

January 21, 2001

Dear John,

It is always good to hear from you. Your request for a description of Salesian discernment, some invigorating discussions on the topic recently with some friends, and a free afternoon suggests God would be pleased if I respond to you in a thorough manner.

St. Francis treats this topic in many places, but especially in the Treatise on the Love of God, Books 8 and 9 (On the Love of Conformity/Love of Submission). He begins by encouraging people to want to do God's will – to love God so much that we want to conform our wills to His Holy Will. Most of the time, the problem is not that we don't know God's Will. After all, Jesus did a very good job teaching and showing us what God wants. Most of the time the problem is that we don't want to know God's Will. We fear that it won't be what we want. We become easily irritated when someone asks us for our opinion only to find out later that he or she had already decided what to do before talking to us. We must be careful not to waste God's time asking for his advice if we have already ruled out half of the answers that he may give us.

In other words, our desire and willingness to do God's Will, which is really a love of God's Will, is essential. Holy people almost prefer God's Will to be the opposite of their wills because only then can they be sure that it was not their own will they were listening to the whole time.

St. Francis taught in the Introduction to the Devout Life that God has one will, but because of the limitations of human knowledge, it helps if we think of God having two wills. The first he called God's Signified Will and the other the Will of God's Good Pleasure. The Signified Will consists of all that God has told us (signified to us) through Scripture, the Church, Natural Law and inspiration – all we know he wants us to do. We do not have to discern if God wants us to love neighbor, help the poor, forgive our sister, attend Mass on Sunday, remain chaste before marriage, etc.

Inspiration can be tricky at times. St. Francis gives three signs that inspiration is truly from God. First, the inspiration is not of God if it interferes with our primary vocation. For example, God does not inspire parents to go to church every night and leave their kids unsupervised and neglected; He does not inspire bishops to live in a cloister like Trappists or Trappists to be as busy as bishops.

The second sign of true inspiration is peace and tranquility of heart, especially when the inspiration contradicts the normal course of action for a Christian (such as an extraordinary poverty or traveling undercover (i.e. in falsehood) in order to reach a new mission territory).

The third sign of true inspiration is obedience to the church and superiors. It is so easy for our wills to disguise themselves as God's Will, especially in the guise of inspiration,

that Francis encouraged all Christians to have a Spiritual Director or Confessor to whom they could make a vow of obedience in spiritual matters. It is hard to remain objective with others and near impossible with ourselves. Discernment works well when the people discerning have no personal feelings about this outcome over that outcome – such as a spiritual director, someone whose only interest is finding what God desires. Obviously, the person in discernment is involved in the process, but his lack of objectivity is humbly acknowledged.

The Will of God's Good Pleasure, which is also called God's Permissive Will, is recognition that God is sovereign. All that happens in the world, except sin, is done according to God's Permissive Will (since if he did not permit it, it would not happen.) Even sin in one sense is part of God's Permissive Will, since he permits us to have and exercise free will (and from this, sin enters the world). St. Francis said God's Permissive Will "is only known to us by events: these show us, by their very happening, that God has willed and intended them." To love God's will is to love his Permissive Will. This is hard to do when it involves suffering. St. Francis writes: "Painful things cannot indeed be loved when considered in themselves, but viewed in their source, that is, in the Divine Will and Providence which ordains them, they are supremely delightful." St. Francis saw three levels of love of God's Will:

1. "To love God's will in consolation is a good love when it is indeed God's will that is loved and not the consolations ... however this is a love without contradiction, repugnance and effort.

2. To love the will of God in his commandments, counsels and inspirations is a second degree of love, and much more perfect, for it leads us to renouncing and quitting our own will, and makes us give up some pleasures (as we help other people, etc.)

3. To love sufferings and afflictions for the love of God is the supreme point of most holy charity, for there is nothing in it for us except obeying the Will of God ... and we not only forsake pleasures but embrace torments and labors". (Treatise on the Love of God Book 9, Chapter 2)

In Book 8, Chapter 14, St. Francis offers a short method to know God's Will: I quote almost all of it with minor changes for the sake of clarity:

"S. Basil says that God's will is made clear to us by his commandments. In such cases, there are no deliberations to be made, for we are simply to do what is ordained. For the rest, S Basil taught we have freedom to choose what seems good according to our liking; although we don't do something just because it is allowed – it must also be expedient, that is, spiritually good for us and those involved. To discern this, ask your spiritual director.

