

True Freedom

by the Rev. Patrick A. Rose

“You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

All people love freedom. Indeed, it is as precious as life itself. Many people, throughout history have given up their lives fighting for the cause of freedom. And even when freedom is not fought for on a battleground, all people, still strive for it. In all kinds of ways, people seek the opportunity to do what they want to do and try to avoid being dominated by others.

This is what freedom is. It is doing what we want to do. And this is why it is so precious to us—as precious as life itself. Indeed, freedom is life. When we do what we want to do, our life goes forth and takes delight in the things that we love (cf. *Divine Providence* 73).

When the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church speaks of our deepest or ruling love—the love which is said to be the very life of a person (*Doctrine of Life* 1)—it is talking about something that is normally above our consciousness. It is something deep within the mind. But when the Heavenly Doctrine speaks about delight, we can understand what it is talking about. We all experience delight, or enjoyment. Delight is nothing else than our inner love descending to a lower plane of the mind, a plane where it can be keenly felt. Therefore, if you wonder whether or not you love something, ask yourself simply whether or not you take delight in it—for if there is delight in something, there is love for it—and it is the love which causes the sensation of delight.

Delight, or enjoyment, is very important indeed. Not only do we think of our own enjoyment as important, it actually is important. Without delight, the Heavenly Doctrine tells us, “a person could not continue to live” (*True Christian Religion* 490). Even the most miserable person has something that he takes a small amount of delight in, even if it is only a certain enjoyment in pitying himself. Otherwise, without delight, his love or life, would cease its activity, and he would cease to live.

And so it is that (at least some) freedom to do what we enjoy, what we take delight in, is necessary for our existence. Indeed, it is in the very order of creation for us to do what we enjoy, what we love. Without some kind of freedom existing in all created things, their continued existence would be impossible (cf. *True Christian Religion* 499). As the Heavenly Doctrine points out, if animals did not have a desire to eat certain foods, together with free access to this food, there would be no animals. It is the same with all living things. The Lord has created a vast variety of living organisms and all kinds of food. But none of the living things He has created would survive if they did not have the desire and the freedom to find or absorb the nourishment they need.

Everything, everywhere, is, as it were, doing what it wants to do, acting from a desire or instinct implanted in it by the Lord from creation. If this were not the case, creation could not survive. This is even true on the atomic level. If the electrons in orbits around the nucleus of an atom did not have an attraction—something analogous to a desire—toward the protons in the nucleus, then every atom would fall apart, and there would be no matter as we know it.

Now let us view ourselves in the same way. The Lord has created us, and so that we might survive, He has implanted certain desires in us which are necessary if we are to continue to live. And it is important that we have the freedom to act according to these desires—to do what we want to do. On this depends the survival of not only ourselves, but of the human race in general.

Take the desire to eat. Normally we want to eat. It is something we do, not as a chore, but as a pleasure. We enjoy the freedom to sit down and eat a good meal. Think how terrible it would be, and how few people would survive, if human beings did not have this desire.

Many things that we do, we do because we enjoy doing them. We act from a sense of delight, from certain loves within us. And we do so in freedom, not from any sense of compulsion. And these enjoyable and free things are essential to our survival. The human race would not survive if people didn't have strong desires to breathe, to eat and drink, to avoid pain and injury, to seek conjunction with the opposite sex, to nourish and protect infants, and so on. It is evident, therefore, that it is right and proper for us to enjoy ourselves, and to do what we want to do. And it is essential that we have the freedom to do these things.

This, though, might sound rather strange. After all, we all realize that it is important that we *don't* do certain things, and that we restrain ourselves, rather than simply acting according to our feelings. For isn't acting with complete freedom, with no restraint, at the very heart of all evil? Some people would say that it is. Some would say that to enjoy ourselves and to do what we want is selfish and evil. Some people even feel guilty whenever they enjoy themselves. They may also have a sense of pride and merit simply because they have suffered or given up certain pleasures. Just as they think that enjoyment is evil, so they think that suffering is somehow good.

But this is not what constitutes the distinction between good and evil. The Lord is a God of Love. He loves us and wants us to be happy. He wants us to enjoy ourselves, and to act in freedom according to the loves He has planted in us. To feel guilty about being happy is a serious mistake, for it is to accuse the Lord, as our Maker, of being mistaken in making us the way He has. And if we think that the Lord wants us to be unhappy, and wants us to suffer, isn't that the same as accusing Him of being a cruel and harsh God?

The Heavenly Doctrine makes it clear that there is nothing wrong with enjoyment, and it makes it plain that there is no virtue in suffering itself. Indeed, far from equating evil with enjoyment, they teach that good is enjoyable and can be enjoyed to all eternity, whereas evil is evil because of the suffering it inevitably leads to.

There is nothing wrong with what is delightful. There is nothing wrong with loving the world and its pleasures. Nor is there anything wrong with loving ourselves and taking care of ourselves. Both the love of the world and the love of self are basically good loves, loves implanted in us by the Lord so that we might survive and be happy (*True Christian Religion* 403). We can and should enjoy acting in freedom according to these loves.

