



HUMAN FREEDOM – THE PATH TO PERFECTION OR THE PATH TO DESPAIR

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to analyze how contemporary man uses the divine gift of freedom. On the one hand, man, freed from sin through the Sacrament of Baptism, can grow in freedom to the extent that he opens himself to the work of grace and fulfills the deeds of freedom, that is, the virtues. On the other hand, caught up in the whirlwind of different life choices to find professional fulfillment, he may not find his desires fulfilled and not feel the joy of earthly life, thus falling prey to fears, fears, unhappiness, and neurotic-depressive behavior, amplified in recent years by the various global crises (the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in the Soviet space etc.).

Keywords: freedom, grace, unhappiness, suffering, depression

INTRODUCTION

Freedom of choice in contemporary societies thrives on many aspects of life: no one dictates to us how to dress, what to study, what to do in our free time, whom to marry etc., besides putting us in mental difficulty, also leads to unrealistic expectations which are a serious cause of unhappiness and, under certain conditions, becomes a cause of depression, according to the famous contemporary American psychologist, Barry Schwartz¹. We expect to be in total control of our lives, trying to always choose the perfect object, the perfect person, and the perfect school, but in fact, the multitude of options creates a sense of failure. In the world of supermarkets, malls, and advertising everywhere - streets, cars, mailboxes, institutions, and blocks - it's as if these words are popping up - mutely but piercingly - in our being: You can choose better! Where did you come from? Come to us to be happy! But reality shows that many options are useless and do not fulfill us. Furthermore, Schwartz shows that „maximizers” those who want to get the best out of their choices, suffer the most, being „prime candidates for depression.” Most of the time, we are looking for the best value for money or effort-benefit ratio, but the many options available make us feel disappointed and the only ones responsible for this. Although we may not realize it, every day our minds are subjected to a grinding process that for some can become fatal.

In the work *Life of God in Communion*, Father Stăniloae speaks in a sub-chapter - *Knowing good by practicing it in communion*² - about the fact that „only love or communion in freedom is the source of good”,³ showing that „evil is overwhelmed by communion”, in

¹ Barry SCHWARTZ, *The Paradox of Choice. Why More is Less*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004, pp. 43-44.

² Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în comuniune*, Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Dacia, 2000, pp. 41-44.

³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în comuniune*, p. 42.



while „good is the other's response to your need for love and your response to his need.”⁴ Therefore, man wanting to serve the good only through reason needs to serve the reason of the one on whom he wants to do good, because „*the ultimate good is clarified in dialogue with that*”.⁵ Father Professor, analyzing the mistake of the forefathers who chose the false good of selfish pleasure, considers that „the man wanted to know only his good and evil about nature, with a nature towards which man does not feel debts, does not feel responsibility”,⁶ explaining that "a man feels responsibility only towards people" and this because "the good does not consist in taking advantage of nature as an object, but in paying this responsibility or debts towards people and using nature for this purpose."⁷

1. FREEDOM - AS A GIFT OF GOD - INSCRIBED IN THE HUMAN BEING

Man's work is embodied in the exercise of freedom as a gift of God from creation. Together, the work received expression for the first time in the words of the Virgin Mary: „Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1, 38). The Virgin Mary gave God „this king without a fortress,”⁸ as St. Nicholas Cabasila states. She allowed Him to incarnate Himself in the very heart of creation (in man) as if to recreate it. „God created the world to find a mother”,⁹ said the same author quoted above. Humanity receives its God through freedom, in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

Recently, it has been noticed more and more clearly that people are looking at any cost to prove that they have freedom. Freedom is inscribed, in fact, in the being of man. Contemporary philosophers and contemporary writers speak in their works about human freedom. Moreover, there are also in our country certain journals which, even though the titles they carry, prove this fact: for example – „Libertatea”, „Cuget liber” etc. But, through these cultural means and mass media, as well as through many others, man seeks freedom apart from God. „People seek their freedom outside of God, outside of true life, where it is not and will not be, because freedom is only where there is no death, where there is true being, that is, in God,”¹⁰ says suggestively the Saint Siluan the Athonite.

