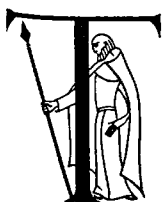


ALL OF A PIECE

BY

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O bridge then the abyss between human and divine, it is necessary to find within the created nature of man some kind of ledge, or base, or some *point d'appui*, where the grace of God could alight, and there infuse life. Or, to vary the metaphor (and the use of metaphor is our only way of stating these truths), there must be within the creature a ground or soil in which God could plant a seed, an embryo of his own life of grace. In the first days of preaching the Gospel of Christ, his apostles made use of the metaphor of *engrafting*, a figure of speech as suggestive and accurate as human words could well be; and by this was intended the implanting of a new growth or life upon some different trunk, which was already in its own order alive. Probably this is a better metaphor than that other of a ledge or footing from which an arch could spring, for it represents the recipient as a living subject within which is placed a power to bring forth fruits of which it was previously incapable. But, whatever imagery or metaphor we make use of in trying to describe this necessary basis for divine grace, the more philosophical and accurate term to use is that employed by the careful theologians of the Church when they spoke of the 'obediential potency'. This technical term, which is not easily translated into a vernacular equivalent, is the exact name for a true reality. Its two words cover all that is essential to its right understanding.

In the first place it is a potency or capacity, real in its own order, with the reality of the subject to which it is attributed. In itself, however, it is not a positive quality but a negative quality: an indetermination which can be acted upon by God. It has two characteristics by which it is distinguished from other capacities or potencies. The first is that it connotes no positive and definable relation with any fulfilment or perfection due to it; and this precisely because there is *no* perfection or fulfilment which is due to it, to which it would be positively ordained. In this sense it is purely passive, or to use a term perhaps less equivocal, purely receptive. Certain theologians in the past have spoken of it as an *active* potency; perhaps urged to use such a term fearing lest the word passive might seem like irresponsible; in fear, perhaps, lest it should appear that when God did actuate such a potency the actuation should not be vital in it, or free within it, but rather an actuation

that was alien and lifeless in the recipient. But it was quickly realised that to call it an active capacity would lead to conclusions and misunderstandings that were close approximations to error. If an active capacity, it would in its very definition name and claim the act which would specify it; and since the act hypothetically specifying it was of a supra-natural order, then the potency itself specified by that act must be of a supra-natural order; and hence we should have no solution of our essential problem of finding some groundwork or base that would be by definition natural in the subject to which it was ascribed. Therefore it is not to be called an active potency; but it is strictly speaking and solely a receptive potency.

The second characteristic marking it off from other natural capacities is corollary to the preceding. It is this: that, whereas other potencies are defined and definable only in terms of the complement or perfection to which they are positively ordained, this receptive capacity implies no positive order to any definable fulfilment, but it speaks solely a relationship to the divine Agent to whom it is subject. And the reason for this is similar to the preceding, namely that it is purely natural in its own order of creation, and as such solely connotes essential dependence upon any further act of its Creator; but it implies no positive reference to any gratuitous condescension of God the Redeemer, whose act of supernatural endowment is in no sense due to the creature, can in no sense be considered as a claim necessary to our nature, but is an act of complete gratuity on the part of God as Redeemer. Therefore there was used in qualification of this capacity the exact term 'obediential'; for, though in a loose sense we frequently speak of obedience to law, the real philosophical basis of rational obedience implies more strictly a relation to a person, the law-giver. Hence this receptive capacity was rightly conceived as placing us in a state of recipiency to the 'Nod of God', whose infinite will not only exceeded our capacities, but infinitely exceeded the measure of our incapacities, and he therefore must be understood as capable of endowing his creatures with whatever movement or state was not repugnant to the nature in which he had created them. In so far then as the Obediential Potency can be positively defined, it must be in terms of subordination to the supernatural agent; and to any action therefore of God which does not imply a contradiction in terms; as the theologians would say in their epigrammatic formula: *dicit ordinem ad primum Agens, ad recipiendum quidquid non repugnet.*

