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## ST. THOMAS AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION



FOR some time, much controversy has raged over a question which is certainly of no small importance in the spiritual life. According to some authors, the whole of the spiritual life, throughout all its different grades, is essentially a unity, while others bring forward grave reasons to prove that what has come to be known as the “ascetical way” is completely distinct from the so-called “mystical ways.”<sup>1</sup> There is no need for us to undertake here an investigation into the reasons for these two opinions; it will be sufficient to point out the gradual separation of the sciences of asceticism and mysticism, not merely from each other, but also in many cases from dogmatic theology. Thus, asceticism has come to be regarded as an *a priori* science, while mysticism derives its main principles *a posteriori*, depending as it does on experiences rather than on speculation. However strong the motives for this separation may have been, the direct consequences have not

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Conclusions of the Carmelite Congress, Madrid, 1923.

been altogether happy, because one direct result of it has been that the true dogmatic aspect of Christian perfection has been widely ignored. The very word "perfection" has come to be applied almost exclusively to the higher mystical states, while some authors have even gone to the extent of denying the application of it to the essential elements of the spiritual life, such as sanctifying grace, and its accompanying virtues and Gifts of the Holy Ghost.<sup>2</sup>

It has long been the opinion of the present writer that such an attitude is by no means the traditional one in the Church, and that this famous controversy may find an amicable solution, which will be conciliatory to both opinions, in the traditional doctrine as presented by St. Thomas Aquinas. A study of Aquinas' teaching confirms this view. In the first place, his description and analysis of perfection show quite clearly that the possession of sanctifying grace, with its accompanying virtues and gifts, implies not merely a perfection, but *the essential* perfection of the Christian life. Also, the controversy which we have mentioned takes on a new aspect when it is viewed in the light of two distinctions which occur frequently in the writings of the Angelic Doctor. The spiritual life can be considered in two ways, i. e., either as it is in itself, or as it exists in the individual. If we consider that life as it is in itself, or in the abstract as it were, then it is undoubtedly a unity, since it is not subject to the laws of divine providence or predestination, but merely to the ontological laws of its own essence. In this sense we can not speak of two or more distinct "ways" of perfection, one ordinary and the other extraordinary, since every single development or manifestation of grace is contained in the ontological essence of that great gift, just as a tree is contained in its seed.

However, when we come to consider this spiritual life of grace not as it is in itself or in the abstract, but rather as it is found in the concrete and in the individual soul possessing it,

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Farges, *The Ordinary Ways of the Spiritual Life*, pp. 44-45 (London: Burns and Oates, 1927).

then a very different picture presents itself to our view, and we have now to apply another distinction used by Aquinas, namely, that between what is essential to that life, and that which is accidental to it. On applying this distinction we find in all individual souls one element which is common to all who possess this life of grace, and also another element which is undoubtedly particular to the individual in question. On considering this particular element, we find that in this sense the spiritual life is in no sense a unity, since there are many ways by which God leads individual souls to their own particular degree of perfection according to His divine wisdom and His providence.

As will be clear from this brief summary, the solution to the problem which is proposed in this article rests on two things: (a) the notion of perfection as proposed by Aquinas, and (b) the two distinctions mentioned above between the spiritual life considered in itself and in the individual, and also between what is essential and what is accidental in that life, both of which distinctions are also part of St. Thomas' teaching. We shall examine the two foundations of this solution very briefly.

Three basic elements go to form the complete notion of perfection, according to the Angelic Doctor. Directly and primarily a thing is said to be perfect if its essence or nature is complete and well-formed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, e. g., anyone who possesses the nature of man is in this sense a "perfect man." However, the concept of perfection is applied not merely to the essence but also to the operation or operations by means of which the end or purpose of the essence is attained.<sup>4</sup> Consequently the second element in the notion of perfection is that of the specific operation, and the third is that of the end or purpose for which that essence or nature is destined.<sup>5</sup> Thus a thing is said to be perfect if it attains or, at least, is capable of attaining the end for which it was made.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *In IV Metaphy.* 16, and *In V Metaphy.* 18.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *III Cont. Gent.*, 64; *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 73, a. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, II-II, q. 55, a. 1; I, q. 103, a. 1; III, q. 27, a. 5, ad 2um.

