

Author: Kovács István. Hungarian original was published in Unitárius Közlöny, 2022, 32/2 12-15, with the title: "Szentelési ima és beszéd". All copyrights remain with the publisher.

The translator wants to acknowledge the copyediting assistance provided by Ms. Karen W Burton.

UnitarianTorch contact: kokenyesi@unitariantorch.com

Prayer and sermon by Kovács István on the occasion of his consecration

"Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

2 Corinthians 3:17

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love."

Galatians 5:13

NASB

Our eternal God, our loving, caring dear Father!

When I stand here before You and my fellow brethren, at this uplifting celebration, my knees are trembling, and questions are swirling inside of me: Am I worthy of this? Am I suited for this tremendous task?

What strengthens me, almighty God, is that in the moments when prophets were called, similar questions, internal struggles and self-doubts surfaced. Because everyone who sizes up the magnitude of a task they called for, will, unavoidably, feel insufficient for it, if it exceeds their capabilities. Right here, Your comforting response comes in a prayer: You don't call the ones suitable for a task, but You enable the ones You call to become Your coworkers. What a message of gladness it is that Your trusting call enables all of us to accomplish anything in every area of life; Your call in itself is a force for creation, and after that Your words are miraculous encouragement for more action. We ought to receive Your call with joy, whether we are ministers in Your service, worldly leaders, or any and all of us called by You to carry out a task that surpass our abilities in any area of life.

I answer Your call by reciting the words of Isaiah whose doubts turned into powerful acceptance [Isiah 6:8]: "Here I am, send me.", and the words of Dávid Ferenc spoken from behind prison walls: "My spirit, you possess wings; do not disavow your true self." I am reciting the rock-solid words of Márton Áron, the unbreakable bishop of

Transylvania: “my Lord, if it is Your will for me to live out the example of Christ’s life for the needs of my nation who worship You from the depth of their soul, then non recuso laborem. I accept your will. I shall not run away from the task.” To such an acceptance I add the prayer of Rákóczi Ferenc, the second: “Grant me wisdom to make decisions, a heart to start carrying them out, and the power to complete them.”

Bless our congregations in Transylvania and in the mother country, all of our brethren in the Carpathian basin, and all throughout the world. Bless this celebration! Bring to life for this celebration, those who went before us, who held this cup and drank from it, as their spirits are with us here today.

Bless Your people who pray and work in the here and now. Bless those who, because of our love, will arrive into this miracle of being alive, so they dream and build Your beautiful country. Amen.

Celebrating congregation, dear brethren!

I am awed and moved to stand in this pulpit as an unworthy successor to great forefathers, and I pray I become worthy. I’m standing here, moved, because I have rarely seen the church so alive, filled with celebrating, praying seekers of God. We are in this unique period of celebration that takes us away from the present and makes us take flight into a timeless place where past and future embrace. I truly believe that those who held this cup throughout the centuries are all here in spirit, through all their dreams and accomplishments. I truly believe those who are awaiting to be called by our love to experience the miracle of being alive are also with us. Our future children who are dreams for us today, but are already present in God’s timeline.

I stand here and speak, because I have to speak. I speak of this strange thing called freedom; this thing that humankind has searched for so much that, as Szilágyi Domokos said: “In our searching we grew sorrowful calluses on our souls.”

We searched for freedom in God throughout history, on the right path, but woe onto us, sometime on the wrong path. In our Bible quotes two concepts strain against each other: the spirit and the flesh. In Greek, the pneuma and the sarx. We could call them the Holy and the mortal, or rather, the Holy and the flesh wanting to be saintly. During history the continuous conflict between those two concepts determined whether we lived in freedom or in captivity, whether weapons rumbled or peace was upon the soul of our people. The decision always depended on whether the pouring out of the spirit or the selfish action of the flesh dominated.

In the previous months of my bishopric -- as you know I was elected six months ago during the pandemic -- I spoke with journalists on several occasion. They asked me what type of radical, innovative goals have I set for my service as bishop, as they expected answers similar to what a politician would promise in terms of spectacular changes and new programs. In my response I explained that there is no place here for

the acrobatics of a personal ego, but for the continuity of humble service because that is what God and life expect from us. What we need to do is to return to our tradition, moving closer to God, acting alongside God. The innovation our modern age needs is the returning itself; the returning to God, to our roots, to our beginnings; the returning to that Christian foundation from which we are in the process of moving away from because we are seeking the freedoms of the flesh.

