

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY AND OBLIGATIONS

(I)

Now in those days Marcus Aurelius was Emperor and it seemed as if Wisdom herself in the person of this adopted son of Antoninus Pius, this disciple of Epictetus, ruled the Roman world . . . Nevertheless the Philosopher Justin, accused of being a Christian, was brought with several companions before Rusticus the Prefect of Rome, the very man who had placed in the hands of the young Emperor the Discourses of Epictetus.

'What is your branch of study?' Rusticus enquired of Justin;

'I have studied all the sciences in turn and I have come to find rest in the teachings of the Christians, unacceptable though they may seem to those led astray by error.'

'Miserable man, is that your chosen study?'

'Yes, for the Christians possess the true doctrine.'

Rusticus turning to one of Justin's companions, asked: 'And you, what are you?'

'I am Caesar's slave, but Christ has given me freedom.'

But the accused men refused to obey Caesar and sacrifice to the Gods and the Prefect passed sentence upon them. Justin and his companions were beheaded.¹

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'I am Caesar's slave but Christ has given me freedom.' My whole discourse is based on this clear, this dazzling reply. My one object will be to make you conscious of its deep meaning.² For to me falls the honour of bringing

¹ The substance of an address given at the *Semaine Sociale* at Rouen. Translated by Margaret Murphy.

² From the *Acta* of St. Justin Martyr.

³ In these words of St. Justin will be recalled those of St. Paul, 'He that is called in the Lord, being a bondman, is the free man of the Lord' (I Cor. vii, 22).

before you during these discussions on the subject of liberty in social life the testimony of the Christian, or, to be more precise, of the theologian; that is to say, of the Christian whose task it is to justify his religion to himself, to examine its structure and its inside workings. The philosopher and the sociologist have laid before you their testimony, their point of view; I now bring you the testimony and the point of view of the theologian. Nor can I find in any theological work a text more limpid, more confident, more pregnant, than these excellent words of a forgotten martyr: 'I am Caesar's slave but Christ has given me freedom.'

There was a time when my rôle of theologian would have been an ungrateful one—a century ago when Metternich, theologian of the Holy Alliance, placed Christians in the hateful position, of which Montalembert spoke, of having to choose between the integrity of their orthodoxy and their love of freedom. Lacordaire was well aware of that dilemma! But to-day a theologian, one of Lacordaire's own sons, has a wonderful opportunity to retrieve that great good which Liberalism compromised and whose enjoyment Catholics seem sometimes to have renounced under pretext of denouncing its abuses. To-day the situation is reversed, and in a world given over to tyranny and violence the Church appears, both in the person of her visible Head and in the body of her Faithful, as the bulwark of freedom. Even to those who do not share our faith it is becoming apparent that the Christian doctrine and the Christian life are the guarantees and rule of all liberty in social life. For while to-day the Church accommodates so far as she may to every régime, even those which were but yesterday her enemies now prudently draw nearer to alliance with her. For on the one hand she find in such régimes the indispensable security given by the true esteem of liberty, and, on the other, the régimes themselves have learnt from bitterest experience that external social liberties can only flourish in climes where the interior liberty

of the soul is respected. To-day the very silence of the Head of the Church is regarded by the whole world as the most positive assertion of man's right to spiritual liberty.

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When the *theologian* speaks of liberty and liberties he does not think of them as subjects reserved exclusively to himself, as are supernatural truths known only by the light of revelation. On the contrary, he declares that here we have to do with a good of the natural order, a property possessed by man in virtue of his rational nature and of which he is conscious through his reason. He, therefore, allows to the philosopher the right to establish the existence of this liberty from his own premisses and to the sociologist the right to treat of work for the organisation of these liberties. The construction of society is not the theologian's task.

But he can shed his own particular light both on the proofs of liberty and the organisation of liberties, and he can bring his own point of view and his own promise of comfort and healing, should need arise. And the need will arise whenever grace and nature come into conflict.

The philosopher must conform to the rules governing philosophy, and make his discoveries, plans and judgments in the light of what he knows of the *universal nature* of man: the theologian will proceed in the light of his knowledge of the *particular vocation* of the Christian. He will consider man from the same angle as the philosopher, but whereas the philosopher sees but the root and potentialities of liberty in man's nature, the theologian will see him in that new shaft of light which is the knowledge God has given him concerning man's divine destiny. Not that he will, strictly speaking, discover new truths, but bathed in this light truths already known will enjoy a new radiance, will assert themselves with new force. We may say that they will flourish in a new 'climate.' For a 'climate' is the temperature which allows the growing plant to develop

to the fullest extent of its nature, the secret warmth which without modifying the tissues will ensure the slow mounting of the sap. The theologian can supply that radiance which diffused over the whole surface of the soul, illumines its most profound depths.

