

# THOSE WHOM HE HAS CHOSEN

## *A Study of the Mystery of Predestination*

By His suffering and death Jesus Christ has taken upon Himself the burden of our sins and has redeemed us from bondage to those sins. Out of His infinite love for each and every one of us He has endured the torments of the cross that He might win for us a share in His very own divine life. Thus He gives us the means whereby we become sons of God, and also whereby that sonship will be crowned in heaven with the glory of eternal union with Himself. Christ, then, died for all men. God wills that all be saved. "This is good and agreeable in the sight of God our Savior, who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:3-4).

Yet not all men actually attain eternal salvation. The words of Our Lord recorded in the Gospels, especially the parables, make this clear. We recall the parable of the good and bad fishes, the wheat and the cockle, the sheep and the goats, the marriage feast. For to those on His left hand the Son of Man will say: "Depart from me accursed ones, into the everlasting fire . . . for as long as you did not do it for one of these least ones, you did not do it for me" (Mt. 25: 41, 45).

Now we know that nothing can happen against God's will, for He is the first and the universal cause. God's will can never be frustrated; it is always fulfilled. Nor can anything escape its influence, as if acting outside the sphere of its causality. How, then, are we to resolve the apparent conflict arising from God's will to save all men and the fact that some are punished for eternity because of their sins. Herein we are faced with the mystery of predestination, the divine plan ordering only some men to glory. And though by God's Revelation and the light of His wisdom we may come to know some things about this mystery, the truths contained therein must always, in this life, remain essentially mysterious. We may reach some conclusions concerning this revealed mystery, but since it is rooted in the Divine Being Itself, we will be unable to intuit the inner content of our conclusions. An insight into the intimate workings of divine justice and mercy must elude us, for His judgments are incomprehensible and His ways unsearchable (Rom. 11:33).

Beginning, then, as we are, an attempt to understand the content of God's Revelation in the matter of predestination, it is necessary to keep

before our minds the limitations and imperfections which are bound to inhere in the fruit of our endeavors. For one thing, in speaking of the perfections or attributes and operations of God our mind will be required to make distinctions not to be found in God Himself. Of course, it is necessary and justified for us to make these distinctions for we can in no other way think of God. Nevertheless, we must remember that when we speak of God's goodness, or His justice and mercy, or His infinity, although He is truly all these things, yet they are contained in Him in utter simplicity. God's essence is His existence, He is His justice, mercy and so forth. The distinctions formally exist in the minds conceiving these perfections. We are forced to think and speak of the perfections of God in a divisive way which does not reflect Him as He is.

An equally if not more important consideration concerns the content of the perfections by which we conceive of God. We think of Him as infinitely good, merciful, just, or perfect. Our conceptions, however, are drawn from the universe of creaturely, finite realities and cannot possibly reflect God's perfections as they are in themselves. His perfections infinitely surpass and transcend our limited perfections—a fact which must be constantly adverted to if we are to avoid errors and misconceptions in our thinking about God. Thus it is of the utmost importance that we not impose the limitations of our own perfections on God. The virtue of justice, for example, is in us but a pale reflection of God's justice, and cannot give us an adequate insight into His own. His mercy cannot be thought of as corresponding to our mercy. If we do, we are in error. And so it is of all the perfections of God, a knowledge of which we are able to attain in only a very limited way. However, as long as we keep before our minds the limitations of our knowledge we can proceed with great profit to that fuller knowledge of God which will be perfected only in heaven.

Having made these preliminary cautions we must now consider some theological notions immediately presupposed to predestination, and on which its understanding is proximately dependent. As has been said, predestination is that special part of divine providence which relates to the supernatural end of intellectual creatures. We must, then, first treat of providence, God's eternal plan for the ordering of all things to their end.

For a starting point in this consideration our thoughts immediately turn to God's universal causality. By His creative act Almighty God draws all things into being from nothingness and He then maintains them in existence by His continuously conserving power. But not only is He the absolutely first efficient cause of all things, He also causes the whole multi-

plicity of creaturely operations by which all things attain their end. It is true that these actions proceed from God through the mediation of creatures as secondary causes, but they as surely find the ultimate source of their being in God as do the things from which they proceed. Nothing, then, escapes the causality of God, whether in the order of essence and existence, or in the realm of activity. According to the plan of His Intellect, and as it is joined to the decree of His will, God predetermines all.

