

On Predestination

If God knows everything, it seems He knows if I'm going to Heaven or Hell. If so, does He determine my destiny? Many have heard the term predestination, but few understand what the term means or the manner in which God predestines souls. In this article, we'll examine predestination, the mysterious pre-ordaining by God of who will make it to heaven and their degree of happiness upon arrival.

The reason we were created is to share a life with God in Heaven. God has designed a general path which leads to "perfect happiness." To stray off this road is the only serious mistake we can make in this life. So before directly addressing predestination, it is helpful to briefly explain our "route" to Heaven.

The Road to Happiness/Heaven

God has endowed man with natural inclinations to guide us in life. Some things we must do for survival. To aid us, God has made them pleasurable. Food, drink and procreation are clear examples. These desires we share in common with other animals.

Man, however, has two additional powers: intellect and will. The purpose of our intellect is to seek the truth. Accordingly, God has given

us a hunger to know the truth.

This is evident in children when they say, "Mommy, what is that?" or the incessant "Why?" The purpose of our will is to search for happiness. Thus, in all our actions we choose what we think is good for us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) says that God has

implanted this desire for happiness so that we will seek Him, for He alone can fulfill this desire (#1718). God's will is "truly good" and our happiness is in exact proportion as we follow it.

Saintliness is the "art" of doing God's will. If you follow certain methods of action you will become a saint.


The normal route of discerning God's designs for you is with prayer, meditation, and frequenting the sacraments.

God has ordained the sacraments to be the primary source of bestowing grace on mankind. These graces give the recipient a supernatural ability to understand and desire "things of God."

Meditation is thinking about things we've read or heard about God. This fills our mind with ideas pertaining to the supernatural order. Thus, we get in the habit of thinking from God's perspective. This fuels our spiritual life because growth in prayer coincides with a growth in familiarity with God. This familiarity enables us to discern God's will much as



Illustration: Maronite Monks



friends know each other's perspective. Once we know God's will, we love Him by obeying it: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Ideally during meditation, various forms of prayer (petition, praise, thanksgiving, etc.) should arise spontaneously. Here we should bring our moral dilemmas or questions to God for counsel. Gradually, imperceptibly, but most certainly, God will increasingly direct our actions. This combination of prayer and meditation is a form of mental prayer. If you read the section on predestination prayerfully—especially the relation between grace and free will—you'll see why the saints say mental prayer always reduces sinful behavior.

Predestination

The Church has not officially defined exactly how God predestines souls, but it does say to follow St. Thomas Aquinas in speculative matters. In fact, both Canon Law and Vatican II say that priests are to be formed according to the teaching of St. Thomas. Moreover, the *Catechism* seems to favor his position. This is especially true in regard to how man merits grace (explained in our question and answer segment).

Basically, St. Thomas teaches that before creation God selected certain souls (called "the elect") to be united with Him in Heaven. Of those chosen, He orders their life and sends timely supernatural assistance to ensure they reach the place in Heaven He has reserved for them. This is what we mean by predestination.

Since there are many puzzling aspects about predestination, we'll switch to a question and answer format to better address these difficulties.

❖ **Could you clearly explain how grace influences my actions?** It is difficult to explain and understand, but let's try. Grace takes many different forms. The kind that directly influences human

actions is called "actual" grace. It operates by enlightening the mind or strengthening the will. It, too, takes many forms based on degree or mode of influence. Sometimes these graces incline us to do what God wants of us, but yet it remains possible to reject this grace (called sufficient grace). At other times, these graces are so powerful that we do exactly what He wants us to do (called efficacious grace). Grace both precedes (antecedent) and accompanies (consequent) the movement of our free will as the primary cause of all our meritorious actions.

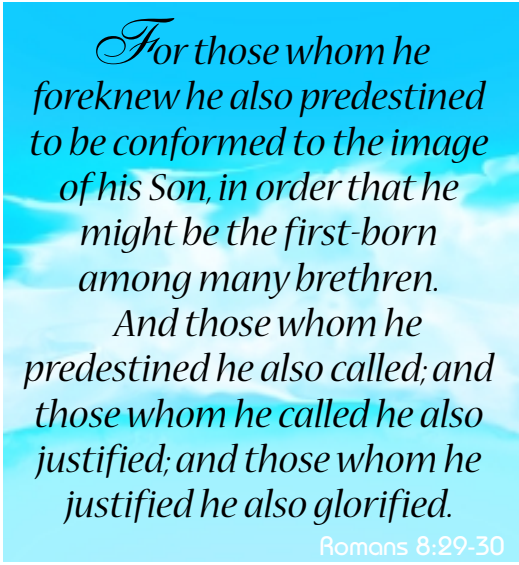
I'll try to clarify. By "enlightening the mind," God appeals to our reason. Using angels, people, a book, or other means, He persuades us to adopt His

course of action. By "strengthening the will," grace assists us in our resolve to abstain from sin or perform a difficult meritorious action. It is also the "light" which enables the prayerful person to intuitively know what to do in a difficult moral situation.

❖ **If everything starts with God's grace, how do I have free will?** The Holy Spirit operates by revealing to us what will truly make us happy. Persuaded instead of forced,

we act freely. This happens so naturally that "grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith" (CCC #2005). We've all met people who were very persuasive, but only God knows precisely how to convince us.

❖ **But don't I influence predestination by living a good life?** There is no question that man freely does good works. But even these are to be attributed mainly to God. The Church teaches: "The merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man's merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the dispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit" (CCC #2008).



For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Romans 8:29-30



Again, our actions cannot be the cause of predestination because some predestined never perform a meritorious action. This is evident in the case of baptized infants who die.

❖ **Is it fair that God “elects” certain souls?** Because of original sin, says St. Thomas, it is just for God to damn us. Since we have no right to Heaven, God can freely choose to give to one person and not another without violating any form of justice. Thus, St. Paul says: “He has mercy on whom he wills; and whom he wills he hardens” (Rom 9:8).

❖ **If God predestines some people, does He damn the rest?** We are “born at enmity with God,” (Eph 2:3) our mind darkened and our will bent toward evil. Accordingly, Jesus tell us our journey will be difficult: “Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Mt. 7-13:14).

Clearly, “God predestines no one to go to hell” (CCC #1037). Indeed, He “wants all to come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved” (1Tim 2:4). But damned souls, weakened by original sin, reject God’s

call. Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange explains: “No one who attains the use of reason is deprived of the efficacious grace necessary for salvation except by freely resisting a sufficient grace, a good inspiration which recalled the duty to be accomplished” (*Christian Perfection*, p.82). After mortal sin, God calls again: “I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ez. 33:11). God is just. These rejections demand justice and leave the soul without excuse at judgment.

❖ **One final question! If God has preordained my destination, why should I pray?** Why would a man reject a sufficient grace and be damned? Predestination is a mystery of faith. God has not taken away our free will with which we can choose to sin. The soul in Hell has put itself there. Mysteriously, our cooperation is included in predestination. More specifically, the patron of Moral Theologians St. Alphonsus Liguori says: “In the ordinary course of providence, it is impossible that a Christian should be saved without...asking for the graces necessary for salvation” (*Means of Salvation*, p.26). Why pray? Because if you persevere in prayer, it means that you were predestined to an unimaginable happiness forever. ❖