

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (July 30, 2023)

Last weekend I spoke about our need to have a solid and regular prayer life and recommended in particular the prayer of gratitude and also in spending quiet time with Jesus in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Today's readings lend themselves to another important reason for prayer: asking that God help us to know and do his will for us—what he wants of us: In the first reading God told King Solomon, the son of King David, to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon didn't ask for wealth or power or other such earthly goals; instead, he simply asked for 'an understanding heart...to distinguish right from wrong'. He knew that all wisdom comes ultimately from God, and so he asked to share in that wisdom—to help him govern his people in accord with God's will for them. And St. Paul in his letter to the Romans wrote about those who love God and 'are called according to his purpose'—in other words, those who want to live in line with the divine will for them.

The will of God ought to be a primary focus for our life and therefore for our prayer life as well. In fact, it's something we pray for every time we say the "Our Father": "...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' Do we realize that we are praying to know and do what God wants of us, or do we run through those words so fast that we don't even know what we are saying? It's important to give some conscious thought to this. What is God's will for me? How can I know it? Do I really want to know it? Ultimately, God's will is for our growth in holiness in this life and eternal life and joy in his kingdom.

But what is the will of God for you, for me on the day-to-day level? Does God have a specific plan for each of us that governs every detail of our daily routine? I don't think so; I doubt if God cares too much what pair of socks I put on in the morning or what kind of cereal I have for breakfast. But other situations present more important decisions to be made and therefore the will of God has a definite role to play. Think, for example, of those times where we experience temptation to what we know is sin. We know that God's will for us at all times is to avoid sin, and he has given us plenty of guidance and direction on the good we are to do and the bad we are to avoid. And so if we are tempted to cheat on our taxes or on our spouse, or to lie our way out of trouble, or to indulge in that juicy bit of gossip, we know full well God's will for us: to say a firm 'no' to those temptations and to choose not to give in to them. Then we need to decide: do I follow what I know what God wants of me here, or do I decide to follow my selfish whims instead?

Still other decisions that we need to make are not so clear-cut or obvious, where it isn't so much a matter of struggling with sin and temptation as it is of what is the direction that God wants me to go in a particular non-trivial situation. For example: what vocation, what state of life, does God want me to pursue? Or your employer offers you a higher-paying job but would require you to move a long way from home and family? Or how to respond to you or a loved one being diagnosed with serious illness—what treatment to pursue? Or what do you do when you realize that your loved one's needs are increasing beyond your ability to handle them yourself?

I want to say more about this idea of the will of God, and I'll do so next weekend. But I'm going to shift gears here rather abruptly, and that's because of the big announcement that was made in Dubuque last Wednesday morning and that you have all no doubt heard about. Our new archbishop will be Bishop Thomas Zinkula, currently in the Davenport Diocese where he has served since being appointed by Pope Francis in 2017. However, he is actually a native son of our own Archdiocese of Dubuque—he grew up on a farm near Mt. Vernon (east of Cedar Rapids), and he was ordained to the priesthood for our archdiocese in 1990. He will be formally installed as archbishop on October 18; until then, Bishop Pates will continue in his interim role as apostolic administrator.

This is very good news indeed! Bishop Zinkula is a good, holy and prayerful man whose life is grounded in his love for and dedication to Jesus Christ and to his Church. I know this personally since he and I worked together with our college seminarians in Dubuque for three years until 2017 when he went to Davenport. He served as rector (or head) of our college seminary, and he did so with excellent leadership skills along with a genuine pastoral love and concern for the seminarians and for their growth in holiness and in discerning God's will for them. I have no doubt at all that he will bring that same excellence in leadership and pastoral and spiritual guidance for our archdiocese.

On a personal level, it was a real joy for me to work with Fr. Zinkula during those three years, especially since we share some common ground:

--we are close to the same age; I'm 68 and he is 66 (so I do claim some seniority...), and we were ordained as priests just two years apart;

--like me, he is also blessed with Bohemian ancestry and so knows all about kolaches and rolicky;

--and we both went to law school in Iowa City and worked for a few years as lawyers until going into the seminary. We weren't in law school at the same time, so I didn't know him then.

While we worked and lived with the college seminarians in Dubuque, Archbishop Jackels at the time lived in the same building with us, and we got to know each other quite well. The archbishop has a quirky sense of humor; sometimes, when he knew that Fr. Zinkula and I were visiting in his office, he would call out from the hallway (loud enough for us to hear): "is there a Bohemian lawyer in the house??" And, sure enough, the two of us were there!

If you had a chance to see Bishop Zinkula's press conference from Dubuque on Wednesday, you heard him say that he learned of his new appointment about a month ago. And you know that, for the last several weeks, we have been praying for the Holy Spirit's guidance of the process to name our new archbishop. Bishop Zinkula said, since learning of his new assignment, he has been praying that same prayer for himself: that he would be "a bishop like Jesus: a priest of deep and true prayer, a teacher with a loving heart and firm resolve, and a shepherd of joy and peace, who desires above all to do [God's] will." Desiring and doing the will of God is at the very heart of being a disciple and servant of Jesus Christ. Bishop Zinkula believes and desires that—let's pray daily for him, and for us that we will believe and desire that for ourselves as well.

