

Life of the Spirit

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CHRISTIAN LIFE

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CHRISTIAN life is a life of friendship with God, 'I have called you friends' (John 15, 5). More, we are called to share the divine life itself in fellowship with Christ and as members of God's family; 'God is faithful, by whom you are called unto the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor. 1, 9). He is our elder brother, 'the firstborn among many brethren' (Rom. 8, 29); we receive the spirit of adoption of sons, and are joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8, 15-7).

The fullness of the divine life is to be ours hereafter in the blessed, all-satisfying vision and love of God eternally possessed. Then 'we shall be like to him, because we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3, 2); we shall see face to face, and know even as we are known (1 Cor. 13, 12). This life of eternal blessedness is indeed promised as a reward for a life well lived here below, but it will be only the full development of the divine life already begun in this world. 'He that believeth in the son *hath* eternal life' (John 3, 36); we are *now* the sons of God' (1 John 3, 2). At baptism the soul is born again to the higher life by adoptive sonship, and by this higher life, which we are accustomed to call sanctifying grace, we are 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1, 4).

We know of the existence of this grace only from revelation. In this world we have no direct and clear knowledge of purely spiritual realities, and we can express them to ourselves only by comparisons and analogies. A comparison helps us partially to grasp the nature of grace. It is beyond the natural capacity of an animal to reason, or that of a plant to see, walk, enjoy or suffer. In a similar way it surpasses the natural power of any created being to see God as he is, sharing the life of happiness which of right belongs only to the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Because this is the inheritance which is to be ours, God makes it possible by raising us to the supernatural and divine life in the rebirth of baptism. But whereas an irrational animal could not produce the

works of intelligence without changing its nature and ceasing to be what it was, our rebirth implies only an accidental transformation, so that the soul becomes a deified soul, and yet remains a human soul. We do not become identical with God, but the very nature of God is imparted to us in a mysterious way by means of a created quality in the soul; it is a true sharing by likeness. We have it as part of ourselves, as that by means of which we are made capable of living the life which God lives. 'O Christian, acknowledge thy dignity, and as thou hast received a share in the divine nature, do not by unworthy conduct return to thy former baseness.'¹ 'The value of the divine grace in a single individual', says St Thomas Aquinas, 'is greater than the natural goodness of the whole universe.'²

Because God is a spirit, his interior life consists of the activity of knowledge and of will, knowledge of the supreme Truth, and love of the supreme Goodness. His knowledge extends to all things, for he is the cause of all, and his love extends to all created beings, for each in its own far-off way mirrors the divine goodness. The soul transformed by sanctifying grace is at root capable of sharing in this same knowledge and love. In this world we have only the less perfect knowledge of God which faith gives. We do not see him, but we know about him. We know the truths concerning his inner life and his intentions in our regard which he has made known. Even while he is known to us only from afar we understand sufficiently to hope for the possession of him who is our supreme good, and to love him who in himself and for his own sake is infinitely lovable. Hereafter faith will give place to clear vision, and hope to fulfilment; charity alone 'never falleth away' (1 Cor. 13, 8). It is in the exercise of these three theological virtues that we make our own the divine acts by which God himself lives, so far as it is possible for us to do so here below.

But man cannot successfully live a dual life. Body and soul form a natural unity, and even on the natural plane his lower activities, with the exception of those which are purely organic, are subject to the control of reason and will. When they are so governed they become reasonable activities, and man's life is unified³. In a way which may be compared with this, all man's actions can share the

¹ St Leo the Great, *Serm. I de Nat. Dom.*—Breviary lesson for Christmas Day.

² *Summa I-II*, 113, 9, *ad 2*. On these words Cajetan comments: 'Hold always before your eyes by day and by night that the value of the divine grace in a single individual is greater than the natural goodness of the whole universe, in order that you may continually be aware of the damnation which threatens those who do not appreciate so great a gift'.

³ 'Since reason is the root of human goodness, this goodness will be the more perfect the wider the grounds of action proper to man are subject to reason' (*I-II*, 24, 3).

divine life of the deified soul. The Christian must govern his whole life in the light of the divine truths which he believes, and under the inspiration of the charity by which he loves God above all things. In the natural sphere his actions are made to share the life of reason easily and with economy of effort by means of the moral virtues, which are habits acquired by practice. Unlike the animals, which act by instinct, man performs his infinitely more varied actions easily and accurately only as the fruit of repeated effort; practice makes perfect in the physical, intellectual and moral spheres. In outward conduct or interior activity, frequent repetition of acts governed by reason gives rise to the habits of so acting which we call the natural moral virtues. On the supernatural plane where man's acts must be governed, not by reason alone, but by reason illumined by the truths of faith, there are corresponding moral virtues. These virtues are more than habits which give a certain facility, they make possible for the first time deified activity in their particular sphere. They cannot be acquired directly by human effort any more than sanctifying grace can be. Grace divinises the soul itself, but the supernatural virtues, which are properties of grace and are received with it at baptism, deify the faculties, the immediate principles by which we act. Nevertheless they are perfectly adapted to our human manner of action, and we cannot practise them without effort, aided by God's actual grace. Indeed more exertion may be necessary than is required to practise the natural moral virtues we already possess. Impediments from our lower selves and from our acquired dispositions and propensities are overcome in the effort to form the natural virtues,⁴ but if we have made no effort to acquire even the natural virtues these impediments will remain to be overcome before we can practise the supernatural virtues with ease.