Now it will be obvious at one glance that there is a very intimate relationship between these three elements of the basic notion of perfection; and also that, of the three, the most important is the notion of the end or purpose for which a thing is made. That is why St. Thomas insists so often that “the perfection of a thing is to be judged principally from its end,”<sup>6</sup> because both the operation and the nature receive their specification from the end or purpose for which they were created.

Needless to say, God is the only Being who has absolute perfection, while the perfection of creatures is relative, being a degree of participation in that absolute perfection of God. Thus it is that God, in the production of His creatures, can have only one end in view, namely the manifestation of His own infinite perfection. It also follows that, from all eternity, God decreed the exact limits of each individual creature’s perfection to fit in with the plan of divine wisdom,<sup>7</sup> and that He then gave to each of these creatures a nature and operation capable of attaining that end. This is true both in the natural order and in the supernatural order. From the beginning God raised his intellectual creatures to the supernatural order, thus giving them a new supernatural end or purpose, the Beatific Vision, which it was impossible for their purely natural powers to attain. Consequently, He also gave them a new supernatural nature, with supernatural powers, so that, by means of this nature and its operations through the infused virtues and the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, the rational creature can attain to its final end, the Beatific Vision. This new supernatural nature we call sanctifying grace, and its powers are the infused virtues together with the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It would take us far too long to discuss in full the many effects of sanctifying grace, but one or two observations are necessary for the complete development of the solution which we have proposed. In the first place, sanctifying grace, being

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 55, a. 1; cf., J. M. Ramirez, O.P. *De Homini Beatitudine*, Vol. I., p. 158-159 (Salamanca, 1946).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *In I Perih.*, 14; *III Cont. Gent.*, 1.

a participation of the divine nature, elevates the whole of man to the divine order of things.<sup>8</sup> It is, as it were, a consecration of the whole of man's being to God, with the consequent effects of adopted sonship and a new presence of the Blessed Trinity in the soul which is rightly called the Presence of Inhabitation. This new presence is, as St. Thomas tells us, a possession of the Blessed Trinity "as the object known in the knower and the beloved in the lover (*sicut cognitum in cognoscente, et amatum in amante*)," <sup>9</sup> which means that God becomes in a very special way the object of our knowledge and love, and that in this way our ultimate end in heaven is possessed in some fashion even in this life. Indeed, Pope Leo XIII writes: "This wonderful union, which is properly called indwelling, differs only in degree or state from that with which God beatifies the saints in heaven."<sup>10</sup>

Now, it should be noted that this complete orientation of the whole of man's being towards God, his supernatural end, is the direct effect of sanctifying grace, even if possessed in its minimum degree. Consequently it is not surprising that St. Thomas should state that "the grace of one individual soul is worth more than the natural good of the whole universe."<sup>11</sup> Thus grace is truly described by the same Angelic Doctor as the "seed of glory" already sown in our souls in this life.<sup>12</sup> Thus it is easy to appreciate the truly great perfection of a soul in a state of grace, and this doctrine which we have just explained should prepare us for the distinction which St. Thomas makes between what is essential to man's spiritual life on this earth and what is accidental.

However, before we can go on to develop that distinction one further point has to be noted, a point which we have already mentioned, namely, that all these wonderful effects are

<sup>8</sup> *II Sent.*, d. XXVI, q. 1, a. 3; *III Cont. Gent.*, 150; *Summa Theol.*, q. 110, a. 2, ad lum.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, I. q. 43, a. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Divinum illud munus*, May, 1897.