Evil does not lie in those loves with which a human being is created, nor does it lie in the enjoyment of them. It lies, rather, in the *disordering* of these loves. When our various desires

are not in the proper order, when a lower desire takes precedence over a higher and more important love, it results in suffering, and this is evil.

Take as a simple example the urge to breathe. It is good that we have such an urge or instinct. It is also good that we have an urge to eat regularly. But imagine a person whose desire to eat took precedence over his desire to breathe—and who was so busy swallowing food that he didn't stop to take a breath, and so died of suffocation. Such an example sounds absurd. Only a complete idiot, or someone in a state of delirium, would do something like this. And yet this is what evil is. It is an absurd disordering of the loves within us. Evil is refusing to act according to higher loves and higher freedoms. It is the desire to indulge lower loves and lower freedoms to the exclusion of everything else. From this comes the misery and wretchedness of evil.

But why is it that a person can come into such misery, whereas no animal abuses the love into which it is born? It is because we are completely different from animals. An animal simply embodies an affection. It doesn't choose that affection. The only freedom an animal has is to act on the natural plane according to whatever affection it has. But we can *choose* our affections. We can choose the spirit by which we wish to be motivated. We not only have freedom, we also have freedom of choice—that is, the freedom not only to act according to our loves, but also the freedom to choose those loves from which we will act.

In order that we might make this choice, we have been given a freedom that is uniquely human—a freedom shared by no other living creatures—namely the freedom to think and reflect upon higher things. We have not only a freedom to do, but also a freedom to think.

We indeed have freedom to *do*. And we can indulge this freedom, acting according to merely natural desires. We can live like animals. Just as an animal follows the prompting of its loves without reflection, so can we. But if this is the case, though we might act like animals, we are still not the same as them. We are not animals, and can never become quite like them. We are human beings—and human beings are not simply animals which happen to have human souls (cf. *True Christian Religion* 480). Because we do have human souls, and because we have the ability to think and reflect on spiritual things, then everything that we do has spiritual significance. All of our choices, even choices on the natural plane, have something of spiritual freedom, of spiritual choice, within them.

When an animal follows the prompting of its appetites, it is acting according to loves instilled in it by the Lord. However, when a human being acts solely according to his natural appetites, with no reference to spiritual things, then he has abused a spiritual freedom instilled into him by the Lord for his spiritual welfare.

If an animal acted like a plant—sitting in one place and hoping to absorb food from the ground, then that animal would die. An animal is not a plant and can never become one. Similarly with us. If we choose to act as animals, living our lives merely on the basis of natural desires and failing to reflect on higher things, then our spirits will languish and come into a state of spiritual misery. For if we act like animals, we will not receive the spiritual good which our spirits need. Nor will we be able to draw spiritual breath.

We can indeed be so busy eating that we forget to breathe—that is, we can be so busy feeding our natural wants and needs that we do not bother to breathe in spiritual air, spiritual truth. When we fail to turn to the truth, then we damage our spirits. We can become as slow and damaged in our spirits as people are in their natural bodies and minds when they have suffered brain damage through lack of oxygen.

For us, whose destiny is a spiritual one, to act from natural freedom alone is to place ourselves in a state of slavery. Worldly pleasures, where there is no concern for spiritual things, will give delight for only a time. They do not last. They can satisfy animals, but by themselves they cannot satisfy human beings, who are born for higher things. The delight of merely worldly things is slavery and it will not last. As the Lord said, "...a slave does not abide in the house forever" (John 8:35).

And so the Lord asks us to exercise our spiritual freedom, to throw off what will only cause us misery in the end, and to choose what will give us eternal enjoyment and happiness. For this purpose, He asks us to think, especially to think about what He tells us in His Word. Only the truth of the Lord's Word can free us from the misery of a merely natural life. And we are able to turn to this truth for ourselves because, as human beings, we have freedom of thought. And so let us use this freedom to move our thoughts to what we truly need—toward the truth of the Word and the higher things this truth teaches us.

As we think and reflect, learning from the Word, let us then compel ourselves to do what we were created to do—to act rightly toward others, and toward the Lord Himself. Then we will be truly free—with a freedom which comes only when we follow the Lord. We will be free and will enjoy ourselves, and be truly happy, to all eternity.

This is what the Lord wants for us. He has given us the ability and the freedom to reflect upon and search after those loves which will bring us happiness. It is we alone who so often insist on making ourselves miserable.

The Lord doesn't want us to weight ourselves down with unnecessary guilt and suffering. He doesn't ask us to stop loving ourselves. He certainly doesn't want us to stop enjoying the pleasures of the world. What He does want is to offer us even more precious things than these. He invites us to love the things of the spirit, and to come to find our greatest enjoyment in the things of spiritual love and charity.

We are not born solely for natural freedom and the pleasures which go with it. We are spiritual beings, and we are born so that we might experience spiritual pleasures as well. And the freedom to love the Lord, to love the truth of His Word, and to love the good in our fellow human beings—this is freedom itself.

Amen.

Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:1-5; John 8:30-36; *True Christian Religion* 403:1