

11. November 2021

Series on the unfreedoms

Part 3: Excessive influencibility, false pliability and dependence on public opinion

In the last two meditations, we had looked at two different deficiencies of freedom: fear and human respects. In addition, we had talked a little about inferiority complexes. On our path of following Christ, we are called to overcome - with God's help - all these limitations to our freedom, so that they do not become an obstacle on this path and do not prevent the freedom that faith gives us from shining forth in our Christian witness. Today we will look at three other forms of unfreedom, which have a certain similarity.

In the first instance, let us look at that unfreedom that arises when we are too easily influenced, so that we easily become inwardly dependent on others who are more forceful than we are. Here there is a danger of adopting other people's points of view not because one is really convinced of them, but simply because they were presented with force and determination. One can go so far as to be intimidated by the other person's strong will that one's own point of view takes second place and one temporarily adopts the attitudes and opinions of others. Thus, we may end up allowing certain concepts to be imposed on us which do not really correspond to our principles.

Another form of unfreedom that is familiar with this excessive influenceability is false pliability.

It often affects people of benevolent character, when this benevolence degenerates into weakness, so that they are unable to resist other people's requests and wishes. Although they do not necessarily adopt the other person's point of view, they somehow allow themselves to be dragged everywhere. Thus, such people are easily taken advantage of, and they feel too weak to resist the wishes of others. They consider it impolite to contradict the other, or they find the displeasure they might cause unbearable. Therefore, they prefer to give in and, if they are not attentive, they can even become slaves to the other person. Sometimes false compassion for the other person can lead them to the point of tolerating an injustice or at least doing nothing to prevent it.

Another profound unfreedom is dependence on public opinion. This is the mentality that dominates the world around us. It can even affect people who are not weak in principle, but who adopt these generalised views as a matter of course, without examining their veracity or confronting them with their own vision. They simply adopt them because they are unable to resist the momentum of a generally prevailing atmosphere or mood.

So how can we deal with such lacks of freedom when we discover them in ourselves? How can we counsel others who are trapped in such attitudes?

In the case of excessive influenceability, contact with people who have a false worldview and a strong capacity for persuasion, should be limited or - if necessary - even avoided altogether. This is not a sign of cowardice, but a humble recognition of one's own weakness and an appropriate way of dealing with such a situation. In case contact with this person who exerts a negative influence on us is unavoidable, we should prepare ourselves in prayer and close ourselves to his influence. As long as we are with him, it is good to remain in prayer within ourselves. In these circumstances, one cannot be relaxed and simply open up - as we are accustomed to do in a good and healthy environment - but must remain vigilant.

It is also necessary to fight with all one's might against false pliability. If we have acquired a well-founded conviction, we must hold on to it and not give in to other people's wishes. We must be aware of our own weakness and resist false compassion, which is not a good counsellor in these circumstances. It is also wise to walk away from a situation when one notices that one's ability to resist is becoming weaker and weaker. This is especially important when it comes to very important issues.

We have to learn to stand firm, and for this we are presented with many occasions. Let us remember that we are not to be a leaf blown by the wind, which is swept away by the slightest movement. The Lord must be our strength and we must anchor ourselves deeply to Him, so that our false pliability does not lead to situations that rob us of our freedom.

Nor should public opinion have any power over the Christian, because, by the grace of God, he knows the truth in Christ; that truth which has been entrusted to our Holy Church and which She preserves in Her authentic doctrine. Therefore, the Christian has a clear criterion and must preserve himself from all illegitimate and unconscious influence; that is to say, he must not allow anything to enter into him that contradicts the truth that has been revealed to us. The currents of the times, which, like false prophets, want to announce something different to us, must be firmly rejected. This is especially important when public opinion takes on anti-Christian traits and wants to influence us with its propaganda. In no way can we naively and confidently adapt ourselves to public opinion, without having examined it, or breathe the air of a profane environment. Let us remain aware of our own fragility and not neglect vigilance.