

Thy Will: "Let it be done unto me"

It is indeed a privilege to be opening our Marian Conference. It is my honour to present the Conference Talk:

Thy Will: "Let it be done unto me."

In my presentation this evening I want to use two musical excerpts, one at the beginning and another at the end, that I think, capture musically the freedom Mary embodied in her life because her will was united completely to the will of God.

I want you to listen to the opening section of Bach's Magnificat. As you allow the notes to cascade over your ear drums, hear how the exuberance of Bach's music illustrates the liberty of Mary's soul fully united with the will of God. There is such confidence as the trumpets usher in the choir's:

Magnificat Anima Meum Deum

"My soul magnifies the Lord".

Here is music that captures true freedom and ecstasy and sets the tone for my presentation this evening. The more we understand the relationship between and soul and the will, the more we can in our lives experience the kind of exuberance captured musically by Bach.

The place of the will in our spiritual life is so important to understand if we are to live meaningful and purposeful lives in this world. At the heart of Mary's recorded words in Scripture are these words that are related directly to the Will. In Luke she says:

I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done unto my according to your Word.

Then in John, the last recorded words of Mary we have in the New Testament are these. Speaking in relation to Jesus at the Wedding at Cana she instructs the steward of the Wedding to:

Do whatever he tells you.

To learn to live out the petition of the Lord's Prayer:

"Thy Will be done"

is what Mary our Mother is always calling us to understand and fulfill. In her repeated apparitions, as represented throughout the Church this evening, is our Mother saying emphatically:

Listen, listen to my Boy!

This is the most important vocation given to each of us by God. Nothing in the end matters more than to learn what Mary so fully lived out:

“Let it be done unto me according to thy will.”

So what is the will? At our conception God formed within us the soul. The soul is that part of our being which will live on after our mortal lives come to an end. It is the soul that will then, at the time of the Second Coming, be united with our Resurrected bodies. The Assumed Resurrected Body of our Lady anticipates the type of body we will all share in the General Resurrection.

Now back to the will. Notice that the Latin for soul is “anima”, as in:

Magnificat Anima Meum Deum

From “anima” we get the word animation. The soul is animated and brought to life by the exercising of our will. How our soul is animated is very much dependent on how we choose to exercise our will.

God, we are told in Genesis 1, breathed into us the “breath of life”. This is a poetic way to talk about the forming of the soul. It is the soul that animates us spiritually. It is so important to therefore understand how the soul and the will are related.

In this world there are three wills at play within each human soul.

1. The Will of God
2. Our Human Free Will
3. The Devil’s Free Will

This painting called the Coronation of Mary depicts this for us. The painting is dominated by the Coronation in heaven where the blessed Trinity is Crowning our Lady. All around them are the saints who are joining in this celebration. The middle of the painting depicts the Crucifixion of Jesus, the pivotal event of human history. It is here on earth where we are called to choose to join our wills with the will of God. Even if we have done this imperfectly in this life, which almost all of us will, we know that in purgatory, represented by those under the earth on what is Jesus’ right hand, we will be aided by the angel to eventually ascend to heaven. On Jesus’ left are those who in their earthly life joined their will with the will of the devil and are sadly represented being in hell.

Why is Mary at the centre of this painting? Because, in her earthly life she always chose to do the will of the Father, and of her beloved Son. Therefore, she is now the one enthroned

because her soul was never willfully obstinate and always pliable to the movement of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to say she is without original sin.

Here is the sobering truth about our earthly lives. Each day we are making choices where our souls are being conformed ever more to godliness or they are becoming more diabolical. We are either growing in virtue or in vice.

There is no middle ground. All who are in heaven are those who with Mary will say "I am the servant of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word" Any who are in hell will hear God say: "You are the servant of the devil because you chose to live according to his deceitful and lying tongue."

Beloved brothers and sisters, how we allow for our will to shape our immortal souls makes all the difference for now and eternity. And we need to remember that the battle for our soul is ongoing in this life. God so desires for our will to conform to his so that our souls can be fully animated and alive, as Bach's Magnificat exuberantly captures. But the soul's enemy, the devil, who also has free will, wants to consume our souls. God wants our souls fully alive and free. The devil wants them dead and consumed by him.

