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The Principle of Subsidiarity and Freedom in the Family, Church, Market, and Government[1]

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Introduction

The principle of subsidiarity, as first stated by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno,*[2] and clarified by Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus,* maintains that a society flourishes best when its citizens recognize that different social organizations have different tasks. "A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good."[3] The family, the church, the market, and the government each have different tasks in society. Accordingly, there is a difference in the lived experience of freedom in each.

Part of my task in this paper is to clarify the position advanced by Michael Novak in his book *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* He argues that "most citizens of the world seek the three basic institutional liberations of human life: a free polity, a free economy, and a free moral-cultural system."[4] He claims further that these three basic liberations are related to three distinct kinds of institutions. The government, the market, and the moral-cultural system serve different tasks and form a sort of system of checks and balances when operating together in a harmonious balance. My purpose here is different from Novak's in two subtle ways. First, I more fully examine the idea of a "free moral-cultural system." I argue that this involves at least two distinct kinds of institutions: the family and the church. Second, I offer an outline of a phenomenology of freedom in each of these institutions, for I believe that the texture of

freedom, the lived experience of freedom in these different social institutions, differ from one another and complement each other in ways that are necessary for a free society.

The underlying presupposition of my paper is that a human being is a complicated entity that needs different kinds of social arrangements in the quest for freedom. Since humans are linguistic animals, we have desires that are both intellectual and organic. The size of our social arrangements should respect the smallness needed for the particularities of an animal organism and the largeness needed for an intellectual being that seeks solidarity with others and the transcendent. Because human beings are a complicated blend of incarnate spirit, the freedom we seek is manifested in a complex of social institutions. The free society will be respectful of these diverse social institutions, seeking a harmonious balance between them.

My goal, then, is to examine how the principle of subsidiarity affects our understanding of the meaning of freedom. I argue that there is a difference in the lived experience of freedom in the family, the church, the market, and the state. By focusing on these four major social institutions, I will draw out four textures of freedom.

Freedom in the Family

The etymology of the term *freedom*, at least when it is traced back to its German origins, shows that it is associated with the family. This insight is seldom remembered in philosophical and socio-political discussions of freedom, though it remains in artistic depictions of freedom, where freedom is almost always personified as a woman with the virtues of a mother who cares for the young and defenseless.

The primary etymological sense of the term *free* is "dear, beloved." It comes from the Old High German *fri*, which stems from the Indo-European root *prijos* (dear, beloved) and is related to the Sanskrit *priyás* (dear) and *priya* (wife, daughter). Likewise, there is a connection with the Old English *frigu* (love) and *freon* (friend). The German and Celtic meaning, "not in bondage or subject to control from outside," comes from calling "dear" (*fri*) those members of a household connected by ties of kindred with the head. A free person is as a friend or beloved, one joined to another in mutual benevolence and intimacy.

The root is also related to the Old Norse goddess *Frigg*, the corollary to Venus in Norse Mythology. She is the wife of Odin. (In English, the sixth day of the week, Friday, is named after her). Like Venus, she mythologi-

cally represents love and unconstrained devotion. In Danish, *frie* means "to propose," that is, "to make an offer of marriage." This Danish phrase for betrothal captures both the sense of free choice and the sense of harmonious love.

So, the root meaning of freedom includes the concept of love and devotion to a beloved. As a beloved, one chooses to be devoted and, in the devotion, one is free. The choice to be devoted to the beloved is made in freedom, that is, it is a free choice. The devotion to the beloved is itself freedom, that is, the freedom of right relation.

In a family, the relation between freedom and bondage has a lived texture unlike that of any other social institution. On the one hand, we feel most comfortable to be ourselves in the family. We can "take off our shoes," eat off our everyday dishes, and feel like ourselves. In this sense, the family often feels like a haven, a garden in which we can take refuge from the stresses of public life outside of the home. In the family, we can find comfort during times of physical ailment and solace during times of mental and emotional duress. The freedom of the family is a freedom founded in love and experienced as a warm bond of togetherness.

