

THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

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“In a heart united with God’s will, the reign of
God has been established.”



This petition—the last of three that concern, so to speak, God’s interests¹—shows us how, concretely, to sanctify his name and foster the coming of his kingdom. While praying for the sanctification of his name and the coming of his kingdom appears quite easy, asking for his will to be done in the world and especially within us awakens—at least at the beginning of spiritual life—the elementary dread of man before the inscrutable and unpredictable mystery of the divine: He who did not spare his only begotten Son, will he spare me? If I ask for his will for me to be done, will he let me too be crucified?

1. THE HUMAN WILL

Some theologians, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure, locate the divine image in our will, since they consider free

1. The second part of the Lord’s Prayer contains four petitions that focus on our basic human needs.

will to be the most godlike feature in a human being. A brief look at the nature of a free decision can help us appreciate their position. If I freely decide to act or to refrain from acting, this implies that I take possession of myself and direct myself toward the goal I have set. I cannot find the adequate cause of my decision in any external or internal force, such as coercion, intimidation, instinct, or passion, because, on the level of secondary causes, I am the ultimate cause of my free act. I have chosen of the many, at times opposing inclinations the one I have allowed to be decisive for my action, or I have simply overruled each one of them and have abstained from action or chosen an action that has gone against all of my previous dispositions. The freer the act or the refusal to act, the sharper is my awareness that I, this concrete person, am the origin of the act, and therefore my own self and nobody and nothing else is responsible for it.² Here, then, is the great similarity with God, the most salient trait of the divine image within us. The human being is able to command himself and be stronger than all external and all internal forces. As Horace wrote: “Si fractus illabatur orbis, impavidum ferient ruinae” (If the world, shattered, falls upon him, the ruins will hit a fearless man).³ If a terrorist threatens to destroy the entire earth if I do not deny my Christian faith, I am still able to refuse to do so. Our free will is potentially stronger than the sum total of the nuclear energies of the universe.⁴

In the process of intellection the movement ends in the knowing subject, which becomes united with the known object in the intellect: as the Thomists say, in *esse intentionali*. For

2. If this definition of a free decision is correct, then very few entirely free acts take place in the world. Adolescents often just feel for a short time that they are free, but they decide to follow the latest fad without too much pondering and conform to the crowd around them. Thus they freely give up their freedom.

3. Horace, *The Odes*, book 3, ode 3, line 1.

4. People can raise a serious objection against this argument by stating that we always choose what, under the pressure of the present forces, appears the best choice for us at this moment. Yes, that is true; we always choose what appears to us to be the best among the alternatives. However, I, in possession of my free will, make the judgment as to which alternative is the best choice for me and which force of those which are pressuring me will be followed. I can even decide to act against all the present forces and create a new force by means of providing convincing motivation.

example, if the known object is the life of a billionaire, this knowledge will enrich the knowers' storehouse of knowledge, and it may give rise to their judging that they want to emulate the billionaire's life. In this case, those who aspire to this goal want not only to unite with this ideal in their minds, but they also want to pursue it in real life so that they become what their goal is: a billionaire. The result, then, will not be simply a union of the knower with the known in their minds, but the conformation of their very existence to the ideal of the rich man. Briefly, in the act of understanding the known object is conformed to the knower's intellect; in the act of the will, the willing person himself conforms to the willed object. Therefore, the increased knowledge always enriches the person's intellect, whereas the increased attachment to the willed object lifts up or debases the willing person according to the moral, aesthetic, or spiritual value of the object. Those whose supreme goal in life is acquisition of material goods will be conformed to what they desire; they become materialistic persons whose very ability to desire higher goods will atrophy. If, on the other hand, someone's ultimate goal is to will what God wills, he will be conformed to God. It is the will alone that, inspired by God's grace, transforms the willing subject into the likeness of God. All the saints insist on this fundamental truth of spiritual life. But our culture suggests and promotes the opposite: "You are what you feel." Thus, we feel we cannot honestly make longtime commitments since we can never predict how long we will be what we are at the present moment. Consequently, the primary measure of the health and growth of our spiritual life is the intensity of our emotions. The problem, however, is that feelings and emotions are the subject's reactions to outside influences and to the subject's own voluntary actions. Emotions and feelings need some knowledge, and the initiative as well as the direction of the will, for taking us out of ourselves and enabling us to conform to our goals. If the will starts and sustains a move toward a desired object, positive emotions and feelings do tremendously increase the will's impetus to reach its object; and negative ones can resist the will and weaken its strength; but feelings by themselves can neither carry us to our desired goal nor prevent us from reaching it. And they certainly do not define us.

