordance with his nature, that is in justice and virtue . . . (Thus) the reason prescribes to the will what it should seek after or shun, in order to the eventual attainment of man's last end, for the sake of which all his actions ought to be performed. (And) this ordination of *reason* is called law.' This natural law, which is the voice of reason, 'is the same thing as the eternal law, implanted

in rational creatures, and inclining them to their right action and end'; and the eternal law is the 'eternal reason of God, the Creator and Ruler of all the world.'

Now it is possible to view this law as though it were an external imposition, attended by sanctions. This is the religion of fear, the religion of bondage, far removed from the liberty of the sons of God. It is possible to view the law as the internal pointer to happiness, the pattern of human perfection, and to obey it as obeying ourselves. This is liberty indeed; but not the highest liberty. It is eudaemonism, not the liberty of the sons of God.

We can never find the fullness of freedom, because we can never find the fullness of life, in the separateness of individuality. Freedom means the freedom to create; but we can create, not in isolation, but only in that union with the other, with the object of vision, which love effects. The condition of the fullness of freedom is love. *They shall be two in one flesh.* It is not merely a union, but a unity. 'Love's first gift is the heart of the lover,' said John of St. Thomas; and its effect is the disappearance of the separateness of mine and thine, and the creation of the new thing, the single will of the two-in-one. To do that will is a greater freedom than to do my will, in isolation; for it means the exchange of a petty principality for a boundless kingdom. But the highest of all freedoms, the freedom which includes all other freedoms, is found in the unity, made possible by the redemptive grace of Christ, not of man with man, but of man with God. To see *quasi oculo Dei*, as though with the eye, the mind, the heart, of God; to will as with the will of God, not as by an external compulsion but from an internal impulsion of unity: this is Christianity—'Christ and the Church,' said Augustine, 'are two in one flesh'—and this is the liberty of the sons of God, the fullest liberty, the point at which liberty and law are made wholly synonymous in love. The depths of wisdom and the fullness of life are to be found only in humility to the Truth, obedi-

ence to the Law. The only way to ascend the heights is to descend into the depths; the only way to reign is to serve; only to the humility of a handmaid could it be given to be queen of heaven and earth.

In the unity of Christ and the Church, two in one flesh, the unity of man with man is again made possible: 'He is not One and we many, but we who are many are one in that One.' Humanity, being one, has one end; and should have one will to that end, as Rousseau, living in a world of oppression, privilege, injustice, seems to have sensed in his doctrine of a General Will. But as the common end of all is not man's invention, so the social laws which point the way to that end cannot be man's invention, but must be founded on the eternal law of God, deciding, as Pope Leo says again, 'many points which the law of nature treats only in a general and indefinite way,' and 'binding all citizens to work together for the attainment of the common end proposed to the community, and forbidding them to depart from this end.' Freedom here again consists then, as even the pedestrian Hobbes discovered, in obedience to law, without which life is 'nasty, brutish and short'; yet here again it is possible to miss the fullness of liberty and of life. The grounds of political obligation are not to be found simply in the self-interest of the individual, as Hobbes affirmed; nor simply in the moral obligation which follows on the establishment of a social contract; but first, in the nature of man, the social animal, and consequently of the social life natural to man, and then, far more fully, in the nature of the Christian calling, and the brotherhood of men as members of Christ. It is not merely that economically, culturally, even spiritually, we *need* society (and therefore the laws which order the life of society) if we are to be whole men; it is also that economically, culturally, spiritually, we need to *serve* society, if we are to be whole men, Christians. The condition of freedom, of creation, is love. There is a sort of counterfeit love, cupidity, in which all giving

is simply a form of getting. But in real love all giving is a form of getting, all getting a form of giving. In an individualist society the serving of society is simply a form of self-interest; and State action is limited strictly to the 'hindering of hindrances' to the life of the individual. In the Christian society, because of the 'communion of saints,' the whole of life is at once directed both to the perfection of the person and the ultimate perfection of the society²: the individual's growth to perfection is

² It is important, in these days of State absolutism especially, to distinguish clearly between State and society. Political society is the union of many, collaborating together for the attainment of a common end; this collaboration, as St. Thomas, for example shows in the beginning of the *De Regimine Principum*, implies authority, sovereignty; the State is the subject of that authority. The limits of State action, therefore, are rigidly defined by the nature and purpose of its authority. For St. Thomas, who, as Roland-Gosselin notes, synthesizes the empiricism of Aristotle with the mysticism of Augustine, the end of the State is to procure the imperfect beatitude possible in this life, as a condition of attaining the perfect beatitude of the next life. Far from being itself absolute therefore, the State must be governed in its action, ultimately by the eternal law of God and the needs of the eternal destiny of man; and proximately, by the necessity of procuring the temporal happiness of the commonwealth as a commonwealth of *persons*. The State is for society and not *vice versa*. And a society is only a society of *persons* if its members collaborate as free men, responsible, creators, fulfilling each his own proper vocation in the making of things of whatever sort it may be (art), and in the making of life through the discovery of the new unity of two-in-one (family). State action, then, is limited, first, by the moral law; secondly, by the rights of the person as such: the rights of self-preservation, of marriage, procreation, education; the rights of freedom of thought, of personal vocation, of property; thirdly, by the demands of the society as determined by the end of society: the preservation of peace, order, unity; the assurance of the necessities of life to all; the restraint of wickedness and the fostering of virtue. The State is *for* the person.