An analogy with the order of human things will enable us to understand more explicitly this notion of divine causality by Intellect and Will. In the artistic order—taking artistry here in the wide sense as applying to any action by which a man produces something according to his preconceived plan—an amateur architect, for example, forms in his mind the plan for a summer cottage. His knowledge then becomes the efficient cause of the cottage when by an act of his will he intends to produce the building in conformity with his plan. In somewhat the same way, but also in an infinitely transcending manner, God's Intellect and Will are the cause of all things. In reality, of course, His Intellect and Will are identical; the distinction is on the part of our mind. Furthermore, God knows all things as they are mirrored or reflected in His own essence as prior to the existence of these things outside Himself. In contrast, all of men's ideas come from already existing things.

As we have been striving to point out, God executes His plan for all things through the efficient causality of His Intellect and Will. However, since divine providence is the plan for the ordering of things to their end, it will more properly concern the efficient causality of actions. Thus for a fuller understanding of providence we turn to a consideration of the different types of secondary causes and the manner in which God, as first cause, moves all of them in their actions.

Some secondary causes, the sun for instance, act necessarily, or in such a way that their movements are never impeded. God has made them *necessary* causes. He is the cause of both their action and the mode of their action. The sun truly causes—but only under the influence of, and in virtue of, God's continual prime causality. Other secondary causes are *contingent* causes. Although they operate in certain fixed patterns, they sometimes have their effects impeded. Plants and animals are an example of these. For one reason or another the apple tree does not always produce its fruit, the hen does not hatch its egg. Because of certain external influences the operations of contingent causes do not always issue in the effect to which they are properly ordered. Now the crucial point to remember with regard

to all these causes is this: whatever the effect may be, down to its minutest detail, it must have God for its first cause, for within His causality there falls not only the determined operation of the plant or animal, but all the various other causes which may enter into the effect. God causes the operations of all the contributing causes and also the particular way in which they concur to produce the final result. Every last detail of the tomato produced by the tomato plant, and of every other contingent effect, must be attributed to God as to its first cause. He provides for and predetermines all.

When we come finally to man we are faced with a special problem. As is evident in our own experience, and also abundantly clear in Revelation, man is endowed by God with freedom. All the moral exhortations of the Scriptures, the precepts and prohibitions, the rewards and punishments are absurd if man is not free. The mode of man's deliberate activity is that of free choice from among a variety of good things, none of which compels acceptance.

And yet God is as surely the first cause of man's activity as He is of the activity of necessary and contingent causes. There cannot be a finite cause not depending on the divine will, as if escaping God's causality. God moves and predetermines man to every free choice of his will except sin. But when God moves the will to its actions, He always does so in conformity with the condition He has placed on it. He does not do violence to man's freedom. God moves the will to freely perform its own actions. What God has predetermined will inevitably come about, but in such a way that the human person always retains the capacity for doing the opposite. More than this we cannot grasp, for the imperceptible movement of God's causality on man's free will is a mystery hidden in the divine omnipotence. God is the first cause of all man's activity, while man does all his actions freely.

Equipped now with this very brief summary of providence we turn our attention to predestination, that special part of providence by which God chooses some men and angels for eternal salvation while permitting others to incur eternal damnation. Predestination is a mystery known only by revelation. It is made known in Sacred Scripture, has been unanimously accepted in Christian tradition and is defined by the Church. The understanding of the mystery, however, is a major point of theological departure for the Pelagians, semi-Pelagians, and all the Protestant sects.

While providence is the total plan for the ordering of all things to their respective ends, including God's ordinary disposition of the natural

order, predestination involves only the supernatural order. It is concerned with an end which totally exceeds the natural powers of man, namely, the vision of God face to face. Since this end is infinitely beyond his capacity man must be elevated to the higher order by supernatural means. Only these means can bring him to the bliss of eternal union with God. The plan, pre-existing in the mind of God, by which He orders those whom He chooses to glory is what we understand by predestination. "For those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rome. 8: 29).

