

Fiat: Abandonment to Divine Providence

‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord: let it be done to me according to thy word.’ We are very familiar with Mary’s ‘Yes’ spoken at the Annunciation, which, by God’s grace and in his providence, opened the world to the Incarnation itself. ‘Fiat, let it be done’: this is the very heart of Mary’s perfect holiness, and reflects Christ’s perfect obedience and conformity to the will of the Father, all the way to the obedience of the Cross. In union with him by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and in imitation of the ‘Yes’ of Mary, the perfect disciple, we are all called to have the same conformity to God’s will.

Today we will reflect in more depth on this conformity and its different levels. At the most basic level, we obey God’s will as communicated to us in his commandments. For salvation, our union with God’s will must include, at minimum, rejection of all grave sin; but truly, all are called and commanded to reject any sin, including venial.

Then beyond the commandments binding on all, for every individual there are the specific duties of the state of life of each one (e.g. of marriage, parenthood, priesthood, consecrated life). Finally, the more open we are to God’s voice, the more we hear in our hearts specific inspirations that he wants us to follow as individuals. All these things make up our active following of what spiritual writers call God’s ‘signified will’ (that is, his will that he makes known to us – signifies to us – in advance of the event).

But there is a further stage in abandoning ourselves to the divine will, which is accepting what is called God’s ‘will of good pleasure’. That means seeing *all things that end up actually happening* as somehow belonging to God’s providence and plan – welcoming the good things that occur by his loving action, but accepting even the bad things (not indeed as created by him directly, but *permitted* by him in view of an even greater good) – and offering up to him all that we experience, in union with Christ. (To clarify, when we say that God in this way ‘permits’ even some sin, the meaning is not that God ‘authorises’ the sin as morally legitimate, but simply that for the sake of a greater good to be attained, he refrains from ‘stepping in’ and preventing the sin from happening.)

We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: ‘Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if he did not cause a good to come from that very evil, by ways that we shall fully know only in eternal life.’ (324) And we learn from St Paul that as long as we are living in the love of God, this will be a ‘greater good’, not simply for the world in general, but also for us personally: ‘All things work together for good for those who love God.’ (*Rom* 8:28)

This ‘abandonment to divine providence’ was especially taught by writers such as St Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and Fr Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751). It does not mean relinquishing responsibility and planning, effort and activity, prudence and spiritual vigilance – that was the misinterpretation called ‘quietism’, condemned by the Church in 1687. Against this error, we do indeed work and strive to grow in virtue and to advance on the path to heaven, not just leaning back and saying, ‘God will take care of it’. God acts partly through the very efforts he inspires in us.

For example, if we are sick, we go to the doctor and take the required medicine: it is God’s signified will that we take proper care of our health. But if in spite of this, our illness remains,

then (even as we continue taking our medicine and hoping for the best) we trustingly accept our suffering at this moment, believing that everything that happens is somehow for our greater good. This submission to God's 'will of good pleasure' might concern physical pain, but also emotional or mental suffering, indeed every sort of failure or setback. There is no cross in life that cannot be accepted and offered up to God in union with Christ and his offering of perfect obedience.

Also, finding peace in God's will cannot mean letting ourselves become indifferent to the sorrows of others – saying as a pretext, 'Oh well, whatever happens to them, it's all God's will', but all the while keeping a lively interest in our own personal woes. Against this, we recall that it is God's *signified will* that we 'rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.' (*Rom* 12:15) Despite the good that God draws from it, evil itself never becomes a good (cf. *Catechism* 312) – so it is only right that we oppose it and weep over it. So to be true people of love, and to feel and act in a fully human way, we do not let genuine sympathy grow cold in our hearts. Rather, we remain ready to 'suffer with' others by true compassion.

And yet – in all this, at a deeper level there will be the profound peace that comes from trusting that, in the end, God's loving providence does rule all things for good. The Anglican poet T. S. Eliot used the great phrase, 'to care and not to care'. (*Ash Wednesday* (1930), quoted in Fr Gerald Vann, *The Divine Pity* (1945)) This means, on the one hand, never to lose our concern for the suffering of others, the suffering of the world; never to become complacent; never to turn our backs on the battle that God wants us to fight and retreat into our own world. But, on the other hand, we keep divine peace and joy in the depths of our hearts.

It may seem very difficult, an unrealistic ideal, even a 'pious dream', to have this level of trust in God's providence – and indeed, it is something only gradually attained, by the help of grace, as we advance on the spiritual path. Yet the reality is that setbacks and suffering happen in the life of every person, holy or not. The person who has learnt to abandon themselves to God's 'will of good pleasure' may suffer the same pains and reversals as another, but they will do so with a deep peace and equanimity – rather than with the added suffering of frustration or even rebellion against all that happens to them. They will have the consolation of knowing that there *is* a deep meaning in all events, even if they cannot see it. The spiritual ideal is thus revealed to be highly practical as well.

This surrender to God, actively obeying his 'signified will' and passively accepting his 'will of good pleasure', is possible for every person and at every moment of life. It is at the core of holiness and belongs to the culmination of love for God.

Fr de Caussade explains in his work, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, how each time we do this, we make Christ and his obedience incarnate again in our own moment in history. In this way, even the most ordinary events, lovingly accepted from God, conceal an infinite divine value. But only faith perceives this. Often God's designs are far from obvious in the events of life. Yet through the eyes of faith, everything in creation becomes the messenger of God's will, and an opportunity for our loving obedience.

Each time we conform ourselves to God's will, Fr de Caussade tells us, we show our trust that God knows best which instruments – even sufferings – will 'chisel' us into the eternal perfect form that he planned for us from eternity; cooperating with him, we create one point in the hidden tapestry of our being, which will be revealed in its fullness in eternity.