What then are the elements of this Christian 'climate' which is so favourable to the fostering of our liberty and the organisation of our liberties? What assistance can the liberty of the children of God, as Christian language calls it, offer to the ordered exercise of our civil liberties? Let us accept the conclusions of the philosopher and the sociologist and examine them in the light of Revelation. The philosopher has told us that the exercise of liberty and its effective ordering are to be based on two truths: firstly, that man being a spirit and therefore a person, an *absolute*, is free; secondly, that because man lives a community life, and that by reason of the very needs of his nature, his liberty can only be thought of, can only be exercised, within the limits of the common good of this community. Liberty has both a personal and a social aspect because liberty and the common good are bound up with one another. But the theologian will regard this dual basis no longer from the point of view of the analysis of man's spiritual and social *nature*, but from the point of view of the Christian economy which is based on the communication of the Divine Life. He sees, awe-struck, how, by this new vocation to which each of us is called, the Spirit of God comes to dwell in this spiritual nature, he knows the magnificent exaltation of the liberty of the spirit which must result; he sees that this Spirit is given by and in Christ, God made Flesh, the Head of all humanity, in whom all men are but one body, more truly a community wherein the Spirit may dwell—he knows how Christians must rejoice in this liberty.

Personal vocation, communal obligation—two poles, centres of attraction, round which we shall see develop a just idea of liberty, of the liberty of the children of God, participators in the greatest of all common goods—Divine

Life in Christ. Spiritual liberty, communal obligation, I submit these two points to you in turn.

The Christian's Liberty

It is because of his spiritual nature, the philosopher tells us, that man is free; it is because he possesses such *plenitude* of being that he exists of himself; thanks to the original dignity with which he was endowed he 'subsists,' he is autonomous. Not merely as an *individual*, but as something in itself irreducible to another category. In short, because he is a '*person*.' He rejoices, therefore, in a conscious 'possession' of himself, and it is this supreme interiority by which the spirit is ever present to itself and to all its acts which is the very measure of his progress and perfection.

Being so constituted the spirit of man has no 'reference' to anything outside itself as necessary to it—save to the Absolute. And this is precisely because its very plenitude will not let it satisfy itself with this or that particular thing, or this or that particular good, but makes it desire all being, all goods, and lets it find adequate sustenance only in the Infinite. How magnificent is this power of absorbing, of engulfing all it knows and loves, of knowing and loving what lies beyond its knowledge and its love! This dependence on the Absolute (or rather this 'opening upon' the Absolute) is the real reason of man's independence with regard to all else.

Nothing else can satisfy him, can fulfil him and make him fully happy, and we have only to reconsider for a moment man's fundamental choice and claim to infinite happiness to recapture the perpetual youth of this liberty and this love, like a child taking its first steps alone, and conscious of its liberty. Thus man is forever and inalienably his own master, and this dependence on the Infinite, this 'opening on' the Absolute (even if he mistakes the nature of this Absolute, and of his own true happiness),

confer upon him a majestic indetermination with regard to everything he can choose. He is free.

But this dependence on the Absolute 'fulfils' itself, takes flesh, if I may dare so to put it, in living contact with a living Being, with a *Person*. The Christian is the man who embarks on a personal relationship with God. This fundamental dependence—fundamental to man's spirit, the very root of his liberty—cries out to the Person Who is Spirit, pure Spirit, the Holy Ghost. This capacity for the Infinite which so exalts human nature, which gnaws at it without ceasing, the bitter but salutary price of its freedom, which prevents it from dissipating itself in the disillusionments of earthly pursuits, consecrates its liberty by the presence of God, for in communion with Him its spiritual desires are consummated. Let me make it clear that it is not a question of finding in Him Whom we call God the Ultimate Cause which explains the existence of the world, its movements, its contingency, its fragility. For then God would not be sought and found for His own sake as a Person to be loved—He would be only useful for explaining the order of the universe, and that universe would be really the object of my eager desire. No, here it is the other way round: I turn to God as to a *person* in whom I take my delight, for a person is no 'use' to me unless he is in the first place the object of my love. This love for God transports me right outside this world with all its material and spiritual limitations and all its fettering ties—transports me into another 'city,' another society, where I am joined in love to the 'one thing necessary.'

