

Eating the Apple

by Robert Babecka

(Editor's Note: The material for this article consists of excerpts from the papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, (The Splendor of Truth). It was issued by Pope John Paul II on August 6, 1993.)

"Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen 2:17)

In the Book of Genesis we read: "The Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' "

With this imagery, Revelation teaches that *the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone*. The man is certainly free, inasmuch as he can understand and accept God's commands. And he possesses an extremely far-reaching freedom, since he can eat "of every tree of the garden". But his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfillment precisely in the acceptance of that law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his very love proposes this good to man in the commandments.

God's law does not reduce, much less do away with human freedom; rather, it protects and promotes that freedom. In contrast, however, some present-day cultural tendencies have given rise to several currents of thought in ethics which centre upon *an alleged conflict between freedom and law*. These doctrines would grant to individuals or social groups the right *to determine what is good or evil*. Human freedom would thus be able to "create values" and would enjoy a primacy over truth, to the point that truth itself would be considered a creation of freedom. Freedom would thus lay claim to a *moral autonomy* which would actually amount to an *absolute sovereignty*.

Some people, however, disregarding the dependence of human reason on Divine Wisdom and the need, given the present state of fallen nature, for Divine Revelation as an effective means for knowing moral truths, even those of the natural order, have actually posited a *complete sovereignty of reason* in the domain of moral norms regarding the right ordering of life in this world. Such norms would constitute the boundaries for a merely "human" morality; they would be the expression of a law which man in an autonomous manner lays down for himself and which has its source exclusively in human reason. In no way could God be considered the Author of this law, except in the sense that human reason exercises its autonomy in setting down laws by virtue of a primordial and total mandate given to man by God. These trends of thought have led to a denial, in opposition to Sacred Scripture (cf. *Mt 15:3-6*) and the Church's constant teaching, of the fact that the natural moral law has God as its author, and that man, by the use of reason, participates in the eternal law, which it is not for him to establish.

The exercise of dominion over the world represents a great and responsible task for man, one which involves his freedom in obedience to the Creator's command: "Fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). In view of this, a rightful autonomy is due to every man, as well as to the human community, a fact to which the Council's Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* calls special attention. This is the autonomy of earthly realities, which means that "created things have their own laws and values which are to be gradually discovered, utilized and ordered by man".

Not only the world, however, but also *man himself* has been *entrusted to his own care and responsibility*. God left man "in the power of his own counsel" (Sir 15:14), that he might seek his Creator and freely attain perfection. Attaining such perfection means *personally building up that perfection in himself*. Indeed, just as man in exercising his dominion over the world shapes it in accordance with his own intelligence and will, so too in performing morally good acts, man strengthens, develops and consolidates within himself his likeness to God.

Even so, the Council warns against a false concept of the autonomy of earthly realities, one which would maintain that "created things are not dependent on God and that man can use them without reference to their Creator". With regard to man himself, such a concept of autonomy produces particularly baneful effects, and eventually leads to atheism: "Without its Creator the creature simply disappears... If God is ignored the creature itself is impoverished".

The teaching of the Council emphasizes, on the one hand, *the role of human reason* in discovering and applying the moral law: the moral life calls for that creativity and originality typical of the person, the source and cause of his own deliberate acts. On the other hand, reason draws its own truth and authority from the eternal law, which is none other than divine wisdom itself.⁶⁹ At the heart of the moral life we thus find the principle of a "rightful autonomy" of man, the personal subject of his actions. *The moral law has its origin in God and always finds its source in him*: at the same time, by virtue of natural reason, which derives from divine wisdom, it is *a properly human law*. Indeed, as we have seen, the natural law "is nothing other than the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided. God gave this light and this law to man at creation". The rightful autonomy of the practical reason means that man possesses in himself his own law, received from the Creator. Nevertheless, the autonomy of reason cannot mean that reason itself creates values and moral norms. Were this autonomy to imply a denial of the participation of the practical reason in the wisdom of the divine Creator and Lawgiver, or were it to suggest a freedom which creates moral norms, on the basis of historical contingencies or the diversity of societies and cultures, this sort of alleged autonomy would contradict the Church's teaching on the truth about man. It would be the death of true freedom: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17).