

# Our Freedom to Think<sup>1</sup>

MONICA LAWLOR

It soon emerges from any discussion about freedom of thought, with for example one's university colleagues, that the very idea of Catholics thinking freely still strikes many people as essentially funny. One quickly realises that many non-Christian intellectuals hold the view that Catholics are forbidden to think on pain of sin, heresy, excommunication and the whole apparatus of the Inquisition. But before discussing the peculiar difficulties of Catholics in this matter, I must say something in general about the meaning of freedom to think, asking the reader always to keep in mind its bearing on the particular problem of Catholic thought.

In order to consider whether we make the best use of the capacity for thought which we have (to which there are obvious limits set by native endowment both in the individual and in the species) it may be useful to establish the conditions in which thinking can occur at all.

The most primitive requirement would seem to be a certain minimal freedom from extreme physical duress. A half-starved man working eighteen hours a day is unlikely to have much time or capacity for thought. There are always exceptions but freedom from want can often be a critical factor in the development of what could be described as abstract cognitive skills, or perhaps less pretentiously the capacity for critical thinking. Chronic poverty and starvation may develop in people a certain low cunning, perhaps even a certain sharpness, but more generally it makes them intellectually limited, unable to concentrate and resentful of attempts at what seem to them irrelevant improvements. Anyone who has tried to teach classes of poverty-stricken half-starved children will tell you what a struggle it is to arouse any interest at all in even the most elementary skills. Again there is the odd exception; the child who, it seems, must think; but it is well not to take such an exception as the paradigm case.

Maslow has suggested an interesting if only partly satisfactory theory of needs, arranged in what he calls an emergent hierarchy; he says that one level must be at least partly satisfied before the person is freed to

<sup>1</sup>Based on a paper read at the Catholic University Teachers' Conference held in Cambridge, April 1962.

experience the next. And while this theory has problems, it seems to have enough of value in it to be worth attention. He suggests<sup>2</sup> this hierarchy:

1. Physiological needs, air, food, sleep etc.
2. Safety needs.
3. Belonging and love needs.
4. Esteem needs.
5. The need for self-actualisation ('what a man *can* be he *must* be').

This last need includes what he calls cognitive and aesthetic needs. He notes, what he regards to be something of a paradox, that people who have had their needs adequately satisfied at some time often seem better able to withstand deprivation later than those who have not. So that while the experience of one need usually depends on the satisfaction of another, it may acquire a certain independence when once established.

What is important here is that it does not follow that as soon as someone is well fed they will promptly start to think freely. In our society we are not really familiar any more with those whose cognitive needs are undeveloped because they are physically deprived; but we are only too familiar with those whose needs for love and esteem dominate their lives, at the expense of thought. But because these needs are more subtle they are harder to talk about successfully or to be able to specify so exactly. These needs, which might be called higher needs, do not seem to block abstract thought quite so directly as the more physiological deprivations. What they do seem to do is to enter into situations in which thinking is demanded and impair or inhibit the process in a number of ways. In what follows I shall discuss the process of learning to think and some of the more direct aspects of the process itself. In this way it may be possible to show how efficient and free thought are achieved in those who at least attempt this activity.

There are things which interfere with both concentration and attention and hence with the capacity to think effectively. They are not always the obvious things either. Perhaps we all tend to think that noise and disturbance are distracting, when in fact they are more often than not fatiguing rather than distracting in themselves. Divided attention interferes far more with concentration than what might be called 'noises off'. And even this is more easily tolerated by some people than others; there are people who can switch their attention easily and

<sup>2</sup>Maslow, A. H., *Motivation and Personality*, 1954, New York, p. 91.

quickly, but for most people this is an effort. The deepest type of attentive concentration (to which Trigant Burrow<sup>3</sup> gave the name 'co-tention') is hard to break into and probably rarely achieved. Yet this type of concentrated attention is often essential to creative thinking. Things which distract, in the sense that they prevent concentration, are many, but high on the list one can put worry, fatigue, the pressure of competing demands both internal and external, and lack of confidence. While some people obviously give up the unequal struggle, and probably never concentrate on anything very deeply, others work out their own gimmicks for ensuring concentration and attention in mental work, often believing them indispensable for others as well as for themselves. Yet one can over-emphasise the value of the ability to concentrate in itself, and fail to recognise that it is concentrating at the right time which really counts, and being free to do it as and when necessary.

