

PRACTICAL REFLECTIONS ON GRACE

DIVINE grace may be regarded: firstly, as the primordial vocation of man to the supernatural order; secondly, as a gift habitually dwelling in the justified soul; thirdly, as an actual and indispensable help from above.

(I)

The practical importance of the doctrine of the primordial vocation of mankind to the supernatural order is unlimited. In it we shall find unending motives for admiration and adoration. It is said of St. Augustine that, after his conversion, he could never fully satisfy his desire to contemplate the divine plan for the salvation of the human race—that is to say, the idea of the Incarnation; and yet, in truth, the Incarnation is, as far as we can judge of such a mystery, only the remedy to the check which the fall of man gave to an antecedent plan. Let us go back further than the Gospel and put ourselves face to face with that incomprehensible love of God for his creature, which destined us from all eternity to the participation of His essential and infinite Beatitude: for that is exactly what we mean by our vocation to the supernatural order. *“We shall be like unto Him, and see Him as He is, face to face.”* This is indeed a great mystery, since, as St. Thomas teaches, God loves nothing in us that He has not first caused in us. In the natural order, His providence inclines Him towards the needs of that degree of being that He, as Creator, has imparted to us. In the supernatural order, His loving charity inclines Him towards the requirements of our previous vocation to the supernatural life. *“Voluntas hominis movetur ex bono praeexistente in rebus; . . . bonum creaturae provenit ex voluntate divina . . .”*

The love of God is ever gratuitous, and, for that very reason, ever incomprehensible. To this principle, we have to refer all the mysteries of Faith—in their attractive as well

BLACKFRIARS

as in their terrifying aspects—and this not in order to explain them, but even to be able to hold to their adorable complexity of light and shade. The mystery of individual predestination, for instance, which includes prospects both astonishingly touching and terrible, is said to be consequent on the supreme independence of the First Cause. What does this mean, but the absolute gratuitousness of the Love of God? When referred to this principle, the darkness of the *mysteries of faith is simply adorable; it makes us lose ourselves in the incomprehensible goodness of God:*

“O how far removed, predestination! is thy root from such as see not the First Cause entire! . . . ” (Parad. xx, 130.)

“Such scantiness of knowledge our delight; for all our good is, in that primal good, concentrate; and God’s will and ours are one.” (136.)

This great doctrine of the elevation of mankind to the supernatural order should be a frequent subject of our meditation; it should never be shunned as a danger.

The practical utility of this doctrine is shewn also in the fact that it is hardly possible to understand the literal meaning of many texts of the Gospel, and certainly impossible to enter into their inner meaning, unless the distinction between the natural and supernatural is kept well in view. When our Lord tells us that to know Him is Life Eternal, that no one cometh to the Father but by Him, and none to Him unless drawn by the Father; when He exacts from his followers such great renunciations; when He curses the spirit of the world; when He unceasingly speaks of Light, and yet without casting the faintest light on natural science; when He promises happiness at the cost of persecution and sacrifice; finally, when we see that, since His time, the Church and the influence of the Gospel have done so little to change the natural order of things, then we begin to grasp the meaning of a supreme Life, which is not only an addition to the present life, but absolutely transcends it, as it transcends all our human hopes and aspirations. If we deprive all these ideas of the light cast on them by the notion of the super-

natural, they lose their force, and almost cease to be in accordance with the initial mystery of the Incarnation. Unless the supernatural rule of interpretation is admitted, the writings of St. Paul are those of a madman.

Moreover, the notion of the supernatural order is indispensable to any real attempt to understand that violation of order implied in the fall of the angels; to a due appreciation of the mysterious disorder of creation itself "*which groaneth and travaileth, until the time of its redemption*"; and finally to a due appreciation of the disorder of our own nature, so deeply divided against itself. Nor can we realize our true position before God, without some comparative notion of the different states, real or possible, of mankind: the state of pure nature; the state of original justice, the state of fallen nature, the state of redeemed nature—which all refer to the fundamental concept of the supernatural order.

The revelation of our vocation to participate in Eternal Life constitutes the most striking characteristic of the Gospel, and its unparalleled greatness. This doctrine is in itself an apologia. It is the highest of all the glories of the Church. It is the finest of the jewels with which the cappa of St. Thomas was seen studded: *Ex monili fulgoris caelici, lux emissa mundo diffunditur*. Clearly this is one of the main objects of our teaching and preaching office, one of the main forces of our apostolate. Its power on all men, learned and unlearned, is inexhaustible—when the teacher is fully convinced of its reality, of its beauty, of its importance. It is a joy to remember how Père Lacordaire penetrated into the supernatural idea at a time when the supernatural aspect of Christianity was very little recognized. Hence came many blessings on his labours, and it is largely to this he owed his glorious mission as restorer of the Dominican Order.

