

The Role of Feelings in Prayer

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As a young man, St Paul of the Cross leaves his home and his family, and he writes a long letter instructing his brothers and sisters:

Please love this dear Father with a most ardent love, and have the strongest and, at the same time, a most reverent confidence in him. Above all, sacrifice to his most holy love all your actions, all your words, all your efforts, cares, pains, and tears.

With this, we begin to see in Paul of the Cross an understanding of trusting God through any kind of trials and difficulties. As Paul will write thousands of letters of spiritual direction over the next sixty years, it becomes quite clear how he sees God as all good, and trusts that the source of all goodness will give

him whatever is good. Paul is extraordinarily wise in not judging the trials that come to him. He believes and directs others in a simple philosophy; if the source of ultimate good gifts us with trials, then the trials must be good. If we are gifted with pains or anguish, then this must be good too.

Paul believes that many people inflict suffering onto themselves by believing that they know better than the Lord. And in rejecting some of the 'gifts' which God gives us we really aren't people who follow the Divine Will. Over the next ten years of his life, reflecting on the suffering of Jesus, the will of God, and his own experiences of surrender to God's will, he learns there are different phases or stages of doing this. The most clear, articulate expression of these stages is in his letter to Sr Maria Cherubina:



Jesus in Gethsemane (Passionist Generalate, Sts John and Paul Retreat, Rome)

This is a very important point. Great perfection is found in resigning yourself in all things to the divine will; an even greater perfection is to live abandoned, with complete indifference to the divine good pleasure. Still, the pinnacle of perfection is to nourish yourself on the divine will in a spirit of pure faith and love. Oh, sweet Jesus, what a great thing you taught us in your life, by word and deed. Remember, this most loving Saviour said to his disciples that his food was to do the will of his eternal Father.

Very succinctly, there are three strong themes here. First is resignation to the divine will. I believe this is where many of us get stuck. The majority of Christians like to tell God how our lives should be. We block anything that is contrary to what we want in our life. Prosperity, love and things that make us feel warm and good we clearly accept, but anything that may bring about pain or suffering frequently makes us feel like we are being punished. We may even whine when we don't get our way and ask, 'Why did this happen to me?' This is clearly a very childish view. Like a two year old learns reward and punishment, so too, in an immature faith we can project our reward/punishment beliefs onto the Lord. Paul meditates on the suffering of Jesus as part of the will of the Father. He concludes that Jesus follows the will of the Father even if it causes physical pain. Disobedience would purposely disregard God's plan.

This is not an option for Jesus.

The second stage moves beyond simple resignation to a greater understanding of who we are in Christ. Paul names it, 'Living abandoned to the divine good pleasure'. When we go through difficult times, it's one thing to say, 'Oh this is God's will, and I guess I'm just going to have to tolerate it'. But it is quite another to grasp that God wants what is good for us. So obviously, somewhere in this pain there is a lesson to be learned and a gift to be received. It's much like Paul the Evangelist writing about the thorn in his flesh in 2 Corinthians 12. The Evangelist believes that if God simply takes away this thorn he will be perfect and then he can boast about how great God is because God made him perfect. And of course we know how the Lord responds to him. Paul is told to trust his weakness, to lean into his weakness, 'For in weakness, power reaches perfection'. Why is it that sometimes the things I don't like about myself are the very places that God speaks most profoundly to me?

Another example of this is the common occurrence of unavoidable surgeries. Perhaps either you or someone you know has had to have surgery. It is not something the common person desires to go through but we know that the greater good will be worth the sacrifice and therefore, we subject ourselves to what needs to be done. The medical profession is also aware of how our mental attitude gets us through it. We can face it with resistance and fear, or

we can face it eagerly with great anticipation to get through it and close a chapter of our lives so the brighter days are in sight.

Still, for our founder, St Paul of the Cross, it is more than this. In this second stage, I don't let the ebbs and tides of life that flow every day influence me. So if something good happens, it doesn't make my day. Similarly, if something challenges me on a particular day it doesn't have the ability to ruin my day. If who I am is who I am in Christ and I understand that relationship in the core of my being, then the joys or frustrations I encounter throughout this day do not have the power to control my joy in the Lord. Paul of the Cross emphasises, again and again, in letter after letter, how God is to be praised when something happens which we would frequently regard as objectionable, or undesirable. Quite simply, in letting the little things in life control or dictate your emotional mood, then you really aren't free. So Paul of the Cross encourages people to give thanks even for the speed bumps in life.