Jacques Barzun<sup>4</sup> has argued an eloquent case for leisure for academics so that they may think; and an even more telling case for freeing them from the sort of petty financial and bureaucratic worry that kills creativity. While I am with him all the way on this second point, I think his emphasis may be wrong on the first. What I think we perhaps need in order to think is not really masses of leisure in which to brood, but the freedom to drop other things when an idea comes to the point where it must be followed up or lost. It is this sort of flexibility of timetable that universities ideally provide, but which worries the unthinkers enormously: it is so untidy. Yet there are limits to the extent to which we can bully our minds to operate as and when we like; and to make the best of our ability to think we have to be somewhat accommodating. Of course training and self-knowledge help; we can fill in the gaps with routine work, rather than wait with our hands folded for inspiration; and we can make the most of what time we have in other ways. The danger here is that we shall always be too 'busy' to think—that we shall fill, not the intervals, but our whole lives with things that make it obvious to everyone how hard-worked we are; what between writing memos and letters, filling up forms, sitting on committees and generally running things we can get very occupied. In fact you can get to the point where you are frightened to death of being found thinking because it looks so idle.

As a matter of mere efficiency, there is a warning in the sheer history

<sup>3</sup>Trigant Burrow, *The Neurosis of Man*, London, 1949.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Barzun, *We who teach*, London, 1946.

of the times and places when and where people get their best ideas: the bath, tops of buses, boats, church, and a host of equally unlikely places. There are probably few of us who do not know the simple irritation of being visited by an idea just when we thought to go to sleep, of being kept awake just when we least want it by the refusal of the beastly thing to go away until the morning. All of these experiences have something in common; if we were to use a crude metaphor, the poor idea has been hanging around in the periphery of our consciousness trying desperately to catch our attention, but since that is engaged elsewhere, it just has to wait until we are in a relaxed state not thinking about anything in particular. You can see at once what may happen if you are never in a relaxed state. This sort of idea doesn't come to, or is not seen as valuable by, the unprepared mind; and this is partly what I mean by saying that knowing when to concentrate is important. We have to be alert for the solutions which wander into our minds or we may miss the fruits of our labour.

Now I suggested earlier that a lot of people only half concentrate; their thinking is spoilt by their divided attention. Many is the miserable and rather unsuccessful student who will tell you that he cannot concentrate. Probing will often reveal that he spends hours drooping around half-working, sitting looking at a book he isn't really reading, making fitful attempts at an essay, or just sitting thinking that he ought to be thinking. Apparently this sort of thing keeps his guilt-feeling at bay; he must be 'working' because he isn't doing anything else. To suggest to such a student that he had much better work for an hour and then go to the pictures is usually to be treated as if you had suggested a life of wild immorality. The uninterested, under-motivated person can often neither work nor play; he always resents the fact that he isn't enjoying himself when he's working and feels guilty because he's not working when he is trying to play; he is inefficient on all sides. In fact one of the few merits of the anti-intellectualism of our 'better' schools lies in the fact that it is so appalling to be caught swotting that the child of capacity in whom intellectual interests are not totally destroyed often learns to work very intensively for brief periods, so that he can pass socially as a non-worker; this can be a valuable if gruelling training. By contrast in some of our 'unbetter' schools there is a sort of snob-system based on hours of unremitting toil, which may encourage half-work with the concurrent resentment that it leaves no time for living.

