

Principle and Foundation Talk #2

In the Book of the Exercises:

[23 con't.]. “Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.”

Usual Preparation Prayer.

First Prelude: The composition of Place: Heaven opened above me and hell yawning under my feet; also myself placed on this earth, halfway between heaven and hell, and saying to myself: “For all eternity I’ll either be in heaven with God, Mary, and all the saints, or else in hell suffering the torments of Satan; and it depends on me alone, which of these two conditions will be my lot within a few years, perhaps within a few months, weeks, or days; it depends on me alone whether I am to gain so great a good or to incur so great an evil.”

Second Prelude: The Petition I need to ask for light to know clearly, to realize intimately the supreme importance of this matter of my salvation and sanctification, as well as strength to adopt resolutely all the means that will most surely bring it to a successful issue. This, then, I must implore with all the energy of my being, with the utmost earnestness and fervor.

By indifference, Saint Ignatius means a quality of the will whereby it is able to choose, not based on some preference it has for this or that thing, or out of fear of losing something, but rather solely for love of God. Indifference therefore means freedom of spirit; indeed, some commentators on the Exercises even go so far as to say that indifference is simply another word for freedom.¹ When we become indifferent to created things, we see that we embrace a radical and all-encompassing freedom, a freedom that touches on the very heart of our vocations as Christians. As Saint Paul writes to the Galatians (5:13): *in libertatem vocati estis* “You were called for freedom.” “You were called for freedom.”

In a sense, we could say that freedom is the “other side of the coin” of indifference, since the two go hand in hand: if I’m not indifferent to created things, then it means that I have my preferences and likes; I’m bound to things, and if I’m bound, I’m a slave: I’m not free. This is, we could say, the negative aspect: freedom means not being bound to things.

On the same token, though, we can look at this indifference from the positive light: being indifferent doesn’t mean saying “Ok, whatever” to anything that happens; nor does it mean being indifferent for indifference’s sake, as if indifference were an end

¹ Cf. *God Finds Us* by Jim Manney

unto itself (as if we were Buddhists). Freedom isn't apathy. Case in point: when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his father takes him up the mountain, and it pains him, because he loves Isaac, but he loves God more. We'd wonder about his love for his son if he just said: "Ok, whatever." He'd be a psychopath, and not a father. Rather, when I am indifferent to all created things, it's for a reason. That reason is that I'm completely and profoundly in love with God and with His will. It means being totally and completely at God's disposal, to be free for what He wants, when He wants it, and how He wants it. Indifference isn't apathy; it's not a universal "whatever" to anything and everything. Rather, it's a stripping away of everything, a detachment from everything that's not God because of a profound and all-encompassing love which can only be profound and all-encompassing because, through indifference, I am free to love that way. When that love of God calls me to use a creature to serve Him, I do, and when it calls me to leave it behind, I leave it. In the future meditations, we'll see concretely how to live out that love, but, for now, we must work on gaining that indifference so as to get that freedom to love completely.

When considering how indifference leads to freedom, we can consider two points: first, the nature of freedom, and second, the perfect freedom that is to be ours as religious. So, the nature of freedom, and perfect freedom.

1. Nature of freedom

Indifference is directed to making us free, to making us be the ones in control of one's actions: to be the one who chooses.

To be free means:

- To be without chains, without any impediments that hold us back. Listen to what Saint John of the Cross writes: "The soul that is attached to anything, however much good there may be in it, will not arrive at the *freedom* of divine union. For whether it be a strong wire rope or a slender and delicate thread that holds the bird, it matters not, if it really holds it fast; for until the cord be broken the bird cannot fly." – True freedom is found in our union with God. Union, or, as Alphonsus Liguori likes to say, uniformity.

