

munist Party. I could not help it, it was part of me. So we agreed to disagree, and I felt I had won another round.

All this time, I was growing more and more depressed. Whatever little victories I might be winning, I knew that I was simply postponing the inevitable. I asked in prayer for courage and wisdom to face each new argument, yet deep down I knew that it was all a big mistake. Every time I brought myself to the brink of calling a halt to the proceedings, though, of taking some firm stand, I faced again that awful moment of decision and of weakness—and finally of indecision. I could not do it. And I knew that every time I approached that decision and failed to make it, the harder it would ultimately be to make.

Then one day the blackness closed in around me completely. Perhaps it was brought on by exhaustion, but I reached a point of despair. I was overwhelmed by the hopelessness of my situation. I knew that I was approaching the end of my ability to postpone a decision. I could see no way out of it. Yes, I despaired in the most literal sense of the word: I lost all sense of hope. I saw only my own weakness and helplessness to choose either position open to me, co-operation or execution. There had been no mention recently of the prison camps; the interrogator had been telling me he must make a progress report to his superior about my co-operation; he spoke of execution as if it was possible at their whim. It wasn't the thought of death that bothered me. In fact, I sometimes thought of death by suicide as the only way out of this dilemma. Illogical, surely, but despondency and despair are like that. Uppermost in my mind was the hopelessness of it all and my powerlessness to cope with it.

I don't really know how to put that moment in words. I'm not sure, even, how long that moment lasted. But I know that when it passed I was horrified and bewildered; I knew that I had gone beyond all bounds, had crossed over the brink into a fit of blackness I had never known before. It was very real and I began to tremble. I was scared and ashamed, the victim of a new sense of guilt and humiliation. I had been afraid before, but now I was afraid of myself. I knew I had

failed before, but this was the ultimate failure. This was despair. For that one moment of blackness, I had lost not only hope but the last shreds of my faith in God. I had stood alone in a void and I had not even thought of or recalled the one thing that had been my constant guide, my only source of consolation in all other failures, my ultimate recourse: I had lost the sight of God.

Recognizing that, I turned immediately to prayer in fear and trembling. I knew I had to seek immediately the God I had forgotten. I had to ask that that moment of despair had not made me unworthy of his help. I had to pray that he would never again let me fail to remember him and trust in him. I pleaded my helplessness to face the future without him. I told him that my own abilities were now bankrupt and he was my only hope.

Suddenly, I was consoled by thoughts of our Lord and his agony in the garden. "Father," he had said, "if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me." In the Garden of Olives, he too knew the feeling of fear and weakness in his human nature as he faced suffering and death. Not once but three times did he ask to have his ordeal removed or somehow modified. Yet each time he concluded with an act of total abandonment and submission to the Father's will. "Not as I will, but as thou wilt." It was not just conformity to the will of God; it was total self-surrender, a stripping away of all human fears, of all doubts about his own abilities to withstand the passion, of every last shred of self including self-doubt.

What a wonderful treasure and source of strength and consolation our Lord's agony in the garden became for me from that moment on. I saw clearly exactly what I must do. I can only call it a conversion experience, and I can only tell you frankly that my life was changed from that moment on. If my moment of despair had been a moment of total blackness, then this was an experience of blinding light. I knew immediately what I must do, what I would do, and somehow I knew that I could do it. I knew that I must abandon myself entirely to the will of the Father and live from now on in this spirit of self-abandonment to God. And I did it. I can



only describe the experience as a sense of "letting go," giving over totally my last effort or even any will to guide the reins of my own life. It is all too simply said, yet that one decision has affected every subsequent moment of my life. I have to call it a conversion.

I had always trusted in God. I had always tried to find his will, to see his providence at work. I had always seen my life and my destiny as guided by his will. At some moments more consciously than at others, I had been aware of his promptings, his call, his promises, his grace. At times of crisis, especially, I had tried to discover his will and to follow it to the best of my ability. But this was a new vision, a totally new understanding, something more than just a matter of emphasis. Up until now, I had always seen my role—man's role—in the divine economy as an active one. Up to this time, I had retained in my own hands the reins of all decision, actions, and endeavors; I saw it now as my task to "co-operate" with his grace, to be involved to the end in the working out of salvation. God's will was "out there" somewhere, hidden, yet clear and unmistakable. It was my role—man's role—to discover what it was and then conform my will to that, and so work at achieving the ends of his divine providence. I remained—man remained—in essence the master of my own destiny. Perfection consisted simply in learning to discover God's will in every situation and then in bending every effort to do what must be done.

