

# FORMATION FOR FREEDOM

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**O** FREEDOM, what liberties are taken in your name'; and the title of this paper is one such, for it suggests that men and women can be formed into a predetermined state called 'freedom', provided they do what we tell them. We can try to encourage, persuade, cajole others into accepting our way to freedom; and we may even succeed in making them conform, but in doing so we rob them of their freedom.

Man is called to freedom because he is called beyond himself to share in God's life, the source of all freedom. God's ways are not our ways: his thoughts are not our thoughts and his Spirit breathes where he will. We can never know precisely what freedom is, we can only grow in knowledge through our experience of it. For those of us in charge of the training of religious, the question is not 'how are we to form others for freedom?', but 'how can we create conditions in which we, together with those in training, can grow in freedom?'

In preparing this paper I took myself in imagination to Ignatius's scene in the meditation on Two Standards, and joined the little demons around Lucifer's 'great throne of fire and smoke', where I listened to his advice on writing this paper and on religious formation in general.

He wheezed and cackled with delight at the title I had been given, 'Formation for Freedom':

Splendid (he said), an excellent title. After all, formation is precisely our task, to form them with terror and lies and so ensure that they can never glimpse the freedom which the enemy has offered them. They can be very troublesome, these creatures called religious, so it is very important that you do exactly as I tell you and form them as I have formed you.

You will find your audience are all very enthusiastic about freedom and willing to discuss the topic and attend conferences on it. They always tend to talk most on those topics which they know least. There is no harm in fostering their enthusiasm, provided you ensure that they never experience freedom. The more you can whip up their enthusiasm with every lie and exaggeration you can think of, the better you can succeed in separating them from the enemy and keeping them within our control. Use lots of obscure words and quote indiscriminately in foreign languages, in order to baffle and bewilder them. Be abstract and vague in this first part of your talk. Tell them

that freedom, like any other gift, can only be won by blood and sweat, fidelity, perseverance and unswerving loyalty.

I was puzzled at these words of Lucifer and unfortunately showed my surprise. His reply was incisive and to the point.

You fool, surely you know by now that truth is our best ally, provided it is only half the truth. Blood and sweat, fidelity, perseverance and unswerving loyalty are virtues for us as well as for the enemy. I myself am the personification of perseverance and loyalty to the cause, the utter destruction of man, and I expect the same sense of duty from you. You will find your religious listeners are divided into two camps called 'progressive' and 'conservative'. The more you can encourage the division, the easier it is to infiltrate both sides. 'Divide and Conquer' is a good general strategy; but here you must try to win over both factions. So tell them that your talk will be based upon the inexhaustible treasures of the Church's tradition, which is ever ancient (this should please your conservative listeners) yet ever new (which should prevent your progressives from falling asleep straightaway). It is some centuries ago since you were last commissioned to work among religious, so do not be surprised at their changed appearance. They are no longer dressed, most of them, in black and white uniforms, but in spite of their varied dress, they are still bound by those vile vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. However, as you know from past experience, those vows can, with a little subtlety, be turned to our advantage. So take as your subject the three vows as ways to freedom. Begin your treatment by making your audience nervous and frightened. Remind them that to be in charge of the training of religious is an awesome responsibility, and that mistakes and carelessness in training will reap a rich harvest of disaster. Make them feel responsible not only for themselves and for their charges, but also for the whole future of their Church. The more serious and solemn you can make them about themselves, the easier your task will be, because they will become so worried and preoccupied with their own responsibilities that they will no longer trust the enemy and so become easy prey. Hammer away at the old sayings, 'A good novice makes a good religious', 'faithfulness in little things means faithfulness in great things later', 'If they keep the rule, the rule will keep them'. Dangerous teaching, I admit, but if you do exactly as I say, you can use all this to our own advantage. If you observe that the more progressive among your audience are falling asleep at this point, throw in a few cant phrases and call it 'depth psychology'. This will win back the attention of the progressives and raise the fear level of the more conservative. Tell them that the first five years in the life of a child sets the pattern for the rest of

life; so too, in religious training, the early years set the pattern for the future.

If you have followed my instructions you should have succeeded by now in making your hearers more serious about themselves, more fearful and more bewildered. This tactic is what the more enlightened military human beings call 'a softening-up operation', before moving in for the kill.

