

THE NATURE OF SANCTITY<sup>1</sup>

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IN her autobiography Margery Kempe reports our Lord as saying to 'this creature' (herself): 'Fasting, Daughter, is good for young beginners, and discreet penance, and for to bid many beads, it is good for them that can no better do, and yet it is not perfect. But it is a good way to perfectionward. For I tell thee, Daughter, that they that are great fasters and great doers of penance they would that it should be held the best life; also they that give themselves to say many devotions, they would have it that that is the best life; and they that give much alms, they would that there held the best life. And I have oftentimes, Daughter, told thee that thinking, weeping and high contemplation is best life in earth. And thou shalt have more merit in heaven for one year of thinking in thy mind, than for an hundred year of praying with thy mouth, and yet thou wilt not believe me, for thou wilt many beads whether I will or not.'<sup>2</sup>

To the wife of Lynn's picturesque teaching may be added that of Scupoli in *The Spiritual Combat* (Ch. I): 'Many have made it (perfection) to consist exclusively in austerities, maceration of the flesh, hair-shirts, disciplines, long vigils and fasts, and otherlike bodily hardships and penances. Others, especially women, fancy they have made great progress therein, if they say many vocal prayers, hear many Masses and long offices, frequent many churches, receive many communions. Others (and those sometimes among cloistered religious) are persuaded that perfection depends wholly upon punctual attendance in choir, upon silence, solitude and regularity.'

Such a view of sanctity, largely negative in character, conveys to many an impression of gloom. It makes holiness unattractive, and would-be holy people a trial to their friends. Hence the jingle:

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a paper read at the Conference of Ecclesiastical Studies, Easter, 1953.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from *The Coasts of the Country, an Anthology of Prayer drawn from the Early English Spiritual Writers*, edited by Clare Kirchberger, p. 34.

‘To live above with the saints of God  
 Is everlasting glory.  
 But to live below with the saints we know  
 Is quite a different story.’

Fortunately, asceticism, necessary though it be, is not the essence of sanctity.

‘In the evening of life’, wrote the intensely ascetic St John of the Cross, ‘we shall be judged by love.’ Supernatural charity is the essence of holiness. So revelation teaches with noonday clarity. ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord thy God is one Lord. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole strength.’ So we read in Deuteronomy, and in Leviticus: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour (i.e. thy fellow-national) as thyself.’ ‘On these two commandments’, said our Lord, quoting them and at the same time enlarging the second to include everyone, ‘dependeth the whole law and the prophets.’ For St Paul the whole life of virtue is a reality because informed by charity. Charity is ‘the bond of perfection’. Charity to one’s neighbour ‘is the fulfilment of the law’. ‘God is love’, writes St John in his turn, ‘and whoso abideth in love abideth in God, and God abideth in him’—words which echo our Lord’s discourse after the Last Supper: ‘If any man 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’; and echo also his beautiful prayer for his apostles and for us: ‘I in them, and thou in me: that they may be made perfect in one. . . . I have made known thy name to them and will make it known: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

St Thomas discusses the matter in the *Summa* (II-II, 184). ‘A thing is said to be perfect’, he writes (a. 1), ‘when it attains its appropriate end. . . . Now the final end of man is God, and it is by charity that we are united to him, as it is written: ‘He who abideth in love abideth in God and God in him’. Therefore the perfection of the Christian life is to be sought chiefly in charity.’

What does St Thomas mean by ‘chiefly’? He explains (ibid. ad 2): ‘There are two senses in which a man may be

said to be perfect, namely simply (*simpliciter*) or relatively (*secundum quid*). A thing is perfect simply when it has its full nature. Thus an animal is perfect when it has all its limbs and everything else needed for the fullness of animal life. A thing is perfect relatively when it is a question of some added quality, such as whiteness, blackness or the like. Now the Christian life consists chiefly in charity, the virtue which unites the soul to God, according to the text: "He that loveth not abideth in death". Therefore, simply speaking (*simpliciter*), the perfection of the Christian life comes from charity; but, relatively (*secundum quid*), from the other virtues.'

He continues: 'Since that which is simply such stands to other things of its kind in the relation of supreme principle, therefore the perfection of charity is the principle of that relative perfection which is found in the other virtues.'<sup>3</sup> It is in charity, then, that perfection, speaking simply or absolutely, consists; and in the other virtues, relatively. Charity is even the principle of the rest; and St Thomas applies to it, in its bearing on them, the Platonic axiom, accepted by Aristotle, which forms the major premise in the Fourth Way of proving God's existence: 'what is said to be the greatest in any genus is the cause of all the things in that genus' (I, 2, 3). 'Charity', says St Paul, 'is patient, is kind, . . .'

