

A. The Search for Freedom

Contemporary culture and Christianity can find common ground in the concept of freedom. However, it is important to understand the real nature of freedom.

1. Freedom and happiness

- a. Human beings have a great thirst for freedom because- our most fundamental desire is for happiness; - there is no happiness without love, and no love without freedom. Human beings were created for love and they can only find happiness in loving and being loved.
- b. The kind of "love" that is the result of pressure, or self-interest, with a mere satisfaction of a need does not deserve the name love. Love is neither taken nor bought.
- c. True love and happiness can only exist between two people who freely yield possession of the self in order to give themselves to one another. This reality shows us how important freedom is. Because freedom is essential to love and love is the precondition of happiness.
- d. But how do we achieve the freedom that will enable love to flourish?

2. Freedom: Claiming autonomy or accepting dependence?

- a. Although Christianity and contemporary culture both value freedom their definitions of freedom are quite different.
- b. For modern man to be free means being able to do whatever one wants. For Christianity true freedom is a gift from God a fruit of the Holy Spirit, received in the measure in which we place ourselves in a relationship of loving dependence on our Creator and Savior.
- c. Jesus says: *"Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* Matthew 16:25. What Jesus means is that by surrendering ourselves in trust into God's hands we will find our true freedom as his children.
- d. The example and experience of the saints validate Jesus teaching on the nature of true freedom. They gave themselves to God without reservation, wanting only to do his will. In return they received the joy of true freedom which nothing in the world could take away from them. And it was their experience of this true freedom that brought them true joy.

3. Outward freedom or interior freedom?

- a. A common mistake in regard to freedom is to make it into something external which depends on our circumstances and not something primarily internal. At times we feel that our freedom is limited by our circumstances: restrictions imposed upon us by society, the obligations of all kinds that people lay upon us, this or that physical or health limitation, and so on.
- b. To find our true freedom, we imagine we have to get rid of these restrictions and limitations. When we feel restricted or trapped in some way by circumstances, we resent the institutions or the people that seem to be there cause. We become resentful toward

anything in life it doesn't go as we wish, and so prevents us from being as free as we would desire!"

- c. This way of seeing things has a degree of truth. However, even if everything we consider as a limitation on our freedom disappeared, that would be no guarantee and that we would find the full freedom we desire. "When we push back the boundaries, more boundaries always lie a little further on. We risk finding ourselves forever dissatisfied."

4. Liberation or suicide?

- a. "The desire for freedom that lives in the hearts of all men and women today is often manifested in a desperate attempt to overcome limitations.
- b. People want to go farther, faster, to have a greater power to transform reality. This is evident in every sphere. People think they will be free or one biological "advances" enable them to choose the sex of their children. They think they will find freedom in always trying to surpass the capabilities." How many people have been killed by pursuing excesses of various kinds whether in "extreme sports", the use of drugs, etc.
- c. We have to discover genuine freedom inside ourselves and in a close relationship with God.

5. "You're not restricted by us but you are restricted in your own hearts."

2 Corinthians 6:12

- a. We can feel restricted in our situation, our family, or surroundings. But maybe the real problem lies elsewhere: in our hearts. It is in our hearts that we are restricted, and that is the root of our lack of freedom.
- b. If we loved more, love would give our lives infinite dimensions, and we would no longer feel so hemmed in.
- c. It is true that sometimes restrictive or oppressive circumstances need to be remedied before the heart can experience real interior freedom. However, often we blame our surroundings when the real cause of our lack of freedom stems from our lack of love. "We judge ourselves to be the victims of difficult circumstances, when the real problem and its solution is within us.
- d. Our hearts can be imprisoned by our selfishness or fears and it is we who need to change, to learn how to love, letting ourselves be transformed by the Holy Spirit; that is the only way of escaping from our sense of confinement.
- e. People who haven't learned how to love will always feel like victims; they will feel restricted wherever they are. But people who love never feel restricted.
- f. And our inability to love comes most often from our lack of faith and will our lack of hope.

6. A witness for our times: Etty Hillesum

(Etty Hillesum was a young Jewish woman from Holland who died at Auschwitz in 1943. Her diary was published in 1981.)

