SPIRITUAL FREEDOM AS LIBERATION WITHIN

Lessons from the Gulag Era

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For freedom Christ has set us free. (Galatians 5:1)

SAINT PAUL SPEAKS ABOUT *the* fundamental gift of and calling to Christian freedom. Saint Ignatius of Loyola grounds the spiritual path leading to God in freedom. Freedom 'from and for' plays a major role in our daily choices. And yet … what is that grace of freedom we as Christians are invited to ask for and to live out?

Reflection on freedom naturally became part of my childhood concerns because I was raised in a country occupied by the Soviets. Very early, I learnt about the difference between 'external' freedom and 'inner' freedom. 'External' freedom, which included exercising human rights, religious freedom and even choosing what to wear or to eat, was very limited. Therefore the emphasis was on 'inner' freedom, that is, the capacity to choose one's attitude towards one's reality and to act upon this choice. The phrase 'freedom of choice', so commonly used and misused nowadays, was unheard of; it belonged to the other world outside the Iron Curtain.

Now, twenty years later, with the geographic borders open and my country, Lithuania, integrating into 'free' society, the lessons I have learnt about spiritual freedom as a liberation within do not leave me, but come into dialogue with my present knowledge of Western spirituality. I would like to share some fruits of that inner dialogue. Since a large part of it is constituted by memories and narrative, I shall start by filling in the background and juxtaposing of some fragments of past and present experiences. I shall continue by recalling two stories of heroic witness in the midst of radical suffering in Eastern Europe under communist persecution. Finally, I shall explore the lessons that can be learnt from these memories.

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The Past and the Present

In 1949, when my father was five years old, his whole family, who happened to be prosperous farmers, together with other 'enemies of the people', were exiled to Siberia. Everything was taken away; humans were put into animal wagons and sent on a long journey. My grandparents persuaded their little ones not to cry by saying that they were going on holiday. Desolate parts of Buryatia became the destination for this weird 'holiday' for the next nine years. Those who returned brought back both their quest for, and their practical spirituality of, freedom. Growing up in the family of a former political exile, I saw that many deportees had learnt the way of spiritual freedom while carrying a cross that they were forced to take up.

Therefore, some time ago, when discussing the topic of freedom in the Spiritual Exercises with a renowned Western Ignatian scholar, I was intrigued and surprised by his approach—which, I felt, undervalued the capacity of the oppressed to live out their freedom. His thinking went more or less along these lines: in order to 'make ourselves indifferent to all created things' (Exx 23) first of all we must have access to different choices. If one cannot choose health because of illness or one is in poverty and cannot really choose wealth, and so on, Ignatian indifference is barely possible. Thus, spiritual freedom cannot be fully exercised by those who lack freedom of choice.[1] In situations of oppression, free choice is very limited. Therefore, it was concluded, the aspiration towards freedom expressed in the Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises cannot be applied to these situations.

But is this true? We all have more or less limited freedom of choice, but does it restrain our spiritual freedom? St Ignatius truly says that indifference should aim only at matters which are 'subject to our free choice' (Exx 23). But does this apply to situations where choice is limited by the abuse of power rather than by our fundamental commitments? Of course, the constant violation of human rights in an atmosphere of distrust, falsehood, isolation, uniformity and 'brain washing' leaves deep imprints on human consciousness and affects a person's spirituality. Nevertheless, spiritual freedom in the Christian

[1] This approach in our discussion was founded on the example of St Ignatius himself. It was said that being one of the *hidalgúa*, a nobleman in sixteenth-century Spain, St Ignatius had a real choice in regard to many things—at least he could choose between wealth and poverty, fame and disgrace.

sense is primarily freedom for discipleship;[2] it is rooted in the Christ-event, and as such belongs to the mystery of human nature 'engraced'.[3] Do we have the right, then, to insist that circumstances that rob persons of their psychological and physical security, and obviously leave deep emotional wounds, always become obstacles to exercising their spiritual freedom?

