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Captain of My Soul

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

RARE it is that blasphemy reaches the heights of poetic excellence found in Henley's poem *Invictus*:

"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate:

I am the captain of my soul."

Hurling challenges at God is no less blasphemous because it is put in poetic form.

There is a sense, of course, in which each man is master of his fate and captain of his soul. The destiny of each man in eternity is decided by a decision he makes in time. Of the ultimate end of Judas, St. Luke says, with chill brevity, that he went "to his own place." By his acts in time Judas chose his eternity. He was, in truth, master of his fate.

But there is a deeper sense in which the Christian does not captain his own soul. Time is too short, eternity too long, too inevitable, and too definitive for him to trust the captaincy of his life to himself. From the treachery of time and from his own inadequacy, the Christian knows he is saved by committing his fate to one who stands above time. To God, this One who made time and rules time, the Christian says, "Rule not only my ultimate destiny, but be king and master of all my decisions." The Christian does not consider it an indignity for him to say to God, "You are the Master of my fate. You are the Captain of my soul."

This dependence on the will of God may look like timidity and weakness, but it is not. In the last analysis the Christian, like Christ, defines his strength in terms of the will of God: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me." The will of God is meat and drink for the Christian. It sustains his life and is the principle of his growth. All the weaknesses he experiences are endurable and surmountable because the will of God is his daily bread.

Besides being the food of the Christ-

ian, the will of God is mystery, law, and freedom.

The will of God is a mystery. Pain and darkness and even agony may be willed by God. And who will say that God loved Christ less because He willed Him the Cross? Does God love the Christian less because He leads him to pain? The Christian does not pretend that he can reconcile in a completely satisfactory way the love God bears him and the sorrow God wills him. It is a mystery he embraces.

God wills to lead the Christian by paths he does not know. The mystery of the will of God is like the mystery of Abraham. God called Abraham to leave "his country, his kinsfolk, and his father's house" to go to a strange land which God would show him. "And he went out, not knowing where he was going." Abraham did not know where God was leading him, but it was God who led and that was knowledge enough.

The Christian finds that the will of God sometimes leads him in darkness. Just what lies ahead is not certain. The Christian does not fully understand. Not knowing, this too is willed by God. But the God who leads is the God of love. In the midst of every pain and defeat into which God leads him is the conviction that, in the end, God leads to joy and victory. "God always leads us in triumph." And for the Christian this is knowledge enough.

The will of God is law. Rebels from birth, we do not like law, God's or anyone else's. We tend to think of law as aloof, fleshless, and inhuman. However, when the Christian submits to the will of God, he submits to a law which is eminently human. Take the classic example in the life of Christ. In the Garden of Gethsemani Christ sinks to His knees and prays, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass away from me; yet not as I will, but as You will." What is the will of the Father in Christ's regard is no less than that He submit to rejection by men, the spilling of His blood, and slow death upon the Cross.

But the Father does not expect Christ to submit to the law of His will with a spurious and carefully practiced insensitivity. The Father asks much, but He does not ask that Christ submit like a totem pole: straight, stolid, and dead.

If there is something divine in Christ's submission to the law of the Father's will, there is also something very human. Christ shrinks from the pain before Him. He draws back and cries out. Then He submits to the will of the Father. More than mere submission, He wills what the Father wills. But there is nothing here of a loveless imposition of a loveless law; nothing of a wooden and unfeeling acceptance of that law. What the Father wills is frightening, but He wills it with great love. What Christ embraces is the law of the Father's will, but in embracing it He remains fully human, fully sensitive to pain, fear, loneliness, and death.

THE will of God is a law that does not ask of the Christian that he be less than human. The law may make him suffer, but it will never say, "Submit to this disease but I forbid you to feel repugnance. Come to the Cross, but experience no fear. Die this death, but do not draw back."

The will of God is freedom. Wherever the divine and the human meet there is paradox. Here the paradox is: the more we are bound by the will of God the more we are free. When we do our own will we are bound by all the limitations of our own will. But when we do God's will we, in some measure, participate in the freedom of God's will. And the will of God is free of limitations. For this reason, to be imprisoned by the will of God is the highest freedom.

The will of God is not to be equated with a ruthless fatalism which makes the Christian an obedient pawn, but not a free son. It does not give rise to that murky, joyless piety so often attributed to the Christian. That God is the Captain of his soul makes the Christian the freest of men and the most joyous.