

Liberating Slavery

Is there such a thing as a liberating slavery and an enslaving liberty?
The analysis of a verse from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians
provides elements for an accurate response.



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Liberty and slavery are words that seem decidedly incompatible, especially to contemporary ears. But in the words of St. Paul to the faithful of Galatia, they have admirable harmony: “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another” (Gal 5:13). How is this paradox explained?

In this verse of his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle of the Gentiles teaches that the true liberty brought by Our Lord Jesus Christ cannot be lived authentically if it is not placed at the service of others. With this in mind he poses the problem: a person is either a servant of others for love of Christ, or is a slave of the flesh for love of self.

The impact that this new doctrine produced among pagans and practicing Jews was of such magnitude that it changed the way of life and the understanding of human relations across the entire Mediterranean Basin. A new concept was launched of the true liberty of the sons of God, redeemed by the precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Is there, then, a liberating slavery and an enslaving liberty? An analysis of the verse cited above, in which the Apostle calls liberty that which today is considered slavery and qualifies slavery that which today is seen as liberty, provides the elements for a fitting response to this question.

Concept of liberty throughout history

In a certain sense, it could be affirmed that the history of humanity is the history of liberty.¹ A liberty that lets man make his own decisions, choose his role and, therefore, govern his own destiny.

The desire to be free has always been one of the greatest human yearnings. This constant striving gave expression to as many definitions of liberty as there are epochs, cultures, civilizations, philosophical currents; almost as many, it could be said, as there have been people throughout history.

A sweeping perusal *au vol d’oiseau*, of the period embracing the end of the Middle Ages until day, reveals that with the passage of time, the concept of liberty was gradually divorced from its associ-

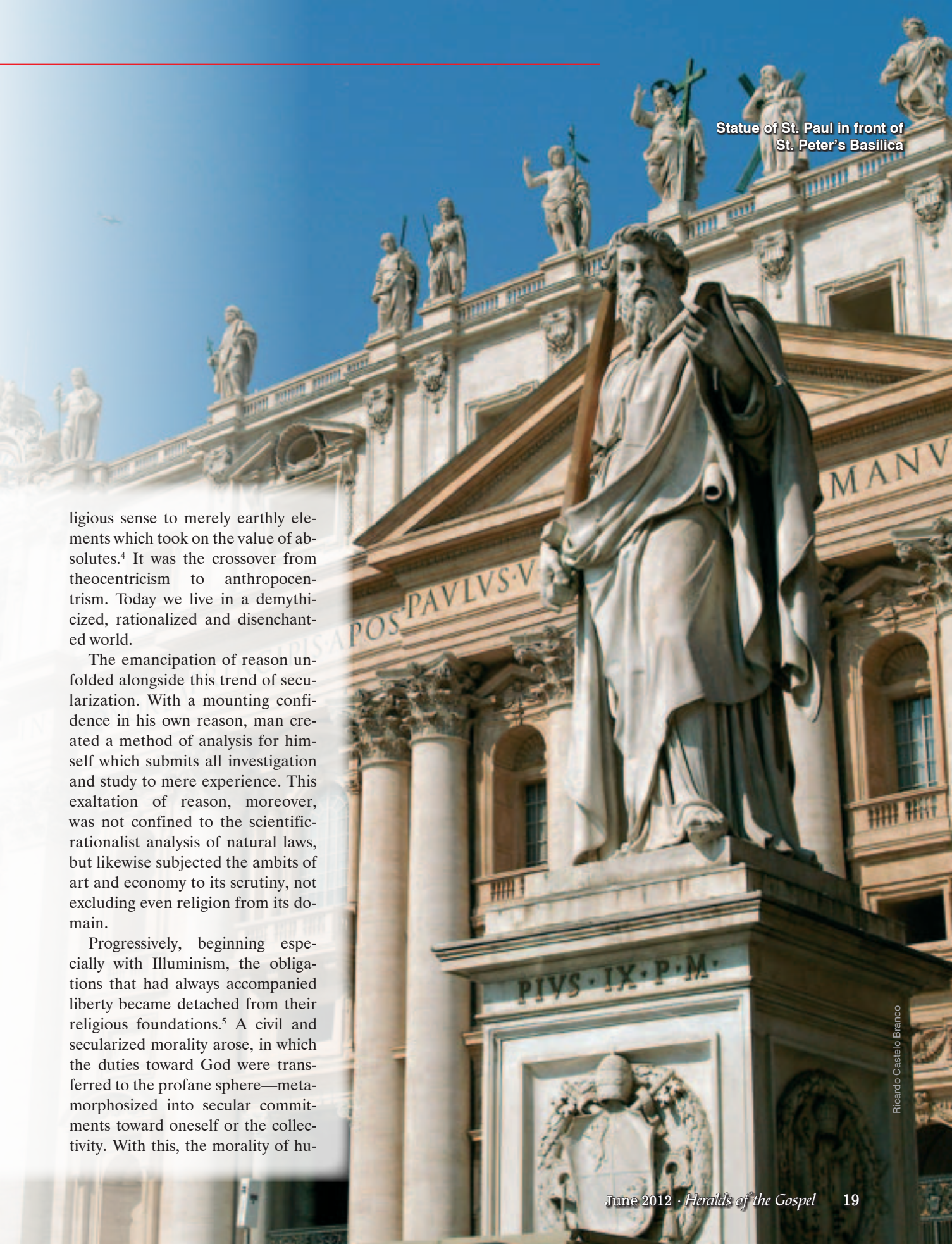
ation with attendant values such as responsibility, sacrifice, self-denial, dignity, faith and, in essence, from God Himself—values that formerly acted as a counterbalance of liberty.