We return then to the question originally posed. How does God will all men to be saved if He predestines only some? Following the distinction of St. John Damascene we understand the willing of salvation to all men to be an instance of God's antecedent will. Antecedently, God wills salvation to all men. This means that the good object, salvation, taken in an absolute sense as abstracted from all the circumstances which in the existing order are inseparable from it, is willed to all. But by His consequent will, that is including all the exigencies of His justice and mercy and the order of His infinite wisdom, God chooses only some men to be saved.

The distinction can be clarified by the following example. Antecedently, the just judge wills that all men continue to live. He wills the good object life, considered without the welter of circumstances which surround it, to all men. But according to his consequent will, that is, in consideration of the demands of the common good, he wills the murderer to be executed. The example can hardly be indiscriminately applied to God, of course, but it does afford some insight into the manner in which God antecedently wills all to be saved while consequently choosing some for salvation and permitting others to fall away. By His antecedent will God places real good in all men. Christ, by shedding His blood for all has won for all graces sufficient for salvation. These graces really direct all men towards eternal life and can only be rendered fruitless by man's refusal to accept them. According to His consequent will, nonetheless, God gives to some men graces which will effectively or efficaciously and without fail, though with free acceptance and cooperation, lead to salvation.

The result that we see of God's antecedent will to save all men is the entirely gratuitous bestowal on all of graces sufficient to lead to salvation. These graces place everyone within the supernatural dispensation and give to all a real orientation and positive direction towards eternal life. The result of God's consequent predestining will is the gratuitous granting to

those whom He has chosen of graces which will move the will without fail to free acceptance and thus eventually fructify in eternal salvation. In the execution of the predestining decree of His will God bestows supernatural grace on those whom He has chosen. These graces sanctify the predestined and move their will to the good acts and further graces which eventually terminate in the glory of the vision of God. "And those whom He has predestined, them he has also called; and those whom he has called, them he has also justified, and those whom he has justified, them he has also glorified" (Rom. 8: 30).

Now if God in the inscrutable designs of His wisdom has chosen only some men for eternal salvation, there must be another disposition of the divine Intellect relating to those who will lose their souls. This counterpart of predestination, in the same supernatural order with it, is known as reprobation. God predestines those who will come to salvation; He reprobates those who will be damned. Unlike predestination, however, reprobation must be viewed in a twofold way, positively and negatively. Positive reprobation, or the positive will of God consigning some souls to hell, is only in punishment of and after, or on account of, foreseen sins. In positive reprobation God wills to damn those souls He foresees as dying impenitent, rejecting the graces that Christ has won for them. Thus, just as it pertains to divine providence to order some men to eternal life, it must also pertain to this same divine providence to permit others to fall away. Nevertheless, the relation of the divine will to those who will be saved differs vastly from its relation to the reprobated. God causes or predetermines the graces and good works which result in salvation for the predestined, but He in no way causes the sins of those who are lost. Sin is the privation inhering in human acts when they are not properly ordered to God but are opposed to His law. Hence in its precise formality sin is the lack of fullness of being which the act ought to have. As such it is real only in a negative way, non-being, the deficiency of something which should have been provided by the will but was not. Thus man's free will must take the entire responsibility for sin. The sense of negative reprobation is that God by not choosing some permits them to fall away. Allowing some to reject His graces and fall into sin, God abandons them to their just deserts.

At this point we might ask why God permits some men to lose their eternal salvation. Would it not be more in conformity with the divine goodness and mercy to save all men? First of all we must note that man has absolutely no claim to eternal life. Salvation, as it belongs to an order

which entirely exceeds the limits, powers and even aspirations of man's nature, the supernatural order, is a gift totally gratuitous, completely undeserved. Indeed, it is infinitely more gratuitous than the gifts of the natural order such as life, health and talents. God is under no obligation to elevate us to this infinitely higher order. But even further, we can find in the divine perfections reasons of fittingness for the predestination of some and reprobation of others.

