

Discovering the Will of God

The priest is in great need to discover God's will in many things in daily life, whether in the decisions he takes in service or in the guidance he offers to the people he serves. I quote here a characteristic passage of St. Silouan the Athonite from the book about his biography and sayings written by St. Sophrony. This passage clarifies how to discover God's will.

“The Staretz used to repeat, ‘It is good at all times and in all things to ask God for understanding of what to do or say, and in what manner’. In other words, on every occasion without exception we should seek to discover God's will and the way to perform it. The quest to know God's will is the most important thing in a man's life, since when he happens on the path of the will of God he becomes incorporate with divine, eternal life.

There are various ways of acquiring this knowledge of God's will. One is through the word of God – through the commandments of Christ. But the Gospel commandments for all their perfections – or rather, by virtue of their perfection – express the will of God in its over-all, ultimate sense, whereas man in his everyday life is confronted with an endless complexity of situations, and very often does not see what to do to comply with God's will. The man who has love of God in his heart, prompted by this love, acts in accordance with dictates which approximate to the will of God. But they only approximate – they are not perfect. The unattainableness of perfection obliges us all continually to turn to God in prayer for understanding and help.

Not only perfect love but complete knowledge is beyond our reach. An act performed, it would seem, with the very best intention often has undesirable and even evil consequences, because the means employed were bad, or simply mistaken. We often hear people justifying themselves by saying that their intentions were good, but good intentions are not enough. Life abounds in mistakes like this kind. That is why the man who loves God never ceases to beseech Him for understanding, and keeps a constant ear for the sound of His voice in him.

In practice, the process is as follows: every Christian, **and in particular every bishop or priest**, when faced with the necessity of finding a solution consonant with the will of God, **makes an inner rejection of all his own knowledge, his preconceived ideas, desires, plans. Freed of everything ‘of his own’, he then turns his heart to God in prayer and attention, and the first thought born in his soul after such prayer he accepts as a sign from on high.**

Such search for the knowledge of God's will through direct invocation in prayer leads man, especially in need and distress, **‘to hear God answering him in his heart’**, as the Staretz used to say, ‘and he learns to interpret God's guidance’.

Man is created in God's image and likeness, and is called to fulness of direct communing with God. All men, therefore, without exception, should be treading this way but in fact experience shows that such is by no means a path for everyone. This is because most people neither hear nor understand God speaking in their hearts: they listen to the urging of passion, which inhabits the soul and with its clamor drowns the still small voice of God”.

And concerning counseling a served person, he wrote the following:

“When a confessor-father answers a question in the performance of his ministry he is at that moment untouched by the passion influencing his inquirer, and so he can see more clearly, and is more accessible to the action of God's grace. **A spiritual confessor's reply will usually bear the**

imprint of imperfection but this is not because he lacks the grace of knowledge but because perfection is beyond the strength and grasp of the one inquiring of him.

When asked for counsel a spiritual father prays to God for understanding but he answers in his capacity as man, according to the measure of his faith. ‘I believed, and therefore have I spoken,’ wrote St. Paul (2 Cor. 4:13) but ‘we know in part, and we prophesy in part’ (1 Cor. 13:9). When a spiritual father gives advice, or tells a man what to do, he himself is anxious not to sin and is on trial before God. **The moment, then, that he meets with an objection, or even some inner resistance, on the part of his inquirer, he does not insist or presume to affirm that what he was saying was the expression of God’s will. In his position as man, he withdraws.** Staretz Silouan, likewise, when he met with resistance, would fall silent.

Why is this so? On the one hand because the Spirit of God suffers neither violence nor argument. On the other, because the will of God is too great a matter to be contained or receive perfect expression in the words of a spiritual father. Only the man who accepts these words of his spiritual father with faith as being pleasing to God, who does not submit them to his own judgement, or argue about them, has found the true path, for he genuinely believes that ‘with God all things are possible’ (Matt. 19:26).

Many people make the mistake of looking upon a spiritual guide as just an ordinary man like themselves, having like failings. (They think they must ‘explain all the circumstances to him, otherwise he won’t understand’. He may easily ‘get it wrong’ and must therefore be ‘put on the right track’.) But those who contradict and correct their spiritual father place themselves above him and are no longer disciples. True, nobody is perfect, and there is no man alive who would venture to teach like Christ, ‘as one having authority’ (Matt. 7:29), for the teaching is ‘not of man’ and ‘not after man’ (Gal. 1:11-12) but the potter’s clay encompasses the priceless treasure of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The prudent novice or penitent approaches his confessor in this wise – briefly he mentions the thoughts that trouble him, or explains the essentials of his condition, and then leaves the confessor free. The latter, in prayer from the very outset, awaits enlightenment from God, and then if he feels inspired pronounces his judgment, which must be the end of the matter, because if the confessor’s ‘first word’ is let slip, the efficacy of the sacrament is sapped **and confession can become an ordinary exchange of opinions**”.