But another factor comes into the half-work condition, and indeed bedevils much intellectual work: the fear of failure. People who are

over-critical of themselves or highly sensitive to the criticism of others (and often it is much the same thing), dare not think in case the result is wrong or no good. Such people are often destructively critical of their own efforts, or too frightened of others to make an effort at all. One of the reasons, I am sure, that so many students can only work late at night, or at the last possible minute, is that either fatigue or necessity dulls the edge of this paralysing self-distrust. I am not advocating a frame of mind in which self-admiration is the dominating feature, but merely the value of some modicum of trust in oneself and others, even a measure of detachment. Such attitudes do not blossom in the desert uncultivated, and the hypocritical individual is often the product of a system which is too concerned with success and failure and too little with doing.

In particular our attitude towards 'mistakes' can be very destructive of the capacity for free and effective thinking. Many people think 'safely' because they are so frightened of making mistakes that they dare not do anything else. While the ability to admit that you have made a mistake may be a moral quality, involving humility or something, it is easy to make the mistake itself appear as a moral failing, so that we find people involved in an irresolvable dilemma; one of those situations in which they simply cannot win. This can make hypocrites of them on the one hand, or nervous bootlickers on the other. Once again rather than leap at once to the virtuousness or otherwise of the whole thing, it is worth pausing to look at the way it works.

It seems to be a *sine qua non* of learning that one makes mistakes or at least contemplates them. To attempt to set up a learning situation in which mistakes cannot happen is to court disaster. What we need to do is to see that mistakes are not too costly: if every mistake is a disaster then every situation in which one can be made is a menace, and the easiest thing to do is nothing at all, unless you are quite sure that it cannot be 'wrong'. Many teachers, parents and pastors do in fact set up such situations for those whom they try to teach to think and judge rightly. Others, overcome with the feeling that mistakes are an intolerable disaster, strive to ensure that they cannot occur, or are covered up quickly so that they may seem not to have occurred. Either situation cramps the mental growth of the victim. Unless you see your mistake as a mistake, you can learn nothing from it; by the same token the more clearly you understand the nature of your mistake the more useful it is. To be merely wrong all the time is unhelpful unless you can also see how, and why it matters. Provided people have a fairly clear idea of

what they are trying to achieve they usually learn most by trying to find and correct their own errors, and by testing the strength of their own excellence; in this way they find out how to think effectively in that area for themselves, they find out how you solve problems: how, in a sense, to think. At an even simpler level, merely mucking about with the basic tools of a skill, and finding out what you can do with them, may lay the foundation for a more formal training in a field; partly because you find the natural limits of the material in a relatively painless way. Bruner in his recent book<sup>5</sup> argues strongly for the rôle of such informal training, because he believes that it develops the intuitive aspects of thinking which more formal education undervalues. But this is getting rather away from the point.

The rôle of the teacher is critical in two ways in learning to think; the first is by showing what there is to do, what to achieve, and the other is by breaking the learning up into the sort of unit that gives the person the best opportunity to learn. He should ideally know how you do whatever it is, and when the learner gets stuck what sort of a mistake he is making and what to do about it (in this he differs from the merely expert). If all the person needs to know is whether the answer is right or wrong then a teaching machine will do admirably. But this doesn't tell him much about thinking. Rote learning is probably one of the few things that this sort of technique really works well with. To think constructively, creatively and originally as well as correctly, involves more than recitation and practical skill; it is just these aspects of thinking which are warped by an undue emphasis on the perils of error. Good teachers both provide an exemplar, a standard of excellence (in itself one of the most important keys to self-correction), and an atmosphere in which the learner is free to experiment. They open new horizons, new possibilities, and awaken or keep alive a spirit of adventure. A person who can note the error without being disparaging, who doesn't let the learner flounder hopelessly for too long, provides a sort of safety in which constructive thinking is possible. And this is true whether you are learning to button your shoes or do calculus. In a society as competitive as ours such an atmosphere is difficult either to create or maintain. People come to value being right more highly than a mastery of the task at hand. They dread error as a loss of face or prestige; they cultivate not the ability to think and do well, but to do better than someone else who, happily, has made a mistake. Indifferent teaching and destructive criticism add their own toll. Half the people

<sup>5</sup>Bruner, J.S., *The Process of Education*, Camb. Mass., 1961.

who get to universities in this country would rather be seen dead than thinking for themselves. They yearn for the right answer, the definitive textbook; not as aids to thought, but as substitutes for it. Whether we do anything to improve this seems doubtful; we are all haunted by the same anxieties, and anxiety is one of the great killers of thought.