The circumstances of the people of this modern age are similar to the prodigal son. We are all familiar with the parable: the younger son demands his inheritance, leaves his father, and when his reckless, selfish search for freedom comes to an end, he finds himself at the feeding trough for pigs. He sought freedom according to the flesh, not according to the spirit. He had but one option: to return to the home of his father, to the spirit of God, where freedom is found, the very freedom he ignorantly sought somewhere else. Thus, the path of returning is a forward leading path, in truth, because the path points in one direction, in the direction of God. Such a forward pointing return was proclaimed by the Reformation, and Dávid Ferenc was also seeking those beginnings upon his return to the pure Christianity of Jesus. The returning to freedom is nothing more than returning to a godly world order, returning to the arms of the Father.

It still reverberates in me what one of my Catholic friends and his Unitarian spouse said: they never spend their time, or sacrifice their time, but, instead, they consecrate their time for each important task. The blessing they have been receiving is noticeable in their works. This present world that has lost its sanctity, sunk to the feeding trough for pigs, has but one option -- to return from the ungodly state to the sanctified state.

This is why I believe it is worth mentioning here that we restored the title of today's celebration to a "consecration" of a bishop, and we don't call it an installation or an initiation. In the communist era, we newly minted ministers were initiated like the pioneers of the communist youth organization. Today the bishop doesn't have to take an oath of loyalty to a ruler or a worldly power, as it was the purpose of the initiation of bishops in previous years, but the bishop has to stand before God, so from His Spirit we all are consecrated in our souls, from the bishop throughout our entire faith community. I am receiving the consecrating power from God and from the community; my coworker ministers, worldly leaders who serve with us, our Unitarian faithful in Transylvania, in the mother country, all Hungarian Christians, and those in other nations are at the extended end of the hands that pronouncing blessing on my head. We consecrate each other in the freedom that respects and serves each other.

I do understand that, no matter how important it is, consecration by itself does not make us instantly suitable for service. Becoming ready for service is such a transforming miracle that only God can perform it through our prayers. Because each time we ask for His help, we move one step closer to the fulfillment of our calling. This is why I call on you, my fellow ministers, and on every brethren of ours, to daily prayer,

because we are not a bystander club about religious worldviews. But, rather, we are a praying faith community who becomes suitable to receive the spirit of God only through prayer, and through that the calling to freedom, to service that is acted out in loving each other.

As a bishop (episkopos means service in Greek), as ministers, and as worldly leaders, we can be servants and guardians only if we are guided by God, if we ask for daily directions to make the best decisions so that we may become worthy to serve.

One of the most important lessons from my three decades of ministerial service is that my prayers, my service, that I expected to better the life of my congregation, actually changed me. Because, in my thoughts, I always believed what I prayed and preached.

I have a loyal, young friend, -my-nineteen-year-old self. A rebellious young man, who, in the suffocating atmosphere purged of freedom, found it crucial above everything else not to compromise regarding freedom. That young man, a day before he began his military service, sat at a table in a café, and sent his future self a message, like a time capsule, with the following thoughts: "It is possible that in the military or in a latter part of your life you will compromise, because you have matured and you feel that it is necessary, and you'll justify your compromise with a million arguments why you gave up your freedom. But if you do give it up, no matter how wise your arguments may be, you can not be right. Call me naïve, but remember that truth will always be with me." That young man is sitting here in the pews, and he sat in every church I served in, and he is always looking back at me from a mirror. He never gave up, he always called me out. We argued a lot; we always learned a lot from each other. He always reminded me that it was not compromising, conforming to a popular fad, or hoping for a profit, but seeking freedom that led me into the arms of God. Today I can look into the eye of that young man, and he nods in agreement when I say that he was right: freedom is not just getting out of the ropes that tied us down or shaking off our shackles, we felt these to be the most important at the time of our isolation, but, rather, the connections that I formed is freedom. My connections to God, my family, my friends, my nation, my church, to the land I was born, to the world created around me, in other words, to my roots and to the God who calls me higher. Because we are like trees: our roots hold us in place and sustain us from the deep, while our canopy spreads wide and reaches for the endless sky, and is sustained by the light of God.

Our freedom comes only from our connections. The most beautiful paradox is: freedom lived out through the connections of love. Saint Augustine said: "The brief commandment is true for all the times, and it is commanded to you as well. Love God, and do whatever you please."

This freedom is not achieved in an instant and it doesn't stay unchanged for all times, but, rather, as Apostle Paul proclaimed, the love that serves each other comes about during an ongoing struggle -- the struggle between the pneuma, the spirit, and the

sarx, the flesh that exists in sinfulness. Like training for an athlete, or pedaling by a bicycle rider, there is no stopping. If we stop, if we do not pray, we lose our vigilance, and immediately the sarx, the flesh takes the place of pneuma, the spirit of God, and freedom is replaced by the avid desires, the selfishness, or the world-endangering hunger for power of the flesh.