God the History Maker

1. God and the Law

God is the law. All the Old Testament, in its totality, pronounces God as omnipotent and omniscient throughout space and time with indefinite power that can neither be constrained by the human mind nor measured by any other power. For, God assumes the epithet of being “the capable”. Thus, this descriptor becomes His name. *“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.’”* (Genesis 17:1).

The Old Testament also shows how it is possible for mankind to prophesy what God is about to perform. For, although God’s power is transcendental, it is also understandable and logical not conflicting with His faithfulness, or contradicting His love or overriding His mercy. *“The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked... Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and*

the rocks are thrown down by Him. The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knows those who trust in Him. But with an overflowing flood He will make an utter end of its place, and darkness will pursue His enemies” (Nahum 1:3,6-8). All of God’s work is beyond the human imaginative capacity. However, man can trust in it without fear. Moreover, man can rely on God’s work, wait for it, deal with it and get assured of its precision and truthfulness. Thus, the glamour of God’s work becomes evident *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble”* (Psalm 46:1) as much as its awesomeness becomes obvious, *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hebrews 10:31). God does not change what He has said or done. In all His deeds He remains steadfast. Therefore, it is impossible that evil becomes good or vice versa. He is the controller of the law of consequences from which no nation can escape. For, whatever is planted will be reaped and whoever plants a wind will reap a storm. *“They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind. The stalk has no bud; it shall never produce meal. If it should produce, aliens would swallow it up”* (Hosea 8:7). *“You have plowed wickedness; you have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, because you trusted in your own way, in the multitude of your mighty men”* (Hosea 10:13).

Based on these fundamental basics, the prophets would prophesy faultlessly because they saw God first and foremost as the law. *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.”* (James 1:17). Their prophecies were fulfilled precisely and in their due time. God has been revealed to them as a faithful, stable, unshakeable law. Jesus Christ has expressed this truth saying, *“Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He”* (John 13:19).

2. God and the Natural Laws

God utilizes the natural laws to discipline mankind. God has been acknowledged as the sole creator of all creatures and controller of all the laws of the universe including the seas, the cold and the heat, the winds and the rains, the earthquakes and volcanoes. Man is in partnership with God responsible for applying these rules over all creations. Evil has turned the green earth into a barren desert. On the other hand, man’s righteousness and obedience turns the wilderness into an oasis. *“He turns rivers into a wilderness, and the watersprings into dry ground; a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of those who dwell in it. He turns a wilderness into pools of water, and dry land into water springs”* (Psalm 107:33-35).

The obedience and submission of mankind to God’s laws put into service all the power of nature to yield crops, ripen fruits, multiply stocks and make available abundant staples free from disease, plagues or fatal pests. *“Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the Lord your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the Lord your God: ‘Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. ‘Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. ‘Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ‘Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. ‘The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. ‘The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. ‘The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you*

keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. And the Lord will grant you plenty of goods, in the fruit of your body, in the increase of your livestock, and in the produce of your ground, in the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers to give you. The Lord will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail; you shall be above only, and not be beneath, if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them. So you shall not turn aside from any of the words which I command you this day, to the right or the left, to go after other gods to serve them.” (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). However, punishment is not at a distance from those who deviate from obedience to God and nature turns into rebellion against them. *“Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. ‘Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ‘Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. ‘Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out...”* (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

The prophets have reached the ultimate conclusion that the natural law is inseparably and directly related to the moral law in general and specifically to the kingdom of Israel, and that God controls the world by two fine measures mainly spiritual and material that befit God’s personal goodness and suit man’s discipline and growth. The application of the natural laws for disciplinary purposes was the first lesson received by mankind, i.e. the Israelites, in preparation for receiving the spiritual laws, i.e. the mature church, in conformity with the natural process from life accordingly to the flesh to a life according to the spirit.

3. God and Interdisciplinary Factors

God uses relations and destinies as means of disciplining. Nations in their futile thinking believe themselves to be free building their history and prosperity through their power. However, in reality God has ordained for nations to be a punitive stick to each other, making use of their commotion to reveal His disciplinary will and merciful acts without being responsible for their evil and atrocities. *“Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, And to tread them down like the mire of the streets... Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Lord has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that He will say, ‘I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks.’ For he says: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent; also I have removed the boundaries of the people, and have robbed their treasuries; so I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man. My hand has found like a nest the riches of the people, and as one gathers eggs that are left, I have gathered all the earth; and there was no one who moved his wing, nor opened his mouth with even a peep.’ Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him who saws with it? As if a rod could wield itself against those who lift it up, or as if a staff could lift up, as if it were not wood!”* (Isaiah 10:5-15). Thus, the more submissive nations are to God, the more beneficial His willful mercies would be to them. Thus, self will leads to destruction and overthrow, loss of the glory and procuring of downfall.

