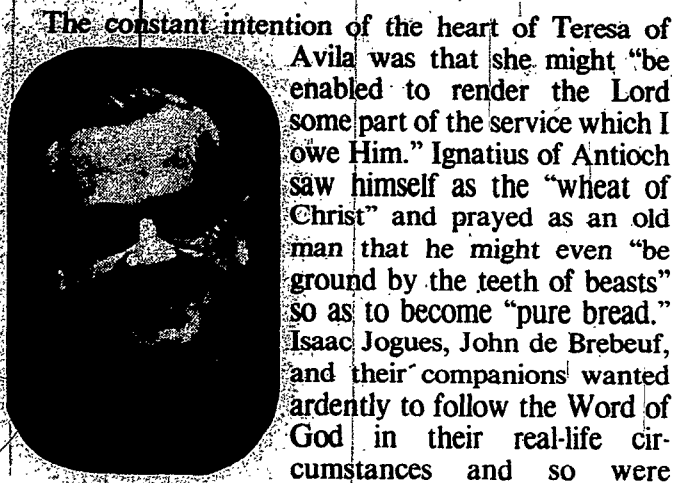


Pastoral Perspective

We are surrounded this week by the feasts of many great saints whose consuming desire was to do the Will of God.



The constant intention of the heart of Teresa of Avila was that she might "be enabled to render the Lord some part of the service which I owe Him." Ignatius of Antioch saw himself as the "wheat of Christ" and prayed as an old man that he might even "be ground by the teeth of beasts" so as to become "pure bread." Isaac Jogues, John de Brebeuf, and their companions wanted ardently to follow the Word of God in their real-life circumstances and so were eventually tomahawked as they imitated the example of Jesus: "No one has greater love than he who lays down his life for his friends."

This very day we celebrate the feast of the evangelist Luke. The overriding purpose of Luke's missionary travels and of the Gospel and Acts of the Apostles which he wrote for the Christian community was to proclaim and celebrate the Good Pleasure of God and his Good Work on our behalf, the wonderful accomplishment of his Will to save us, and the primacy in the Christian life of obedient collaboration with and gratefulness for that tender, healing Will of God which brings our salvation. Luke's Gospel is a magnificent hymn of the compassionate and effective goodness of our "Father's business" and of the joy of the poor but obedient community that lets itself be gathered in our "Father's house." Luke is really talking about the Father's merciful Will and about our participation in that Will when he announces in today's Gospel, "the kingdom of God is very near to you."

More than any of the other evangelists, Luke tries to give us some deeper understanding of what it means to welcome and to do the Will of God. He says that Mary "believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled," and that she assented to it: "let what you have said to me be done." He tells us that she "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart," that she found the Lord, her son, by finding him "busy with my Father's affairs," and that when she was puzzled by the mystery of God's unfolding will "she stored up all these things in her heart."

In a crucial scene in his Gospel Luke portrays Jesus transcending all the claims of blood kinship and proclaiming, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice." When he wants to represent a key final moment in Jesus' cooperation with the Will of his Father he puts this prayer on the lips of the suffering Jesus in the garden: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your Will be done, not mine." Then, describing the death of Jesus, the high culmination of Jesus' own obedience to the Will of God, he states with utter theological simplicity: "When Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, he said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'" Finally, after the ascension of the Lord, Luke pictures the first followers of Jesus "in the upper room where they were staying, ... joined in continuous prayer," awaiting the direction and the enabling power of God's spirit.

In these and other passages Luke gives us a true insight into what we mean when we speak of the Will of God.

Sometimes we seem to talk of the Will of God as if it were a gigantic prefabricated highly detailed jigsaw puzzle in the heavens, and as if our human responsibility were to try to search for the already cut but hidden pieces, and then to try to guess by trial and error where and how and when to fit them in the already totally planned picture. We also speak of the Will of God for us as if it were an already detailed and completed blueprint stored statically in God's mind.

In such an understanding of the Will of God, our human freedom, creativity, and resourcefulness are not honored, as God himself honors these gifts he has given, and God's own creativity, tenderness and cooperation are in some way reduced to rigid game-playing.

The God of Luke's Gospel is not like this. The Will of God which Luke seeks to celebrate is the constantly renewed and renewing call and response of God's directing love still creating and still engaged in enabling conversation with his people's hearts. For Luke, the Christian who is faithful to the Will of God is the poor man or woman who believes God's gracious promise, who lets it be done in his or her life, who ponders the things of God, who hears the word and puts it into

The Will of God

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practice, who works to avoid agony and yet says, "Nevertheless ..." who commits his or her spirit into the Father's hands, who awaits and receives the direction and power of God's spirit.

