

HUMAN FREEDOM AS THE PIVOT OF THE PROVIDENTIAL ECONOMY¹

• Maximus the Confessor •

“[I]t was also as man that he, who was himself God by nature, willed the fulfillment of the Father’s will.”

Concerning the words “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me.”

If you say that the words “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me,” which appear to express a shrinking back, are spoken by man—“not by man understood as of the Savior’s sort (for *his* will, having been wholly divinized, was not contrary to God in any way), but by the man of our sort, inasmuch as the human will does not altogether follow God, but, for the most part, resists and struggles against him,” to cite the divine Gregory [Nazianzen]—what, then, do you make of the rest of the prayer, in other words, “not what I will, but your will be confirmed”? Is that an expression of shrinking back or of courage? Of the most perfect convergence or of divergence? But no one possessed of intelligence will gainsay that it expresses neither resistance nor cowardice, but rather complete coalescence and convergence.

And if these words express complete coalescence and convergence, then by which “man” do you think they are spoken: by the man of our sort or by the man understood as of the Savior’s sort?

If by the former man, then the teacher’s [Gregory Nazianzen’s] statement missed the mark when he declared about him

¹Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula theologica et polemica* (PG 91:65A–68D).

“inasmuch as the human will does not altogether follow God, but, for the most part, resists and struggles against him.” For if it follows, then it does not resist, and if it resists, then it does not follow. The two things are contraries, so that one is removed by, and gives way to, the other.

If, on the other hand, you say that the words “not what I will, but your will be confirmed” were spoken, not by the man of our sort, but by the man understood as of the Savior’s sort, you have confessed the perfect convergence of the [Lord’s] human will in relation to the divine, paternal will, which is also his, and you have asserted that he who is double in nature has two natural wills and two natural operations, inasmuch as, lacking the slightest contrariety in either of them, he maintains the natural difference of everything from which, in which, and of which he himself was by nature.

Now, if, boxed in by these arguments, you should attempt to escape by saying that the words “not what I will, but your will be confirmed” pertain neither to the man of our sort nor to the man understood as of the Savior’s sort, but express a denial referring to the eternal divinity of the Only-begotten, a denial that rules out his willing anything on his own apart from the Father, then you must refer the object he wills—the deprecation of the chalice—to the same eternal divinity. For, even if you should say that the denial removes his willing anything on his own, it still does not do away with the object he wills. You cannot extend the denial to *both* the Only-begotten’s willing anything on his own apart from the Father *and* to the object he wills. As a result, the volition of the will that Father and Son share will turn out to be the removal of the object that God wills, namely, our salvation. Yet *that* [salvation] is the object of his will by nature. But if it is not possible to extend the denial to both things, it is obvious that, if you apply it to the [Only-begotten’s] willing anything on his own, as a way of establishing the commonality of will [between him and the Father], you nonetheless do not thereby remove the object he wills, namely, the deprecation of the chalice. Rather, you will impute it to the common, eternal divinity [of Father and Son], to which you have also referred the denial [of any independent willing on the Son’s part].

If, however, it is blasphemous even to entertain this notion, then clearly the denial in this passage, namely, the words “not what I will,” does away with any sort of contrariety, but brings home how the Savior’s human will coalesced with the divine, paternal will that was also his, inasmuch as the whole Logos was embodied in the

substance of our whole nature [*holēn holou tēn physin ousiōthentos tou Logou*] and divinized it by this embodiment. It was thus that, having for our sakes become of our sort, he said, in a truly human way, to God and his Father “not what I will, but your will be confirmed,” for it was also as man that he, who was himself God by nature, willed the fulfillment of the Father’s will.

Wherefore, it was in accord with both of the natures from which, in which, and of which he was the hypostasis that he manifested his existence as the one who wills and works out our salvation: on the one side, decreeing it, in his good pleasure, together with the Father and the Spirit; on the other side, for its sake “becoming obedient” to the Father “unto death, even death on a cross,” and effecting in person through his flesh the great mystery of the economy in our regard.—*Translated by Adrian Walker.* □