

PERFECTION AND CONTEMPLATION

IN an age in which no special premium was placed on experimental science St. Thomas did not feel the urge to submit the Christian life to a process of psycho-analysis. He was as convinced of the validity of reason, and the principles derived therefrom, as that the sense are to place us in touch with reality which would otherwise remain a blank to the human mind. In this sense he was an experimentalist, though his aim was not merely to classify phenomena and to place them under generalizations, but rather to deduce from them principles which in the light of reason would be valid at all times and under all circumstances. He believes in basing his conclusions on tested facts, and when it is a question of pure reason he is unwilling to draw conclusions in advance of the evidence. He is more than usually aware that an attitude of mind may be easily coloured by desires, but he is equally assured that under the influence of grace the desire of charity may give a deeper insight into divine truth by immediate intuition.

Through conscious or unconscious prejudices and preconceived attitudes of mind in matters pertaining to the spiritual life, the intellectualism of Thomism does not appeal to all, while many become wary of impending danger. Even those who might well be expected to know better, are afraid of the intimate connection which Dominicans hold to exist between speculative theology and contemplation. This doubtless is in some measure due to the marked contrast which is observed between the writings of St. Thomas and of those who are classified as mystical writers. As Père Garrigou-Lagrange has shown,¹ the difference between St. John of the Cross or St. Teresa and St. Thomas is one of method and not of principle. "In the great sobriety of his language, St. Thomas, expresses the essence of things;

¹ *Christian Perfection and Contemplation.* By Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. Translated by Sister M. Timothea Doyle, O.P. (Herder, 14s.).

without writing of mystical theology, he has given us its principles.”² Indeed theology at its best is not the mere application of natural reason and of philosophy to revealed truth, but it is the elucidation of revealed truth through the agency of a living faith vitally conjoined to reason. The study of divine mysteries appertains to the contemplative life both because the spur to theological speculation is love of the contemplated, and because it removes the perils of heretical thinking which by ignorance may invade the contemplative mind.³ Yet there are different approaches in the study of the same subject. There is the descriptive method of St. Teresa, there is also the scientific method of St. Thomas, and mid-day between the two is St. John of the Cross. To adopt a terminology of M. Maritain, Aquinas is Doctor of a science which is speculatively practical, whilst St. John is Doctor of a science which is practically practical.⁴

In an introductory letter Archbishop McNicholas of Cincinnati observes that there are many who imagine that ascetical and mystical theology is for the select few. “They therefore wrongly think that it is confined to priests, religious, and a few chosen souls in the world. The appearance of Father Garrigou-Lagrange’s work in English should not only aid greatly in dispelling this false idea but should, we trust, lead many to a higher state of perfection and to a closer union with God. It should find a place in the library of every priest and seminarian, in the libraries of sisters’ convents, and in the homes where there is Catholic reading. May *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* awaken in many an appreciation of the higher things of the spiritual life.”

The author insistently defends the unity of Sacred Doctrine and deplures exaggerated distinctions between moral and dogmatic theology, and between ascetical and mystical theology. Sacred doctrine is absolutely one, eminently speculative and practical. Moral theology thus

² *Ibid.*, p. 324.

³ *Summa IIa IIae* 188, v.

⁴ *Les Degrés du Savoir*, p. 632, f. —.

understood as contained in the perfection of sacred doctrine, possesses the principles necessary for leading souls to the highest perfection. "Ascetical and mystical theology is nothing but the application of this broad moral theology to the direction of souls toward ever closer union with God. It presupposes what sacred doctrine teaches about the nature and properties of the Christian virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and it studies the laws and conditions of their progress from the point of view of perfection."⁵

Christian perfection consists essentially in charity, and since the precept of the love of God is without limit, even the perfection of divine love falls within its object. Perfection of the Christian life is therefore not a matter only of counsel but commanded to all. From which three consequences follow. Firstly, progress in the love of God ought to be continual. Secondly, "every Christian, each according to his condition, must strive for the perfection of charity. For each and every one it is a general obligation, and is not reserved to religious or clerics." This will involve the avoidance of mortal and venial sin, and the living in the spirit of the counsels which is compatible with the married state. Thirdly, "since the perfection of charity falls under the precept as the end toward which one must tend, assuredly actual graces are progressively offered to us proportionate to the end to be attained."