In a strict sense, I do not think we ever can or ever do know the full merciful Will of God. It would be presumptuous of us to think we could. Our hope and our prayer is that we may come to know ways, choices, patterns, decisions, modes of living that are compatible with and obedient to that comprehensive and compassionate Will. This is what God asks of us. For us, this is to know and "follow" Christ as best we can by the power of his spirit living in us — though the phrase "to know and follow Christ" implies no simple intellectual and volitional task, but rather a continuing seeking, a continuing conversion. Yet Christ, himself, has said and still says: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you know my Father too. From this moment you know him and have seen him." (John 14:6-7)

To know the Will of God is, in Christ's sense, a lifelong desire and commitment to discern what it fully means, in one's own life, to obey the two great commandments that he gave us, for "Anybody who receives my commandments and keeps them will be one who loves me; and anybody who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and show myself to him." (John 14:21-22)

We have to hold in our minds and hearts the complementary realizations that God himself works in his people their salvation in Christ Jesus (His Will for us) and that at the same time we are called to cooperate freely, to listen to, to obey, to honor and heed this work (Will) of God. This means that as individuals and as a Christian community we are never released from the loving command to seek, identify, interpret that Will in our regard, in all the aspects of our pilgrim journey to the Father.

God's Will is the great, all-encompassing Will that his kingdom of truth, justice, love and unity may come to its fullness and that we may participate fully in its creation using his commands and counsels to guide us to this end. How we choose to do this is rooted in the radical mystery of our personal and communal freedom which is itself rooted in the even greater mystery of God's effective love by which his purposes are made known, preserved, reconciled and enhanced in our lives.

Ladislav Orsy, the Jesuit theologian, speaks of the reverent providence of God by which the details of God's plan for us "somehow emerge out of our own resources of nature and grace," resources which he has given us and which he allows us and enables us to develop.

"At one time we must create a decision after grace-filled and intelligent deliberations. At another time we have to ask for light and strength that we cannot muster in ourselves. Granted, there is something new in all decisions, whether they are created from our ordinary resources or are the extraordinary gifts of God. But in one case the fruit is produced out of the ordinary potentials of the tree; in the other case God's intervention produces the fruit that the tree could not bear."

We seek the Will of God together as a Christian community. Each one of us contributes his own discernment of the Will of God and his own response to that Will. The ageless guides to knowing and doing the Will of God are many. Each of the following is a great help as we go our way to the Father:

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

1. The reading of Scripture and listening to it proclaimed, in an attitude of prayerful listening, openness, teachableness.

2. Genuine consultation with other Christians, in ongoing ways and as particular needs or questions arise.

3. Open sensitive examination of one's own life: our consciences have their historical formation and their flaws, but they are the precious consciences we have and as such must be valued, treated with respect, worked with, listened to, taught, corrected so that over the years they may become more and more helpful, reliable indices of what God desires of us.

4. Prayer, "in spirit and in truth": both personal prayer in solitude and liturgical prayer in community. When one prays alone or with the community one begins to grow in a kind of inner honesty before one's own life and in the presence of Christ. A deeper sense of God's Will begins to emerge. This does not mean that a decision, or action, or attitude suddenly appears with a tag labelling it "God's Will." Rather certain values, commands, or counsels, certain priorities, certain needs, certain realizations begin to assume their true weight in the situation or question at hand and one begins to have a clearer, stronger sense of what God asks and of one's role in the fulfillment of God's Will.

5. The tradition and authority of the Church: one who seriously seeks the Will of God must take this seriously. That means that we have to listen to, study, and care about what the Church has taught by word and example. And the Church, itself, as it seeks the Will of God must also be taught through all the human means and gifts of God on which we have been reflecting.

6. The sacraments themselves: these are great, enduring helps to discerning and effecting the Will of God. If, for example, we believe in the abiding help and grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, then we experience a certain nakedness of spirit before God in the presence of another member of the Christian community whom God and the community have blessed and ordained to assist us in our sincere search for what is in conformity with God's Will.

7. Persons gifted with special kinds of human knowledge or asked to assume special kinds of human authority — such as doctors, lawyers, financial consultants, scientists, government leaders, and countless others: one cannot refuse to consult these persons when one is seeking the Will of God in matters where their particular knowledge or authority is relevant.

8. Watchfulness in this world: we have to love this world and be alert to the signs of our times, but we also have to call the world to its full development; we have to be "in it, but not of it." We then come to see that the working out of the Will of God is accomplished in and through our responsible presence in the earthly fabric of human history and faithful cooperation with God's purposes in creation and redemption as these are unfolded in the world and in the whole universe.

In seeking to know and live the Will of God, we have to learn not to fear "mistakes" or risks of mistakes. We pray for and try to act with the spirit's gift of prudence and yet we know that "perfect love casts out fear." The Will of God is a direction that can deal with mistakes, not a disconnected point in one's life. It is the total thrust of all our lives together that will ultimately fulfill God's Will in our regard, we hope and pray. Inordinate fear of mistakes is the opposite of the trust and hope that sustains and motivates the obedient lives of the saints. Rather, humble fear of the Lord casts them and us confidently upon the mercy and care of the Spirit of Christ Jesus who "comes to help us in our weakness" and "we know that by turning everything to their good God cooperates with all those who love him, with all those that he has called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:26-28)

We can perhaps grasp the realization that in seeking to do the Will of God WE are seeking to cooperate with a God who loves us, but it is very hard for us to get it into our bones that in seeking to accomplish his own Will, GOD HIMSELF is also constantly cooperating with all those who love him, and ceaselessly providing ways of turning everything to our good.