As is the case with their natural counterparts, there are four principal supernatural virtues, the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. All the others are connected with one or another of these four. Intellect and will already share the divine life by the theological virtues, but we do not occupy these powers exclusively with God. The activities of mind by which we direct our practical conduct are divinised by supernatural prudence. Supernatural justice and its connected virtues deify our acts of will in our relations with others. It is true that these acts must also be divinised by charity. We must love God, and we cannot truly do so unless for his sake we love also those whom he loves. But we have relationships with the world external to ourselves which are

⁴ Cf. St Thomas, *De Veritate* 1, 10 ad 14.

even more fundamental, and without justice charity can have no place. We must be just towards God himself, paying him the homage of reverence and submission to his Majesty and Sovereignty in which worship consists. The passions and emotions of our lower being are controlled and supernaturalised by fortitude and temperance with the virtues allied to them. It is by these moral virtues, themselves governed by faith and inspired by charity, that our human activity—reason, sense, and exterior life—shares the life of God. This deification is necessary not only as an extension to the whole man of the divine life of the theological virtues, but for another important reason. On the natural plane the interests of the different parts of our very being are not identical, and if the lower activities are not brought under the control of intellect and will, they develop at the expense of the higher rational life. In the supernatural sphere it is not otherwise, and if the activities natural to man are not supernaturalised, he runs the grave risk of losing the divine life altogether. The more is that so because by the first sin man lost the special gift of God by which human nature was brought into complete harmony, the lower part being made perfectly subject to the higher, as the higher rational soul itself was made perfectly subject to God by grace.

But in living the divine life, the principles of which we can but imperfectly grasp in this world, we are in a position not unlike that of a man not yet fully qualified in his chosen profession. Such a man will make many mistakes unless he is constantly helped by one who is fully qualified⁵. We need 'those secret warnings and invitations, which from time to time are excited in our minds and hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Without these there is no beginning a good life, no progress, no arriving at eternal salvation'⁶. The soul is made habitually docile to these inspirations by the sevenfold Gifts of the Holy Spirit which are received at baptism with sanctifying grace and the virtues. The Gifts are permanent, habitual dispositions of mind and will which enable us easily and readily, and as it were naturally, to respond to the passing, transitory helps of the Holy Spirit who dwells within the soul in a state of grace. These suggestions, illuminations of mind and inspirations of will, are given that the soul may overcome special difficulties and temptations or as a mark of special love. In the practice of the theological and moral virtues, which supposes the ordinary divine assistance of actual grace, we live the divine life in a way which is perfectly adapted to our human way of acting by delibera-

⁵ St Thomas, *Summa* I-II, 68, 2.

⁶ Leo XIII, Encyclical *Divinum illud*, 9/5/1897.

tion and choice. But there are occasions when we experience sudden inspirations to avoid sin or to practise virtue which are not the result of previous deliberation. It is in this way that the Holy Spirit takes the initiative, although even by subsequent reflection the sudden inspirations cannot be known with certainty to be his 'secret warnings and invitations'. If it is not possible to begin a good life without his help, it is much less possible to reach any high degree of sanctity without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Prayer in its higher forms is an activity of the mind under his illuminating movement. Under his direction we are in the first instance passive, instruments; but we are responsible human instruments, capable of responding freely to his guidance in the path which faith marks out.

As God sees the Christian soul, it is transformed both in itself and in its powers of acting. We do not know the spiritual and the supernatural directly, and only from the truths which God has revealed are we aware of this change. Without a special revelation we cannot know with absolute certainty that we ourselves are in a state of grace⁷. A good conscience, and the desire and intention to love God and to avoid sin, give us a practical assurance sufficient for peace of soul that it is so. The same is true of the virtues. The domain of the natural and supernatural virtues is the same. We are in part aware that our actions are supernaturally virtuous because of the higher supernatural motives which inspire them.



FROM ST THOMAS'S COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF ST JOHN

Jesus saith to her: Do not touch me: for I am not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brethren and say to them: I ascend to my Father and to your Father, to my God and to your God.

(John 20, 17.)



ESUS saith to her: Do not touch me.' The Evangelist is here describing how our Lord gives Mary two commands, the first a prohibition, the second a positive order, when he says 'But go to my brethren'.

Now as to the prohibition, two points should be noted: (1) our Lord gives the command; and (2) he explains the reason.

Although we do not actually read in this Gospel narrative that she wanted to touch him, our Lord certainly forbids Mary by saying 'Touch me not'. From what is written we are to infer, according

⁷ St Thomas, *Summa* I-II, 112, 5.