In fact, in his restive search for liberty, man began in the Renaissance to discard his zeal for austerity and sacrifice, along with the desire for holiness and eternal life, seeking an order fundamentally opposed to that which had reached its apex in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²

Thus, a process of secularization developed throughout the Renaissance, based on pagan models from classical antiquity. This process was marked by the disappearance of principles dictated by the Faith and was stamped by a distinctly anti-scholastic and anticlerical attitude. With time, this tendency grew, some of its manifestations reaching the point of attempting to supplant Christianity, offering humanity a stoic-epicurean standard of behaviour, such as that of renaissance libertinism.³

The emancipation of reason

This crisis of faith and secularization caused a deviation of man’s re-

A large, detailed photograph of the statue of St. Paul in front of St. Peter's Basilica. The statue is a full-length standing figure of a bearded man in a long robe, holding a scroll and a wooden staff. It is positioned on a high pedestal in the foreground. In the background, the facade of St. Peter's Basilica is visible, featuring a series of statues on a balustrade and the inscription "PAVLVS V" on the pediment. The sky is clear and blue.

Statue of St. Paul in front of
St. Peter's Basilica

ligious sense to merely earthly elements which took on the value of absolutes.⁴ It was the crossover from theocentricism to anthropocentrism. Today we live in a demythicized, rationalized and disenchant-ed world.

The emancipation of reason unfolded alongside this trend of secularization. With a mounting confidence in his own reason, man created a method of analysis for himself which submits all investigation and study to mere experience. This exaltation of reason, moreover, was not confined to the scientific-rationalist analysis of natural laws, but likewise subjected the ambits of art and economy to its scrutiny, not excluding even religion from its domain.

Progressively, beginning especially with Illuminism, the obligations that had always accompanied liberty became detached from their religious foundations.⁵ A civil and secularized morality arose, in which the duties toward God were transferred to the profane sphere—metamorphosized into secular commitments toward oneself or the collectivity. With this, the morality of hu-

man actions was relativized, since man had set himself upon a pedestal as the judge of his own acts.

The sense of duty so characteristic of Judeo-Christian culture, in which the concept of service was deeply rooted, was gradually being forgotten. Happiness was no longer the fruit of atonement and service to truth, but rather of absolute liberty, attained thanks to the progress of science.