Now, with sudden and almost blinding clarity and simplicity, I realized I had been trying to do something with my own will and intellect that was at once too much and mostly all wrong. God's will was not hidden somewhere "out there" in the situations in which I found myself; the situations themselves *were* his will for me. What he wanted was for me to accept these situations as from his hands, to let go of the reins and place myself entirely at his disposal. He was asking of me an act of total trust, allowing for no interference or restless striving on my part, no reservations, no exceptions, no areas where I could set conditions or seem to hesitate. He was asking a complete gift of self, nothing held

back. It demanded absolute faith: faith in God's existence, in his providence, in his concern for the minutest detail, in his power to sustain me, and in his love protecting me. It meant losing the last hidden doubt, the ultimate fear that God will not be there to bear you up. It was something like that awful eternity between anxiety and belief when a child first leans back and lets go of all support whatever—only to find that the water truly holds him up and he can float motionless and totally relaxed.

Once understood, it seemed so simple. I was amazed it had taken me so long in terms of time and of suffering to learn this truth. Of course we believe that we depend on God, that his will sustains us in every moment of our life. But we are afraid to put it to the test. There remains deep down in each of us a little nagging doubt, a little knot of fear which we refuse to face or admit even to ourselves, that says, "Suppose it isn't so." We are afraid to abandon ourselves totally into God's hands for fear he will not catch us as we fall. It is the ultimate criterion, the final test of all faith and all belief, and it is present in each of us, lurking unvoiced in a closet of our mind we are afraid to open. It is not really a question of trust in God at all, for we want very much to trust him; it is really a question of our ultimate belief in his existence and his providence, and it demands the purest act of faith.

For my part, I was brought to make this perfect act of faith, this act of complete self-abandonment to his will, of total trust in his love and concern for me and his desire to sustain and protect me, by the experience of a complete despair of my own powers and abilities that had preceded it. I knew I could no longer trust myself, and it seemed only sensible then to trust totally in God. It was the grace God had been offering me all my life, but which I had never really had the courage to accept in full. I had talked of finding and doing his will, but never in the sense of totally giving up my own will. I had talked of trusting him, indeed I truly had trusted him, but never in the sense of abandoning all other sources of support and relying on his grace alone. I could never find it in me, before, to give up self completely.



There were always boundaries beyond which I would not go, little hedges marking out what I knew in the depths of my being was a point of no return. God in his providence had been constant in his grace, always providing opportunities for this act of perfect faith and trust in him, always urging me to let go the reins and trust in him alone. I had trusted him, I had co-operated with his grace—but only up to a point. Only when I had reached a point of total bankruptcy of my own powers had I at last surrendered.

That moment, that experience, completely changed me. I can say it now in all sincerity, without false modesty, without a sense either of exaggeration or of embarrassment. I have to call it a conversion experience; it was at once a death and a resurrection. It was not something I sought after or wanted or worked for or merited. Like every grace, it was a free gift of God. That it should have been offered to me when I had reached the limits of my own powers is simply part of the great mystery of salvation. I did not question it then; I cannot question it now. Nor can I explain how that one experience could have such an immediate and lasting effect upon my soul and upon my habitual actions from that moment on, especially when so many other experiences, so many other graces, had had no such effect. It was, however, a deliberate act of choice on my part. I know it was a choice I never could have made, and never had made before, without the inspiration of God's grace. But it was a deliberate choice. I chose, consciously and willingly, to abandon myself to God's will, to let go completely of every last reservation. I knew I was crossing a boundary I had always hesitated and feared to cross before. Yet this time I chose to cross it—and the result was a feeling not of fear but of liberation, not of danger or of despair but a fresh new wave of confidence and of happiness.

