

PALM SUNDAY, 2014

We begin today the most sacred week of the year, Holy Week, which is surely called "holy" not simply because it commemorates the passion, death, and resurrection of the all-holy, sinless Christ Jesus but also because all of this is intended to lead us to holiness. On this latter point, it is crucial to keep in mind that the words "holiness" and "wholeness" do not sound alike by mere coincidence. No, they come from the same root, which tells us that a truly holy person is "whole," that is, "integrated, undivided." Our entire need for redemption stems from the basic truth that all too often we have been divided, especially in our will. In the New Testament, this division is nowhere so forcefully expressed as when St. Paul, writing to the Romans, laments: "I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate" (Rom 7:15), and again a few verses later: "I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want" (Rom 7:19). This inclination or tendency to do what is wrong even against our own basic desires for the good is, more than anything else, the reason why Christians have always recognized their need for a redeemer, a savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Just how we understand Jesus is, however, not a matter of ready-made or universal agreement, but it matters a great deal in how we understand ourselves, our own prayer, the very way we live our lives. I want to illustrate the challenge by looking at one of the most important verses in the Passion narrative that we just heard. There in the garden of Gethsemane, as his closest followers keep dozing off, Jesus prays: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:39). This surely means that Jesus underwent genuine distress at the thought of his impending death. That's why we speak of his *agony* in the garden, and yet some important theologians have been reluctant to attribute such distress to him. The first great theologian of the early Church, Origen of Alexandria, notes that the Passion narrative has Jesus praying that *this* cup pass from him, suggesting that Jesus knew that there were various kinds or cups of martyrdom possible for him and that he was probably

praying for another kind that was even harder, so that still greater benefits for a greater number of persons would be accomplished through some other cup.¹ I'm sure we all find such reasoning strange, but it comes from a reluctance to acknowledge that Jesus really was like us in all things but sin and would therefore have experienced an altogether natural aversion to a painful death--crucifixion being so terrible a way to die that it was illegal for Roman citizens to be executed in this way.

I doubt that any of us would have that kind of difficulty with Jesus' prayer there in the garden of Gethsemane or with the distress that led him to say, "My soul is sorrowful even to death" (Matt 26:38), but there is another kind of response that has been more widespread and longer lasting. An almost perfect example would be in a treatise "On Detachment" that has been attributed to the well-known medieval Dominican Meister Eckhart, who remains so popular today that there is an international society dedicated to the study and promotion of his writings. In that treatise, whether written by Eckhart himself or by one of his followers, the author claims that Christ's speaking of being sorrowful even unto death was spoken only by what he calls "the outer man," whereas his "inner man" (which we might say was his "true self") remained wholly free in immovable detachment. As you would expect, the author says that we ourselves should give so much emphasis to our "inner man" (our "inner self") as not to pray to receive anything in particular from God or to have God take anything painful away from us. In the words of that treatise, "a heart in detachment asks for nothing, nor has it anything of which it would gladly be free. So it is free of all prayer, and its prayer is nothing else than for uniformity with God."²

This has been called a "stern-minded attitude,"³ which regards concern over earthly joys or sorrows decidedly secondary and ideally to be altogether transcended. Thus Eckhart says in one of his sermons: "Throw all anxiety out of your heart.... Even if I had to see with my own

eyes my father and all my friends killed, my heart would not be moved by it. . . . I have rightful joy only when neither sufferings nor torments can ravish it from me."⁴ Or again, in his "Counsels on Discernment" (sometimes called "Talks of Instruction"), Eckhart writes that "the most powerful prayer . . . and the most honorable of all works, is that which proceeds from an empty spirit. . . . [And] what is an empty spirit? An empty spirit is one that is confused by nothing, attached to nothing, . . . and has no concern whatever in anything for its own gain, for it is all sunk deep down into God's dearest will and has forsaken its own."⁵