Unrestricted satisfaction of whims

The evidence of facts undeniably show that the fight for liberty and for the dominion of nature yielded enormous benefits in almost all fields of human endeavour. Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, this progress unfolded outside of a morality capable of clearly defining the borders between good and evil, in search of a liberty in which the sense of responsibility was practically non-existent.

Today, especially in Western society, technology and science provide such material comfort and pleasure, that the idea of abnegation has all but lost its value, while humanity gives exclusive preference to that which satisfies the immediate desires and ego,⁶ aiming at the liberation of the disorderly instincts.

Self-realization serves as a pretext for all forms of utopian struggles with the goal of giving full vent to human passions with no control of the intelligence and the will, allowing for the prevalence of the imagination and of “experiences” over the serious and methodical analysis of reality.⁷

To this was added the widespread diffusion of the theories of Sigmund Freud and other schools of psychology, whose concept of liberty opened the way for untold concessions to human egoism, creating and spreading a cul-

ture in which the unrestricted satisfaction of egocentric whims holds first place,⁸ seeking “to implant the reign of the arbitrary will over the tomb of duty.”⁹

New forms of slavery

All of this gives the impression that humanity wished to model itself after the animals, aspiring to the spontaneity they enjoy. However, there is something that profoundly distinguishes the human being from the irrational animal: as a consequence of original sin, human nature is disordered and needs the

help of grace to practice good for any length of time. Animals, by contrast, possess the ordered instincts proper to their nature.

Therefore, it would be a serious error to associate liberty with spontaneity. On the contrary: liberty is, in some way, the negation of spontaneity. Man should at every moment judge and act in accordance with factors as they arise, and the accuracy of his decisions depend, in large part, on the cooperation of the reason and will.

Egoism blinds man to the fact that liberty is subject to moral, psychological and sociological factors, and that fundamentally, he is not free *from*, but rather *to* take his proper position in face of all these factors.¹⁰

This egoism takes its toll, and those who strive for happiness by means of irresponsible liberty, paradoxically find themselves burdened with fresh problems, and what is worse, new forms of slavery, the worst being one’s own ego—which Paul calls *σάρξ*, the flesh—that subjects and deceives the individual.

The tyranny of the ego leads the person to a state of imbalance,

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Island of Manhattan viewed from the top of the Rockefeller Center, New York

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"Jesus in discussion with the Pharisees" - Library of the Monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla (Spain)

making him oscillate between the delirium of feeling the omnipotent master of everything, and a self-destructive, self-annihilating depression.¹¹

Thus, in the few moments of peace that contemporary man manages to find, when he ponders the "neurotic tumult of disappointments, worries, wild ambitions and exacerbated weariness," a question comes to his mind: "What am I living for?"¹² Undoubtedly, a question more suited to a slave than a free man.

For liberty ruled by egoism always leads to slavery, inasmuch as liberty is not capable of liberating in and of itself. What makes the human being free is the truth freely sought after.¹³

Liberty as pretext for the slavery of the flesh

In face of this sad paradox in which the search for liberty results in slavery, the Apostle Paul suggests an even greater paradox, opposed *per diametrum* to the focus of the first: liberty should be attained through the service of neighbour for love of God. A knower of human ways, he conveys the hopeful news that humanity is called to liberty in

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Jesus Christ, but, at the same time, does not hesitate to point out the danger that the improper use of this liberty can entail.

By recommending caution in ensuring that liberty does not become a pretext for the flesh—a word that means not only human sensuality, but also everything regarding arrogance and pride in man—St. Paul seems to allude to the occasion narrated by St. John the Evangelist, in which the Pharisees boast to the Lord that they have never been the slaves of anyone (cf. Jn 8:33).

As to the liberty established by Jesus, the Pharisees respond with pride, showing how sin, in addition to enslaving, blinds and leaves the human being virtually incapable of discerning the truth. Flaunting their liberty, they forget that the history of the Hebrew people holds undeniable proof of how the Israelites were subjected to slavery by neighbouring peoples each time they turned their back on the Lord.

