

the world'. The Supplement evidently has an appeal to those interested in the question of religious life and the special form of Christian life for laymen.

'BE YE THEREFORE PERFECT'

BY

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WE use the word 'perfect' in so many contexts that it is easy to lose sight of its etymological meaning ('*per*', thoroughly, '*facere*', to make). We need to look to its roots in order to understand St Thomas's use of the term.

He speaks of 'first perfection' and 'second perfection' (I. 73. 1). 'First perfection' is God's gift to every man

as he enters upon this life; he has a nature which is perfect, 'thoroughly-made', in that it lacks none of the finely-adapted faculties proper to a rational being. Activity is the very *raison d'être* of these faculties and in bestowing them on a nature God imparts to it the ability to act, to operate. He who 'created heaven and earth' has been prodigal even of his power, since he willed to create a world which should mirror his omnipotence as well as his goodness. God could have fashioned the universe as something already fully perfect and therefore changeless, had he not wished that its beauty should be not merely static, like that of a great painting, but full of life and movement, in which the component parts contribute actively to the beauty of the whole. Hence it is that every creature is created perfect 'substantially' and is granted the power to achieve the further and accidental perfection to which God has destined it.

God, as the architect of the universe, has to direct the activity of his dynamic creature towards the accomplishment of his vast design. This he does by assigning to the hierarchy of created agents a corresponding hierarchy of ultimate ends, so that each agent in attaining its appointed end makes its contribution to the beauty of the whole. 'Second perfection', the 'making' of oneself, which God has placed in the power of the creature, consists in the very activity by which it attains its ultimate end. (I. 73. 1.) God ordained that men, the noblest work of his hands, should achieve the highest perfection and should achieve it in being united with himself. Now 'It is charity which unites us with God', St Thomas tells us. 'He that abideth in charity abideth in God and God in him'. (II-II. 184. 1.)

Our Lord himself gives more explicit teaching on this point. In reply to the question, 'Master, which is the great commandment in the law?', he says, quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets' (Matt. 22, 36-40). The love of which the commandment speaks is the love of friendship, based on our sharing in God's divine life. We are commanded to love God primarily, since he is the source of this life, and 'after him our neighbour', as one who joins with us in sharing the divine life. 'With thy *whole* heart . . .' St Thomas tells us that 'whole' in this context implies perfect love (*Perf. Vit. Spir.* cap. IV). However, this does not mean that God demands more than is possible to mere humans. There is no absolute objective standard to which it binds; the subjective conditions of the individual man must be taken into consideration, as his personal perfection depends on his personal capacities.

The prototype is the divine love. God loves his own essence wholly, with a twofold plenitude or fulness, a plenitude both of God loving and of God loved (II-II. 184. 2). In other words, not only does God bestow on himself all his love, but that love answers completely to his infinite capacity for being loved. Such plenitude is not possible to any creature; the charity of even the highest angel falls infinitely short of the lovableness of the deity. However, the angels' love for God is a plenitude, a plenitude in relation to angelic nature. St Thomas calls it '*perfectio secundum naturam*'—perfection according to the capacities of the lover's nature—and adds that this is possible to man, but not in this life. He describes this fulness of love in man as when man's whole heart [all his affective powers] is actively and continually directed towards God (II-II. 24. 8). The wholehearted and unceasing consecration which this implies is not possible to man during this present life. The effects of sin render men less sensitive to the appeal of things of the spirit and more prone to turn away from God to lower things. Moreover, much time and interest and energy are necessarily devoted to the very struggle for existence—in the fields, factories, offices of day to day life. Furthermore the 'infirmity of the present life' entails that we spend a considerable time in sleeping, eating and the like. Lastly, the fact that 'the corruptible body is a load upon the soul' makes the perfecting of charity impossible in this life, for it prevents the soul from seeing 'the divine light in its essence', and this vision is required to perfect charity. (*De Caritate*, 1, 10).

These factors, coupled with the laws of growth and development

to which we are subject, give its specific character to our quest for perfection. Charity itself, the power of loving God, is bestowed upon us from above. Our part in the process consists in removing the hindrances and barriers to love. Now, since charity cannot co-exist with mortal sin, it follows that observance of the commandments is essential to the preservation of charity. Keeping the commandments to the extent of avoiding mortal sin ensures a certain degree of charity, and obviously all are obliged to have charity in this its lowest measure which is called 'essential perfection'. However, our obligations extend much further; essential perfection is only a starting point.

As we have said, the obstacles set up by the exigencies of our present life obstruct the full scope of charity. The removal of these obstacles is a gradual process, subject to the growth and development to which we are subject. Consequently, to fulfil the precept of charity takes on the character of a 'tending towards' fulfilment. 'Not that I have already won the prize, already reached fulfilment. I only press on . . .' writes St Paul. (Philipp. 3, 12). His metaphor of running a race expresses admirably the nature of our obligation to perfection. We are not obliged to a definite measure of perfection, we are obliged to run a course of which the starting point is 'essential perfection' and the finishing-post is the full perfection of which our nature is capable. St Thomas's terminology expresses the same truth in another way and points out the real difference between angelic perfection and the perfection expected of us in this life. All created perfection is relative and St Thomas relates angelic perfection to something static and definite, labelling it 'perfection according to nature'. Human perfection, however, he relates to something fleeting and indefinite—to time, which is ever moving forward. Obviously, however, the yardstick is not merely 'time'. The phrase 'perfection according to time' really means perfection according to our nature's capacity at any given stage in our development.