"This morning I cycled along the station quay enjoying the broad sweep of the sky at the edge of the city, breathing in the fresh, un-rationed air. And everywhere signs barring Jews from the pass and the open country. But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky, intact. They can't do anything to us, they really can't. They can harass us, they can rob us of our material

goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our misguided compliance. By our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, oppressed. By our own hatred. By our swagger, which hides our fear. We may of course be sad and depressed but what has been done to us; that is only human and understandable. However, our greatest injury is one we inflict upon ourselves. I find life beautiful, and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head. I believe in God and I believe in man, and I say so without embarrassment. Life is hard, but that is no bad thing. If one starts by taking one's own importance seriously, the rest follows. It is not morbid individualism to work on oneself. True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself; when we have all vanquished and transformed our hatred for our fellow human beings of whatever race – even into love one day, although perhaps that is asking too much. It is however, the only solution. I am a happy person and I hold e life dear indeed, in this year of O's ur Lord 1942, the umpteenth year of the war."

7. Interior freedom: Freedom to believe, hope, and love

- a. True freedom, the sovereign liberty of Christians, resides in the possibility of believing, hoping, and loving in all circumstances, thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit who "helps us in our weakness." As St. Paul says: "*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Rms 8:38 – 39.
- b. "No circumstance in the world can ever present prevent us from believing in God, from placing all our trust in him, from loving him with our whole heart, or from loving our neighbor. Faith, hope, and charity are absolutely free, because if they are rooted in us deeply enough, they're able to draw strength from whatever opposes them!"
- c. If someone tries to prevent us from believing in Christ by persecuting us, we always would have the option of "forgiving our enemies and transforming the situation of oppression into one of greater love."
- d. If someone tried to silence our faith by killing us, our deaths would be the best possible proclamation of our faith! Love, and only love, can overcome evil by good and draw good out of evil."
- e. Whoever understands these truths and puts them into practice achieves the ultimate freedom. "Growth in faith, hope, and love is the only pathway to freedom."

8. Freedom in action: Choosing or consenting?

- a. Many people think that the only way of exercising freedom is to be able to choose what suits them best from among various possibilities. They think that the more choices they have the greater their freedom is.
- b. "People want to have a choice in all of life's circumstances. A choice of vacation destinations, choice of jobs, choice of the number of children they will have, and soon a choice of the children's sex and the color of their eyes. They dream of a life resembling

an immense supermarket, where each aisle offers a vast assortment of possibilities and they can stroll at their ease, taking whatever they choose and leaving the rest. Or, to use another image, people would like to select their lives as they select clothes from a huge mail order catalog.”

- c. It is a good thing that we do have the freedom to make certain choices in life. However, “there are fundamental aspects of our lives that we don’t choose it all: our sex, our parents, the color of our eyes, certain aspects of our character, our mother tongue. In some respects, the elements we choose in life are far less important than the ones we don’t have any choice about.”
- d. When we are young our lives offer a broad range of possibilities to choose from. But as time goes on and we make choices the range of possibilities gets progressively narrower. Each choice we make reduces the number of possibilities left open. For example, getting married means choosing one man or one woman, thus excluding of all others. “A celibate man chooses to renounce all women, and a man who gets married renounces all women except one. That isn’t really such a huge difference!”
- e. The older one gets, the fewer options one has. As Jesus said to St. Peter: “Truly, truly, I say to, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.”
- f. Under such circumstances what remains of our freedom if we see it in the “supermarket” terms described earlier?
- g. The false “supermarket” idea of freedom has profound repercussions on the behavior of people today, especially young people. Many find it extremely difficult to make any sort of commitment because such a choice is seen as a loss of freedom. They always want to keep their options open. They “channel surf” through life. As a result, they never make a choice and so never enter the story.
- h. Paradoxically, their refusal to choose itself becomes a choice.

9. Being free also means consenting to what we did not choose

- a. Being free to choose among a number of options is of course important. However, there is another way of exercising freedom that we are presented with. It can also be much more fruitful both humanly and spiritually. It is consenting to what we did not originally choose.
- b. “The highest and most fruitful form of human freedom is found in accepting, even more than in dominating. We show the greatness of our freedom when we transform reality, but still more when we accept it trustingly as it is given to us day after day.”
- c. It is easy for us to accept pleasant things that happen to us even if we did not choose them. But it is a challenge to accept those things we did not choose that are unpleasant. However, if we are to become truly free, we must learn to choose to accept what we did not want. This is one of the paradoxes of life. “One cannot become truly free unless one accepts not always being free!”
- d. “To achieve true interior freedom we must train ourselves to accept, peacefully and willingly, plenty of things that seem to contradict our freedom. This means consenting to our personal limitations, our weaknesses, our powerlessness, this or that situation that life imposes on us, and so on.