In this communion, and in proportion to the closeness of this communion, the human spirit becomes free with the very liberty of God, participating in some way in the Creator's independence of His creation. A conquest slow of achievement, it is true, and never really finally accomplished in this life, but one already sufficient for the Christian, be he never so weak, to be able to know himself invincible by all the powers of the world, to be able to

feel himself his own master, more powerful than all the ardours of earthly loyalties and than all social and political passions. He attains to a self-mastery and a self-possession, such that his inmost soul can never—no more than can the God to which it is united—become enslaved to partisan ideologies and policies.

Ubi Spiritus Domini ibi libertas. The words of St. Paul strike in aptly on the musings of the philosopher. If liberty is indeed the very law of the spirit, if its measure be the *plenitude* of the spirit, then the Christian whose soul has become the tabernacle of Him Who is called the Holy Spirit, will enjoy the most sovereign liberty—the liberty of God Himself. He will fight to defend his liberty, for he knows that it is the seal, the sanctuary, of the Spirit, and that to abandon his own liberty would be to quench the Spirit of God within him. So, too, the presence of the Spirit within him is the guarantee and pledge of his liberty. And Spirit is not to be constrained, it can pass through all barriers, no force can restrain it, and even in those most dangerous fetters that are forged of gold, it remains un-sullied and intact smiling like that virgin Blandina in the arena of her martyrdom. *Ubi Spiritus, ibi libertas.*

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Let us penetrate the secret mysteries of this personal relation with God, and see the parts it plays in the destiny of man.

For the fulfilment of this capacity for God—the inviolable fortress of liberty—does not come about in the same stereotyped way in each soul, as it would if human beings were merely individuals in a species. No, it is a matter of *persons*, and as we have seen the difference between persons and individuals is not merely one of degree, but there is in each person something entirely distinctive. Such is our dignity that God deals with us as one person with another, and this mutual commerce is the unfolding of what we Christians term a 'vocation.' For a 'vocation'

is the 'Christian name' given to each soul's relationship with his God. As St. Paul says, we are the 'chosen,' the 'elect,' and in this call, this choice, we see the work of Love that is of the freest and most absolute liberty of all, that of God. As Christians we are born into, we live in, the atmosphere of this great love and all our actions are stamped with its seal; we know this to be so whether they bring us sorrow or joy. To listen to this call, to accept this gift, to share in this love, is to free ourselves forever and to create between us and *everything* that is not God or united to God an unbridgeable gulf. Have we not seen among our fellow men him who has surrendered himself to love? He treats the most precious of earthly goods with disdain, supported by an irresistible and invincible strength drawn from the object of his love . . . The love of God, like all loves, is a jealous love; once taken in its delectable toils we shall treat with an easy indifference all that is not of it.

If all human beings find their stability, integrity and independence in a vocation, it seems that the Christian, given his consciousness of his divine vocation, is *fiercely* independent, by very reason of the sweet dependence in which he relies on the One Who loved and chose him.

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Carried as far as this, does not liberty evade all obligation? What room is there for such liberty in a world where earthly laws hold sway—moral, social, civil and political laws?

Many false solutions suggest themselves here, false not because of their ends only, but because of their clumsiness, as do those which treat liberty and obligation as two conflicting quantities which must be reconciled *from without*. Some stress the frailty of our liberty—it needs guidance and restraint. Others bring in the question of social expediency—after all, one must adapt oneself! Yet others content themselves with saying that as the 'children of God

should love one another' they should perforce get on with one another. Or perhaps they keep to a prudent common-sense attitude: Liberty is certainly a precious thing, but it must be reasonable none the less, and submit to its duties. We will accept none of these heteronomous threats to our liberty; man should always be *autonomous* because the liberty which God gives us is not to be compromised and imprisoned by slavery to external laws; on the contrary, obedience itself must be *within* liberty.