It is because charity directs the whole of our moral activity to our final end, God, that it exercises this causal function in relation to the other virtues. It must be classed as formal causality. 'The principle of moral activity is the will, and the . . . form so to say, of the will is the end it intends. Now the form of an act always follows from the form of the agent producing it. Therefore in moral activity that which directs an act to an end must give the act its form. But it is obvious . . . that it is charity which directs the acts of all other virtues to their last end, and which, consequently, gives them also their form' (II-II, 23, 8). It is, says St Thomas, formal causality arising from efficient causality, in

<sup>3</sup> 'Et quia id quod est simpliciter est principium et maximum respectu aliorum, inde est quod perfectio caritatis est principalissima respectu perfectionis quae attenditur secundum alias virtutes.'

that charity effectively imposes on the other virtues a direction to their last end. Hence charity may be called the mother as well as the form of the virtues.

Charity is not, strictly speaking, their intrinsic form, since this results from the particular object which specifies each of them individually. At the same time it is not merely an extrinsic form. As the universal virtue, charity inspires and animates the activity of all the other virtues. Even though a man does not and cannot make direct acts of charity on each several occasion, it yet remains a living influence in his will, unifying all his moral activity. His acts of humility and of the rest thus become also acts of charity. Since in this way charity leaves its impress on the other virtues and, so to say, transforms them, its relation to them is more influential than that of an extrinsic form and can only be called in a sense intrinsic.

In the *Summa* (II-II, 184, 3) St Thomas asks whether it is in the commandments or in the counsels that the perfection of the Christian life consists. He replies that it consists essentially in the commandments. But since the commandment to love God and our neighbour concerns our final end itself, this commandment enjoys a unique status among the rest. Unlike them it is unlimited in its range; it is with our whole heart that we must love God, and the whole and the perfect are, says Aristotle, the same thing; it is as ourselves that we must love our neighbour, and our love for ourselves is, in the nature of things, a maximum love. Each of the other commandments has its particular function as directing us to a specific virtue; but at the same time they all bear an essential relation to the commandment of charity, the virtue of our final end, in that their *raison-d'être* is in fact the removal of impediments to charity. When they are not observed, charity itself cannot exist.

But charity can exist without the observance of the counsels. Therefore perfection does not consist essentially in them, but only secondarily and instrumentally. Their function, says St Thomas, is to remove impediments to the full activity of charity, not to its very existence. As instances of such impediments he indicates marriage, business occupations, and the like. He quotes Abbot Moses (*Collationes*

*Patrum*, Coll. I): 'Fasting, watching, meditating the Scriptures, nakedness, the depriving oneself of all resources, are not perfection itself, but the means to perfection, since it is not in them that the discipline of life finds its purpose, but it is by them that it attains it'.

St Thomas's teaching is compressed; and it may seem to many rather involved. His commentators have not been of one mind in expounding him. The most satisfactory explanation appears to be that which Garrigou-Lagrange, o.p.<sup>4</sup> adopts from Passerini, o.p.<sup>5</sup> Summarised, it runs: Perfection consists essentially in the precepts. Of these the two principal ones concern charity. The function of the others is to remove what is contrary to charity. Perfection consists accidentally or instrumentally in the counsels, which invite us to renounce certain things which, while not being an obstacle to charity, are nevertheless an obstacle to its activity and its full development. Perfection, therefore, consists essentially not only in charity, but also in the acts of the other virtues in so far as they are of precept and are commanded by charity. Thus acts of faith, hope and religion, prayer, the assistance at the holy Sacrifice, holy Communion, penance and so on, belong to the very essence of perfection. Perfection is therefore a *plenitude*. Of this plenitude charity is the form and, in St Paul's expression, the bond.

The doctrine of the redemption furnishes a useful analogy. If we ask by which act of Christ we were redeemed, the answer is, by his passion and death; not, however, taken in isolation, but as gathering to itself, inspiring, directing and giving meaning to all the previous activity of his incarnate life. Without the passion this activity would not be efficacious for our salvation; but in conjunction with the passion it becomes an effective part of Christ's redemptive work. Redemption is thus a plenitude embracing the whole course of the Incarnation. Likewise in the matter of sanctity. Its essence is charity; but charity as informing all other virtuous activity. Without charity, as St Paul says, that activity lacks supernatural value. With charity, it becomes part of the plenitude of sanctity.

<sup>4</sup> *Perfection chrétienne et contemplation* (1923), vol. I, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> *De Statibus Hominum* in II-II, q. 184, a. 1.

