

On the Relationship of Freedom, Truth, and Faith
as Found in the Theology of
Pope Benedict XVI and Blessed John Paul II

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IN THE THEOLOGY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI AND BLESSED JOHN PAUL II

“Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery.”

- John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* ¹

To speak of an essential and constitutive relationship between freedom and truth is to speak of the intimate relationship between humanity’s greatest desire and vocation – truth - and human nature’s fundamental condition: freedom. If the passage cited from *Fides et Ratio* is seriously considered, then there is much more than theory or epistemology at stake in this relationship. “Perish” and “misery” are not trivial words; they are about destiny and satisfaction. Unfortunately, in a time when technology is the dominating force in culture, destiny and satisfaction are less interesting than “reality TV” and today’s complex fabric of thought is laced with radical doubt.² It seems that humanity is adrift in creation and unsure of what it means to be free or to be true. Informed by the theology of Pope Benedict XVI and Blessed John Paul II, this essay explores the origins of humanity’s aimlessness. First, it describes truth as the fundamental condition for human freedom. Then, it addresses two ways in which truth needs freedom by showing what can happen to truth when freedom is misunderstood. It then presents faith as a solution to the aforementioned misconceptions of freedom and identifies Jesus Christ as the consummate relation between freedom, truth, and faith.

Freedom is the ability to choose without constraint³ and with conviction.⁴ A person is most free when they make their decisions based on reality and outside the influence of deception or doubt. When Christ says in the Gospel, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (Jn 8:32),” He is announcing that recognition of the truth is a requirement for authentic freedom.⁵ “[W]ithout knowledge of the truth, freedom degenerates, becomes isolated, and is

reduced to sterile arbitration.”⁶ At a crossroads, the man with a map is freer than the man without. For the man with empty hands, the choice is simply left or right, and neither leads to anywhere in particular. He cannot choose with conviction and his lack of knowledge constrains him. However, the man with the map has a real choice. His right and his left have direction and meaning. Bearing knowledge of the truth, the individual has access to authentic freedom.

As truth shapes freedom, falsehood distorts it. In many trends of modern thought (like subjectivism), freedom is no longer a condition obedient to objective reality. Instead, freedom is an end in itself and, like a fire that has left the hearth, it becomes something dangerous. When regarded as an end, freedom can treat the human person as means to an end, the machine necessary for freedom to exist. When this occurs, human choice becomes a source of value. Persons or acts are secondary as long as choice is involved.⁷ This is a serious problem. If freedom or the act of making a choice is supreme, then truth quickly diminishes in importance. If freedom (reduced simply to choice) is the supreme good, then not only may I choose anything, but I may even choose to ignore truth.⁸ In this scenario, “the inescapable claims of truth disappear, yielding their place to a criterion of sincerity, authenticity and ‘being at peace with oneself.’”⁹ The exaltation of freedom as the ultimate good introduces subjectivism to be at least as good as, if not better than, truth itself.

In a similar way, freedom exalted as an end also assails truth from another perspective, the perspective of independence. Independence says that we must be “free from every requirement to receive, from all dependency.”¹⁰ It is as if dependence contradicts freedom and as if every free act must also be a declaration of independence. This secular doctrine teaches that a free person is not required to receive anymore than they are required to give. Most especially, a free person is not required to give or receive beliefs or truths. This freedom to accept or reject

becomes dangerous when it is coupled with the idea that dependence contradicts freedom. If dependence (or the act of receiving) is incompatible with freedom, then the person who desires to be free will never choose to depend or to receive. If the person is unwilling to receive, then they must make things for themselves – including truth. In this way, freedom seen as independence encourages the exaltation of personal or self-made “truths” and the rejection of authentic truth.

“Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth.”

