

Life of the Spirit

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THE VIRTUOUS LIFE

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IT is not out of place, perhaps, to consider the influence of the Platonic habit of thought upon the conception of the virtuous life, particularly of the beginner. The general characteristic of the beginner is that of acquiring the virtues, so that the virtuous life appears to him at first as something outside himself, something that has to be grasped and brought into his own possession. The *Golden Epistle* of William of St Thierry sets this out very clearly in terms of what he calls the 'animal man', the man who lives by his senses rather than by the interior grace within him. Such a man is first moved by authority or admonished by a teacher; he accepts the good where he finds it, but he finds it always in what others say and do. So he begins by being obedient and by imitating the ways of others. By degrees, in subduing his inclinations to dissipate himself through his senses and his sense life, he begins to acquire virtues, a fact which is revealed by the delight he eventually discovers in exercising himself in the ways of others. In this way God's word is dictated from outside; the Christian must hear and accept it in such a way that it becomes his own word too. At first, when he is told to be patient, he does so without gracefulness, striking the self-conscious attitude of one who 'offers it up'. But by dint of subduing his irritation and hot temper the Christian moves on to accept an insult without bridling.

All this time God is himself assisting the Christian by infusing grace into his soul; for a man can do no good without God's assistance. And while the Christian is schooling himself into patience, God accompanies this practice with the gift of supernatural, infused patience welling up now from the depths of his being and running through the garden of the soul to meet the small trickle of the acquired virtues, thus uniting to make a strong stream of the Christian life. This does not, however, imply that these are two entirely distinct virtues; for grace perfects a nature

and the infused virtue sanctifies, heals, makes whole and powerful the man's own puny efforts at virtue. It is this combination of divine and human action that makes the virtue more and more interior as the man advances in his pursuit of God.

The tendency of the Platonist who is always expecting to find his ideas and his virtues ready made is to regard all virtue as infused. Plato describes the quest of the virtuous life as a flight to the heavens where man becomes like God with his holiness and justice and wisdom (*Theaetetus* 176a). Here we seem to be stepping forth from the shackles of the well-measured humanism of the Greek and laying hold of the freedom of the sons of God. These good habits are a share in God's life; they come out from God and are planted in the centre of the soul. They therefore fashion a man not so much according to the image of the perfect man, adorning him with the proper ornaments of human nature—the characteristic idea of the virtues in classical humanism—but they fashion him according to the likeness of God himself.

The Neoplatonist develops this conception of virtue into the arresting and beautiful sight of the divine rays issuing from the sun of the Godhead and penetrating each individual soul. These rays are always shining, the soul has these virtues constantly from the Source. The soul is in a sense made a soul by these creative virtues which flash from the divine nature. In the Godhead, Plotinus tells us, justice and patience and love are not themselves virtues for there is only one power and one act in the Supreme Being. But the Supreme Being is 'an exemplar, the source of what in the soul becomes virtue; for virtue is dependent, seated in something not itself.' This is 'the act and essence of the Supreme manifested in a new form' (Ennid. 1, 2, 6). When, therefore, Plotinus says that 'the purification of the soul must produce all the virtues' (id.), he is applying his doctrine of catharsis to this idea of infused virtues. For the process of becoming unmixed with the body will, in this view, eventually reveal the hidden treasure of the virtues resting like gleaming jewels underneath the slime of unrestrained emotion and impetuous feeling. The virtues lie there needing only that the individual set out to discover them beneath the clods of everyday life and the debris of social intercourse. The Platonic doctrine of catharsis, the cleansing of the soul from mixture with the body, is in this way bound closely to the teaching regarding the principles of man's behaviour. 'Regarding knowledge and

virtue', says St Thomas, 'certain writers have taken them to be wholly from within, in such a way that all the virtues and all the science naturally pre-exist in the soul; and so by discipline and exercise man removes the obstacles to knowledge and virtue that come upon the soul from the heaviness of the body—and this was the opinion of the Platonists.' (I-II, 63, 1.)

Such a supernatural and divine explanation of the Christian life of virtue fitted in well, therefore, with the process of self-knowledge and catharsis which was characteristic of the Neoplatonist influence on the Christian. So we find St Gregory of Nyssa writing: 'The rays of true and divine virtue shine in the purified life by means of "apathy" which emanates from it; it is the same in some ways as speaking of the rays of the sun, the overflowing of virtue, or the sweet odour of perfumes' (cf. Daniélou. *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, pp. 106 seq.). Naturally no Christian would ignore the necessity of acquiring virtue at the same time, and St Gregory says later on: 'The end of the virtuous life is likeness to God. For this purpose virtuous souls give themselves to the acquiring of purity of soul and to the casting away of all sensual love in order to receive the imprint of the divine nature through a better life. . . .' But in this description it is not difficult to detect the same theme: the body and its loves have mingled with the soul and obscured its virtue, so that the acquisition lacks the positive nature of repeated acts producing settled habits, and is limited to the removal of those impediments to the already existing rays of divine power shining in the depths of the soul.