However, this not only happens to the Hebrew people: those who give over to sin become slaves of sin (cf. Jn 8:34). It would make no sense for the liberty announced by St. Paul—which not only encompasses liberation regarding the Law, but also, and above all, to sin—be taken as a pretext for sin.

The solution proposed by St. Paul: Slavery of love

The Apostle then points out the remedy by which this liberty may rightly be called Christian: being the servants of one another through charity.

It should be noted that this imperative to "be servants" (*δουλεύετε* - *douleúete*) would be more precisely translated as "be slaves", since *doulos*, in Greek, means slave. Therefore, it is not the service pertaining to an employee, but of one who serves without the right to retribution.

And yet—here is the paradox—St. Paul affirms that liberty should be acquired through precisely this type of service (slavery) to others. Only by converting oneself into a servant of neighbour for love of God, can man attain his long yearned-after liberty.

Slavery of love: this is the solution that St. Paul proposes to the Galatians for maintaining true liberty, the liberty of Christ. However, this slavery of love is not simply the solution for avoiding slavery of the



Baptism in the Church of St. Cecilia, São Paulo (Brazil)

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flesh. It is not a medicine, a vaccine whose function is limited to preserving the individual from the clutches of sin.

Joyful dependence of the human being on God

The Apostle is fully aware that man, as creature, is a limited being and, as such, he has a restricted and dependent liberty, which in effect is reduced to the possibility of choosing the master he wants to serve, “either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness” (Rom 6:16).

Moreover, the concept of St. Paul on service (slavery) far surpasses its current connotation. As a Hebrew, his idea of slavery acquires a profoundly religious sense; a slave is one who finds himself in complete and absolute dependence on his master, to whose service he should dedicate all his activities.

It is also fitting to point out that in the Hebrew world man was convinced that God is the absolute Lord of all, and felt complete dependence on Him. In this way, to be chosen by

God to serve Him is not humiliating, because He expresses His love to the Hebrews by making them His chosen people. To be a slave not only expresses service, but also the joyous dependence of the human being on God.

Liberated from sin by Baptism, the Christian should live with the complete and joyful conviction that, as a redeemed person, he becomes the property of Christ, his new Lord, to whom he owes all reverence, since Christian liberty can only be conceived beginning with the “experience of total dependence upon God.”¹⁴

This is what St. Paul wishes to transmit in his exhortation to serve Christ, referring to his own experience of absolute dependence on He who loved him and gave Himself for him (Gal 2:20), for this total giving can only initiate from the personal experience of God’s love.

Members of Christ’s body

In fact, slavery arises from the complete conviction that He to

whom one surrenders can, with His loving virtue, compensate for all the shortcomings and debilities inherent to the human being, which impede him from practicing the good that he desires (cf. Rom 7:18). This conviction is not a mere rational fact; it is an authentic act of faith that essentially unites us to Christ, who expressed His love for us by surrendering Himself.¹⁵

The slave of Christ “believes, therefore, that his life is loved by Christ’s love,”¹⁶ thus converting this belief into the chief motive for all of his actions. Paul himself acknowledges that the love of Christ “was the determining principal of his passion,”¹⁷ because He “loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal 2:20; cf. Eph 5:2,25).

As a result of this faith, the slave, as a member of Christ (Eph 5:30), shares in His same life and can repeat with Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Christ lives in the slave not as merely a place to be, but in an oper-

ative manner by which the slave wants what Christ wants, thinks what Christ wants him to think and does what Christ wants him to do. And the slave, previously incapable of practicing good, now succeeds in doing all things, through this union with He who strengthens him (cf. Phil 4:13).

In this way, man's total surrender to God is transformed into liberty, because if "this Creator loves us and our dependence means being within the space of His love, in that case it is precisely dependence that is freedom."¹⁸

Likeness with Christ through service to others

Clearly, liberty should be attained by means of slavery to Christ Our Lord. But since "he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20), is it possible to be the slave of Christ without being the slave of others?

