

## Foreword

Realizing the challenge that his *Treatise on the Love of God* can present to its readers, Francis de Sales in his Preface evokes the image of a pearl diver who needs both courage and competence to plumb the depths of the seas in order to find pearls of great price. It is those qualities, he notes, that are required to plumb the depths of a science, and especially the science of the love of God.<sup>1</sup> Fr. Eunan McDonnell, SDB, has tackled the formidable task of the concept of freedom in the works of the Doctor of Love with those qualities of a pearl diver so esteemed by the saint and has uncovered for us many facets of his teachings that shine forth like inestimable pearls. It is my pleasant task to give readers of this study a passing glance at some of these pearls so as to whet their appetite to plunge into this work and experience their luster first hand.

Taking the intellectual temper of our times in mind as the saint himself avowedly did in writing the above-mentioned spiritual classic, Fr. Eunan has brought to bear his not inconsiderable acute powers of analysis and a solid background in philosophy, theology and spirituality to bear on his reading and understanding of many of the saint's texts and certain aspects of his life. In a number of instances, he brings to light ideas that are there implicitly and enriches them for us. This is particularly evident in the way he views the personal crisis the saint experienced in Paris while struggling with the problem of predestination which was being hotly discussed and debated at the time. This struggle can be better understood and appreciated as involving the role of human freedom in the face of God's plan for humanity and its basic relation to God's goodness. He perceptively notes how de Sales viewed freedom through the lens of God's love while Augustine looked at it through the lens of original sin. In doing so, he hits upon a theme, viz., the

1 See *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. and ed. J.K. Ryan (Stella Niagara, N.Y.: De Sales Resource Center, 2007).

relationship between freedom and love, that is woven into the very fabric of the saint's writings and life and uses it very effectively to unfold for us the rich implications of this fundamental and optimistic orientation.

Fr. Eunan faces squarely the climate of many misrepresentations and misconceptions in our world today of the concept of freedom and proceeds to deftly show how the saint's view of this essential quality of human nature can fruitfully engage our culture fashioned by the ideas of freedom of such influential thinkers as John Stuart Mill, Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. These thinkers, especially the latter, viewed human freedom essentially as an absolute value that stresses man's autonomy, self-determination and individuality to the detriment of the common good and an authentic human flourishing. He viewed religion as incompatible with and diametrically opposed to human freedom. Fr. Eunan convincingly demonstrates how the saint's ideas of freedom differ fundamentally from these pernicious and persistent influences.

To accomplish this, the author delves profoundly into the link between love and freedom, the very terms in which the saint viewed this relationship. From a Christian and Salesian perspective, the gift of freedom is incomprehensible without an understanding of the nature of true love. Freedom and love are mutually dependent because freedom has been given to human beings so that they can freely love God, goodness itself. Only in the light of love can authentic freedom be understood and properly valued. As Fr. Eunan notes, this idea has been treated elsewhere but, I wager, not to the extent and depth that he has studied it. The love of God is particularly seen in a virtuous life. The more virtuous we become the greater our love for God and the more free we become.

The inextricability of love and freedom has ineluctably a relational character that derives from the nature of the Christian tripersonal God in whose image all humans are made. Since love and freedom for the Christian is rooted in the Trinity, this liberates the concept of freedom from a narrow individualism bequeathed by the Enlightenment which wreaked and continues to wreak havoc in modern societies. Freedom is not so much freedom *from* as it is intended to be a freedom *for* – something or someone.

The author's methodology is noteworthy and very appropriate. The thoroughness of this study is seen by the meticulous digital searches that

Fr. Eunan has made of all of the saint's writings of words and phrases related to the notion of freedom and his careful and considered evaluation of them. By placing these results in their proper contexts, he does not force any preconceived views on them and hence draw unwarranted conclusions but painstakingly examines them in the way the saint intended to use them. A textual analysis, he observes, does not yield a viable and rewarding approach to the saint's teaching. So he wisely opted for a hermeneutical-historical one.

Of particular interest, is Fr. Eunan's treatment of freedom and holy indifference, which appear to be incompatible. This holy indifference, so prominent in the saint's spirituality, is expressed by the well-known saying 'Ask for nothing and refuse nothing.' The apparent annihilation of the will by submission to God's will far from destroying human freedom in reality enables us to enjoy the very freedom of God. The texts he adduces and so thoroughly analyzes give us a clearer understanding of new depths to human freedom viewed in the light of our pure love of God. This quite naturally leads to the daunting problem of grace and freedom.

Fr. Eunan very carefully and diligently lays the philosophical and theological background in discussing the role of freedom in the saint's writings. This is noteworthy in presenting Francis's view of the motive for the Incarnation that is keeping with that of Duns Scotist and the Franciscan School.

His very perceptive study of the relation of grace to nature and to human freedom, in particular, is very intriguing and profound. It is particularly interesting to see how Fr. Eunan examines the saint's ideas on inspirations as actual graces in an obvious attempt to navigate the perilous waters of the heated debate in those days on the nature of grace. The saint's reconciling attitude comes through very clearly. Also noteworthy is the way he shows how de Sales agrees with and diverges from Augustine, one of his great mentors.

Many of his observations in the footnotes invite us to reflect more deeply on his line of argument. For example, Fr. Eunan makes a striking point on the saint's use of the term '*Liberateur*' (Liberator) and its relationship to '*Sauveur*' (Savior). This readily helps us see the connection between salvation and liberation or true freedom. The many pertinent and excellent references cited open up new vistas for further study of related problems.

One of the thorniest problems Fr. Eunan grapples with is that of the relationship between affectivity, cognition and freedom. He rightly points out the limitations or inadequacy of a faculty psychology or a rational psychology since it does not adequately explain Francis's thought. The saint's description of love as a movement of the heart reveals an important theological intuition, as the author demonstrates. If love in general is viewed primarily as a movement of the heart, this allows for a better understanding of the relationship between feeling and loving than the traditional rational psychology of scholasticism. The ambiguity that the symbol of the heart (which can include both the will and feeling) has in the saint's spirituality allows for the possibility of a love with or without affectivity. This insightful approach can shed light on some apparent inconsistencies in the saint's thought regarding the distinction he makes between passions and affections. It can be the basis of further study and research of the role of the passions and affections in the saint's writings. Furthermore, it gives a clearer focus for any future dialogue between Francis's thought and what modern psychologists today call 'cognitive emotions.'

In the final chapter, Fr. Eunan has effectively tied together the many aspects previously treated and broken new ground in our understanding of the anthropology of Francis de Sales. The distinction he draws upon from Augustine between *libertas* (freedom) and *liberum arbitrium* (free will) is rightly applied to Francis and does give us a deeper understanding of his conception of freedom.

I can think of no more timely topic than the concept of freedom in the writings and life of the Doctor of Love. Freedom was for him our most precious gift because it enables us to love, and it is in loving rightly and faithfully that we achieve the true measure of our humanity; it humanizes our life and our world. These pages bring a breadth and a dimension to this subject that will give the reader a greater appreciation and enjoyment of the saint's thought and the depths that Fr. Eunan McDonnell has plumbed to give us this truly outstanding, enriching and stellar study.

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