Lurking within this tendency to reduce everything Christian to a supernatural principle there lies an element of antinomianism. The law and all the hundreds of rules which a man must adopt in order to learn how to live do not easily find a place in the platonic scheme. Laws teach the will of another or of others and come from outside. The acquisition of virtue, if it is a positive thing, entails the learning of the will of God and putting it into practice until such time as the first external acts of the practice of the divine will have sunk into the man's own will as habits, and he begins to follow the law of God from this interior principle as well. But the Platonist will tend to recognise the abolition of the Law by Christ as a final removal of the natural way of exterior guidance in favour of the interior movement and guidance springing from the rays of divine power. When Aldous Huxley, for example, criticises—

and rightly criticises—the legalism which so easily encumbers the religion that attempts to sanctify man as body as well as soul, he does so on the assumption that the Western lawyers who moulded the thought of Christianity were impervious to the inner light because of their law (cf. *Perennial Philosophy*, pp. 31 and 66). This is an age-long conflict between the religion of love and the religion of law; but it is not always recognised by those who fly too readily *from nature to grace*, who too soon invoke divine Love, the gifts, the intuitions of faith, that they are accepting the platonic dualism between the body and the soul. In the fourth century, for instance, the urge to follow the rule of the desert was inspired, at least in one large section of the eremitic movement, by the ‘spiritualism’ of the followers of Origen; it was necessary for the soul to rise above the evil body which had to be overcome by almost exclusively negative asceticism. Evagrius, who inspired Cassian and therefore exercised indirectly a great influence on Western monastic thought, limited the active life to the overcoming of the deadly sins. He was the first to list these ‘deadly’ sins, and by waging a ferocious war upon them he sought to establish the holy indifference which would release the divine virtues. This became an established Christian tradition—after outlining the general external rules of behaviour, authors of institutes, charters and rules went on to discuss these capital vices.¹

There may, however, have been hidden in the crude anthropomorphism of the opposing camp among the monks, some elements of the religion of the Incarnation which were overlooked by these other avid seekers after spiritual perfection. If virtue is also to be acquired it must first of all be sought outside a man in the social community in which he finds himself. He learns and acquires good habits from a simple obedience towards his parents; until they give him the words he cannot speak intelligibly, and until they show him what is the just way to behave towards other men he may have the right ‘instincts’ but he will not know how to act with justice. Most important of all, he has to look beyond himself towards the unique and perfect model of human kind and human kindness; Jesus Christ the Son of Man. The imitation of Christ is the principle way of acquiring the Christian virtues; for he led the way of the perfect man, whole and not relegated to the purely spiritual. It may have been that these monks, too, desired

1 Compare Cassian's *Institutes* and the *Ancren Riwle*.

to centre all upon this external norm. Certainly they began by training themselves according to a very ascetic and stringent rule, and they were inspired to a certain degree by the desire to follow our Lord into the desert, taking him at his word by leaving all things to follow him. In all this they would have been following the Christian rule of life with a special intensity, in the hope of the sooner growing into Christ by habit and delight so that his virtuous habits might be theirs. They would have had no idea that the rule they followed so faithfully was inimical to the full life of Christ in the freedom of the spirit.

In short, the virtuous life for every Christian consists in the establishment of the habits of good living and good thinking, both by the individual efforts of the man acquiring them and by the divine action infusing them supernaturally within the compass of those efforts. There is of course in man a natural disposition to right living and right thinking. In the sense that the soul is 'naturally Christian' he has the inclination to act in accordance with the common good, to sacrifice himself for it, for instance, but he first requires the external standards of his community, be it a religious or a natural family, to teach him how to fulfil those dispositions and inclinations. The virtuous life begins with the natural possibility in the whole man to know truth and to love good, that is to say, as a man he will at the first opportunity begin to seek human knowledge, knowledge about nature and its source, knowledge about man, not merely as a soul, but as the sum of Nature and Creation; and he will begin to love good human things, to love people and to love doing things, not merely with his soul, for others. But all this requires the formation and guidance of the existing ways of human society, the guidance above all of the perfect man who is God and the formation of the divine inspiration of grace welling up into good habits in the will and the true ideas of faith in the mind. None of these three elements—the natural disposition, the human activity and the divine infusion—can be omitted from the balanced understanding of the virtuous life. To isolate one or the other would be to lead either to a naturalism which left out the divine assistance, or to a legalism which vested the external rule of life with an absolute value, or to a 'supernaturalism' which treated man as a potential angel instinct with divine graces from the first. But above all, the Christian must keep his eyes fixed upon the supreme and unique model

of the virtuous life, and by becoming a pilgrim on earth, following Christ mile by mile as the days pass, he may one day catch up with Christ and find that he is walking with the same footsteps as his Exemplar. In this way he will purify his life, acquire the true virtues, absorb into his very being the Christian rule of life, and expand his heart with the divine breath of supernatural virtue. And so the Christian, in his complete being, becomes a divine ray leaping out from the Word in whom all things are made, and penetrating the darkness of unformed and undirected material creation.



THE SILENT JOY

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WHEN one has traced the bridegroom and the bride motif in the pages of the Old Testament and seen with what divine persistence God wooed his chosen people lest the alliance be forgotten: 'I will espouse thee to me forever' (Osee 3, 19), one is the more forcibly struck by the few references in the Gospels of the New Testament to Christ as the Bridegroom of the Covenant. In the writings of the Four Evangelists the nuptial theme practically disappears, at least as far as direct allusion to Christ's fulfilment of the promised espousals goes. It is as if the actual *presence* of the 'young man' whom Isaias prophesied would come and 'dwell with the virgin' (Isaias 62, 5) made all further allusion unnecessary. Even in the Gospel of St John, where we find more evidence of the fulfilment-sense than in the other Gospels, there is only one mention made of the Bridegroom, the text spoken by the Baptist when he wished to point out to his disciples that he was not the Christ but only his 'friend': 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom who standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice.' (John 3, 29.) And even here we sense the veiled inference rather than the direct statement. There is nothing of the positive boldness we hear in: 'Behold the Lamb of God'. To point out the bridegroom to the Jews, the Precursor suggests rather than declares.