<sup>11</sup> *Summa Theol.*, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2um.

<sup>12</sup> *In Joann.*, iii. 36; vi, 40-47.

produced by sanctifying grace even in its minimum degree. St. Thomas is very definite on this point.<sup>13</sup> The reason is clear to see and is at the same time very profound. It is because the least degree of sanctifying grace is sufficient to direct man entirely towards his supernatural end in heaven and to merit that eternal life. Here we have a clear example of an application of St. Thomas' general doctrine concerning the intimate relationship between the end in view and the means to that end, a doctrine which we have already explained. For this reason alone, if for no other, it should be quite obvious that, if we consider this spiritual life of grace in the abstract, then any development of that grace, no matter how wonderful or extraordinary from our point of view, is still only a development of this "seed of glory" planted in us. In this sense the spiritual life is and always will be a unity, because, as St. Thomas puts it, "the first effect of habitual grace is the remission of sins: but it has other effects, since it is sufficient of itself to promote man through all the grades of grace even to eternal life itself."<sup>14</sup> That is exactly what is meant by the essential unity of the spiritual life; yet, as we shall see, it has to be understood of grace considered in the abstract, i. e., as it is in its nature and under the ontological aspect, as it were, and not of grace as it is in the individual.

In order to make this quite clear, we must devote some space to a very brief discussion of the distinction between essential and accidental perfection, as taught by Aquinas. In general, we may say that St. Thomas divides Christian perfection under three main headings, insofar as he says that there are three classes of things which pertain to man's spiritual life on this earth. Some of these things pertain to that life in such a way that without them there can be no life at all, nor can man reach the Beatific Vision without them. Consequently, they are, in the true sense of the word, essential, pertaining as they do to the very essence of all perfection. This is nothing

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 62, a. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 112, a. 4; III, q. 72, a. 7, ad 1um.

more than a direct application of the first element in the general notion of perfection as we have already explained it. There are other things, however, which do not constitute the essence of perfection, since they are added to it once it is there in the soul, and consequently they are truly called “accidental” to perfection. Lastly, there are certain other elements of the spiritual life which, although added to that life once it is possessed, are not merely accidental. They are more than that because they constitute definite and proven means by which the soul can acquire an increase in its accidental perfection, and so they are rightly called by St. Thomas “instrumental perfection.”<sup>15</sup>

The Angelic Doctor himself outlines for us the various elements which go to make up the essential perfection of the spiritual life. Of these elements sanctifying grace is the foundation on which the whole of that perfection is built, this sanctifying grace which, since it is not itself immediately operative, needs the infused virtues and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit as proximate principles of those supernatural operations which can alone earn heaven for man by way of merit. The formal element in this essential perfection is the virtue of charity, both in habit and in act, since it alone directs all the other virtues to their supernatural end. This infused virtue of charity unites us with God, our final end, even in this life, since it leaps over all the bounds imposed by the obscurity of faith and attains to God as He is in Himself.<sup>16</sup> Thus it is that the formal perfection of our spiritual life depends principally on charity and secondarily on the other infused virtues, inasmuch as they are the means by which we can remove the impediments which stand between us and God,<sup>17</sup> and thus increase our love for Him. Once more it must be stressed that this perfect union between the soul and God its Creator and final end is achieved by the minimum degree of grace and charity. We are *all* bound under

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 184, a. 2; a. 3, ad 3um; q. 186, a. 2; *III Cont. Gent.*, 130; *In Phil.*, iii, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 66, a. 6; q. 27, a. 2, ad 2um.

