

THE LIFE OF GRACE: I

BY

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THE author of the article on Mysticism in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* bases his study on the idea of the experimental knowledge of God. It is an idea that anyone wanting to treat the problem by the inductive and psychological method would be bound to arrive at. The theologian tries to confine this field of enquiry within concepts and laws, and he will define mysticism as the predominant influence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost in a Christian life. This is the standpoint we must take up if we want to discover St Thomas's attitude, and in the end our problem will amount to this: what place have the theology and the activity of the gifts of the Holy Ghost in the organism of the life of grace? Both, in fact, depend on those attributes that enrich and transform human nature, attributes called, in a word, the supernatural life.

The supernatural life has been justly called our divine life. The riches, and especially the deep ontological reality contained in supernatural life are indeed summed up in the statement that under supernatural influence Christians are made to share in the divine nature. People often think that this is a pious metaphor, but Christian wisdom has always read the famous passage of St Peter's second epistle about 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1, 4) as an expression of realities attaining the very substance of our being. Our supernatural life is entirely a life of grace. And what is grace? Grace is not a condition of supernatural life, it is the principle of it, just as human nature is the principle of human life. Since it is connatural to us and really ours, it makes of us beings with a supernatural aim. And as from human nature are deduced the end and the means, which are the goal and rule of the activity of human life, so from the nature of grace will flow the form and laws of supernatural life. They will be discovered by faith, developed as theology, starting from the idea given it by revelation that grace is a sharing in God's own nature.

The very roots of our being are transformed by God's action in us; it is not just a matter of acts being inspired by God or even of powers of the soul being bathed by him in a special influence. In question 110 of the *Prima Secundae*, St Thomas tries to find out exactly what is implied by the idea of sharing in the divine nature and in the fourth article he concludes that grace informs even the

essence of the soul: 'For as man in his intellectual power participates in the divine knowledge through the virtue of faith, and in his power of will participates in the divine love through the virtue of charity, so also in the nature of the soul does he participate in the divine nature, after the manner of a likeness, through a certain regeneration or recreation.'

In spite of its divine character, grace remains something created, something superadded. If we have to react against a conception of grace as a purely accidental thing, we must all the same insist that the subject of grace is still man and that, according to the great Thomist principle, grace lifts nature up but does not destroy it. Besides lifting up and preserving, it adapts itself to human nature and even takes on the exact shape of it. Hence the pattern according to which the subject is established in a state of grace will bear constant comparison with that of the same subject considered in his human nature. Because it is a created thing, grace needs power to work through. These are, first, the theological virtues, which enable it to bring into use the life it has simply as grace, a life which is a participation in the life of the divine nature. The gifts fall into place in the same organism. The part they play needs studying in greater detail, particularly for its bearing on the virtues. There is, however, one notion which it is important for us to remember: it is that the supernatural virtues *par excellence*, the theological virtues, must be taken not as mere virtues but literally as organs; their function is wider and deeper than that of the *habitus* we acquire in our natural activity. They act as powers of the supernatural life. Hence, as the understanding and will are at the root of all mental activity (and it is, moreover, on to them that the virtues are grafted, just as grace itself is grafted on to the soul), so will these virtues be found everywhere in supernatural activity and more especially in the activity of the gifts, which cannot be explained without them.

But in what does the supernatural life consist? St Paul has summed it up in a few words in his epistle to the Ephesians (5, 1): 'Be ye therefore followers of God, as most dear children.' That is the law and essence of all our supernatural life. Because we share in the divine life, we have to lead the divine life. The inner life of God is his natural life, and in him his nature is realised to the full. God is a spirit and he leads the life of a spirit; therefore he knows and loves, since these are the operations in which the life of a spirit dwells. The object of this activity is God himself. The outer life of God is the activity he displays in creating and in preserving his creation in its due order. It comes from his inner life by which he

knows in himself the possibilities he has of creating and by a free act loves them enough to want to realise them. They are thus created under the influence of his attributes or perfections, are a 'magnificent though yet unfinished revelation, one for us of mingled light and shade, but, we may be bold to say, a revelation of his divine morality'.¹

This is not the place for a full development of this doctrine: the scope of this is limited to the cognitive elements integrating our supernatural life. It is evident from the brief outline sketched above that the culmination of our divine life occurs precisely in the attainment of the divine object by our spiritual faculties, that is by knowledge moved by love and drawing love after it. The object of our contemplation is above all the divine nature in God himself. Now it is impossible for us to grasp the divine nature in this way as long as we are in this world. God must adapt himself to our weakness by giving himself to us in revelation, which faith must accept and assimilate, and there it will really meet God.

