

August 30, 2009

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is clear from the story of His agony in the garden that Jesus brought His will into conformity to the Father's will. It is equally obvious, however, that the will of Jesus was distinct from that of His Father. That is to say, this story proves that Jesus possessed a human will.

For this reason, the account of the Lord's agony became particularly prominent in two theological crises:

The first was the Pelagian controversy in Africa in the early 5th century. The heretic Pelagius, we recall, taught that human beings are able, through their intelligence and free decisions, to live virtuous lives pleasing to God. Against this theory, St Augustine of Hippo argued that the human will, left to its own power, lies in bondage to sin. The human will, through the actions of Christ and grace of the Holy Spirit, is liberated and brought into conformity with the will of God.

Augustine found the prototype of this conformity in the prayer of Christ in the garden of His agony. He made this prayer, Augustine contended, in order to model the vocation of His disciples. Some of these, he wrote, "would at first be disposed to pursue their own will, but would in due course follow the will of God. In Himself the Lord prefigured such people. He demonstrated that, though they are weak, they still belong to Him. So in advance He represented them in Himself. He sweated blood from His entire body, as a sign that the blood of martyrs would flow from His body, the Church."

Following this model, Augustine exhorted, "make your own the prayer that He said, 'yet, not what I will, Father, but what You will be done'" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.19).

Augustine, for whom the liberation of man's will was an essential component of Redemption, found in Christ its representative principle. In the Son's obedience to the Father this transformation of the human will was inchoatively achieved. That is to say, man's Redemption---his radical reception of God's sovereign redemptive grace---first took place in the human will of Christ. Thus, the mystery of Redemption was accomplished by the Father in the personal resolve and obedient activity of the Son. Redemption flows to us from that active, existential source.

The story of Jesus' prayer in the garden was important in a second theological crisis, the "Monothelite" controversy of the 7th century. This name, composed of the Greek words for "one" (*monos*) and "will" (*thelema*), indicates the heresy that recognized only "one will" in Christ.

Although the Council of Chalcedon (451) had ascribed to Christ both the divine and human natures, a fear of introducing a "second subject" into the incarnate Word prompted some theologians to credit all His activities to a single will. Because this theory seemed to strengthen the "single subject Christology" of the Council of Ephesus, it enjoyed considerable favor for a time, especially at the Byzantine court.

The most compelling arguments in opposition to Monothelism were elaborated by Maximus the Confessor (580-662), who contended that the story of the Lord's prayer in the garden was ample evidence against this heresy. In that scene, moreover, Maximus saw depicted the very process of Redemption: the grace-filled joining of the human will with God's. Like Augustine, Maximus rooted Redemption in the free assent of Christ's human will, through which He obediently united His destiny to the Father's redeeming grace.

Citing Paul's contrast between the disobedient Adam and the obedient Christ, Maximus wrote, "Just as through one man, who willingly turned away from the good, human nature was changed from incorruption to corruption---unto the misfortune of all humanity---so likewise through one man, Jesus Christ, who willingly refused to turn away from the good, human nature underwent a restoration from corruption to incorruption, unto the benefit of all humanity" (*Questions to Thalassius* 42).

Thus, the Gospel story of the Lord's agony, which illustrates the Christ/Adam contrast of Romans 5, represents more than an initial stage in the Passion account. It is, rather, the living, defining context of the Redeemer's obedience, whereby He resolved that the Father's will should be accomplished in what He was about to endure. In that declaration of obedience, the New Adam modeled for His brethren the dominant petition of the prayer He gave them: "Thy will be done."

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