



SESSION 14

The Truth will set You Free



The Young Virgin, Francisco de Zurbarán

STEP 1: Begin

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To envision life as a pilgrimage and the Church as our refuge and guide
- To understand what freedom is, and is not, in the teaching of Scripture
- To encounter the Church as our Mother and Teacher, who heals, instructs, and nurtures us
- To discover what conscience is, the need to form it, and the role it plays in the moral life
- To appreciate the greatness of human freedom and how it is meant to be exercised for love of God and neighbor

OPENING PRAYER

O my God!

I offer Thee all my actions of this day

for the intentions and for the glory of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

I desire to sanctify every beat of my heart, my every thought, my simplest works,
by uniting them to Its infinite merits;

and I wish to make reparation for my sins by casting them into the furnace of Its
merciful love.

O my God!

I ask of Thee for myself and for those whom I hold dear,
the grace to fulfill perfectly Thy holy will,

to accept for love of Thee the joys and sorrows of this passing life,
so that we may one day be united together in heaven for all eternity.

Amen.

– A Morning Prayer, *by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*

INTRODUCTION

Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. By free will one shapes one's own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude. (CCC 1731)

Saint Paul gives the early Christians in Galatia a rallying cry: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1). But it's a puzzling rallying cry. If Christ has truly *set us free*, why are we free *for freedom*, as though freedom still must be achieved or attained? It sounds like we're free to be . . . free?

Freedom is the ability we have "to act or not to act, to do this or that." This ability is a fragile one. Not only can we suffer coercion, but we can find ourselves dominated by wishes or desires that we know will not bring us happiness. For freedom to reach a place of strength and security, it must be formed and solidified in the good. Only when fortified by virtue and grace does freedom enable us to give ourselves in love to another freely and consistently. Only when freedom is mature does it enable us to receive love with hearts that are grateful and overflowing.

So how do we use our freedom in a way that strengthens rather than compromises it? How do we make free choices that lead to further choices made in greater freedom rather than under duress or domination? The previous sessions focused on our call to a loving communion with Christ, and on the theological virtues enabling its attainment. This session turns to the gift of freedom and to how Christ nurtures, guides, and strengthens it within his Church. Through the Church's sacraments, teaching, laws, and culture, God provides a haven in this life for us. In the Church we are strengthened on our journey toward our heavenly homeland.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Tucked into a remote corner of northern New Mexico, the small town of Chimayó houses the Santuario de Chimayó. This simple yet beautiful shrine has a vibrantly painted chapel and holy dirt that has greeted millions of pilgrims and visitors over the years. People come from far and wide to find a place of comfort, peace, and healing. This spiritual oasis symbolizes and enacts the Church's care for souls, acting as a Mother and a Teacher to provide for the needs of her children and the world.

In the young man [of Matt 19:16], whom Matthew's Gospel does not name, we can recognize every person who, consciously or not, approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality. For the young man, the question is not so much about rules to be followed, but about the full meaning of life. This is in fact the aspiration at the heart of every human decision and action, the quiet searching and interior prompting which sets freedom in motion.

— Pope Saint John Paul II, *encyclical letter, Veritatis splendor*, no. 7

The Christian life is like a pilgrimage. On the journey, we often find ourselves in need of sustenance, support, and a really good map. But while we're on this journey, we often ask ourselves where we should turn to for the care and guidance we need. Even though we are free, this doesn't mean that our best bet is to wander in any direction. In this session, we explore the themes of freedom and law in the Bible and how the Church has brought these together in her understanding of conscience. The gifts of freedom and conscience are meant to honor the truth, to cling to God, and so to help us grow into maturity and the fullness of human life.

I. The desert is a place of pilgrimage, encounter, and change

II. Salvation History: Slavery or freedom

- A. Exodus presents a contest: Pharaoh versus God
 - 1. Pharaoh enslaves the Hebrew people; they must work for him
 - 2. Serving the Lord and following his law offer true freedom and fullness of life
- B. Freedom is meant for giving and receiving love
 - 1. God, the architect of the universe, guides us with his wise commandments
 - 2. If we follow God's voice and teaching, we share in his life and blessings
 - 3. If we reject God's guidance and disobey him, we suffer the consequences—death

III. Pilgrimage: Chimayó is "the Lourdes of the American Southwest"

- A. Devotion to Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas comes to New Mexico in a miraculous way
- B. Chimayó symbolizes the Church as a place of oasis and refuge in the desert
 - 1. The Church brings healing through the sacraments and miracles, like we find at Chimayó
 - 2. The Church brings Christ's teaching and instruction
 - 3. The Church brings new life, giving birth to believers and to art and culture
 - 4. The Church makes Christ and his saving action present in the world and through time

