

even by the very few to whom it is granted.

These are however special graces and do not form the usual furniture of the illuminative way. The Christian who is enlightened now by the gift of Understanding will yet be often plunged in darkness and uncertainty. Aridity of a very deep and penetrating nature is still often the only outward aspect of his prayer. As the aridity had attacked his sensitive faculties in the night of the senses, so his 'enthusiasm' had died, and by now he has come to depend far more on the will of God working in the purity of his own will and mind. With this sensible dryness goes a bitter and burning desire and an intense love which is almost purely a thing of the will. And these last two features of the illuminative way are of course so characteristic of Richard Rolle that they will require another article for their treatment.

SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

or GROWTH IN CHARITY

BY

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(Adapted from *Le Saint-Esprit dans la Vie Chrétienne*
by Bernard Delany, O.P.)

*The path of the just is a shining light and shineth more and more
unto the perfect day. Proverbs, 4, 18.*

I. THE LAW OF PROGRESS



HE spiritual life is the life we live in Christ. We are alive in him because he is the head of the body of which we are living members. From him we get light, life, movement. His ceaseless graces flow from the sacraments, those living streams circulating within the veins of his mystical body. Chief among these graces are the Church's teaching, the Liturgy, and then the words and living example of the saints who share with us membership of the same body which is Christ.

The Church is alive and life-giving and makes alive all those who are its living members: the branches live in and by the life of the true Vine. All the mysterious and wonderful influences that flood the Christian soul have their source in Christ now gloriously alive in heaven. From the heart of his divinity he sends us the Holy Ghost, given to us as an abounding personal gift. Christ is the head of our

spiritual life: the Holy Ghost is the heart. These two divine Persons are the forces constantly working within the soul in the state of grace.

It will be profitable to dwell briefly upon this dynamic action of God's loving power.

Sanctifying grace is like the grafted shoot of new life imbedded in the old stock of our wild nature to give new vigour to its sap, to give it a divine energy and to enable it to produce magnificent and abundant fruit. When our Lord infuses grace into the soul he gives us the three theological virtues: faith which 'puts us through' to the true God, hope which sets us in motion to reach out to our only Good, charity by which we surrender to this good with all our mind and heart and will, and yearn to possess and enjoy the sole object of heart's desire.

Under the sway of faith, hope and charity, prudence governs the special virtues implanted in our faculties and submits them to God; justice moves us to give to each his due; fortitude and temperance control the passions and animal instincts of our nature.

Over and above these normal helps the Holy Ghost comes to our aid with his personal presence, gently, firmly, ceaselessly stimulating us with his inspirations and actual graces and keeping us ever moving towards what is better and more perfect.

The just man, ennobled and engraced, suggests a sublime image of strength, grandeur and moral beauty. He is perfectly armed and equipped for his journey along the road that leads to eternal life. While feeling his way in the darkness of faith, he clings to the evidence of things that do not appear and, as it were, holds already in his hands the substance of things to be hoped for.

Eternal life, thus begun within the soul, follows the law of all life: and the law of life is growth. We must develop; we must tend to perfection. To be alive means movement, it means going from strength to strength, having life more and more abundantly. It is like the newborn light of dawn which gradually banishes the darkness, grows and intensifies until it expands into the full light of day. It becomes a ceaseless, perpetual light lighting up the road along which we travel ever on and on: 'the path of God's children is as shining light and shineth ever more and more unto the perfect day'.

II. GROWTH IN GRACE AND CHARITY

How is the soul to be kept on the move, progressing towards eternal life, growing more and more in God?

It is a law of our nature that progress comes from repeated acts. Habits are formed by the attentive, deliberate repetition of acts. Practice makes perfect, as we say. It is a truism of psychology that we acquire skill and ease by dint of conscious repetition until the

performance of the act becomes second nature. This is the law of progress in any art or craft or human activity.

