

DISCERNMENT IN THE MAXIMS OF PERFECTION

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I don't know why I stay with the Maxims. Anyone looking at the surface of my experience with them would label me masochistic, since I have run the gamut of getting my fingers slapped to the real wrenching that comes from dying to my own ideas and letting go of seeming insights or truths. My preparation for this talk was true to this pattern, although I'd label it someplace in the middle of those two extremes of getting my hands slapped and wrenching.

Last summer, I used the preface, and the first and fourth chapters of the Maxims of Perfection to prove that the Maxims are not only teachers of discerning skills, but that they are also an experience of the discernment process itself. I ended that talk with a Medaillian definition of discernment, that is, "a process by which the heart 'sees' with the help of grace and the leading of the Holy Spirit, in order to distinguish what is the will of God, that is what will give him more glory and content him more, so that the heart may truly know what is real, that is, what is in God or being in God for it."

In choosing my topic for my sharing this summer, I blindly (I say blindly because I didn't know why at that moment, nor did I know what I was in for); I blindly chose to stay with the topic of discernment because I had the feeling that I had only scratched the surface of what the Maxims could teach me about this process.

It finally came to me that I had talked about the process of discernment, but not the product or goal or object of this search. I called it "God's will" and treated it purely as an intellectual concept at that point.

My first error was born at this moment. I had this year an experience that led me to a false hypothesis when encountered only at the intellectual or what

seemed to be the logical level of reasoning. My forty-four-year-old aunt was diagnosed as a terminal cancer patient in early December and was dead by March. My God could never will the suffering that both she and all of her family endured. It was utterly senseless. God could not will such utter and complete suffering. My thinking moved me to the false conclusion that, since God's will was not synonymous with the events of a person's life, that they must be separate.

Then I committed the sin of using the Maxims to "prove" my point. I focused my attention on the tenth chapter entitled: "Maxims of Indifference, Abandonment, and Conformity before the Will of God," but I was anything but indifferent. Aha! Maxim nine calls the events of your life "accidents," accidents, chance happenings. See? Even Medaille is saying they're unimportant by his choice of words! If it's not life events, then what is the will of God?

I pushed and forced and strained each word and got nowhere. I was stuck. At every turn I met dead ends, because I had approached the Maxims from a purely intellectual perspective, and I knew in my heart that they defy reason and logic. They don't always "make sense." Secondly, I had isolated Maxims from the whole work, and again, in isolation some are dead ends. I was trying to "figure out" something, trying to speak to them, instead of experiencing them and letting them speak to me. I had done that physically as well. We were working at one of our cottages in Erie, and I saw every phone call, every visit, even the gardener, as an interruption. Will you all please just go away? I'm trying to find God's will! I was looking for an "object," something tangible, and the Maxims led me to an experience, an experience of a relationship.

What did they teach me? The will of God for Medaille can neither be separated from nor equated solely with the events of our lives. Rather, it is in the

dynamism, the energy generated from the action of the Holy Spirit and my response to him within a given situation. It's that being in relationship, that perfect love that is his will. In a 1967 article in the French periodical Ascetical and Mystical Review, the author Second de Turin says this about the seventeenth century: "The will of God was often synonymous with love of God during this period when affective vocabulary was still imperfect." This seemed to concur with what the Maxims had told me. Both sides, my response and the stimulus of the Holy Spirit are necessary for this relationship. That's why Medaille cautions on one hand not to go ahead of grace: I can't respond when the stimulus isn't present, otherwise I choose what is not energizing, not life-giving for me; and, on the other hand, he says not to remain passive: when it comes to you, go along with it, move with it, respond to it, with great gentleness, humility, fidelity and courage. The balance that he's calling for here is not one that creates a state of equilibrium, but rather one of creative tension that explodes into new life, that allows the Holy Spirit to meet me at new depths, at more intimate levels with each ensuing event of my life. The effect is the creation of more and more spaces and possibilities from which the Holy Spirit can draw me in the future. And so, the process of discernment and the goal of discernment come together. ^{they become one.} Love is the outcome of loving Him, desiring Him more is the result of desiring him in the first place; more or new life is the gift of choosing life.

And it is a choice. Indifference does not mean not caring about anything. In Maxim six of Chapter ten, Medaille says: "Always be perfectly ready to receive with gentleness and indifference everything that is not contrary to God—to be

healthy or sick, happy or dissatisfied, loved or persecuted; to do one thing or the other; to live or to die." He's not asking me to be numb or to be unfeeling. He's not asking me to passively accept whatever comes along as in the tradition of Quietism. Otherwise, I'd be dead and not alive. I'd miss the stimulus of the Holy Spirit that may be present there, and I'd never be able to respond. Besides, even when I do recognize the Spirit, I ^{still} have a free will and can choose not to respond. What he is saying is that the Holy Spirit could act in either situation. In that light, the event is not essential; to suffer will not necessarily lead me to any deeper union with God than great joy or vice versa. These events merely provide a setting for my meeting with God. That is why Medaille calls them "accidents." For example, suffering is not always life-giving; it does not always embody the life-giving Spirit. It may be at this moment of my life that I'm not being called to suffer. In this case, it would be death for me to go to the cross too soon. I cannot limit God by saying that if something is difficult or distasteful, then it must be his will. "God did not create death," as the Book of Wisdom told us recently, and suffering for the sake of suffering is death. Suffering can only be life for me when the Holy Spirit is present there.

That is why it is only at the faith level that there can be a climate for discernment. God will not be discovered in the realm of logic or reasoning alone. "Why" is a non-question in face of the events of our lives.

Yet the event, the milieu of my relationship with God, is not entirely negligible. It's a kind of important non-essential. For I can't really meet him outside of these human contexts, either. That's why my effort to separate

God's will from those "accidents" was dead, was literally without life. This is the whole message of the Incarnation. This is why Jesus is our way. He is the concrete reminder that every moment and experience is telling me who God is and who I am. The question; therefore, becomes not "What is God's will for me?", but "Who is the God of my experience?"

This stance implies that I can't answer that question once and for all time. My experiences ^{at least the events of my life,} are ever new. God will not always speak in the same setting. What is salvific for me now may not be at a later moment. Present options may become closed doors in the future. That is why in Chapter 14 Medaille speaks of the "present will of God." That is why he warns us not to be anxious about the future. If I live my life in the future, my timing will be off, and I won't be able to meet a God who is present. His will won't be "accomplie," as Medaille puts it; that is, finished, completed. ^{in the} The Holy Spirit will send out the impulses, but I'll never complete the circuit by my response. He's throwing me the ball, and not only am I not catching it, I'm not even in the game!

God's will means for us to live and to always choose life. Even a "senseless" death can bear the seeds of life. Isn't that what Jesus proved in his very being? It is our glory to reiterate his message. Medaille ends the chapter about God's will by ^{stating} that in this is the perfection of our love and our holiness.

I know why I keep returning to the Maxims, even though I have gotten my hands slapped or had my ideas wrenched from me: the effects of those experiences have always been life-giving; they have created in me a thirst for more and more experiences of God, and; consequently, a movement toward all the "givens" of my life; they have brought me to a balance that is in essence a creative tension

that draws me more and more to the realization of the unity and wholeness of all of life.

Somehow, I imagine Father Medaille delighting in this experience of a hope that he expressed in the preface to the Maxims of Perfection. He says: "Read the following maxims carefully, meditate upon them frequently, and I hope through divine goodness that they will enlighten you about the great virtue, make known to you in what it consists, and help you to put it into practice. . . Believe, my dear reader, that if you use them in this way, the truths that these few maxims contain will purify your heart, will free it from the affection of all creatures, will enlighten it in order to know the great and true virtue, will make its exercise easier, and provide helps to practice it; in a word, they will fill you with Christ Jesus by stripping you of your self in order to clothe you with his self; and in the fullness of the Holy Spirit they will root you in the possession of a perfect peace, will crown you with merit, and will successfully lead you to the happiness of eternity in order to possess a great glory there. This is the good that I wish for you with all my heart."

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July, 1979