Grace as such cannot in this life be experienced directly; only its effects can. But the same affective states it produces can also be produced by purely natural causes. For example, experiments have demonstrated that some psychedelic drugs and the electronic stimulation of certain nerves in the brain can cause intense religious emotions. We need to realize that we *are* embodied but truly spiritual beings; that is, intellect and will; but we *have*, rather than are, our emotions. Much peace and confidence derive from this discovery. We may be more united with God if we persevere in our adhering to his will when all our emotions vehemently oppose it than when we savor the peace and joy of our union with him. Temptations are not a sign that we are removed from God, but rather, that Satan is trying to remove us from him. Since we are spiritual beings, the one effective way to become united with God is to become one with his will. According to Bernard, to do this is to be *unus spiritus* (one spirit) with the Lord.

The question, however, still remains: Why should I choose God and strive for union with his will for my ultimate goal? Why not be satisfied with some lesser but very tangible ultimate goal, such as becoming a billionaire? In every act of free choice I choose that goal that seems to me the closest to full happiness and thus to full goodness.⁵ Both empirical evidence and philosophical reasoning agree that no finite good can fully satisfy the human being. In the case of a billionaire, reaching his goal clearly does not fully satisfy him since he always wants more wealth, more power, and greater recognition; or he finds other goals, such as philanthropy; or he loses his ambition for other goals, tries just to enjoy what he has of material goods, and, as a result, loses his ability to appreciate spiritual values, such as friendship, love of neighbor, and service of the common good, and becomes indifferent to seeking union with God. Suffering, illness, or fear of death will ultimately awaken him to the utter futility of putting his hopes of perfect happiness in a finite material good, the accumulation of wealth. His sorry state, however, works both as an automatic punishment for trying to act as a god

5. It is a free choice in that the choosing subject freely determines which of the available alternatives at that point in time he deems closest to full happiness and goodness.

and also as a potential medicine facilitating rediscovery of the true Good in God.

A philosophical analysis confirms the conclusion from the empirical evidence. If in every finite created good we seek that which comes closest to the fully Good, to the Infinite Good, then we must conclude that in every volitional act we do not only will the finite created good at which we directly aim, but at the same time we affirm the necessary direction of our will toward the Infinite Good. Thus we will not find full joy and fulfillment except in union with this absolute and infinite goodness whom Christians and Jews call God. If we make any lesser good our ultimate goal, we stifle and constrict the naturally unbounded openness of our desire, which—at least in the long run—distorts and chains our freedom.

By moving beyond the boundaries of philosophy into a theological perspective, we may make our union with God's will more precise. We enter into union with the divine will not in generic terms, such as with the will "of the Triune God," but specifically with the will of the Son *within* the Triune God. This may look like hairsplitting since in the Trinity the three divine persons have one and the same will or else we posit three different gods. The one will of the Trinity, however, is possessed by each divine person according to his relationship within the Trinity. Thus the Father's will is absolute generosity, love, and self-gift toward the Son; the Son's will is absolute generosity in returning his self in loving thanksgiving to his Father; and it is in the Holy Spirit, who unites Father and Son, that the absolute oneness of the divine will is manifested and extended to us as we are made children of God in sanctifying grace. So the Christian is within the Holy Trinity, and by the Holy Spirit becomes united with the Son and, consequently, shares in the Son's unity with the Father. This is the leitmotif of Jesus' priestly prayer: "I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and you in me; that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me" (Jn 17:22–23).

This mystery is almost totally unknown to our people and remains underdeveloped in trinitarian and christological treatises, even though it occupies a central place in the New Testament, in the Fathers (especially of the East), and in our liturgi-

cal prayers. Every eucharistic prayer ends with this great doxology which summarizes the entire Christian life as glorification and thanksgiving to the Father as we are drawn into the unity of the Holy Spirit in whom Father and Son are one: “Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever.”

It is true that there is only one will in the Triune God, but each divine person possesses that one divine will in his own proper way corresponding to his trinitarian relationship. Thus the Father’s will manifests itself in the (spiritual) generation of the Son, in the sending of the Son to redeem humankind, and in the gathering together of the redeemed brothers and sisters of the Son into his one “family.” The Son’s will identifies fully with the Father’s will in praise and thanksgiving, while the Holy Spirit is one with the mutual love of both Father and Son and thus joins them together. Being breathed out by the Son, who receives him from the Father, the Spirit enters the redeemed and conforms them to the Son, and thereby makes them sons and daughters of the Father as well as brothers and sisters to one another.