No one questions the mercy of God. Its manifestations abound everywhere. The gifts of God's mercy and love for both the reprobate and the predestined far exceed our comprehension. Yet mercy is not the sole perfection of the all-Perfect God. In an utterly simple and indivisible way all perfections subsist in Him, and all must be manifested in creation. One perfection without the others would in some way be incomplete, it would not truly be a perfection. The mercy of God is manifested in the saving of the predestined, but His justice is manifested in permitting the reprobated to fall away. Without negative reprobation man would not come to know the fuller expression of God's justice, which is just as holy and adorable as His mercy.

God does not prevent sin. It is within His plan of providence to permit sin to enter the world. But we know that the very permission of sin cannot but be from His goodness and love—for our good and for His own greater glory. Sometimes it is hard for us to see what greater good could possibly come from God's permission of sin. Yet when we realize to what greater heights of sanctity the sinner sometimes soars after his fall, we catch a glimpse of God's wisdom. There are the classic examples—St. Peter, St. Mary Magdalen, the good thief, St. Augustine—but there are also countless others throughout the ages of whom we never hear. When a man sins, God gives him the grace to realize his own misery and helplessness. By discerning the horror of separation from God and the preciousness of the gift he has lost, the sinner is moved by God's grace to sorrow and sets himself more strongly against sin than he ever would have if he had not sinned. A knowledge of God's love and mercy will then lead him to great heights of love in return.

Even for the family or acquaintances of the sinner there may be very salutary effects. Their own anguish may be the beginning of spiritual reflections and prayers which will lead to their own greater good. Of course, we are not by any means saying that sin is good. As it is a privation of the proper order to God and ultimately a rejection of Him it is the only true evil existent in the world. Nevertheless, God by a new act of His love

draws great good from sin. In the permission of sin greater goods accrue to the whole than otherwise would come to it.

To conclude, we must be aware that in the mysterious designs of God this natural universe is destined to culminate in the universe of grace. Because of sin God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, to become one of us, to bear our infirmities and finally lead us to glory. No greater goods are possible to us than those which come to us through His Incarnation. Somehow in God's design, His glory, mercy and justice are better manifested by a partially sinful universe than by one in which sin is not permitted. The glory of God intended by Him is best achieved by permission of some to fall away. In this way the saved are more fully aware of the utter gratuity of their salvation while the damned are acutely conscious that the sole cause of their damnation is their own sin. For the elect, their own sins are an occasion for making them more humble, wise and cautious, while the sins of others provide a warning against pride. Beyond this our impoverished understanding cannot go, but must in faith leave this mystery to the revelation of God's ineffable wisdom which will be made in the beatific vision. The words of St. Paul in the 9th chapter of his epistle to the christian community at Rome make this ever so clear:

What then shall we say? Is there injustice with God? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will show pity to whom I will show pity." So then there is question not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God showing mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised thee up that I may show in thee my power, and that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore he has mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardens.

Thou sayest to me: Why then does he still find fault? For who resists his will? O man, who art thou to reply to God? Does the object moulded say to him who moulded it: Why hast thou made me thus? Or is not the potter master of his clay, to make from the same mass one vessel for honorable, another for ignoble use? But what if God, wishing to show his wrath and to make known his power, endured with much patience vessels of wrath, ready for destruction, that he might show the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he has prepared unto glory—even us



whom he has called not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles? (Rom. 9: 14-24)

We consider now the relation which prayers, good works, and merits have to predestination. The question arises whether predestination is in virtue of the good works which God foresees us performing under the influence of grace, or whether it is entirely without reference to good works, which would then be an effect of predestination. As regards God's predestining act itself, it is clear that predestination is co-substantial and co-eternal with God, and in no way motivated by anything outside of Him. God is not moved or caused by anything that is in creation; rather He causes and determines the entirety of creation. So in this sense, before the foundation of the world, as St. Paul says, and entirely according to the inscrutable designs of His wisdom, God chose those whom it was His will to choose.

With regard, however, to the effect of predestination, those efficacious graces by which the predestined are led to salvation, there is a sense in which these proceed from our meritorious actions. Our meritorious actions can be conceived of in much the same way as prayer. By prayer we by no means change God's mind. Our prayers do not persuade or dispose Him to do something He had not already determined to do. If this were the case God would be motivated by something in creation, His will would be determined by something outside Himself and so would be imperfect. And yet in the plan of God our prayers are really the causes of the good things we receive. God determines to give us good things by means of and in virtue of our prayers. By His grace He moves us to pray, decreeing that our prayers should result in graces and benefits. The whole order thereby proceeds from God as its first cause. He has determined all, but in such a way that some things should come about by means of secondary causes.