Questions can come to have the status of mistakes and be treated as such. Rather than a means of testing the limits of an idea, elucidating its meaning, or merely gaining information, they are seen as a challenge and a threat. The more inadequate the teacher, the more unwelcome the question; the query itself is given the status of the error it might have exposed. We all know the sort of fate that often greets those who 'merely ask'. The whole situation is often rendered even more confusing by the lip service that is paid to the value of an enquiring mind; the pupil is urged to ask questions, only they have to be the right questions—the ones to which the teacher knows the answers. This farce is sickening to the more intelligent student and bewildering to the duller. It makes for cynicism and spreads the feeling that questions are as dangerous as mistakes. And this is just as true in society as in education. The person who asks the 'wrong' questions is very much an outsider. He is seen, just as the curious pupil is seen, as threatening the *status quo* by 'putting ideas into people's minds', a most uncouth occupation. Yet oddly enough nearly all advances in knowledge arise from asking the right questions; but then a lot of people think knowledge had much better not advance.

Once you have successfully killed people's intellectual interests, warped their capacity for concentration and filled them with anxiety lest they fail, they may perform intellectual operations, they may learn large quantities of facts and opinions, and even synthesize these in an *ersatz* way, but they don't really think—they know it is far too dangerous. They absorb the right ideas like blotting paper, and with about as much relish. And they no doubt fit admirably into a society which feels that thinking is indecent anyway.

All this is largely about learning to think or not to think, and as such may be all too familiar; but it is central to the issue because habits of mind cultivated from the cradle to the university are very hard to eradicate. We are formed, in great measure, by the influences of those years, and even the survivors bear the scars of the system. It is much harder to stop a person thinking effectively who has learnt to do so from childhood, than to prevent someone from ever learning how. Why then are these anti-thought processes so successful? I think we get the

clue to this if we return to the point I raised some time ago about anxiety.

The fearful and worried individual will be inclined to think in a limited and stereotyped way, especially if his self-esteem is low and his need for approval strong. There are all sorts of results of this frame of mind, from swallowing the ideas of 'nice' people, to buying brand X because the neighbours do; anything which makes life look safer, even for a bit, is a boon. Such people are worried by the unfamiliar, terrified of breaking the conventions. Others still can only keep their fear and anxiety at bay by keeping the world in order. They exert tremendous efforts to keep everything tidy. Some of these people become scholars, but no one could say they thought freely; they hate every new idea, they go mad at the smell of the blood of life. Correctness is all; they may be efficient, but they kill everything they touch. They are around in all branches of knowledge, and their dead-sea fruits abound.

Yet even in this there is something we should pay attention to; independent thought is difficult, dangerous and can make for considerable anxiety of its own. We should not attempt to treat the matter lightly. It makes for change and disorder and upheaval. The enormous resistance to new ideas which societies as a whole display is not always mere laziness or inertia, it serves as a measure of protection to the established order. Sometimes this seems disastrous, when it is only a way of sifting the durable from the effervescent in new ideas. Sometimes it is disastrous, in ways which are too familiar for me to reiterate; wars, dissensions and lost opportunities would only be a brief catalogue of what can follow.

For the person who does his own thinking it can be a difficult and dangerous path to follow. He may find himself out on a limb a long way from everyone else, thinking and doing all the wrong things. There is the added difficulty that the actual value of his ideas may be in question; people are notoriously bad at knowing which of their ideas are really good ones. It is much nicer, if you are going to be original, to find someone else who is equally mad that you can talk to; since it is in the exchange of ideas that we ultimately ratify them. The ability to decide when you are being merely pig-headed and when you really have got hold of something that matters, is even more rarely distributed than the ability to think freely. We have to face the fact that, in spite of the present day emphasis on 'group-think,' most good thinking is done by individuals who may find it a lonely business.