Across that threshold I had been afraid to cross, things suddenly seemed so very simple. There was but a single vision, God, who was all in all; there was but one will that directed all things, God's will. I had only to see it, to discern it in every circumstance in which I found myself, and let

myself be ruled by it. God is in all things, sustains all things, directs all things. To discern this in every situation and circumstance, to see his will in all things, was to accept each circumstance and situation and let oneself be borne along in perfect confidence and trust. Nothing could separate me from him, because he was in all things. No danger could threaten me, no fear could shake me, except the fear of losing sight of him. The future, hidden as it was, was hidden in his will and therefore acceptable to me no matter what it might bring. The past, with all its failures, was not forgotten; it remained to remind me of the weakness of human nature and the folly of putting any faith in self. But it no longer depressed me. I looked no longer to self to guide me, relied on it no longer in any way, so it could not again fail me. By renouncing, finally and completely, all control of my life and future destiny, I was relieved as a consequence of all responsibility. I was freed thereby from anxiety and worry, from every tension, and could float serenely upon the tide of God's sustaining providence in perfect peace of soul.

Filled with this new spirit and transformed interiorly, I no longer dreaded the next interview with the interrogator. I saw no reason now to fear him or the NKVD, for I saw all things now as coming from the hands of God. I was no longer afraid of making a "mistake," since God's will was behind every development and every alternative. Secure in his grace, I felt capable of facing every situation and meeting every challenge; whatever he chose to send me in the future, I would accept.

The change in me, in fact, was so striking that even the interrogator noticed it. His newest proposal was that I might serve as chaplain in a newly formed army of Polish communists under Wanda Wasilewski, or perhaps as chaplain in General Ander's army, an army of Free Poles formed to fight on the proposed second front. I told him quite simply I was willing to do either. He seemed genuinely pleased with the promptness of my reply and my new disposition. He told me that I seemed more relaxed and easy in my mind—as indeed I was, because the fear of making a mistake had left



me now that I was conscious God was with me. I think he was suspicious, though, of this sudden change of heart. "Good," he said, "I'll tell the people upstairs that you are ready and willing to act as chaplain wherever you're sent. I'll let you know their answer as soon as I hear."

The next time I saw him, however, he had a new proposal. He told me that the people upstairs wanted me, instead, to go to Rome and serve as an intermediary between the Kremlin and the Vatican. Now that the Soviet Union was a member of the Allies, perhaps a sort of concordat about communism could be arranged. I agreed, as far-fetched and absurd as it all sounded. The notion of returning to Rome, to the free world, might in the past have excited me—but it was a measure of my new sense of abandonment that I was not the least excited by this offer more than any other. Whether I went to Rome or not was for God to decide, for him to arrange. I stood ready to accept any and all events as coming from his hand. Discussions of this Roman business took up many sessions with the interrogator, yet through it all I remained totally detached and perfectly relaxed. Naturally, the interrogator explained, I would not be alone in Rome. I would be part of a team and there would be other information I would be asked to pass along, other details I would be expected to provide for transmission back to Moscow. Should I fail to do so, should I betray this trust, those with whom I worked would see to my speedy execution. Before I left for Rome, there would be a month's training in certain techniques of espionage that I would probably need in Rome.

Through all this, I remained at peace. Where before, the notion of such co-operation would have upset and tormented me, I felt no such distress any longer. If these things were to be, then they were to be—for a purpose God alone knew. If they were not to be, then they would never happen. My confidence in his will and his providence was absolute; I knew I had only to follow the promptings of his grace. I was sure, completely sure, that when a moment of decision came he would lead me on the right path. And so it happened.

When at last the interrogator asked me to sign an agreement covering the Roman business, I just refused. I had not thought of doing so in advance; in fact, I had simply gone along with everything up to that point. But suddenly it seemed the only thing to do, and I did it. He became violently angry and threatened me with immediate execution. I felt no fear at all. I think I smiled. I knew then I had won. When he called for the guards to lead me away—and I had no assurance but that they were leading me before a firing squad—I went with them as if they were so many ministers of grace. I felt his presence in the moment and knew it drew me toward a future of his design and purpose. I wished for nothing more.