

DOES GOD HAVE A PARTICULAR WILL FOR EACH OF US?

Michel Rondet

THE QUESTION IN THE TITLE is a tricky one. Some days we are quite happy to talk about a particular will of God concerning our vocation. It is such a reassurance, such a comfort, when things are unclear or difficult. How nice it is to know we are part of a divine plan, foreseen from all eternity, in which every element of our lives, happy or miserable, has its place and its meaning.

But, at the same time, something in us protests. If things are like this, then God requires us to fit into a scheme fixed without any reference to us. Moreover, God has not even give us any secure ways of finding out what this scheme is supposed to be. Granted any normal meaning of the words, how could there be a will of God that did not constrain our freedom?

Then think of the anxiety involved in making a choice. Mistakes, even delays—these would be catastrophic. Ignoring God's plan, placing ourselves—even if we do not want to—outside his scheme: what a disaster! The anxiety only redoubles when we reflect that God's ways are not our ways, and when we experience each day how difficult, sometimes hazardous, it is when we want to discern what we call the will of God. It is as though God has put us at a crossroads. There are several ways forward, but only one right way. And God has not given us any reliable means of finding out which one it is.

The basic image of God here is just perverse. Such thinking cannot reflect the attitude of the God of the covenant, the God who has come to save what was lost.

But there is more to be said. As we know perfectly well, this same God is the one who calls us by name. Our encounter with this God is a process particular to each one of us. From Abraham to Peter, salvation history abounds in examples of people called to new life in order to carry

out a precise mission. Often the reality is expressed symbolically through a change of name. Abram becomes Abraham; Jacob becomes Israel; Simon becomes Peter. The missions of Moses, Jeremiah, Paul—these indeed correspond to a particular will of God. So much so, that these missions mark their recipients' lives in a unique way. Mission leads them to solitude, in the most authentic sense.

Are we, then, to see these biblical figures as privileged exceptions? Or, on the contrary, are they normal, examples of what we are all in fact called to live?

A Badly Put Question

Every priest, every teacher trying to help young people find their path in life will, at one point or another, have had individuals coming and saying, with a mixture of hope and anxiety: *I've got a decision to take. I want to do God's will, and I don't want to get it wrong—that would be awful. But I don't know what God is expecting from me. And so I've come to you so that you can tell me how to find this out and be quite sure.*

If the matter is put in these terms, the question cannot be answered. And to try to do so is at best presumptuous. Who could ever have that kind of insight into the divine will? We say that discernment is important, and rightly so. But discernment does not deliver God's plans, whatever they may be, into our laps. It does something else. It puts us in a place where we can recognise, from among our desires and longings, those which can be attributed to the Spirit of God. And this is not at all the same thing.

If the question is put in the way just evoked, the only answer we can give is to say to the young man or woman concerned:

God's will is not primarily about whether you choose this or that, but about the use you make of this or that. You choose for yourself the way of life that is going to be most fruitful and happy. And you make your choice based on reflection that is shaped by your faithfulness to Christ, and free from both selfishness and fear. Think about who you are, about your past, your history, about the people you have met, about your sense of the needs in the Church and the world. What is the personal response you can give to the calls you have sensed in the gospel? What God wants of you is not that you choose this way or that, in line with what God might have foreseen from all eternity for you. Rather, you should create today your response to God's presence and God's call.

No longer, then, is it a matter of discovering and carrying out some pre-established programme. Rather, we are bringing a fidelity to birth. Experience suggests that the change in perspective here is quite radical. It often demands time.

An In-Depth Conversion

A part of us finds it quite difficult to let go of a perverted image of God, one that often derives from the deism that has marked Western culture. Almighty God sees everything, and knows everything. Before God, human history runs its course like a play in which there are no surprises. God just waits until we act our part, and in just the way God has eternally foreseen. Of course no one would put the matter as crudely as this. But you do not have to dig very deep before you find this image of God at the root of some of our ways of thinking about God's will and God's providence.

Now there is, indeed, a divine plan for humanity. The Pauline letters and the Johannine prologue have tried to describe it: 'he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 1:4-5) 'To all who did accept him, He gave the power to become children of God' (John 1:12).

This plan of God is not some arbitrary decree of a sovereign and free divine will. It is a plan of salvation, a plan that expresses the very nature of God: self-giving, self-imparting love. The plan expresses externally the intrinsic communion between Father, Son and Spirit, a communion opening itself to a reality that is other in order to incorporate it. This covenantal plan embraces all history and all humanity. But because what God wants is covenant, what God desires is communion, the call can only be addressed to people who are free.

