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Gracious freedom as an effect of the grace of the sacraments of initiation in human life

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Abstract. In Orthodox theology, the sacraments of initiation through which a person becomes an Orthodox Christian, have, in addition to the classical effects already known, other effects such as haric freedom. Practically, in addition to the fact that the newly baptized person enters the Church of Christ, he also receives liberation from the slavery of sin in which the progenitors Adam and Eve once fell, and through them the whole of humanity. Even if freedom is a gift of man through creation, the choice of sin brought with it enslavement, thus the partial loss of the state of freedom. Therefore, in what follows we will exemplify the difference between natural and grace freedom.

Keywords. grace, mysteries, initiation, man, church

I. Freedom in patristic theology

The Fathers of the Church of Christ often spoke about the difference between natural and grace freedom, pointing out that freedom itself is the gift of the Creator for the crown of His creation. Unlike all created things, only the human person, being created in the Image of God, receives the ultimate gift, that is, freedom. In the 4th century, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem taught those who came to receive the sacraments of initiation into the Church of Christ about the need for them to know that God has endowed them with qualities of His Image, qualities such as freedom¹. In the same idea, Saint Gregory of Nyssa taught that the choice of sin and implicitly evil is the full responsibility of man who is free by creation².

By giving humanity the gift of freedom, God does not become the author of evil in the world through the wrong choice that each person makes. This is highlighted by Saint Basil the Great when he says: "virtue comes from the voluntary choice of man and does not come from any absolute necessity. The will therefore depends on our freedom, this gift of human nature"³.

¹ Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, *On the Holy Mysteries, Letters and Hymns*, trans. by Rev. Prof. Ene Braniște, Prof. David Popescu and Prof. Dan Negrescu, in the P.S.B. collection, vol. 53, p. 119

² Magistrate Constantin Cornișescu, *Comparative study between the Great Catechetical Word of Saint Gregory de Nissa and the Manual to Laurentius of Blessed Augustine*, in rev. Orthodoxy, year XVI, no. 1/1964, p. 117.

³ Saint Basil the Great, *La Hexaimeron, Homily VI, PSB 17*, pg. 139, in Pr. Assist. Alex. I. Stan, *Saint Basil the Great in systematic Romanian Orthodox theology in the last thirty years*, in rev. S.T., series II, year XXXIV, no. 3-4/1982, p. 169.

Another Holy Father of the Church, Saint Gregory the Theologian, highlights how through the creative act, God gives man freedom, and at the same time he is given a law in which to exercise his will. By the words "thou shalt not eat!" God sought the stabilization of man in good and in full obedience. The free will that man enjoyed in Heaven was given to him so that the joy of choice belongs to human nature⁴.

II. The natural liberty of the progenitors

When it comes to the natural freedom of the progenitors Adam and Eve, it can be exemplified that it was accompanied by wisdom, a fact proven by the Biblical account of the book of Creation where Adam gives names to those created by God. The evil that entered the world has nothing to do with the tree from which the progenitors of humanity ate, but with the fact that, in full natural freedom, they chose not to obey the command of the Creator⁵. The gift of freedom given to human nature is lost through disobedience. Furthermore, sin, with its various forms of manifestation, has enslaved human nature, affecting especially the will.

III. Graceful freedom

In addition to natural freedom, which is a given, patristic theology also highlights the elements of grace freedom. There has always been the idea that to live in the absence of sin, it is necessary for man to live outside the city, away from daily temptations, and this perception was held especially by those who wanted to justify their lives lived in sin. The Holy Fathers have always preached the fact that true freedom is highlighted precisely in the multitude of temptations, in which man lives, to choose freely and fully consciously to keep himself in God's will. From here we understand that grace freedom is the result of individual effort corroborated with divine grace, to will and work according to God's will. "Emphasizing the role of human will, by recognizing the importance of the freedom we enjoy, does not in any way diminish the importance of God's power for our lives. But God, even if he is all-powerful, does not want to defeat the will of man, leaving him to choose the good. And only when man has chosen this good, God comes with His help, with His grace that completes our free work. That is why the Holy Fathers speak about the freedom of man, a freedom in Christ and in His Church"⁶.

Considering the fact that human nature did not preserve the Image of God unaltered by accepting sin, the natural freedom with which it had been invested by creation also suffered, man's will after disobedience being more inclined to sin. That is why it can be said that the restoration of man's freedom is achieved by grace. When the human person chooses the good, "God comes with His help, with His grace that completes our free work"⁷. From here we understand that the grace freedom necessary for man is defined as freedom in Christ and in His Church.

The conditions for man to remain in grace freedom is that he collaborates with uncreated divine grace, through faith and good deeds⁸. Although the fall into sin took place, the

⁴ Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Word at Holy Easter, trans., pp. 67-68, PG 36, col. 632. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, Word at the appearing of God, or at the birth of the Savior, trans., pg. 27 (PG 36, col. 324).

⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, Word V at Creation, trans. by Pr. Dumitru Fecioru, in rev. G.B., year XLIV, no. 7-9/1985, pg. 494 (PG 54, col. 600).

⁶ Assistant Sebastian Şebu, The Three Hierarchs Saints, chosen models of understanding and current experience of Christianity, in the magazine Mitropolia Ardealului, no. 1-3/1976, p. 145.

⁷ I.V. Assistant Leb, Teaching of the Holy Fathers about the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, in rev. M.M.B., year LXVI, no. 1-3/1990, p. 76-86.

⁸ Archbishop Prof. Univ. Dr. Irineu Popa, In the Spirit of Christ's Holiness, Craiova, 2001.