But, just as to be pure water needs to be more than simply free from dirt, so too to be free also means

- to be able to see what the end is, and to be able to choose it and the means to it. To be free means to be able to choose Jesus, no matter what He asks: when Blessed Chiara Luce Badano lay dying and was in great pain, she continually refused medicine for the pain and instead offered everything to Jesus. A few days before her death, she said, "I'm not asking Jesus to come and take me to heaven with Him. I don't want Him to get the impression that I don't want to suffer for Him anymore."² She was 19, and died in 1990.
- We could say the same of Venerable Montserrat Grases, who died at

² Ann Ball, *Young Faces of Holiness*, 27.

the age of 17. When her parents told her that she had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, she took the news calmly, went to her room, made her usual examination of conscience, kissed her crucifix and said, “*Serviam* – I will serve,” looked at an image of Our Lady and said, “[I accept] whatever you want,” and went to sleep, with a calm that her parents could only describe later as supernatural.³

Indifference, then, frees us so that we can be about the things of God.

On the other hand, the slave is one who is chained, perhaps blinded by their own judgments or likes, one who doesn’t have the strength to love and choose, the one who is bound by their tastes, fears, disordered desires, and so on.

Even the littlest things can enslave us: they are like the little foxes in the Song of Songs (2:15): “Catch us the foxes, the little foxes that damage the vineyards.” The foxes are small, but their damage is great, since they destroy the greatest of treasures. It doesn’t matter what the attachment is; someone in prison could care less if their chains are gold or silver or platinum studded with diamonds. The end result is always the same: to be bound.

2. The Law of Perfect Freedom

This leads to our second point. In his letter, Saint James says that we are called, not to just any sort of freedom, but perfect freedom: “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like. But the one who peers into the *perfect law* of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does.” Our English word *perfect* comes from the Latin *perfectus*, meaning, *completely*. Our freedom is *perfect* when it completely embraces absolutely every aspect of my life.

That perfect freedom is to be found in indifference, and is freedom, of course, from slavery to sin, death, and hell, but also from any secondary end that we might place in front of or in the way of God.

Indifference gives us that freedom because it gives us a four-fold control or dominion (*señorío* - lordship):

- a) First, control over ourselves: as we submit our souls to God and strip away our attachments, our intellect sees clearly what is most important, and our will becomes free to attach itself entirely to God. Everything else, then, falls into place. We can think of Saint Dominic Savio, whose motto was “Death, but not sin!” Not just mortal sin, mind you, but all sin. Imagine the detachment that let him see things in their proper light, and the control he must have had over himself to not only say that, but live it. For the record, Savio died when he was 14.

3 Cf. Mercedes Eguíbar Galarza, *Montserrat Grases: Una vida sencilla* (Madrid: Ediciones Palabra, 2016).

- b) Second, dominion over others. This doesn't mean that we get to boss them around, but rather that, by giving ourselves entirely to the service of Jesus Christ, we have a certain spiritual authority over them. Case and point: there is a well-known incident with Saint Theresa of Calcutta. While out asking for donations, she asked a man for something for her orphans and held out her open hand. The man spat in it, and she, very gently, drew her hand back and stuck out her other one. "Thank you," she said, "that was for me; now please give me something for my orphans." From that moment on, the man became one of her biggest benefactors. How do you argue against that? This woman wasn't attached to her pride, her feelings, or anything: she had a mission from God and she was going to fulfill it, and there's something about that that will always inspire awe.
- c) Third, dominion over the world: and this in two senses: one, by collaborating with it through our apostolates, but, at the same time, rejecting it when it tries to become an end unto itself. Again, being indifferent means being free, and being free means being able to serve God whenever, wherever, and however He calls us. When Blessed Titus Brandsma, a Dutch Carmelite, was warned that the Nazis would imprison him, he would reply, "Well, now I am going to get what I've always wanted—a cell of my own. At last I shall be a real Carmelite."
- d) Lastly, dominion over the devil: when we're free from attachments, the devil has no tools he can use against us.

In short, Saint Alphonsus Liguori writes that "this is the beautiful freedom of the sons of God, and it is worth vastly more than all the rank and distinction of blood and birth, more than all the kingdoms in the world." It is worth so much because it is the key to heaven, but it is a key that is gained only by walking through the doors of indifference and detachment. The Song of Songs we read "Set me as a seal upon your heart." Indifference is that seal that keeps our hearts safely shut, to be opened only by God, when He asks, how He asks, and for what He asks.

Lastly, we can consider those four examples Ignatius gives as particularly paradigmatic examples of indifference: "Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created."

