

THE GREATEST OF THESE

'Men may be evil in many ways, but good in one alone.' So wrote wisely the unknown poet whom Aristotle quotes in the *Ethics*,¹ and he wrote with deeper significance than he could have known. To be 'good' is, properly understood, to be on the way to the attainment of that essential perfecting which human nature of itself craves and must seek, and even mere reason can show that this perfection is to be found only in the attainment of the Universal Good, which can be none other than God, for God Who is the First Cause must needs be therefore the Final End. This much may be known by reason; but from a source of knowledge infinitely surpassing reason in profundity and certainty comes the revelation of a human destiny which a finite mind could not otherwise know nor finite power hope to attain to. The First Cause and Universal Good has revealed Himself as the Father and Friend of man. He has revealed man's elevation from the natural order to the supernatural wherein it is possible for him to become the friend of God and to attain to a perfection such as 'eye hath not seen nor ear heard.' Once raised to this supernatural possibility, man can find no peace, no happiness until he attains to that perfection. 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart rests not until it rests in Thee.'²

The faculties which a man has and the only means of operation open to him (and therefore the only means he has of reaching the perfection which his nature craves) have not, in their natural state, the necessary power of supernatural operation. This is added by the virtues

¹ ἔσθλοὶ μὲν γὰρ ἀπλῶς, παντοδαπῶς δὲ κακοί. (*Nich. Eth.* II, 6).

² St. Augustine, *Confess.* I, 1.

which God infuses into them, amongst which Charity holds the primacy of honour and command. For Charity gives to the will the power to desire, to love and to seek union with God on terms of friendship, and as the will moves and controls the other faculties, so does Charity move and control the other virtues. Its importance, therefore, cannot be over-rated. 'Because Charity has for its objective the ultimate end of human life, namely eternal beatitude,' says St. Thomas,³ 'therefore its influence is extended to the actions of the whole of human life by way of command.'

It is quite clear, then, that an analysis of Charity, in itself and in its implications, is of prime necessity to any who would engage seriously upon the search for happiness, which is the search for the eternal friendship of God. Neither the profundity of thought nor the breadth of vision which such an analysis might be expected to include need prove an obstacle to the intelligent enquirer, providing he can find a guide who speaks a language he may be expected to understand. Such a guide has declared himself recently in the person of Dom Aelred Graham, O.S.B., through the medium of his volume entitled *The Love of God*.⁴ Being trained in the Thomist school of theology, Dom Aelred shows in a marked degree the influence of his close acquaintance with both the thought and the method of St. Thomas, not least of all in the clarity and simplicity with which he has been able to set down the results of his analysis of Charity, without avoiding the profundities or the problems which some might wrongly judge to be only the concern of the professional theologian. For Dom Aelred does not write merely for the theologian, nor does

³ *Sum. Theol.* II-II, xxiii, 4 ad 2m.

⁴ Published by Longmans, Green; pp. 252 + xix; 7/6. But it would probably have been more satisfactory to the majority of his readers if Dom Aelred had given an English rendering of the Latin quotations which appear sufficiently frequently in his text.

he offer a technical theological treatise; he aims rather to cover the whole of his subject adequately for the thoughtful and intelligent layman. In effect he has produced one of the most important books of spirituality which has appeared in recent years.

It would be a tragedy to regard the 'spiritual life' as the privilege or peculiarity of the chosen few. The spiritual life is simply human life lived wisely, the life of one who hastens and battles his way through time, as all men must, but runs not as at an uncertainty and fights not as one beating the air, with the knowledge that comes of Faith, the confidence that comes of Hope and, above all, the inspiration and the power that comes from Charity. Such wisdom is not attained without some effort of understanding the hidden things of God, for 'God revealed His secrets in order that they might in some measure be understood, and condescended to the mentality of those who were to receive His revelation,' to quote Dom Aelred.⁵ 'Nevertheless,' he goes on, 'it was clearly in accordance with His will that the inner content of that revelation should be brought to light in terms other than those in which it was first set down and its objective validity for the whole world made clear . . . Accordingly we should be false to the traditional Christian method, and courting failure in advance, were we to attempt a discussion of our subject without reference to the hard-won philosophical concepts in which a universal religion must necessarily express itself.' Yet, on the other hand, to think of God, an indispensable preliminary to our approaching Him in love, 'requires no intellectual technique. The philosophy of the Church is not an esoteric doctrine; it is nothing more formidable than exalted common-sense and requires for its understanding only patience and mental simplicity.'