But, Theotimus, I want to warn you about a troublesome temptation often experienced by those who truly desire to know and obey God's will. At every turn, the enemy puts them in doubt whether it is God's will for them to do one thing rather than another. For

example, they ask God if they should eat with a friend or not, whether they should wear gray or black clothes, whether they should fast on Fridays or Saturdays, whether they should recreate a bit or not. In all this they lose much time, and while they are busy and anxious to find out what is better, they unprofitably let slip the time for doing many good things. Doing good things would be far more to God's glory than distinguishing between the good and the better.

We are not accustomed to weigh little money, but only valuable pieces. If we did so, trading would be far too troublesome and would devour too much time. So we are not to weigh every petty action to know whether it be of more value than others; in fact, there is often a kind of superstition in trying to make this examination. The best workers are those who do the work, not those who stand around deciding in every detail what must be done and how to do it. We are to proportion our attention to the importance of what we undertake. It would be foolish to go to as much trouble planning a one-hour trip as we put into planning a journey of many miles.

The choice of one's vocation, the plan of some business of great consequence, of some work occupying much time, of some expensive purchase, of moving to a new town, and the like, deserve to be seriously pondered in order to see what is most in union with the will of God. But in little daily matters, where even a mistake is no big deal and easily repaired, what need is there to scrutinize over choices or to ask everyone's advise about them. We must walk in good faith and without minute considerations in such matters, and, as S Basil says, freely choose as we like, so as to not weary our spirit, lose our time, or put ourselves in danger of disquiet, scruples and superstition. Again, I am referring now only to situations where there are no great differences between the options.

We must approach discerning God's will with humility and not think we can find out God's will by force of examination or subtlety of discourse. Implore the light of the Holy Spirit, let us apply our consideration to the seeking of his good pleasure, listen to our spiritual director and perhaps two or three other spiritual persons and then decide. Afterwards, let us not question our choice, but devoutly, peacefully and firmly keep and pursue it. And although things may go badly and cause us to doubt as to whether we have made a good choice, we must remain calm. Consider instead that if we had made another choice we might be one hundred times worse off than we are now; to say nothing of the fact that we do not know if God wanted us to experience hardship and desolation and thus had led us to this choice.

Once a resolution is holily taken, we are never to doubt the holiness of the execution; for unless we fail it cannot fail. To act otherwise is a mark of great self-love, or of childishness, weakness and silliness of spirit." (Emphasis mine)

The greatest enemy to discerning God's Will and doing God's will (true holiness) is ourselves ... our own willfulness. The human condition, fallen human nature, and the effects of original sin create in us exaggerated needs in three areas:

1. Power and Control – need to control others, our environment and ourselves.
2. Affection and Esteem – need to be appreciated, recognized, love, esteemed
3. Security – need to be safe, avoid death, pain, and suffering

We become aware of these three areas early in life. Depending on our temperament and early childhood experiences, we develop little programs for happiness, such as "for me to be happy, I must have control (or affection, or security symbols)". Failure to satisfy these needs result in various upsetting emotions (anger, sorrow, fear, and anxiety), coping mechanisms (manipulation, passive aggressive behavior, violent behaviors, etc.) and a greater desire to satisfy these needs in the future. These exaggerated needs, and the simple programs for happiness connected with them, can exercise great influence on us well into adulthood, always growing in demand and finding more convoluted ways to be satisfied. The three temptations of Christ in the desert represent these exaggerated human needs. The evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience) represent the Catholic Church's long desire to master (with God's help) these exaggerated drives.

If we are to discern God's Will and avoid confusing it with our own, we must be very aware of the exaggerated needs within us. They do not just go away on command; we will have to live with them a long time. However, they do not have to control us or trick us.

We have seen above St. Francis' advice on discernment:

"Implore the light of the Holy Spirit, let us apply our consideration to the seeking of his good pleasure, listen to our spiritual director and perhaps two or three other spiritual persons and then decide. Afterwards, let us not question our choice, but devoutly, peacefully and firmly keep and pursue it."

People using this method must be careful not to let the discussion become an exercise of Willfulness. During the considerations, they must remain open to God, repeating again and again in their heart: "not my will, but yours be done." Discernment requires honesty about all their motivations for wanting this choice over that one, aware of the tricks of the exaggerated needs to control (get my way), to be esteemed (this will make me look good to my peers or family), and security (after this decision, I won't have to trust God as much). Are they open to the input of the spiritual people they have invited to be part of the process, and are those people also remaining open to God and aware of all their motivations? Salesian discernment is based on honesty, trust and good will and the belief that if we truly desire God's Will, God will make sure it happens. Then we move ahead and don't look back, accepting all the good and bad that comes with the decision, ever ready to embrace God's Permissive Will.

Peace,

Fr. Ken

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