

January 5, 2014
The Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
The Encounter of Tautologies

Since the understanding of anything—according to Aristotle—consists in the discernment of its cause, man's freedom cannot be understood, for the simple reason that a free choice *is its own* cause. It is impossible, therefore, to trace the effect to the cause. Like a tautological proposition, freedom's predicate is contained in its subject.

Freedom, therefore, is the most mysterious of everything human, and trying to understand it is the least satisfactory and most frustrating of all endeavors of the mind. Alas, an enormous amount of mental energy has been wasted in the attempt, especially in the grace/works controversies raised at the time of the Reformation.

The synergistic theology (the "cooperation" of the divine and human wills) taught by St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662)—the theology canonized at the Sixth Ecumenical Council and completely embraced in the Orthodox Church—recognizes the logical impasse inherent in the concept of freedom. Orthodox Christians prudently spare themselves the frustration of trying to figure it out.

Part of the mysterious quality of the events of salvation derives from the intersection of divine and human freedom implied in the historicity of those events. By this comment I mean to suggest a double mystery:

First, if the freedom of man is inherently mysterious (indeed, aporetic), what shall we say of the freedom of God?

Second, going one step further, who can say what *happens* when divine and human freedom confront one another in an individual moment of time? In other words, since we predicate freedom in God by way of analogy with human freedom—and human freedom itself is beyond understanding—how can we even begin to grasp how divine and human freedom are related to one another in the great drama of Salvation History?

The biblical writers themselves do not even try. They simply tell the stories of Rebecca and Abraham's servant (Genesis 24), Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37-45), Ruth and Boaz, Jonathan and his armor-bearer (1 Samuel 14), Esther and Mordecai, Paul and his nephew (Acts 23), and so forth—without attempting to examine the "mechanics" or "meshing" of divine and human freedom. The biblical authors seem simply to accept that the *synergism* of Salvation History—the workings and interplay of God's will and man's—lies outside of human reckoning.

As though these considerations were not sufficiently puzzling, a third dilemma intrudes itself: God's providential use of man's evil will (sin, infidelity, apostasy) in the fulfilling of His own salvific purposes. That is to say, the theology of *synergism* must find some place for God's ability to bring good out of evil, to employ "vessels of destruction," as well as "vessels of election," in the course of Salvation History.

Romans 9-11 is a meditation on that theme, founded on the thesis enunciated earlier in 8:28; to wit, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." In Romans 9-11 Paul attempts to show that Israel's failure to recognize the Messiah (a major theological problem in the New Testament) conforms to a pattern found elsewhere in the Scriptures: God, in His provision for Jacob/Israel, employed the resistance of certain opponents (Esau and Pharaoh) to make good on His promise and election.

The explicit context of Paul's discussion is the puzzling fact that Israel failed to recognize its Messiah. This question, and this alone, is the task to which Paul directs his thought.

Paul reasons: man's opposition to God's will, exemplified in Esau and Pharaoh, was subsumed into His providential activity, so that a greater good ensued. How God accomplishes this no one can grasp. It pertains to the mysterious quality of Salvation History.

Much of Western theology has sought to evade this mystery by substituting another. It has removed Romans 9—11 from the dynamics of Salvation History and translated it to the realm of an eternal decree, according to which God predestines some people to heaven and some people to hell. I suppose one can make an argument that both Esau and Pharaoh found their way to hell. However that may be, it has nothing to do with Romans 9—11.

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