Two Life Stories

I am not an Ignatian scholar, nor am I expert in spiritual freedom. However, the shared memory of the 'freedom within', which existed in our part of the world despite the absence of political and religious freedom, sheds some light. Therefore, I shall try to answer the questions above by presenting two testimonies about spiritual freedom rather than by offering theoretical speculation or attempting to perform a hermeneutical leap between the Ignatian notion of freedom and the spirituality of freedom from the Gulag era. These will be two life stories from one little Eastern European country. They are only two among almost 800,000 stories—that is how many Lithuanians were exiled, imprisoned, tortured or killed between 1940 and 1952 by communist persecution (this amounts to approximately one quarter of the whole population). Of course, not every story is as touching and inspiring as those of Juozas Zdebskis and Adele Dirsyte. Nevertheless, there are quite a few similar stories showing the ability to live out the aspiration towards liberty in the midst of extreme suffering. Therefore I think that these two stories can rightly be seen as an archetypal narrative on spiritual freedom. My acquaintance with both heroes is not direct. I never knew them personally, but talking with the people they knew, reading about them, and reading their diaries and correspondence, as

[2] Among many other definitions of Christian spirituality, I prefer the one which describes spirituality as a discipleship. If we take it seriously, the adjective 'spiritual' becomes inseparable from 'being a disciple'. The notion of Christian spirituality as discipleship can be found in the writings of many theologians, but for a broader comprehension of it I am particularly indebted to Gustavo Gutiérrez. According to him, 'a spirituality is a concrete manner, inspired by the Spirit, of living the gospel' (Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'Discipleship: Walking According to the Spirit', in *Essential Writings,* edited by James B. Nickoloff [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996], 287).

[3] I borrow this expression from Michael Himes. In one of his lectures at Boston College he argued that, rather than being two separate layers of reality, nature and grace are two stages of the same process of continuous engracement.

well as my own shared experience of the communist time, make me feel as if they were my spiritual teachers.

Juozas Zdebskis (1929–1986)

The Lithuanian priest Juozas Zdebskis was assassinated by communist forces on 5 February 1986, in a so-called 'car accident'. When I remember him, I think of his courage and commitment to human rights and to the mission of the Church despite repeated imprisonment, recurring investigation, torture and calumny spread by the KGB. The sisters of my religious community still remember his steadfast humour and his habit of collecting all the drunkards while driving his Zhiguli, in order to take them home and maybe encourage them to stop drinking. Zdebskis' words in court to the communist authorities who were about to sentence him to jail speak of his courage in resisting evil despite the cost: 'The freedom of faith you offer is similar to the permission to live, but is actually a prohibition to be born'. In order to scare him and to lessen his influence, the communists disgraced him publicly, falsely accusing him of immoral behaviour, and later tortured him by burning his skin with acid. Nonetheless, at the height of the communist persecution, when even his friends wavered in trusting him owing to the KGB's lies, Zdebskis wrote to one of his spiritual children:

> Did you understand already that to receive freedom, to rid oneself of slavery to the material world … is possible only through a great suffering? In great suffering alone we can experience the greatest joy of which the world does not even have a clue …. It is wonderful, it is like the pain of giving birth: it is the pain that gives life to others ….
>
> When our nature some days is very rebellious, it seems that making the sacrifice is impossible without coming into the presence of death. We need to offer freely that which death will take away from us by force. Just make the simple mathematical calculation—subtract the values that will be taken away by death from all the values in life. You'll see that what remains is that which is really worth living for.[4]

What strikes me in this short quotation is Zdebskis' trust in the God who is willing to transform present suffering into enormous joy

[4] *Pazinsite is vasiu: kunigo Juozo Zdebskio korespondencija—adresaciu atsiminimai,* edited by Loreta T. Paulaviciute (Vilnius: Lumen leidykla, 1997), 62–64. All citations from Lithuanian sources are translated by the author of this essay.

and to vindicate the sufferer. It reminds me also of the Beatitudes as a 'transposition of Cross and Resurrection into discipleship'.[5] The Paschal mystery itself is at the heart of such experience. The capacity to live out that mystery in the grip of radical suffering is rooted in spiritual freedom. Even the shadow of dualism, that divides the world into confronting realms of material and spiritual reality and was characteristic of Zdebskis' time and place, does not obscure the light of his message. Spiritual freedom is possible and, moreover, it can grow to fullness through suffering as a fruit of unity with the One whose death conquered death.

Zdebskis' urge to ground one's choices in the values that remain for eternity echoes St Ignatius' advices on election: 'If I were at the point of death, consider what procedure and what criteria I would then wish to have followed in making the present election' (Exx 186). Suffering presents one with grave choices between hatred and love, revenge and forgiveness, despair and trust. Alternatives become sharp, as they are in the desert: life or death. In the acuteness of an extreme situation that is not freely chosen, one often has a better chance to come to terms with the fact that there are true and false values in life. Displaced from what is familiar, put on to unsafe ground or even seemingly deprived of any ground at all, one faces the choice of falling down into the abyss that is God or succumbing to the abyss of despair. Trusting in God's saving action enables one to give oneself away freely and to find hope, whereas despair feeds on the bitterness that everything is taken away by force. Surrendering to *kenosis* rather than to robbery is a decisive choice in one's journey towards fullness of spiritual freedom.