Paul believes that the Christian, redeemed from sin by Baptism, entered the sphere of God's love, making himself one who loves—not only God, but also his neighbour, for "one who is aware he is beloved, becomes active in love."¹⁹

Therefore, the neighbour, "especially [...] those of the household of the faith" (Gal 6:10), becomes the contrary of the flesh and in him one should only see a reflection of Christ. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40), the Divine Master affirmed.

Indeed, "being taken by Christ's love in the Faith, we become free to love, which is also directed to our neighbour and, in this way, fulfills the Law in everything regarding the divine will,"²⁰ because the practice

The commandment of love is obligatory. Since the Christian is another Christ, he should also be like Him through service to others

of charity satisfies all the requirements set forth by the law.

For the slave of Christ there is no other law than that of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 9:21), which summarizes the whole governance of the old law and, based on love, impels the human being toward others to serve them and do good to them, which, in its turn, strengthens their faith in Christ.²¹

Coming from "a profound sense of the life of Christ,"²² the commandment of love is obligatory. Thus, as the Christian is another Christ, he should also be like Him through service to others.

From this perspective, the Christian subjects all the rules of conduct to the ideal of love of neighbour, concerning himself with others and totally giving himself to the life of the community. His fidelity or infidelity, then, to the law of Christ will be measured according to the position he takes toward his neighbour's needs and difficulties; not occasionally or sporadically, but reliably and consistently.

And the more generously one corresponds to this vocation of Christ, through the forgetting of *self*, dedicating himself to a duty or a person, for the love of a cause, without any concern for *self*, the more he fulfills himself as a human being,²³ and the more he is *himself* and he obtains the happiness of having fulfilled God's plan.

In this way, "being servants of one another through love" becomes an instrument of liberty, making it clear that happiness does not consist in having everything without restraint, but in giving oneself entirely.



"Jesus washes St. Peter's feet" -
Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris



Mary, already the Mother of God, hastened to the aid of her cousin Elizabeth

“Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth” - by Fra Angelico, Diocesan Museum of Cortona (Italy)

Solution to so many modern evils

In this era, in which society is steeped in liberty, naturalism, false optimism and egoistic comfort, the message of St. Paul speaks to us, with the prophetic intention of denouncing and, simultaneously, of showing the way.

As the solution to so many modern evils, the Apostle suggests sacrifice, abnegation and surrender, promising true liberty as a reward, the value that all actively seek—frequently in vain.

Some Christians may still feel, even after all is said and done, a psychological difficulty in reconciling the words love and slavery, or slavery and liberty. How can the voluntary subjection of oneself to another be explained? Is the slavery of love an absurdity?

On the other hand, love is the act by which the will freely desires something. Thus, slavery and love can be reconciled in the noble decision by which a person freely gives himself to an ideal, to a cause, to the service of others.

This is the example Jesus gave to His Apostles in the Last Supper. After having washed their feet—the duty of a slave—and declared Himself the

¹ Cf. AYLLÓN VEGA, José Ramón. *Filosofía Mínima*. Barcelona: Ariel, 2007, p.151.

² Cf. CORRÊA DE OLIVEIRA, Plínio. *Revolução e Contra-Revolução*. São Paulo: Retornarei, 2002, p.27-28.

³ Cf. FAZIO FERNÁNDEZ, Mariano. *Historia de las ideas contemporáneas. Una lectura del proceso de secularización*. 2.ed. Madrid: Rialp, 2007, p.29.

⁴ Beginning in the eighteenth century the situation would radically change, making earthly elements “sacred” and giving a place to new divinities: reason, science, progress... (cf. FAZIO, op. cit., p.23).

⁵ Cf. LIPOVETSKY, Gilles. *El crepúsculo del deber. La ética indolosa de los nuevos tiempos democráticos*. 5.ed. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000, p.12.

⁶ Cf. Idem, ibidem.

