

THE LIFE OF GRACE: III

BY

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ST BONAVENTURE, who sees so clearly that theology has an object of its own—‘the things we have to believe, when considered as such, pass into the class of things that can be grasped by the mind, and this because we now look at them from a second point of view’ (I Sent. proem. q. 1.)—does not for all that think it anything but an instrument or stage in the movement towards Love. He states its aim like this: ‘Revelation turns us towards the affections’. (loc. cit. q. 3, a. 1.) Albert the Great holds the same opinion: ‘Knowledge of truth is not sought through the intellect alone but through the affections and substance; hence it is not intellective but effective, for the intellect is directed towards the affections as towards its end’. (I Sent. d. 1, a. 4, ad 2m.)

This text lays bare the heart of the matter: the intellect is subordinate to the *affectus*. Cognitive activity, especially at the supernatural level, does not represent something autonomous, something with value in itself. To use Aristotelian terms, we have in theology not a speculative science but a practical one. This point of view St Thomas consistently rejected from the first, thereby establishing the autonomy of theology, since a speculative science has its own end within itself. (cf. I Sent. prol. q. 1, a. 3, qa. 1a.)

First of all, what in his eyes is theological knowledge as compared with mystical knowledge, the ‘wisdom of the saints’? He explains in the very first question of the *Summa*. Theology is the human mode and the wisdom of the saints the divine mode in which knowledge is exercised in the supernatural life. It will be remembered that it is precisely this double modality in our supernatural life, together with the virtues, which justifies the existence of the gifts in us. Theology corresponds to the intellectual virtues of wisdom and knowledge, the wisdom of the saints to the gift of the Holy Ghost. (Ia, q. 1, art. 6, ad 3m; IIa-IIae, q. 45, art. 1, ad 2m.) ‘A man may judge in one way by inclination . . . in another way by knowledge, just as a man learned in moral science might be able to judge rightly about virtuous acts, though he had not the virtue. The first manner of judging divine things belongs to that wisdom which is set down among the gifts of the Holy Ghost. . . . The second manner of judging belongs to this doctrine, which is acquired by study, though its principles are obtained by revelation.’

The human mode of knowing is science, and science as Aristotle defines and describes it tends to know a being. It does this the moment the essential principles are seen at the subject's *raison d'être*. Thus science assumes principles without having to prove them, and by means of them it shows the truth of other propositions. To St Thomas's mind, all theology has to do is to exercise such an activity on the data supplied by faith.

Speculative theology is a work produced by the reason and the understanding. The authorities it refers to do not form part of its work, they precede it; for the end of theology is not to prove the existence of certain things but to get through to their essence. St Thomas has perhaps nowhere better expressed it than in the *Quodlibetal Question IV*, article 18: 'An explanation in the schools aims not at repulsing error but at instructing the hearers, that they may reach an understanding of the truth being treated; and so it must be based on arguments going to the very roots of the truth and teaching *how* what is affirmed is true: otherwise, if the master treats the question simply by quoting authorities, the pupil will certainly know that it is as he says but will not acquire any science or understanding and will go away with nothing in his head.'

Broadly speaking, the task of theology can be described like this: For its formal object it has God in his godhead, reached by a supernatural habitus, faith. In order to get through to this object by its natural mode, the mode of reason, it has to distinguish two groups of truths in the object: immediate truths, improved and received from a superior science (Ia,p.1,art.2), which is God's, and mediate ones. The first are the articles of faith. The theologian has to deepen his grasp of these and elaborate them scientifically; he will then link the second group of truths to them by causal connections. Thus theology has not so much to find new predicates as to discover in the immediate ones (whether objectively immediate or whether only received as such) the justification of others, which belong to the revealed subject only by virtue of these. The formal element in theology is the 'light of virtual revelation; i.e., theology knows all the truths constituting its proper object, as being scientifically explained by some truth that is in the formal sense of the term revealed. It matters little that the truth seen in relation to a formally revealed truth should itself be formally revealed. The formal motive, then, of our assent to the truths of theology, whether these are formally revealed or not, is always human discursive thought, which is what discovers and manifests these connections'.¹

¹ Gagnebet, *La Nature de la Théologie Spéculative* (*Revue Thomiste*, 1938, p. 239.)