Dom Aelred does not hesitate, therefore, to embark at once upon a brief but illuminating enquiry into the nature

⁵ *The Love of God*, pp. 4, 5.

of 'the One Who is loved,' summarising the opening questions of the *Sunma Theologica* in a sequence of considerations which, 'despite their abstruseness, cannot be too much dwelt upon.' 'Things spiritual and intangible leave us unmoved,' he wisely observes,⁶ 'only because we do not give them sufficient thought.' Whereupon he invites to thought by exemplifying in a practical way the shadowy quality of finite excellence as compared with its prototype in God. It is, indeed, the author's easy and frequent transition back and forth between the abstruse and the concrete, always in the same simplicity and dignity of style, that will hold fast even the less disciplined mind.

Vitally important as it is to know 'the One Who is loved,' it is no less important, from another angle, to have a full and balanced view of 'the one who loves'; and to secure the latter knowledge, no less than the former, no surer guide than St. Thomas could be found. Following him we must lay down two fundamental theses, as Dom Aelred does, the first that man's nature is a composite essentially including both matter and spirit, body and soul; the second that grace does not destroy or essentially change nature, but perfects it in its entirety. With regard to the first thesis, Dom Aelred has many valuable observations to make. 'A moment's reflection will make clear that any study of man's nature which concentrates on one of these aspects to the prejudice or complete exclusion of the other will lead to conclusions that are false and one-sided. To over-emphasize the formal element, our essential spirituality, is the more pardonable error and indicates a deeper insight, but it is an error nevertheless . . . In Christian times the habit of certain ascetical writers of legislating for man as if he were a disembodied spirit exemplifies the same tendency. Not least among the services rendered to the Church by St. Thomas was his correction of all this. By reinstating Aristotle and Christianizing his teaching on

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

prudence he was able to lay down moral principles which could harmonize the most uncompromising pursuit of perfection with the conditions of life as we know it. It is, however, the opposite error to the one just indicated which dominates our modern ways of thought . . . Be it noted that we are not concerned to deny . . . that much light has been thrown on human behaviour by modern psycho-analysis and experimental psychology. What is here deplored is the appeal to an empiricism of this kind for an answer to the ultimate questions about our nature and activities. To do so is not only to be profoundly unphilosophical, but to flout common-sense. The last word on any human problem rests with the philosopher—not to say the theologian—rather than with the psychologist. We shall learn immeasurably more about ourselves, our needs and aspirations, from the pages of Aristotle's *Ethics* than from the writings of Sigmund Freud.'⁷

It is with no little sense of satisfaction and relief that one finds set forth in this admirable volume a sane and balanced resumé of St. Thomas's psychology and ethics of the normal man. Without doubt the measured credit which the author allows to the results of modern empirical psychology is rightly allowed, but it must be recognised that the latter has become almost entirely a science of the abnormal, if such a contradiction in terms be permitted, at any rate amongst the more materialist and fanatical extremists. It is true, as Dom Aelred remarks, that 'practical good sense is a fairly adequate safeguard against the aberrations of the extremists,' but 'unfortunately the press and modern methods of propaganda have given to these researches a publicity out of all proportion to their value. As a result, what is at best a branch of the science of medicine is in danger of attaining to the status of a philosophy.'⁸ Not enough allowance is made either for the lasting results

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 19, 20.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

of Original Sin or for the dominating power of free-will, still less for the pervading force of supernatural grace and virtue.

This much can readily be conceded to modern empirical psychology, namely that man is dominated by desire (surely no new discovery, but known since man first began); what cannot be allowed is that this desire is at best a sublimation of an animal 'libido.' On the contrary, it is essentially a desire for God, however little it be recognised explicitly as such by many individuals and however foully it be abused in some; and 'the will, the source of every desire, can never desert its first love, which draws it in secret before consciousness wakens it to lesser though inevitable claims. By a seeming paradox the best assurance of our own good will is to have at least some faint awareness of the divine discontent, the heart's ill-ease at finding nothing that can satisfy a longing for it knows not what.'⁹ But once let the human will find some object even apparently worthy of its love, and it becomes infused with a force that is all-absorbing and dominant. The more nearly this object approximates to the Supreme Good, to God Who is the only adequate fulfilment of the will's longing, the more exalted and the more selfless will this love become, for, as St. Thomas maintains, by our very nature we tend to love God more than ourselves, even though this natural tendency fails in practical effectiveness owing to the weakness we inherit from Original Sin.