Image of God in man was not completely lost, but only darkened, and human nature remained with "the power to freely choose good and to distinguish good from evil"⁹.

Man's living in grace is not a practice alien to human nature. Ever since Heaven, the forefathers experienced it, and today every Christian receives it from the beginning of life, through the sacraments of initiation, to grow beautifully, according to God's will and in complete freedom. St. Gregory the Theologian highlights this aspect in his discourses, when he highlights the fact that although God is the free Subject who moves everything, He lets man move freely. "Man collects grace in himself, being called to deification and deified by his natural inclination to God"¹⁰.

The entire patristic theology, based on the word of Scripture, highlights that there is no incompatibility between grace and freedom, in the sense that uncreated divine grace never restricts freedom. St. John Chrysostom highlights, for example, the fact that grace is the proof of God's love towards man, the proof of His care, this proof being received by man since the administration of the first Holy Mysteries. "Grace is the source of faith, and faith continuously feeds the Christian's state of grace. Grace leaves man the possibility of choice... Grace makes love work and the very state of holiness of man comes as a fruit of love. To achieve it, divine grace collaborates with human freedom"¹¹. Saint John also differentiates between the natural man and the spiritual man, balancing free will and Christian freedom. If free will highlights man after creation, Christian freedom refers to man baptized through the sacraments of initiation. "The evil done by the first people was possible because of the freedom of the forefathers. The sin we are committing now is possible because we also have the freedom of choice"¹².

IV. The manifestation of religious freedom in the Church

Within the Church, all those who have received the sacraments of initiation belong to the same body, they are the living and active members of the ecclesial body of Christ. "In the church, Christian freedom, far from being a cause of isolation and individualism, becomes a unifying factor and urges moral activism, stimulated by love for fellow human beings"¹³. Even if the fall of the proto parents took place, the Image of God was not completely lost, the aspiration to God and the desire for deification remained in man. "Christian freedom springs from conscience. The good done by him is not forced. Therefore, when man does evil, he has no word of correction. Therefore no one is good or bad by nature"¹⁴.

Also, within the Church, its members, i.e., all those who have received the sacraments of initiation, receive different gifts from the Holy Spirit. Thus, manifestations of a spiritual nature are effects of the exercise of the various gifts offered by the Holy Spirit to each individual

⁹ Priest Magistrate Mihai Georgescu, *Moral and social ideas in the Commentary on the Psalms of Saint Basil the Great*, in rev. Theological Studies, series II, year X, no. 7-8/1958, p. 465.

¹⁰ Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Word at the Nativity*, in vol. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Dogmatic Works*, trans. by Fr. Gheorghe Tilea, Herald Publishing House, Bucharest 2002, p. 67.

¹¹ Saint John the Golden Mouth, *La Romani*, Homily XXXI, 4 (PG 60, col. 677); Rev. Prof. Ioan G. Coman, *The relationship between justification and love in the homilies of St. John the Golden Mouth in the Epistle to the Romans*, in rev. Orthodoxy, year XVIII, no. 2/1966, p. 204-208.

¹² Professor N. Chițescu, *Was St. John Golden Mouth semi-Pelagian?* in rev. M.M.S, year XLI, no. 3-4/1965, p. 139, 142.

¹³ Priest Prof. I. G. Coman, *The ecumenical meaning of the Holy Eucharist at Saint John the Golden Mouth*, in rev. Orthodoxy, year XVII, no. 4/1965, p. 526.

¹⁴ Saint John Chrysostom, in I Corinthians, Homily II, trans. p. 22 (PG 61, col. 21).

person. "Working in the soul of man, the Holy Spirit cleanses from the ugliness of sin, brings him back to the beauty of his own nature"¹⁵.

The good fruits of man's relationship with God are placed by the Holy Spirit in the believers in the Church of Christ. From these fruits accompanied by faith, the works of faith are produced, that is, the good works that illuminate the spiritual path of the human person. "Authentic spirituality presupposes the existence of a perfect balance of soul and body powers, like a balance, which has as its objective the perfection of man, responding to God's call"¹⁶.

Another particularly important effect resulting from the reception of grace by the human nature is that man wants to work the works of faith, this work implicitly bringing the closeness between God and man. "The balance found in the spiritual man means his mastery of the passions and the work of the virtues, which bring physical health and spiritual elevation. The notions of perfection, completion, sanctification, or deification belong to the work of the Holy Spirit, which creates the possibility of restoring the image of God in man by all those who are blossomed by the dew of grace"¹⁷.

By collaborating with the uncreated divine grace, the human person does good naturally, as the normality of our nature, because man was not created to do evil, but to perfect himself in good, in communion with God and with his fellow men.

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¹⁵ Bischof Timotei, *The Spirituality of Saint Basil the Great*, in Vol. *Studia Basiliana 1, Saint Basil the Great. Worship for 1630 years*, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest 2009, p. 310).

¹⁶ Saint Basil the Great, *Great Rules*, VII, 2, PG 31, col. 932; P.S. Timotei Seviciu, *The Spirituality of Saint Basil the Great*, in Vol. *Studia Basiliana 1, Saint Basil the Great. Worship for 1630 years*, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest 2009, p. 316-317.

¹⁷ Saint Basil the Great, *On the Psalms, Homily on Psalm XLVIII*, PG 29, col. 432; P.S. Timotei Seviciu, *The Spirituality of Saint Basil the Great*, in Vol. *Studia Basiliana 1, Saint Basil the Great. Worship for 1630 years*, Basilica Publishing House, Bucharest 2009, pp. 319, 324-325.

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