Does this solve the problem of the autonomy of theology? Yes, if theology is a kind of knowledge that bears its own end within itself. The thomist conception of knowledge, integrating, as it does, both platonism and aristotelianism when set in a perspective of wisdom, enables us to say that it does solve the problem. Every being is perfect in so far as it is what it is, but being what it is forces it not to be what others are. To the extent to which it lacks what others are, it falls short of perfection pure and simple. Knowledge is a remedy for this limitation, for through knowledge we become what others are. It thus becomes possible for the perfection of the whole universe to be in a single thing. (*De Ver.* q. 2, art. 2). The more one knows the more perfect one is, because the more one knows the more one is. The knowledge of God, which gives us *the* Being itself, therefore represents a supreme achievement for the creature capable of knowing. Hence such an operation does bear its own end within itself.

Is theology prevented by its mode from claiming this autonomy and the title of speculative? Not in the least; for after all, the mode of procedure—man's discursive thought or the angel's intuition—is of small importance, provided it leads to possession of the Being known in the inner word: 'the known in the knower'. (*Cf.* Ia-IIae, q. 5, art. 1, ad 1m.) What matters is the end, and the end of theology is to know God in himself and—of course by the mode proper to the human mind—to become ever more and more the God whose very essence has been made accessible to us by faith. The end once fixed, it can be granted that there will be imperfections in the realisation of it, gaps in the result. These are implied in the essential dualism of all supernatural life in this world: the human mode for touching God in himself. 'The fact that some happen to doubt about the articles of faith is not due to the uncertain nature of the truths, but to the weakness of human intelligence.' But St Thomas vigorously concludes: 'Yet the slenderest knowledge that may be obtained of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge obtained of lesser things.' (Ia, q. 1, art. 5, ad 1m.)

We have established the autonomy of theology, but it will be objected that for all that, mysticism remains superior as knowledge and hence theology remains directed towards mysticism. We must answer first of all that the autonomy of theology does not exclude more perfect kinds of knowledge but justifies theology in being its own end. The two kinds of knowledge may be superimposed, may help and confirm each other; they nevertheless each remain autonomous. The mode of the one is not the mode of the other: *modus humanus*, *modus divinus*. Hence the higher one does not deprive

the lower of its *raison d'être*. Valuable evidence of this can be found in St Thomas's last words. We know that after an ecstasy the saint said: 'The end of my writing has come, for such truths have been revealed to me that what I have written and taught seems to me very slight'. But another day, when referring to this incident, he let it be clearly understood that the vision had not said the last word on the subject, or rather that it did not operate at the level of his theological labours. He was going to die, he said, after this vision, but if he had gone on living he 'could have made greater progress in science and been of greater use to others through science'. The gift of wisdom had reached such a point in him that it left him no esteem for anything he might write; and yet, if he went on working 'at science', he still had some progress to make in science.² The fundamental reason for all this comes from the fact that for the perfection of the whole the perfection of the parts is required. That is why Christ, who was perfectly human, besides enjoying the vision of God also had infused science and acquired science, and why in the angels and the blessed there is a distinction between 'morning' and 'evening' knowledge.

But that is not all. On the one hand theology has a relative superiority over mysticism in this life; on the other, to call it autonomous does not mean that it is a stranger to mysticism. If it is not a mere instrument for use in the search made by mysticism, it can still serve it, because supernatural life depends on it: it belongs to wisdom to be speculative and it is practical by way of overflow. This was the way in which St Thomas carried out, and to the full, the programme he assigned to his order: 'To hand on to others things seen in contemplation'. *Contemplata aliis tradere*. (IIa-IIae, q. 188, art. 6.)

We have seen that the place of theology is at the level of the human mode of our supernatural life. Now it is according to this human mode that Christian life usually develops. Divine grace touches the soul at all times, but it depends on God's good pleasure that the influence of these touches should become prominent. This is not miraculous, for it is in accordance with the laws of development of the soul, but it is rare, because the soul does not often reach the highest point of its capacity. Then again, mystical knowledge is essentially experimental and affective; it is achieved according to the divine mode and so is inexpressible. From these few remarks it can be deduced that mystical knowledge represents an exceptional state, that it will be strongly marked by the individual

² Cf. William de Tocco, ed Prümer, 63.

event it represents, and that it cannot be given an exact expression for the benefit of other people. It will be enough, I think, to read any mystic, to see that this is the case.