- e. We find it difficult to do this, because we always want to be in control of our lives. But the fact is that the situations that really make us grow morally and spiritually are precisely those we do not control.

10. Rebellion, resignation, consent

When we are faced with difficult situations there are three possible attitudes that we can adopt.

- a. The first is rebellion. “For example, we do not accept ourselves as we are; we rebel against God who made us like this, against life because it has permitted this or that event, against society, and the like.” Rebellion against unjust situations of course, can be a good and necessary response. However, it is not good when our rebellion is actually the rejection of reality. This is often our first reaction to difficulty or suffering. But such rebellion has never solved anything. “All this sort of rebellion does is add another wrong to the existing one. It is the source of despair, violence, and resentment.”
- b. A second response to negative situations is an attitude of resignation. In fact this attitude may often follow one’s initial rebellion against the negative situation. “We realize we cannot change the situation or cannot change ourselves and end up by resigning ourselves. Resignation may represent a certain degree of progress beyond rebellion, in the sense that it leads to a less aggressive and more realistic approach. But it is not enough. It may be a virtue for philosophers, but is not a Christian virtue, since it doesn’t include hope.”
- c. When faced with negative situations the attitude that we should strive to attain is one of consent. “Compared with resignation, consent leads to a completely different interior attitude. We say yes to a reality we initially saw as negative because we realize that something positive may arise from it.” Our consent in these situations is based on hope. “We can, for example say yes to what we are in spite of our failings, because we know God loves us.”
- d. The difference between resignation and consent is that with consent even though the negative reality remains the same the attitude of our hearts is very different. “For example, consenting to the deficiencies of our own being means trusting in God, who created us as we are. That active consent, therefore contains faith in God, confidence toward him and hence also love since trusting someone is already a way of loving him. Because of this presence of faith, hope, and love, consent requires great value, scope, and fruitfulness.”

B. Accepting Ourselves

11. God is realistic

- a. It may be that in various parts of our lives we shall have to follow the path that leads from rebellion or resignation to consent and finally ends in "choosing what we did not choose."
- b. God's love is infinitely more powerful than anything that we can do on our own. The great secret of all spiritual growth is learning to let God act.
- c. However in order for God's grace to work in our lives it is essential that we accept who we are and the situations in which we find ourselves. This is because God is "realistic."

The person God loves is the person that we are and not some idealized notion that we have of ourselves. "He is not interested in saintly figures in stained-glass windows but in us sinners."

- d. What often blocks the power of God's grace in our lives is our failure to accept our own weaknesses. We refuse to admit that we have failings and commit sins. ("I accidentally....I forgot...I misremembered...I misspoke")
- e. When we don't admit our failings we block the Holy Spirit's action since he can only heal what we acknowledge needs healing. "We must accept ourselves just as we are if the Holy Spirit is to change us for the better." (Example: waiting until we have lost some weight before we go to the doctor.)

12 Desire for change, and consent to who we are

- a. Consenting to who we are with all of our limitations does not mean being complacent. It is essential for us as the followers of Christ to desire to grow in perfection. "To stop moving forward means to stop living. Anyone who doesn't want to become, holy never will....We need to accept our limitations, but without ever resigning ourselves to mediocrity."
- b. These ideas may seem to be contradictory. However they are simply stating the obvious. We can only transform reality if we recognize it for what it is first.
- c. "This also means having the humility to recognize that we cannot change ourselves by our own efforts and that all progress in the spiritual life, every victory over ourselves, is a gift of God's grace."

13. The mediation of another's eyes

- a. Sometimes accepting ourselves can be very difficult. Pride, the fear of not being loved because of our weaknesses, and feelings of worthlessness can be deeply rooted in us. We can become very upset and demoralized by our own sins and failures.
- b. We must always remember what God says to us through the prophet Isaiah: "*You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.*" Isaiah 43:4.
- c. We need the mediation of another's eyes to love ourselves and accept ourselves. The eyes maybe those were a spouse, parent, a friend ... but above all they are those of God our Father.
- d. The look in our Father's eyes is the purest, truest, most loving, and most hope-filled in this world. The greatest gift given those who seek God's face in prayer is to perceive something of this divine look upon ourselves; we will feel ourselves loved so tenderly that we will be able to fully accept ourselves.
- e. The opposite of this experience is also a possibility. "When people cut themselves off from God, they deprive themselves of any real possibility of loving themselves."