<sup>17</sup> *De Charitate*, a. XI, ad 5um.

strict precept to love God above all things, and this perfection of love is possible to all who are in a state of grace. Thus charity is, in very truth, the “bond of perfection.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, as was pointed out at the beginning of this article, there is in all individual souls who are in a state of grace a common element which is rightly called essential perfection, since it is absolutely necessary in order to attain our final end, and since it and it alone directs the whole of man, even in this life, towards that end. This it does *perfectly*, insofar as all who possess it necessarily love God above all things, and thus fulfil perfectly the precept of perfection. Without it the attaining of the Beatific Vision is impossible, as is our earthly union with that end which we call the Presence of Inhabitation. This essential perfection alone is absolutely necessary for salvation, and it is for that reason that St. Thomas calls it “essential.”

When we come to consider what St. Thomas calls accidental perfection, the position is very different. His description of this element of perfection can be summed up in one passage from his writings. He says: “We can adhere to God in this life in a two-fold way. One is necessary to salvation, to which all are bound, namely that man should not set his heart on anything contrary to God, but should habitually refer all his life to him. This way is expressed in those words of St. Matthew, ‘thou shalt love the Lord thy God etc. . . .’ The other is of supererogation, when someone adheres to God over and above the common state, which is done by removing the affections from temporal things, that thus the heart may approach closer to heaven, because, as earthly desires decrease so charity increases.”<sup>19</sup>

By accidental perfection, then, we understand the numerous grades of grace and charity possible to the individual soul; and, although St. Thomas admits that these grades are many, he, like other theologians, divides them into three main classes, that of the beginners in the spiritual life, that of the proficient and, lastly, that of the perfect.<sup>20</sup> Since the Angelic Doctor’s

<sup>18</sup> *In Coloss.*, iii, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9; q. 183, a. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *In II Philipp.*, iii, 1.



teaching on the nature and the causes of this accidental perfection is necessary for a correct understanding of the solution we have proposed, it is worth while developing it here.

He begins by saying that the real reason for the difference in the grades of grace and charity lies in an analogy between the natural and the supernatural orders. Just as, in the natural order, there is a multitude of different forms and grades of perfection according to the different degrees of participation in the perfection of God the Creator, so in the supernatural order of grace there are many degrees and grades of perfection “in order that, from these different grades the beauty and perfection of the Church may shine forth.”<sup>21</sup> The analogy in this doctrine is clear enough. He then sets forth the same doctrine under a different aspect, in the form of a principle which Fr. Garrigou-Lagrange has aptly called the principle of predilection: “it is therefore necessary that a thing should possess being or indeed any good, insofar as it is willed by God.”<sup>22</sup> And in another passage from his works he states the same thing in a slightly different form: “since the love of God is the cause of goodness in creatures, one would not be better than another were it not for the fact that God wills greater good for one than for another.”<sup>23</sup> As a direct consequence of these principles we find his teaching with regard to divine providence, in the course of which he proves that everything, great or small, falls under the care of that providence.<sup>24</sup> He follows this up by his doctrine on predestination, which for him includes all the different elements and circumstances of man’s life, whether natural or supernatural.<sup>25</sup>

All these great doctrines form, as it were, the background to St. Thomas’ teaching about the nature and causes of the different grades of accidental perfection. It is when he comes

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 112, a. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, I, q. 20, a. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 20, a. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 22, aa. 1-4; *De Verit.*, q. 5, a. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Cf., Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. *De Deo Uno* (p. 530), for a complete scheme of this idea of predestination.

to apply this general doctrine to the question of the fullness of grace given to Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the other Saints that he reveals quite clearly his mind on this subject of accidental perfection. Here he repeats time and time again that the grade of grace and of charity depends in the first instance, and above all, on the divine will.<sup>26</sup> He speaks of the “limits fixed by God,” of the “divine ordination to a higher or lower state of life”; then he concludes: “the first cause of this diversity [of graces] is to be found on the part of God, who dispenses his gifts of grace in a different way to each, in order that, from these different grades, the beauty and the perfection of the Church may shine forth.”<sup>27</sup> Nor does St. Thomas leave it at that, because he goes on to give us the true metaphysical basis for this efficacy of the divine causality,<sup>28</sup> and also to show how it depends too on the merits and the grace of Christ, who is the Head of the Mystical Body. Thus he says: “There is not one of us who is not made a partaker of the divine graces . . . but this grace is not given to all in a uniform way nor equally, but according to the measure of Christ’s gift, i. e., insofar as Christ is the giver and has measured it out to each individual . . . this difference is not from chance or blind fate nor from our own merits, but from the gift of Christ, i. e., according as Christ has measured it out to us.”<sup>29</sup>