In fuller explanation of this receptive capacity in the created

nature, in reference to the supernatural agency of God three further points must be made clear. First of all, it implies nothing in any way derogatory to the divine nature of the Creator. He by whose action and movement all things come into being, upon whose power they depend essentially for their continued existence, by whose mind and wisdom they are in their natural order and disposition, he cannot be subject to them, nor his action dictated by anything but his own infinite wisdom and power. According to their natures, which are determined by him, are receptive of movement which does not contradict their own specific character, they are subject to his divine action, and this must of its perfection infinitely exceed the qualities and capacities with which in their own order they are endowed. Thus he who in his wisdom produces effects through secondary and instrumental causes, cannot be strictly subject to these subordinate causes but he, being God, first cause and primary mover of all that is, can produce their very effects immediately, and otherwise than through the order of nature which he has created. This indeed is the precise philosophical explanation of the phenomenon called 'miracle'. The miraculous fact is merely a natural effect produced by God other than through the intermediate causes which are in the normal order he has appointed. The particular laws governing these intermediate and particular causes can certainly be suspended and in that sense overridden by the Creator; indeed in a hundred ways they can certainly be suspended by man, who with his reason rules the elements and bends them to serve his own rational will. When engineers construct a great irrigation dam upon some vast flow of water like the Nile, they are obviously overriding the natural law of the waters ruled by it, suspending its natural effect for a good reason, canalising the waters to serve man and to manifest his power. Similarly, God in his miracles is but effecting immediately, for a particular reason, some natural phenomenon which ordinarily could be produced by secondary or instrumental causes. And this, so far from being derogatory to the mind and will of God, redounds to his wisdom, and the more marvellously reveals his power. These phenomena must not be conceived as results of some 'change of mind' in the divinity. They are eternally decreed in the dispensation of divine Providence as particular and especial manifestations of the presence and purpose of the Creator, exceptions to the normal course of natural fulfilment; not capricious, not whimsical or superfluous, but according to the universal law and rule of the unchangeable divinity who eternally foresees and decrees all things that shall come into being. When the modernist writer naïvely says: 'We do not believe in

modern miracles, and we do not see how an event can be supernatural but not miraculous', one is reasonably compelled to ask why the writer does not believe in modern miracles: because they are modern? or because they are miracles? But if God could work miracles in ancient times in Cana it is certain that he could work miracles in modern times at Lourdes. If it is answered that neither of old nor now can God work miracles it is clear that the writer is either naïvely imagining a miracle to be an irrational, capricious 'second-thought' unworthy of the Deity, or he is restricting the omnipotence of God to the limitations of the order God himself has created. In either case it is clear that the writer has not seriously considered the significance of the words he uses; he must be similarly unaware, in the use of such phrases, that miracles are not objects of faith in which one is asked to believe, but that they fall within the sphere of rational evidence; and anyone who refuses to examine the evidence, or discredits miracles when they are evident, only acts thus as the victim of superstitious and sectarian credulity.

Secondly, it must be pointed out that whatever has proceeded from the creative hand of God continues in being only as dependent upon the power and will of God. The creature as such denotes by very definition a subordination that is native and original. In every fulfilment of it, whether within the defined area of its kind or beyond the frontiers of that area, the causality of God is continuous with the permanency and use of its being. In saying this we are but affirming the truism that the Absolute alone is sufficient for itself, that the relative has meaning and movement only in reference to the absolute by which it exists, and the created being, in its myriad forms, kinds, hierarchy is always by definition relative to the Supreme Being who not only conceived, created, and holds his creatures in existence, but moves and directs them in all the modes and activities of their being. He who is their primary principle is also their ultimate end; and nothing has meaning except as derived from the external Mind. From this necessary truth it follows immediately that, if there be given by God to any creature activity being or life in addition to that defined by its own nature, this addition must be primarily and formally an added evidence of its aboriginal dependence upon the Supreme Being. It is but an extension of its essential subordination. In no sense can it be nugatory or invalidating to the principles of the nature which receives it. The bread multiplied by Christ for the crowds of Galileans was no less bread because Christ miraculously increased it, and its multiplication was quantitative and measurable by rational evidence, even though it was a multiplication proceeding from the

pre-eminent power of God. Lazarus raised from the dead was the same Lazarus whom his relatives and friends had watched die, whom then afterwards they had prepared for the grave and buried. When he was recalled days later from his tomb, he received back life discernible and verifiable because in the natural order, from the supreme power of God who had originally given him life. What was restored to him, just as what in the case of the bread had been multiplied, was subject to the divine omnipotence and the divine will, and could scientifically be verified and attested as something in itself evident even though its mode of production or restoration surpassed the agencies seen in the ordinary course of procedure in the natural order. In no sense therefore is this intervention of God's transcendent power adverse to the law of divine Providence, nor even hostile to the particular law of the individual nature in question; for the bread is still bread even though the divine action multiply it, and the multiplication is a mathematical and measurable multiplication even though it proceed immediately from the sovereign *fiat* of Christ. Indeed by this occasional suspension of the ordinary course of proximate causalities in the phenomena we call miracles not only is the divine power made more manifest, but the very creature is thereby exalted to bear greater witness, evident and compelling, to the intervention of God. Any refusal to examine or accept this evidence of miraculous phenomena is a refusal that can only really be dictated by an unreasoning prejudice.