Of course, the opposite of freedom in a family has its own texture as well. Many adolescent children have felt the constraints of family as a noose around their necks, rather than as a cradle in which they are comforted. The loving gaze of the mother for her child can become the imprisoning stare that the teenage child feels. It is a curious complaint that growing children make of their parents: "I feel coerced when I am with them, because I have to live up to their expectations." For the teenage child, freedom is often associated with a break from the family, rather than with the comfort of the family. "I am free to act on my own" comes to mean "I do not have to obey my parent's wishes." The idyllic garden of home is now perceived as a prison in which the child is trapped by the parent's expectations.

In the institution of the family, freedom is a loving bond. It flows from the bond of love between husband and wife, and their free decision to love one another. As with Aristotle's description of the complete friendship, where the friends are good and alike in virtue, each loving what is good in the other and voluntarily working for the fulfillment and happiness of the beloved, the husband and wife form a free society. The children that usually flow from this union extend this society. In love, the children are taught the virtues of self-restraint, just as the husband and wife encourage one another in mutual fulfillment through self-restraint.

The parents restrain their children in order to develop in them those habits necessary for a good and fulfilling life. Further, the family has the task of forming "a synthesis of the various disciplines of knowledge and the arts."[5] In this postmodern age of cultural fragmentation, when there is no agreed-upon public or cultural framework in which to organize the diversity of human life, the family has the responsibility of synthesizing, integrating, and providing a sense of the right order of things.

The task of lovingly teaching self-restraint to one's children and family is not always accomplished well or completely. In adolescence, it seems that every teenage child recognizes the many flaws in his or her parents, and the parents themselves usually recognize their own shortcomings. Because of this misused freedom, the family is not a self-sustaining social institution. Of course, families need each other, in neighborhoods, in the market, and in political arrangements and laws that allow them to live peaceably together. But families also need the social and cultural support of other institutions that maintain the strength and vitality of families. Chief among these is the Church.

Freedom in the Church

So long as there are families—social institutions founded on the freedom of love—there will be distorted families. This is the realism of the doctrine of Original Sin. Though freedom does not necessitate sin, it provides the opportunity for sin. Anyone who has misused his freedom has some sense of the ways in which he has participated in distorted social structures. This doctrine is explained clearly and eloquently in *Centesimus Annus:*

> It cannot be forgotten that the manner in which the individual exercises his freedom is conditioned in innumerable ways. While these certainly have an influence on freedom, they do not determine it; they make the exercise of freedom more difficult or less difficult, but they cannot destroy.… Man, who was created for freedom, bears within himself the wound of Original Sin, which constantly draws him toward evil and puts him in need of redemption.[6]

Freedom does not necessitate that one become misrelated to others in a distorted social structure. The innocent child who grows and develops in a distorted family is not destined to have a distorted relationship with others. However, as a matter of fact, we find ourselves having misused our freedom; we recognize ourselves as participating in distorted relations in distorted ways. It is primarily in the family where we find ourselves hav-

ing fallen short of the harmonious love that we seek. Because of sin, that is, the misuse of freedom before God, the warm bond of the family becomes the tight noose of alienation. Hence, though the family is prior to the Church, it finds itself, because of sinfulness, in need of support and unable to sustain itself. While this inability to sustain itself may have material components, insofar as the family may need other social institutions for food, shelter, and clothing, it also needs the support of another social institution in its quest for freedom.

The Church provides two means of support for the family. First, it provides models of families struggling with their freedom. Many of the Old Testament stories provide narratives of families facing the normal difficulties of relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister. Likewise, the tradition of the Holy Family, of Joseph and Mary in raising the child Jesus, provide a model that families can turn to for guidance in how to live as a family. In this sense, the Church supports the family through its narrative traditions that provide models of family life.

Second and more important, perhaps, the Church opens up the possibility of divine grace and freedom from sin. In this sense, the Church provides a way for families to experience God's redemptive grace in order that they might again become a community of love. For example, in the Catholic tradition, as seven- and eight-year-old children prepare for their first reconciliation, they are asked to reflect on their own sinfulness. They are often given suggestions of sins that they might have committed, and these usually involve their own family members: "I disobeyed my parents," "I was mean to my sister," "I lied to my grandmother." In our parish, the parents of second-grade children are encouraged to attend the reconciliation service with their children. As these parents go to confession, their sins are probably similar to those that their children confess: "I was too hard on my child," "I lost my temper," "I was not always loving toward my spouse," "I was unkind toward my mother-in-law." These misuses of freedom, if left to fester and decay, can destroy the loving bonds of family. It is through forgiveness that misrelations in the family can be overcome so that the bonds of love might be restored.