There is a vivid depiction of this battle in the ***Lord of the Rings***. Towards the end of the first book the Fellowship is breaking apart and Frodo needs to escape from Boromir because Boromir wants the ring for himself. Frodo finds himself on the Summit of Amon Hen where there is depicted a most vivid interior battle in his soul. Let me pick up the tale at this point:

*And suddenly Frodo felt the Eye. (The eye is that of Sauron, the Dark Lord of Middle Earth). There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. **A fierce eager will was there.** It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. Very soon it would nail him down. He threw himself from the seat, crouching, covering his head with his grey hood. He heard himself crying out: Never, never! Or was it: Verily I come, I come to you? He could not tell. Then as a flash from some other point of power there came to his mind another thought: Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring! (Here he is hearing the voice of Gandalf the Grey who earlier had been destroyed by the Balrog. A fierce creature from the Mines of Moria) The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again, Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger. He was kneeling in clear sunlight before the high seat. A black shadow seemed to pass like an arm above him; it missed Amon Hen and groped out west, and faded. Then all the sky was clean and blue and birds sang in every tree. Frodo rose to his feet. A great weariness was on him, but his will was firm and his heart lighter.*

Notice how Tolkien says he was free to choose and in choosing to listen to Gandalf's voice, Frodo chose to will the good and not the evil. Such exercising of his will, made it more firm and also lightened his heart or we could say his soul.

Here we learn something important. As we align our will to the will of God, something that requires courage and fortitude, we will become more fully alive and our anima, that is our soul more buoyant. What would have happened if Frodo had listened to the fierce eager will of Sauron? His will would have been weakened and his soul deflated.

The question each of us faces in this life is what are we going to do with the Free Will God has given to us? Will we seek to conform our will to God's – the very thing Mary always did – or will we allow for our will to be co-opted by the Devil. It is the very thing that happened to Adam and Eve in Genesis Three. They joined their will with the will of the serpent and thus were banished from the paradise God had intended to be their garden home.

Mary as the one who always desired the will of God had as her theme song the Magnificat, where she forever sings:

My Soul Magnifies the Lord and My Spirit Rejoices in God my saviour.

In her life Mary always directed her will to doing God's will and therefore hers was a life that truly magnified God so that she rejoiced in God.

But there is a question then needs to be answered.

Did Mary have any choice in how she responded to the Angel Gabriel's announcement? Was she truly free to say yes or was the whole thing orchestrated so that there was no opt out clause.

In other words, to use a more theological vocabulary, was Mary Predestined to be the Mother of Jesus, case closed. And if so, how was she free to choose?

St. Augustine can provide a helpful answer to this question. In a book called *On Grace and Free Will* Augustine poses the problem in the following way:

Are the choices we make the first cause or is God the first cause? If we are the first cause we are free but not predestined. If God is the first cause we are predestined but not free. How can we be both? This is a very hard question. What does freedom mean? Is freedom a kind of neutral thing where you stand suspended in the middle of nowhere? Or is freedom the choice to get to where you are supposed to be? That is your end and your destiny, which is in God. Isn't that the deepest freedom and liberty?

How does God's Sovereignty and Grace work with our freedom? Does God work from outside as a tyrant and demand our conformity to his will or does he work from the inside? Does God want to fulfill us or tyrannize us? Is God our interior master rather than our external master? By asking these questions Augustine concludes that grace and free will are interdependent. God's grace and our free will are like the opposite sides of the same coin. Our true liberty is conforming precisely to God's predestination. And his predestination consists in predestining us to be liberated.

Our problem is that we do not always conform our soul and will with that of God. Instead we succumb to the devil's will and rather than experiencing liberation we are in spiritual bondage. But as we look to Mary, who is the perfect exemplar of what it means to be a disciple we can discover what St. Augustine teaches. As with Mary we learn to sing "My Soul Magnifies the Lord and My Spirit rejoices in God" we can discover that liberty which is God's will for us. Listen to what the Catechism says about Mary's will.

The Virgin Mary most perfectly embodies the obedience of faith. By faith Mary welcomes the tidings and promise brought by the angel Gabriel, believing that "with God nothing will be impossible" and so giving her assent: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word." Elizabeth greeted her: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." It is for this faith that all generations have called Mary blessed.