Obedience, whether to the most trivial of social conventions or to the gravest of laws, is *within* liberty; that is to say, all dependence is and should be seen as being inherent in that divine dependence in which and by which we have established our liberty. Which means that no obligation has any strength or meaning unless it is the expression of this divine dependence, the loving dependence of our personal relationship with God. Some, good Christians even, say that to grant divine authority to law is to immolate the spirit to an external obligation, but they have not understood; they treat submission to God as though it was of the same sort as submission to man—differing from it only in degree. But obedience to God is in quite another order from obedience to man. And for the Christian no man has power over another man unless he gets his power from God;⁴ for whereas no one has any right to dominate another person, God is closer to me than I am to myself, and when He acts on me it is not in a manner alien to the nature of my soul. And indeed, is it not obvious that it is when one man dominates another that obedience degenerates into servitude? It is better, in every sense of the words, to obey God rather than men. *Omnis potestas a Deo*. How absolute this maxim is!

⁴ So Leo XIII. 'There is no man who of himself possesses anything which empowers him to fetter the free will of his fellow men by a bond of conscience. God alone, as Creator and Lawgiver of all, possesses such power.'

That is the full meaning of Leo XIII's words in the Encyclical *Libertas*: It is absolutely impossible to understand man's liberty without submission to God, 'for submission to God is the very source of our liberty' Man does not obey man. All authority cut away from God, its root, is tyranny. This is not a more or less accidental phenomenon; it is in the very nature of things.

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It would be a simple and fascinating task to start from this point and describe the influence of this interior liberty of the Christian upon the whole sphere of the social order where the divers authorities, public or private, hold sway. The Christian observes, judges, loves these 'powers' endowed with divine truth and worth from *within* the mind and will of God, and with the eyes of God. For him every law is an emanation, a projection, an application of Divine Law—applied, not by breaking it, as it were, into a thousand little human pieces *exterior* to the thoughts of God, but by indwelling, by participation. He will seek the standards of his obedience not in the men who make these laws, nor even, firstly, in the immediate ends or goods which they are fashioned to attain, but in the spiritual aspect they take on in pursuing this end. The Christian accepts the law in a spirit of filial piety, as an act of communion with his fellow men, as an 'act' of liberty. And in the end obedience and liberty should coincide in that state of perfection in which obligation, having become completely interiorised, will appear where man is concerned as a law of nature, where God is concerned as the expression of attention to love.

I must emphasise the fact that this 'interiorising' of obedience is directly opposed to conformism—to all conformism, however pious, however moral it may be—to submission to some command which is treated as a task to be carried out, a task which is set by the leader, the party, the society, and is not a spontaneous expression or fulfilment of liberty.

For this reason we see that the Christian's attitude to those in authority is characterised at once by a reverence and independence whose chief effect is to free him from party-passions and to ensure for him a clear and serene outlook when faced by problems which seem agonisingly complex and obscure. There is no need to insist upon the importance for the public order of this liberty of spirit (not to mention liberty of action) secured by Christian life and teaching.

I will content myself with the most summary of references to a very delicate situation, one where social and political liberties cannot in sober earnest attain to an ordered exercise without the balance of vision given by liberty of the spirit—the question of obedience to those in power. You know the outlines of this problem, and I need not go over them here—I will only try to show how they bring out the dignity and strength of Christian liberty. We are taught that we owe our obedience to those in power whoever they may be, provided only that our moral principles are safe, and that just because it is not the man, the frail human being, the party-leader, whom we obey, but God Whose authentic representative he is. *Omnis potestas a Deo*. Here we find bound up with one another at once complete reverence and righteous independence just where we might expect to find them most opposed. Since this authority is 'divine' I accept the laws and precepts it lays down not, as it were, *from without*, as a concession to a necessary but troublesome external order, but *from within*. I make the content of the law mine, in my heart, I can see in the trustee of power 'God's minister for good,'⁵ God's own delegate. But also because this authority is 'divine' I consider this public authority itself as a means. No doubt in its own order the common good which it serves is a great one, and the government has a right to its claims, but always to be at the service of human beings. For this

⁵ Cf. Rom. xiii, 1-7.

reason we shall find throughout the whole course of history that, even apart from actual conflict, there has always been a resistance on the part of the State which will not tolerate such 'relative' treatment and stands amazed at seeing combined in the Christian souls so great a reverence, so sincere a respect, and yet, whenever the State tries to arrogate to itself the credit for the holiness of its rôle and mission, so stubborn an independence.*

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There is a phrase which expresses to a nicety the interior transformation wrought by this Christian obedience—the liberty of the Gospel.'