The precept imposes an obligation of tending towards the full 'perfection according to nature' as to an ultimate end, even though we can only attain to it in heaven. A man's chosen end in life exercises, to the extent to which he really chooses it, a magnetic attraction on all his activities and limits his pursuit of all other objects. Nothing, however, limits his pursuit of the ultimate end; it takes on a 'quasi-ad-infinitum' character pressing all his energies into its service. Aristotle exemplifies this in the *Politics* by saying that if a man makes the accumulation of wealth his aim in life he will amass riches 'quasi ad infinitum' and his passion for money will impose limits on his pursuit of all other objects. Similarly if we accept growth in

charity as the purpose of our lives, our quest of perfection will likewise assume a '*quasi ad infinitum*' character and all other aims will decrease in their importance.

This notion of growth in charity *ad infinitum* presents some difficulty. But if we examine the respective parts played by man and by God in that growth, we shall be on the track of a solution. Man's part, as we have said, is to remove the obstacles to love, and this cannot be fully accomplished during the present life. The fact that something further will always remain to be done guarantees the '*ad infinitum*' character of the quest. God infuses charity into our souls, but that we grow in the love of God implies not that he adds to our charity, but that he makes it more intense and subjects the soul more completely to it. Charity becomes more and more wholly the 'act' of the soul (II-II. 24. 5) driving out imperfections, for it is 'a consuming fire'. This growth can go on *ad infinitum* because human charity is a participation in God's infinite love, infused into our souls by his infinite power and because every increase in charity stimulates in the soul a capacity for further increase (II-II. 27. 7).¹

Not only does our Lord put us in mind of the nature of our 'second making', he also shows us the instruments best adapted to it. In answer to the rich young man's request for counsel, he says: 'If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and come follow me' (Matt. 19, 21). St Paul, for his part, tells the Corinthians: 'He that is without wife is solicitous for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please God' (1 Cor. 7, 32). On the other hand the natural law dictates that men should busy themselves with the things of this life, should own property, should marry and give in marriage. Is there then to be a conflict between the counsels and the natural law impressed on men's minds by God? God has resolved the possible tension by uniting men in an organic whole, a Mystical Body made up of diverse yet finely adapted parts, each contributing to the good of the whole by its own specific function. 'And

¹ This points to a more fundamental explanation. (cf. II-II. 24. 7 ad 3.) We love only those things which we know and our love for them is proportioned to our knowledge. In this life we know God in a limited manner, by faith, and our love for him suffers the same limitations. Consequently it can increase *ad infinitum* within its narrow framework, without ever becoming equal to '*caritas patriae*', the charity of heaven. The reason is that the 'quantity' of the charity of heaven is as different from the 'quantity' of the charity of the present life, as the quantity of a plane surface is different from that of a straight line. The Beatific Vision oversteps the boundaries set by faith, opening up new vistas, new reasons for loving God, and the charity proportioned to this new knowledge knows none of the limitations set to charity here below. St Thomas's example is enlightening. Just as a straight line produced *ad infinitum* will never equal a plane surface, so charity which is increased *ad infinitum* within the limits set by faith, will never equal the charity of heaven.

because the Church is the Body of Christ', writes Karl Adam (*The Spirit of Catholicism*, chap. 3), 'she is essentially an organism, with its members purposively interrelated, and a visible organism'. The Church is divine in its origin, but is also human in its members. Therefore while it has organs whose functions derive from Christ's purpose in founding it, others of its members exercise functions of a purely human character, such as the begetting and rearing of children. Diversity of function ensures that within the Church the conflicting demands of nature and of the counsels are fully satisfied.

However, it should be borne in mind that practice of the counsels is not necessary for the attainment of perfection. St Thomas distinguishes between 'perfection and the 'state of perfection'. Perfection consists in charity, infused into the soul by God, something beyond our perception. A person is said to be in the 'state of perfection' who binds himself solemnly to something necessarily connected with perfection, '*perfectioni annexum*'. The '*anneza*' may be either preparatory to perfection, instruments for its attainment such as poverty, chastity, obedience, or effects and expressions of perfection, such as the care of souls. The solemn binding of oneself to such instruments places a man in the 'state of perfection' without making him perfect. On the other hand, the solemn binding of oneself to the effects of charity, as a bishop binds himself to the care of souls, presupposes, or ought to presuppose, perfection.

