

Life of the Spirit

Vol. I

FEBRUARY 1947

No. 8

COMPANIONSHIP WITH GOD IN DIVINE SOLITUDE

BY

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*God not only loves his creatures as a craftsman does his work, but also by a kind of social friendship, as a friend does a friend, inasmuch as he attracts them into the society of his own enjoyment. This he does that their glory and blessedness may be that which is his.*¹



SAINT THOMAS is here speaking of the amicable society between God, Three in One, and the soul endowed with grace, which finds its full enjoyment in the communion of saints to which God's love attracts. This companionship in holiness is entirely suited to man's social nature, though it transcends the powers of nature, and every human hope and aspiration. According to St John, those who see God have eternal life.—'This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God'. (Jn. 17, 3.)²

In spite of this, Christians frequently do not live up to the ideals of their Master. The antidote for such human weakness cannot be to water down those very ideals so as to make them more acceptable to unbelieving critics. It is rather for them to learn that it is no part of the Church's mission to be engaged in the construction of an earthly paradise of peace and plenty. The kingdom of Christ is not of this world.

The soul's supernatural life is sanctifying grace. This divine enrichment bestowed out of God's bounty places a man in another world. Christ's Spirit of adoption, which he has received with this 'newness of life', admits him into the inner circle of God's household. The new life of the spirit is to be worked out within the social framework of the Church, after the manner in which that same life in its plenitude is lived by the saints. They are in close communion and fellowship with each other, by reason of the total concentration and absorption of their thought and love in God, their Common Good shared by each, and their *Summum Bonum*.

Lex intra mensuram est: ultra mensuram Gratia. 'The Law is within measure, Grace is beyond measure'. (St Ambrose, *Expositio*

¹ St Thomas in 2 *Sent.* d. 26, p. 1, a. 1, ad 2.

² cfr. St Thomas, *Summa*, Ia, 10, iii.

supra Lucam. Lib. vii; c. xi, v. 33.) The life of grace is a measureless life precisely because it is eternal and a prelude to the life of glory. 'This is the will of my Father that sent me: that every one who seeth the Son, and believeth in him, may have everlasting life'. (Jn. 6, 47.) Of this life St Peter speaks: 'He hath given us most great and precious promises: that by them you may be made partakers of the divine nature'. (II Peter i, 4.) In the thought of St Paul, the 'newness of life' is an adopted sonship making us 'conformable to the image of his Son' (Rom. 8, 29), who himself is by his divine nature the image of the Father. Not otherwise than through incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church, do we become in Christ and, through him, sharers by way of similitude in the divine nature. The Christian soul is given power to enter into the divine inheritance and to share in God's riches, by being caught up into the divine activities of knowledge and love made most intimate by the personal indwelling of the Blessed Trinity as in a tabernacle. In this we see the fulfilment of our Lord's words, '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 14, 23).

'The elect are truly of the family of God: in heaven they are gathered into the life-stream of the Holy Trinity who dwells in them. The Father in them generates the Word, the Father and the Son exhale within them the Spirit of Love. Charity gives them a likeness to the Holy Spirit, the beatific vision assimilates them to the Word, who transforms them into the likeness of the Father of whom he is the image. In each one of them the Blessed Trinity known and loved dwells as in a living shrine, and still more are they in the Blessed Trinity, at that peak of Being, Thought and Love'.³

The Christian life then is essentially a life of the Spirit. Not indeed as though a man should live as a disembodied soul—his body-soul composition makes impossible such an attempt—but human beings differ from all other lower types in the universe of God's making in that they are not only individuals but persons. A Christian is a Christian no more if he allows himself to live and behave as one of the masses, for in so doing he loses his personality and his independence. But a spiritual man is one who lives not only according to the functioning of the highest faculties of his soul, but in a manner by which he may be known to belong to Christ in being ruled by his Spirit. In the state of fallen nature man must win the independence which is due to him as a person, not by following his natural propensities or those of the herd instinct. His independence must be sought for a nature which is in the process of being healed and elevated by the

³ P. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Perfection Chrétienne*, vol. I, pp. 138, 139.

grace of God, and it will be communicated to him through the spirit of Christ.

Our Lord often shows clearly that he has no intention of allowing his Church 'to fall into the dust of religious individualism'.⁴ Certain types of piety easily take on an excessive individualism when they become merely private and divorced from the mind and life of the Church. It is the divine intention that the Church should be God's kingdom. And the human soul is one of the palaces in that kingdom in which he is to reign. 'The Church is Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ poured out and communicated'.⁵ His life-blood is also poured out into, and communicated to, the human soul, by that 'fountain of waters springing up into eternal life'. (Jn. iv, 14) which is sanctifying grace. That communicated life is at the heart of prayer and sacrifice, which have their divinely appointed expression in the liturgy of the Church.