On the other hand, nothing is safe when grace is confounded with nature. Such confusion results in the negation of grace itself. It is significant that the confused system, which in the present day goes under the name of "immanence," coincides with an error which reduces the sacraments to the level of mere practical rites, and denies their

reality. Reverence and gratitude to God cease when the notion of our supernatural destiny grows feeble and dim.

(II)

The doctrine of divine grace, since it implies a supernatural gift abiding in the justified soul, must have a real practical command over our lives. We should strive to understand what is meant by *sanctifying grace*. It must not be identified with the theological or moral virtues; it is something more, it is a quality by which God imbues the very essence of the soul with something of His own nature. That deep source of our manifold activity is mingled with a divine energy, so that the faculties derived from it ought to produce acts fused into a divine alloy. For this reason it is said that sanctifying grace is in us *as a nature—per modum naturae*—that is, as an inherent and personal principle of action.

Beautifully does St. Thomas express this, when he says that God has to provide His creatures not less in the supernatural than in the natural order, with informing principles of action, so that the creatures may be moved of their own impulse, and not only by occasional fits and starts: "*ut secundum seipsas inclinentur ad actus.*"

Sanctifying grace, being somewhat of a sharing in the Divine Nature, draws with it a special and loving presence in us of the Divine Persons. One can do not more than allude, in passing, to this greatest of all wonders worked in the soul by sanctifying grace. To expound the mystical indwelling of the soul by the Divine Persons would require a long treatise. One can only point out the practical results of a doctrine which reveals to us a fact so utterly beyond our ordinary experience. The ascetical rule of *Recollection* is inspired by, and founded on, the sanctifying presence of the Blessed Trinity in us. Recollection, with us, is no unnatural tension of our powers towards an abstract object, not a violent effort of internal realisation, but simply the consciousness of the loving presence of God in us, which initiates the possession of those realities to be hoped for.

It is the actual and living belief in the words of our Lord: “*If any one love Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and will make Our abode with him*” (John xiv, 23). It is impossible to be convinced of the truth of these words without, at the same time, crying out to God: “*Averte oculos meos ne videant vanitatem*”—which is the very voice of the soul turning from created things to seek the living God within.

The presence of the Divine Persons endows us with the gift of “*Unction*”—a keen and persuasive instinct, which keeps us on the trail of divine grace. It is through spiritual unction, that, as St. Thomas teaches, “those who need to be led by the advice of others, know nevertheless how to direct themselves, *if they have grace in themselves*, because they do not shrink from seeking counsel, and they discern the good from the bad” (IIa. IIae.—Q. 47. art. 14).

Observe the wonderful autonomy of the Christian soul. Observe the dignity and liberty that divine grace preserves in it, in the very moment that it bows to obedience.

If, generally speaking, habit is a second nature, how much more so is that divine quality, engrafted in our very spiritual substance, which we call sanctifying grace!

Consequently, the first thing to observe is that, by being justified, we are utterly and completely renewed. The natural order becomes inadequate to our powers, and we have incessantly to emerge from it. Grace, in this sense, is a sort of creation, according to the words of St. Thomas: “Grace is said to be created, from the fact that men are created anew by it; they are made out of nothing, and without their own merits into new beings.”

The practical question with us, is to prove to ourselves that we have, as a result of this new birth, also new instincts and inclinations. Such are called by St. Paul the “*mind of Christ*,” and, in ordinary language, the supernatural spirit. In view of this we can no longer content ourselves with acting from natural motives; but we ought to accomplish in a new and more perfect manner even indifferent actions

and common duties. We must, without ceasing to be men, cease to be human. Woe to us, if we no longer feel in the depths of our hearts the throbbings of supernatural instincts! Worse still, if we fear to be different from men of the world. It would be a proof that, instead of the living waters springing up unto life everlasting, we contain only stagnant pools, from which even the world would turn away in disgust.

Behold on what real foundations the supernatural spirit is based.