Conversion of sinners begins in many different ways. For example, it might start from fear of death and God’s judgment, or from a realization of the utter waste of one’s previous life and from a growing intuition that the genuine love shining in some people might have a transcendent origin. At any rate, when the first uncertain, fragile longing for goodness, truth, and pure love rises in the heart, we may infer that the Holy Spirit has begun his transforming work in that person. If he finds fertile soil in that soul, the Spirit helps the beginner to discover his past as guided by Providence. One perceives a logic in the events, in the joys and sufferings, in the tragic or fortunate turns in one’s lifetime, a logic that suggests the presence of a thoughtful and caring power in everything that has happened. Then, perhaps for the first time, this person will be inspired to pray—still with some trepidation about the unknown future—“thy will be done.” This fragile movement of trust—in itself the work of the Spirit—opens wider both the Father’s generosity and the recipient’s heart, leading to a more radical transformation by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit works at the inmost depth of the human spirit and unites himself with it so intimately that many people, especially in some Asian reli-

gions, mistakenly identify the divine Spirit with their own soul. Once the Holy Spirit establishes his dwelling place in the soul,⁶ this Spirit-transformed soul finds itself in the closest communion with everyone else in whom the Spirit dwells, so that the terms “brother” and “sister” are only vague approximations to the reality: in the prayers of each one of us the same Holy Spirit prays within us, and inspires in each one of us different acts of charity. Since the one same Spirit who dwells in us is present in the Father and the Son, our union with them is so intimate that the terms “brothers and sisters of the Son” and “children of the Father” cannot express the full reality of our relationships. We in fact reach what we might call a qualified identity with the Son⁷ such that the Father looking at us sees and loves his one Son in each one of us.⁸ We see now that our “divinization” is developed on God’s side by the proper role of each divine person, and on our side by the free cooperation of our will with the Triune God’s will. The one divine will, however, does operate in each divine person according to that person’s trinitarian relationship: inspired by the Holy Spirit, we obey the incarnate Son in love so that our will becomes one with his, which joins us to the person of the Son in the one Spirit and to the Father as his child, one with the Father’s will by obedience.

Since we are historical beings and, as a result of original sin, are divided within ourselves, we can realize unity with the will of God only piecemeal, by many acts and sufferings throughout our entire life. In this struggle Christ is both our model and the source of divine energies that raise us up to the level of conscious free communion with the Father’s will. Christ’s human nature has not been divided by original sin, and his will has always been in perfect union with his Father’s; but, as a historical being, he had to freely subject his will to the Father over and over

6. In the Western Church we call this situation the state of sanctifying grace.

7. An ancient hymn calls the Holy Spirit “*dextrae Dei digitus*” (the finger of God’s right hand) because, like the finger of an artist, the Holy Spirit shapes and forms the soul into a new creature that possesses and mirrors the features of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father.

8. According to Origen, it is also true that Mary gives birth to, and loves, her one Son in each one of us (see *Comm. in Johannem* 1.3, 8, 9, 10, in Cipriano Vagaggini, *Maria nelle opere di Origine* [Rome: Pontificium Institutum Orientale Studiorum, 1942], 115).

again by every new decision in every new situation. He made it clear repeatedly that the Son can do or say nothing but what the Father tells him to do or say. Thus, by repeated, conscious, free decisions he succeeded in subjugating every new word and action of his to the Father's will. In other words, his gift of self to his Father, progressed in time, has been extended to, and actualized in, every new situation. The composite nature of the human being—the consisting of soul and body—necessitated Christ's giving himself over to God in a temporal process. Thus he realized and also revealed his eternal Sonship on the level of human existence by gradually carrying out his obedience to the Father up to his last breath, when he cried out, "*Tetélestai*"—"It has been brought to completion" (Jn 19:30).⁹

If we want to be united with the Son's will in loving obedience, we need to do it by a process analogous to his. Even less than Jesus could, can we give ourselves to the Father once and for all by one single act. We also need to restore unity as much as possible to our divided will and emotions, so that our acts of obedience extended in time to new situations actualize more and more our whole being. Just as the last word of Jesus was *tetélestai*, we should so strive that our last word may be analogous: "We hope that we have completed God's plan for us."

