

LIBERATION AT THE WELL
Reflections of a Repentant Male
(Fr Paul Verghese)

At the well a woman of Samaria met the Master. In meeting him she met her destiny as well. The course of her life was totally altered. Till then she had lived her life "to the full" - five husbands and all that. She was an experienced woman; but her experience had made her bitter, cynical, hard. Everybody was out to do his or her own thing she had realized. And nobody cared for anybody else. She found herself in the wilderness of lovelessness and alienation. No path seemed to lead out of it and the scorching wind of despair blew mercilessly on her bruised face and soul.

Then suddenly, in a moment of grace, the vision had been granted her. The liberating vision. The vision of the Master. And in seeing the Master, she saw herself as well, as she was. For the Master was the unique one in whom all men and all women could find themselves. He was the source from which all creation had received its life. He is also the source from which women in the wilderness could draw the water of life, the water that gives life in the midst of death.

And today, in the wilderness of our despair, where shall wisdom be found? How shall the liberating vision be seen? Who shall open the springs of life in the midst of death and despair? Who shall liberate us from bondage - bondage to the humdrum and the commonplace, bondage to boredom and meaninglessness, bondage to a life of unfulfilling excitements and hopes of bliss turned to ashes and dust in the hand?

Man is made to be free. So is woman. But what is freedom? The man from Tarsus, who knew the mind of the Master, once said to the Galatians: "For freedom you have been called, friends. Only don't use your freedom as a spring board for the lusts of your body, but rather use it to serve each other in love".

Freedom means being free to do what you please. Yes, but the way you use your freedom determines your being. Doing my own thing is all right. That is what the Master wants us to do. But the thing we do creates other things. That is the tension of freedom. One must do one's own thing, and not someone else's. Neither should one do the things that other people tell one to do.

I had often ~~wemad~~ wondered as a child why God did not make us in such a way that we would simply do what God wants us to do. I had also wondered why God had not told us more clearly what things to do and what not to. I began growing up when I realized that what I wanted God to do was to make me a machine. An automobile for example. It simple does what you want it to do. Though even automobiles at times do also some things which we do not want it to do. Like stalling, going flat, or belching out gusts of poisonous vapour. Even the automobile seems to have a measure of freedom. But we hardly blame the automobile for acting the way it does. We would rather blame the men who made the car rather than the car itself. The car is not responsible, for it is not free to make decisions.

A machine makes no mistakes. It may go wrong, but that is simply because it obeys the laws of the material that makes it up. We too, in our fear of freedom, would sometimes like to be

like a machine. If something goes wrong in the things we do, we try to say it is the fault of the material or the mistake of its maker.

We are not allowed to be machines, however much we may wish so. Men and women are not meant to be manipulated by feasts of "human ~~mm~~ engineering". We have been given the power to transform the material of which we are made, and to make something good and distinctive of ourselves.

That is true freedom - this potentiality to be transmuted and to become good. It is part of our freedom to do what we please to do our own thing. But the thing we do is always a transforming action. It transforms ourselves as well as the world in which we are placed. And that is why, in doing our own thing we have to be mindful of how it affects others and the world. For others and the world are also expected to become good, beautiful and true as a result of our actions.

Here are the two sides of the tension of freedom. First, doing my own thing cannot be separated from the life and being of others and the world. This calls for certain structures for our life. So that each person doing his or her own thing adds up to the whole of mankind and the whole world becomes good. We cannot choose pure anomia, pure anarchy or lawlessness, and yet each person must be free to do his or her own chosen good. But secondly, there is the other side of the tension of freedom. If we find the perfect structure that would ensure that every person is able to do only that which is for the good of the whole, then we lose our freedom and become mere cogs in the wheel. We would then be doing good not because we are really good, but simply because the structure does not

allow us to do anything else. There we lose our freedom.

Liberation is thus the constant tension and struggle between the authority of structure, and the freedom of the person. Both are necessary; but the ultimate is the freedom of man, and structure and authority are but instruments for use in the attainment of the freedom of man.

Structures are often blind. The structure of Samaritan Society had cast the samaritan woman out, for she had violated its rules. And yet the Master found her, gave her life, liberty and meaning. Samaritan society was not equipped to deal with her

Today, 2000 years later, we are in the same situation, though the gospel of freedom has been here for two millennia. We still judge people by the accepted norms of our society and cast out those who do not conform. The most gifted and the most creative are the ones who usually find it difficult to obey the rules always. They see that the rules often inhibit creativity that life has rules that transcend the rules of society. From such people alone new patterns of life can come, but society shuffles them or despises them, for fear of change.

Now liberation can come only when both these things happen simultaneously - the creative individual is given freedom to create, and his or her creativity is allowed to change the pattern of life for the rest of us.

Take for example the women's liberation movement. The oppression of woman is as old as humanity. The humanity hunting male

was more aggressive and so became dominant. This male aggressiveness, taking new and civilized forms has recently been expressing itself in the drive for world domination through political and economic conquest. Making money, cut-throat competition, rising to the top, the sanctification of success the exercise of uninhibited power, aggression against possible rivals to the domineering instinct - these are the values of a male dominated society. Women too have tried to succeed along the same lines, occasionally; in that process they became aggressive domineering males in all but sex. The majority of women have been drawn, willy-nilly, into a secondary role as home-makers for the men of an aggressive and acquisitive society. Political and economic power is always wielded by men, of course not without appearing or deluding the woman voter.

