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Rule and Spirit

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RULE AND SPIRIT

"The written law kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Cor 3.6)

St. Augustine comments: "By the 'letter' the whole of Scripture is meant, and even all the moral precepts included in the gospel". St. Thomas adds: "Consequently the letter of the gospel would kill if one had not healing grace interiorly" (I-II 106, 1). The two doctors of the Church remind us that grace, the Spirit, are the origin of true Christian freedom. Thus the Christian is called to love and to liberty at once. "He is exempt from the law in so far as it is law, namely, external constraint, compared with the exacting love the Holy Spirit puts in our heart" (Yves Congar).

"The law of the spirit" (Rom 8.2)

St. Paul does not speak of a spirit of the law but of the law of the Spirit. He is thinking of the Law that is none other than the Holy Spirit. We are indwelt by a new strength, Love, the Holy Spirit, who leads us to fulfil the precept of charity that sums up God's will (Rom 13.10). "The fruit of the spirit is love" (Gal 5.22). "If you are guided by the spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal 5.18). The expression, "law of the Spirit", is inspired by two Old testament texts, one of which speaks of the new law, the other of the gift of the Spirit. They are like a preliminary sketch of the gospel of grace. "I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31.33); "I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees" (Ez 36.27). St. Paul's short-hand phrase, "law of the Spirit", is impressive: the new law proclaimed by Jeremiah is actually the gift of the Spirit promised by God in Ezekiel's oracle.

"Love and do as you please" (St. Augustine)

Love with that love poured out into your heart by the Holy Spirit. Carried along by him, you will be faithful to the Lord's will. "I always do my own will", said St. Thérèse of Lisieux — since she let herself be led by the Spirit, her will sought nothing outside God's good pleasure.

The rule, which spells out the radical gospel path for us, traces our way of holiness. The new text calls for new fidelity, as the retouching of a musical score calls for a new execution of it. The Spirit, who is Love, bears the heart along in genuine fidelity.

O divine Spirit, I want to be before you like a light feather, so that your breath may carry me where it will, and that I may not offer the least resistance to it.

(Francis Libermann, *Commentary on St. John*, p. 89)

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