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Review Article

On a Theology of Human Liberty

C. G. ARÉVALO

FREEDOM IN VATICAN II. The Theology of Liberty in *Gaudium et Spes*. By Antonio B. Lambino, S.J. (*Logos*, no. 10). Manila: Loyola School of Theology, 1974. 122 pages.

No one will contest the claim that “freedom” and “liberty” – and in the last twenty years or so, “liberation” – are the “words of our age”. In the preface to a recent work, a French theologian writes these lines:

If one wishes to understand our epoch, he must *interpret* it We have to decipher the immediately accessible data . . . which really make a ‘language’. In various systems, doctrines, ideologies, institutions, we have to seek through the ambiguities of the ‘languages’ used, the true object, the real project: what is at depth intended. From this inquiry, I would say that mankind today, the world today is occupied by, obsessed (if you will) with *the project of freedom*. One might say that this has always been true of man, but the rapid and profound evolution of civilization accentuates, heightens, brings to fullest intensity this fundamental, perennial human quest (Pierre Ganne).

To address oneself to a study of the notion of freedom in contemporary Christian ‘language’ would seem then to be undeniably a task of importance and value. “One cannot, for instance, speak intelligently of the Christian understanding of ‘liberation’ without an adequate idea of what freedom means” (Preface). Hence the intent of the work under review. “To the best of our knowledge,” its author tells us, “no comprehensive treatment has yet been accorded to the theme of freedom in *Gaudium et Spes*. The present work makes a contribution toward meeting this need.”

With a conscientious fidelity to the texts, but also with a notable sobriety with regard to “scholarship,” Father Lambino makes judicious use of all the available primary sources, unpublished notes, minutes of the discussions of the successive drafts, as well as the commentaries of the bishops and theologians

most qualified to discuss the redaction-process and the issues which the various parts of the document raise. The results of his investigation and reflection he gives in a report of just over a hundred pages, written with an austere clarity of (what we might call) "story line" and an enviable economy and felicity of language.

METHOD, BASIC THEMES

We might begin by summarily indicating what Father Lambino (henceforth referred to as L) says of the theological method, the underlying motif, and the basic thesis on freedom given us by *Gaudium et Spes* (GS).

1. *Freedom in Vatican II* in several places deals with "the new way of doing theology" found in GS, the "new style of the magisterium" which has, since the Council, become even more widely used in documents from the Roman Pontiff and various local hierarchies (cf. index, under "Method"). For GS, the starting point of theology is "a two-faceted reality, with elements standing in a 'dialectic' interaction with each other: the testimony of revelation read and interpreted in terms of the contemporary human experience, or, to put it the other way around, the contemporary human experience discerned in the light of revelation" (p. 11). "Whatever results were achieved by GS," L tells us, "were due in no small measure to the method it followed."

2. The review of L's book in *Theological Studies* sees it as valuable in focusing attention on "the importance, for grasping the concept of freedom in GS, of the traditional but rather neglected theme of man as image of God." Setting in high relief the centrality of this theme in the pastoral constitution is, meritoriously, one of the key elements of the work: the image theme is present on almost every page.

L shows how GS roots its understanding of freedom in the image-theme in the Scriptures and in Christian tradition (the Patristic writings surely make abundant use of this motif) as related to the contemporary — rather than the Greek or mediaeval scholastic — models of man and the human condition. The Christian understanding of freedom in GS is thus a *theological* notion. The power of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) is not, then, the core of liberty, but relational and functional to what fundamentally human liberty is: the true nature of liberty is self-actuation in openness to and communion with God and fellow-men. In other words, liberty is the fulfillment of the deepest reality of the human person made to the image of God. To be a man for God and for others — this is what liberty means (p. 63).

3. We believe L will not disagree when we suggest that perhaps these lines summarize the central argument of the book: "Liberty is used in GS to signify the Christian redemptive mystery; liberty is a thematization of that reality which the Gospels call salvation. *To say that man is free is to make a*

soteriological affirmation" (p. 25, italics mine). The previous statement can serve as a thematic refrain for the entire study, understanding that soteriology here is set within the dynamics of the "man: image of God/image of Christ" theme.

The concept of liberty in *GS* is thus taken up in the context of the history of salvation. It is first and foremost, "man's response to God's call", "man's primordial capacity for self-donation to Someone greater than himself." Freedom *from* is thus functional to freedom *for*, to that "liberty of self-donation which is the fundamental notion of Christian freedom." This freedom must of course be actuated and realized within history, within the human project in the world. Thus it must have personal, social, and cosmic dimensions. "These correspond, as a matter of fact, to the three principal aspects of the theological anthropology sketched by *GS*. The explicitation of these three dimensions of human liberty has been the endeavor of the five chapters of this study" (p. 115).

TOWARD AN INTEGRAL NOTION OF FREEDOM

We may here cite the American theologian Thomas Clarke's remark, in his note on this book, that L's "skill in analyzing the Vatican II text . . . discloses the wealth of potential development of an integral notion of freedom which he or others might profitably pursue." In the paragraphs which follow, taking up chapters II-V successively, I would simply like to indicate *a few of the elements* of this development of a fuller theology of freedom which are in fact already present – if, unavoidably, not fully exploited – in L's nonetheless remarkably complete and illuminating analysis.

