

Introduction

Spiritual writing often places a strong emphasis on obeying God's will. That is good, but I think we can deepen our relationship with God by shifting the emphasis from trying to do God's will to sharing God's desire. The two seem to amount to the same thing: if God desires something, then God wills it. But the differing connotations of these two words resonate differently within us. The phrase "obey God's will" suggests that God's will is something we should allow God to impose on us. The phrase "share God's desire" has a much gentler connotation. It suggests that God has a certain desire that God wishes to share. Sharing a desire is a very different thing than giving marching orders. God's desire extends an invitation to enter into a great mystery. I purposely use the singular form of desire for God because, although God could be said to have many desires, they all converge into one all-encompassing desire for the well-being of all Creation.

Thinking and praying in terms of God's desire is attractive in the sense that it opens up a collaborative relationship with God, such as what Abraham and Moses had when they bargained with God on behalf of God's people. But our desires are complex, stimulating, and troubling. The problematic aspect of our desires makes us want to exert our own wills against these desires and then ask God to take the same dictatorial approach with them as well. But if God shares God's desire with us instead, then exerting our own will against our desires when God does not do that to us is not likely to work. That God shares a desire with us rather than imposes it on us tells us that desire is always shared by two or more people.

The French polymath thinker René Girard has suggested that the desires within us do not originate within ourselves, but rather they originate from the desires of others. When our desires are shared, they are contagious and this contagion can become an epidemic. We see this when a firestorm of rage flares up throughout a social network. Shared desire can also be as contagious as a gentle smile that floats around people like a soft breeze. Girard calls this shared desire "mimetic desire." That is, desire that imitates the desires of others. Mimetic desire is not imitation in the sense of an external copying such as mimicking the actions of others. Rather, our desires are shared through a deep resonance that connects us with other people and with God. When we think of desires as our own, we are likely to treat them like weapons in battles with the will. But the more we try to assert our desires as our own, the more they are governed by the desires of others. If we try to control the desires of others by trying to make them imitate us, we are organizing our lives around their desires all the more. Meanwhile, the people who have lured us into imitating their desires are just as trapped into imitating ours.

This phenomenon of shared desire is like a worm that boars through an intricate route to the depths of our personhood. This is why trying to control our own desires as if they were strictly our own is "beating the air." (1 Cor. 9:26) On a broad social scale, this labyrinth of mimetic desire can lead to meltdowns, culminating in collective violence such as the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. For his part, Jesus nailed this persecutory meltdown to the cross, to quote Paul creatively. (Col. 2:14)

God's desire enters into this dizzying matrix of human mimetic desire more deeply than the devouring worm ever could, so as to save us from being overrun by these desires. The amazing thing about God's desire is its spaciousness, contrasting greatly with the cramped nexus of human mimetic desire. In God's desire, there is all the room in the world. That is not surprising since God created all of the room in the world. While human mimetic desire creates

scarcity through conflict, God's desire provides abundance such as the abundance that flowed from five barley loaves and two fishes to a multitude of people in the wilderness. (Jn. 6:1–14) The gentleness of sharing God's desire might make it look like an easy option, but I find it highly challenging. Sharing God's desire asks of us nothing short of a total transformation of ourselves as we open our hearts to embrace the expansive desire of God.

In bringing the shared aspect of desire to our attention, Girard and his colleagues have opened up a powerful avenue for spiritual and social renewal. This small insight may not look like much, but it has the power to help us understand how violence, especially violence connected with religion, occurs. This is especially true with the Paschal Mystery of Christ. More importantly, this small insight can help us learn how we can become living stones in the temple of God that grow into God's Kingdom like a mustard seed growing into a large tree. (Mt. 13:31–32) In the pages that follow, I will explore these ideas as means of hearing God's Word and making it flesh in our acts of service and prayer. I will touch on the most fundamental aspects of Christian living but not everything. Ways of reading scripture will be stressed throughout. Practices of liturgical prayer and contemplative prayer will be examined. I shall probe the fundamental attitudes of respect and humility and the process of forgiveness. Indeed, as the greatest of challenges, forgiveness will be a running thread throughout this book. These are the areas of Christian practice that most benefit from insights into mimetic desire and that are most helpful for resting and moving in God's desire.