The people in heaven - Adam and Eve - had the original state, without sin and with almost complete freedom, like God's complete and natural freedom, only with the requirement to fulfill His will. And after he built „good things” (Genesis 1, 31), we learn that „God rested on the 7th day” (Genesis 2, 2), while the Holy Apostle Paul, referring to man's rest in the „rest of God”, i.e. man's peace in communion with God, asks man to „enter God's rest” (Hebrews, chapter 4). The apostle reasons that the man who is no longer free - in the sense that he is no longer in the right freedom, that of the good and the relationship with the Creator - commits many sins, many unnatural deeds, accepts and even accomplishes much evil, and then he can no longer be in „God's rest” nor „shall enter into God's rest” neither here nor in eternity.

Our freedom consists in no longer being slaves to sin, to passions. I need freedom as long as I do the will of my Father. In God's rest, there is no sin, no sorrow, no trouble, but

⁴ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în comuniune*, p. 41.

⁵ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în comuniune*, p. 42.

⁶ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în comuniune*, p. 42.

⁷ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Trăirea lui Dumnezeu în comuniune*, p. 42.

⁸ Cf. Olivier CLEMENT, *Trois Prières: le Notre Père, La Prière au Saint Esprit, La prière de Saint Ephrem*, Desclée de Brouwer, Normandie Roto Impression 1996, p. 71.

⁹ Cf. Olivier CLEMENT, *Trois Prières, le Notre Père*, p. 71.

¹⁰ Cf. Andrew LOUTH, *Gânditori ortodocși moderni de la Filocalie până în prezent*, trans. by Justin Mihoc, Cristian Untea and Lucian Filip, Iași: Ed. Doxologia, 2016, p. 563.



God Himself. What the Holy Apostle Paul explains in the same chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: „He who entered God's rest also rested from his things, just as God from His.” The Savior also says this at a certain moment: „Learn from me that I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11, 29).

Father Sofronie Sakharov believes that God treats man's freedom as the most precious principle he possesses. God, through His humility, draws the human soul to His love but does not compel it, and on this path that leads to love, man can encounter the devil's influence. Thus, God educates the human soul not by protecting it from evil, but by giving it the necessary powers to overcome it, and when it succumbs to demonic influence, „man breaks away from the divine life and suffers the loss of his freedom.”¹¹ Therefore, St. Silouan the Athonite believes that „the commandments of Christ are not ethical norms, but a source of divine life in itself...in our fallen state we are torn inside...sin being an almost personal entity that lives in us and which they parasitize us.”¹² And the answer to the question of how we can get rid of this alienation and find true freedom is given by Saint Maximus the Confessor: „By fulfilling the commandments, the mind is stripped of its passions.”¹³

2. SUFFERING, THE PATH TO PERFECTION, OR OCCASION FOR DEPRESSION AND HOPELESSNESS

During life, many people suffer for short or long intervals due to serious diseases. The teaching of the Church is clear and unequivocal on this point. Through suffering, man is cleansed of his sins. The Holy Fathers often talk about this point, because, according to the words of the Holy Apostle Peter: „... since Christ suffered in the body, arm yourselves with the same thought: he who suffered in the body has finished with sin” (I Peter IV, 1). However, it is not the suffering itself that cleanses from sin, but the grace of God, which awakens the one in the furnace of suffering to repentance. And this grace is the sign of God's love; therefore, God chooses to see us suffer for a shorter or longer time here - some of us, precisely those whom he loves - because in this way, being helped by divine grace, we may be fully cleansed of our sins and receive the most precious gift, that of eternity. Mark the Ascetic says in this regard that „God's mercy is hidden in involuntary pains, which draws to repentance the one who is patient.”

This must be the message we must receive and humbly accept, that suffering in the body, physical suffering, or the unfulfillment that can cause suffering – short or long – is not unjust, as it often is and most of us tend to interpret it when it falls on us or some of our close ones, but it is the fruit of God's love, who chooses in this way to pass us through the fire of suffering here on earth, for a period - which in any case can never be as long as eternity - so that in this way we can go, at the right time cleansed of sins in the Kingdom of light, amid the desired communion with God and all those who have fulfilled the purpose of earthly life, that of salvation, of eternity.