Sin. The understanding of sin is deepened and renewed by being collocated within the man-as-image-of-God and freedom-as-human-vocation horizon. This process takes place with regard to the notions

- of "concupiscence" (I might add, not just in its place in a person, but in society – within the discussion of "sinful social structures");
- of the "sin of the world" in Johannine hamartology (*GS*, in articles 4, 9, 10, 13, cited by L on pp. 47–48, sketches something of the basic drama of human history and of the fundamental ambivalence that accompanies all of man's activity and all of his achievements: the "mysterious blend," L calls it, "of greatness and misery in man and in all his life and activity");
- of the task of liberation (now so prominent in all of Christian theology; L devotes some 30 pages to this theme as spelled out in *GS*: once again, there is an authentic *theological* understanding of human liberation in the Christian scheme of things);
- of the relationship of sin to Christ (hamartology in a Christian theology of liberty is shadow to the light of Christ's saving work).

Jesus and Freedom. L's chapter on Jesus develops the motif of salvation as liberation mainly from Pauline theology wherein *GS* roots it. Christ's liberating action as obedience: paradoxically, in the Christian scheme of things, *the* paradigmatic act of liberty; the Cross as the supreme deed of that self-giving freedom which is the source and pattern of ours; the Spirit as inner law of discerning and loving liberty; reconciliation and communion as the goal toward which liberation, in the Christian vision, must move (there are pages which can serve as excellent commentary on some passages in the recent text of Paul VI, "Evangelii nuntiandi") — these points surely bear noting.

The two last sections, on the Incarnation and on man as image of Christ, develop the theme of the radicality of Christ's "gifts of newness": "He fashions a new expression of liberty, a liberty which empowers others also to be free. . . . The grace of the Christ-event is given to every man to fulfill his vocation to liberty." It is when man, in the likeness of Christ and by the empowerment of his grace, responds to the love of the Father, opening his heart to meet that supreme and enduring love, that he in fact comes to the knowledge and appropriation of the authentic freedom of the sons of God. And if freedom is saying a self-transcending *Yes* to Someone greater than oneself, then freedom finds its fulfillment most truly in the adoration of the living God (p. 68).

Community. Theology students (the term is used in its broadest sense) will, in our country, find Chapters IV, on freedom in community, and V, on human activity and freedom, of special interest and relevance.

The fourth chapter gives us some basic elements for a theology of human community. Once again, the operative word here is *theology*; *L* himself underlines the shift in emphasis in the social teaching of the magisterium from "a social ethics relying heavily on the natural law schema" to an increasing accent on "revelation as the primary basis of affirmations about the social dimension of man." Hence, for example, relations in the human community are seen as analogous to the trinitarian relationships ("in a certain sense as profoundly real and ontological"); the human vocation is, through disinterested and self-transcending love, to open oneself to the Father and one's brothers and sisters (the brethren, especially, spoken of in Mt. 25), to refashion the world and history and thus realize oneself in life-long self-gift: the *evangelical* law of charity is the intrinsic law of human existence.

The section entitled "the new covenant in Christ" (pp. 88–91) is a meditation on the task of the Church and of the Christian in the world. That task, the realization *in Christ* of Christ's own saving work, is seen as the shaping of human solidarity (pp. 88–89). The Church is meant to be that community of freedom and love whose gift to the world is the fostering of oneness among men, of the love of brothers, the raising up within mankind of the 'city of brothers'. In a characteristic summative statement, *GS's* teaching

is given us in these terms: To have changed the world for the better for one's brothers: that is the meaning of man's calling to freedom within the community of man. And this vocation can only be achieved in Christ (p. 81).

Human activity. The discussion of human activity and freedom lays the groundwork, from *GS*, for a theology of development — but one seen, once again, within the man-as-image-of-God anthropology. One hesitates to single out any chapter above others, but there is much in this last part of the book for those concerned with a reflection on the great global project of mankind today — call it development, the building of one truly human world, the humanization of the earth. Once again, it is a *theology* which L draws for us from *GS*, and a theology wherein the presence of the Cross is a central fact. *GS* affirms, L recalls for us, the inevitability of bearing the cross “which the world and the flesh inflict upon those who search for peace and justice”; thus *GS* separates itself from a purely secular view of human progress. L cites the earlier Arricia text: “The mighty and powerful of this world accomplish their objectives by force and by spectacle. Such is not the way of Christ, for he willed to liberate man by the Cross” (p. 105). It is in and through the paschal mystery of the cross and resurrection of Jesus that man has become God's partner in bringing the world to the fulfillment of the divine design.

On the relationship — perennially difficult to formulate — between the city of man and the kingdom of God, L tells us that *GS* goes out of its way to affirm the view that “whatever on this earth is the fruit of Christian liberty or Christian love endures in the world to come” and that “the city of man has a value and consistency of its own which will endure” (p. 109).