You are now ready to treat of the vows in particular. Your general tactic is to arouse their potentially dangerous enthusiasm for the vows as a means to freedom, and then channel it off by suggesting a practical course of action which will not only defuse their enthusiasm, but lead them to destroy one another.

Start with poverty; make vague assertions about the third world, world-hunger, ecology, St Francis of Assisi, needles' eyes and camels. Having worked them up, assure them that unless they live their vow of poverty they will join us for ever. To ensure that they really do so and that you do not lose them at this point, move quickly into an interpretation of poverty which will render their enthusiasm quite harmless for us and destructive for them. They must be brought to understand poverty primarily as doing without things, as economizing. Those in charge of formation must be made to feel themselves responsible for ensuring that everyone in the community observes this spartan régime in all its vigour. Remind them that their novices are weak, immature, sinful people, so that those who are in charge must exercise a very strict surveillance over them in all matters, but especially in poverty. Those in training may grumble at this strict supervision, but later these former novices will be grateful. It is important, too, that this period of early training should be spent in some isolated place where the religious may be safely insulated from the actual poverty of their fellow human beings.

If you communicate this message successfully, you will enjoy watching its destructive effects later on, both in individuals and in communities. The deprivations imposed on novices in the name of poverty, and the strict supervision by those in charge, will engender ill-feeling within the community, increase their greed and develop in them deceitfulness and dishonesty. The more rigorous the economies, the wealthier the communities are likely to become, increasing their properties, which will, in turn, demand more economies and more energy diverted into fund-raising, which is one of the most profitable occupations in which we can involve them. They will soon be ensnared in their corporate possessions.

The enforced economies within the community will lead to irritability, discontent and grumbling. Discontent is a most powerful ally for us, provided it is kept secret and not openly expressed; so you must exhort

them to stifle their anger, reminding them that they must not expect the vows to be easy. Arouse their enthusiasm for poverty by any means you like, then channel this potentially dangerous enthusiasm into detailed observation of restrictive measures, practices which will irritate them and engender ill-feeling within the community. Stifle this irritation by reminding them that their grumbles are due to unfreedom and selfishness within them. These tactics should ensure a growing love of possessions, deceitfulness, mutual mistrust and moral irresponsibility.

The fear level in your audience, gradually rising during your treatment of poverty, should leap up when you come to treat of chastity. Be extremely vague at first. Emphasize the delicacy of the matter which you are now going to treat, and develop this until you see that they are all thoroughly uncomfortable. Then begin to praise the virtue of chastity, subtly ensuring that they understand the virtue to mean living as though their sexuality did not exist, extol the preciousness of the gift and tell them how easily it is lost, bringing them to a state of near panic.

Your tactics will be very simple. Make them afraid of their own sexuality. As this is an integral part of their nature as social beings, fear of their own sexuality makes them afraid of themselves and of friendship with each other. Justify this fear for them by assuring them that their love of God must be stronger than any human friendship. This will ensure that they do not get near to him who, in his folly, became one of them, befriended them and identifies himself with each one of them.

Speak much of love and tell them that their love is proved and improved by their getting on with the job appointed for them by superiors. Be careful that they never speak the truth about how they feel or what they think on chastity or any other matter. Frighten them into trying to live as angels like ourselves. Then they will begin to despise their bodies, hate themselves and each other, and so destroy themselves. If you should fail to destroy them with the first two vows, even incompetent idiots like yourselves should succeed in destroying them with the final vow of obedience. If you disobey my orders and fail in this, know that the torments you have suffered are as nothing in comparison with those you will endure. I cannot tolerate any disobedience in my demons. Obedience means obeying my order to the letter; this is the message you have to communicate to them. Insist that the essence of religious life consists in surrendering their will and judgment to their superior and doing exactly as they are told.

Speak in praise of this virtue and of the inestimable value of obedience of their will and judgment. Remind them that they are sinful, weak, blinded in their intellects and wounded in will, twisted, unreliable, untrustworthy. Assure them that the only way to freedom is by abandoning their own will and judgment and submitting it to superiors.

Any threatened deviation from the path leading to their own destruction can easily be prevented by appeal to this virtue. If practised for long enough, they will eventually lose the ability to think or feel for themselves or for others, and become creatures whose appetite for orders is matched only by their appetite for food. Once we have reduced them to this unthinking and unfeeling state, our problems are over. We may safely leave them to their own destruction.