14. Freedom to be sinners, freedom to become saints

- a. When we see ourselves with God's eyes we experience a double freedom, the freedom to be sinners and to become saints.
- b. The freedom to be sinners doesn't mean we are free to sin without worrying about the consequences – that would not be freedom but irresponsibility. It means that we are not crushed by the fact of being sinners –God knows our weaknesses and infirmities, but he is not scandalized by them and doesn't condemn us.

- c. *"As tenderly as a father treats his children, so the Lord treats those who fear him; he knows what we are made of; he remembers that we are dust."*
Psalm 103:14
- d. God is always inviting us to greater holiness. He encourages us to conversion and progress in our moral lives. But he does not want us to be discouraged and always feeling guilty for not measuring up to some expectation or standard.
- e. God's look of love gives us permission to be ourselves, with all of our limitations and deficiencies. It gives us the right to make mistakes.
- f. "The world has turned its back on Christianity with its dogmas in commandments, on the grounds that it is a religion of guilt. Yet there has never been a time when people were so weighed down with guilt as they are today. Girls feel guilty for not being as beautiful as the latest fashion model. Men feel guilty for not being as successful as the inventor of Microsoft. And so it goes. The standards of success dictated by contemporary culture weigh on us much more heavily than the appeal to perfection made by Jesus."
- g. Knowing of God's love for us delivers us from the oppression of always having to be "the best." We can simply be who we are.
- h. In addition to allowing us to be ourselves, God's love enables us to be daring in our desire for holiness. We can hope to reach the highest level of holiness because God wants and is able to grant it. We do not have to settle for our own mediocrity.
- i. Even if we fall every day, as long as we get up again and say, "Lord thank you, because I'm sure that you will make me a saint!" we give immense pleasure to God and sooner or later we will receive from him what we hope for.
- j. The right attitude toward God then, is having a very peaceful, very relaxed acceptance of ourselves and our weaknesses as well as an immense desire for holiness, and a strong determination to progress based on limitless trust in God's grace.

15. Limiting beliefs and self- prohibitions

- a. "Before saying we can't do this or that, we should discern whether this estimate is the fruit of healthy spiritual realism or purely psychological conviction that needs to be healed."
- b. "If there is one area where nothing will ever be forbidden to us it is holiness, provided it isn't confused with external perfection, extraordinary feats, or permanent inability to sin." If we understand holiness properly, as the possibility of continually growing in love for God and our brothers and sisters, nothing will be beyond our reach.
- c. All we need do is never get discouraged and never resist, but trust completely the action of God's grace.
- d. "We don't all have the stuff of sages or heroes. But by God's grace we do have the stuff of saints. That is the baptismal robe we put on when we receive the sacrament that made us God's children."

16. Accepting ourselves in order to accept other people

- a. There is a connection between acceptance of ourselves and acceptance of others. If we are not at peace with ourselves we will find ourselves at war with other people. Non-acceptance of self creates an inner tension, a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration that is then taken out on others, who become scapegoats for our inner conflict."

- b. If we close our hearts against other people, and make no effort to love them as they are, then we will never have the grace to practice the deep reconciliation within ourselves that we all need.

C. Accepting Suffering

17. We cannot change our lives effectively unless we begin by accepting them,

- a. Whatever projects and plans we have, many times situations that are beyond our control will upset our expectations and we must accept this reality.
- b. In fact we should not only accept setbacks but should truly consent to them. We need to go beyond simply enduring setbacks and actually "choose" them (even if in fact we have no choice, and that's what most annoys us).
- c. "Choosing here means making a free act by which we not only resign ourselves but also welcome the situation. That isn't easy, especially in the case of really painful trials, but it is the right approach, we should follow it as much as possible with faith and hope.
- d. As Christians we know God can bring good out of evil.
"We know that all things work for good for those who love God."
Romans 8:28.