⁷ Cf. CORRÊA DE OLIVEIRA, op.cit., p.75.

⁸ Cf. GONZÁLEZ-QUEVEDO, Luis. *Vocação*. In: APARICIO RODRÍGUEZ, Angel; CANALS CASAS, Joan (Dir.). *Dicionário Teológico da Vida Consagrada*. São Paulo: Paulus, 1994, p.1158-1159.

⁹ AYLLÓN VEGA, José Ramón. *Introducción a la ética. Historia y funda-*

mentos. Madrid: Palabra, 2006, p.91.

¹⁰ Cf. FRANKL, Viktor Emil. *Ante el vacío existencial. Hacia una humanización de la psicoterapia*. 9.ed. Barcelona: Herder, 2003, p.123.

¹¹ Cf. MARTINI, SJ, Carlo María. *Una libertad que se entrega. En meditación con María*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 1996, p.41.

¹² CORRÊA DE OLIVEIRA, Plínio. A ti caro Ateu [To

Teacher and Lord whom they should imitate, He exhorts them to wash the feet of one another, to serve one another as slaves (cf. Jn 13:12-15).

A magnificent example is also found in the free choice made by the Handmaid of the Lord (cf. Lk 1:38), when she accepted to be the Mother of God: free because she responded to God's summons as a person not previously subjugated; free because she lives her liberty in relation to God and others, with a balanced awareness of herself, whose humility does not deter her, but, on the contrary, casts her trustfully into the arms of God.²⁴

And with this same confidence, she also plunged into serving others, not hesitating for an instant—already being the Mother of God—to hasten to the aid of her cousin Elizabeth and to place herself at her service.

Thus, in contemplating the behaviour of the Virgin Mary we find the true formula for following in the footsteps of Christ, the Suffering Servant (cf. Is 52:14; 53:12), who, for love of mankind did not hesitate to assume the condition of a slave and become obedient unto death, even death on a cross (cf. Phil 2:7-8). ✧



And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8)

“Christ crucified” - Church of the Martyrs, Lisbon (Portugal)

You, Dear Atheist]. In: *Folha de S. Paulo*. São Paulo: August 31, 1980, p.3.

¹³ Cf. SAYÉS BERMEJO, José Antonio. *Teología y relativismo. Análisis de una crisis de fe*. Madrid: BAC, 2007, p.205.

¹⁴ TUÑI, Oriol. *La Biblia día a día. Comentario exegético a las lecturas de la Liturgia de las Horas*. 2.ed. Madrid: Cristiandad, 1981, p.580.

¹⁵ Cf. LEAL, SJ, Juan. Carta a los Gálatas. In: *La Sagrada Escritura – Nuevo Testamento*. 2.ed. Madrid: BAC, 1965, v.II, p.615.

¹⁶ SCHLIER, Heinrich. *La Carta a los Gálatas*. 2.ed. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1999, p.122.

¹⁷ BOVER, SJ, José María; CANTERA BURGOS, Francisco. *Sagrada Biblia. Versión crítica sobre los tex-*

tos hebreo y griego. Madrid: BAC, 1947, t.II, p.410.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI. *Address to the Community of the Roman Major Seminary*, from 20/2/2009.

¹⁹ GÜNTHER, W.; LINK, H.G. Amor. In: COENEN, Lothar; BEYREUTHER, Erich; BIETENHARD, Hans (Org.). *Diccionario Teológico del Nuevo Testamento*. 3.ed. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1990, v.I, p.115.

²⁰ SCHLIER, op. cit., p.284.

²¹ Cf. FITZMYER, SJ, Joseph Augustine. *Teología de San Pablo. Síntesis y perspectivas*. Madrid: Cristiandad, 1975, p.161.

²² Cf. BECKER, Jürgen. *Apóstolo Paulo, vida, obra e teologia*. São Paulo: Academia Cristã, 2007, p.425.

²³ Cf. FRANKL, op. cit., p.17.

²⁴ Cf. MARTINI, op. cit., p.39-40.