A number of recent encyclicals have emphasized the relation between freedom and truth,[7] drawing upon the eighth chapter of John's Gospel.[8] But the truth that is liberating is not simply a set of propositions but a way of being in the world. The right relation of the self to itself, to others, and to God, having been distorted by the self's misuse of freedom, is restored in

the freedom of redemption. The Spirit of the Lord, which informs the Church, is freedom, for where "the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."[9] This freedom is a freedom from the bondage of sin. When the disciples ask Jesus how they will be made free, since they have never been held captive, He responds: "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin."[10] So, the primary freedom of the Church is the freedom from sin, the freedom from the misrelations brought about by the misuse of freedom.

This Spirit of freedom is often not experienced as freedom, for it is the freedom to return to a life of virtue and self-restraint. It is the freedom that restores one's relation to others, and especially to one's family and to God. In a materialist culture where every form of self-restraint is seen as a violation of freedom, the freedom offered by the Church is considered to be a form of bondage. To accept forgiveness is to admit self-bondage, so the false freedom that escapes self-responsibility is often thought to be preferable to the freedom of forgiveness. Hence, the Church, founded on the Spirit of freedom, is portrayed by the materialist culture as repressive—an enemy of liberty. The freedom of the Church is the freedom of God's forgiveness, a freedom that makes possible the restored relationships of the family and the warm bonds of love central to the family.

Freedom in the Market

It may take several generations to digest the significant developments in Catholic social teaching with regard to freedom of religion and the free market. The central document of social teaching from the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes,* does relatively little to advance the social teaching of the Church. In fact, in many ways, *Gaudium et Spes* is little more than a summary of *Rerum Novarum, Quadragesimo Anno, Mater et Magistra*, and *Pacem in Terris.* The central advance in social teaching from the Second Vatican Council comes in *Dignitatis Humanae.* The key argument in this document is that "the right to religious freedom has its foundation, not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature."[11] In other words, given that the human being is an animal created by God with reason and will, an incarnate spirit with dignity, then freedom of conscience and freedom of religion follow naturally. For the only genuine religious response accords with one's dignity as a person, that is, a being endowed with reason and free will privileged to bear personal responsibility for one's decisions. The conclusion is clear: Since the Church teaches that human beings have the dignity of conscience to bear responsibility

for their decisions in their relationship to God, there is a right to freedom of conscience and freedom of worship.

A parallel line of reasoning is advanced in *Centesimus Annus* with regard to the economy. The central argument of *Centesimus Annus* is this: First, human beings have the capacity for self-reflection that allows each individual to transcend the present in a quest for what is good and true. While humans are always conditioned by their environment, environmental influences are not determining factors. Human conscience, and the ability to use reason and will, gives human beings a special dignity deserving of a fundamental moral respect.[12] This fundamental human dignity ought to be respected in every area of life. Hence, economic decisions and the arrangement of economic structures should be in accord with the respect befitting the fundamental human dignity of each person. From this, it follows that working conditions should always be such that workers are respected as human beings, never treated merely as a commodity.[13] John Paul II then reviews the economic conclusions—familiar to those who have studied the last hundred years of Catholic social thought—that follow from an emphasis on the dignity of the worker as a human being. Workers have a right to work, to humane and hygienic working conditions, to reasonable working hours, to a just wage adequate to raise a family, and to time off for holy days and Sunday rest to discharge one's religious duties.[14] Because it is most often among the poor that the basic rights of human dignity are disregarded in the economic realm, the pope reaffirms the notion of the "preferential option for the poor," whereby the justice of social structures and particular actions should be evaluated by measuring their effects on the poor.[15]