But that terrestrial beatitude which it is the purpose of the

found through serving, and being served by, society, and society is served through the individual's growth to perfection, so that the end or perfection of the society is not separable from the end or perfection of the individual person. 'Let charity make thee a slave.' In a purely individualist society the citizens would no doubt obey; in a perfect Christian society they would obey obediently: they would do what the law or the sovereign commanded, which is to obey; but they would do it, not from fear or pure self-interest, but because of the identification of their wills with the will of God from whom the civil power is ultimately derived, and because of the identification of each with the community and with the common good, which it is the object of civil law to serve.

To obey obediently is not the same as to obey blindly. It is significant that the Church, in these days of dissension about the nature of civil life and civil obligations, has set before us with special emphasis the pattern of life as revealed in the Holy Family—its unity, and the wholeness of its mutual serving. Happiness will come to civil society in so far as it approximates to the ideal of the family. But the unity of a family is, or ought to be, the result of unity of will, not of absence of judgement. The tragedy of the man in Wordsworth's Ode was not that his eyes were opened to the common light of day, but that they were closed to the celestial light which hitherto had

State to procure is, itself, a *social* beatitude. And the ultimate aim of all human life, eternal beatitude, is also a social beatitude. If 'we who are many are one in that One,' it follows that we cannot think of our personal happiness apart from the happiness of this greater unity. The Church is wholly distinct from the State: their aims are different, their power is different, their competence is different. But the persons who make up political society are also the persons who (actually or potentially) make up the mystical Body of Christ; the unity of charity must in-form political life also; and in that sense the perfection of person and of society of persons is one.

apparelled the common things. Human authority, in family or in society, is liable to error; we have to obey God rather than man, and 'where a law is enacted contrary to reason, or to the eternal law, or to some ordinance of God, obedience is unlawful.'³ Independence of mind, the power of judgement, is no hindrance to unity of will; on the contrary. The man who has no will of his own because he has no mind of his own can scarcely be obedient in the full sense; it is when what is commanded, while not being immoral, yet goes against our deepest convictions, that we need to call upon the virtue of obedience in its fullness. But where the command of the civil authority is contrary to the law of God, then we are bound to refuse to obey; and it is our obedience to the community that compels us to disobey the State, since in disobeying the State we are serving the common end of society which is God. Our common pursuit of a common end is informed by our unity in Christ; but we cannot equate natural society, with its fallible authority, with the divine, infallible Church.

It is a tragic thing that, in reaction to the evils of individualism, some have turned for an affirmation of the principle of authority to fascism. If it was obvious that individualism was a travesty of the Christian doctrine of the dignity of the person, it should surely have been equally obvious that fascism was a still more blatant travesty of the Christian doctrine of obedience to authority.

In the 'Labour Charter' of Italian fascism we find the individual subordinated to the nation which is 'endowed with an existence and with ends and means of action superior in power and duration,' and the nation 'finds its integral realization' in the fascist State; the State is, in the words of Mussolini, the 'veritable reality of the individual,' and 'all is in the State and nothing human exists

³ Leo XIII, *op. cit.*

and *a fortiori* nothing has value outside the State.' According to Gino Arias, 'the individual has his life in the nation, of which he is but an infinitesimal and passing element, and for whose ends he is but the organ and instrument.'⁴ Nazism and fascism are at one in their assertion of State absolutism. Nazism lays more emphasis on the pseudo-mysticism whereby this Absolute is given the worship and the self-surrender which belong to God, and on the elevation of instinct and the *mystique de la force* in place of mind. But both are essentially anti-personalist. Our Blessed Lord came to redeem the race of men. You cannot redeem a shopful of automata. Fascist obedience is a travesty of Christian obedience, first, because it is obedience to an idol, the absolute State; secondly, because it is the obedience, not of a man, a person, but of an automaton. The Christian ideal is not to be an automaton in order to obey, but to be obedient in order to be a person. Whereas fascism is loud in its assertion that man only exists in and for society, the late Holy Father, for example, was emphatic in his assertion that ultimately it is society that is for man, and not man for society. It is true that he warns us against taking this in a liberal-individualist sense, as 'subordinating society to the selfish use of the individual'; it means that through 'an organic union with society and by mutual collaboration the attainment of earthly happiness is placed within the reach of all.' But he concludes that in the final analysis it is society that is made for man, since 'only man, the human person, and not society in any form, is endowed with reason and a morally free will.'⁵ There can be no compatibility between the destruction of the person in the name of State worship, and the building up of the person to the worship of God.

