

Wish is not a will

ambition, he sent this woman away in order to become engaged to an heiress. However, since his new fiancée was not yet old enough to marry, Augustine quickly took another mistress.

Years later when Augustine reflected back on these early years he described his will as enchained — caught in a chain which moved from desire to habit to necessity.

How, he wondered, was it possible to break out of this difficult situation? He wanted to change but found he did not do so. He described his struggle by observing:

"The new will was not yet strong enough to overcome the old. So these two wills within me, one old, one new, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart."

Augustine described his conflict as a halfhearted attempt to change his way of life. In the "Confessions," he revealed the intimate details of his prayers at this time:

"I had prayed, 'Give me chastity and continence but not yet!' For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon."

Augustine recognized later that this prayer was only a wish which he did not want to turn into a clear act of will. He came to understand that:

"No more was required than an

act of will. But it must be a resolute and wholehearted act of the will, not some lame wish which I kept turning over and over in my mind."

Many of us have faced a similar situation when we made New Year's resolutions or chose a particular Lenten penance: Despite good intentions, we didn't make a wholehearted act of the will to bring the wish into reality.

Augustine concluded finally that he had to pray to God directly for help. One day he felt an inner voice prompt him: "Why do you try to stand on your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon God and have no fear."

At this moment, the young man finally asked God for help and discovered the power of his will. It was then, with the help he believed God gave him, that he made a wholehearted act of the will: He moved from wishing to willing a different course of action.

This victory in one area of Augustine's life was repeated in many other areas until he became the priest, bishop and saint he was called to be.

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power of choice

them. For freedom distinguishes human beings from animals.

The power to make free choices — to exercise the human will — is a precious and terrible power. We can use it to fulfill ourselves or to destroy ourselves. Used rightly, free choice is a share in God's own creativity.

Jesus himself was not a puppet or a robot. He had to make deliberate, often difficult, choices. This is clear from the accounts of the temptation in the desert and the agony in the garden.

Choices always involve tension. People are torn in two directions at once. That is why, even though will power opens up all sorts of exciting possibilities, its exercise is not always easy.

There are people who feel that they can accomplish anything if they have enough will power. Often this leads to disillusionment, frustration, tragedy.

St. Paul gave a classic description of this universal problem. Speaking not in his own name but in that of all humanity, he wrote:

"I cannot even understand my

own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate... The desire to do right is there but not the power. What happens is that I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend... What a wretched man I am! Who can free me from this body under the power of death?... The law of the spirit, the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, has freed you from the law of sin and death" (Romans 7,15-8,2)

So there are pressures and influences of all sorts that make it difficult to use freedom well. Can one escape the slavery which is the thief of freedom without God's help? The letter to the Philippians observes:

"It is God who, in his good will toward you, begets in you any measure of desire or achievement" (Philippians 2,13). God gave the gift of freedom; only God can empower its right use.

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FOOD...

...for thought

What decisions did you make today?

Have you made any decisions this year that affect your life at home, or your workday, or your future?

Can you recall a decision made some years ago that still influences you and those who are close to you?

Decisions. They represent a most important human task.

A philosopher might say that decision making is a sign that the human will is being exercised. A psychologist might examine patterns of personal decision making — thoughtless decisions or the refusal to make decisions — for evidence of the kind of personality at work.

But is discussion about the will reserved to the professional philosopher or to the psychologist?

It seems that people commonly speak of the will and its power.

•For example, an exasperated parent can be heard to exclaim: "He is such a willful child!"

•Or it is said of a certain leader: "She imposed her will."

•Again, a committee chairman searching for agreement on a disputed point may ask: "What is the will of the group?"

•Of course, this terminology has found its way into the prayer of Christians, who regularly ask that "your will be done."

The will. We speak of it often.

Because of the human will's power, people can extend their reach into the world around them. Through exercise of the will a person's intentions and decisions are put into action. And that means others too can be touched by our will.

So this capacity to make decisions and put them into action is pretty awesome. It is a way in which a person makes connections with the rest of the world. For better or for worse, it puts us into contact with others.

The fact of the will, then, offers some food for thought:

•It points us inward to ponder our capacity to make decisions and take action that will shape personal life.

•It encourages us to contemplate the ways our own decisions and action might contribute to the life of the world and the people around us.

•It offers a clue that life holds real meaning — that there may well be some things worth deciding about, worth trying to fulfill.

In other words, the human capacity to make decisions just might serve an important purpose. Could it be considered God-given, an endowment that can be used to build up hope in the human family?

...for discussion

1. What makes it hard to be a decision maker when it comes to matters related to your personal life?

2. Can you think of a decision you have made that changed or altered your life?

3. Do you think the human capacity to make decisions — to use free will — can be regarded as a gift from God? Why?

4. Sister Prudence Allen distinguishes a wish from an act of the human will. What does she mean? Do you think there are times when wishing and willing become excellent partners?

SECOND HELPINGS

Discouragement is not an uncommon feeling. But what can you do about it? *Mary Perocket* offers suggestions in a booklet titled "Coping With Discouragement." It includes a series of brief chapters to read day by day. What decisions might people make and what mistakes are helped when a person experiences a period of discouragement? The author encourages a positive acceptance of one's own worth as well as a healthy outlook on the potential and limits of one's role in others' lives. Her thoughts on suffering offer food for thought. Suffering, she writes, "isn't nothing to fear." But it can be made meaningful. For example, she states, recovering alcoholics who give time counseling others share their suffering meaningfully. This might be called a booklet for the times when you wonder why bad things happen to good people. (Liguori Publications, 1 Liguori Dr., Liguori, Mo. 63057. \$1.50)