

“What are you doing with your freedom?”

“What are you doing with your freedom?” In Europe, but also in other regions of the world, this question is being put more and more forcefully. (Letter from China)

Pilar (Spain) took part in a workshop on freedom at Taizé this summer.

For some time I had an apparently full life - new friendships, good marks at the university, a stable relationship, a comfortable life with my parents, even a group of teenagers at church. But, each day, I was further from God: my prayers were routine and empty of meaning. I thought freedom meant “do what you want when you want”. But, did I really feel happy?

I started to feel free from the moment I began my relationship with God again. It was a time when my life was at the worst moment: a broken relationship and a degree finished with an uncertain future ahead. I decided to follow my intuition and listen to God, and this allowed me to understand the true source of joy.

So I left myself in God’s arms and promised to accept whatever he wanted of me. From that moment, I have been trying to do my best in every simple thing, wearing a smile and looking with love and tenderness at every person, trying to focus on good things and forgiving undesirable actions of others. It is true that it is not always easy, but it works!

The more we seek God, the more we can make this astonishing discovery: God is the one who seeks us first.

Edel-Anne (Britain) speaks about Father Kolbe, who died in Auschwitz in 1941.

The most basic and important freedom we have is to accept God in our lives and hearts. During the twentieth century, there are countless examples of people who chose not to let fear conquer their hearts but acted through freedom of love, through God’s grace instead.

A notable example is Maximilian Kolbe, who overcame our most important desire, the desire to live, in order to give his life for a man with a family. This is a great proof of how, through God, we are made free to overcome our earthly desires, when we recognise that our real freedom lies in the next world. This can stretch as far as overcoming our desire for self-preservation. We are freed by recognising a greater truth. Fr Kolbe’s choice was the result of a long history of prayer which made him free in a unique way.

While he is a famous example, he is not alone in choosing love above all else. When we accept Christ, we are made free to be the lights that flicker in the darkness. No regime can destroy this freedom or take it away, because the light of Christ that shines through us is stronger even than death when we say yes to him.

We know that we cannot do or have everything. Far from leading to sad resignation, this awareness can liberate us and help us live in a more unimpeded way.

Theophile (France), 18 years old, speaks about the phrase “what frees us is what binds us together” (François Garagnon)

Agreeing to follow the commandments of the Gospel means losing a certain amount of freedom. However, following the path offered by Jesus frees us from our addictions, and actually helps us to become free human beings. Alcohol, drugs, sex, new technologies, excessive material consumption... all this appears to us more clearly by listening to our inner selves. We often feel we are free, whereas it is the very nature of human beings to depend on other things than oneself. Who can claim to live alone in this world? Rather than being dependent on something else, why not choose what liberates us!

Only by clearly and critically listening to myself can I discern whether or not I must give in to the impulses and thoughts that cross my mind. Am I free to choose my actions, or am I a prisoner of my desires or of my fears?

The need for recognition, the thirst for power, the fear of death... so many things that bind us! Following Jesus is demanding, but in truth that is what makes us free!

And we must let the deepest of all longings awaken in us: the desire for God! It is true that it is not easy to keep alive the spirit of wonder and adoration, since our societies set such a high value on efficiency and doing things as quickly as possible.

Jaesun (Korea), because of his work as a teacher, has contacts with many teenagers.

I always wonder how we can give our young students some free time to do whatever they want and how we can teach them to be creative with their freedom. And sometimes this thought should reach a deeper level. How can we talk about the true meaning of freedom, which means inner freedom?

Here in Seoul, most students have to hop from one private study institute to another institute even after school and until very late at night. They do this to enter good universities and to survive in this ever competitive society. Even after they become college students, they also study for different exams, to get good jobs.

In Korea, young people are not accustomed to have free time or free will to do something. As a reaction to too many controls and constraints on their life, young people easily become either passive or hostile. To acquire some freedom from established social structures and to be imaginative and creative with their freedom are two main challenges to the young people of Korea.

Today, in Europe as well as across all the continents, are we reflecting enough on the meaning of freedom? Every young person could ask themselves: What are you doing with your freedom?

Keiji (Japan) writes about how the students at his university see freedom.

In my country we have political and economic freedom, and students certainly have the freedom to study and even have free time. However, many emphasize that they do not live in true freedom. Of course, they freely enjoy their studies, their network of friends, and all sorts of activities. But for many, this freedom is only temporary; it does not last.

In this society, it is very difficult for them to find true and lasting freedom. But it also suggests that they aspire to such freedom; they desire to be free from fear, to live as they are, and share more with others. And some students are actually trying to live that freedom, by engaging in activities to support children with learning difficulties, helping young people with a disability and supporting the homeless. Still others go abroad to help people in developing countries. And so it is possible to study very hard, not only to get a good job, but also to prepare a better world for humanity.