18. The most painful suffering is the suffering we reject

- a. "The worst pain of suffering lies in rejecting it. To the pain itself we add rebellion, resentment, and the upset the suffering arouses in us. The tension within us increases our pain. But when we have the grace to accept the suffering and consent to it, it becomes at once much less painful."
- b. It is natural to try to alleviate suffering as much as we can. However there will always be sufferings that have no remedies. These we must make an effort to accept peacefully.
- c. "This is not masochism or love of suffering for its own sake, but just the opposite, since consenting to the suffering makes it much more bearable than tensing ourselves against it."
- d. For example, a blow received in a hard tense body does much more damage than one received in a relaxed posture. "Rolling with the punches" makes them much easier to take.
- e. "Those who habitually seek to avoid all pain and experience only what is pleasant and comfortable, will sooner or later find themselves carrying far heavier crosses..."
- f. What really hurts is not so much suffering itself as the fear of suffering. If welcomed trustingly and peacefully, suffering makes us grow. It matures and trains us, purifies us, teaches us to love unselfishly, makes us poor in heart, humble, gentle, and compassionate toward our neighbor.
- g. Fear of suffering on the other hand hardens our hearts and often leads us to make irrational choices with disastrous consequences. Imagined sufferings are often much greater than the reality itself.

19. Refusing to suffer means refusing to live

- a. Contemporary culture tells us that we should avoid suffering at all costs and seek pleasure alone. However there is no surer way of making oneself unhappy than by

following these principles. Suffering is a part of life and attempting to get rid of it completely means suppressing life, refusing to live, and ultimately rejecting the beauty and goodness that life can bring us.

- b. "By accepting the sufferings offered by life and allowed by God for our progress and purification, we spare ourselves much harder ones. We need to develop this kind of realism and once and for all, stop dreaming of a life without suffering or conflict. That is the life of heaven, not earth. We must take up our cross and follow Christ courageously every day; the bitterness of the cross will sooner or later be transformed into sweetness."
- c. Accepting the reality of our crosses "sets us firmly within reality and conserves energy otherwise wasted on complaining, wishing things were different and dreaming of an impossible world.
- d. When we suffer we should be encouraged by the words of St. Paul:
"This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." 2 Cor. 4:17

20. Badness isn't all bad: The positive side of difficulties

- a. Difficulties, no matter how hard they may be, bring advantages as well as disadvantages.
- b. The first advantage is that they prevent us from assuming exclusive ownership of our lives. They prevent us from shutting ourselves up inside our programs, our plans, our wisdom....
- c. In order to enter little by little into God's wisdom, which is more beautiful, richer, more fruitful, more merciful than ours, our human wisdom needs a very thorough shakeup. Not to destroy it, but to raise and purify it, and free it from its limitations.

21. from mastery to abandonment: Purifying the mind

- a. In times of trial not knowing why we are being tested is often harder to bear than the testing itself. "Why me?" "What is the meaning of this?"
- b. When we know the reason for suffering it is much easier to accept. For example, we do not get angry when a doctor hurts us as part of his treatment because we understand that he does it in order to make us better.
- c. "Nothing is more beautiful than the possibility given man of cooperating in the work of God...It is therefore good right that we want to understand the meaning of everything in our lives."
- d. However, sometimes our need to understand what is happening in our trials is an expression of our lack of trust in God and the search for security. "Full freedom comes from progressively freeing ourselves from the need for human security through the realization that God alone is our rock."
- e. Freeing ourselves from the desire for control and our need for security requires that entrust ourselves to God. There are times when we must "renounce all efforts to decode the mystery. The time has come to stop our activity and abandon ourselves to God with blind trust. Light will come later."
- f. Sometimes trying to understand at all costs could do us more harm than good. Not getting the answers we desire can increase our suffering instead of alleviating it. It can also increase our insecurity and fear.

- g. In situations of suffering, when there are no apparent answers, we must make acts of faith. In these situations, the only thing that can bring us peace is humble and trusting prayer.

22. Understanding God's will

- a. The desire to know God's will is normal. Usually if we seek God's will with sincere heart and are living in a state of grace we know what it is that he wants us to do at any given moment.
- b. However, there are times when even after all due diligence and prayer, reflection and guidance we still do not have a clear answer as to what the Lord wants us to do.
- c. There are two reasons for this: first, "God treats us as adults, and in many situations he wants us to decide for ourselves. The second reason is that if we were always sure we were doing God's will we could develop spiritual pride.
- d. Not always being absolutely sure we are doing God's will is humbling and painful but it protects us. It preserves a fruitful attitude of constant seeking and abandoning ourselves to God.
- e. On those occasions when we are uncertain about the Lord's will in regard to a particular matter, we must be sure to continue to practice those things that we know the Lord wants us to do. For example, meeting the responsibilities of our vocation, practicing Christian virtues, praying and receiving the sacraments. "Lacking answers about the future, we should prepare to receive them by living today to the full."