But in the supernatural order increase of the divine life in the soul cannot be acquired by the simple repetition of acts, by the mere application of our will. Something more than will-power is required because, it must be remembered, the supernatural comes from God. We cannot by taking thought add one cubit to our stature, nor can we by our own efforts alone grow in the supernatural life. Do not misunderstand me. Of course it is true that progress needs effort on our part and the dogged repetition of many acts; but the real cause of progress is not in this effort or this repetition: grace is the gift of God, it is a sharing in the divine nature, something infinitely above us and beyond our grasp. God gives grace and he gives the increase as well. This thought should humble us. If we find goodness within ourselves we can only say with St Paul: 'By the grace of God I am what I am'. (1 Cor. 15. 10).

Have we then simply to sit down and wait for God's grace? No. We must be intensely active. The man who aims at skill in any art wins his way to mastery by hard work; the Christian progresses by the good work called merit. We have the capacity for what is called merit, and by merit is meant our being able to stake a claim with God for an increase of supernatural life. By our own efforts alone we cannot move an inch along the road to perfection; it is merit that secures for us growth in the divine life. He who uses his talent instead of hiding it in a napkin receives from the Master a rich recompense.

There are two kinds of merit, merit of fittingness (*de congruo*) and merit of strict justice (*de condigno*). Take for instance a good man who knows nothing of God's law, yet lives blamelessly according to his lights; does such a man in strict justice merit any supernatural good? No; he cannot put before God a strict claim to grace; he is not on the supernatural plane. But it is quite seemly and reasonable that he should not go unrewarded. He is doing what he can and it is reasonable to believe that God also will do what he can. Such a man, who is outside the divine economy of grace, cannot merit in the full rigour of justice; but he can merit the uncovenanted mercies of the Lord. Such also is the merit of sinners: it obtains its effect by good works; these good works do not compel the action of God's grace, but they dispose him, if we may so speak, to give his grace as a gift of mercy. The sinner cannot so act as to guarantee for himself salvation; only by God's intervention can the soul return to grace; but he who does what he can infallibly draws upon himself the infinite goodness which is always seeking to communicate itself. Such is

what theologians call congruous or reasonable merit (*de congruo*).

For souls in a state of grace it is far different. They are rooted in the divine life which is a sharing in the very nature of God. The Christian, sanctified by grace, is a child of God: his actions are supernaturalised—effects of the God-life: he is taken up to the level of the divine life in which he actively participates. Such is the merit of strict justice which makes the soul worthy to receive more abundant increase of charity; this is the merit of the man who uses his talents fruitfully and has the right to a rich increase.

For every act performed in a state of grace or for the love of God there is a divine recognition or recompense. Therein lies the secret of spiritual progress. By the doing of these divine actions we obtain in full justice a divine reward which is nothing more or less than a more intense growth within us of the divine life.

The merit consists not in the mere material act in itself, not in the difficulty or the pain that it costs, but in the depth of grace in which the act is rooted, in its elevation to the supernatural. This and not the effort makes us worthy of God's glory. We are apt to imagine that it is the sacrifice, the toil, the stress and strain that win us greater merit; our only claim to greater merit is greater love. To perform some humdrum insignificant task with an immense love is more meritorious than to undertake a difficult work with very little charity. St Augustine says: 'What constitutes the merit of our actions is what God puts into them'. (*Enarr. in Ps. 99, n. 15*).

III. WHAT IS IT WE MERIT?

By every act done in the state of grace we merit eternal life. A single act of charity, even if we had only enough conscious use of reason to utter a single sigh or aspiration of love towards God, merits eternal life. During the whole course of the soul's existence in grace each of these acts merits eternal life.

Such is our progress in the life of grace. These multiplied actions performed in a state of grace through the virtues and gifts accumulate and fill that treasury where neither rust nor moth can consume; we thus amass a hoard of precious stones, each one of which can purchase for us a happy immortality.

A good life becomes an overflowing store of merits laid up in heaven. St Paul has said that some light momentary affliction brings with it a reward multiplied every way, loading us with everlasting glory. (*2 Cor. 4, 17*).