When we consider the majestic, progressive events in human history, we can catch a glimpse of the Holy Spirit in action during their manifestation, with the intent of aligning with a godly world order. When the good news of Christmas appeared, with it appeared the glory of God, and peace on Earth. When we look in the opposite direction, when darkness, tyranny, suffering, war took over, or when people turned their back to God, or when they misunderstood or misappropriated His will, people committed the most heinous crimes in His name.

Among the historic events guided by the Holy Spirit was the evangelium of Jesus, the message to redeem the world, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in prophets and founders of religious denominations, and every act guided by the revelation from God to change the world for the better. One such event happened in Transylvania in 1568 when the law of religious freedom was proclaimed at Torda, sanctifying our freedom to move towards God, and recognizing that we have to accept each others' ways of seeking God.

Most certainly we turned away from the Holy Spirit when, during the following nearly half a thousand years, we interfered in the practice of religious denominations, we erred, we were misguided. Admittedly that was part of our life. We can't forget the time when, for 150 years, our Catholic brethren weren't allowed to elect a bishop. Later, during the era of Counter Reformation our Catholic brethren were the ones to limit religious practices by Protestants. And on other occasions Protestant denominations made the practice of religion difficult among their denominations. That is all history. That is all in the past. They were not our transgressions, but this provides an opportunity to confront them. We, all the Christian denominations of Transylvania, are deserving of our magnificent heritage only if we recognize that through that God is offering an outstanding opportunity right now to seek out each other and acknowledge those transgressions, even though this chance has been there all along, and to honestly apologize: Protestants to Catholics, Catholics to Protestants, and Protestants to Protestants. Such is a true call to freedom, and the expression of serving each other. I am not saying this to be diplomatic, or to use empty figures of speech from the pulpit, but I speak from the heart; I do believe it is crucial for our existence that we hold hands. Because we need each other in our time when two extremes menace the world: one is the religious intolerance and fanaticism, and the other is anti-religiousness in its many forms. Because of its terrorist tendencies, religious fanaticism is easily recognized as dangerous; however, the anti-religiousness that consumes our world, is frequently deceptive, as it uses the slogan of freedom to separate people from God, and to subjugate people to its views.

In my youth the calling from God made me joyful about the beauty of being alive, and as that was pulsing through my veins, I wanted to share that joy with everyone; I would have loved to shake the lethargic people who dismissed me with a wave of their hand. In the words of Farkas Árpád (this was our motto at our high school graduation): “I wanted to wake up the tall, slumbering poplar tree.” I wanted to shout in the faces of people the words of Szilágyi Domokos: “Struggle is good; this human life is good.” Ever since those days I have believed that the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit is awakening and enlightenment, without which there is no freedom. Awakening to realize that we live in the midst of God’s miraculous creation. With that kind of enthusiasm I want to shake up those of us who became hopeless or discouraged, and to proclaim with the joy that it is worth praying and working, because the Holy Spirit is with us. We ask God to grant us, leaders, faith and enthusiasm, so that we can serve our communities with a prayerful soul and a wise heart. May we have the courage in all times to resolutely guide those entrusted onto us, knowing that God’s truth, and the understanding of the evangelium of Jesus are lighting our path. Let us be mindful that our church is the heir to significant values. During the centuries of tribulations our faith was tested many times, and the mere fact of our survival is the uncontestable proof that God has remained at our side from generation to generation, and He keeps calling us to achieve the greatest freedom attainable by mankind: the freedom of the ones who serve each other in love.

Hereby I call on all of us to work towards this greatest of freedoms: to serve each other. We fail to achieve our obligation if we just talk about freedom, our religion, and our heritage, but we don’t embrace individuals. Let us then serve our entire nation, the entire human race through serving the individual who has a face, who has happiness or pain in their eyes. They might be elderly arranging their will with trembling hands and still thirst for the solace of the continuation of their lives, they might be young struggling to make choices between the path of prodigal emigration, the connections to the land of their birth, and the seeking of freedom, they might be mothers at the start of a family looking for encouragement to have children, they might be dancers, poets, singers, miracle workers, people on a meteoric rise, people with a meteoric downfall, people who know how to love, people who deserve to be loved, people who live in the remotest corner of Transylvania or in the whirlwind of Budapest. I pray to God who called us to freedom to grant that all to us, and to be our coworker. Amen