As the Mystical Body is organised hierarchically, many of its members are called to be bishops and consequently are called to the 'state of perfection' proper to bishops. Many more are called to the other 'state of perfection', to bind themselves solemnly to the practice of the counsels. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the precept has a lesser binding force on Christians to whom the actual practice of the counsels is impossible. They are not excused from their 'second making' by the fact that the best instruments are withheld from them. Neither is perfection put beyond their reach; indeed, if they hanker after a higher state they seek to thwart God's purpose.

Karl Adam says that 'the supernatural redemptive might of Jesus, as it reveals itself in the Church, is not tied to a single person, so far as he is a person but only so far as he is a divinely-appointed organ of the community'. (*The Spirit of Catholicism*, p. 36, Unicorn ed.). Through Christ the Head of the Mystical Body, 'the charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, who is given to us' (Rom. 5, 5), that charity by which we love God. God calls certain members of that Body to prepare themselves in a special way for charity and so to fulfil in the most perfect manner the precept he has given. This preferential selection, oddly enough, finds its vindication—

if we can use such a term in speaking of the works of God, whose Spirit 'breatheth where he will'—in the fact that the divine purpose is concerned with the sanctification of the whole Body as a unity, and not just as a 'haphazard collection of individuals'. These chosen souls exercise a function in the Mystical Body, they share very specially in the work of sanctifying the whole. The organic nature of that whole furnishes the reason why only some are called to perform the nobler tasks. 'If the whole body were the eye, where would be the hearing? . . . Yea, much more those that seem to be the more feeble members of the body, are more necessary'. (1 Cor. 12, 17 and 22). But to seek to understand their election solely in terms of function is to be satisfied with only a partial explanation. The function which they exercise is really secondary to their attainment of sanctity. After all, the primary object of every religious order is the sanctification of its own members.

St Paul tells us (Eph. 5, 25 and 27) that 'Christ shewed love to the Church when he gave himself up on its behalf. He would hallow it . . . he would summon it into his own presence, the Church in all its beauty. . . .' St Thomas shows that diversity of states, of perfect and less perfect states, belongs to that very beauty. He says that just as in the natural order the perfection which is found in God in a sublime simplicity and uniformity, can be found in creatures only in multiplicity and without uniformity, so the plenitude of grace residing in Christ the Head of the Church flows to his members with the diversity we have described; '. . . there are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit' (1 Cor. 12, 4). Order in this diversity makes for the beauty of the Church. If St Augustine could say of sinners that 'the universe is beautified by them as the beauty of a picture is increased by well-managed shadows' (Civ. Dei 11, 23), surely we can say of the less perfect states that they add to the beauty of the Bride of Christ. The application of two distinctions enables us to assess all this at its true value. The first is the distinction we have already made between 'perfection' and 'the state of perfection', the distinction between perfection 'in the eyes of God' and perfection 'in the eyes of the Church'. The second contrasts the actual renunciation of worldly goods and marriage and their renunciation '*in preparatione animi*', the spirit of renunciation, which is evidently more important. 'What is meritorious', says St Vincent Ferrer, 'is not that a man should be poor, but that being poor, he should love poverty'. It is the distinction between the practice of the counsels and the spirit of the counsels.

When we speak of higher and lower functions, of perfect and less perfect states, we are speaking of the Church as visible. Consequently the gradation in perfection is a gradation 'in the eyes of the Church',

it is something external. There is also an invisible beauty and gradation of which the visible is the outward manifestation. It is probably true that generally speaking the invisible order corresponds to the visible, that those who are perfect 'in the eyes of the Church' are also perfect 'in the eyes of God'. Yet, precisely because to be 'in the state of perfection' does not make one 'perfect', the invisible gradation need not correspond to the visible. Many who are placed in the state of perfection never attain perfection, but many who are not in that state do. Every man has it in his power to transcend 'in the eyes of God' the limits imposed upon him 'in the eyes of the Church'. We can see how this is possible by applying our second distinction. Even though the actual renunciation of worldly goods is not possible to all (and it is wrong of one whose condition forbids it to hanker after a higher state of perfection) all can and ought to aspire to the spirit of that renunciation. St Catherine tells us: 'Inasmuch as the counsels are bound up in the commandments, no one can observe the latter who does not observe the former, at least in thought, that is to say, that they possess the riches of the world humbly and without pride'. (*Dialogue*, c. 47). Moreover, according to the manner in which the precept binds them, all, layfolk as well as religious, must fulfil in some way the obligation of tending towards perfection. Père Lemmonyer, O.P., following St Thomas, lays down that all must refrain from contemning the higher degrees of perfection (II-II. 186 a 2 ad 2), must positively tend towards the higher degrees (St Thomas in Heb. 6, 1) and must want to do the more perfect actions (St Thomas in Matt. 19, 12).² By a strange paradox, the organic nature of the Mystical Body, though it deprives many of the ability to practise the counsels, ensures to them the help to acquire their spirit. All the members of that Body serve one another, the higher the lower as well as the lower the higher. The poor and chaste and obedient help the millions who are co-members of the Body with them to attain the spirit of poverty and chastity and obedience.

² Lemmonyer, O.P., *Somme Théologique, La Vie Humaine*, Edition de la Revue des Jeunes, pp. 550 sqq.