Grace and charity make us the friends of God; and holiness is the full flowering of this friendship. *Idem velle, idem nolle* is the hall-mark of friendship. It means in our relation to God complete dedication to his interests, reciprocating his incomparable benevolence to us, and a constant and resolute effort, as far as our mortal condition permits, to subordinate our will to his, not merely in the things he expressly commands, but also (but without scrupulosity or fussiness) in the purposes he discloses through the circumstances and opportunities of our life.

It is perhaps not uncommon to describe this conformity to God's will as resignation. But resignation has a joyless sound; and in any case it expresses only half the truth. 'To suffer divine things', *pati divina*, implies activity as well as passivity. We are made for action; and our submission to God should be that of men who are alert and alive to every opportunity of promoting his glory.

The love of friendship is a union of wills. But man has a body as well as a soul, an intellect, imagination, senses, emotions; and the whole of him must be used and unified in the grand work of loving God. St Francis de Sales insists much on this; and indeed it is but the Scriptural behest that we must love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. God himself has not been content to remain, in Dante's phrase, 'the primal love that moved the sun and th other stars'. He has entered our world to draw us with the cords of Adam, the love of a human heart. We, therefore, must not be afraid to love him and our neighbour in a human way. 'A heart', writes St Francis de Sales, 'that has no movement, no emotion, no feeling, has no love. And conversely, a heart that has love must also have emotion and affection.' This is contrary to Stoicism and to all who have derived their spirituality from Stoicism. But it is good thomism. It is also the spirit of the great Carmelite writers. St Teresa of Avila is remarkably vital, warm-hearted and human; and the very austere St John of the Cross was, in his intense love of nature, one of the greatest of Spanish poets.

Grace builds on nature; it does not destroy it. Hence, as a corollary of what we have said above, while sanctity is one

in its essential nature, it nevertheless reflects in the individual saint his cast of character, education, environment, race and epoch. As an instance of two contrasting characters we have the contemporaries St Francis de Sales and Cardinal de Bérulle, as described by Dr Michael Muller in his valuable study of St Francis de Sales: St Francis bathing in the warmth of God's love which diffuses goodness everywhere, and emphasising therefore man's greatness as the object of this love; Bérulle, on the other hand, prostrate in spirit before God's majesty, and, as a consequence, stressing man's nothingness. They were striking instances of optimism and pessimism in the spiritual order—two complementary tendencies which ebb and flow throughout the centuries. St Augustine was, for Dr Muller, the first pessimist; inevitably, since he had plumbed by personal experience the depths of man's weakness. Clement of Alexandria was the first professed optimist; he was a Christian Platonist, and Platonism with its emphasis on the love of the good and the beautiful is an optimistic philosophy. Among the pessimistic writings Dr Muller singles out the *Imitation of Christ*: Thackeray considered it a morbidly depressing book; but then Thackeray was a hedonist as well as a Protestant. Optimism, however, has on the whole prevailed over pessimism, even where the greatest stress has been laid in theory and practice on severe asceticism. The scholastics of the golden age were optimists; so too were the Christian humanists, among whom St Francis de Sales is so luminous. So too were the so-called Italian School—St Bernardine of Siena, St Philip of Neri, St Charles Borromeo, St Cajetan, the Saints Catherine, St Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi, and many others; an ardent love of God and in some cases an intense mystical prayer distinguished them. But besides optimism and pessimism there are a host of contrasts between saints: the medieval human tenderness, for instance, which is absent from the Fathers; and, in the Middle Ages, the various currents: the intellectualism of St Thomas, the fervency of St Bonaventure, the transcendental mysticism of the Rhineland.

A vital element in sanctity, underlying all the differences among saints, must be the Faith itself. Sanctity is a personal achievement; but the saint is not just an individual, nor

again just a member of a religious order, imbibing and typifying its spirit. He is also a unit in an organism, the mystical body of Christ. Apart from this body he cannot normally be sanctified as Christ would wish. It is as the soul of the mystical body that the Holy Ghost supernaturally energises the individual, spreading and developing within him the charity which is the form of holiness. Hence the charity possessed by the individual is a sharing in universal charity, in the life-force of the mystical body. Has not St Ignatius of Antioch described the Church as the *Agape*, and St Augustine as *unus Christus amans seipsum*? Therefore the saint will necessarily express the spirit of the *Catholica*. God incarnate will be the centre of his devotion. Loyalty to the Church will be a paramount part of his obedience. His practice of the virtue of religion will be liturgical as well as personal. His act of adoration will be the holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He will esteem the sacraments, especially holy Communion, which gives him Christ, charity itself. I feel that Scupoli, in my original quotation, while being strictly accurate in instancing frequent Communion as one of the incorrect notions of perfection, misconceives somewhat the point and purpose of this sacrament. It is true that Communion is a *means* of perfection; it is not, as Communion, perfection itself. But since the effect of Communion is charity, the very virtue of holiness, devotion to holy Communion manifests in a soul a clear awareness of the true nature of sanctity and a will correctly orientated. With devotion to Christ there naturally goes, in the Catholic, devotion to his Mother and ours, and to the saints, The Catholic's charity to his neighbour will have the distinctive mark of apostolic zeal.