Jesus' every act of loving obedience to the Father was perfect throughout his life, since he did not labor under the disintegrating effect of original sin as we do. His will was not divided against itself, nor did his lower faculties weaken the resolution of his will, as does happen to us. Therefore, we fallen human beings, in addition to persevering in obedience in every new life situation, have to struggle also for the integration of our divided self. How often it has happened to us that we were barely strong enough to accomplish a good act because more than half of our will, so to speak, was opposed to it, its resistance supported by our sloth and selfishness. It might happen even more often that we almost performed the good act, but

9. The translation in the New American Bible, "It is finished," truncates the meaning of the original, which (as is evident from Jn 19:28) is that all the scriptures about Jesus, as well as all the works his Father entrusted to him to accomplish in his life of obedience to him, have been fulfilled, completed, brought to perfection.

eventually the reluctant half of our self prevailed. But barely—and afterward we bitterly reproached ourselves. The lifetime task, then, of every human being is to mobilize all available energies, gradually even our subconscious resources, and expose them to the unifying and purifying radiation of the gaze of Christ so that we love and obey the Father with our whole heart and mind and strength.

As we make progress in uniting our unstable and fickle self with the eternal and unchangeable will of God and more sincerely loving his will, the more our will and life gain stability, consistency, and direction. According to Bernard, the way to imitate on earth God's eternity is through our perseverance.¹⁰

In a heart united with God's will, the reign of God has been established. Origen explains that if our souls reach that state, "the Lord walks in us as in a spiritual Paradise, ruling alone as King over us with his Christ, who sits in us on the right of the spiritual power."¹¹

United with God's will, we share in his love for every human being. We want their existence, their improvement, their flourishing; we share their joys and their sorrows. God's generosity cannot be outdone. If we not only do his will when he commands something under pain of sin, but also respond to his gentle requests, he will lavishly reciprocate. Already on earth, he will fulfill some of our most cherished desires, often in a totally unexpected way, but later we will discover that he gave us so much more than we had dared to hope for.

Many people wonder about the usefulness of petitioning God. If he has decided everything from all eternity, how can our prayer make any difference in his will and in our lives? It is true that God's will has been set from all eternity, but he has decreed that certain desires be fulfilled as a result of our prayer or the prayers of others. In this sense we share in God's almighty power—in that the happening of certain things is contingent on our prayers. We shall see this connection more clearly in heaven.

10. See Bernard, *De Consideratione* 5, 14.

11. Origen, *On Prayer*, 25:3.

2. "ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN"

"Heaven," in the Lord's Prayer, does not mean the sky, but the heavenly court of God the Father, the world of the angels and of those perfected members of the human race who, like the angels, take part in the heavenly liturgy. For the ancient and medieval Church this interpretation was quite evidently correct, since they were convinced that a much larger number of intelligent beings lived in heaven than on earth. They believed that humankind was created to replace only one fallen *chorus* of angels—a small number in comparison to the many who had remained faithful.

Thus, in spite of holding a geocentric view of astronomy, patristic theology was certainly not anthropocentric, in the sense of holding man and woman to be the highest intellectual creatures in the universe. Remarkably, the discovery of the astronomical insignificance of the earth almost coincided with the anthropocentric turn in theology. While patristic theology concentrated on the mission of the angels in mediating God's messages to us and eagerly contemplating Christ's saving work on earth while longing for its completion, and in the Middle Ages the center of interest became the metaphysical structure of their being and activity, in the modern age—and especially after the Second Vatican Council—the treatment of the angelic world has suffered a period of what we might call benign neglect.

We would regain a sense of balance regarding our place within the universe and within God's plan if we rediscovered the reality and the role of the angelic world in it. The earth would no longer appear as the only privileged place of intelligent life, but as only a small portion of it. The salvation history of us human beings would be seen in interrelation with that of the angels. The data of revelation on the angelic world are admittedly scarce, but sufficient for realizing the importance of angels' interventions in human history.

When we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we ask that just as God's will reigns in every good angel, so may our wills too be subject to him. The material universe obeys God's will necessarily, but human wills are free to obey or disobey him. Which shall we choose? If, on the one hand, we reject God's will, even then we can never escape from it, but instead of our experiencing the peace and sweetness of being one

with him, his will becomes a barely endurable burden we can never shake off. If, on the other hand, we freely and lovingly subject ourselves to his will, we, by so doing, truly give ourselves to God—a gift he would not have without our consent.¹² Here we can pinpoint the high dignity of the human will: God himself respects the autonomy of the creature he created and never forces the consent of our will. It is an even greater gift from God that he makes his giving of grace to human beings dependent on the prayers of other humans. By our loving deference to his will and by our prayers for others, not only do we help in the preparation of the kingdom of God, but, in some true sense, we cooperate in building it up, since, as is taught by Paul and the Second Vatican Council, of all our earthly activities, love alone remains to enter into the kingdom.¹³