Mary understood that God's will for her would allow her to fulfill her vocation and purpose for living. I like how the Catechism says she welcomed the tidings brought by the angel. This is what it means to conform our will to that of God's.

So the question is how can we day by day intentionally grow in welcoming the will of God to become ever more our soul's desire?

I would like to talk about two ways.

1. The Prayer of the Rosary
2. The Examination of Conscience.

I want to share with you something that I mentioned in a Sunday Homily, called the Law of the Gift. This is a term coined by St. John Paul II.

"We are at our best, we are most fully alive and human, when we give away freely and sacrificially our very selves in love for another." (St JP II)

"Greater love than this no one has, than to give one's life for one's friends. (Jesus)

The more you give your being away, the more your being increases; the more you cling to your being, the more your being decreases. (Fr Robert Barron)

"Man finds himself only by making himself a sincere gift to others" (GS 24)

Law of the Gift as displayed in Philippians and the Creed:

When we look to St. Paul's letter to the Philippians and the Creed we see the Law of the Gift at play. Consider the following verses from Philippians 2:

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,

Then in the Apostle's Creed we read:

*And in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.*

Here are verses the related directly to how Jesus embodied the Law of the Gift as he emptied himself. Notice as well how this portion of Philippians and the Creed relates well to the Joyful Mysteries.

The Law of the Gift is further accentuated in the next part of Philippians and in subsequent clause of the Apostles' Creed:

being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell

Not only is the Law of the Gift further developed as Jesus goes all the way to death, we also see a parallel with the Sorrowful Mysteries.

With the next portion of Philippians and the next sentence in the Creed we see expressed the Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

*The third day he rose again from the dead:
He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty:
From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead:*

I have found this connection between the Christological hymn in Philippians 2, the portion of the Apostles' Creed pertain to Jesus Christ and the Mysteries of the Rosary developed by St. Dominic back in the 13th century a helpful guide in praying this sacramental with greater meaning so that my will is conformed with the Law of the Gift as expressed in the Rosary.

St John Paul II said of the Rosary:

With the Rosary, the Christian people sits at the school of Mary and is led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love. Through the Rosary the faithful receive abundant grace, as though from the very hands of the Mother of the Redeemer.

When we are able to pray the Rosary with this kind of attention we will be forming our wills to more fully conform with the will of Mary and our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the beauties of this sacramental. When it is prayed thoughtfully and with the pattern of Philippians and the Creed in mind, then we increasingly will discover the transformative power of the Rosary so that we will with Mary say increasingly:

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Examination of Conscience:

Along with this thoughtful praying of the Rosary we can also further discern how our wills are aligned with the will of God through the five stages of the Examination of Conscience.

How Can I Pray?

1. Become aware of God's presence.

Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to you—a blur, a jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

2. Review the day with gratitude.

Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.

3. Pay attention to your emotions.

One of St. Ignatius's great insights was that we detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Confidence? What is God saying through these feelings? God will most likely show you some ways that you fell short. Make note of these sins and faults. But look deeply for other implications. Does a feeling of frustration perhaps mean that God wants you consider a new direction in some area of your work? Are you concerned about a friend? Perhaps you should reach out to her in some way.

4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.

Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

5. Look toward tomorrow.

Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what's coming up. Are you doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? Allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God's guidance. Ask him for help and understanding. Pray for hope. St. Ignatius encouraged people to talk to Jesus like a friend. End the Daily Examen with a conversation with Jesus. Ask forgiveness for your sins. Ask for his protection and help. Ask for his wisdom about the questions you have and the problems you face. Do all this in the spirit of gratitude. Your life is a gift, and it is adorned with gifts from God. End the Daily Examen with the Our Father.

Conclusion:

In her life Mary declared "Thy Will. Let it be done unto me". As we live each day aware that the will of God, our free will and the devil's will are all at work in this world, we can with greater insight and understanding learn to live more each day so that our wills are aligned with God's will. The Rosary and the Examination of Conscience can guide us along this path so we can with Mary declare:

My Soul Magnifies the Lord and My Spirit Rejoices in God my saviour.