The third stage Paul speaks of, the pinnacle of pursuing God's will, is to nourish yourself on this divine will. Let God's will be nourishment and food. Paul referred to this as 'having the food of the divine will in a pure spirit of faith and love'. His understanding comes from his meditations on John's Gospel (John 4: 34). Recall when Jesus describes to his disciples that He has food that they do not know. 'My food', Jesus explains, 'is to do the will of my Father, and bring it to completion.' And so in this third stage, one will find oneself pursuing God's will because it is true sustenance.

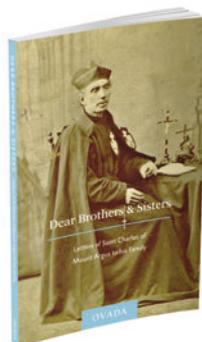
Personally, I find this lived out in our contemporary society in the lives of many people. Probably if you are reading this, you are one of these people.

And it is lived out in the balance between prayer and ministry. I continue to be amazed at the number of people who invest hours or years to give of themselves out of their love for God. Frequently, those who do this choose it freely knowing they could be making more money if they were in the corporate world, except for one thing – my food is to do the will of my Father. Money and sacrifice are certainly not the issue. The hunger and desire for God's will is fulfilling and deeply sustaining. Additionally, ministry changes the way we pray. Whether it is personal prayer or communal prayer, when a person is in that zone of hungering and desiring God's will, their prayer is different. There is a real sense of sustenance and interconnectedness resulting in a rich understanding. If you are one of those who truly finds the Eucharist nourishing, you know what this means. It is something that you need, want, desire, and pursue. It is something that is ultimately good and feeds you in a spiritual way.

Paul would live his life by these three stages: resignation to the divine will, living abandoned to the divine good pleasure, and to have as food the divine will in a pure spirit of faith and love.

At seventy-seven years of age, Paul hadn't changed his understanding. To Anna Maria Calcagnini he writes:

Now I would like to tell you about a principle of faith which embraces the highest perfection. Jesus Christ said to his apostles one day that his food was to do the will of his eternal Father. What an important point this is. Therefore, in every event of life, in all interior and exterior worries, desolations, aridities.... In bodily pain, in all of these find the food of the divine will....



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The emphasis that St Paul of the Cross places on the Will of God is truly remarkable. We can say of him what has been said of St Ignatius of Loyola, that he was 'a man of the Will of God'. Both seemed to have an 'obsession' with the Will of God. Often, at the end of his letters, St Ignatius would beg his correspond-

ents to obtain for him the grace of knowing the will of God better that he might fulfill it more perfectly.

The great saint of Lombardy (St Paul of the Cross) habitually asked prayers, instead, that the Will of God would be accomplished in him and outside him. While the former, following the example of the Apostle, often used ejaculatory prayer, 'Lord, what will you have me to do?', the latter repeats more readily the words of the Saviour, 'Your Will be done.'



A PASSION MEDITATION

Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane

After speaking to them and singing the hymn in thanksgiving, Jesus left the Upper Room with the eleven Apostles, and entered the Garden of Gethsemane.

1. He goes to the garden, as was his custom, and, after addressing them, he withdraws to a solitary place to pray and, by this prayer, to prepare himself for the Passion.

Learn to never leave aside, on account of any suffering or distress, your usual devout practices, especially prayer and, in time of greatest need, pray more often, and with greater fervour.

2. Jesus prays prostrate, with his face to the earth, and his entire prayer is spent in acts of love, and

confidence in his Eternal Father, abnegation of his will and total resignation to the Divine Will.

Learn how to pray: with reverence, and interior and exterior humility: with a loving and childlike trust in God: with the offering of your whole self, and perfect conformity to the Divine Will.

3. Jesus encourages the Disciples to pray, that they may not fall into temptation: he comes to them and, finding them sleeping, he gently scolds them.

Learn that prayer is the only way to overcome temptations; and without prayer you will fall, as the Apostles fell; that God sees you, and comes to you with his graces when you pray; that the sleep of laziness and lukewarmness is reproved by Christ, because it disposes you to serious falls.

from *The Passion of Jesus Christ in Forty Short Meditations recommended by the Most Reverend Father Paul of the Cross* (Camerino, 1750), Meditation VII.