This petition of the Lord's Prayer implies also that God's kingdom has already been perfectly realized in heaven, and that its coming in fullness to us means the heavenly kingdom's extension to the earth. We must, however, pay attention also to the data of revelation, which make it clear that in this final state we will remain embodied spirits in the kingdom (whereas angels are, according to the ordinary magisterium of the Church, pure spirits). God will not forever deprive the human soul of its body, which, as the soul's expression, shares in the dignity of the divine image. Yet, if we are found worthy to arrive at the resurrection of the just, our bodies will be changed. Our souls being fully transformed and conformed to Christ by the Holy Spirit, our bodies will be changed into the likeness of our glorified souls and fully united to the body of Christ. As Jesus said, we will be like angels (Lk 20:36).¹⁴ We may wonder why God wants us to live as embodied spirits, when in heaven we will not need to procreate nor to eat and drink.¹⁵ Yet, since we are substantially united with our bodies on earth, our identity would be substantially altered if

12. Of course, it is God's grace that enables us to perform this free act of self-giving, and so the paradox remains that God is the source of our freedom.

13. See 1 Cor 13:8, 13; *Gaudium et spes*, 39.

14. Cf. Mt 22:23–33; Mk 12:18–27; 1 Cor 15:35–55; *Gaudium et spes*, 39.

15. At the same time, eating and drinking in the kingdom of God is the most frequent metaphor Jesus uses to describe the joy of heaven.

in life everlasting we were bodiless souls. Moreover, it is through the human body that God intends to unite the material world to the realm of the spirit, and both spheres to himself. To use the felicitous term of Maximus the Confessor, the human being is the *syndesmos*, the uniting link of the cosmos.¹⁶ We might also venture to propose that such harmony and union of opposites (in this case, matter and spirit) expresses the playful exuberance of the Divine Artist. Does not any musician, poet, fiction writer, or artist create beauty by actualizing in sound, word, clay, stone, steel, and so forth, the hidden virtualities of matter in order to bring to light the hidden riches of the spiritual element as it is present in their own spirit, in the spirit of the entities they “create,” and in nature—the traces of the Creator Spirit—riches that could not be disclosed in any other way? The human being is one of the most magnificent creations of the Divine Artist, and he has destined our bodies to express our souls. Thus, every morally significant action in one’s earthly life, at times imperceptibly, at other times quite visibly, leaves a trace on one’s body. In the long run, then, with God’s grace or with our rejection of it, we ourselves create the final shape and value of our soul, its beauty or its ugliness. As the saying goes, after the age of thirty every human being is responsible for their face. Yet, in our earthly life our body cannot appear as the perfect expression of our soul. Birth defects, accidents, age, and so forth, may leave much more identifiable marks than do our actions. In heaven, however, the risen body is what Paul calls *soma pneumatikon*: a spiritual body, incorruptible, immortal, shining with God’s glory, and endowed with the strength of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ The earthly body is just a “solitary kernel of wheat” meant to grow into a full plant (Jn 12:24), and just as the brightness of the sun, the moon, and each star is different, so will be our heavenly bodies. According to Paul, God gives the brightness of glory to every body according to the quality of the correspondent soul. In the kingdom, then, each body will be the perfect expression of the beauty of the respective soul: a beautiful masterpiece of the Divine Artist.

16. See Endre von Ivánka, *Maximos der Bekenner: All-eins in Christus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961).

17. See 1 Cor 15:44.

According to Bernard, in the angels we honor the prevenient grace of God that led them not to repentance, but away from all sins that would call for repentance. Rather than rescue them from temptation, he preserved them from it. Yet not even the angels arrived in heaven without some struggle, if this could be called a struggle—that they persevered in adhering to God, while other angels turned against him. Those who come from earth should be honored for another kind of sanctity: they come “out of the great tribulation” (Rv 7:14), joining the angels after a lifelong struggle against the flesh, the world, and Satan.

Not only God desires the final full extension of the kingdom to the earth, but so do all in heaven, since the will of each of them is completely attuned to God’s. They are eagerly looking forward to our arrival because without our presence (that is, the presence of all those who will be in heaven), God’s kingdom and their own joy are not perfected. But even now, here on earth, we are already members of Christ and connected with the blessed: we reign among them through devout meditation; they reign among us, and fight for us, by intercession. We share their joy, and they share our sufferings. On the last great day of the feast we will all unite into the one perfect man, Jesus Christ.¹⁸ □

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18. See Bernard, *In festo omnium sanctorum* 5:1, 11.