Juozas Zdebskis

[5] Joseph Ratzinger [Pope Benedict XVI], *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 74.

Zdebskis' capacity for such surrender is witnessed, not only by his choosing to oppose the forces of evil whenever he met them, but also by his ability to retain his high spirits and even be amusing in difficult situations. Just reading his thoughts on suffering could leave a wrong impression that he was a pale ascetic with a sour face. Quite the opposite: there are hundreds of anecdotes about what a merry companion he was. One of these stories relates how, after visiting political prisoners in a far corner of Russia, a group of dissidents discovered that all the return air tickets were sold out. It was risky to remain in the area longer, but there was no other way to go home. Pre-booking, as one can imagine, did not exist in those times. But there were special counters in the airports for the 'heroes of the Soviet Union'. Those who belonged to this select group could always get tickets even if they were sold out and not available for ordinary mortals. Zdebskis, who was part of the visiting group, went to such a counter and requested tickets. He was immediately asked to prove that he was a hero by providing a special document. Zdebskis' reaction instantly softened the heart of the employee. He said: 'To be truthful, I am not a hero yet, but I certainly will become one, I promise'. The whole group was then able to purchase its tickets without delay.

Adele Dirsyte (1909–1955)

Adele Dirsyte taught me what the words 'Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul' (Matthew 10:28) are about. She was a schoolteacher, arrested in 1946 for Catholic and civic consciousness-raising activities, which were considered 'counter-revolutionary'. Interrogated for eight months in the dungeons of the KGB, she was finally sentenced to ten years of imprisonment in the Gulag and sent to Siberia. Despite unbearable sufferings—constant torture, humiliation, extremely hard labour and hunger—she remained a teacher who provided support for the girls and young women in the camp.

Adele encouraged her fellow prisoners to pray and she wrote down her prayers. In this way the prayer book of the Siberian prisoners, *Mary, Save Us*, was born. This book represented the possibility of expressing the sorrow and aspirations of the oppressed and persecuted Christians in the Soviet Gulags and became a symbol of their cries to God. One part of this book is dedicated to prayers focused on the

celebration of the eucharist. There Dirsyte says something that reminds me of Ignatius' *Suscipe* prayer:

> O Lord …
> accept my suffering
> and fatigue, humiliations,
> tears of longing,
> hunger, and cold,
> all my soul's infirmities;
> all my efforts for the freedom
> of my fatherland, for the welfare
> of my friends and my dear ones,
> for the souls
> of the deceased combatants.
> O Lord, have mercy on those
> who persecute and torment us;
> grant to them also the grace
> to know
> the sweetness of Your love ….
>
> With a grateful heart,
> I shall accept all
> from Your hands:
> powerlessness, endless longing,
> contempt, neglect
> and disregard, the loss
> of those dearest to me
> and of my liberty.
>
> Lord, do with me
> whatever You desire
> only have compassion
> on my nation ….[6]

Although the actual celebration of the eucharist was not possible in the forced labour camps for women, Adele found ways to distribute communion after getting it from the men's camp, at enormous risk. She encouraged and enabled other prisoners to pray and to study, to think and to discuss, to see beauty and to forgive. She found creative ways to teach and to celebrate liturgical feasts despite the threat of penalties. In 1953 Adele wrote to her relatives:

[6] Adele Dirsyte, *Marija, gelbek mus* (Kaunas: Atmintis, 2009), 39–43, 53–55. English translation: *Mary, Save Us*, translated by Vincent J. Hines (Huntington, In: Our Sunday Visitor, 2005), 34–35, 38–39.