It is thus quite true to say there is a desire of God addressing each of us personally. If God manifests Godself through the Word, then this needs to be understood by each one of us. If God is calling each of us to be a daughter or son in the Only Son, God is waiting for us to express ourselves in a word corresponding to the Word. God hopes to hear this word from each of us. The revelation of God's love may well bring it to birth in us, but it is we who have to say this word. It will never be dictated to us.

To put it another way, in creating us in God's image, God is calling us, each of us, to give this image our own particular likeness. Just as Jesus gave the Image of the Father a particular human face, and the Father's



Word a unique intonation, so each of us is called to reflect in our lives the Father's holiness.

The God who confronts us is not, then, some infinitely powerful computer, planning out and then holding in its memory billions of individual destinies—a computer that we have to consult in fear and trembling about our future. We are dealing with Love: Love which has taken the risk of calling us to life, with all our differences, and with all we have in common. And this call from Love offers us covenant and communion. This is the face of God towards which we need to turn if we want to confront what is really the will of God. If we can do that, we will see this divine will not as a diktat or a matter of fate, but as a call to creation in common.

For a Creation

The response that we are going to give to God has not been prescribed anywhere: not in the Book of Life, nor even in God's heart. It is, rather, a matter of waiting and hoping: hoping for what God does not yet see, and for what we—yes, we—are going to endow with form and likeness. This is what makes for the grandeur and the riskiness of our lives: being called like this to awaken God's own joy through the quality and generosity of our response.

It follows that the choices we make are not creations from nothing. We prepare them out of the raw materials that are the ways our humanity has been conditioned: our temperament, our history. We cannot do everything, but we can give meaning and face to what would only be a

destiny. In this effort at personal creation responding to God's call, the Spirit meets us—not like an external force imposing itself on us, but rather as an energy from within, aroused in us by our acceptance of the Word of God and our participation in the life of the Church.

The gospel will not tell us what to choose, but it will open up horizons for our desires. 'You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you' (Matthew 5:26); '... strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness' (6:33). 'Where I am, there you may be also ...' (John 14:3); 'I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last' (15:16). The gospel will not tell us what we must do, but it will call us, in all things, to the perfection of divine love: 'be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48); 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12); '... if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart ...' (Matthew 18:35).

The Church, too, can direct its calls to us: to ministry, to consecrated life, to one or another form of service. But, whatever its needs, it will never commit anyone to a particular path without being sure of the person's free consent. To help us in our response, it links us to an immense crowd of witnesses, in which it teaches us to recognise sisters and brothers. There they are: their lives, their choices. They represent calls to us, not to imitate but to follow. Francis of Assisi, Ignatius, Thérèse of Lisieux are unique. They cannot be imitated. But their lives are so many invitations for us to invent in our turn the response that will lead to God's glory.

And if we do try to recover what they lived, we will see that nothing was less foreseeable and programmed than their lives were. They sought the will of God with their whole heart. They had a very lively awareness of having been preceded, led forward by the love of God: a love which they never stopped acknowledging with acts of thanksgiving. In their choices, they were *unsure*, they hesitated, often they were doubtful. But finally they confided themselves to the Spirit who was guiding them towards the Kingdom. Out of the widest variety of events, they were able to make graces, glorifying God in times of trial just as much as in success. The continuity, the coherence we admire in their lives often did not become clear except in hindsight, when an overview could be taken of a path that was very unsure. Think, for example, of the succession of choices marking the spiritual journey of Charles de Foucauld. What characterizes the lives of the saints is not so much any kind of rigorous scheme, but rather a quality of spiritual reaction to events, whatever these may be, even if they are the most unexpected.

Pascal wrote of events as the way God teaches us how to serve.¹ We have not always understood this idea properly. Let us not make this say what it does not say. Events are not a structure within which God encloses us. Events in themselves are not what make people saints.

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Events are the material given to us from which to construct our response. The response will indeed be marked by the raw material used, but much more by the architects: ourselves, as we take responsibility for our lives. You cannot do everything with everything, but you can always make something coherent out of a life. Love can make holiness spring from the worst of human contexts. The witness of those who have given their lives to the friendship of the marginalised, the disinherited, the excluded, never ceases to remind us of this.

