III. FUNDAMENTAL CHOICE AND SPECIFIC KINDS OF BEHAVIOUR

“Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal 5:13)

65. The heightened concern for freedom in our own day has led many students of the behavioural and the theological sciences to develop a more penetrating analysis of its nature and of its dynamics. It has been rightly pointed out that freedom is not only the choice for one or another particular action; it is also, within that choice, a decision about oneself and a setting of one's own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately for or against God. Emphasis has rightly been placed on the importance of certain choices which "shape" a person's entire moral life, and which serve as bounds within which other particular everyday choices can be situated and allowed to develop.

Some authors, however, have proposed an even more radical revision of the relationship between person and acts. They speak of a “fundamental freedom,” deeper than and different from freedom of choice, which needs to be considered if human actions are to be correctly understood and evaluated. According to these authors, the key role in the moral life is to be attributed to a “fundamental option,” brought about by that fundamental freedom whereby the person makes an overall self-determination, not through a specific and conscious decision on the level of reflection, but in a “transcendental” and “athematic” way. Particular acts which flow from this option would constitute only partial and never definitive attempts to give it expression; they would only be its “signs” or symptoms. The immediate object of such acts would not be absolute Good (before which the freedom of the person would be expressed on a transcendental level), but particular (also termed “categorical”) goods. In the opinion of some theologians, none of these goods, which by their nature are partial, could determine the freedom of man as a person in his totality, even though it is only by bringing them about or refusing to do so that man is able to express his own fundamental option.

A distinction thus comes to be introduced between the fundamental option and deliberate choices of a concrete kind of behaviour. In some authors this division tends to become a separation, when they expressly limit moral “good” and “evil” to the transcendental dimension proper to the fundamental option, and describe as “right” or “wrong” the choices of particular “innerworldly” kinds of behaviour: those, in other words, concerning man's relationship with himself, with others and with the material world. There thus appears to be established within human acting a clear disjunction between two levels of morality: on the one hand the order of good and evil, which is dependent on the will, and on the other hand specific kinds of behaviour, which are judged to be morally right or wrong only on the basis of a technical calculation of the proportion between the “premoral” or “physical” goods and evils which actually result from the action. This is pushed to the point where a concrete kind of behaviour, even one freely chosen, comes to be considered as a merely physical process, and not according to the criteria proper to a human act. The conclusion to which this eventually leads is that the properly moral assessment of the person is reserved to his fundamental option, prescinding in whole or in
part from his choice of particular actions, of concrete kinds of behaviour.

66. There is no doubt that Christian moral teaching, even in its Biblical roots, acknowledges the specific importance of a fundamental choice which qualifies the moral life and engages freedom on a radical level before God. It is a question of the decision of faith, of the obedience of faith (cf. Rom 16:26) by which man makes a total and free self-commitment to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God as he reveals' [112] This faith, which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6), comes from the core of man, from his 'heart' (cf. Rom 10:10), whence it is called to bear fruit in works (cf. Mt 12:33-35; Lk 6:43-45; Rom 8:5-10; Gal 5:22). In the Decalogue one finds, as an introduction to the various commandments, the basic clause: 'I am the Lord your God...' (Ex 20:2), which, by impressing upon the numerous and varied particular prescriptions their primordial meaning, gives the morality of the Covenant its aspect of completeness, unity and profundity. Israel's fundamental decision, then, is about the fundamental commandment (cf. Jos 24:14-25; Ex 19:3-8; Mic 6:8). The morality of the New Covenant is similarly dominated by the fundamental call of Jesus to follow him--thus he also says to the young man: 'If you wish to be perfect... then come, follow me' (Mt 19:21); to this call the disciple must respond with a radical decision and choice. The Gospel parables of the treasure and the pearl of great price, for which one sells all one's possessions, are eloquent and effective images of the radical and unconditional nature of the decision demanded by the Kingdom of God. The radical nature of the decision to follow Jesus is admirably expressed in his own words: 'Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it' (Mk 8:35).