⁴ Cf. E. Hounier: *A Personalist Manifesto*, pp. 36, 37.

⁵ *Divini Redemptoris*, par. 29.

We cannot serve unless we first are free. To compel service is to run the risk of destroying the very foundations of service. For the life of political society is a *life*: not an inert, but a growing, thing; growing by the creativity of the many-in-one. An automaton cannot create. We should defend our freedom, as the Church defends freedom, against all tyrannies: against the tyranny of absolute dictatorship; against the tyranny of fussy bureaucracy; against the tyranny which throws to the multitude the sop of social services when it ought primarily to be making possible for each man in the multitude the living of a responsible creative life; against the tyranny of money, which invests the few, in defiance of all constitutions, all moral principles, all the authority of God, with power over the lives and destinies of the many. It is a terrible temptation to turn from the disorders and injustices of democracy towards the orderliness of an absolute dictatorship: it is a temptation and should be treated as such. We become wise through obedience to truth; we become good through obedience to law; but absolutism destroys truth and abrogates law, and so makes obedience impossible. If Nelson had said, not England expects, but England compels every man to do his duty, it would have been impossible for any man to do his duty. Because our duty is to obey lawful commands as men. There is a type of machine which leaves to man only a sub-human, uncreative share in the business of making: the absolutist State is such a machine. The Christian thinks and speaks, not in terms of a political machine, but in terms of the body politic, the common weal.

On the other hand, there is a danger, now, that a revulsion from fascism, motivated more by political emotion than by philosophical or religious principle, may issue in an indiscriminate acceptance of the assumptions of individualism. If there is question, as there must be, of building a new and better world, it must start from the premiss that the individualism of a capitalist society, which can

allow enormous riches to the few and indigence to the many, which can give irresponsible power to the few unhampered by the legitimate power of those whose function it is to represent the interests of the many—the individualism of such a society is anti-Christian in its turn. The citizen of fascist theory is neither child, since he lacks humility,⁶ nor man, since he lacks the exercise of reason and judgement. The citizen of individualist theory, while not lacking in the exercise of reason and judgement, is lacking in that which would make him a child. In his self-interested co-operation there is no humility, for he sees nothing greater than himself, no eternal law or eternal purpose or Christian brotherhood; in his eudaemonism there is no ideal of creating in service; he has reason, but not vision; he trails no clouds of glory.

St. Thomas speaks of that circular movement whereby the whole of creation returns, as to its end, to that principle, God, from which in the beginning it sprang. If we are to think of building a new world, then our thought must begin, if it is not to be futile and disastrous, with the *Our Father*. *Thy* kingdom come, not ours; *Thy* will be done, not ours; or rather, ours too, since we will our will to be identified with *Thy* will. God has given us, through the Church, a vision of Himself that we might be seers; and reason, that we might be builders; in that order, however, we should use His gifts, for we shall not build well unless first we see. He has made us, and restored us, that we might return, a unity, a unity of persons, to Him; and the way is Christ, so that we shall return to Him only by becoming one with Christ and, in Him, with one another. The law of Christ—brotherhood, unity, wor-

⁶ Compare the bragging brutality of fascist technique, the nazi scorn of mercy and all the gentle virtues, with Pope Leo's affirmation that *gentleness* 'speedily takes the place of cruelty' in any land where the Church, with her Gospel of freedom, has once set foot.

ship-in-unity—gives us the plan of the city of God; and since they labour in vain who build unless the Lord do the building, we shall put the plan into execution only in obedience to the law of Christ. Individuals concreating the life of the family; families concreating the life of the nation; nations concreating the life of the world; all building in unity, in worship, in obedience; building, not in the imposed subhuman humiliation of the fascist individual, the 'infinitesimal and passing element,' but in the strong humility of the Christian personality, immortal and called to union with the Infinite, yet happy to play even an infinitesimal part in the age-long travail of creation after God—this is the Christian answer to the Satan of selfishness, of commercialism, of cupidity, of rivalry and hatred and war. We heard recently on the wireless the story of the airman who, having found in his present life the meaning of comradeship, of brotherhood and the selfless collaboration of brotherhood, declared that he could never again return to the world of cut-throat competition, of ruthless predatory profit-making, that he had known before. How far will that vision spread? And how far can it spread, how deep can it go, without the grace of obedience to the law of Christ? For if the mind needs the grace of God in order that it may deeply and securely know the truth, still more the will needs the grace of God that it may will and accomplish the truth. Perhaps our chief prayer, in these days when there is so much hard thinking, so much right willing, to be done, these days when out of chaos and horror may perhaps through God's mercy come an opportunity to build a little better than we had done before—perhaps our chief prayer should be that we may be made one in the love, and one in the obedience, of Him of whom it was said that *He was made for us obedient unto death, even unto the death of the Cross.*

GERALD VANN, O.P.