Theology suffers from none of these disadvantages. Doubtless it does not go so deep, but its fruit is objectively surer. As it does not depend on an experience it can constantly check its own progress; as it develops according to the laws of human growth it does not depend on the free intervention of God; as it works with human concepts it is essentially capable of expression. If, then, in the realm of the supernatural, wisdom remains the work 'of greatest perfection, sublimity, usefulness and delight', the man who wants to give himself to its pursuit must walk by the human road of science of the object of faith. And as the man of wisdom not only contemplates but diffuses his contemplation, he will tell other men about it, and he will be able to tell them about it because he has first thought about it in a mode which is theirs. Thus St Thomas, the theologian *par excellence*, could apply to himself those words in which St Hilary says: 'I acknowledge that I owe my life's chief occupation to God, so that every word and every thought of mine may speak of him'. (*Contra Gentes*, 1, c. 2.) The work that was the outcome of that occupation is eminently social because it meets the needs of all minds in quest of truth. The Church has seen her way to make it her own and, with a due sense of proportion, to proclaim the science of St Thomas the theological science *par excellence*.

But St Thomas also insists that the science of theology makes us more worthy of God's love because more in conformity with him and because it is by means of it that we have access to immortality. To understand this properly, we must remember that the primacy of the understanding does not exclude love. All that we mean is that we do not know in order to love but love because we know. If contemplation starts from love, which urges the acquisition of knowledge, it ends in love because it knows better. (IIa-IIae, q. 180, art. 1.) Doubtless it is possible to have a great deal of love without a great deal of knowledge, especially at the supernatural level. Yet if it is the knowledge of the just and is conducted simply with a desire for the Truth (here we see how important it is for a theologian to be a saint), it will normally create more love. Thus it is only to be expected that the way St Thomas points out should reveal a royal road of the Christian life or, more precisely, of a Christian life out to possess the most perfect gift of God. Study is favourable to contemplation because it gives light to the understanding and provides it with its object. It will ward off the errors that are so quick to creep into a life of contemplation. It will make teaching

and preaching possible. (IIa-IIae, q. 188, art. 5.)

Thus a current of spirituality has developed, bearing the impress of science and, it could be said, of order. There is no absolute but the end and the end is God. There is nothing so lovable as he and nothing has any value save with reference to him. Affections, austerities, good works and everything else must have their limits; the incarnation itself is not an absolute but a means directed towards the restoration of a troubled order. Everything returns to God after coming out from him and it all returns through him, for nothing can act without him, especially at the level of the supernatural. Creation started from a loving knowledge, and through the minds of creatures—angels and men—it returns to a knowledge that will flower in love. (Cf. *Contra Gentes* I, c. 1.) And because the life of grace in this world is a beginning of eternal life, the knowledge belonging to it begins the beatific vision in us, in that by faith, faith developed in theology and, if God wills it, faith made perfect in mystical wisdom, it unites us to the First Truth, the source and end of all things. (Cf. in *Boet. de Trin.*)

The man who mapped out this course was the first to follow it. At fifty he was as chaste as a child of five, he never gave way to vainglory, he used to talk familiarly with Christ and obtain from God the favours he wanted. In the end he saw things that cannot be revealed and was so moved by them that he had nothing to keep him on earth any longer; he was ripe for heaven: he was a saint.



LE PROCES DE DIEU. By A. Bessières, S.J. (Editions Spes; 150 frs.)

The problem of evil and suffering—'How could a loving Providence allow it?' The old problem is discussed, all through the catalogue of evil, in terms of contemporary thought and in lively and readable dialogue. Père Bessières has a rare and intelligent sympathy with the perplexity of the humanitarian sceptic. If the book reaches a public beyond the 'magic circle of the converted' it might well help to convince some types of enlightened rationalist of the reasonableness of faith.

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