With a final exhortation to obedience and the threat of prolonged torture if I failed, Lucifer dismissed me in a puff of acrid smoke to prepare my paper on 'Formation for Freedom'.

In this perverted way, what am I trying to say? Briefly, that much of what passes for religious formation impoverishes the person by undermining his self-confidence and so destroying the very source of his communication with God. God dwells within us, his Spirit speaks to our spirit. If we dare not trust ourselves, we dare not trust God either. If we are afraid of ourselves, we cannot know ourselves, cannot discern what is happening within us and therefore cannot come to know God's will for us.

If the vows are to lead us to freedom, they must be chosen freely and loved for their own sake, not endured as a temporary deprivation in the hope of an eternal reward. Poverty, chastity and obedience are not the preserve of religious. Every human being is called to these virtues. In religious life we take the three vows as a means to help us to grow in these virtues.

In the remaining part of this paper I shall treat very briefly of the three vows as a means to finding freedom.

I was searching late one evening for a place in which to camp for the night. I called at a house where the owner took me to the end of his garden, pointed to a field and said, 'It's yours'. Later, I sat outside the tent, gazed over the field and said, 'It's mine'. I felt great happiness in that moment. I could enjoy the field as mine precisely because I had no claim on it, and was not worried at the thought of losing it when I moved on next morning. Afterwards, whenever I camped, wherever I rested, I used to look around at the fields and orchards, the mountains and valleys and say, 'It's mine'. In Christ I can possess all things: in myself I can only be possessed and imprisoned by what I own. I had a glimpse of the truth that in Christ I could possess all things precisely because I possessed nothing. I began to see the value of the vow of poverty. It is the vow which can help us to know that everything that we have and all that we are is a gift freely given to which we have no right. This inner knowledge

heightens our appreciation and enjoyment of the material world and of every moment of existence.

Those vowed to poverty renounce material possessions. This renunciation can help us to break out of our cocoon of self-interest, not only in regard to material possessions, but from all those attachments which enclose, constrict and stifle us. Just as the field became mine on that evening precisely because it was not mine and I could let it go next day, so too with my possession of my own life. I must learn to see it as mine precisely because it is not mine: I must possess it in poverty, ready to let it go. 'Unless you lose your life, you cannot find it'; 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. The vow of poverty is practised as a means of helping us to know and experience the truth of these words of Christ.

What kind of religious training can help us to glimpse the value of poverty? Love of poverty is like any other love: it cannot be forced. We can only effect an introduction, and try to create the conditions in which this love can grow. The conditions must avoid both penury and destitution on the one hand, luxury and softness on the other.

St Ignatius devised a series of experiments for his novices which were designed to recreate the conditions in which he and his first companions had discovered their vocation. The experiments included a thirty-day Retreat, corresponding to his own experience at Manresa, a month's pilgrimage on foot, begging one's way, a period of work in hospitals and time spent in teaching poor children their catechism. Today we need to devise similar experiments in which novices can have some experience of living poor with those who are poor, sharing what they have and experiencing the joy as well as the hardship of living in insecurity and uncertainty.

Perhaps we shall never succeed in devising real as distinct from artificial experiments, until we religious find ourselves without money, without property, like the founders and first members of most religious orders and congregations. Novice masters/mistresses would then have to train their charges in small groups living in poor areas, supporting themselves like any other poor family. Living in small groups in an unobtrusive way and sharing the life of the poor is more likely to enable us to glimpse the value of the virtue of poverty than living in a large building, insulated within religious walls from the life of the poor, and practising a form of poverty which, far from freeing the spirit, can make us more self-protective, possessive and timid.

Integrity is a virtue to which all men are called. Chastity is the virtue of integrity as it affects us as sexual creatures. All men are

called to chastity. Some are called to it through marriage; others are called to it through celibacy/virginity. The most important element in training religious for chastity is enabling them to discover within themselves their desire for celibacy/virginity as a means to chastity. It is only in so far as we discover this desire deep within us that we are capable of ordering our emotions and appetites and withstanding the more superficial and temporary drives within us. Unless there is a genuine desire to live a celibate life, enforced celibacy can become destructive of human life and spirituality.