- John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*¹¹

This quote from *Fides et Ratio* is the beginning of an understanding that reattaches truth and freedom to their proper counterpart. If the source of humanity’s woes is idealized choice, the solution is faith, and it is important for multiple reasons. First, faith is the recognition that God is the ultimate end; not even freedom (and most certainly not choice) can claim this. Freedom is the means by which humanity may enter into communion with the ultimate end, the means by which an individual may *choose* to love and serve God. Freedom is realized in acts oriented towards God because it is God who creates human persons in His likeness, gives them meaning, and allows for their self-realization.¹² What is more, God has invited all people (through the gift of human freedom) to love Him as He loves them: without constraint and with conviction. With God at the forefront, choice cannot become a source of value (as described earlier) and truth is saved from being replaced by sentiments.

Second, faith is required to receive and to depend. In fact, faith is the very opposite of what it means to be independent (*self-reliant* in the modern context). In faith, “the truth made

known to [humanity] by revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason. It appears instead as something gratuitous.”¹³ The human person is not the maker of truth or of any creation - least of all itself. Instead, individuals are recipients and must understand themselves as such. Each must admit that what is true and what is good, who God is and what comes from God, are not of their own design.¹⁴ Faith leads people face to face with this realization of their created-ness and enforces the reality that the central question of truth is: “Do I accept or reject this as true in reality?” and not “Do *I* want this to be true in *my* reality?” If a person admits the former question, then an earnest search for authentic truth naturally follows.

Finally, faith is required to receive Jesus Christ as the consummate relation between truth and freedom. He is the way and life toward which all freedom is directed and the truth to which all reality is subject (Jn 14:6). Worship of Him “in Spirit and in Truth” (Jn 4:23) is the deepest foundation of freedom.¹⁵ In His public ministry, He freed men and women from sicknesses (Mk 2:9-11), demons (Mk 5:1-20), and physical death (Jn 11:38-44). He also freed them from that which captivated their hearts, minds, and bodies: sin (Romans 8:2). Jesus, the Truth incarnate, invites all people to live in Him and through Him.

Christ accomplished humanity’s freedom in the totality of His life, uplifting the nature of humankind in His incarnation and setting it free in His Passion. At His birth, Christ exalted human nature (Phil 2:9) and came into the world bearing witness to the truth (Jn 18:37). At His death, He freely went out to meet His Passion (Mt 26:46) and in obedience to the Father gave His life on the Cross (Phil 2:6-11). This is Jesus, human and divine. He is the light that dispels darkness and the ultimate choice made with conviction and without constraint. In His life, death,

and resurrection, Christ showed the world the vocation of all people: to abide in truth and live in freedom.¹⁶

Two thousand years later, Christ is still the harbinger of truth and the bearer of freedom. He alone is the ultimate antidote to the sin that rends asunder, the sin that fills with doubt, and the sin that captivates.¹⁷ The revelation of Christ is a signpost pointing to the transcendent and an invitation to live freely as creatures. If modern men and women are indeed adrift, lost without meaning, it is because they do not have Christ. “[O]nly in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.”¹⁸

Citations

1. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998), part 90, page 111.
2. Ibid., part 81, pages 101-102.
3. John Paul II, *The Wisdom of John Paul II*, compiled by Nick Bakalar and Richard Balkin (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 43.
4. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2007), part 24a, page 29.
5. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003), part 87, page 105.
6. Benedict XVI, *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, Clementine Hall, Vatican City, February 2006, accessed June 24, 2010, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060210_doctrine-faith_en.html.
7. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, part 48, page 65.
8. Ibid., part 84, page 106.
9. Ibid., part 32, page 48.
10. James Corkery S.J., *Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 41.
11. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, part 13, page 23.
12. Ibid., part 13, page 23.
13. Ibid., part 15, page 26.
14. Corkery, *Ratzinger's Theological Ideas*, 39.
15. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, part 87, page 108.
16. John Paul II, *The Whole Truth*, edited by James V Schall S.J. (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), 139.
17. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, April 1979, accessed June 24, 2011, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html, part 12.
18. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by his Holiness Pope Paul VI, December 1965, accessed June 24, 2011, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, part 22.

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