It will be very obvious that this conclusion is no more than a particular application of Aquinas’ general doctrine with regard to the divine causality. God’s intention in the whole of creation is to manifest His own glory and infinite perfection by means of creatures. This means that, since the infinite perfection of God can not be adequately manifested in one or a few individuals, He attains that end by the diversity of perfection of those creatures both in the natural and the supernatural orders.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf., *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 7, a. 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 112, a. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, III, q. 7, a. 12.

<sup>29</sup> *In Ephes.*, iv, 4; cf. *In Rom.*, xxi.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. St. Francis of Sales, *The Love of God*, Bk. IO. Ch. 6.

This perfection of the divine causality in no way implies a loss of man's freedom, and so, under the guiding hand of God, he must play his part to the full in the increase of his own accidental perfection. He must learn to cooperate with those graces which he receives from God, thus removing obstacles to the future workings of that grace. Above all, he must be fully prepared to make any sacrifice which God may ask of him in order to reach the full heights of grace and charity if that should be the divine will for him.

Thus, in this distinction between essential and accidental perfection we can find a solution which will bring the two conflicting opinions with regard to the unity or diversity of the spiritual life into harmonious concord. If we consider the power of grace in the abstract, in its nature, so to speak, and apart from the circumstances in which it is found in individuals, then that spiritual life is essentially a unity, because the least degree of grace not only unites us perfectly even in this life with God, our supernatural end, but is also capable of developing through all the different grades of the spiritual life from the lowest up to the highest, even to the beatific vision itself.

If, however, we think of that grace as it is in the individual soul then once more we must distinguish between the element which is common to all namely grace with its accompanying infused virtues and gifts, and the accidental grade of that grace and charity, which is particular to each and every individual. This grade of grace will depend on the will of God with regard to the individual, and in this sense we can not speak of the spiritual life with truth as a unity, first of all, because, by means of its very diversity in the individuals who possess it, the infinity of the divine perfection is manifested in a splendid manner and, secondly, because the will of God is the true factor which determines both the manner of grace and its grade where the individual is concerned. Hence we can truly say that there are as many grades as there are individuals, and that, so far as the "way of perfection" is concerned, God leads some by one path and some by others according to His will.

This solution which we have outlined here has many direct applications in the spiritual life, and here it might be as well to mention some of them. First of all, there is the famous question about the universal call to perfection. Usually authors deal with this question as if it referred merely to accidental perfection, whereas once more there is need of the distinctions we have proposed, because our solution to this question will vary accordingly as we consider essential or accidental perfection.

If we are considering the call to essential perfection, we have to keep in mind the doctrine of the Church with regard to the will of God that all should be saved (with St. Thomas' famous distinction between the antecedent and the consequent will), as well as the doctrine of divine providence and predestination. This is quite clearly St. Thomas' position with regard to this question.

When we come to consider the question in the light of accidental perfection—and in particular when we consider the question of the call to infused contemplation—then the solution proposed in this article has direct application. Thus, in the abstract, since all are called to sanctifying grace, which is the means necessary for the Beatific Vision, all are similarly called to infused contemplation remotely and in the abstract, since grace contains in itself the power to carry man through all the grades of the spiritual life up to that very vision itself. In the concrete, however, since we are now dealing with that grace as it is in the individual soul and, moreover, with the accidental grades of it, the call of any individual soul to infused contemplation will depend on the will of God. He calls to that state those whom it pleases Him to call, and how and when He pleases. To propose any other solution to this problem is to go contrary to the mind and the letter of Aquinas, as we have seen.