23. "No one takes my life from me, but I live down of my own accord"

- a. It is beneficial for us to train ourselves not only to put up with difficulties but in a certain sense to choose them. This does not mean that we go about looking for difficulties. But it does mean that once they do arrive we accept them with all our hearts by positive active freedom and by moving quickly from disappointment to acquiescence based on trust.
- b. Consider the example of Jesus. His life was certainly taken from him: he was put in chains, condemned, led to Calvary and crucified. And yet before it all happened he told his disciples "No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord."
- c. In his heart Jesus always desires to do the Father's will. He knew that his obedience to the Father would cost him his life but still he obeyed out of love.
- d. Jesus remained supremely free in his death, because he made it into an offering of love. By his free, loving consent, the life that was taken became a life given.
- e. If we choose we can give God the same gift. "Our freedom always has this marvelous power to make what is taken from us – by life, events, or other people – into something offered. Externally there is no visible difference, but internally everything is transfigured: fate into free choice, constraint into love, loss into fruitfulness.
- f. We are not always masters of the unfolding of our lives, but we can always be masters of the meaning we give them. Our freedom can transform any event in our lives into an expression of love, abandonment, trust, hope, and offering.
- g. The most important and most fruitful acts of our freedom are not those by which we transform the outside world as those for which we change our inner attitude in light of the faith that God can bring good out of everything without exception.

- h. Our lives no longer have anything negative, ordinary, or indifferent. Positive things become a reason for gratitude and joy, negative things and opportunity for abandonment, faith, and offering: everything becomes a grace.

24. Helplessness in trials, and the trial of helplessness: The freedom of believing, hoping and loving

- a. "There are times in every life when we find ourselves in situations of trial difficulty, either affecting us or someone we love. We can do nothing. However much we turn things over and examine them from every angle, there is no solution. The feeling of being helpless and powerless is a painful trial, especially when it concerns someone close to us: to see someone we love in difficulties without being able to help is one of the bitterest sufferings there is." (Example of parents who suffer when their children do foolish and sinful things.)
- b. "At such times we should tell ourselves that even if we apparently have no way of intervening, we still, despite everything, can continue to believe, hope and love. We can believe that God will not abandon our child and our prayer will bear fruit in due course. We can hope in the Lord's faithfulness and power for everything. We can love by continuing to carry that person in our heart and prayer, forgiving him and forgiving the wrong done to him; and expressing love in every way available to us, including trust, self- abandonment, and forgiveness.
- c. The more devoid of means our love is, the pure and greater it is. Even when externally, there is nothing to be done we still have inner freedom to continue to love. No circumstance, however tragic, can rob us of that.
- d. For us this should be a liberating and consoling certainty amidst the trial of powerlessness. Even if we can do nothing, as long as we believe, hope, and love, something is happening whose fruits will appear sooner or later in the time of God's mercy.

D. Accepting Others

25. Consenting to sufferings caused by others

- a. How should we react to all the sufferings caused by people around us? We should respond in the same way that we do to other difficulties: we should consent to them.
- b. Of course we have a right to confront someone whose actions cause us to suffer when they act unjustly. The same is true when we see that others are being made to suffer unjustly. We do have a right to protect ourselves and others from such treatment.
- c. However, there will always be a certain amount of suffering that comes to us from other people that we can neither avoid nor correct. "Then we are invited to accept it with hope and forgiveness."
- d. This can be very difficult. When we are harmed by others it often appears that they are choosing to harm us.
- e. "Hard as it is, we need to learn to forgive other people for making us suffer or disappointing us, and even to accept the problems they create for us as graces and blessings. This attitude is neither spontaneous nor natural but is the only one by which to achieve peace and interior freedom."

26. Making allowances for differences in temperament

- a. However, when we believe we have been harmed we need to remember that many interpersonal problems are simply misunderstandings.
- b. We should always assume the best of others and that they do not deliberately try to hurt us. We should remember those times other people have misjudged our motives.
- c. All human beings can be very insensitive at times to the feelings of others. Most often when others hurt our feelings it is not through maliciousness but rather thoughtlessness.
- d. We also need to accept that other people have different opinions about matters than we do and when they differ from us is not because they are trying to be disagreeable.