This consideration should give us confidence in the face of our venial sins which are thus outweighed by all our acts of love. But the greater contains the less. If God gives heaven for each of our meritorious acts, with still greater reason will he give an increase of

eternal life in our present state. Thus by each of our good acts we merit an increase of grace and growth in charity. St Paul says: 'I can show you a way which is better than any other'. (1 Cor. 12, 31). Charity is like a moving way, a kind of escalator which moves forward and makes us advance with it.

IV. HOW CHARITY GROWS

How are we to explain the growth of grace and charity and, along with them, eternal life which they initiate? It cannot be the object that increases, for the object of charity is God himself. A single degree of grace gives us the right to possess eternal life, complete and entire. We cannot have eternal life more or less or by halves. How then are we to understand progress?

Grace, charity, and the virtues which flow therefrom are like grafted shoots implanted in our nature: they can be more or less deeply rooted. There can be more or less of immersion; there can be more or less of submission of the natural energies of the soul to the divine sway.

In nature a grafting may 'take' or it may not. If the grafting takes properly, it draws up to itself the sap of the tree upon which it has been grafted. If it does not take well, the main stock sprouts forth a number of shoots, more or less healthy. If the shoots are very strong, they absorb all the sap and vitality and the grafted branch dies; if they are feeble, they do not benefit the grafted tree, but they do not impair its life.

Making allowances for the imperfection of any analogy, we have here a fair image of the work of grace in the soul. It is by being rooted in our fallen nature that grace and charity grow. If they entirely dominate the soul, nothing escapes their sway, they engrace and ennoble everything . . . everything in the soul's life takes on the dignity and beauty of supernatural grace. It means that the grafting has 'taken' extremely well. There may be all sorts of little acts which escape this divine force, venial sins, outbursts of self-love, imperfections—all these sproutings which do not impede or destroy the divine foliage. Yet it must be remembered there is to that extent a lack of response to the divine love. Still only mortal sin (which is, as it were, sinful nature rendering the grafting ineffective) can completely arrest the life of grace and charity.

This means that every single act performed in the state of charity merits a deeper rooting in the life of grace; our nature comes more and more under its control; our native energies become more and more supernaturalised; and by the continual exercise of such activity our whole being comes entirely under the mastery of the divine, every fibre (in the phrase of St Francis de Sales) vibrating for God.

The grafting of divine life draws all the forces to itself and then diffuses them into fruitfulness.

V. OUR EVERY-DAY ACTIONS AND CHARITY

Some of our acts of charity are mediocre and feeble, performed in a very routine manner; we sometimes act in a lackadaisical fashion with little thought of God and scant warmth of love. These casual, aimless acts have no vigour or energy; they are not sinful, they are just negative and owe their inspiration for the most part to nature. When we reflect on the immensity of the gift of grace we begin to wonder why our acts can sometimes be so imperfect, so lukewarm, so dead-alive. Now, we may ask, do these acts—not in themselves bad, but just half-hearted and slack—diminish the interior treasury of grace? No; nothing is lost. Although our acts do not always merit in virtue of actual love of God, nevertheless everything in the soul, alive with grace, is for the love of God—sin alone excepted. In spite of our easy-going attitude we have not definitely turned our back on charity; we have not retracted our intention of doing all for the love of God; and any act which is not positively sinful has the fragrance of virtue and the quality of true merit. What does it merit? What increase of grace and charity is due to so apparently paltry an act? There is no perceptible or actual increase, only a disposition in the soul to receive an increase. No new degree of charity is produced, but a new aptitude or preparation for an increase. There is no actual failure or falling off, but on the contrary an increase of the mysterious potential of life which accumulates within the soul and prepares for a more real blossoming of the life of love: these acts are treasured in the depths of the soul and the supernatural organism is enriched. For those who love God, nothing is lost, even when they act remissly, provided no sin of commission or omission is involved. Whatever is not sin, done in the state of grace, brings us nearer to God and prepares us for greater union.

But the day will come when some circumstance will require us to give positive proof to God of greater love—perhaps to pardon an injury, to devote ourselves to someone who is sick or in distress, to undertake some difficult task which may cost us a tremendous effort. Then, drawing on our reserves, we shall rise to the heights of our clear duty and call forth an act of intense charity which has been long since preparing and thus shall we show our title and capacity for a higher degree of grace.