> I find justification for my days. Now when we travel to the mountains to collect firewood I discuss different topics with Fele. Although she finished only four grades, she dreams of becoming a teacher. When we have a free minute, we learn fractions and difficult words by writing them in the snow ….[7]

In a letter sent from the camp in 1951 Adele writes that 'girls need my heart' and talks of the need to express one's attitude of love in actions by 'giving rather than taking'.[8]

The most difficult days for her were those 'when desire evaporates and everything becomes so dim that every place seems wrong'.[9] She knew that desire is the powerful agent which moves our hearts and guides our choices. Therefore she was attentive to her inner movements and tried to help others in keeping alive their God-given desires. One of the greatest desires in her circumstances, of course, was the desire for freedom. However, in Adele's sayings and letters the highest value was placed, not on the political or the physical, but on the spiritual dimension of freedom. In an undated letter from Siberia she wrote:

> We need to rise up, we need it desperately. There are many souls that suffer a lot, for all their lives are spent in waiting. Without knowing surely what they are waiting for, they wait for freedom, but it does not come, for inside lies slavery.[10]

She also said to the young women, her fellow-prisoners, 'the seeking of freedom is more than freedom itself' and 'the one who is free is free even in prison'. Was she speaking here of spiritual freedom as opposed to freedom of choice? Or was she pointing out that freedom is not an end, but a means, not a state, but a process which is never completed? We do not know. Nevertheless, something in these words touches the depth of our perception of spiritual freedom.

Adele's activities in the camp were constantly interrupted by cruel punishments. The final punishment—torture, which lasted several months—drove her mad. She returned to her place of imprisonment

[7] Adele Dirsyte, *Jus manieji. Laiskai* (Kaunas: Atmintis, 2000), 61.
[8] Dirsyte, *Jus manieji*, 51–52.
[9] Dirsyte, *Jus manieji*, 51.
[10] Dirsyte, *Jus manieji*, 79.

Adele Dirsyte

physically almost unrecognisable and unable to say what had been done to her. Attempts to find out would result in a heart-breaking cry and delirium. However, even in the psychiatric ward where she was placed for the last weeks of her life, she remained the same person in terms of her commitment to others. When offered food there, she is remembered as saying: 'No, I do not work, therefore I cannot eat. Give it to those who work ….' She was holy, even when she was insane. She was a martyr, although she died in hospital. She was a priest, although she was not ordained. Commitment to love, despite her horrible circumstances, was a sure sign of the spiritual freedom that she lived out as awareness, attitude and action directed towards the end for which we are all created.

Lessons about Freedom Learnt

These and similar stories confirm the wisdom of the gospel and can be illustrative as well as instructive in learning about Christian spirituality as a way of discipleship walked in freedom. Stories of those mourning and thirsting for righteousness, being persecuted and falsely accused, can teach us something that is relevant to our daily choice to live out the gospel. In what follows, I would like to share some lessons that are important to me.

Spiritual Freedom Is a Gift of the Spirit

By God's grace, spiritual freedom is possible and can even be brought to fullness in the absence of external freedom of choice, as it is understood nowadays. Of course, the evils of injustice, oppression or abuse can never be justified by seeing them as an occasion for victims

to exercise their inner freedom. In doing so we would severely undermine the complexity of the problem of suffering in the world.[11] However, the testimonies given above witness that, when nothing can be changed about the external situation, freedom on the level of choosing one's attitude remains, if God wishes it. And God, surely, desires and grants such freedom, for 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). Thus, spiritual freedom, first of all, is liberation within, accomplished by God's saving action in Christ. As such, freedom presupposes identification with Christ and, in turn, is a fruit of such identification; but, at the same time, it is a gift of the Spirit far surpassing natural human capacity.

Living in and out of God's Reign

If true spiritual freedom is the gift *of* the Spirit, none the less it is also a gift *for* life in the Spirit and thus freedom to live in and out of God's reign. It is neither a passive acceptance of reality nor a violent resistance to it. Rather, it is a conscious choice to live according to the rules of God's kingdom, no matter what the personal cost might be. Becoming aware of, understanding and rejecting the rules of evil constitute an essential part of this choice. The two life stories shared above could exemplify what Susan Nelson calls the eschatological paradigm of understanding evil.[12] The capacity to live *as if* death and sin do not have the final word is the main feature of the response to suffering rooted in eschatological hope. The law of death loses its power when authentic Christian freedom enters, for 'Christ is the end of the law' (Romans 10:4)—everything is subjected to him and is moving towards him who is 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6).

[11] The suffering and violence endured in Eastern Europe during the Soviet era (as well as in many other places and times) cannot simply be thought of as divine pedagogy or testing, thus does not fit into the moral view which, according to Susan Nelson, is a dominant paradigm for understanding suffering in Christian tradition. Nelson offers four other paradigms (radical suffering, ambiguous creation, eschatological imagination and redemptive suffering), which are more adequate when facing suffering of the innocent. See more in Susan Nelson, 'Facing Evil: Evil's Many Faces: Five Paradigms for Understanding Evil', *Interpretation*, 57/4 (2003), 398–413.