Again, the goal of this life is to get me to heaven, to be a saint, so, whatever it is that God wants to use to get me there, has to be fine by me. We're talking, not just about avoiding sin, (as Blessed Joseph Kentenich said, "He who only tries to avoid sin, will fall into it"), but about becoming saints. God knows exactly what I need to become a saint, and I have to trust that, and accept it. Therefore, I shouldn't prefer:

Health to sickness: Some saints have been healthy. Others have been quite sick, but, submissive to God's will, they became saints through their sufferings. Saint Gabriel

Lalemant was inspired to offer himself for the missions because of his uncle, Father Jerome Lalemant, who was the Jesuit superior of the Canadian missions. Yet, Lalemant's health was always poor; reporting his death, the Jesuit superior wrote that Lalemant's had been a "very delicate constitution, and [it was a] fact that his body had no strength except what the spirit of God and the desire of suffering for his name could give him." Nevertheless, Lalemant offered himself wholeheartedly to the mission, but his uncle still had to be careful in assigning him. Lalemant quickly picked up the language, but, after a mere six months, he was martyred along with John de Brébeuf. Interestingly enough, as weak as his body might have been, Lalemant endured torture for 15 hours, while de Brébeuf, who was so strong and tough that the native called him "Echon," "The Strong One" in Huron, died after three. Lalemant accepted his mission, as well as his physical limitations, as coming from God. Ultimately, his poor health had no impact on his ability to serve in the missions, since he wasn't there long.

Likewise, Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity died at a young age after great suffering, so much so that "upon her death, the prioress described her body as being 'like a skeleton.'" Yet, shortly before her death, "Elizabeth pressed her profession crucifix to her heart and said, 'We have loved each other so much.'" "We have loved each other so much."

Perhaps the greatest example of this is Saint Therese of Lisieux, the Little Flower; as she was literally suffocating from tuberculosis, was asked whether she wanted to die or to live. Her reply is the crystallization of indifference. She said: "I desire neither death nor life. Were our Lord to offer me my choice, I would not choose. I only will what He wills; it is what He does that I love. I do not fear the last struggle, nor any pains – however great – my illness may bring. God has always been my help. He has led me by the hand from my earliest childhood, and on Him I rely. My agony may reach the furthest limits, but I am convinced that He will never forsake me." *"I desire neither death nor life. Were our Lord to offer me my choice, I would not choose. I only will what He wills; it is what He does that I love."*

I will just mention in passing, that sometimes we are attached to our fears, our what if's. Indifference, meaning, loving God above all things, requires that we abandon ourselves to Him and trust in Him and in His will.

Riches to poverty: Some saints have been rich, but made good use of that wealth. Some, like Saint Francis, simply gave it all up. Poverty is not an impediment to God accomplishing His work. After all, He says, "Mine is the silver; mine is the gold."

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979), in his renowned book, *Way to Happiness*, narrates an incident in the life of a pious nun residing in a cloistered Carmelite convent (chapter 31). The nuns were leading a simple, silent and austere life and were practicing penance, prayer and meditation without access to the outside world. Once, during the feast of St. Therese, the cloister of the convent was opened to visitors who wanted to witness their lifestyle. Among the visitors was an industrialist who could not appreciate the silent lifestyle of the sisters. He met a young, beautiful and highly educated nun and showed her a large, palatial house on the opposite hill. It was large and luxurious with all modern amenities, a gorgeous garden, beautiful buildings,

expensive cars and fine furniture. He asked her, "If you had the fortune to be born in and own such a house with all facilities for a luxurious modern life, would you have left it and joined this convent with only poverty, penance and prayer?" The nun gave a short but firm reply, "Sir, that was my home!"

Honor to dishonor: The young Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, and many other early Jesuits, gave up royal titles to become religious. How many saints have suffered dishonor and humiliations!

An example of this trust can be found in the life of Saint Louis de Montfort: the fiasco of the Calvary at Pontchâteau. After having preached eight popular missions in the vicinity of Pontchâteau, "Montfort dreamed of building a gigantic Way of the Cross, which would dominate the entire countryside." He obtained the land, and in May of 1709 work began. The labor was all volunteer; inspired by de Montfort, over 20,000 people from as far away as Italy and Spain came to help. Everything was donated as a gift to God. The work was finished, and the date for the blessing was set for September 14th, 1710.