Without suffering, the Kingdom of Heaven is hard to win. A conclusive example of this is the thief on the cross with whom the Savior opens the gates of heaven. We tend to say in theological terms that the thief earned his heaven by affirming the divinity of Jesus Christ,

¹¹ Cf. ARHIMANDRITUL SIMEON, „Poruncile lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, in *S-a dus să-L vadă precum este: 20 de ani de la mutarea la eternitate a Părintelui Sofronie Saharov*, trans. by Aniela Siladi, Editura Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, p. 230.

¹² Cf. ARHIMANDRITUL SIMEON, „Poruncile lui Dumnezeu și libertatea omului”, p. 230.

¹³ SFÂNTUL MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, „Capete despre dragoste”, în *Filocalia*, vol. II, trans. by Dumitru Stăniloae, București: Ed. Humanitas, ²1999, p. 66.



forgetting to note that this thief earns his heaven not only through the prism of what he affirmed but also by assuming the suffering of the crucifixion. The big difference regarding the understanding and acceptance of suffering is this: suffering in the Christian sense means assuming and facing the Cross, suffering in general.

Suffering is an opportunity to grow in patience to the highest degree. From the patience of sufferings comes faithfulness (constancy in faith), and from faithfulness, hope, as the Holy Apostle Paul shows: „And not only that, but also in tribulations, we boast, well knowing that tribulation produces patience, and patience, trial, and the attempt, hope.” Suffering leads to humility, and next to humility is repentance. And above all and in all, there is prayer, the source of many spiritual blessings, because it makes man a vessel of God's grace. Suffering is truly a great test because through it man can be saved or lost, falling into despair. This thing is shown to us paradigmatically in Holy Scripture in the Book of Job and is often reinforced by the Holy Fathers. Suffering can also be a great temptation, as long as the person falls into despair, does not understand the purpose of this trial, renounces faith and God, and thus turns towards evil. But, when suffering becomes the cause of good, it is a way of salvation.

Today, many people, due to suffering, and shortcomings of all kinds, end up suffering from depression. Regarding depression, there is not much disagreement on the fact that it represents a deep state of unhappiness that affects human life both internally and externally, affecting social, professional, and family life, and which has experienced substantial development recently. The World Health Organization has stated that almost 300 million people suffer from depression, with cases increasing by 18% between 2005 and 2015. In Romania, almost 1 million people are diagnosed with this disease annually.

According to the *Medical Dictionary* edited by Valeriu Rusu, the term "depression" comes from the Latin "depressio, -onis", „letting down, descent” and defines a „mental state characterized by pathological sadness, moral pain, pessimism, self-devaluation, disinterest, anxiety”, with somatic and psychosomatic implications and which can be of several types: anaclitic (of children separated from their mothers between the first month of birth and the age of one year), bipolar (alternates with moments of good mood), endogenous (with genetic load), involution (in subjects over 50), masked (disguised by somatic pain), neurotic (obsessions, phobias), post-partum (found in mothers who have recently given birth), reactive (following negative events), recurrent (repeated episodes), resistant (when resistant to medication), seasonal and unipolar (major depressive episodes but without alternation with manic episodes). Sometimes the term "anxiety" (lat. „anxious”, restless, tormented) is also used to express the state of unease and agitation that occurs when we have a sense of imminent and undetermined danger, restlessness, anxiety, and anguish being three degrees of the same state.¹⁴

Psychologist Dietmar Stiemerling shows that this widespread „disease of the age” affects all social backgrounds and age groups, having a „complex soul configuration” that includes both emotions, drives, will, thoughts, and bodily functioning.¹⁵ All of this leads to what C.S. Lewis calls „the hells of pain in human life.” These hells of pain caused by the various sufferings that we feel during our earthly life give you the impression that the same leg is being amputated over and over again. However, „in suffering, nothing stands still.