Perhaps for the less gifted person the freedom to think rests more in

the ability to recognise a good idea when they see it; to select and make their own rather than to produce. Such people are probably less unusual although still unhappily none too plentiful. But at least we can see a more practical goal in this; it would seem that a lot of people could be brought to the point where they were creative within their capacity, and independent in their judgment; perhaps even everyone could be. It seems to me that this is what we must aim at. Genius is bound to be rare, but independence of mind, in the less exalted sense that judgment is thinking rather than conformist, is something that seems proper to man in general. It must always be an ideal, but not, I think, a possibility so remote that we can comfortably ignore it for practical purposes; in the ordinary course of events people seem to be more under-functioning than under-endowed. We certainly need faith and hope to sustain any determined conviction that people can be fairly reasonable; but to argue otherwise is to countenance an arrogance which is hardly Christian.

To think freely then is to judge and evaluate, to decide issues on their merits rather than to be swept along by habit and convention, or to be driven by fear and anxiety from one unthinking action to another. In this sense to think freely is to take the full responsibility for ourselves and our decisions and actions, to be self-determined and self-aware.

These have been general considerations; yet I hope their relevance to our particular Catholic situation has sufficiently emerged. There is a real problem here, something which makes it difficult for people to believe that a Catholic can have any independence of mind; all choices limit our freedom to some extent, but the faith being given from outside imposes on us both an unusual freedom and an unusual limitation. The straightforward inability to believe that

If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

(Jn 8. 31-32).

poses a special sort of problem. Part of the difficulty arises from an inability to believe in the freedom of assent rather than dissent, which is perhaps peculiar to our age. The idea that freedom rests in being different simply fails to allow that the free recognition of the best, the submission to the truth of things, to reality, is not to be confused with the blind assent of the unthinking mind to the conventional cult. The newness of the truth for every individual and its unfailing richness is something that a good many Catholics don't believe in, let alone anyone else. In a sense Catholics do believe what they have been told by

God in his revelation, and to see this as an assent to the essential truth may be very difficult if you deny the premises on which it is based. The favourite remark of a friend of my undergraduate days, 'You'll never be able to think for yourself, your mind has been warped by priests from the moment you were born' has a certain necessary validity, although not, I would think, in quite the way she meant. While a deep mistrust of any 'old' idea may be a disease of our time, and the perennial freshness of any living truth an alien concept, we cannot entirely shelve the responsibility for what I might call our 'brand image'. The faith itself is only one aspect of this image.

A good many Catholics behave as if they did not believe in any 'freedom in the truth', as if learning to recite were the equivalent of understanding, and independence of judgment a prime evil. The truth is congealed for ever in the penny catechism and the correct response to those who deny it is the dodgy argument of an apologetic which shows the other person how irrational *he* is. We 'defend' the truth or the faith more freely than we explain it or live it. If all this strikes people as intellectually suspect, we can hardly blame them. We live in an age which is suspicious of indoctrination—it knows all too much about it—and rightly sees it as an affront to human dignity.

The rule by fear has much the same effect; beliefs held in fear and anxiety are not attractive to their owner or anyone else. The truths we dare not examine, lest they prove too fragile to stand it, the cautious life by rule (am I actually two yards over or under the three mile limit?), the burning necessity to have all one's decisions made by someone else in case they are 'wrong', the refusal to even consider new ideas because they conflict with belief (before we have tried to find out how or why) do far more damage to the public face of Catholicism than any ability to believe five impossible things before breakfast can possibly do; the latter, in itself, often strikes people as interesting if peculiar.