But it is not simply the state that ought to guarantee these rights. "The state could not directly ensure the right to work for all its citizens unless it controlled every aspect of economic life and restricted the free initiative of individuals."[16] The marketplace is to be bounded by both the state and the "moral-cultural system," in particular, the habits developed in the family and through the Church. *Centesimus Annus* is important because it provides a defense of the free-market economy based on the nature of the human person. Human beings are free and seek freedom. Wounded by Original Sin, we can both transcend our own self-interests and yet seek our own interests. One of the virtues of the market economy is that it provides room for individual freedom and initiative, making it possible to work for the common good in a manner that does not entail ignoring one's self-interests. In a state-controlled economy, "where self-interest is

violently suppressed, it is replaced by a burdensome system of bureaucratic control which dries up the wellsprings of initiative and creativity."[17] The virtue of the market economy is that it allows individuals to perceive market needs by using their initiative and creativity to respond to the needs of others. The market thus serves the common good, while individuals pursue their own well-being. There is, of course, a need to guard against the abuses of freedom that occur in a market economy, including all of the abuses mentioned in the encyclical tradition since *Rerum Novarum.* The state should play a role in limiting these abuses, but it is better if these problems are addressed through voluntary associations, worker groups, professional associations, and so on.

Human freedom as exercised in the market, then, has a different texture. It is the freedom to spend one's own money, to invest one's own time, to take a risk in starting one's own business. It is the freedom to recognize a need in the economy and respond with a product or service. Rather than the feeling of the warm bonds of family, or the refreshing offer of divine forgiveness, it is the freedom to enter and leave the marketplace, to take a chance or play it safe, to enter a contract or refuse an offer. This freedom is a part of life, but it is not the whole of life. In the developed economies, such as in the United States, the challenge to freedom is to avoid thinking that the freedom of market economies is the whole of freedom and the only way to think about human relations. The temptation is to reduce every human relationship to a cost-benefit analysis, where an economic analysis is falsely presumed to trump every other kind of human consideration. The new market economies face their own challenges, one of which is striking a balance between human desires appropriately met by a market economy, and human desires best approached through other social institutions, especially the family and the Church.

Freedom in Democratic Government

In the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae,* the Church affirmed that democratic government is compatible with the dignity of the human person. Consider the development of Church teaching on the question of religious freedom. In the 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura*, Pius IX denounced the erroneous opinion that "Freedom of conscience and worship is every man's proper right."[18] In fact, Pius IX went so far as to call it a "madness" to think that there is a right to freedom of conscience and freedom of worship. However, in little more than a century, John Paul II spoke to the nations signing the Helsinki

Final Act, stating that "freedom of conscience and of religion ... is a primary and inalienable right of the human person."[19] The explanation for the development in Catholic thought on the question of a right to religious freedom is to be found in an examination of the historical and political background of *Dignitatis Humanae* and in an understanding of its primary argument.

The eighth- and nineteenth-century defenders of religious freedom were often more concerned with freedom from religion than with freedom to practice religion. The liberalism that made freedom of religion a cornerstone of democratic government was based on a philosophy of radical individualism. Each individual is a law unto oneself. Society is the result of autonomous individuals. Just as each individual is subject solely to self-law, the society as a whole cannot be accountable to an imposed external standard. Since the state embodies the will of the people, the state is coextensive with society. The state cannot be accountable to any standard other than its own. Hence, the state must be agnostic or atheistic. Religious freedom serves to guarantee that the state will not be accountable to any standard other than the will of the people. Religious freedom serves to neuter religion, guaranteeing that it will carry no public weight. Privately, each individual is allowed to hold any religious beliefs—as long as they are kept private. The public square is to remain naked, devoid of any religious beliefs under which the state could be challenged.

The reaction of the Church to this philosophy—and here I think that *reaction* is the best word—was to turn away from liberal democracies to the *ancien regime* where there was at least a place for the Church in the temporal order. Hence, when Pius IX called religious freedom a "madness" and "erroneous opinion," his charge was against those who identified freedom of conscience and worship with the radical individualism that undercut the possibility of the Church's having a public voice in society, a voice for justice.

Dignitatis Humanae is an important development in the Church's teaching on religious freedom because it takes the same theological presuppositions that informed Pius IX but moves them in a different direction. Instead of condemning radical individualism and then concluding that there is no right to religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* draws a different conclusion. The false philosophy of radical individualism continues to be criticized, but it is complemented by the positive philosophy of the person, a philosophy perennially taught by the Church. It is an error to move from the radical subjectivism of atomistic individualism to the claim of religious

freedom. However, the problem is not in the conclusion but in the presupposition. Given a more adequate presupposition, that is, when we begin with the understanding of the human being as a linguistic animal with reason and will, then it follows that humans have a right to freedom of religion.

