

Obedience and Freedom

Adapted from an article by the Rt. Rev. George de Charms

Angels love nothing so much as to be led by the Lord, attributing all things they receive to Him...whatever they hear from the Lord, whether through the Word or by means of preaching, they...instantly obey it, that is, will it and do it.
(*Heaven and Hell* 278)

An important and persistent problem confronting parents in bringing up their children is determining the proper relationship between obedience and freedom. Both are necessary. Each has its own essential part to play in human development. Yet outwardly they appear to be irreconcilable opposites. Obedience is a state of bondage, while freedom implies the total absence of bonds. How can they be reconciled?

The truth is that obedience and freedom are equally important. One cannot exist for long without the other. From the Writings we learn that obedience is the first law of heaven, because no one can enter into the Lord's kingdom who does not obey His Divine commandments (*Heaven and Hell* 218, 278; *Apocalypse Explained* 443). At the same time we are taught that not even the Lord, with all His infinite power, can force any one into heaven. Only people who enter of their own free will can possibly enjoy the happiness of heaven. For this reason the Lord, in His Divine Providence, protects human freedom above all else, even permitting people to go to hell if they so choose. So obedience is unavoidably necessary, but freedom is the supreme goal to be kept in mind.

All sense of freedom is derived from love, because whatever people love, they think and do freely (*Heaven and Hell* 589). All children come into the love of self at birth. But by virtue of influx from heaven, all children from birth are touched and moved by love to the Lord. This love of self is associated with the pleasures of the senses, in which all children find the delight of their lives. Whatever sensations are pleasurable to children, they feel as freedom. It follows that children's first sense of freedom comes from the pleasures of the senses.

Now, the delight of sensation is a Divine gift. By means of it the Lord calls all children into conscious life, just as He called Abram (later his name was changed to Abraham) so long ago, saying, "Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). But Abram mistook the call of the Lord for the call of an old false god. Just so, children will at times mistake the Divine purpose in the pleasures of the senses and so become like idolaters, worshipping their own delight. Sensual pleasure becomes the tool of self love, and, as all parents know, this love of pleasure can lead children into danger, from which they must be protected. For the sake of this protection, obedience becomes imperative. It is the first and most important requirement of education. It involves restraint, which children feel as bondage. Yet children can only enjoy freedom from parental restraint if they first learn to obey.

As children grow, their struggle for freedom becomes stronger. Outright rebellion against their parents would be inevitable except for the fact that all children are being moved, not only by the

love of self, but also by love to the Lord which comes from heaven. Because babies have no idea of who the Lord is, they first perceive this love as the love of their parents, who stand to them in the place of the Lord. The children are not aware of this love, but it affects them mysteriously and leads them secretly. So the Lord, as an apparently invisible and unknown God, led Abram and his descendents in their journeys toward the land of Canaan. Through this love to the Lord, all children have an internal life, distinct and separate from their external life of the senses. This internal life is awakened to consciousness by the love of their parents. Children respond to this love and in doing so become increasingly aware of the wish to express love in return. This return of love contains the joy of heaven within it. It prompts children to comply willingly to what their parents demand and to find an unexpected delight in obedience.

It is very important to realize that although all children have a selfish nature, and resist all external restraints, they nevertheless have the capacity to love others and so to feel the delight of bringing happiness to their parents and friends. This internal ability is from the Lord. If freedom is to be achieved, children must be given the opportunity to obey willingly. Children cannot be free to obey unless they are also free to insist upon their own will. Such freedom is not possible if children are subjected to constant nagging. In order to avoid this, parents must be patient. Parents can appeal to this capacity for love by caring for their children's freedom. Discipline and punishment are unavoidable but they should never be regarded as a goal, only as the means of introducing children into truer freedom and deeper delight. As parents, we must cultivate a spirit of trust in the guidance of the Lord, as He inspires our children with love from heaven. We must believe in His presence deep within and in His power to lead children toward conjunction with Himself.

This trust is of paramount importance; for, after all, our children do not belong to us. The Lord has placed them in our care, but He is their Heavenly Father, and He alone can provide for their eternal welfare. We must realize our own limitations and not seek to carry the whole burden of raising children on our own shoulders. The tendency to completely control the lives of our children arises from our own love of self, and it conceals within it a denial of the Lord. It assumes that we can understand the internal needs of our children, which only the Lord can know. Our understanding of how to raise our children is very human and very fallible. Only the Lord Himself can teach our children; we are but vessels in His hands. For this reason, our best efforts often appear to fail. We are likely to become discouraged. But this is because we cannot see what the Lord is doing, in secret, to turn our failure into His success. He alone can know how our children are interiorly affected. He alone can guide their lives, even as He protects their freedom.

Discipline, therefore, must be prompted by kindness and tempered by love. Its purpose is to protect children from dangers and inspire them with a willingness to obey. Only when children are obedient can the Lord introduce them into the joy of true freedom. For the time being, children must comply with the will of their parents, but the ultimate goal is for children to learn to gladly comply with the will of the Lord. This is the supreme importance of teaching the truths of the Word to our children. Through the Word children come to know the Lord, to love Him, and to find delight in keeping His commandments. Without this, their lives will lead only to spiritual bondage and the eternal unhappiness of hell.

For this reason, if we desire the true happiness of our children, we must introduce them to the Word from earliest infancy. We must teach them a sense of reverence for it. We must encourage them, as they grow older, to read the Word for themselves and to look to the Lord in it for guidance. We must teach them to obey the Lord's commandments, and to do this because they love the Lord and wish from the heart to do His will. And we must also encourage our children to think for themselves from the Word, making its truth the foundation of their individual consciences. We must do all this to the best of our ability and then entrust the future of our children to the Divine Providence of the Lord, knowing that He will use our efforts in His own way and for the furtherance of His own ends, all of which are beyond our view. Only in this way can we cooperate with the Lord in seeking to achieve the proper relationship of obedience and freedom, the one as a necessary means, and the other as the inevitable goal of all our efforts.