

SERVAIS PINCKAERS, O.P.

QUESTIONS: What do you make of Pinckaers' distinction between freedom of indifference and freedom for excellence? Is this distinction relevant to how you understand yourself as a teacher? Does the distinction have any relevance in how you educate your students? What role should faculty take in educating students (nondirective, authoritarian, etc.)?

INTRODUCTION TO SERVAIS PINCKAERS, O.P.: Fr. Pinckaers was born in Liege, Belgium in 1925. He entered the Order of Dominicans in 1945. After the novitiate, Pinckaers obtained the rank of reader studying theology in Studium of Sarte with Huy. He was ordained in 1951 and received a Ph.D. from the Angelicum of Rome in 1952. He taught moral theology from 1952 to 1965 in Belgium, and from 1965 to 1973 exerted pastoral ministry with the convent of Dominican of Leige. In 1973, he began teaching at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, becoming a full professor of moral theology in 1980 and a senior member of the faculty of theology in 1989 until 1991. He has been a member of the International Theological Commission since 1992. His most recent books include *L'Evangile et la Morale* (1989) and *La Morale Catholique* (1991).

Pinckaers' *Sources of Christian Ethics*, where the following essay is taken, remains one of the most important and formidable works of moral theology of the 20th century. Its shorter version, *La Moral Catholique*, was published in 1991. Its English version, *Morality: The Catholic View*, is prefaced by Alasdair MacIntyre, translated by Father Michael Sherwin, and published by St. Augustine's Press -- an effort in part sponsored by the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture.

FREEDOM FOR EXCELLENCE BY SERVAIS PINCKAERS, O.P.¹

We are so accustomed to thinking of freedom as the power to choose between contraries that we can hardly imagine any other concept of it. We need, therefore, to embark on a real rediscovery of freedom if we wish to shake off the notion of freedom of indifference.

In this research we shall begin with the concrete experience of certain external activities in which our freedom is at work and can be observed. These examples will help

¹ Pinckaers, Servais, *Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, c1995.) pp. 354-378. Used with permission.

us to discern how our freedom operates in more the interior actions of the moral order. As we combine various characteristic features of this freedom in a harmonious whole, a freedom will emerge that is utterly different from freedom of indifference. Finally, we shall verify the affinity of this new freedom with the teaching of St. Thomas.

I. EXAMPLES

We shall begin with two examples from the realm of art as understood by the ancients: the study of music and of a foreign language. Such activities engage a person sufficiently to provide a number of analogies with moral action, and will serve as an introduction to our study of human freedom.

We all know how music is taught to a child—piano, for instance. In the first place, the child must have certain predispositions. Without some attraction to music and an ear for it, lessons are a waste of time.

But if the child is gifted, it is well worth the effort to find a music teacher who will explain the rules of the art and develop the talent by dint of regular exercises. In the beginning the child, despite a desire to learn, will often feel that the lessons and exercises as a constraint imposed on freedom and the attractions of the moment. There are times when practice has to be insisted upon. But with effort and perseverance, the gifted child will soon make notable progress and will come to play with accuracy and good rhythm, and with a certain ease—even the more difficult pieces. Taste and talent are developing. Soon the child is no longer satisfied with the assigned exercises but will delight in improvising. In this way, playing becomes more personal. The child who is truly gifted and able to keep up these musical studies may become an artist, capable of executing with mastery, whatever may be suggested, playing with precision and originality, delighting all who hear. Further, this artist will compose new works, whose quality will manifest the full flowering of talent and musical personality.

In this very simple example, we can clearly see a new kind of freedom. Of course anyone is free to bang out notes haphazardly on the piano, as the fancy strikes him. But this is a rudimentary, savage sort of freedom. It cloaks an incapacity to play even the simplest pieces accurately and well. On the other hand, the person who really possesses the art of playing the piano has acquired a new freedom. He can play whatever he chooses, and also compose new pieces. His musical freedom could be described as the gradually acquired ability to execute works of his choice with perfection. It is based on natural dispositions and a talent developed and stabilized by means of regular, progressive exercises, or properly speaking, a *habitus*.

Let us look now at the study of a foreign language. Undoubtedly the best method is to begin by taking courses in grammar and vocabulary, and then to add a visit to a country or an area where only the new language is spoken. Here again, a minimum of predisposition is needed in the beginning, and then perseverance in our efforts to follow the rules that are the very constraints of a language. Little by little, we will succeed in expressing ourselves correctly and in understanding better what we hear and read. Soon we will feel at ease; we will enjoy speaking the language. In the end we will be able to understand and say whatever we wish, with facility and precision.

Once again, we have seen a new kind of freedom, very different from the choice between contraries; we are free to choose whatever words we wish to form our sentences. It is a