¹⁴ Valeriu RUSU, *Dicționar medical*, Editura Medicală, București, 2007, pp. 396-397.

¹⁵ Dietmar STIEMERLING, *10 abordări psihoterapeutice ale depresiei. Modele explicative ale psihologiei abisale și concepte terapeutice asupra depresiei nevrotice*, trans. by Roxana Melnicu and Camelia Petcu, București: Ed. Trei, 2006, pp. 7, 18.



When you think you're over a phase, you start over. Again and again. Everything repeats itself... Suffering is like a long valley, a winding valley, in which, at every turn, you can come across a completely new view."¹⁶

The environment is conducive to a disease of depression, especially if we also consider the fact that human relationships are also becoming more and more affected by materialism. Man almost has no time even for himself, but especially to „give” it to others. In crowded societies, argues Zygmunt Bauman, the citizen must possess the „art of the false encounter,” a technique of „desocializing” space necessary to survive in such cities.¹⁷

The world in societies with a high level of material well-being does not seem to understand the importance of relationships and personal connections, of communion, leading to the conclusion that the social environment - as it appears - cannot constitute an optimal framework for human fulfillment. So an inner effort is necessary. Without paying close attention to what the consumer society in which we find ourselves offers, we can easily fall prey to „disgust and boredom with life”, even if we are in a good material situation and countless options unfold before us. The brain can no longer perceive reality and we become captive to the proposed illusions.

The abundance of life offers - starting with family, work, religion, free time etc. – the characteristic of a prosperous economy does not feed the human soul but rather lets it slowly suffocate while whispering to it that this strange sensation is happiness. Professor Barry Schwartz talks about the negative effect of unlimited choices and demonstrates that having multiple choices causes anxiety, panic, pain, and suffering, and sometimes even paralyzes the will. The fact of being able to choose from a lot of objects, services, or lifestyles always makes us regret that we could have chosen better, even if we chose a very good option at the moment. Unlimited options create very high expectations, which often lead to mental fatigue and disappointment. Drawing a parallel with the process of McDonaldisation, it is very interesting that an essential characteristic of it is precisely the high degree of disappointment it offers, which it tries to cover with a „veil of false pleasures”, suggestively says the American sociologist, George Ritzer.

Viktor Frankl, the great Viennese psychiatrist, and philosopher, survivor of four Nazi camps, conveys in his writings such traumatic experiences but finds to lay down an important Christian teaching to which we must relate even when the forces of evil act upon us: the manner in that we will react to everything that happens to us, even in the most difficult moments of life. In *Man in Search of the Meaning of Life*, Frankl appreciated that even in the hardest moments, „a man who has nothing left in this world can know happiness, if only for a moment when he thinks of the person he loves.”¹⁸ Reporting to the loved one presupposes familiar communion, as well as communion with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. We cannot enter into communion with God the Father without participating in the suffering and death of

¹⁶ C.S. LEWIS, *De ce, Doamne? O radiografie a suferinței*, trans. by Tatiana Niculescu, București: Ed. Humanitas, 2020, p. 75, 77.

¹⁷ Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Epoca postmodernă*, trans by Doina Lică, Timișoara: Ed. Amarcord, 2000, pp. 168-170.

¹⁸ Viktor E. FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning. The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust*, London: Rider Publishing, 2004, p.49: „A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that the love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved” – pp. 48-49.



the Son. Thus, „communion with Him takes place not only through the protocols of joy and hope but also through the trial of suffering and death,”¹⁹ says Andrei Pleșu.

The preferred environment of evil influences is the human soul and if we allow evil to gain control over us it can produce brutal and direct havoc or it can manifest itself in the form of subtle aggressiveness; in one case and another this association with evil, which we make room for in our mind and soul, leads to tragic and total alienation from everything that is life: from God, from love, from beauty and meaning.