However, there were some who were angry at Montfort, for whatever reason. They and those in power managed to convince the king that the Calvary was to be a fortress, a threat to national security, and so, on September 13th, while he was preaching a mission, Montfort was told that the blessing had been called off. He hurried on foot through the night in order to see the bishop, arriving, exhausted, the next morning. He was given the sad news: there was nothing that could be done. The king ordered the Calvary, so painstakingly and lovingly built by volunteers, to be taken down, block by block, by the peasants under the army's watchful eye. "Montfort's personal humiliation must have been nothing compared to the anguish he felt for all those who had invested so much of their energy and time in the Calvary of Pontchâteau." On the bishop's advice, Montfort went on retreat, but, in that time of silent suffering, the Jesuits who ran the retreat house were amazed at his attitude. As one wrote later:

I thought I would find him downcast and disappointed; I had prepared myself to do as much as I could to console him; but I was astonished to find him happier and more peaceful than I myself was. I said to him jokingly, "My, you are acting like a strong and courageous fellow!" . . . "I am neither strong nor courageous," he replied, "but, thanks be to God, I am neither grievously pained nor desolate; I am at peace." [I asked him] "You are content, then, that they have destroyed your Calvary?" "I am neither content nor discontent. The Lord allowed me to have it built; but now He has allowed it to be destroyed. Blessed be His Holy Name! If it had depended on me, the Calvary would have stood till the end of time, but since it depends upon God, may His will be done and not mine. I would prefer, o My God, to die thousand times . . . than to oppose your Holy Will." "If it had depended on me, the Calvary would have stood till the end of time, but since it depends upon God, may His will be done and not mine."

Or, closer to our days, we can think of Servant of God Jérôme Lejeune, the French geneticist who discovered the cause of Down Syndrome. Pope Saint John Paul the Second reportedly called him "the most intelligent man [he] had ever met." In 1969, when he was awarded the top prize of the American Society of Human Genetics, rather

than give a lecture on his research, which was the norm, he instead gave an impassioned speech about the dignity of human life, and begged that genetics not be used as a reason for abortion. The powers that be informed him that if he wanted to win the Nobel Prize for medicine, for which he was certainly a candidate, he should keep his mouth shut about prolife issues. After the speech, Lejeune is said to have called his wife and remarked, "Today, I lost my Nobel Prize in medicine." His tireless defense of life would cost him funding for his research, friendships, his reputation in the scientific community, and earn him the hatred of many. When France was debating liberalizing their abortion laws, graffiti appeared on the walls of the Sorbonne, proclaiming: "Death to Lejeune!" Yet, none of this mattered to him; his sole concern was God's will and to defend the truth.

A long life to a short life: How many saints reach holiness after a short life! We already mentioned a number, but think of the Fatima visionaries. A clear example of this is Venerable Antonietta Meo, who died from cancer at the age of six and a half. She had just learned how to write, wrote 105 letters to Jesus. As her illness progressed she would dictate to her mother. Her last letter is dated June 2nd, 1937. This is what her mother had to say: "I sat by her bed and wrote down what Antonietta struggled to dictate: 'Dear Crucified Jesus, I love you and am so fond of you! I want to be with you on Calvary. Dear Jesus, tell God the Father that I love him, too. Dear Jesus, give me your strength for I need it to bear this pain that I offer for sinners'." Her mother said: "At this point Antonietta was consumed by a violent fit of coughing and vomiting but as soon as it was over she went on dictating: 'Dear Jesus, tell the Holy Spirit to enlighten me with love and to fill me with his seven gifts. Dear Jesus, tell Our Lady that I love her and want to be near her. Dear Jesus I want to tell you again how much I love you. My good Jesus, look after my spiritual father and grant him the necessary graces. Dear Jesus, look after my parents and Margherita. Your little girl sends you lots of kisses. . . .'"

Colloquy: We can end with the same colloquy as in the last meditation, by conversing with our Lord upon the Cross. Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that "Whoever wishes to live perfectly should do nothing but disdain what Christ disdained on the cross and desire what he desired." Ask Him for the grace to love what He loves, to desire what He desires, and to disdain what He disdained.