Finally L takes up what *GS* tells us on the sense and power of Christian hope. I have till now resisted the temptation to cite any passage at length, but here I will yield, reproducing because of its relevance a particularly suggestive paragraph:

... there is a certain thematic incomprehensibility about Christian hope, and on the theoretical plane it is extremely difficult to come to a truly definitive and satisfactory explanation. In any case, the Christian answer would have to start off from the Christ-event, from the premise that Jesus lived an authentically historical life, and died not a cultic-liturgical death, but a truly human death on the cross; his sacrifice was not an escape from the world but a total sharing of the human condition. From the Christ-event comes the active (as opposed to theoretical) character of Christian hope which can only find expression in the radical giving of oneself for the sake of others after the manner of Jesus Christ. In other words, the “relativization” of Christian hope is not based on a lack of commitment to mankind but on the absolute conviction of the primacy of the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ. The Christian should, paradoxically, be more radically committed than anyone else to the humanization and liberation of this world because, although he believes that no perfect

world is attainable in this life, he knows that "human activity constitutes an integral part of the history of salvation, and that through his work man prepares that consummation whereby God will transform the world." *Gaudium et Spes* says that through his efforts to transform the world, man contributes already on this earth of "the growth of the Body of that new human family which in some way foreshadows the new earth." (p. 110).

THE LAW OF LIBERTY

An attempt to sum up what L's work sets in relief in the teaching on freedom in *GS* could run along these lines: There is a Christian, theological understanding of human liberty rooted in the image of God as fulfilled and realized in the person, life and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Jesus actualized in the real human life he lived and the real human death he underwent, the revelation (the "definition") and the empowerment of that freedom which is his gift to us and our task in the world. Thus, in this understanding, the 'process' of salvation is the re-creation of the divine image, deformed by sin and egoism, through man's response in love and self-gift to the Father and to one's brothers and sisters, toward the liberty of the sons of God. This process is the inner sense of history — personal, interpersonal, societal, cosmic — and the dynamic power in the shaping of human community, the creation of human solidarity, the humanizing of the world. Men are most free, paradoxically, when they are most committed in self-transcending love. When, *inserted into the mystery of Christ*, man "gathers himself" to give himself in the service of others; when with all his effort he labors to build a world more human, more free, more just, more fraternal; when he loves, accepts, forgives his fellows in community; when he adores the Lord in spirit and in truth — then is he most truly free, then does he most fully realize himself and bring into being as partner and co-creator God's loving design for the world.

Thus, at the very depths of the dynamics of human history, at the core of "the grandeur and misery of man", lies — like flame in the darkness — the freedom of the heart of man. There the power of Christ's passion and death and rising again is at work; there the radiant energy of his love seeks, as from the ground of reality, to create within the city of man the promise and the earnest of the kingdom of God.

Salvation is thus liberation in all its dimensions, and the full Christian meaning of human liberation is rooted in the self-gift of Christ. Paradoxically enough, the Christian image of freedom is "the crucified God". On the Cross the freedom and love of God and the freedom and love of man meet *commercio admirabili*, in wondrous collaboration and exchange. In the understanding of faith, the Cross of Christ is the law of liberty.

EVALUATION

The "selective summary" we have given in the preceding pages is in fact a commentary of sorts — even the bits and pieces give us a good idea, I believe, of how a discerning and reflective effort can wonderfully illuminate what, at first reading, appears as monochromatic. I do not think it is an overstatement to say that the study under review is something of a model in its genre. At its presentation as a dissertation to the board of examiners, it was compared to one of those high-priced, nearly coin-thin Swiss watches: slight in volume, compactly and expertly crafted, with precision of high order; readers will, I believe, find the comparison apt. Canon Philip Delhaye of Louvain, presently Secretary of the Pontifical International Theological Commission, who worked on the text of *GS* and wrote an authoritative history of its successive redactions from his own first-hand knowledge, has said of L's book: "The work is of extraordinary interest both to the historian of Vatican II and to the professor of moral theology." I have already cited Thomas Clarke's remarks earlier in these pages.

Freedom in Vatican II comes, then, to the reader with the abundant recommendations of experts, and this reviewer might be allowed to add that several careful readings of this work, done with pen in hand, have yielded an understanding of several key themes in Vatican II theology (not in *GS* only!) which no other single monograph has given him. I believe that no one who wishes to reflect on the Church's teaching on freedom can afford to bypass it; it will be a work, I submit, of lasting interest and value.

It is ten years now after Vatican II came to its euphoric and in many ways earth-shaking term. The Council inaugurated a new age — a stormy and unsettling new age — in the Church. (Perhaps the Council gives further proof of the ambivalence of human achievements which *GS* speaks of — even human achievements which men seek to place under the guidance of the Spirit of God.) This new age has as one of its main characteristics precisely the "project of freedom" for men within the Church. It is against Vatican II's understanding of Christian liberty that this new age in the Church, too, should be most fruitfully and most honestly measured: "To affirm that man is free is to make a soteriological affirmation."