Jesus' call to 'come, follow me' marks the greatest possible exaltation of human freedom, yet at the same time it witnesses to the truth and to the obligation of acts of faith and of decisions which can be described as involving a fundamental option. We find a similar exaltation of human freedom in the words of Saint Paul: 'You were called to freedom, brethren' (Gal 5:13). But the Apostle immediately adds a grave warning: 'Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.' This warning echoes his earlier words: 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1). Paul encourages us to be watchful, because freedom is always threatened by slavery. And this is precisely the case when an act of faith--in the sense of a fundamental option--becomes separated from the choice of particular acts, as in the tendencies mentioned above.

67. These tendencies are therefore contrary to the teaching of Scripture itself, which sees the fundamental option as a genuine choice of freedom and links that choice profoundly to particular acts. By his fundamental choice, man is capable of giving his life direction and of progressing, with the help of grace, towards his end, following God's call. But this capacity is actually exercised in the particular choices of specific actions, through which man deliberately conforms himself to God's will, wisdom and law. It thus needs to be stated that the so-called fundamental option, to the extent that it is distinct from a generic intention and hence one not yet determined in such a way that freedom is obligated, is always brought into play through conscious and free decisions. Precisely for this reason, it is revoked when man engages his freedom in conscious decisions to the contrary, with regard to morally grave matter.

To separate the fundamental option from concrete kinds of behaviour means to contradict
the substantial integrity or personal unity of the moral agent in his body and in his soul. A fundamental option understood without explicit consideration of the potentialities which it puts into effect and the determinations which express it does not do justice to the rational finality immanent in man's acting and in each of his deliberate decisions. In point of fact, the morality of human acts is not deduced only from one's intention, orientation or fundamental option, understood as an intention devoid of a clearly determined binding content or as an intention with no corresponding positive effort to fulfil the different obligations of the moral life. Judgments about morality cannot be made without taking into consideration whether or not the deliberate choice of a specific kind of behaviour is in conformity with the dignity and integral vocation of the human person. Every choice always implies a reference by the deliberate will to the goods and evils indicated by the natural law as goods to be pursued and evils to be avoided. In the case of the positive moral precepts, prudence always has the task of verifying that they apply in a specific situation, for example, in view of other duties which may be more important or urgent. But the negative moral precepts, those prohibiting certain concrete actions or kinds of behaviour as intrinsically evil, do not allow for any legitimate exception. They do not leave room, in any morally acceptable way, for the "creativity" of any contrary determination whatsoever. Once the moral species of an action prohibited by a universal rule is concretely recognized, the only morally good act is that of obeying the moral law and of refraining from the action which it forbids.

68. Here an important pastoral consideration must be added. According to the logic of the positions mentioned above, an individual could, by virtue of a fundamental option, remain faithful to God independently of whether or not certain of his choices and his acts are in conformity with specific moral norms or rules. By virtue of a primordial option for charity, that individual could continue to be morally good, persevere in God's grace and attain salvation, even if certain of his specific kinds of behaviour were deliberately and gravely contrary to God's commandments as set forth by the Church.

In point of fact, man does not suffer perdition only by being unfaithful to that fundamental option whereby he has made "a free self-commitment to God."[113] With every freely committed mortal sin, he offends God as the giver of the law and as a result becomes guilty with regard to the entire law (cf. Jas 2:8-11); even if he perseveres in faith, he loses "sanctifying grace," "charity" and "eternal happiness."[114] As the Council of Trent teaches, "the grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin."[115]

*Mortal and venial sin*

69. As we have just seen, reflection on the fundamental option has also led some theologians to undertake a basic revision of the traditional distinction between mortal sins and venial sins. They insist that the opposition to God's law which causes the loss of sanctifying grace and eternal damnation, when one dies in such a state of sin--could only be the result of an act which engages the person in his totality: in other words, an act of fundamental option. According to these theologians, mortal sin, which separates man from God, only exists in the rejection of God, carried out at a level of freedom which is neither to be identified with an act of choice nor capable of becoming the object of conscious awareness. Consequently, they go on to say, it is difficult, at least psychologically, to accept the fact that a Christian, who wishes to remain united to Jesus
Christ and to his Church, could so easily and repeatedly commit mortal sins, as the "matter" itself of his actions would sometimes indicate. Likewise, it would be hard to accept that man is able, in a brief lapse of time, to sever radically the bond of communion with God and afterwards be converted to him by sincere repentance. The gravity of sin, they maintain, ought to be measured by the degree of engagement of the freedom of the person performing an act, rather than by the matter of that act.

70. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliatio et Paenitentia reaffirmed the importance and permanent validity of the distinction between mortal and venial sins, in accordance with the Church's tradition. And the 1983 Synod of Bishops, from which that Exhortation emerged, "not only reaffirmed the teaching of the Council of Trent concerning the existence and nature of mortal and venial sins, but it also recalled that mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.”[116]

The statement of the Council of Trent does not only consider the "grave matter" of mortal sin; it also recalls that its necessary condition is "full awareness and deliberate consent." In any event, both in moral theology and in pastoral practice one is familiar with cases in which an act which is grave by reason of its matter does not constitute a mortal sin because of a lack of full awareness or deliberate consent on the part of the person performing it. Even so, "care will have to be taken not to reduce mortal sin to an act of 'fundamental option'--as is commonly said today--against God,” seen either as an explicit and formal rejection of God and neighbour or as an implicit and unconscious rejection of love. "For mortal sin exists also when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses something gravely disordered. In fact, such a choice already includes contempt for the divine law, a rejection of God's love for humanity and the whole of creation: the person turns away from God and loses charity. Consequently, the fundamental orientation can be radically changed by particular acts. Clearly, situations can occur which are very complex and obscure from a psychological viewpoint, and which influence the sinner's subjective imputability. But from a consideration of the psychological sphere one cannot proceed to create a theological category, which is precisely what the 'fundamental option' is, understanding it in such a way that it objectively changes or casts doubt upon the traditional concept of mortal sin.”[117]

The separation of fundamental option from deliberate choices of particular kinds of behaviour, disordered in themselves or in their circumstances, which would not engage that option, thus involves a denial of Catholic doctrine on mortal sin: “With the whole tradition of the Church, we call mortal sin the act by which man freely and consciously rejects God, his law, the covenant of love that God offers, preferring to turn in on himself or to some created and finite reality, something contrary to the divine will (conversio ad creaturam). This can occur in a direct and formal way, in the sins of idolatry, apostasy and atheism; or in an equivalent way, as in every act of disobedience to God's commandments in a grave matter.”[118]

IV. THE MORAL ACT

Teleology and teleologism

71. The relationship between man's freedom and God's law, which has its intimate and
living centre in the moral conscience, is manifested and realized in human acts. It is precisely through his acts that man attains perfection as man, as one who is called to seek his Creator of his own accord and freely to arrive at full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.[119]

Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them.[120] They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices, they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his profound spiritual traits. This was perceptively noted by Saint Gregory of Nyssa: "All things subject to change and to becoming never remain constant, but continually pass from one state to another, for better or worse... Now, human life is always subject to change; it needs to be born ever anew... But here birth does not come about by a foreign intervention, as is the case with bodily beings...; it is the result of a free choice. Thus we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions."[121]

72. The morality of acts is defined by the relationship of man's freedom with the authentic good. This good is established, as the eternal law, by Divine Wisdom which orders every being towards its end: this eternal law is known both by man's natural reason (hence it is "natural law"), and—in an integral and perfect way—by God's supernatural Revelation (hence it is called "divine law"). Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with man's true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness. The first question in the young man's conversation with Jesus: "What good must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt 19:6) immediately brings out the essential connection between the moral value of an act and man's final end. Jesus, in his reply, confirms the young man's conviction: the performance of good acts, commanded by the One who "Alone is good," constitutes the indispensable condition of and path to eternal blessedness: "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:17). Jesus' answer and his reference to the commandments also make it clear that the path to that end is marked by respect for the divine laws which safeguard human good. Only the act in conformity with the good can be a path that leads to life.