[12] The eschatological paradigm 'insists that radical suffering cannot be justified, that it must be resisted and the sufferer vindicated …. Resistance and justice reveal both the courage to defy the world as it is known (where there are always innocent people who suffer the workings of individual and systemic sin) and the capacity to live as if resistance to the suffering of the innocent is where the moral meaning of the universe must be found.' (Nelson, 'Facing Evil', 408)

Liberated to Take the Cross

Such non-violent resistance to evil empowers one to take up one's cross freely. Exercising spiritual freedom is inseparable from following Jesus and sharing in his lot. In a situation of oppression, this might mean accepting radical suffering. Nevertheless, authentic spiritual freedom, as it is seen in the stories of Zdbeskis and Dirsyte, responds to the invitation to carry the cross, not for the sake of suffering, but for the sake of love. Spiritual freedom grows, makes sense and is nourished and empowered only by love. In the light of the paschal mystery, Christian freedom means living out the paradox of losing one's life in order to find it (Matthew 16:25). The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez once urged his readers 'to know and experience the fact that, contrary to the laws of physics, we can stand straight, according to the gospel, only when our centre of gravity is outside ourselves'.[13] Exactly this shift in their centre of gravity helped people 'to stand straight' in prisons, in the dungeons of the KGB, in concentration camps, in Gulags and in every place where spiritual freedom has been exercised with a heroic commitment to love. Selfless love outweighs the cruelty of persecution, mockery, imprisonment and torture.[14]

[13] Gutiérrez, 'Discipleship', 288.

[14] Speaking of selfless love in contemporary Western society is dangerous, for it is automatically associated with the lack of authentic self-love or even self-hatred. The emphasis on holistic spirituality in the West sometimes goes so far as to regard it as the only legitimate spirituality. Living between two worlds—East and West—I know well that, no matter how well holistic spirituality is suited for 'normal' circumstances, when facing situations of oppression it can become a caricature of Christian living. Tortured and starving bodies can gain nothing from the spiritual practices facilitated by massage. In situations of oppression and persecution forgetting one's personal needs may be the only way towards greater integration of body and mind.

Liberation Within

These three lessons do not exhaust the spiritual treasury of the Gulag era. Nevertheless, they challenge some of the basic assumptions and tendencies of our contemporary culture. They oppose our propensity to rely on ourselves too much instead of opening up to God's active presence, to prize our psychological and emotional integrity over selfless love, and to remain outsiders to the paschal mystery. Along with other testimonies of Christian freedom lived out in the context of oppression, persecution and repression,[15] they can be of great value to our present times, which are not untouched by these same realities.

Whether we look back to the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire or in the Soviet Gulag, the times in history when Christian martyrdom blossomed teach us of the potential of spiritual freedom. We can take these lessons to the future, to the corners of our world and our hearts where oppression and suffering are encountered as a multifaceted reality, and we can resist evil by love. Or we can ignore the wisdom of the cross by denying that spiritual freedom can flourish in circumstances devoid of 'freedom of choice', and thus make those who are assailed by this evil even more voiceless and insignificant.

I believe that the martyrs of the Gulag era join the 'cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1) in the choir of heavenly praise. Uncovering their hidden lives and giving voice to their experience can help us to grow in holiness and in freedom. Their example can teach us that spiritual freedom, first of all, is liberation within. To say that does not mean to limit spiritual freedom to some inner movement. The three dimensions of ongoing conversion in exercising one's freedom as awareness, attitude and action are evident in the stories told here. Spiritual freedom begins as an awareness of God's active presence in the world, unfolds in choosing one's attitudes in accordance with the gospel, and is fulfilled only in the action of rejecting evil and in giving oneself away, thus participating in the paschal mystery. Such freedom

[15] One of the greatest testimonies from the Western spirituality is given by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He is the herald of freedom that grows in passing through the stages of discipline, action, suffering and, finally, death. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Stages on the Way to Freedom', in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prison Poems*, edited and translated by Edwin Robertson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 73–74.

acknowledges that neither life nor death is a goal in itself, but the end towards which we are created. As a line in a contemporary hymn simply states, 'in our living and our dying we are bringing You to birth'.

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