We see, then, that man's divine life will depend on the modes in which the theological virtues act in him. And here we must remember that because this supernatural life is a gift from God, it requires ceaseless action by God himself in all its being and moving, an action which is more than mere conservation of the natures of things. It is profoundly true that by his grace, which makes us know and love him, God dwells in the souls of the just as in a temple, in a very special and intimate way. (Cf. I, 43, 3, c.) If, as cause of every creature, God is indeed in them all by essence, power and presence, in spiritual creatures there is yet another presence, which enables it to be said that 'God is as the object known in the knower and the beloved in the lover'.

If, then, the part played in our new life by the theological virtues is precisely that of the faculties of knowing and loving, the practice of these virtues is essential to the unfolding of our divine life, especially at its highest point, which is the knowledge of God as he is in himself. In fact, the only difference between the state of the blessed in heaven and that of a soul in the state of grace comes from the condition they are in—for the blessed, the veils will have fallen. And this enables St Thomas to write: 'The good of grace in one is greater than the good of nature in the whole universe.' (I-II, 113, 9, ad 2.) Christian contemplation, or, to use a more general term, all the supernatural knowledge of the Christian, is thus only a sort of rehearsal for the beatific vision or a foretaste

¹ Lemonnyer: *Notre vie divine*, p. 40.

of it. Throughout the entire field it covers, a field represented in this world by the immensity of the domain of faith, we can speak with the *Prima Pars* (1, 3 ad 2) of the 'stamp of the divine science'.

But how and with what does the Christian develop his knowledge in this world? As I have already said, it is with and by the theological virtues: by faith, which is the one to which knowledge properly belongs. St Paul tells us the characteristics of this state when he speaks of seeing 'through a glass in a dark manner' (1 Cor. 13, 12) and of the 'substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not' (Heb. 9, 1). The knowledge of faith rests on God and leads to God, and to it can be attributed that union of the object known with the knower which ensures the presence of the one within the other; yet it is not 'seeing', it is 'believing'. It does not accept its object because that object is evident, it takes it on the authority of the Master. In any case things could not be otherwise in this world; the state of union with the body, such as it is on earth, and especially the mind's dependence on images, make an immediate vision of the divine essence radically impossible. To explain the vision of God granted to Moses and St Paul one has to go so far as to admit a temporary suspension of the functioning of their entire sense-apparatus. (Cf. II-II, 185, 5.) 'Whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not.' (2 Cor. 12, 3.)

The object of faith is thus a witness, the witness God bears to himself. In its presentation and formulation this witness too takes on the human mode, the mode of our nature. And not only does it find expression in our language and adapt itself to the forms of our thinking so that the knowledge we gain of it becomes expressed in judgments (II-II, 5, 2), but the expression it takes on is not the highest or most scientific possible. As every Christian knows, the language of the Bible does not possess the precision of a work of Aristotle, and if it reaches the sublime by its form, the excellence it thus achieves is to be set down more often as poetry than as metaphysics. Finally, the expression of revelation is moulded by individual facts, by history, above all by the history of him who is the Man *par excellence*, Christ. Now, outwardly, Christ spoke to Jews of the first century of our era and spoke their language. 'For God provides for everything', says St Thomas, 'according to the capacity of its nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects. . . .' And still more: 'It is befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons—"To the wise and to the unwise I am a debtor" (Rom. 1, 14)—that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple

who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it.' (I, 1, 9; cf. ad 3.)