In practice this natural desire for God is important only as being the basis in nature for the infinitely greater supernatural desire into which it is transformed by grace. The question of the ontological content of the natural desire for God is so intricate and at the same time so speculative that we were at first inclined to think Dom Aelred would have been advised to omit the discussion of it in a treatise that neither allows nor calls for the detailed examination

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

it properly demands. Yet even in this he remains true to the Thomism of his adoption and at least shows how in this essential element of the supernatural life, as in all others, grace is the perfecting of nature, for 'Charity includes all that is implied by the natural love of God and immeasurably more.'¹⁰ Moreover, from the point of view of man, as well as of God, Charity is a very personal and intimate quality, an intrinsic reality which can stir a man, as it stirs the saints and mystics, to the inmost depth of the soul. Without it there can be no other true virtue, and where there is no virtue there is no human life worthy of the name. Conversely, given Charity there is not an element in human nature nor an aspect of human life that is not influenced and supernaturalized by it and made an effective instrument of a man's love of God upon a level of divine friendship. 'If the approach to God demands a withdrawal from creatures, including even ourselves, it is only to find that these lesser things are restored to us in Him. Nothing noble or of good report has to be finally abandoned for charity's sake.'¹¹

It is quite clear, therefore, that the implication of Charity in practice will be very widespread, covering every angle not only of the spiritual but also of the natural life (if, indeed, the distinction is a valid one). Dom Aelred has wisely devoted the major portion of his book to a consideration of these implications, and it is a tribute to his power of synthesis as well as analysis that he has succeeded in his endeavour to give a bird's-eye view of the Christian life that is sufficiently inclusive without lacking the detail necessary for intelligent appreciation. Under the general headings of 'Knowledge,' 'Drawing near to God,' and 'Unworldliness' he encompasses the conditions of divine love; and in each section there will be found deep thought combined with practical common sense. Inadequate as quota-

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

tion must inevitably be, one cannot refrain from reproducing such wisdom as the following: 'This essentially non-philosophic character of science is the explanation why a specialized attention to it can have so baneful an influence on the general mental development . . . Bookishness should be encouraged only in those who have a taste for it—and even then with no exaggerated emphasis on its importance; for others it is the highroad to intellectual bankruptcy . . . By attempting to place education in its natural setting and informing it with the light of divine truth we shall provide an antidote to that learned levity and moral irresponsibility which are the ever-recurring blight of a humanism broken loose from first principles . . . When millions are trained to the belief that wireless telegraphy and the aeroplane are the high-water mark of human achievement it is not to be expected that they will contemplate life with any sense of proportion, or indeed that they will contemplate it at all . . . Charity is interpreted as a mere serving of tables, a succession of 'good turns,' instead of being recognised as a vital tendency implanted in the secret depths of the spirit by which it moves, in the light of faith, upwards towards God in passionate longing and outward upon our neighbour in unceasing good will and enlightened activity . . . Mr. Huxley lacks the geniality of St. Thomas, who could reconcile legitimate fear and even righteous anger with charity and non-attachment . . . Eight hours' sleep and three square meals a day are adequate safeguards of comfortable living, but it may be questioned whether the Kingdom of Heaven suffers any violence by such a régime.'

Such quotations as these—and they are taken almost at random—give some idea of Dom Aelred's approach to the implications of Charity. In the third part of his treatise, where he deals with the expressions of the love of God in Prayer, Self-abnegation, and Action, and in the final part, where he considers the effects of Charity in terms of the presence of God in the soul, of union with God and

the development within us of the 'mind of Christ,' there is the same deep wisdom combined with an understanding of practical human difficulties, dangers and needs, which amply justifies our earlier assertion that this veritable epitome of the *Summa Theologica* is one of the most important books of spirituality that has appeared in recent years. Writing of divine love, he must necessarily write of an ideal, but, especially as he expounds it, it is an ideal that 'ordinary' Christians can and ought to aim at. Interpreted in terms of the Incarnation, as it should be, Charity loses nothing of its sublimity and yet is translated into very human and understandable words by the Word of God Himself; and not only is it understandable, but it is also eminently practical. Undoubtedly it is more important to *do the truth in charity* than merely to know the truth about charity. Yet it is essential that we should first know, and there is a way of knowledge that is an encouragement to corresponding action; this way to the knowledge of practical friendship with God Dom Aelred has done much to establish.

HILARY J. CARPENTER, O.P.