

Year 2025  
**Course: Recognising oneself**  
**The Statutes: a path and a mirror**

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Lesson 4A  
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### **Rules and Freedom**

*When we talk about Statutes, we immediately think of rules and, therefore, of freedom, which is also a very trendy topic in today's society, isn't it?*

Freedom is a big word, and perhaps it is the word that best explains the spirit of our time. In some way, our time is a time of freedom. It demands freedom. At least, this is the case in the West or in the Westernized world. Freedom is one of the defining features of our time. This is well known not only by the great movements of emancipation that arise here and there in the world, but also by the market. In fact, if you pay close attention, almost all adverts – for a car, a blender, anything - in order to sell the product, they propose and guarantee, and promise freedom to those who buy it. If you buy that phone, you will be freer! Let's ask ourselves: when we talk about freedom, what are we talking about? I'll begin by saying that I'm not going to answer this question with a definition or a word that's all-inclusive; rather, I would like to offer a reflection, which I hope you can continue wherever you are and together with your communities. And the question of freedom, as we'll see right away, as was already mentioned will be connected to another key issue: that of rules.

*Freedom is a word that can be much more appealing than rules and statutes. But what do we mean when we talk about freedom?*

A few years ago, in his bestseller *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Baumann, used a very effective metaphor to talk about freedom. The metaphor is that of a buffet. Just like at a big banquet, the difficulty lies only in choosing which canapés or pizzas to put on your plate and so it is with our world. It is a world full of possibilities, of choices. No choice is inherently wrong, no one will condemn someone else for choosing the canapés with salmon rather than those with ham. However, if there is no mistake, there is also no certainty that we have made the right choice. For those who choose, the question of the individual then becomes: Have I used the means available to me in the best possible way? One faces a dilemma: in a world full of opportunities, making choices means leaving aside infinite possibilities. We are faced with a problem of excess, not scarcity. In this kind of paradigm where maximum freedom coincides with omnipotence, everything is then reduced to the individual, it's reduced to me. Baumann says that it is up to the individual to discover what they are

capable of and to push that capability to the extreme limit. It is also to choose the goals to which that capability can be best applied, in other words, for the greatest possible satisfaction.

*So, a person or an institution can choose who they want to be. In other words, their identity comes through.*

In a world of infinite opportunities, the individual seemingly has the potential to become anyone. Yet, that becoming anyone is a choice that excludes other kinds of opportunities. Even worse: if that individual achieves their goal and becomes that someone they wanted to be, then the game is over. They no longer have another option. Once they have become someone, they are no longer free to become someone else. In short, you are no longer free, you are no longer yourself. Baumann states that we are faced with a paradox that generates anxiety. While not knowing what to choose can be frustrating, on the other hand, a choice that excludes all other possibilities, which means to use freedom in an absolute way, disappears. This idea, which we could summarize as the concept of absolute freedom, is an idea where one wants not everything, but *the* everything. It is the delirium of omnipotence that the Bible speaks of in a masterful way, through that famous passage. In Genesis 1 – we all know it, at least by hearsay – the serpent says to the woman: 'If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will be like God, for your eyes will be opened.' Beyond the fact that snakes don't speak, and women don't pay attention to talking snakes, but these are literary genres of the Bible, the idea of the serpent is that of absolute freedom that wants to possess *the* everything. In other words, it wants to possess God. Ultimately, it wants to be God. The search for this absolute freedom, therefore, as Baumann explains very well, has anxiety as its counterpart. In addition to being a time of freedom, of searching for freedom, we could say, our time is also a time of anxiety. We live in a society of anxiety of wanting everything. However, the fact that we have a limited body, speak one language and not another and were born to certain parents and not others, certainly good but specific, already indicates limits to our situation. That is, we cannot choose everything. Some circumstances are already determined by our being here, by our being here in this moment, in this time, by being as we are and by having lived in a certain cultural and social context. Choosing seems to be the only way to achieve one's freedom. Without freedom and without choices, freedom itself dies. This is very complicated especially if we think of certain youth today where one already experiences a crisis in front of the choice of which cereal to put in the milk in the morning.

*And in all this talk about freedom, what do rules have to do with it?*

Now, let's talk about rules. We have expanded a bit on the discussion around freedom, but this helps us now to talk about rules. Many choices that we repeat form a certain habit. This is quite obvious to all of us. Many similar habits shape a social style, that is, a way in which people behave with each other in certain contexts. Let's take an example: Italians drink coffee after lunch. It's a social habit. This means it's a habit that each individual repeats multiple times. It's not just one person repeating it, but many who do. This way of interacting with others, of doing or not doing certain things, takes on a habit in certain contexts. Now, justice which is the foundation of rules as we will soon see, is precisely the act through which what is proper to a society and each of its members is guaranteed. Therefore, justice is a right such as the right to life, the right to have a pen in your pocket, the right to drink coffee or something else. In short, it is the right to possess something, from a small object to something larger, like life. And now we come to the topic of rules. The law is the description of our rights. Therefore, the right of each individual, from life to the pen to a cup of coffee. So then, the law doesn't put limits on freedom but is the way in which freedom is usually expressed and described in a certain context among a given people. The law describes the

organizational form of a group of people. When this organizational form changes because people change or because the world changes, because the circumstances in which people live change, then the laws also change. And it's good that laws change because humanity grows in awareness. It grows concerning certain actions, that should or, should no longer be carried out. So, I repeat, for this reason, in a very abstract way, the law doesn't put limits on freedom. Instead, it is the description of how freedom is routinely implemented in a certain group of people.