In much the same way our good works are ordered to the ultimate effect of predestination, union with God. By grace God moves us to perform meritorious actions which are vitally elicited by us and personally our own. These actions in His plan are the cause of further graces and further good works throughout life until finally they culminate in the attainment of glory in heaven. Throughout the whole order, and even though it is sometimes interrupted by sin, each good work and each grace is ordered to another as cause and effect. The final goal, salvation, is that for the sake of which all the graces are offered, while each grace in its turn is the meritorious cause of another and finally of glory.

This entire process constitutes the execution of predestination, and to

it must be applied our notions of God's universal causality. The initial granting of grace, as we well know, is completely unmerited, completely due to God's bounty. But again, the whole process taken in its totality is entirely previous to the prevision of merits. As such, the effect of predestination is not in virtue of anything to be found in creatures, but is entirely due to God's free choice. "He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ as his sons, according to the purpose of his will, unto the praise of the glory of his grace, with which he has favored us in his beloved Son" (Eph. 1: 5-6). He chose us not because we were saints, for we were not; but He chose us that we might become saints and be without blemish.

Within the order of the effects of predestination, then, one grace of good work is the meritorious cause of others, but even here God is the first cause moving us to every good deed. Without grace first moving it, human free will can contribute nothing of itself to salvation. The will acts for good only under the influence of grace. Hence without grace the will is completely inert as far as supernaturally meritorious acts are concerned and itself has nothing positive to offer. The words of the New Testament on this matter are very explicit: "Without me you can do nothing" (John 15: 5); "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6: 44); "And no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12: 5).

Under grace the will truly becomes the cause of its actions, as subordinated secondary cause. As we have seen above, God, moving the will to its actions, does not destroy either the freedom or the true causality of man. The effect comes from grace and the will as one total cause, not as from two separate and distinct contributors. By His grace God efficaciously moves men to the good act which will be consummated in salvation. Under grace's influence man will perform meritorious actions, but he will do so freely, retaining the capacity for acting in a contrary manner.

Thus we see God's causality as it relates to the souls of the predestined. For them His grace is truly effective, infallibly causing the good actions which they perform. God's causality does not relate in the same way to the reprobated. They are offered graces which are really sufficient to bring them to salvation, but these graces, although they may result in conversion and supernaturally good works, do not in the final analysis efficaciously lead to salvation. God permits the reprobated to reject His grace and to commit the sin of final impenitence. They freely and knowingly refuse His goodness and mercy, being capable all the while of acting

otherwise. The positive decree of God's will then punishes them for their sins.

The infallible certitude of predestination then surely is an evident conclusion of all that has been said. Those whom God has predestined will inevitably attain eternal life, but their freedom will not be imposed upon. Free and meritorious actions will really contribute to their salvation. Those whom God has reprobated, on the other hand, certainly will not attain salvation, but only by their free rejection of grace. By their sins they will be damned. Likewise, the exact number and identity of the predestined is known to God, although He does not make this known to men except by a very special revelation which is extremely rare. It remains for us to "work out our salvation in fear and trembling."

Thus from Sacred Scripture, the declarations of the Church, the explanations of the Fathers, and sound theological principles we have developed an integral understanding of predestination and reprobation. In the end, however, we must acknowledge that herein is contained a mystery into whose unsearchable depths we must not presume to delve too far. We know that God is infinitely merciful, and that He is infinitely just. We know that out of His infinite love for us He has redeemed us through the merits of His Son. Let us, therefore, place our hope and trust in this love, knowing that even our desire for salvation and our solicitude to love and serve Him are the effect of His grace and a sign of His favor. We must strive on as St. Paul urges, to fight the good fight, to continue in good works, to persevere in grace, for these words of Our Lord ever ring in our ears: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks, it shall be open" (Matthew 7: 7-8).

—Alexius McDonnell, O.P.