Taken to its extreme point, this could lead a person to have *no* will of his or her own but always to pray purely and simply that God's will be done. Eckhart says as much in what is probably his most famous sermon, which includes the lines: "I tell you by the truth that is eternal, so long as you have a will to fulfill God's will . . . then you are not [truly] poor, for a poor man is one who has a will and a longing for nothing."⁶ This sounds heroic, but it has the huge problem of taking us away from the example and teaching of our truest master, Christ Jesus, who clearly prayed for release from the suffering that he feared would soon befall him. That "stern-minded attitude" will always and inevitably have to gloss over or try to explain away Jesus' prayer, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

Far more faithful to Gospel teaching is Eckhart's medieval Dominican confrere Thomas Aquinas, who recognized the truth that lay behind those words of St. Paul that I quoted at the beginning of this homily. Paul could lament that he often did what he did not want to do because there really is a sense in which we have more than one will: on the one hand, there is what Aquinas would later call our "sensuous will" and our "rational will acting by natural instinct," and on the other hand, our "rational will modified by [good] judgment."⁷ There is nothing wrong or reprehensible about the former, provided only that we don't allow it to be the final arbiter of

our decisions, and that is precisely what Jesus did not allow when he added that crucial phrase in his prayer to his heavenly Father, "yet not as I will but as you will." There is nothing intrinsically wrong with our natural impulses, our instinctive desires, as long as we respect the proper hierarchy. St. Thomas is eminently clear on this when he writes:

Christ prayed in this way with the object of offering us a threefold teaching. First, he wished to reveal to us that he had assumed a true human nature together with all its natural urges. Second, he wished to show that it is permissible for a person to entertain an instinctive affection for something which God does not will. Third, he wished to show that one must submit his own impulses to the divine will. [Thomas then quotes the following passage from St. Augustine's commentary on one of the Psalms.] So we find Augustine saying, "Christ, existing as a man, reveals a man's particular desire when he says, 'Let this cup pass from me.' This was his human will speaking, seeking its own individual satisfaction. But because he wished to be a just man, following the paths of God, he added, 'Yet not as I will, but as you will.' It is as though he were saying [to us]: 'See yourself in me; your will may have its own desires even though different from those of God.'"⁸

I hope you will forgive me if this seemed like too theological a reflection, for I am well aware that in some circles today the very word "theological" has the very negative connotation of "removed from reality." But in this case, at least, there are truly practical conclusions we may draw from the theology, above all about the rightness of praying for particular goods, not only as we see Jesus doing in his prayer in the garden but also in his instruction about the Lord's Prayer,

or in his telling us to pray for our persecutors, or (in his discourse about the end times) to "pray that your flight be not in winter or on the sabbath" (Matt 24:20), not to mention all the things that St. Paul asks his communities to pray for in his various letters. For us, this means that we ought indeed to pray--and pray fervently--for restoration to health of those among our relatives or friends who are ill, for peace for those suffering the ravages of war in places like Syria and the Central African Republic, for safety for travelers, for decent employment for those who have long been out of work, for freedom for persons who have been abducted or unjustly imprisoned, and for all the other things that regularly and rightly find a place in our general intercessions at every celebration of the Eucharist. But because what we ought desire *most of all* is that God's will be done, and because we cannot always know just what God wills in particular cases, may our prayer always include, at least implicitly if not verbally, that all-important phrase that our Lord Jesus added there in the garden of Gethsemane: "Yet not as I will, but as you will."

1" Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, in *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist, 1979), 61.

2" "On Detachment," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist, 1981), 292.

3" Eleonore Stump, "Not My Will but Thy Will Be Done: Aquinas and Eckhart on Willing What God Wills," *Medieval Mystical Theology* 22, no. 2 (2013), 161.

4 Eckhart, Sermon "See What Love," in *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher*, trans. Reiner Schürmann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 135-36.

5" Eckhart, "Counsels on Discernment," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 248.

6" Eckhart, Sermon "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit," in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons*, 200.

7" See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 18, art. 5.

8" *Ibid.*, q. 21, art. 2. The quotation from Augustine is from his commentary on Psalm 32.