IV. Catechesis: We are free to choose life, to choose love, to choose God

- A. Freedom is not for "doing what I like" but for "doing what I ought"
 - 1. Conscience helps us to judge what we ought to do
 - 2. Conscience must be formed in knowledge of the good—through natural law and revelation
- B. Natural law and God's law direct us toward our end: happiness, flourishing
 - 1. When we act against these laws, we frustrate our pursuit of happiness
 - 2. Our greatest happiness is to be in union with God, in this life and in the next
- C. Freely choosing to love God puts us in harmony with him and with ourselves
 - 1. We are free to turn away from God, but this path leads to slavery and suffering
 - 2. God wants us to choose to love him, and he has given us many helps to do that: grace, the sacraments, Scripture, law, the Church's teaching

V. *Lectio divina*: Galatians 5:1–6

- A. Like God's chosen people in Exodus, we can fall back into slavery
- B. Confident in Christ's victory, we ask God to free us from division, entanglements, and slavery

WORD MEANING:

Law

A rule of conduct made and promulgated for the sake of a common good by the competent authority who has care of the community; all law finds its root and source in God's eternal law (see CCC 1950–1953).

The gift of the victorious Christ is the homecoming and thereby makes possible the building of the house, and the house is called "Church." Here the theme of spirit as freedom and liberation plainly comes into play. Although paradoxical to contemporary thought, freedom consists in becoming a part of the house, in being included in the building. This idea is not paradoxical from the perspective of the ancient concept of freedom. For the ancients, whoever belongs to the house is free, and freedom is finding a home.

– Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "The Holy Spirit as Communio," *Communio* 25 (Summer 1998): 336.

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) Consider this paradoxical, even contradictory, idea: to grow in freedom, we have to follow and obey laws, God's laws above all. Can you think of some times when you submitted to a law or followed guidance and felt freer and happier? How can these examples teach you something about the truth that God's commandments are the result of his love for us and, as such, are meant to lead us to greater freedom and fulfillment?

Naturally, many examples could be given in response to this question. These might include learning to play a musical instrument or a sport; learning a skill or craft; driving on (relatively) well-ordered streets when traffic laws are obeyed; following a household rule; and many others. These kinds of examples tend to highlight two aspects of the matter. The first is that our knowledge of ourselves and of the world is often limited, and we profit by following the rules or guidance of someone wiser or more experienced than we are. The second is that most of our capacities are not like on and off switches, where there is no gradation and no room for growth or improvement. Instead, our capacities can typically be strengthened, improved, perfected. In this respect, freedom is no different. We have a certain kind of fundamental freedom—the freedom to choose between option A and option B. This, however, is only part of the picture, and not even the most important part, because this fundamental freedom is really for the sake of something else, namely, the freedom to do good, to pursue excellence, to love, and to receive love. Just as a master musician or athlete or artist can guide us along the path to being an excellent musician, athlete, or artist,

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so too God—the Master Artist—lovingly guides us along the path to being an excellent person, which ultimately means being like his Son, Jesus Christ. The more we are like Christ, the greater our freedom and our happiness will be. The more we take his yoke upon ourselves, and learn from him, the more we will find rest for our souls (see Matt 11:29).

- 2) When we look at the life of Jesus Christ, we are struck by how much time he spent helping others: healing them, teaching them, feeding them, and caring for them. During his short earthly ministry, Christ poured himself out in showing mercy to those around him. When we think of the Church, we might not have such a positive impression. But the Church continues to make present Christ's merciful action in the world. Christ healed, and so does the Church; Christ taught, and so does the Church; Christ sanctified, and so does the Church. What examples can you think of to show how the Church brings Christ's mercy into the world?

Leader

For this question, a great starting point is the sacramental life of the Church, since it encompasses all the dimensions of the Church as Mother and Teacher. The sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist, bring about our birth into Christ and our ongoing growth. Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick bring Christ's healing touch into our lives. Other sacraments nurture and strengthen us along the way. The teaching that happens during the Mass is ideally a particular expression of the universal teaching office of the Church, embodied most of all in the pope and the college of bishops. We might also consider the Church's remarkable tradition of intellectual insights and cultural expressions. These, too, contribute to the formation and strengthening of her members. Of course, all of us are keenly aware of the shortcomings of and downright abuses by some leaders in the Church that bring about tragedy in the lives of believers. These situations need our prayers and efforts to rectify these wrongs. But, as the Body of Christ and at the command of her founder, the Church continues to carry out her mission to be Mother and Teacher, and those of us who are her members draw from her motherly wisdom and take refuge in her motherly care.

- 3) Conscience is not the "supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil," says Pope Saint John Paul II; instead, it is simply reason's "application of the law to a particular case" (*Veritatis splendor*, nos. 32 and 59). This important, but more limited, function of conscience clarifies why we must form our consciences: We have to learn the laws to apply in a given case, laws based on reason and revelation. What are some ways that we can form our consciences to make better judgments about correct courses of action? How does the Christian life go beyond discussions of conscience?