Up till now it is more of what may be called 'metaphysical' liberty that I have been treating, and I reproach myself with having spoken to you in so ponderous a manner of this supple, this fascinating power whose spontaneity is its most striking characteristic. After this long analysis let us return to the direct perception, the simple and touching emotion of Marcus Aurelius' unknown martyr—'I am a slave but Christ has given me freedom.' What could be simpler, purer—it is the very stuff of the Gospel! Yes indeed, for the Gospel is essentially a law of liberty.⁷ Being made, in and through Christ, the sons of God, we are no longer as children under tutors and governors, we have our part in the heritage, the heritage of the first-born Son. It is a new life in the strongest sense of the word, a life in which we receive not only gifts and advantages, precious helps though they may be to being a good man and

* 'Christ has made us free. Stand fast and be not held again under the yoke of bondage' (Galatians iv, 31—v, 1). 'You are bought with a great price; be not made the bondslaves of men' (I Cor. vii, 23).

⁷ Cf. I. Tonneau, O.P.'s, *L'Eglise parle: Mystère Chrétien de liberté* in *La Vie Intellectuelle*, 10 Juin, 1937. Also C. Tunmer, O.P.: *The Spirit quickeneth* in BLACKFRIARS, November, 1935.

a good citizen, but the Spirit Himself directing our lives in a régime of love outside which nothing has meaning or substance, in which everything is transformed. Some have abused this great gift, and the more precious a good, the more dangerous is its abuse—we have only to think of the havoc wrought to Christendom by the 'evangelicalism' of Luther. But the fact that some have misused the liberty of the Gospels is no reason for renouncing it, though I fear that too often we are apt, through a sort of timidity, to treat it as something dangerous.

None the less it is the teaching of St. Paul, and with him we are at the heart of the Christian 'mystery.' We are no longer subject to the Law, that is to say to a régime where observance is the final test of value. Not, indeed, that the external rules of conduct are done away with; laws bind us still both individually and collectively, from the Highway Code to the most sacred of family ties and obligations. It is the same St. Paul, preacher of this new liberty, who teaches us the duty of submission to those in authority; but these precepts and obligations only hold sway *within* this mystery of sonship and liberty. They hold sway there or they break down entirely—too heavy for human strength. Our sole power is our consciousness of Sonship—and how far more powerful is this instinct of supreme liberty than the precepts of the pedagogue or the shallow commands of the law. This consciousness urges us, incites us, presses and pushes us forward, forces us; it is indeed our living law. Not that other laws are bad or wrong, but it would be a grievous fall from their Christian calling were the sons of God, with His Spirit to guide them, to become enslaved to them. For we must realise that if a régime of external law does exist, other than the pure law of the Gospel, it can have for us no other rôle than to form within us, and to express, our essential liberty.⁸

⁸ I. Tonneau, *loc. cit.*

But (it may be said) it is, after all, itself a law, even if it comprehends all other laws! Yes, replies St. Thomas,⁹ but it is called *grace*, and this law is in fact the grace of God Himself infused into our hearts, with all the power and spontaneity of a 'nature.' A divine 'nature'; that is to say, a live and supple principle of life, a sap forever mounting and forever rich, an eternal faculty of renewal, a power of assimilation and transformation which rejects only that which is evil.

As Christians it is not with a series of *external* laws that we have to do either in the fields of sociology, politics, or even of ethics—external laws embodying the time-serving and limited disciplines arranged for us by the fatherly kindness of secular institutions. Our life, our law is *within* us and will express itself in all its mysterious reality in all those activities and through all these régimes.

We are not tied beforehand to such and such an organisation of labour, to such and such an exchange system, to such and such a social convention, or to this or that institution which may have hitherto proved beneficial to mankind. We are free even with regard to earthly success, with regard to what has been proved to 'work.' We may even suspect these too easy triumphs, this temptation to ensure the spiritual welfare of men at the price of this radical independence which only love can guarantee.

Ubi Spiritus, ibi Libertas. The Church, the only authentic and inviolable dwelling place of the Spirit, appears to us now and always clad in the shining robes of her perpetually creative youth, free from the bondage of any régime, free from all earthly ties, calling up all over the world an apostolate of conquest whose freedom is the sure witness of the presence of the Spirit within it.¹⁰

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⁹ *Summa Theol.*, Ia IIae, cvi.

¹⁰ A subsequent article will treat of the social obligations of a Christian in the light of this law of liberty.