

What is True Freedom?

Freedom. One of the things that our culture prizes the most is freedom. But what is true freedom?

Born into a wealthy family in Italy in 1901, Pier Giorgio Frassati was just a regular guy who was a championship skier, a rock climber, and he liked to hang out with his friends and relax, but what was remarkable about his life was his love for God which translated into his love for the poor. In order to get to mass, Pier Giorgio would have to run for 45 mins to get to the nearest mass. When his parents would give him money for the bus and for the train, he would save that money by biking to school or taking the train in third class. He saved all this money so that he could help the poor by buying bread for the poor and paying for their kids to go to school. On his 18th birthday his dad bought him a car and he sold it the next day giving half of it to an organization helping the poor and the rest he gave to families. By the time he was 21, he was taking care of 121 families with their food, rent and the education of their children. Eventually after helping the poor he contracted polio and there was no cure for it back then as we do now.

As he was dying, one of the last things he did was ask his sister to grab his notebook in his pocket and told her to give the medicine that was in his jacket to a man who was sick before he died.

He was thinking about others even on his deathbed!

At his funeral his family and friends were expected to be there but out of nowhere 10 000 people showed up, many of them were the poor people he supported. He was only 24 years old when he died.

During Ash Wednesday this year, Jesus is challenging us through the Church to prepare for Easter by striving for this freedom for excellence, ***the freedom to love supernaturally.***

But what is the difference between the freedom that our culture offers and the freedom for which Christ has set us free?

When our culture presents freedom, it proposes that we should do whatever we want, whenever we want. Anything that tells me otherwise is an obstacle to my freedom.

Our culture's idea of freedom is like having someone randomly bang on a piano with no sense of timing or harmony or melody. Are we free to play however we want, whenever we want with this piano? In some ways, yes.

However, the Church proposes a different view of freedom, that our freedom has a purpose, our freedom has a goal and there are conditions which allow it to flourish and grow.

The freedom we experience in Jesus is like the freedom that a master pianist has when he or she plays Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" or one of Mozart's "Piano Sonatas". It is only the master pianist who has the freedom because the master pianist has the freedom to create beautiful music and harmony whereas the amateur can only create a cacophony of sound, a mix of random noises.

In the same way, the Church desires that we create magnificent melodies with our freedom by loving supernaturally, loving God and neighbor with an excellence just like Pier Giorgio Frassatti, and not only is this the path to true freedom, it is the path to true happiness. *But the freedom of the master pianist can only happen through PRACTICE, DISCIPLINE and ASSISTANCE.* Therefore, the Church has established Ash Wednesday to give us practice, discipline and help so that we may become masters in the art of Christian charity, i.e. saints.

So how is the Church challenging us to grow in true freedom this Lent?

ALMSGIVING: Almsgiving is nothing other than loving God through our neighbor, **practicing** the art of love by loving our neighbor in our daily life in small actions which prepare us to love our neighbor with excellence.

FASTING: Fasting helps us grow in our freedom for loving others by shifting our perspective from being self-centered to being other-centered. By denying ourselves food, drink or entertainment, we gain **discipline** and self-mastery in order to make a gift of self.

PRAYER: Ultimately, it is not up to our efforts alone to love supernaturally. We need the grace of God, the **help** of God to love like Pier Giorgio Frassatti who ultimately loved like Jesus Christ. In order to love like God, our hearts need to burn with the love of God, but we must ask for grace in prayer and receive it in the sacraments.

The ashes we will receive on our foreheads are a sign of repentance, and so for these next 40 days of Lent, let us not just ask what kind of things we can give up like chocolate or tv or internet time (all of these are good things to give up), but we need to ask the bigger question: what is impairing my freedom to love with excellence and what can I do to grow in that freedom through prayer, fasting and almsgiving?

As we inaugurate this Lenten journey, let us remember our dignity as Christians who are called to this supreme gift of freedom given to us by our Savior who offered his life to set us free. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1).