The terms of the message are explained, then, by its universal applicability. And the terms do not matter so much. The prophet sees through the veil and reaches the reality behind it; we ought all of us to learn from him and do likewise. The simplicity of the exposition will be all the more precious to us as a stimulus to going with all our strength towards the reality itself. (*loc. cit.*, ad 2, ad 3.) We begin to touch the heart of the matter. As we have said, the culmination of the Christian life will be found in the knowledge of God. The starting-point of this knowledge is faith, and faith is so essential to the state we are in as wayfarers, *viatores*, that nothing will escape the field it covers. Further, as we have seen, faith is presented to us in a form suited to our nature and our mode of knowing: in the concepts and judgments contained in revelation. But it is also true that our knowledge relies for its certitude here on the truth of God himself, and the assent it makes through the veils bears on God himself. Thus a dualism can be found at the heart of faith—which explains why at the level of supernature our state in this world is one of violence or, alternatively, is a seed incapable of full flowering, an undertaking that cannot reach its goal, a 'certain beginning of hoped-for happiness'. (II-II, 5, 1.) This dualism works throughout the supernatural life: we possess and do not possess; the object we are grasping will suffer no imperfect possession and yet our possession of it is imperfect.

From this dualism St Thomas concludes to the necessity of the existence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost in us.

He explains that in the natural order we have full and perfect possession of our faculties and for that reason can of our own accord bring them into play effectively enough to attain our natural end. But a being with an imperfect form or one that has only partial participation in a given nature will be able to use that form or nature only with the help of a more accomplished being. Thus a medical student will know a certain amount about a doctor's job, but his knowledge is still imperfect and he needs the professor's helping hand and watchful eye. Now the theological virtues do not inform the reason fully and completely; they are as yet only imperfect possessions. Therefore, side by side with the use made of them by the reason on its own, there must be an intervention by God himself, moving them more directly. This intervention is the 'instinct of the Holy Ghost'. The gifts are dispositions for being moved in these new ways belonging to the divine order, for in a perfect organisation the thing capable of motion must be propor-

tionate to the motion of the thing that makes it move. (Cf. I-II, 68, 1 and 2.)

There are, then, two capital points. Grace follows the shape of our nature, and faith, in particular, the shape of our understanding. And we have to live by grace and use the knowledge of faith in a mode in conformity with our nature. This mode, however, cannot be equal to the task; hence God must intervene directly by specially moving us. There is a whole scale of such interventions, and the dispositions corresponding to it are the seven gifts. The more progress the soul makes, the more frequently should it be moved in this way. It is with such motion that the mystical life begins.

The mystical life is not the inner life and it is not the life of prayer either; it begins with supernatural passivity, which consists of the reception of motion in the soul from the Holy Ghost, outside the usual order and by means of the gifts. The theological virtues still operate in the gifts, as the gifts are not complete principles but simply sources of modification of the activity of the virtues. And the essence of this life dwells in the highest point of our supernatural life, mental prayer, which at this stage is called mystical prayer.

The mainspring of the contemplative life from the beginning is charity, because if the understanding is to be moved to go out to the truth and let itself be informed by it, the will must intervene, moved either by desire for contemplation itself or by love of the object to be contemplated. (III. Sent. d. 35, q. 1, art. 2, sol. 1.) When contemplation is quickened by love, by charity, its object is God as he is in himself, therefore God accessible to the 'wayfarer' by the light of revelation, the God of faith. The virtue of faith makes us believe and in that way brings about the union of knower and known, union between us and God; it enables us to see the meaning of God's word and by a sort of connaturality distinguish to a certain extent what is to be believed and what is not. Faith's movement of assent in contemplation is dictated, reinforced and sustained by charity. By the delight derived from the act of contemplating, charity sustains the application of the mind, but above all, 'he that abideth in charity abideth in God, and God in him'. (1 John, 4, 16.) For by knowledge the beloved is indeed in the lover, who is continually thinking of the beloved, and the lover is in the beloved, with whom he wants union in the depths of his own being. Thus the understanding acquires an experience of its object and is perfected by that experience. And similarly, through the affective power, the beloved is in the lover, and the lover either rejoices in the presence of the beloved or aspires towards him. The person loving is in the person loved, because he identifies himself with him

and wants to possess and enjoy him completely or share his joys and sorrows. Such is the teaching of the *Prima Secundae* (28, 2): 'Whether mutual indwelling is an effect of love?'—a passage which seems more characteristic of a sermon of St Bernard than of the *Summa Theologica*.