The saying of many prayers is not the essence of sanctity, as Margery Kempe tells us, agreeing, of course, in this with all the spiritual writers. But a truly holy man will be a man of prayer; prayer has undoubtedly a place in the plenitude of which charity is the bond. A final question therefore is: what relation is there between sanctity and prayer, particularly mental prayer? Margery Kempe reports our Lord as saying: 'I have oftentimes, Daughter, told thee that thinking, weeping and high contemplation is *best life on earth*'.



Can there, then, be no perfection of charity without high contemplation?

St Teresa has described the stages of contemplative prayer. At the summit is the mystical marriage, in which the soul is so transformed that it forgets itself and thinks only of God and his glory, and becomes, in the words of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 'perfectly oned unto God in perfect charity—such as may be had here, if God vouchsafeth'. (Ch. xlv.) Had, then, our Lord the mystical marriage in mind when he prayed to his Father 'that they may be one in us', so that without it there could be no full sharing in the divine life of the Holy Trinity?

Assuredly there is in the highest grades of prayer an intimacy with God which is as close as this earth can know. The great mystics pour out their souls in the most intense love. 'The language of human passion', writes Evelyn Underhill, 'is tepid and insignificant beside the language in which the mystics try to tell the splendours of their love.' (*Mysticism*, p. 106.) But obviously these summits of contemplation will ordinarily be attainable only by those who are called to the secluded life, free from distracting occupations. St Teresa was not thus free; but she is quite clearly an exception. 'It should be known', writes St Gregory the Great, 'that, unless we are free from the oppression of outward care, we are quite unable to reach the height of contemplation' (*Moralia* xxx. 54). He himself was never free from such oppression. 'When my business is done', he writes, 'I try to return to my inner self, but cannot, for I am driven away by vain, tumultuous thoughts.' (Ep. I. 5. *ad Theoctistam*.) Our cares are not comparable to his. But of those whose vocation is to the active life there are very many who share his experience of oppression. Shall we say that the summit of charity is inaccessible to them?

Undoubtedly some degree of contemplation is demanded, even in the active life, in order to attain perfection. Contemplation is the prayer of union, and charity is union with God. Each is therefore connatural to the other. Moreover, a merely active life has no place in the Christian scheme; it should be what is known as the mixed life, *contemplata aliis tradere*. St Francis de Sales, the 'Doctor of the mixed

life', describes the sort of contemplation I have in mind as 'a loving, simple and habitual attention of the mind to God'. Bossuet called it the prayer of simplicity and explained it very clearly. It is the normal development of mental prayer, active contemplative reaching into the lowest grade of passive prayer which St Teresa called the prayer of quiet. It would seem that the distracted mind of the active worker for souls cannot normally go higher. But what he may lack in the reach of actual prayer he can compensate for in virtual prayer, that is, in the faithful and generous doing of God's will in his appointed state of life. As we have seen, charity is nothing else than the doing of God's will. Our Lord said that his meat was to do his Father's will. He is our Way; and they who spend their days in toil and care for souls are living the life that he lived. It is unthinkable that in such a life they should not be able to reach the heights of union. It was in fact apostolic men in the world whom Christ had primarily in mind, along with the twelve, when he offered to the Father his prayer for their unity in the divine life. This is, I think, clear from the context.



## THE SONG OF LOVE—II

A MODERN COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF SONGS

**D**RAW me.' After being impelled almost irresistibly to beg for the divine embrace, after reflecting on the incomparable worth of God's love and realising that without the assistance of the Beloved she cannot attain to it, the soul calls upon him to draw her to himself. Is it then necessary that the Spouse should be drawn to follow him, as if she came unwillingly and not of her own free choice? Is she so weak that she cannot walk alone? Or is she so reluctant that pressure must be brought to bear upon her? Her request is due to none of these causes. Abundant evidence exists in the physical universe of the law of attraction. The rain in the clouds is attracted towards the earth: the moisture from the warm earth is sucked up as vapour