

Piercing the heart

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [October 14, 1998](#) issue

He was sitting quietly, almost impassively, as I talked to a group of people gathered in Zagreb at the launching of the Croatian translation of my book *Exclusion and Embrace*. The forcefulness and impatience with which he asked his question as he brought the book to be signed took me by surprise. "But where does that will come from, that will to embrace the enemy?"

I had just finished explaining one of the central claims of the book. I had argued that truth, justice and peace are unavailable without the will to embrace the other. Moreover, the will to embrace must precede any "truth" about others and any construction of their "justice." In a sense, everything in my argument depended on that will, but I said nothing about how to acquire or sustain it; I simply assumed it.

"Is it instinctive?" he inquired.

"No, instinctive would not be quite the right word, but you are getting at something important with that term . . ." I said somewhat haltingly. He interrupted me.

"So what then? Can one learn to want to embrace the evildoer?"

"Yes, one can learn to will rightly . . ." As I was responding, my mind was following another train of thought. "To learn," I reasoned, "a student has to be willing to learn. But what if the student is unwilling?" I was back at the original problem. Moving full circle back to my interlocutor's initial question, I heard myself talking to him about engaging in spiritual disciplines such as prayer and the reading of scriptures, about seeking communities that practice embrace and about studying the lives of the saints. But the look in his eyes told me what I knew well myself. What I said might be important, but I had not answered his question; I had removed the problem one step further. One has to want to engage in spiritual disciplines; one has to want to seek out communities that practice embrace.

Other people were hustling to get a few words scribbled into their books or to talk, so our conversation ended. But the problem of the will that wills not what it ought remained with me.

Reflecting on his own inner struggle, the apostle Paul wrote: "For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate." From the perspective of my questioner, Paul had it easy: he was captive to sin he did not want to commit. My interlocutor's question was implying something more radical: a willing captivity to sin. At issue was not simply the inability to do the good, but the unwillingness even to attempt doing it. It is difficult enough when people are internally divided and do what they would rather not. But sometimes they seem at one with themselves in doing evil.

The next morning a journalist asked basically the same question. "How can we acquire the desire for reconciliation? How can we sincerely and simply desire to embrace the enemy?" I talked to her about the human propensity to let that desire be buried under the mass of negative images and experiences generated in conflicts. We let the inner logic of the struggle dominate our actions and attitudes, a logic that demands that we see enemies only as enemies so that we can fight and finally overcome them. I implied that we all possess the will to embrace the other, as an aspect of the desire for good implanted in us by our Creator. But conflicts with others generate and intensify a struggle within ourselves in which the will to exclusion often wins and crowds out the will to embrace.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine reflects autobiographically about such a perversion of the will. He recalls being "tied down not by irons outside myself, but my own iron will. The Enemy had control of the power of my will and from it he had fashioned a chain for me and had bound me in it." By capturing the will, the Enemy had enslaved the very principle of the self's freedom. The will willed wrongly, and became captive to the evil it willed. What can free the captive will? When the will is bent on exclusion, what can turn it toward embrace? This was the question of my impatient interlocutor, which I did not get to address.

Ultimately, the only answer possible is the one Augustine gave. Addressing God, he wrote about his conversion, "Thou hadst pierced our heart with the arrow of Thy charity." Liberation of the will by a piercing of the heart? Love as the instrument of piercing? Piercing must take place if the walls of the dungeon in which the will has incarcerated itself are to be broken and the will freed. But if the heart is not to be violated, love will have to do the piercing--ultimately divine love, which comes not only from the outside, but is always inside the dungeon, tearing at its walls and striving to transmute the will to exclude into the will to embrace.

Elsewhere Augustine describes the liberation of his will as follows: "Yet Thou, O Lord, art good and merciful and didst not look propitiously upon the depths of my death and didst empty out with Thy right hand the sea of corruption from the lowest region of my heart. And this Thy whole gift was, to nill what I willed, and to will what Thou willedst."

The next time I am asked about the origin of the will to embrace, I'll repeat everything I said to my two prospective dialogue partners from Zagreb. But in the same breath I'll also talk about the freeing of our wills by the love which God has shown to us in that Christ died for us "while we were still sinners" and which was "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."