This domineering instinct of the male has been conceptually justified on a variety of pretexts - from a pseudo-biblical teaching about man's mastery over nature to pseudo-biological assertions about coital positions. Women have occasionally raised protests, mostly to the effect that they should have equal right to dominate with the male. They have resented the fact that major decisions are always made by males in almost all political and economic matters - matters that determine the shape and structure of humanity.

It is only recently that there has been a genuinely audible protest - one that males cannot afford to grin and forget. But even in the present protest there are two fundamental factors that hamper its effectiveness.

First, there is the fact that the number of protesting women seems quite limited. The student protest, which stems from similar roots, became largely ineffective, primarily because not more than 2% of the total student body were actively committed. Similarly the majority of women in America still remain largely uncommitted to the movement for women's liberation. This makes it easy for critics to allege fadism, and to condemn it as a means of working out life's frustrations for a few. Such charges need not, however, be taken seriously, for not protest movement of large aggregates of humanity can even hope to acquire the active involvement of more than a creative minority. The majority may in the beginning stand aloof or even actively oppose, but sooner or later they are bound to see and even to reap its benefits.

The second charge is that of discordance. Even the protestors are lacking in unanimity. They are sure neither of what they are protesting against nor of what they want. This is partly inevitable for women's protest is but one aspect of a general protest against the evils of society as it is presently constituted. Black women, for example, generally refused to join the women's lib movement, for they feel identified with black men in the more intensive protest against white, rather than male, domination. For many black women, women's lib seems a manoeuvre intended to distract and side-track the black protest movement.

Even among white women, there is no ideological consensus beyond the one goal of putting an end to male domination. Some would simply fight for equal rights in social and sexual freedom, political

and economic power, in employment opportunities and in wage structure. Others are more perceptive in demanding a new structure of society itself, based no longer on the male principles of aggression, acquisition and domination, but rather on mutual concern, compassionate service and imaginative creativity.

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It is at this point that one repentant male would like to offer a few reflections for the consideration of males and females alike. These reflections have their roots in the Christian faith and are offered merely as a standing point for discussion and decision within the Christian community, though such discussion should never be limited to Christians alone.

1. Humanity, made in the image of God, comprises of both man and woman as complementary realities, each incomplete in itself and incapable of fulfilment without the other. Woman's liberation and fulfilment are thus part of humanity's search for freedom and significances. The woman of Samaria was set free by the Master, in order to return to her village to call the men of her society to the Master's presence. For until they too were liberated, her freedom would remain incomplete and incapable of fulfilment in a society that remains unfree and unjust. The word of the woman led the men of Samaria to the Word of God, and today this has to happen again. Women alone can bring the necessary fecundity of imagination and the poetic creativity essential for the reconstruction of a society bled to death by the ruthless aggression of the male "reality principle".

Women's protest is by far the most significant and potentially the most effective instrument for the negation of the present which alone can pave the way for affirming a better future. It is significant because it is made in the name, even if not with the conscious consent, of one-half of humanity. Only such a vast segment of humanity can be a sufficient counterweight to the obduracy of present structures. It is potentially the most effective for, in a world numbed by ideological cerebration, intellectual disputation and pragmatic calculation, only woman can inject the necessary amount of imagination, creativity, joy and beauty and love into the very structures of society.

The first main point is this that women, in their very seeking of liberation for themselves, should in the same act will the liberation of the whole of mankind.

2. Women's liberation movement should not be an alternative to other movements of liberation, especially that of the Blacks in America and Southern Africa. When the White women's liberation movement joins hands, even if rather one-sidedly, (for the Blacks are at the moment in no mood to accept white women's support without question) with the Black movement for liberation, the stage would at least have been set for a total re-orientation of western society. Women's lib should not separate itself thus from other movements of liberation, even if such movements are unwilling to trust the white women or to co-operate with them. Only when the women's liberation movement becomes identified with all the oppressed people and takes up their cause for their liberation as well, can it become genuinely creative today.

3. Women's lib should help western society to get out of its present parochial ~~by~~ group egoism, by focussing on world issues in which America is involved. Women should learn the facts about the world's economic and political situation. They should ask the ~~ese~~ questions with earnestness: Who keeps two-thirds of the world poor and one-third rich? Why is it not possible to give equal pay for equal work all over the world? Why should the Brazilian who grows my coffee or the Cuban who used to produce my sugar get only a small fraction of the wages that the American who makes my automobile gets? Is American industry exploiting both the ordinary people of America, as well as the rest of the world which has to buy from America? Is our military machine the main cause for prolonging the war in South East Asia? How can the major aspect of male domination in the world - the ~~mx~~ military-industrial complex of the U.S.A. - be made to behave more responsibly? Why is it not possible for the U.N. to become a more effective instrument for justice and peace in the world? Are the big powers the main obstacles to world government and world democracy? How can business, sales, advertising, and ~~mx~~ bureaucratic organization be made more humane and less dehumanizing

4. Women's liberation movement should clarify its goals and purposes with greater clarity and begin to pioneer in new constructive operations. At present the movement is chaotic and disorganized somewhat inevitable in the first stages of a powerful upsurge of human energy and feeling. But it will gain the support of wide sectors of both male and female humanity all over the world only when it begins to show positive elements of imagination and creativity. How to live, how to organize society, how to educate - these are important questions to which women's lib should give not merely

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theoretical answers, but actually pioneer in demonstrative experiments which bring imagination and creativity into play. It may also have much to teach the Church which has gone dry and lifeless through centuries of male domination.

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The woman at the well became the liberator of the Samaritan people, in the very act of finding her liberation. The movement for the liberation of women in our time will be evaluated by the future in terms of the degree to which it liberates the whole mankind from war, oppression, exploitation, and injustice.