27. Some reflections on forgiveness

- a. Sometimes when others harm us it is due to a real fault on their part. In these instances our response must be forgiveness.
- b. “Modern culture doesn’t rate forgiveness very highly. More often it justifies resentment and revenge. But does that reduce the amount of evil in the world?” The only way to diminish the suffering that burdens mankind is by forgiveness.
- c. Unless we practice forgiveness in our relations with others we will never achieve inner freedom but will always be prisoners of our own bitterness.
- d. When we refuse to forgive someone for harm done to us we are adding another wrong to the first. That solves nothing at all. We are increasing the quantity of evil in the world, which has quite enough as it is.

28. Forgiving is not the same as condoning of wrong

- a. Forgiving does not mean condoning an injustice. That would be a denial of the truth.
- b. Forgiveness means saying: This person has wronged me, but I don’t want to condemn him; I don’t want to identify him with his fault. I don’t want to take justice into my own hands. God is the only one who searches mind and heart and judges justly and I leave it to him to weigh this person’s actions and pronounce judgment.
- c. This is difficult but we must say to ourselves: “I believe something can grow and change in him and I continue to want his good. I also believe that from the evil done to me, even if it seems irredeemable from a human viewpoint, God can draw good.”
- d. The resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee that God can cure every wrong and every hurt.

29. The chains of resentment

- a. “When we forgive someone, while we are in a sense doing good to that person by canceling a debt, we are also doing much good to ourselves. We rediscover a freedom that we were at risk of losing through resentment and hurt feelings.”
- b. The refusal to forgive binds us to another person. In this case it binds us to the person we resent and diminishes or even destroys our freedom of thought and action. “When we foster resentment toward someone we can’t stop thinking about them.”
- c. We are filled with negative feelings that absorb a large part of our energy. Holding on to resentments drains us of the energy that we need to pursue positive relations with other people.
- e. “When someone has made us suffer, our tendency is to keep the memory of the wrong alive in our minds like a “bill” we will produce in due time to demand settlement. Those

accumulated bills are poisoning our lives. “Refusing to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

- d. It is wiser to cancel every debt as the gospel invites us to. In return, we will be forgiven everything and our hearts will be set free.

30. “The measure you give will be the measure you get back”

- a. Our Lord’s words on the necessity of forgiving others are very demanding. His teachings on forgiving others including our enemies are the most distinctive principles of Christianity.
- b. But we need to understand the demand as a magnificent “gift” that the Lord wants to give to us. The Lord always gives to us what he commands and this saying contains a promise: the Lord can transform our hearts to the point that we become capable of loving with the love that is pure, freely given and disinterested as God’s own love.
- c. “God wants to give us the gift of forgiving as he alone can do and so make us like himself.”
- d. “God became man so that man might become God – might love as only God is capable of loving, with the purity, intensity, power, tenderness and inexhaustible patients that belong to divine love. It is an extraordinary source of hope and a great consolation to know that, by virtue of God’s grace working in us if we remain open to it by persevering in faith, prayer, and the sacraments, the Holy Spirit will transform and expand our hearts to the point of one day making them capable of loving as God loves.”
- e. In saying “the measure you give will be the measure you get back,” Jesus is not saying that he will punish us for not being more forgiving. We will punish ourselves by not forgiving. “Our judgments, mistrust, rejection or resentment imprison us in the net that will strangle us. Our deepest aspirations for the absolute, the infinite, will be blocked and go unfulfilled because lack of mercy toward another has enclosed us in the world of calculation and self-interest.... Forgiveness releases us from that curse.
- f. When our hearts feel cramped, very often we need seek no other reason than this: we are refusing to love and forgive generously. Generosity in love and forgiveness make us “sons of the most high,” and sets us free to explore the limitless oceans of God’s love and life...

31. How other people’s faults can be good for us

- a. The bad behavior of those around us, which causes the suffering, offers certain benefits!
- b. Other people’s imperfections and the disappointments they cause us oblige us to establish a relationship with them that is not limited to an unconscious search for satisfaction of our needs, but tends to become pure and disinterested, like God’s love....
- c. Those imperfections also help us not to look to others for happiness, plenitude and fulfillment we can only find God....
- d. Disappointments in our relationships with other people oblige us to pass from “idolatrous” love to a love which is realistic, free, and happy. Romantic love will always be threatened with disappointments. Charity never is, because it “does not insist on its own way” or seek its own interest

32. Other people’s offenses take nothing from us

“One of the biggest obstacles to forgiving is the feeling that the other party’s behavior has deprived us of something important, even vital. This confused feeling nourishes resentment....”