Andrew Solomon is a well-known contemporary author who developed many ideas (scientifically documented) regarding this disease, himself having suffered from this disease, which is why he even calls himself the „historian of sadness.” In his representative work, *The Demon of Noon*, in which he describes in detail the symptoms, evolution, and remedies of this disease, not only medically, but also psychologically, he says at one point: „The birth and death that make depression occur at once. I returned, not long ago, to a forest where I used to play as a child and I saw an oak tree, in its age-old grandeur, in the shade of which I was playing with my brother. Within twenty years, a huge vine had clung to the tree securely and nearly suffocated him. It was hard to tell where the tree ended and the vine began. The vine had twisted itself so skilfully over the scaffolding of branches that its leaves seemed, from a distance, to be the leaves of the tree; only up close you could see how few living branches of the oak were left and that some desperate oak shoots were sticking up, climbing the massive trunk like a string of thumbs, the leaves continuing their photosynthesis in the ignorant fashion of mechanical biology. Having just come out of a major depression, where I didn't have the time to think about other people's problems, I identified with that tree. Depression had grown on me like the vine that had conquered the tree; it was draining me and had wrapped itself around me, come on, more alive than me.”²⁰

And also Andrew Solomon, in the same work, believes that the bad associations we face daily, bring man closer to the edge of the „abyss of life”, leading him to a continuous torment: „the pace of life, the endemic loneliness, the coexistence between people, the collapse traditional family structures” are the main factors leading to an increasing rate of depression. The neurotic-depressive behavior is suggestively explained by the same Andrew Solomon: „You can't enjoy anything... You can no longer trust someone, be touched, cry.”²¹ He also proposes means of healing when he says that we must seek faith in God, and help the disenfranchised, but above all, we must deal with love and teach others to do this²², for that: „Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I have become sounding brass and a resounding cymbal. And if I had the gift of prophecy and all the mysteries I would know them and all science, and I would have so much faith that you would mount, and I have not love, I am nothing. And if I divide all my wealth and give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing. Love is long-suffering; love is kind, love does not brag, does not boast, does not boast. Love does not act unseemly, it does not seek its own, it does not get angry, it does not think evil. He does not rejoice in injustice but rejoices in the truth. He suffers all, believes all, hopes all, endures all. Love never fails” (I Corinthians 13, 1-8), says the Holy Apostle Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, in what is called „the hymn of love” or of „the best definition of Christianity.”

¹⁹ Andrei PLEȘU, *Prefață* la C.S. LEWIS, *De ce, Doamne?*, p. 9.

²⁰ Andrew SOLOMON, *Demonul amiezii*, trans by Dana-Ligia Ilin, București: Ed. Humanitas, 2014, pp. 24-25.

²¹ Andrew SOLOMON, *Demonul amiezii*, p. 26.

²² Andrew SOLOMON, *Demonul amiezii*, p. 26.



CONCLUSIONS

In the current context, in which, contrary to divine Revelation, culture, philosophy, ideologies, science, and even some theologies separate the unseen from the seen, spirit from matter, soul from body, grace from God, and at the same time from man, God Himself from man, on man from his fellow man by promoting individualism instead of communion and deals with the issue of human freedom ignoring its connection with God, it is necessary to highlight the union willed by God between man and the cosmos, between man and God, between man and his fellow men and between the parts of man himself.

Choosing good over evil is done through love. Suffering has a purifying role, and man's salvation is achieved through faith. Faith presupposes God and man as persons, the Creator being the supreme personal reality. And between these personal realities, the only saving link is faith. As a person, man is free, and faith is always linked to freedom.

If for Friedrich Nietzsche freedom is the power to say „no”, from the point of view of Christianity, freedom means having no obstacles in the way of love and the power to lay down your soul for your neighbor at any time. Freedom means being able to respond to Christ's call at any time: „Take up your cross and follow me” (Mark 10, 21). Thus, freedom means not having reasons to run away from God, but to draw closer to Him all the time. God is the first to respect these principles of freedom. To find his freedom, man must approach God, and submit to His will.

If freedom is not an illusion, but a supreme responsibility for contemporary man, then its loss, which is a cruel reality, means slavery or possession and/or suicidal tendencies, as a result of some neurotic-depressive manifestations.

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