The life of grace in the individual soul, as the *semen gloriæ*, holding within it the roots of glory, exacts a ceaseless effort after closer union with God in Christ. This life is identical in kind with the state of beatitude in the heavenly kingdom. 'Grace and glory are classified together, for grace is nothing else than a beginning of glory in us'. (St Thomas, II-II, 24, 3, ad 2.) 'The hope of future happiness may be in us for two reasons. First, by reason of our having a preparation for, or a disposition to, future happiness: and this is by way of merit; secondly, by a kind of imperfect inception of future happiness in holy men, even in this life. For it is one thing to hope that the tree will bear fruit, when the leaves begin to appear, and another, when we see the first signs of the fruit'. (*ibid*: I-II, 69, 2; cf. *De Veritate*, 14, 2).

This beginning of beatitude is particularly realised when the soul is occupied in contemplation, because the contemplation of divine truth is the end of the whole human life. (II-II, 180, 4.) 'This contemplation will be perfect in the life to come, when we shall see God face to face, wherefore it will make us perfectly happy: whereas now the contemplation of divine truth is possible to us only imperfectly, namely through a glass and in a dark manner'. (I Cor. 13, 12.) (*loc. cit.*)

Yet it is not alone in contemplation precisely as an act of the intelligence that perfection is found. 'Nevertheless the loving contemplation of God here below is the most efficacious means of attaining the perfection of charity: it is indeed a means conjoined to its end'.⁶ It is love of the contemplated which incites to contemplation, 'inasmuch as through loving God we are aflame to gaze on his beauty.

⁴ Clerissac, *The Mystery of the Church*, p. 23.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁶ Masson, *The Christian Life and the Spiritual Life*, p. 29; cf. *Summa*, II-II, 1 & 7.

And since everyone delights when he obtains what he loves, it follows that the contemplative life terminates in delight . . . the result being that love also becomes more intense'. (St Thomas II-II, 180, 1.)

The perfect development of the spiritual life consists in charity which is to abide for ever, even when faith and hope have passed away to give place to the vision of God in the light of glory, and in the perfect possession of God. The continuity of tradition which meets in St Thomas in the thirteenth century is carried on into our own times through the Council of Trent. The Catechism of that Council states, 'The kingdom of grace must precede that of glory, for in him, in whom the grace of God has not reigned, neither can his glory'. We cannot designate glory otherwise than a certain perfect and absolute grace.⁷

St Thomas is in the current of patristic tradition coming from the East, and especially from St Augustine in the West. According to the Holy Doctor's teaching, grace is a 'new spiritual principle which transforms and renews human nature by the communication of the divine life: in other words the state of deification of which the Greek fathers habitually speak. It is not merely a power that moves the will but a light that illumines the mind and transfigures the whole spirit. This combination of the Augustinian tradition with the characteristic doctrine of the Greek Fathers is perhaps the greatest theological achievement of the scholastic period, though it is usually little noticed in comparison with their philosophical synthesis'.⁸

Grace is the product of God's love, which makes a person gracious in his sight and his works meritorious. This rich endowment given out of the divine bounty is a participation of the divine nature and divine life. The supernatural virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost grow out of the deified soul, even as the powers of the soul are springs of activity coming from the innermost nature of the soul itself.

The perfection of the life of grace is found in union with God by charity, to which the only way is by leaving the whole world and all creatures. And the foundation of this union is likeness. 'The more a thing approximates to God's likeness the more acceptable it is to him; whence the Apostle gives this instruction, "As God's favoured children, you must be like him"'. (Ephesians v, 1.)⁹

In all created things there is a trace of the Holy Trinity, since 'everything inasmuch as it has being inclines to the similitude of God, who is being itself'.¹⁰ But man is made to the image of God, and of the Blessed Trinity. St Thomas teaches that the image of God is

⁷ Catechism of the Council of Trent, Proem to the Lord's Prayer.

⁸ Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Religion*, p. 39.

⁹ St Thomas, *De regimine principum*, lib. 1, c. 9.

¹⁰ II-II, 1, ad 3; Ia, 45, 7; cfr. 33, 3.

found in intellectual creatures alone. 'Considering the degree of perfection with which each one approaches God according to its capacity, the intellectual creature, *quæ est capax summi boni*, is more like unto the divine perfection than the whole universe in its entirety. For it alone is properly the image of God'.¹¹ The supernaturalising of man under grace is by a deepening of that image which is implanted in him by nature. The exemplar after which he is modelled is the God-man who is the most perfect image of God: 'Christ is placed before men as the exemplar of all'. (III. 39, ad 3.) The complete realisation of the likeness of the soul to God is in the vision of God, which is the highest activity of the intelligence in beholding God unveiled.¹² 'The beatific vision', writes M. Maritain 'is the most perfect, the most secret and the most divine solitude with God. Yet it is the most open and most inhabited solitude. Because of it another society is formed—the society of the multitude of blessed souls, each of which on its own account upholds the divine essence and enjoys the same uncreated Good'. (*op. cit.* p. 424.)

