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## Freedom and Holiness

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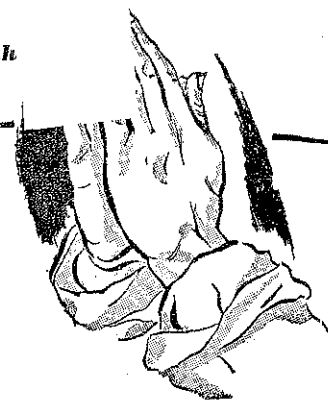
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## Freedom and Holiness

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

SOME thinkers have reasoned that God, in making man, enslaved him. Actually it is quite the opposite. In making man, God, in a sense, surrendered something of His own freedom. In some degree, speaking of God in a human way, the potter becomes servant to the pot that he has formed from the slime of the earth.

In the beginning was God, and He was free. Then God, freely and without compulsion, created man. To this man He willed, again freely, to give the right to choose between good and evil. It is a fearful right, glorious beyond compare and perilous. But once God has given man this right and has promised to respect man's choice, then, in that degree and in that respect, God is no longer free. He is bound by His own honor.

Having received the freedom to choose good or evil, man can also choose to reject God. This choice God respects. Man can will to play the field and choose as his whims dictate: evil when it is convenient, as it usually is, and good when he feels the need for heroics and the need for the respectability of virtue. Or man can will to be a good fellow who, in all honesty, tries consistently to choose the good. But being the plodding clot of clay that he is, occasionally, out of weakness, he chooses the evil. Or man can will to be the saint, choosing the good with a divine determination, rejecting the evil though it costs him blood.

It is not that God, in creating man and giving him the right of choice, has abandoned him to his own devices. It would be heresy to think so. No, God gives man grace. Grace suggests that man choose the good, strengthens him for the choice, urges him to the choice, leads him to it, makes it with him. But, sad privilege, man can reject God's grace. And when man rejects God's grace, he rejects God. All of this is to say that in creating man God has created a free creature. The freedom of this creature is a self-imposed limi-

tation on God's ability to force His creation to obey Him.

The saint is the man who sets God free. Under the promptings of grace the saint (or the sinner aspiring to holiness) reaches out and, in a human manner of speaking, tears away the limitations God has imposed upon Himself. The saint knows that this Lord of the universe can give to man only in so far as not to encroach upon man's freedom. He knows that God alone is holy, that God alone can give to man of that holiness. It is God who makes saints. But He can do so only if we let Him, only if, prompted by grace, we set Him free.

But a man in prison cannot liberate. He is himself helpless, and how will he give freedom to another? No, first he must break his own bounds, throw open the doors of that which imprisons him, leap over the walls that enclose him. Only then can he turn and give freedom to another. And what imprisons man is often an innocent thing: excessive attachment to his hours before the TV, to his Saturday poker or his Sunday golf.

We have often wondered about the saints. Some of them at least have—let us use the nasty word—disgusted us. They were so fierce in the rejection of innocent earthly pleasures. Their zeal for holy poverty strikes us as a little inhuman. We say that their fastings and vigils and hairshirts edify us in a numb sort of way, but at a deeper level, perhaps at a more sincere level, we feel that they were fanatics. Good fanatics, holy fanatics, even canonized fanatics, but fanatics none the less. Why all this tortuous, brittle-hearted rejection of what we ordinary mortals accept as a matter of course? Why all this clawing at the flesh?

Do you really suppose that the saints thought it was sinful to enjoy a picnic on the river bank? Did they really think it evil to own things—big things like a house and a field, little things like a dog and a fishing rod? No, they did not. The man who, strictly speaking,

despises good human things and innocent pleasures is not called a saint, but a heretic or a queer. The saint loves God. He also loves all that God has made. He knows that earthly possessions are good. He also knows that heavenly possessions are better, much better. He knows that the joy of earthly love is often the one thing that makes the brutalities of life endurable. But he also knows that the joy of heavenly love is the joy of God, a joy so heavy with delight that he could not now fully experience its weight without being crushed.

Because the saint sees that the earthly possessions and pleasures make it more difficult to grasp the heavenly possessions and pleasures, he prefers the heavenly to the earthly. Sometimes the saint speaks about the innocent pleasures of earth as being vile and base. Actually he does not mean it. What he does mean is that these things are good and wholesome in themselves, but that in comparison to heavenly pleasures, earthly pleasures are as nothing. He is right. And this accounts for what seems to us to be violence.

IN a civilization in which higher standard of living is the goal, in which luxuries become necessities, in which needs are artificially multiplied and stimulated, it is with terrifying ease that the good, wholesome things of earth become a prison. These good things of earth are like a beautiful palace in which we are imprisoned. We must break from the prison. We do not destroy what imprisons us, merely free ourselves from it. That does not mean that all must make a vow of poverty. Some will make the vow, others will not and should not. All must aspire to that freedom found in simplicity of life and poverty of spirit.

When once we have freed ourselves from our wondrous prison, we can, in a sense, set God free. When we are free and God is free, then there is that full-flow-of-love. This is holiness.