

ENCYCLICAL LETTER OF OUR HOLY FATHER,

BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE

POPE LEO XIII.

ON

HUMAN LIBERTY.

TO OUR VENERABLE BROTHERS THE PATRIARCHS, PRIMATES,
ARCHBISHOPS AND BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC WORLD,
IN FAVOR AND COMMUNION WITH THE HOLY SEE.

POPE LEO XIII.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

Liberty, the highest gift of nature, which belongs only to intellectual or rational beings, confers on man this dignity, that he is "in the hands of his counsel" and has power over his actions. But the manner in which this dignity is borne is of the greatest moment, inasmuch as that on the use that is made of liberty the highest good and greatest evil alike depend. Man indeed is free to obey his reason, to seek moral good, and to strive after his last end. Yet he is free also to turn aside to all other things, to follow after false dreams of happiness, to disturb established order, and to fall headlong into the destruction which he has voluntarily chosen. The Redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ, having restored and exalted the original dignity of nature, vouchsafed special assistance to the will of man; and by the gifts of His grace, and the promise of heavenly bliss, He raised it to a nobler state. In like manner this great gift of nature has been, and always will be, constantly cherished by the Catholic Church; for to her alone has been committed the charge of handing down to all ages the benefits purchased for us by Jesus Christ. Yet there are many who imagine that the Church is hostile to human liberty. Having a false and absurd notion as to what liberty is, either they pervert the very idea of liberty, or they extend it at their pleasure to many things in which man cannot rightly be regarded as free.

We have on other occasions, and especially in Our encyclical letter *Immortale Dei*, in treating of the so-called *modern liberties*, distinguished between their good and evil elements; and We have shown that whatsoever is good therein is as ancient as truth itself, and that the Church has always most willingly approved and practiced it; but whatsoever has been added is of a vitiated kind, the fruit of the disorders of the age and of an insatiate longing after novelties. Seeing, however, that many cling so obstinately to their own opinion in this matter as to imagine these modern liberties, vitiated as they are, to be the greatest glory of our age, and the very basis of civil life, without which no perfect government could be conceived, We therefore feel it now Our duty, for the sake of the common good, to treat separately of this subject.

It is with *moral liberty*, whether in individuals or in communities, that We proceed to deal. But, first of all, it will be well to speak of *natural liberty*; for though the two kinds are distinct and separate, the natural is the fountain head of liberty of whatsoever kind. The unanimous consent and judgment of men, which is certainly the voice of nature, recognizes this natural liberty in those only who are endowed with intelligence or reason, and it is by this that man is rightly regarded as responsible for his actions. For, while other animate creatures follow their senses, seeking good and avoiding evil only by instinct, man has reason to guide him in all the acts of his life. Reason sees the contingency of all the good things which are upon earth, and thus, seeing that none of them are of necessity for us, it leaves the will free to choose what it pleases. But man can judge of this *contingency*, only because he has a soul that is simple, spiritual, and intellectual—a soul, therefore, which is not produced by matter, and does not depend on matter for its existence, which is created immediately by God, and, far surpassing the condition of material things, has a life and action of its own—so that, knowing the unchangeable and necessary reasons of what is true and good, it can judge of the contingency of anything in particular. When, therefore, it is established that man's soul is immortal and rational, the foundation of natural liberty is at once most firmly laid.

As the Catholic Church declares in the strongest terms the

simplicity, spirituality and immortality of the soul, so with unequalled constancy she asserts also its freedom. These truths she has always taught, and has sustained them as a dogma of faith; and whenever heretics or innovators have attacked the liberty of man, the Church has defended it and protected it from assault. History bears witness to the energy with which she met the fury of the Manicheans and the like; and the earnestness with which in later years she defended human liberty in the Council of Trent, and against the followers of Jansenius, is a well-known fact. Never, and in no place, has she made truce with *fatalism*.

Liberty, then, as We have said, belongs only to those who have the gift of reason or intelligence. Considered as to its nature, it is the faculty of choosing means fitted for the end proposed, for he only is master of his actions who can choose one thing out of many. Now, since everything chosen as a means is viewed as good or useful, and since good, as such, is the proper object of Our desire, it follows that freedom of choice is the property of the will in so far as it has in its action the faculty of choice. But the will cannot proceed to act until it is enlightened by the knowledge possessed by the intellect. In other words the good wished by the will is necessarily good in so far as it is known by the intellect; and the more so because in all voluntary acts choice is subsequent to a judgment upon the truth of the good presented, declaring to which preference should be given. No sensible man can doubt that judgment is an act of reason, not of the will. The end, or object, both of the rational will and of its liberty, is the good which is in conformity with reason. Since, however, both these faculties are imperfect, it is possible, as is often seen, that the reason should propose to the will a good that is not true, but apparent, and that the will should choose accordingly. Just as the possibility of error, and actual error, are defects of the mind, and attest its imperfection, so the pursuit of an apparent good, though a proof of our freedom, just as a disease is a proof of our vitality, implies defect in human liberty. The will, also, simply because of its dependence on the reason, no sooner desires anything contrary thereto, than it abuses its freedom of choice and corrupts its very essence. Thus it is that the infinitely perfect God, although, because of the supremacy of His intellect and of His essential goodness, He is supremely free, nevertheless cannot choose evil; neither can the Angels and Saints, who enjoy the Beatific Vision. St. Augustine and others urged most admirably against the Pelagians that, if the possibility of defection from good belonged to the essence or perfection of liberty, then God,—our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Angels and Saints, who have not this power, would have no liberty at all, or would have less liberty than man has in his state of pilgrimage and imperfection. This subject is often discussed by the Angelic Doctor, in his demonstration that the possibility of sinning is not freedom, but slavery. It will suffice to quote his subtle commentary on the words of our Lord: "Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin" (St. John 8: 34). "Everything," he says, "is that which belongs to it naturally. When, therefore, it acts through a power outside itself, it does not act of itself, but through another, that is, as a slave. But man is by nature rational. When, therefore, he acts according to reason, he acts of himself and according to his free-will; and this is liberty. Whereas, when he sins, he acts in opposition to reason, and is moved by another, and so is bound by another's chain. Therefore: 'Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin.'" Even the heathen philosophers clearly recognized this truth, especially those who held that the wise man alone is free; and by the term "wise man" they meant, as is well known, the man trained to live in accordance with his nature, that is, in justice and virtue.

Such then being the condition of human liberty, it necessarily stands in need of light and strength to direct its actions to good and to restrain them from evil. Without this, the freedom of Our will would be Our ruin. First of all there must be *law*, that is, a fixed rule of teaching what is to be done, and what is to be left undone. This rule cannot affect animals in any true sense, since they act of necessity, following their natural instinct, and cannot of themselves act in any other way. On the other hand, as was said above, he who is free can act or not act, can do this or do that, as he pleases, because his judgment precedes his choice. And his judgment not only decides on good or evil in the abstract, but also on what is practically