Even in this present life, as St Thomas says, 'the Holy Ghost is spoken of as the spirit of adoption, because through him a likeness is bestowed on us of the natural Son of God, who is begotten Wisdom'. (II-II, 45, 6 ad 1.) The standard exemplar upon whom human perfection is built is Christ our Lord. He is at once the image of God, a wayfarer and a beholder of the divine countenance (*comprehensor*). The nearer the resemblance in the soul to the divine exemplar the more perfect the image. As he that sees the Son sees likewise the Father (*John* 14, 9), so he that resembles the Son is made like also to the Father. Furthermore, the indwelling of the three divine Persons in the souls of the just implies a transformation bringing about in them a resemblance to the Persons who take up their abode there. (Cf. I, 43, 5c and ad 2.)

St John of the Cross explains how this 'union of likeness' is achieved, 'when the two wills—namely, that of the soul and that of God—are conformed together in one, and there is naught in the one that is repugnant to the other. And thus when the soul rids itself totally of that which is repugnant to the divine will and conforms not with it, it is transformed in God through love. This is to be understood of that which is repugnant, not only in action, but likewise in habit, so that not only do the voluntary acts of imperfection cease, but the habits of those imperfections, whatever they be, are annihilated . . . when all that is unlike God and unconformed to him is cast out, the soul may receive the likeness of God; and nothing will then

¹¹ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, in *The Review of Politics*, October, 1946, pp. 422, 423.

¹² I, 12, 1; cf. I, 93, 7 and 8.

remain in it that is not the will of God and it will thus be transformed in God'.¹³

This transformation, involving the annihilation of every moral imperfection, is under grace the work of the ascetic life, through the exercise of both natural and supernatural virtues, and the mortification of self.

There is a still closer 'union of likeness' of which St John of the Cross writes; it results from the temporal giving of the Divine Persons to the sanctified soul, and may be regarded as a prolongation in time of the eternal processions within the life of God himself. We must quote the saint at length: 'The Holy Ghost, like one breathing, raises the soul by his divine aspirations, informs it, strengthens it, so that it too may breathe in God with the same aspiration of love which the Father breathes with the Son, and the Son with the Father, which is the Holy Ghost himself, who is breathed into the soul in the Father and the Son in that transformation so as to unite it to himself; for the transformation will not be true and perfect if the soul is not transformed in the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity in a clear and manifest degree. . . . Nor is it to be thought impossible that the soul should be capable of so great a thing as that it should breathe in God as God in it, in the way of participation. For granting that God has bestowed upon it so great a favour as to unite it to the most Holy Trinity, whereby it becomes like unto God, and God by participation, is it altogether incredible that it should exercise the faculties of its understanding, perform its acts of knowledge and of love, or to speak more accurately, should have all done in the Holy Trinity together with It, as the Holy Trinity Itself? This however takes place by communication and participation, God himself effecting it in the soul, for this is to be transformed in the Three Persons in power, wisdom, and love, and herein it is that the soul becomes like unto God, who, that it might come to this, created it to his own image and likeness. . . . Souls have by participation that very God which the Son has by nature, and are therefore really gods by participation like unto God and of His society. . . . And although this union be perfect only in the life to come, yet even in this, in the state of perfection which the soul is said now to have attained, some anticipation of its sweetness is given it, in the way I am speaking of, though in a manner wholly ineffable'.¹⁴

There are evidently dangers and misapprehensions in this doctrine. Pope Pius XII has pointed out some of them.¹⁵ It would be a mistake

¹³ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. II, ch. v, nn. 3, 4.

¹⁴ *A Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza XXXIX, trans. Lewis, nn. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. pp. 394-397.

¹⁵ *Mystici Corporis Christi*, June 29, 1943.

to suppose that the advance towards virtue is solely due to grace and the working of the Holy Spirit. There must also be a close co-operation between the human and the divine. 'No one, evidently', says His Holiness, 'can deny that the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is the only source from which all supernatural power flows into the Church and its members; for as the Psalmist says, "the Lord giveth grace and glory". But the unremitting perseverance of men in works of holiness, their eager progress in grace and virtue, and their strenuous efforts, not only to reach the summit of Christian perfection themselves, but also, in the measure of their power, to spur others to a similar achievement—all these effects the heavenly Spirit will not produce unless those men do their part with constant and energetic application. "Divine blessings", says St Ambrose (*Expositio Ev. sec. Luc.* iv, 49), "are not granted to those that sleep but to those that watch".'¹⁶

FROM ST AUGUSTINE

Tam potenti enim natura deus fecit animam, ut ex eius plenissima beatitudine quae in fine temporum sanctis promittitur redundet enim in inferiorem naturam, quod est corpus.—*Ep.* cxviii, 14.

When touched by Grace, the soul such virtue knows,
 Brimmed with beatitude it overflows
 Even to the body. Even the dull flesh feels
 New vigour, and new zest for life reveals.

JOHN SEARLE.

Cf.—'This grace is sometimes so great, that out of the fullness of devotion here given, not the mind only but the weak body also feels great increase of strength bestowed on it'.

The Imitation. Book iv, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.