*And how does this principle apply to a religious institution?*

This is the point. Since we are learning about the Statutes of the Focolare Movement, therefore, of an institution that in itself exists within a religious context, the question is inevitable. This in itself, is not that simple and here we must necessarily be a little concise and simplify it. Religious organizations inscribe their laws on a foundation. This foundation is not a random one but, at least for Christian organizations, it is God. The Bible knows this kind of operation because the fundamental law of Israel is based precisely on this foundation, which is God. In the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which are ancient biblical books that establish and speak about the law, this law is established from a principle. This principle is love. It sounds very nice said like this, but it's also very complicated. Let's see why. Because it's paradoxical! That is, how can you oblige someone to love? The very act of love, which is the act that demands the greatest freedom, how can you force it? How can it be done? It's a biblical paradox. The commandments of love, in fact, outlined in Deuteronomy, seem to suggest that in them one can discern a certain resonance of a fundamental experience of the people of Israel: it is the experience of freedom. Do you know that the ancient peoples near Israel, from the Persians to the Greeks to the Romans, did not have the same idea and experience of freedom as Israel? Because freedom for them was a political matter. Let's put it like this, it was a relationship with a master: that is, is a slave free or not free? Or is a citizen free or not free in relation to a slave? Israel has a different experience. It has the experience of liberation, of being a people set free by God. And this act of liberation forms the identity of the people; that is, Israel becomes a people the moment it is freed from oppression and slavery. It is freed by a liberator who is God. In their daily prayer, the Jews remember this fact of liberation. So, love is at the foundation of the law because it is the experience of a freedom given by God to the people. Therefore, if love is possible only as an intrinsically free act, then placing love at the heart of the law of Israel means inserting this law of the covenant between God and the people into that experience of *agape*, of love and freedom, of the exit from the condition of slavery. For the Bible, then, love, justice, and freedom are a set of three that go together.

*And specifically in the Focolare Movement, how can we live this relationship between law, rules, and freedom?*

Let's reflect on an interesting fact: if a specific expression of law like that of the Focolare Movement, has love as its foundation, then that law is fragile. It is fragile because it's evident that, if love is missing, the law lapses, either partially or completely, losing its meaning because it loses its foundation. This is the case of the Focolare Movement because the Statutes of the Work of Mary set mutual love, mutual and constant love as the premise of every other rule. Therefore, it is the foundation of everything written in the Statutes and also in the individual regulations for those who belong to the Focolare Movement. The fact that it's required not just for there to be love, but that this love be reciprocal, makes the Focolare statute even more fragile, because it implies a symphony of multiple freedoms and gratuity. That is, it's not enough for one person to love, it's not enough for me to love Valentina; reciprocity is needed. Therefore, in the Focolare rule, everything else that

follows without reciprocal love collapses. Therefore, in harmony with the Bible, the Statute of the Focolare Movement appeals to the freedom of its members. It's as if to say: the Focolare Movement surrenders to the freedom of each of its members. For this reason, it opens itself up to a great possibility of fragility and exposure to failure, because I cannot force you to love. However, to this end, in harmony with the New Testament, the charism of Chiara Lubich indicated a path of love even before we had the Statute. Chiara condensed this path in an expression that is the fruit of an experience which is the fruit of revelation, and this is Jesus Forsaken. Jesus Forsaken is the experience of fragile love: a God who dies, a fragile God who surrenders to the freedom of women and men. By creating this freedom, God limits His own. He is a fragile God. So, there is no other way to love than that which is unfolded, expressed, shown and given by Jesus at the ninth hour in the cry of abandonment on the cross. That is a love that welcomes all, gives itself completely to everyone without reservation. This love lends an ear, offers an embrace, goes beyond, and goes through the non-God of today which is made up of division, conflicts, atheism of all kinds, sadness, and disappointments that are sometimes present in some of our communities. This may be because the apostolic fruits of the past are perhaps no longer visible. So paradoxically, all this means being fully in vocation in the call that Jesus Forsaken makes to every member of the Focolare Movement. It is a call to go where God is present, as one who is absent or who seems absent. Therefore, there is neither sadness, nor disappointment, discouragement, conflict, nor division that the members of the Focolare Movement are not called to go through.

*What advice would you give to young people? How can we encourage them to read the Statutes as a way to feel more free?*

That's a great question! I would like to answer it like this: I wouldn't give any advice to young people; rather, I would give advice to the adults who, if they don't want to lose even the few young people who remain and if in faithfulness to their call, to their Christian life, they want to witness to the joy of the Gospel to young people belonging to the Focolare Movement as well as those who are not part of it, then this is my advice: take seriously the premise found in the Statutes, in other words, live mutual love, which means letting ourselves be inhabited by love, which means to allow our relationships to be filled with the love that today is already dwelling among us, already here and now. It is this love that, by being witnessed through us who become its voice, its expression, its manifestation and its co-protagonists in the testimony of love, draws everyone to itself, not to us, but to Love, to God. And then perhaps it will spark the desire to discover this identity card of freedom that the Statutes represent. But only those who live and love Jesus Forsaken can do this. Thank you.