The rational ordering of the human act to the good in its truth and the voluntary pursuit of that good, known by reason, constitute morality. Hence human activity cannot be judged as morally good merely because it is a means for attaining one or another of its goals, or simply because the subject's intention is good.[122] Activity is morally good when it attests to and expresses the voluntary ordering of the person to his ultimate end and the conformity of a concrete action with the human good as it is acknowledged in its truth by reason. If the object of the concrete action is not in harmony with the true good of the person, the choice of that action makes our will and ourselves morally evil, thus putting us in conflict with our ultimate end, the supreme good, God himself.

73. The Christian, thanks to God's Revelation and to faith, is aware of the "newness" which characterizes the morality of his actions: these actions are called to show either consistency or inconsistency with that dignity and vocation which have been bestowed on him by grace. In Jesus Christ and in his Spirit, the Christian is a "new creation," a child of God; by his actions he shows his likeness or unlikeness to the image of the Son who is
the first-born among many brethren (cf. Rom 8:29), he lives out his fidelity or infidelity
to the gift of the Spirit, and he opens or closes himself to eternal life, to the communion
of vision, love and happiness with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[123] As Saint
Cyril of Alexandria writes, Christ ``forms us according to his image, in such a way that
the traits of his divine nature shine forth in us through sanctification and justice and the
life which is good and in conformity with virtue... The beauty of this image shines forth
in us who are in Christ, when we show ourselves to be good in our works.''

Consequently the moral life has an essential ``teleological'' character, since it consists in
the deliberate ordering of human acts to God, the supreme good and ultimate end (telos)
of man. This is attested to once more by the question posed by the young man to Jesus:
``What good must I do to have eternal life?'' But this ordering to one's ultimate end is not
something subjective, dependent solely upon one's intention. It presupposes that such acts
are in themselves capable of being ordered to this end, insofar as they are in conformity
with the authentic moral good of man, safeguarded by the commandments. This is what
Jesus himself points out in his reply to the young man: ``If you wish to enter into life,
keep the commandments'' (Mt 19:17).

Clearly such an ordering must be rational and free, conscious and deliberate, by virtue of
which man is ``responsible'' for his actions and subject to the judgment of God, the just
and good judge who, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, rewards good and punishes evil:
``We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive
good or evil, according to what he has done in the body'' (2 Cor 5:10).

74. But on what does the moral assessment of man's free acts depend? What is it that
ensures this ordering of human acts to God? Is it the intention of the acting subject, the
circumstances--and in particular the consequences--of his action, or the object itself of
his act?

This is what is traditionally called the problem of the ``sources of morality.''

Precisely with regard to this problem there have emerged in the last few decades new or
newly-revived theological and cultural trends which call for careful discernment on the
part of the Church's Magisterium.

Certain ethical theories, called ``teleological,'' claim to be concerned for the conformity
of human acts with the ends pursued by the agent and with the values intended by him.
The criteria for evaluating the moral rightness of an action are drawn from the weighing
of the non-moral or pre-moral goods to be gained and the corresponding non-moral or
pre-moral values to be respected. For some, concrete behaviour would be right or wrong
according as whether or not it is capable of producing a better state of affairs for all
concerned. Right conduct would be the one capable of ``maximizing'' goods and
``minimizing'' evils.

Many of the Catholic moralists who follow in this direction seek to distance themselves
from utilitarianism and pragmatism, where the morality of human acts would be judged
without any reference to the man's true ultimate end. They rightly recognize the need to
find ever more consistent rational arguments in order to justify the requirements and to
provide a foundation for the norms of the moral life. This kind of investigation is
legitimate and necessary, since the moral order, as established by the natural law, is in
principle accessible to human reason. Furthermore, such investigation is well-suited to
meeting the demands of dialogue and cooperation with non-Catholics and non-believers, especially in pluralistic societies.