Our question is whether it makes sense to talk about a particular will of God for each of us. But when the Church calls us to live out the communion of saints, it is reminding us that it is more accurate to talk about God's desire for us all, and of the personal response to this desire that comes from each one of us.

Dialogue of Two Liberties

The love of God goes before us. We will never stop learning what it is and giving thanks. But, as St Paul reminds us, this love emptied itself out (Philippians 2:7), subjecting itself to our freedom. From all eternity it had taken for us the form of the Servant. Which amounts to saying that in calling us to communion, God's only desire is to consecrate our liberty, to offer it a horizon which stretches it, just as it is, out to infinity: 'Abide in me as I abide in you I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.' (John 15:4, 11) If God has desires in our regard, it is first of all to see us bear fruit. 'You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.' (John 15:16) Could the point be any more emphatic? The priority of God's desire issues in a deep divine wish: to see us take on our liberty fully. Love evokes love; freedom evokes freedom; God's freedom evokes human freedom.

¹ See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, n. 552; also François Mauriac, letter of 26 September 1938, *Temps Présent* (30 September 1938), 1, available at http://mauriac.ex.ac.uk/26_septembre_TEMPS_PRESENT_1938-09-30_p1.dip.html, accessed 26 January 2015.

Moreover, the spiritual quality of my response to God depends on how freely I have made it. Is my response a fruit of deep liberty? Does it express a life really taking responsibility for itself? My decision corresponds to God's will if it makes me more free, that is, if it introduces into my life a coherence and meaning, if it unifies my past by opening it up to a future.

Here we are touching on one of the deepest characteristics of a spiritual decision. It will draw together what have previously only been successive threads in my past. It will be weaving into my memory links that I had not yet perceived, and introducing into the apparent discontinuity of my graces and my weaknesses a new continuity. And, at the same time, it will be opening up a future to me. When the past is reintegrated in this way, it will make new possibilities appear. What might have seemed impossible or meaningless becomes natural.

While returning from Jerusalem, Ignatius of Loyola took the decision to go to school. This choice integrated a whole history of graces around a spiritual thrust perceived as fundamental: the desire to help souls. At the same time, it opened up a future that Ignatius did not yet perceive, but which continued the logic of this choice: the foundation of the Society of Jesus.

Ignatius would come, as we know, to say that this foundation was entirely the work of God, whose love had preceded him and guided him at all stages of his life. For our part, we say that it was Ignatius' work, coming out of his generosity, his clear-sightedness, his fidelity. It bears the hallmark of his liberty. Must we then talk of a decision willed by God? We can see now that every contrast of this kind ignores the profound truth: that of encounter, that of communion between two freedoms discovering each other in a shared work.

For the Good of the Whole Body

When we talk about God's specific will for each of us, we need to be careful. In the Bible, every calling is particular, whether it is addressed to individuals or to a people. But St Paul will remind us that all grace is given for the good of the whole body. When we want to evoke the main stages of salvation history, we will mention names: Abraham, Moses, David, the Prophets, Jesus. These are proper names, with very specific destinies. At the same time, none of these figures can be understood without referring to their place in a shared history. There are no saints except in the communion of saints, in the movement of God's people

towards the Kingdom. And so, when I am discerning the will of God for my life, I am also asking myself about my place in the Body of Christ. This is not the place assigned to me, but rather the place that I can, that I want, to take. Which member am I going to be for the good of the whole Body? On this point, too, my response is mine. God is waiting for me to give it, in its generosity and creativity, so as to be able to take delight in my solidarity, just as God has taken delight in my freedom.

Are We Subject to a Particular Will of God?

We have to discern the calls of God in our lives. It would be absurd to say that there are no such things. God never ceases to create us by God's Word. We exist only in that Word, a Word which is calling us to live, today. It is for us to recognise the various words that translate this creative Word, just as children become attentive to the words calling them to move beyond themselves. Often it is when we try to reread our life as God sees it, in remembering God's love and fidelity towards us, that we become sensitive to the calls God is making on us. These calls express less a specific thing to do, manifest in a rule of life, and more the desire of God, what God is waiting for, hoping for: to see us invent, gradually, our response. And we will, after all, be able to reckon, free from anxiety, with the hesitations, the setbacks and ambiguities of our choices. As Emmanuel Mounier used to say: 'God is big enough to make a vocation even out of our mistakes'.

There are many mansions in the Father's house. God is waiting for us to build our own. And God is with us, at work.

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