Another thing to be observed is, that grace being rooted in the very substance of our soul, manifests itself not in deceptive emotions of passing devotion and enthusiasm, but in the acts of the noblest faculties of our justified and sanctified souls: reason enlightened by Faith, and will aided by Grace. These are the true organs of the divine life in us; and such acts are the genuine product of our regenerated nature.

It may seem superfluous to insist on the necessity of acting from reason enlightened by Faith and from will aided by Grace; yet, there are few, whose inner life proceeds habitually from the depths of their souls. There are many, on the contrary, who not only neglect and ignore the supernatural powers which come from abiding grace and which strengthen with new energy our natural faculties, but who seem also to ignore and neglect even those chief organs of rational life, intelligence and will. We cannot expect acts proceeding from feeling and imagination to be fruitful of substantial results. You often hear, nowadays, from certain dabblers in theology, that we must go to God with our whole soul; which saying, under cover of open-mindedness, minimizes the part which the intellect has to play in our adherence to God. Ethical sensitiveness is regarded, nowadays, as the best conductor of divine light. Let us note that going to God with one's whole soul firstly and mainly implies an act of intelligence and will; all the so-called intuitions of the heart are not worth one good act of reason and will. Here you have an exact illustration of the result of confused

notions about supernatural principles. It is all too true that we are tending to a Christianity made up of sentiment; devotion is taking the place of faith and virtue, not to say of duty, whereas it should be its outcome.

We must persuade ourselves that it matters very little, after all, if the spiritual life is interesting or not, if prayer is sweet or arid, if virtue is easy or difficult. The one thing necessary is that all our activity should come from our very soul, and return to it. All true virtue originates from reason and will. In the Christian soul, the virtues are, in fact, the royal escort of sanctifying grace; they have no longer to do with the senses, except that they exact from them service, and they reward that service with the overflow of their own joy.

Look at the high standard of conduct, which is involved in the doctrine of sanctifying grace. We are children no longer: with St. Paul, we must "*put away the things of a child*" and be conscious of manhood renewed in Christ.

(III)

As to the third aspect of the doctrine of grace, we believe not only that divine grace is necessary for all the acts of our Christian life, but also that those very acts, and what in them is most personal and free, receive from God, the *agens principale*, all their formal perfections, their true value. This implies that no good really belongs to us. Yet, *free* we remain; and prayer, though it cannot be made without grace, does not lack the power of obtaining it. This implies that our spiritual life is based not only on fidelity to grace, but on the deep consciousness and the indisputable conviction of our absolute dependence on divine grace. This goes further than the simple belief in the necessity of supernatural charity to make our works meritorious; it goes further than belief in a—let us say—concourse of the divine and human activity; even further than belief in the Sacred Humanity of Our Lord as the meritorious and instrumental cause of all graces. The Thomist doctrine of the continual need and the absolute efficacy of grace confronts us with the all-embracing and all-efficient causality of God; it shows the

BLACKFRIARS

divine causality claiming for itself all action of ours achieved in the supernatural order; as, in the natural order, the divine motion claims for itself all the exercise of our activity. Such a statement does not lead to fatalism, nor to quietism: this is an intelligent and noble doctrine, which refrains from the attempt to explain the liberty of man by limiting the liberty and the power of God; which is fully conscious of the difficulties that may arise from its principles, but holds nevertheless that principles ought not to be sacrificed to objections, strong though the latter may be. This is the doctrine of men such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Bossuet, who were by no means fakirs or idlers. On the contrary, these men felt that never were they so much masters of themselves, and never did they use their energy so generously, as when they gave to God the homage of all their human activity. Moreover, what do we do, when we try to bring souls to God, to conform them to the spirit of the Gospel, what, but convince them of their own nothingness, and that without God they can do no good thing? Do we not begin by teaching them that all that belongs to them is deficiency and sin, and that they absolutely depend on prayer and help from above? Until we have led these souls to say to God, in sincerity and truth: "*As the eyes of the servant are on her mistress, so have we waited on the Lord until He has pity upon us,*" we can hardly admit that they have so much as taken the first step in the spiritual life. What is this, but to enter practically into the doctrine of all-efficient grace?

Not only does this doctrine imply the preparatory virtues of humility, self-distrust and obedience, but also it guides up towards the end of the spiritual life, which is perfection, wisdom and union with God. The most precious fruit of experience that ripens in us as the years go by is the conviction that it was not we who directed our steps on the path of life, but God who worked everything in us of His own good pleasure; and that we, by our self-will and self-agitation, marred the divine work.

HUMBERT CLERISSAC, O.P.