Similarly the idea of the teaching role of the Church as a sort of system which says 'now keep quite still, and I'll tell you what to think and when to change it; ask no questions children, just do exactly what I say and I'll see that you are safe', is hardly intellectually stimulating. Though it is easy enough to say that waiting constantly to be told what to do and think, to abrogate judgment in favour of compliance, is not what we mean by the teaching rôle of the Church, it is much harder to say exactly what it is in a few sentences. Granted there is the straightforward, although by no means easy, task in which we teach our children to participate in Christian life, this is only one aspect. The

development of Christian thinking is something which is essential to a living Church; new ages produce new problems, the truth is deepened and renewed, the essential dredged from the inessential. Since the Church is a society that must be a process in which the members participate, a process in which some people are clearly more expert than others, some have more authority than others, but surely one in which no one is totally irrelevant. In so far as membership of that society depends (as it does in all societies) on shared beliefs and interpretations, then we clearly cut ourselves off from it when we no longer accept these; but this is a different matter from an unthinking conformity. Trying out new ideas and exploring possibilities which may be of value to the group is only self-negating when it involves the unwillingness to admit that you have made a mistake, or the refusal to assent to something with which you do not personally agree, for the sake of the larger truth. It involves the liberty of the society as well as the individual. I think I may not have expressed this very satisfactorily or acceptably, but all I wanted to do was to suggest that the issue is a complex one and that simple statements may distort the truth.

Perhaps one should not generalise too freely from limited evidence, but I think the result of one of Maslow's studies<sup>6</sup> may give us food for thought. Discussing what he claims to be a carefully studied example (although he adds that only further research will show whether this is a paradigm or a special case) he says, '... in Catholic women we find often low self-esteem with high security.' Now we may say 'how admirable—a nice humility' but I wonder whether the Church of God should be a comfortable crèche for people who under-rate themselves. The world does see us as 'secure' in our belief, as living in a world of cosy unreality, and again the image is not compellingly attractive to the independent mind. Kind humanists trot up to you in the Common Room and tell you how worried they are about undermining the faith of Catholic students lest they lose their 'security'. They sometimes even ask you to undo the damage done to these poor souls by allowing them to think. And there are few sights more depressing than the wooden face of the victim saying 'But I don't want to think about it, it may all go and I want to keep it. Leave me alone, I can keep my beliefs separate from my life.' Security is a good starting point but a bad goal.

To sum up; the freedom to think seems to involve an openness of mind, a willingness to consider things on their own merits, an ability

<sup>6</sup>Maslow, A. H., 'Dynamics of Personality Organisation', *Psychol. Rev.*, 1943, No. 50, page 548.

to know a good idea when you see one regardless of whether it is your own or someone else's; it means being prepared to make an effort when the occasion demands it and facing the sometimes unpalatable implications of thought. It also demands skill and efficiency and a reasonable degree of freedom from fear, anxiety and want. It needs leisure, or at least time for ideas to mature and be developed. And last but not least some sort of community in which ideas are valued, where they can be discussed and amended and improved, a meeting ground for like minds. It is this that the Church can provide us with: it is up to us to see that it does.

## The Feast of the Eucharist

GILES HIBBERT, O.P.

*O sacrum convivium in quo Christus sumitur  
recolitur memoria passionis ejus  
mens impletur gratia  
et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*

In this antiphon is to be found what is probably one of the most perfect expressions—being both precise and comprehensive—of the nature and function of the mass or eucharist. It comes from the liturgical office of the feast of Corpus Christi and is also used on other occasions connected with the eucharist. It is of the mass as a whole however that it is descriptive, as its opening words show: *O sacrum convivium*—the sacred feast in which Christ is preached, made present and then eaten.

To translate it into English is not easy for each original word contains overtones, depth of meaning and openness to further interpretation, the exact equivalent of which cannot all be captured in translation. Thus as well as translating and considering each phrase in turn it will be well to comment almost word by word, bringing out the meaning of each within its overall context.

*O sacrum convivium in quo Christus sumitur* 'O sacred feast in which Christ is received.' The most obvious thing about a feast or banquet is