Frequently this increase of charity occurs at the time of Holy Communion, the Eucharist being the food and life of the soul. The body grows by its daily nourishment and the soul grows spiritually by frequent Communion. A Communion, well made, in which we

surrender ourselves completely, allowing ourselves to be consumed by him whom we receive sacramentally, will obtain for us in virtue of our preceding meritorious acts a new degree of love established for ever within the soul, if only we do not go back on God's love.

VI. VENIAL SIN DOES NOT DIMINISH CHARITY

But besides these half-hearted actions there are positive sins. We have the terrible power of obstructing the vital action of the sap from the divine grafting; we can lose the supernatural life by mortal sin. Venial sin, we know, does not destroy the life of grace. But does it lessen it? No. Venial sin does not cause us to lose the degree of charity which our merits have gained us. Venial sin concerns the means of perfection which are not necessarily bound up with charity. It concerns this particular duty of prayer, this or that observance or act—all those things which are not indispensable to the supernatural life, which may be omitted therefore without forfeiting the friendship of God. For one particular act of remissness in prayer or some outburst of impatience we do not lose the state of grace.

This is sound and wise doctrine. Charity has to do with God, our last end: sin concerns the means. If the means is so essentially bound up with charity that a Commandment of God is involved, clearly one cannot go against the means without going against the end. In other words we cannot say we love God if we go against his will. The little shortcomings do not involve a breach with essential charity and are not absolutely incompatible with the *end* which is the love of God. True enough it cannot be said that by venial sin we exercise our love of God; but it is also true that we have not abdicated from the state of habitual love of God above all else. It would not be fair if for one small defect we were punished by the loss of the accumulated treasures acquired by many good actions, perhaps some of them even heroic: it would be out of all proportion. The gifts of God are without repentance. So long as we keep free from grave sin, we preserve intact the degree of grace which our merits and the mercy of Christ have won for us.

Still, it must be borne in mind that venial sin is not innocuous: it works mischief in the soul and is the source of harmful dispositions. Venial sins are like those little shoots that sprout on the grafted tree and threaten the healthy life of the grafting. If they multiply they exhaust the vitality of the tree and if they grow strong they may imperil the life of the entire tree. Venial sin paves the way to mortal sin, lessens the supernatural activity of virtuous habits and puts the life of grace in real danger.

VII. GROWTH WITHOUT LIMITS

The growth of the divine life in the soul is unlimited, not infinite but indefinite. Charity itself is without limit because it is a certain participation in that love with which God loves himself. Our charity is a little image of the love of the Holy Ghost; its aspirations are infinite; they go up to God who is infinite. The soul is not like a vessel of limited capacity: it can expand without measure and charity goes on increasing beyond the power of a human heart because it is a communication of God's own love. The loving soul is possessed by the desire for the infinite; it reaches out to the perfect Good, the living God; each accession of grace, instead of overflowing the soul's capacity, enlarges it to the stature of God's love. Saints like St Dominic, St Catherine and St Teresa grow in love and seem always moving on to greater and more tremendous love. The more we drink at this source the more we thirst. Reversing the processes of nature, the more we partake of spiritual food, the more we desire and the greater becomes our power of assimilation.

There is no limit either in the power that moves our love. Charity, the virtues and the gifts keep us ceaselessly under the influence of the Holy Ghost whose power is infinite; the more the Holy Ghost moves us, the more we respond to grace, the more grace we receive.

This deeper rooting in the life of grace, and growth in the divine love works by merit. It is a perpetual growing like the 'shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day'. We have passed out of darkness into the light of the glory of the living God.

Life should have only one meaning for us, namely to grow in God's love, to believe more truly, to love perfectly. St Thomas says in the *Adoro Te*:

Let it be that faith in thee grow without surcease,

Hope and love together more and more increase.

That is in its deepest sense our life. Happy if we grasp that truth. It will sustain us on our way to God. We have the means to move us along the way. God grant we go ever forward on that road and that our life be like the unfailing light that shineth ever more and more unto the perfect day.