The immigration and movement of peoples are controlled by God causing them to walk according to his supreme goals. Israel was not the only nation God had taken out of Egypt. He took out the

Palestinians from their original birthplace as well as the Syrians. “*Are you not like the people of Ethiopia to Me, O children of Israel?*” says the Lord. *’Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?’*” (Amos 9:7). Thus, God rules over nations with an absolute rule issued with fixed principles and measures which are to be gradually recognized over time.

It might seem that the advanced nations control the destinies of developing countries as if to confirm that human greed forms and maneuvers history. However, the reality is that neither a single person nor a whole nation can control the world history. For, history springs from the will of God as the sole source and moves towards one aim. Over the extended time, all the incidents both good and bad will be detected to reveal the will of God as the Supreme Power that utilizes all good and bad incidents, people and governments to form a unified destiny for all the people on earth making them harmonious with God’s will and confirming that God alone is the maker of history because He alone is the maker of mankind. “*And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, ’What have You done?’*” (Daniel 4:34-35).

4. God and the Outcome of Punishment and Salvation

The law of punishment does not stand isolated from both the moral law and ethical law both springing from God’s nature and righteousness. Therefore, man is responsible for any punishment that befalls him; rather man manufactures his own punishment.

God is in a position to defer punishment until it gets cancelled through repentance and reconciliation with the law erred against either the moral or ethical law. However, God cannot cancel the punishment easily or unconditionally; because it would contradict His nature and insult his righteousness and all His other laws. In other words, forgiving a sin without repentance or letting it go without the due punishment is considered not only a grievous undertaking against the law of righteousness but also a destruction of both the ethical and moral laws that is certainly against the nature of God, the nature of goodness and righteousness.

Sinning against the ethical and moral laws creates in the world an active evil and deadly energy that separates from God Who is the source of everlasting life. What goes around comes around. Any evil is bound to come back and revolve around the neck of the sinner because the evil energy comes back to dwell in its source. However, due to time, forgetfulness, spiritual shortsightedness and lack of sensitivity and discernment people think that evil and its consequences are two separate entities. However, in reality, both are two sides of the same coin separated only by man’s foolishness or God’s longsuffering and patience.

Articles on the Christian History The Fifth Century Post Ephesus Council Incidents

Seven days after the dissemination of the decisions convened during the Ephesus Council (431 AD), came the surprising appearance of John of Antioch (Nestorius’ friend) along with thirty-three of his bishops. Hearing about the people’s acceptance of the Council decisions, John hastened to convene a council composed of the bishops, who came with him along with eight others in order

to oppose the excommunication of Nestorius as well as reject all the twelve anathemas previously issued by St. Cyril.

During that time, Emperor Theodosius II issued an article prohibiting the departure of any bishop without his permission. At the same time, Philip the priest came and with him two people representing Celestine, bishop of Rome. The Council of Ephesus convened its second session to hear Celestine's opinion concerning Nestorius' heresy. Celestine's faith conformed totally with St. Cyril's beliefs and supported the decisions convened during the first session.

The following day, the third session was convened during which Philip the priest, and those with him, asked Celestine's representative to view the decisions of the first meeting. With the assent of the bishop of Rome, they signed their consent on those decisions and all the fathers sent a message to Emperor Theodosius II asking his permission to have them appoint another bishop for Constantinople instead of Nestorius the erroneous and allow them to return back to their sees.

Shortly after that, St. Cyril along with the new bishop of Constantinople asked the Holy Synod to convene a special session to discuss the anathemas issued against them by John of Antioch and his illegal council. So, the Synod called for the fourth meeting presided by Julian, bishop of Jerusalem. John refused the three invitations sent to him and his three bishops to attend that special meeting. At this point, one of the fathers announced that John was wrong in two things: firstly, he had no right to excommunicate St. Cyril and Bishop Memnon because their faith was part of the faith of the whole synod. Secondly, the council he had formed had no legal authority to excommunicate or return any bishop. After discussion and exchange of ideas, the Synod refuted the order of excommunicating St. Cyril and Bishop Memnon considering it non existing.

Utterly out of sheer desire to walk the second mile for the lost sheep, John of Antioch, the ecumenical synod met the following day for the fifth time led this time by Juvenal, bishop of Jerusalem. However, John refused to respond. Consequently, the Synod had no choice but to excommunicate him from the holy community accordingly to the church laws and this decision was added to the previous ones.

A few days later, the ecumenical synod met twice more to discuss a problem at a church in Cyprus as well as a number of new organizational canons that were added to the previous ones.