Besides the downward tendency of fallen nature, the mediocrity which prevails in Christian living is in large measure attributable to a lowering of the traditional ideal of the Christian life. Thus spiritual writers and others presuppose if they do not expressly affirm that there is only a restricted obligation for ordinary Christians of striving to progress in the spiritual life up to the point that that is required for remaining in a state of grace.⁶ Latent in this idea is the notion that higher forms of close union of the soul with God are outside the normal development of the life of grace, and are therefore not only uncommon but extra-

⁵ *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, pp. 13 f.

⁶ *cfr.* A. Tanquary, *The Spiritual Life*, p. 176, n. 353.

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ordinary. The outcome of this view in actual fact is that the standard of Christian living is reduced to the avoidance of grave sin because it is prohibited by law and incompatible with the state of grace. The attitude is completely negative and devoid of vital activity.

But Father Garrigou-Lagrange has undertaken to display the Christian life in the fulness of its possibilities and splendour. "Since sanctifying grace is the beginning of eternal life, and since every just soul enjoys habitual union with the Blessed Trinity dwelling in it, the mystical union with God, such as it found here on earth in holy souls, appears as the culminating point on earth of the development of the grace of the virtues and of the gifts, and as the normal, even though rather infrequent, prelude to the life of heaven. This mystical union belongs, in fact, to the order of sanctifying grace; it proceeds essentially from the grace of the virtues and of the gifts, and not from graces *gratis datae*, which are transitory and in a sense exterior (as miracles and prophecy) and which may accompany it. The mystical life is Christian life, which has, so to speak, become conscious of itself . . . As the life of grace is essentially ordained to that of glory, the normal, although in fact quite rare, summit of its development should be a very perfect disposition to receive the light of glory immediately after death without passing through purgatory; for it is only through our own fault that we will be detained in that place of expiation, where the soul can no longer merit."⁷

Contemplation which particularly may be arrived at by assiduous prayer, is an intellectual intuition of divine truth accompanied by admiration. When this simple view of revealed truth is the fruit of human effort aided by grace it is called acquired. But when contemplation is such that it is beyond our power to produce without a special superhuman influence of the Holy Ghost exercised through the Gifts, it is properly speaking infused or passive.

Although in infused contemplation the intelligence is

⁷ *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, p. 128.

absorbed by its object through the influence of an outside agency, it is nevertheless a meritorious act. It still remains vitally free and springs from charity. It is one of those acts which comes entirely from God as first cause and entirely from man as second cause. Even Father Baker seems to exclude freedom from these acts and consequently their meritorious quality.⁸

In mystical contemplation the whole soul is inundated by one single and identical act of knowledge and love, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, produced simultaneously by the intellect and will, by faith, charity and wisdom. Faith elicits an act having special reference to a divine object, charity modifies that act by an infusion of love, and the gift of wisdom experimentally bestows an instinctive perception.⁹ No new revelation is imparted but a deepening feeling and insight into that which is already known by faith. But the consciousness of being in a state of grace, or a sense of delight, or the feeling of God's presence is not necessarily associated with the mystical state of infused contemplation.¹⁰ Quite the contrary is the case during certain periods of interior desolation which are recognised nevertheless as mystical states.

By contemplation however the soul may be allowed to feel conscious of God's presence within, and taste a divine sweetness experimentally by an affective knowledge. In this way God may be known, not immediately as He is, but by the effects which He produces in the soul.

The foregoing doctrine has sometimes been erroneously understood as a denial of any real experimental perception of God's presence in the soul.¹¹ In the present translation small opportunity is given for testing the validity of this conclusion, for the simple reason that the section in which Father Garrigou-Lagrange treats *ex professo* of this problem has been omitted. Indeed 331 pages of the second volume

⁸ *Holy Wisdom*, Fourth Treatise, