

THE WILL OF GOD

Sister Veronica Fortin
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario
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I was not present with the Research Team last summer when each member decided upon a theme to be given in this summer's programme. Nor did I know until March of this year that I would be free to work here at St. Paul. So when I wrote to Julie to tell her that I could come she suggested I choose a theme and be prepared to present it if it could be fitted into the programme. I picked up the book of the "Maxims of the Little Institute" and began to read through them to see what would surface for me - something that was speaking to me where I was at. As I read I was amazed at the number of times I found the expression "the will of God", and so I decided to pray the Maxims for awhile. After a couple weeks I knew that's what my theme would be. And so, my talk is not a theological consideration of the will of God, but simply a result of my pondering and a putting together of my reflections. It is how I came to understand "the will of God" as found in the Maxims. I quote primarily from the Maxims of the Little Institute, though I did use the Maxims of Perfection as well.

I would like to begin with a reading of two verses of Psalm 122.

"To you have I lifted up my eyes, you who dwell in the heavens;
my eyes, like the eyes of slaves on the hand of their lords."

"Like the eyes of a servant on the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes are on the Lord our God . . . "

I chose this psalm because I see it as my stance before the Lord. Obedience to God's will is synonymous with "receiving the Word and acting on it." However, to receive it, I must hear it. And so, just as the eyes of slaves are on their lord and the eyes of servants on their mistress, watching, waiting for a sign that will indicate the will of the master - so I must be before the Lord - listening, attentive, ready to move at the slightest sign of God's word spoken to me in whatever way it comes.

I like to think of the will of God as a Father's dreams for me. And I want to know what those dreams are, so I need to listen, be attentive, sensitive to the movements within me through which He reveals Himself, His action, His drawings, his calling me - so that if I am faithful to how I experience these, step by step the dream will unfold as I live each moment.

What I would like to treat of in this talk are:

1. Implications of seeking the "will of God."
2. Some means which enable me to seek God's will.
3. Consequences of living the will of God.

The question of the "will of God" is probably one which, whether we like to admit it or not, most of us try to avoid. I believe this is so because it is a very demanding aspect of our lives - perhaps the most demanding. It was easier for us years ago to say: "Your will be done, Lord", for at that time, we were taught that God's will was found in the rule and in the will of our superiors; we didn't have to seek it, discern it as we would say today. Also, I believe it is true for many of us - at least it is for me - that we did not really see beyond those beautiful

words to the reality of the implications behind them. Yet, the seeking of God's will remains an integral part of Christian living.

How did Jean-Pierre Medaille view the question of God's will? Certainly he considered the seeking of it of primary importance for our growth in Christ. Of the 100 Maxims of the Little Institute, 28 of them deal specifically with "the will of God", not to mention those in which he uses other terms to express the same thing; and the book of the Maxims of Perfection contains one whole chapter entitled: "Maxims of Indifference, Abandonment and Conformity Before the Will of God."

Undoubtedly, our founder was a man deeply rooted in Jesus, and he saw that Jesus' whole life was a constant seeking of the will of His Father. He also saw not only where it led Jesus ultimately, but what each step meant for Him on the journey. If Medaille calls us to the imitation of Jesus in this search for the Father's will, it is because he sees in it a means of our being conformed to the image of Jesus and thus of pleasing the Father. In all the documents of Medaille, and especially in the Maxims of Perfection, the will of God is central. At times it is synonymous with "the glory of God", sometimes with "the total double union". Most often the founder links together God's will, God's glory and God's contentment. We see this in Maxim 2 where we are presented with a challenge to make God's will, God's glory and God's contentment central in our lives.

"Take it as a general rule for your inner being, for your virtues and for your actions, that 'you must be made perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect', that is to say, embrace in all things what will bring about the greater glory of God, be more conformable to His holy will, and be more pleasing in His sight."

Is being more pleasing to the Father the same as being more conformable to His will? This is a question the team asked as we worked on the translation of the Maxims. I see conformity to the will of God as making us more pleasing to the Father because it makes us more like Jesus. In the Poems of John of the Cross, the author interprets the Father's words at the Baptism of Jesus as follows:

"Nothing contents me, O my Son,
Except to be in your presence,
And if someone contents me,
It is that I love him in you.
The one who resembles you the most
contents me the most." (Poem XII)

And so, when Medaille says in Maxim 26:

"Seek in everything God's contentment and not anything else...."

he is asking us to be like Jesus. But to be like Jesus is to live in the Father's will.

According to Medaille, we are to

"accept without hesitation the loss of all good and the suffering of all evil rather than the failure, however slight, to fulfill the holy will of God." (M.13)

While the team was working together on the translation of the Maxims of the Little Institute in the summer of 1975 at Erie, Pennsylvania, we became very conscious of the demands made upon us in the living of them. As a consequence, our own reflections

resulted in the question which follows the Maxim I have just quoted: "God ... his grace...his will...but to what lengths might that lead me...and to what deaths?" The search for the will of God in my life implies many deaths—indeed an emptying of self which is a life-long process. Medaille says in Maxim 16:

"In everything and everywhere, have only God, his will and his glory before your eyes, and make no account of anything else."

This Maxim offers me the highest motive for all my actions, but it also points out to me that to live it I must empty myself of self. Maxim 18 speaks again of this self-emptying humility required:

"Make so perfect a sacrifice of self and of will that you are empty of self from this time on, and thus you will no longer be able to choose deliberately anything except that God's will be completely and perfectly accomplished in you, by you, and among all others."

Purity of intention, single-mindedness, self-emptying --- all these are implied in our daily striving to live God's will. I say daily striving, for the will of God can only be lived in the present moment of our lives.

The will of God is not some blue-print away out there to which I am constantly trying to adjust my vision in order to see it more clearly. Rather, the will of God is in all the events of my everyday living, in each moment where God meets me and reveals His presence to me - in people, in situations, in a book, in my work, in interruptions...in most unseemly ways. And, the more contemplative I am, the more readily will I recognize Him there. Merton says: "Contemplation shows a man how to seek God in His will. It makes the soul attentive to God's presence and God's desires." And again: "In contemplation God is the principal agent who infuses his gift into the soul and who, by this means, takes possession of the soul's faculties and moves them directly according to His will."

Ignatius' method of Examen of Consciousness enables me to become such a contemplative person. By means of it, he would have us reflect daily on the situations, events, persons, etc. that have touched our lives to see how God is acting in us through the movements we experience. If I am faithful to this practice, I can learn to find God in all the events of my life, recognizing what He is calling me to from moment to moment. This reflective awareness enables every moment to become sacrament for me, because that is where and when I meet God and recognize His will.

I believe those first women who grouped themselves together as Daughters of St. Joseph must have been familiar with such a method. They were women "in movement", recognizing that God's will is a goal but also a process. And the action taking place is within the person. It is saying "yes" to the next step, to what God is calling me to NOW - IN THIS PRESENT MOMENT.

Father Medaille considered this so important that he counsels us not to waste time and energy in a useless search for what God might will for me tomorrow or sometime in the future. Maxim 20 clearly points this out:

"Apply yourself seriously and totally to perform with perfection the present will of God, not diverting yourself from it, to the detriment of your obligations, by considering uselessly what will be intimated and manifested to you in due time and place."

In this Maxim I am also reminded that carrying out what I see as God's will for me implies trust. I must believe that the loving Father will give me the grace I need at the present moment to be totally for Him. St. Francis de Sales, the saint of the great love of God, says in his Spiritual Conversations: "Remain in the arms of Divine Providence without entertaining any desire unless it be to want what God wants of us." (No. 21) Am I able to say with Jesus: "It is meat and drink to do the will of Him who sent me until I have finished His work?" If I wish to know whether or not the will of God is the core of my life I need only examine my living out of Maxim 54 which urges me to:

"Empty yourself of all human respect and of the least blameworthy concession, and declare, with a generous heart, never to yield in anything that would be against God's will."

How do I learn to live God's will? Can I really speak of means of arriving at the practice of such a virtue? Truly, so much overlaps in the search for God's will and in the practice of it that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the means and the practice. However, it seems to me that Father Medaille has set out the direction for us in the opening words of the chapter on "Conformity to the Will of God." He begins: "In order to reach the perfection of this virtue, desire very little in this world, and what you do desire, desire that very little." (MP Chapt. X) Maxim 17 repeats these words and adds:

"And better yet, live without desire and without set plans. Abandon yourself, surrendering very gently, to the very loving Providence of God your Father."

We are also reminded to

"Consider as suspect any desire which is overeager." (M 68)

Overeagerness in our desires and in our searching is a sign of self seeking. The opposite of this is to surrender our desires and to abandon ourselves totally to God. Commenting further on our desires, Father Medaille, in truly Ignatian spirit, invites us to a sort of holy indifference with regard to our own interests in order to bring us to the purest of desires, i.e. the desire for God's contentment.

"Seek in everything God's contentment and not anything else, and the better to practice this, remember in the entire living out of your life, in desolation, in sickness, etc., to desire God's greater contentment without giving a thought to your own interests." (M 26)

Needless to say, this constant search for God's will in our lives springs from growth in the love of God, which is synonymous with growth in resemblance to Jesus. It is no longer a question of simple imitation of Him, but rather that he becomes more and more the living force in us. It seems to me that in the Maxims of Perfection there is a progression in the demands which our founder places upon us -- and this is true especially in regard to the seeking of God's will. In the later Maxims, Medaille is not speaking to beginners in the spiritual life, but to those who have already walked the way of Jesus for some time and have been deeply touched by the Father's love. Indeed, Maxim 2 which I quoted earlier invites us to "embrace in all things what will be more conformable to God's will." We embrace only when we love, so the person truly in love with God will be ready to meet the challenges of love.

"Be always ready to obey peacefully, indifferent to all that is not against God's will: to live or to die, to be healthy or ill, happy or unhappy, loved or persecuted, finding always your complete contentment solely in fulfilling God's will." (M 72)

The person who responds to such an invitation takes on a greater resemblance to Jesus who was content only in fulfilling the Father's will.

The consequence of such a practice is God's greater glory and contentment and our greater freedom and peace. We become more free in our whole person: free in will, in desire, and in action, to recognize and to choose God's will. This freedom enables us to

"Be above everything that is not God." (M 86)

- and that kind of freedom brings peace.

A summary of the quest for the will of the Father is offered us in Maxim 95:

"Develop fully in yourself indifference and resignation to the will of God; abandonment of self once and for all to the orders of his good pleasure, whatever may be the circumstances of your life; a tender affection for the very pure will of God, an ardent desire to be entirely according to His heart. All these expressions describe for you, in a variety of ways, the perfect conformity of your will to God's, which constitutes your entire perfection."

For Medaille then, our perfection consists in seeking the will of God and of acting on it in love - a love which spills itself over in the service of the neighbor for the sake of the total double union. Everytime I enter into the "death" of the next step, I see a connection between God's present will and love. The real goal of "obedience", which is another way of saying "the will of God," is the total double union.

Is what I have painted for you an "ideal" picture? Does Father Medaille call us to something unrealistic or unrealizable? It would seem so only if we forget that while he invites us to the perfection of love, he never tires of reminding us that it is not our work:

"Root the strength of your resolutions and the hope of the success of your undertakings in the knowledge of your great weakness and the total mistrust of self, as well as in the firm and assured confidence you ought to have in God, for whom nothing is impossible and who will always assist you in everything you undertake for his glory through the movement of his grace and according to the orders of obedience." (M 8)

We find everywhere in the Maxims such expressions as: as much as you can; if you are able; whenever possible; you can by grace, etc. Medaille clearly leads us to an awareness of our own weakness and frailty but peacefully brings us in our powerlessness to the love of God our Father to Jesus who is our strength, and to the Spirit who will achieve the work in us if we remain open. Knowing our weakness and trusting in God's providence enables us to expect peacefully that God will work out his loving will in us:

"In your greatest troubles and dangers hope with a firm confidence not that God will comfort or deliver you but that he will effect in you and through you his holy and loving will, and live perfectly at peace with this hope." (M 24)

If our founder calls us to anything, it is to the perfection of love which manifests itself in a single-minded desire to live united to God's will - His will that all may be one. As a Sister of St. Joseph, I would want to enter into the obedience of Jesus who came to do the will of His Father, which obedience not only enabled Him to share in the Father's glory but through his death enables us to become one and enter into that same glory. St. Thomas Aquinas has said: "It is obedience which makes us fit to see God." This is the prayer I make for all of us whom Father Medaille addresses as His daughters.