

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

A few months ago we promised to provide some regular contributions for religious men and women. It has proved a surprisingly difficult task to discover writers willing to undertake this responsible work. However we are fortunate to have secured from the posthumous papers of the late Very Reverend Father Austin Barker, O.P., S.T.M., a profound and thorough treatment of the foundation of religious life. In his essay on obedience the author, who was Professor of Metaphysics at the English Dominican House of Philosophy, takes the opportunity of showing the natural basis for the complete self-dedication of the vow of obedience, so that his words do in fact provide wholesome doctrine for all readers, be they lay or religious. But the final chapters which, as we are publishing the essay serially, will only appear in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* after several months, are concerned more exclusively with the vow of obedience and its implications. We publish below Father Barker's introduction to his essay under the title which he gave to the whole work.

THE EDITOR

THE HUMAN BASIS OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

INTRODUCTORY

BY

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HE subject matter of this essay, in so far as it is concerned with what is called the Obediential Potency, naturally finds no exact place within a course of philosophy properly so-called, when later the student proceeds into formal theology, the divine science, it is customarily assumed that the matter has been already sufficiently studied in the preliminaries to theology. It finds its right place within the Science of fundamental theology, or Apologetics, which deals with the *Præcambula Fidei*, the motives of credibility and similar material. Sometimes, however, its central importance fails to receive adequate attention, and its essential significance, while not being entirely overlooked, rarely obtains the emphasis which is its due. The following pages are intended briefly to co-relate it with the growth of divine action in the soul, and to suggest that the endowment of divine grace progressively proceeds in correspondence with the development of the obediential capacity.

In regard to any movement of God within man beyond the natural human measure, there must be recognised either implicitly or explicitly some native principle of receptivity. If the human being

can be raised up by divine movement to any supernatural activities whether of mind or will, this can only be in so far as there must exist in man what we may call in the most general terms, a capacity to be inspired. The saint and the prophet are understood as beings whose achievements transcend the limitations of their mere human reason. And a certain analogy can be drawn between these and the poet or the hero. The true poet, as much as the saint, will look back upon some product of his pen, and readily affirm that while indeed it did proceed from him, it certainly proceeded from something greater than, and beyond, himself. He may speak of a spirit who moved him, or the gods or muse who inspired him; or more wisely, he will attempt no explanations and remain dumb. But the truer poet he is, the less credit will he take to himself for the poem or the work or wonder that came from his hands. He will be at no pains to explain how it was done; he will hardly know. The right use of his tools will be quite familiar to him; but sometimes, somehow, a rare song, something unique and universal will be thrown off, and looking back upon it, he will wonder how it was done, he will holdly call it inspired, and he will wisely leave it at that.

The saint will be less concerned with what he has done than with Christ present to whom all credit for all is due. And the saint, in ascribing credit to God (like the true poet who credits his best work to the muse), is judging rightly; or so it is the purpose of this essay to show. We are all generally agreed that the heroic in life and deed does historically occur, and we shall be mindful of the martyrs enduring death for their faith with an immovable fortitude, or of saints like Vincent de Paul or the Curé of Ars spending their mortal days in supreme self-sacrifice for the gain of others; or of genius in life like that of St Louis, or in thought like St Thomas Aquinas, or in missionary zeal like St Francis Xavier. Or again, in what we shall call a different order, we may have in mind some genius in poetry like a Dante; or in painting like Cimabue; or in sculpture like Michael Angelo. With artists such as these this essay is not directly concerned, though the mind is instinctively drawn to see a certain analogy between their best works and the supernatural lives of the saints. But in contrasting the histories of St Teresa of Avila and St Catherine of Siena, or the life of St Pius V with that of St John of the Cross, it will be admitted in all such cases that there is surely genius in action and in thought. By that we shall mean the play of the divine within men and women of our mortal kind. Yet, furthermore, while such figures in history have by their canonisation and public influence received renown among men, and their life-stories serve always as examples in which the

practice of docility and receptivity can be best considered, nevertheless it must be borne in mind that this same principle of receptivity is to be found in play whenever men are actuated and guided by divine grace. In the daily life familiar to us all, we are made frequently aware of the unfamed, unpublished faith practised by simple, loyal, devout Catholics, exercising trust and a supernatural hope in God within circumstances which to human reason look hopeless enough, living lives of heroic charity, for no mortal return, but from an eternal and sublime good-will. This conduct or behaviour we necessarily admire, we praise it when we see it, and we regret when we ourselves as individuals do not rise to it; but there is undoubtedly an instinct in man to marvel at such things, the tireless perseverance in pursuit of an ideal, or the heroic patience of the poor.

How then do these achievements occur? Are such things an offence to human reason? If not an offence to the mind, are they in mere accordance with sound judgment, and therefore to be credited simply to the human agents from whom they proceed? Or if they do appear somehow to extend beyond the reach of human reason, must they be attributed to the power of God at play within the soul? And how can such things be? If God does move the Saints with superhuman activity, do they remain free agents and intelligent under such movement? Is there within them naturally any one principle upon which divine action can so build and grow that while the action remains theirs, it is still more to be ascribed to the Creator whose grace moves them to these achievements? These are the obvious questions arising from the facts we have named, questions to which the following essay is an endeavour to give clear and intelligible answers. But it must be seen that a covering answer must deal firstly with the general problem in its essential principles, before being applied to the particular human activities in which the essential principles will be verified. The general problem will need to consider the customary antithesis suggested in the terms *natural* and *supernatural*, marking what is implied by these terms, and indicating the basis upon which their legitimacy rests. It will consider a Providential activity of God intervening within the life of man, disclosing destinies of life and motives of behaviour which human reason itself could not discover or attempt. It will need so to correlate these two apparently antithetic terms, as to preserve the identity of each, to safeguard the nature of each, and to show them not so much antithetic as mutually complementary.

From one point of view at least their mutual relation might be analogous to that between the ancient and the new Covenants, a

relation definitely indicated when Christ said: 'I am come not to destroy the law, but to fulfil'; yet analogous only, and in one similitude only, for both Old and New Law were by definition progressive parts of the same divine intervention which the advent of the Messiah completed, the earlier one prophetic and promisory of the later one in fulfilment; whereas in the correlatives we have here in mind, we have no reason to assume that the one is prophetic of the other, or that the second is a fulfilment of the first. Therefore the material first to be discussed is the distinction of two areas or spheres of action, a human and a divine, from which we may perceive means how man, from an order of activity and fulfilment conforming with his nature, might be raised up by God to an end and mode of activity to which his nature can make no positive claim. Proceeding in this way, we shall need to point out that such an intervention could find within our human nature a certain ledge, as one might say, upon which to rest, and from it to grow or develop without repudiating or depreciating the subject within which it acts. If this primary analysis can be substantiated and verified, it will be possible subsequently to appreciate its application in the sphere of the miraculous, in the difficult problem of obedience, and in the respective references of the human reason to divine revelation, and of human love with charity. In the result there will be seen an order and harmony which are so far from offending the intellectual nature of man that they completely satisfy and fulfil it. Human reason is a true norm, measuring the truths correlative with its nature. If divine truths and supernatural life are offered to it by God, it is reasonable for the human mind to accept that endowment; and the supernatural conditions under which they are given are such as the mind might reasonably expect and can always in strict reason defend. Particular difficulties such as the common and superficial objection to mortification, are easily solved in the light of the broad principle and are rightly passed over in the terms of this essay. Lastly, the fuller development and final perfection of the divine movement in the soul, under the play of the sevenfold Spirit of God through the life of charity, will be found in conformity with the natural aspirations of the soul, and the exact way to its divine destiny.