From this analysis rises at once the third consideration to elucidate fully the quality of the obediential potency, and to enable us the better to understand the accession or supplement that comes to the recipient under the supernatural action of God. In the sphere of divine grace, the reality received is not within that order; but it is a quality of mind and will exceeding (except by its material effects) any natural intellectual verification. The recipient is now raised up into a condition whereby the divine grace of Christ penetrates and sublimates the very soul of its subject; and the man sanctified by this grace is, as it were, clothed in a new nature, 'born again' as Christ himself said. The New Testament phrases in description of this new manner of life must continually be our guide in every statement concerning this grace. As many as received him, he gave power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in his name, who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1, 13). St Thomas could well say that 'this adoptive filiation is thus really a participated similitude of the eternal filiation of the Word' (S. T., III, 7, 3). The first apostles stated this truth in phrases that fixed it for

ever; thus St John: 'Behold what manner of charity the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called and should be the Sons of God' (1 John 3, 1). St Peter gives a still fuller formula of this same sublime dogma: 'by whom he hath given us most great and precious promises, that by these you may be made *partakers of the divine nature*; flying the corruption of that concupiscence which is in the world' (2 Pet. 1, 4). Lastly St Paul no less explicitly: 'for whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be made *conformable to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn amongst many brethren*' (Rom. 8, 29). Similar descriptions to these are found up and down the pages of the New Testament, and while they declare in express terms the divine elevation conferred upon men by the grace of Christ, they make equally clear the supernatural actualisation of that receptive capacity which we have called the obediential potency. In this actualisation by divine grace, there is no destructive or catastrophic nullification of any human faculty; there is only the gratuitous endowment of man by God, with qualities of being, principles of action, norms and motives of conduct or behaviour that are wholly of Christ. This is the real Christian revelation, the Catholic tradition of doctrine, the renovation, revivification, redemption of human life to be divinely achieved by Christ in the revealed faith.

Therefore the obediential capacity found in our created nature exactly provides the metaphorical ledge or footing upon which the merciful grace of God can alight and there call forth the flight, the upward thrust, leading even our fallen nature into the intimate communion of the divinity. The ascent, growth or increase is from God himself, just as also the base which is our original nature was received from him the Creator. By him alone can be achieved the harmony, the perfect co-ordination of the two principles of action, grace and nature; a unity of effect made perfect by this exact coherence of the component parts. Within the living groundwork which derives originally from him, he superinduces an embryo of grace, a quality of life that denotes kinship with the Eternal Father through the Son. The life evoked within, *and not from*, that groundwork is a supernatural renaissance, initiated by divine activity, guided and strengthened always by the Spirit of God and now co-ordinate with a consummation in the eternal vision of the divinity. This was the meaning of the earlier theologians when they called divine grace in man the *Semen Glorise*, the principle of growth of life whose fulness should appear when the saints arise in glory, co-heirs with Christ because renewed in his divinity.

One final point can be set down, a truth perhaps especially to

be emphasised and appreciated in our own days of social and mental chaos; it is the point of harmony, coherence and co-ordination between the reconciled elements of nature and grace. Among the most urgent and instinctive desires of the mind of man perhaps the most significant is the appetite for order. Nothing so much fulfils and contents the activity of the soul. Discord is not an element in which we move and breathe freely. Discord and disorder are always oppressive, order and concord are always liberating and constructive. In the Person of Christ there was revealed a unique and the supreme type of divine order. In him there was no clash of ill-matched parts. His humanity was caught up into the divine personality, not absorbed, nor oppressed; not alien, nor even ill-disposed to the nature of God which was equally his. His sacred humanity was the more convincing, the more compelling, the more winning, for the divinity to which it was assumed. In all the annals of recorded history never was there a life so much 'all of a piece' as his. His anger with the mercenary men who had profaned the Temple, his wrath at the oppression of the poor, his tears for his dead friend, his passionate love for the city of David though it was now to reject him, his explicit delight in children, his concern for his mother; all these varying elements are perfectly at one in the divinity which speaks through them. They do not distract from his Godhead. In their very order they set forth, like a perfect setting for jewellery, the stupendous personality who was always divine. In him from the things told of him there is evident the perfect unity from co-ordinate and hierarchical elements; the eternal being of the Logos revealing the divine, and consecrating to his Father his complete humanity. In him of course that perfection of harmony, order and unity was unique in kind, and therefore in achievement. In no other created nature can that hypostatic unity be repeated. But in its growth and effect likens the disciple. When they called St Francis of Assisi 'the Mirror of Christ' that was what was meant; in that saint as in a thousand others a human nature was saved, the physical body in complete subordination to the faculties of the soul; and the soul with its faculties in exact conformity with the mind of Christ. The will was more wilful because it loved God; the mind was clearer, more penetrating and intelligent, from accepting the high obscurities revealed. At the head of such figures presides for ever the Queen who is the Mother of God. Her obediential capacity gave to God his complete delight; and therefore it was in order that while she kept the words, pondering them in her heart, the Incarnate Word should be the fruit of her womb.