It will be obvious too that the solution we have proposed also helps to explain what is usually called the “precept of perfection,”<sup>31</sup> because it will be clear that all those who possess

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Matt.*, vi, 48.

essential perfection as we have described it in the course of this article can and do love God above all things, with their whole hearts, souls, minds, and strength; consequently, they observe the essence of the precept perfectly.

Nor does this mean that we can neglect or in any way despise accidental perfection. Such is very far from St. Thomas' thought. On the contrary, since the precept of the love of God above all things deals directly with our final end, we should desire always to fulfil that precept in an ever higher degree, even though some of those higher degrees are not under our own immediate control, but are God's gift in accordance with the dispositions of His divine will. It is for this reason that St. Thomas insists that, unlike the moral virtues, there is no "mean" in the action of the theological virtues, because they have for their direct object God, the Infinite Good.<sup>32</sup> Thus we can never love God as much as He deserves to be loved, no matter what our grade of grace, charity, and sanctity may be. For this reason, too, he insists on what we may call the "law of acceleration" in the spiritual life, when he says: "those who are in a state of grace should increase in that grace ever more and more according as they approach their final end," and this increase should proceed at an ever growing pace, much as a stone, flung into the air, increases its speed as it nears the earth which is attracting it by the force of gravity. That is our obligation, and God's grace will always be with us to enable us to fulfill it.

The very delicate and debated question of passive purgation after death also finds an answer in this solution. Some authors maintain that those souls who have not reached the heights of accidental perfection in this life, but who have died in the state of beginners will be obliged to pass through purgatory in order to acquire the passive purgation and the accidental perfection proper to souls who have passed through that purgation in this life and have thus reached the stage of those we have called the perfect.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 184, a. 3, ad 2um.

It is clear that there are really two questions involved here, one of fact and the other of possibility, and we can attempt to answer them both in the light of the principles we have already explained. With regard to the question of fact, i. e., whether *de facto* such souls have to pass through purgatory *simply* to acquire that passive purgation which is proper to the states of the proficient and the perfect, we can answer at once that at least all such souls do not have to pass through purgatory, since baptised children who die before coming to the use of reason, and also martyrs for the faith, enter at once into the Beatific Vision. Also there is no valid reason for stating this fact of passive purgation after death merely for the purpose we have mentioned, provided that we are not all bound to reach the stage of the perfect in this life. As we have seen, these higher states are a gift from God, and their graces are dispensed according to His good pleasure. Indeed, the whole doctrine of purgatory as it is taught by the Church seems to imply that those who die without sin or the debt of punishment due to sin on their souls need no further purification before entering heaven. So much for the question of fact. Now, with regard to the *possibility* of entering heaven immediately after death, we have to keep in mind the fact that there are many ways and means open to us in this life by which sin and the punishment due to sin may be removed from the soul. Once we admit that this active purification is possible here below, then we are forced to admit at the same time at least the possibility of entering heaven immediately after death. This is especially true in the light of the principles we have already explained in the course of this article, because, if the grade of accidental perfection in the individual depends on the will of God, He will not demand from us a perfection greater than that which He has willed for us. Thus it would seem that, provided we do what we can to cooperate faithfully with the graces we receive from God in this life, and also do what we can to atone for our sins in this life, using the abundant means He has placed at our disposal through His Church, it should be possible so to live

that we may enter heaven immediately after death. The contrary teaching seems to demand from us more than we can give, which is contrary to God's normal method of acting in the souls of His creatures.

Our aim in this life, then, should be to live faithfully in loving service of God, each according to his state and degree of grace, prepared always to leave all things to follow Christ if such should be His divine will, desiring to love Him ever more and more. Thus, star may differ from star in brightness in heaven, but that very difference will only redound to the greater glory of God Whose divine will we have fulfilled.

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