The relationship between basic rights and the democratic order is made especially clear in the United States. The U.S. Constitution is framed on two sides by texts concerned with basic human rights. On the one hand, the Declaration of Independence reasons that the colonies ought to break from British rule, based on the claim that all human beings have certain basic rights, "among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Likewise, framing the other end of the U.S. Constitution is the Bill of Rights, which begins with the First Amendment right guaranteeing that the federal government will not make any laws "respecting an establishment of religion." Hence, government of the people, by the people, for the people, a system of laws that recognizes certain basic rights, is affirmed by the Church as a form of government compatible with the dignity of the human person.

Like the freedom of the market, the freedom of democratic government has the potential to devolve into atomistic individualism and moral relativism. A number of leading philosophers in the United States, such as Richard Rorty,[20] advance such positions. Any claim to the truth is seen as a threat to the democratic order. However, this position is itself unsustainable because of its inherent self-contradictions, and it has not been widely adopted in the United States except among some groups of intellectual elites. The freedom of democratic government does not deny that there is an ultimate truth. Instead, it recognizes that human laws are, at most, penultimate. The laws of nations and states are human efforts to achieve that social justice of which we, because of our fallen state, can only partially achieve.

The freedom to elect new representatives and leaders, the freedom to run for political office, the freedom to influence the legislative process, and so forth, are each individual freedoms that are part of the freedom of democratic government. These freedoms have a texture like the individualized freedom of the open market, for each citizen is as free to participate in political activity as they are to participate in market activity and exchange.

These individualized freedoms are contrasted with the freedoms of the family and the Church, which emphasize the warm bonds of community. In the United States, the difference here can be captured in two contrast-

ing experiences: If you get on a crowded elevator in a Chicago skyscraper during business hours, you will feel the freedom of atomistic individualism. Each person looks ahead in silence. Riders are free to get on and off at each floor as they please. There is little conversation or social interaction. In contrast, if you enter a small room in a Southern Alabama town, the feeling will be very different. The others in the room will ask you where you are from, how long you will be in town, where your father works, and all manner of questions. There is in this exchange of southern charm a kind of friendliness and freedom. They are just being neighborly.

In democratic government, the demands of freedom are loose and almost entirely negative. Like the riders on the elevator, all that is expected is that each will respect the rights of the others. Do not bother other people. If you want to vote, run for office, or write to your legislator, you are free to do so. There is efficiency and equality in this freedom, but there is little that is warm or personal.

Conclusion

The free society cannot be reduced to any of these individual freedoms. When any of these spheres is expanded beyond its appropriate domain, the freedom of the society is placed in jeopardy. There are, no doubt, other textures of freedom appropriate to other kinds of social institutions. For example, I believe it would be worthwhile to describe the freedom of voluntary associations such as worker groups, professional associations, literary or artistic groups, and so forth. These play important social roles in a free society. Still, the four social institutions that I have examined seem to be of crucial importance, each differing from the others. The principle of subsidiarity provides a way to order these four, recognizing that we have a need for social institutions of different sizes that serve different purposes. In our pursuit of freedom, we are not seeking a simple unit but a synthesis of the warm bond of family, the liberating spirit of divine forgiveness, and the more individualized freedoms of the market and of democratic government.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the World Congress of Christian Philosophy conference on “Freedom and Contemporary Culture” held in Lublin, Poland, in August 1996. I would like to thank the participants in the conference for their comments, questions, and suggestions.

[2] Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (15 May 1931), no. 79. "Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them."

[3] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (15 May 1991), no. 48.

[4] Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 219.

[5] Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World," *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 61.

[6] *Centesimus Annus*, no. 25.

[7] Cf., *Centesimus Annus*, no. 46. The same theme is drawn out in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

[8] John 8:32.

[9] 2 Corinthians 3:17.

[10] John 8:34.

[11] Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae,* Chapter 1, section 2. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 679.

[12] *Centesimus Annus*, no. 38.

[13] Ibid., no. 7.

[14] Ibid., no. 8–10.

[15] Ibid., no. 11.

[16] Ibid., no. 48.

[17] Ibid., no. 25.

[18] Quoted in Kenneth L. Grasso, "A Special Kind of Liberty: *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965)," in *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. by George Weigel and Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), 107.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Cf., his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).