We can form our consciences in a variety of ways, but most involve learning the laws and rules that apply to life and its various domains. For example, we have a duty to become familiar with the basic laws of

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the land, traffic laws, tax law, and the like. In addition, we should learn what the Church teaches about morality, about receiving the sacraments, and about the laws of the Church, especially the precepts of the Church. Another great source of formation comes from prayerfully reading Scripture, which presents to us God's revelation in written form and contains much moral wisdom. Finally, the lives of the saints can be remarkably helpful in seeing how to discern right and wrong in ordinary life and in the face of extraordinary situations, often very difficult ones. What is especially helpful about the lives of the saints is that they show us how forming our consciences and following God's law is a necessary first step, but the law of love goes far beyond this. In other words, there is a moral minimum that we cannot go below without falling short and sinning, but there is no upward limit to love and to the willingness of the lover to do whatever is best for the beloved. In the witness of Christ and of the saints who reflect him, we see that love goes far beyond the minimum requirements of the law. For this reason, it's important to see that conscience, and even freedom of conscience, plays an important but limited role in the Church's moral teaching. Even more than conscience, the Christian life revolves around beatitude, virtue, love, prayer, and modeling our lives on Christ, the Master. Ultimately, we form our consciences so that in doing the good consistently, we become increasingly ready and willing to go beyond what the law requires, to give generously, and to love with the love of Christ.

STEP 4: Conclude

If the Christian life is a battle, then we need rallying cries: "For freedom Christ has set us free." We need them especially when we expect to meet challenges along the way, as Saint Paul goes on to note: "Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). Slavery is always a danger for God's people. Even when we are free from external constraint and coercion, the human heart works against its own freedom. Christ gives us the grace to overcome this temptation, and he mediates that grace to us through his Church, through her sacraments and teaching, through her laws and cultural treasures. We have no shortage of ways to strengthen our freedom, and no shortage of God's help to grow into a freedom that leads us to life and love.

CLOSING PRAYER

O my God,
I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee,
and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments,
but most of all because they offend Thee, my God,
who art all good and deserving of all my love.
I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more
and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Amen.

— *Act of Contrition*

MEMORY VERSE

For freedom Christ has set
us free; stand fast therefore,
and do not submit again to a
yoke of slavery.

— GALATIANS 5:1

CALL TO CONVERSION

Have you had an incredible mentor or a hero in your life? Someone you looked up to? Someone whose every word you hung on? Perhaps following this person's guidance was so easy, and obedience was so effortless. Others might have even thought you to be a "fanboy" or "fangirl," a groupy, a devoted follower, an adoring fan.

Psalm 1, the very first chapter of Psalms, describes just such an adoring fan:

"Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:1–2).

For this man, the law of the Lord is not unwelcome, burdensome, or unpleasant. Instead, it is a delight, a gift, something to treasure and savor.

What if we could have the same attitude toward God's law? What if we could treasure, savor, and meditate upon the laws of God as they come to us through the natural law and through revelation, safeguarded and interpreted by the Church? It isn't always easy—there's no doubt about that. But as with many things, love makes the prospect and task sweet. And when it comes to the laws that guide and strengthen our freedom, one of the best ways to allow love to warm our hearts is to see that God's laws tell us something about him, our Beloved. As the *Catechism* puts it, "The gift of the Commandments is the gift of God himself and his holy will. In making his will known, God reveals himself to his people" (CCC 2059). The more we come to know God, the more we reflect on all that he does for us in salvation history and in our own lives—then the more we will come to love him, making his law a delight to our hearts. We will come to trust him more, leading us to trust his law and his guidance to set us free and to disciple us in the great gift of freedom.



DIGGING DEEPER

Two common views today misunderstand human freedom. The first holds that human freedom is so exalted that each person must be free to do as he or she pleases, making each of us our own arbiter of good and evil. The second seems at first to be the opposite. It holds that we are all influenced by so many biological and social factors, and to such an extent, that we aren't really free; our actions are determined, and thus freedom is an illusion. Although these viewpoints oppose one another, they end up having the same practical consequences: Whatever each person decides to do is right for him or her, is good, and cannot be judged otherwise by anyone else.



Both views are wrong, but each has a kernel of truth. We are, in fact, bound to do what conscience judges to be right—not whatever most pleases us, not whatever our current whim is. A well-formed conscience is decisive. However, our conscience and freedom don't make automatically make a choice the right one—rather they recognize what is right and respond to it. And many biological, chemical, and social factors affect us in significant ways. Sometimes these factors can diminish our freedom, but that's not the whole story. At other times, these conditions can increase and strengthen our freedom, as they do in the context of a truthful, beautiful, and wholesome cultural milieu.

The Church's theological tradition gives us a middle way through these two extremes. Human freedom is not the absolute freedom of the Creator, nor is it a mere illusion. Instead, it is the limited but real freedom of a creature. This freedom depends on the Creator not only for its existence—for how could human freedom exist at all if God had not made it to be?—but also for its growth and maturity, through the guidance that the Creator and Redeemer offer us, in the gift of our human nature and in the gift of revelation.

FOR FURTHER READING

Deuteronomy 30:11–20, Psalm 1, John 8 and 15

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1730–1756, 1950–1974, and 2052–2074

Steven J. Jensen, *Living the Good Life: A Beginner's Thomistic Ethics*, chaps. 2–4

Pope Saint John Paul II, encyclical letter, *Redemptor hominis* and *Veritatis splendor* (especially chap. 1)

Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity*, chaps. 29–30