The contemplative life always works according to the foregoing plan and there is no instance in which the gifts of the Holy Ghost do not come into it, even if only very slightly. But there comes a time when God takes the initiative in the soul to a much greater extent. This need not necessarily occur late in the history of the soul, though normal growth will require some purification at least and a longer or shorter stay in the human mode of action. The prayer of simplicity will be reached, and Père de la Taille has dwelt on the difficulty there is in settling the boundaries of that. For favourable circumstances, a happy temperament and a well-tried piety² can bring the prayer common to all Christians very near to that special grace that will sweep the will into cleaving to God independently of the senses and imagination, under the attraction of a secret vague taste which is purely and simply God or his will. This is the point where mystical knowledge begins. It is characterised by an experimental knowledge of God, which is due entirely to the persistent force of attraction exercised by God.

What is the theological interpretation of this experience? Because charity goes out directly to its object and can love it perfectly without knowing it perfectly, it provides a means of knowing God by connaturality. It reaches the God really present in us, the God known as gift and friend, the God of its own life. Charity becomes the objective means, *objectum quo*, by which we experience not only our love for God but God himself. It could be said that under the influence of the gifts, the subject has become conscious of his charity and that in this way it gives him God. Moreover, this supreme degree of contemplation could not now be practised by the activity of our human powers even if they were supernaturalised; it is precisely the work of the gifts to dispose us to receive that motion from God which proceeds from the close union brought about by charity.

Let us see what St Thomas has to say about it: 'The mind of man is not moved by the Holy Ghost, unless in some way it be united to him: even as the instrument is not moved by the craftsman unless there be contact or some other kind of union between them. Now the primal union of man with God is by faith, hope and

² La Taille: *Théories mystiques*, in *Recherches de science religieuse*, 1930, p. 296

charity: and, consequently, these virtues are pre-supposed to the gifts, as being their roots. Therefore all the gifts correspond to these three virtues, as being derived therefrom.' (I-II, 68, 4, ad 3.) Speaking of the supreme gift, the gift of wisdom, he tells us its cause. This kind of wisdom judges of things not 'after reason has made its enquiry', as the intellectual virtue of wisdom does, but by a certain connaturality. 'Now this sympathy or connaturality for divine things is the result of charity, which unites us to God, according to 1 Cor. 6, 17: "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit." Consequently wisdom, which is a gift, has its cause in the will, which cause is charity, but it has its essence in the intellect, whose act is to judge aright.' (II-II, 45, 2.)

There may perhaps be nothing in the technical formulation to suggest that this teaching contains the density, ardour and enthusiasm found in the witness of the mystics, and yet this is the place where all that belongs. The reluctant will perhaps be reassured by the doctrine because it makes such ample room for charity. However, it remains true that it is at these heights that the soul has its most direct encounters with God. It is abundantly clear that everything turns on the invitation God gives to the soul, and that in this world the great moving force of the entire mystical life is not so much a knowledge which can never perfectly hold God as charity, which goes out directly to the divine reality and 'reaches God as he is in himself'. (II-II, 23, 6.) Of course, at its highest point the mystical life will consist of acts of the intellectual gifts, and the operation of these will still be essentially cognitive. But because the essential action takes place in a field where God operates according to the mode proper to him, we can see that not much previous knowledge according to the human mode is required to bring the soul to that dividing-line where God will take a new possession of it. The early Christians were thus in no way unjustified in congratulating themselves on despising the wisdom of this world in order to speak the wisdom of God. And all the history of sanctity is there to prove that the knowledge called divine wisdom presupposes not the knowledge of the intellectual virtue of wisdom but only the knowledge of revelation, for that will enable us to cleave to the First Truth and thus set in motion all the activity of a life of grace.