- a. To live at peace, even when it is the people around us are causing us suffering, we must take a fresh, radical look at our frustration. It does not correspond to reality.
- b. Other people's faults *do not deprive us of anything*. Other people's actions cannot take away the love God has for us or the love that we have for him.
- c. "Nobody can prevent us from believing in God, hoping in him, and loving him, everywhere in all circumstances...."
- d. "Rather than wasting time and energy blaming others for what isn't working out, or reproaching them for what we think they are depriving us of, we should strive to acquire spiritual autonomy by deepening our relationship with God, the one unfailing source of all good.
- e. That others are sinners cannot prevent us from becoming saints. Nobody really deprives us of anything.
- f. At the end of our lives, when we come face-to-face with God, it would be childish to blame others for our lack of spiritual progress.

33. The trap of indifference

- a. Regardless things not going well around us in our families in our community in our parishes we should never give in to discouragement. Whatever mistakes and faults are committed by this person or that, it robs us of exactly nothing.
- b. "Even if we lived among people who were committing mortal sins from morning till night, that could not prevent us from loving God and serving our neighbor, or deprive us of any spiritual gift or stop us from tending toward the fullness of love. The world could collapse around us but it wouldn't rob us of the possibility of praying, placing all our trust in God and loving".
- c. The devil often tries to discourage us and to lose our joy in serving God. One means he uses particularly is to make us worry about everything that is not going well around us. "If problems cause us to become sad and lose our fervor we've solved nothing but only added another problem to the rest.
- d. "If the sins of those around us lead us to become upset and discouraged we are helping to spread the evil more rapidly.
- e. Evil is only overcome by good and we can only put a stop to the spread of sin by fervor, joy and hope doing all the good we can today without worrying about tomorrow.

34. The real harm is not outside us but within us

- a. "At times of struggle we need to also recall that the conversion we should be concerned about is not our neighbor's but our own. Only if we take our own conversion seriously do we stand any chance of seeing our neighbor converted.
- b. The holier we are the more we will suffer due to the evil and sin in the world. But external evil only harms us to the degree we react badly to it, by fear, worry, discouragement, sadness, giving up,... judging, fostering bitterness and resentment, refusing to forgive and so on."
- c. "Harm does not come to us from external circumstances but from how we react to them interiorly."
- d. "The harm that other people do to me never comes from them, it comes from me." The harm is self-inflicted.

35. Our complicity increases the harm

“When we concentrate too much in something that isn’t right, and make it our main topic of conversation, we end up giving evil more substance than it has. Deploring evil sometimes only strengthens it.”

36. Evil comes to fill a gap

- a. “If the wrongs people commit do penetrate our hearts that is because they find room there. If suffering makes us bitter and ill humored, it is because our hearts are devoid of faith, hope, and love. But if our hearts are filled with total trust in God and love for him and our neighbor, there is no room there for evil, hurt, and harm.”
- b. “The ability to remain untouched by evil is not acquired all at once. It is the fruit of a long process of self-conquest and grace that makes us grow in the theological virtues. It is an aspect of spiritual maturity, more a gift from God than the result of our efforts.
- c. But this gift will be given to us more quickly, and surely, the more we strive for it, desire, and try to practice the attitudes described here: rooting ourselves in God through faith and prayer; not blaming people and things around us for what isn’t going well in our lives and refusing to see ourselves as victims; resolutely shouldering responsibilities in accepting our lives as they are; and using our present capacity for believing, hoping, and loving to the full at every moment.

37. The Royal freedom of God’s children

- a. In baptism we are anointed with sweet smelling oil as the sign of our new character: by our union with Christ each of us is priest, prophet, and King.
- b. We are kings because we are children and heirs of the King of heaven and earth but also in the sense that we are subject to nothing and everything is subject to us.
- c. This is what happens to us when we let the grace of baptism operate in us living as God’s children in faith, hope, and love.
- d. Yes, we know suffering and sorrow, but everything that happens serves to make us grow in love and in the fact of being God’s children.
- e. What happens and how others behave can no longer touch us negatively; they can only promote our true good which is to love.

“St. Paul expresses that sense of royal freedom, the privilege of Christians living in the arms of God our Father by saying: ‘**All things are yours.**’ And he adds: ‘**And you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.**’