Chastity is a virtue which concerns our sexuality, but our sexuality pervades our whole being. Training in chastity must include forming habits of intellectual honesty and emotional sincerity. Uncritical enthusiasm for a cause, indiscriminate grumbling, sentimental piety, religious effusiveness are unchaste. Lucifer was right in saying 'You cannot exaggerate too much'. In noviceships enormous harm can be done by subjecting novices to a hot-house atmosphere of sentimental and uncritical piety. Training in honest criticism is part of training in chastity.

Chastity is the virtue which enables us to grow more at one with ourselves and with our own sexuality, and so be more wholeheartedly dedicated to Christ. A fanatical denial of sexuality is just as unchaste as concubinage. Fear of our own sexuality and refusal to acknowledge it is fear of ourselves and of the depths within us. This fear separates us from God and stifles our spiritual growth.

In training religious we must try to help novices to grow out of fear of their own sexuality. Openness, honesty and a sense of humour in discussing sexuality is essential. A training in prayer which enables novices to get in touch with their own deepest feelings is an important part of training in chastity, because in finding in their own genuine and deepest feelings a call to celibacy/virginity, they will want to be loyal to this gift in face of temporary, superficial feelings.

We grow in chastity as in any other virtue, and a rigid segregation of the sexes during the years of training can stunt growth in the virtue. But, surely, great strictness and discipline is required for training in chastity? Certainly, but the control must be the control of love. If we really want celibacy/virginity, the control must come from the wanting. Imposed precautions, excessive protection and prohibitions can weaken the novice and eventually lead to emotional childishness and irresponsibility.

All institutions, including religious ones, are potential tyrannies. The institution, very naturally, prefers the safe and predictable man.

The man without ideas is unlikely to be a nuisance. If obedience is thought of as the virtue which enables the institution to run smoothly, then Christ was the most disobedient of men.

The root meaning of obedience is *obaudire*, to listen. Obedience is the virtue which enables us to listen to God in the depths of us. He is a mysterious God who leads us beyond ourselves, to transcend ourselves to be at one with him.

It is not easy to listen to God: listening to him demands sacrifice. If I feel drawn to him, he calls me to love my neighbour as myself. I must then abandon a way of life which gives priority to my own ease, my own wants and needs. If I want to achieve anything in life, I have to make sacrifices, organize the claims on me and find a priority of values. If I really want to climb mountains, I have to remove my carpet slippers, abandon the armchair and all the other counter-attractions of the day.

I am a social animal. If I am to be obedient to my truest self, I must also be obedient to others. I need them to find myself. I need to listen to them if I am to learn to listen to myself.

If authority demands obedience simply because it says so, without reference to the individual's or anyone else's good, then disobedience is the only morally responsible reply.

In obedience of will and judgment I recognize my own blindness, my own deafness. Through obedience to others I am willing to break down the barriers which enclose me in my own point of view, and so widen my vision and increase my perceptiveness, in order that I may become more perceptive and responsive to God within me. But if I abandon all trust in my own will and judgment, I also abandon my power of listening and responding to God at work within me and become spiritually dead.

Training in prayer is a vital part of training in obedience. The essence of prayer is obedience in the literal sense of the word, *obaudire*.

Those in charge of formation must be good listeners to God in prayer and to those under their care. They must also love those who are in their charge. The exercise of obedience outside a context of love and understanding is destructive.

If obedience is listening to God and to one another, there is no reason why obedience should be exercised in a subject-superior relationship rather than in a group relationship in which important decisions are discussed by all and reached by agreement. There is just as much need for obedience in a democracy as in a monarchy. Those in formation should be allowed some share in shaping it.



Developing the critical faculties of novices, far from being subversive, is an integral part of training in obedience.

If obedience is the virtue of listening and responding to God at work within us, it is important that the period of religious training should provide individuals with plenty of opportunity to exercise their own initiative and make their own mistakes, so that the training produce not character, but characters.

To sum up. I have rejected the title with which I began this paper, 'Formation for Freedom', and have tried to show that training men and women for religious life is to work in co-operation with them to discover freedom in Christ. The three vows are the traditional means to that freedom. If they are to be effective means, they must so be practised that they lead us more and more to love poverty, chastity and obedience as the virtues which answer our deepest longings.