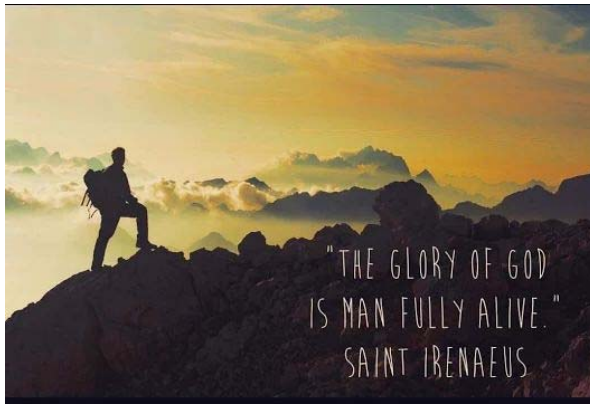


Stephen Colbert, J.R.R. Tolkien, John Henry Newman, and the Providence of God

Bishop Robert Barron

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The evangelical bottom line is the cry, "Jesus Christ is risen from the dead." Tightly linked to that declaration is the conviction that Jesus is who he said he was, that Jesus' own claims to act and speak in the very person of God are justified. And from the divinity of Jesus there follows the radical humanism of Christianity.

It is this third evangelical principle that I should like to explore, however briefly, in this article. The Church Fathers consistently summed up the meaning of the Incarnation by using the formula

"God became human, that humans might become God." God's entry into our humanity, even to the point of personal union, amounts, they saw, to the greatest possible affirmation and elevation of the human. St. Irenaeus, the great second-century theologian, expressed the essence of Christianity with the pithy adage "the glory of God is a human being fully alive!"

Now I realize that much of this is counter-intuitive. For many, Catholic Christianity is anti-humanist, a system characterized by an array of laws controlling self-expression, especially in the area of sexuality. According to the standard modern telling of the story, human progress is tantamount to an increase of personal freedom, and the enemy of this progress (if the darker sub-text of the narrative is allowed to emerge) is fussy, moralizing Christianity. How did we get from St. Irenaeus's exuberant Christian humanism to the modern suspicion of Christianity as the chief opponent of human progress? Much depends on how we construe freedom.

The view of liberty that has shaped our culture is what we might call the freedom of indifference. On this reading, freedom is the capacity to say "yes" or "no" simply on the basis of one's own inclinations and according to one's own decisions. Here, personal choice is paramount. We can clearly see this privileging of choice in the contemporary economic, political, and cultural arenas. But there is a more classical understanding of liberty, which might be characterized as the freedom for excellence. On this reading, freedom is the disciplining of desire so as to make the achievement of the good first possible, then effortless. Thus I become increasingly free in my use of the English language the more my mind and will are trained in the rules and traditions of English. If I am utterly shaped by the world of English, I become an utterly free user of the language, able to say whatever I want, whatever needs to be said.

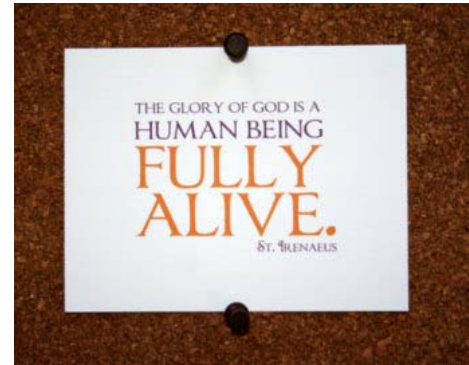
In a similar way, I become freer in playing basketball the more the moves of the game are placed, through exercise and discipline, into my body. If I were completely formed by the world of basketball, I could outplay Michael Jordan, for I would be able to do effortlessly whatever the game demanded of me. For the freedom of indifference, objective rules, orders, and disciplines are problematic, for they are felt, necessarily, as limitations. But for the second type of freedom, such laws are liberating, for they make the achievement of some great good possible.

St. Paul said, "I am the slave of Christ Jesus" (cf. Rom 1:1), and "it is for freedom that Christ has set you free" (Gal 5:1). For the advocate of the freedom of indifference, the juxtaposition of those two claims

makes not a bit of sense. To be a slave of anyone is, necessarily, not to be free to choose. But for the devotee of the freedom for excellence, Paul's statements are completely coherent. The more I surrender to Christ Jesus, who is himself the greatest possible good, the very Incarnation of God, the freer I am to be who I am supposed to be. The more Christ becomes the master of my life, the more I internalize his moral demands, the freer I am to be a child of God, to respond promptly to the call of the Father.

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Finally, human beings are not hungry to choose; they are hungry to choose the good. They don't want the freedom of the libertine; they want the freedom of the saint. And it is precisely this latter freedom that evangelization offers, because it offers Christ. Strange as it is to say, one of the greatest evangelists in the New Testament is Pontius Pilate. Presenting the scourged Jesus to the crowds, he says, "Behold the man" (John 19:15). In the delicious irony of John's Gospel, Pilate is unwittingly drawing attention to the fact that Jesus, completely acquiescent to the will of his Father, even to the point of accepting torture and death, is in fact "the man," humanity at its fullest and most free.



The evangelist today does the same thing. She holds up Christ—human freedom and divine truth in perfect harmony—and she says, "Behold, humanity, behold the best you can be."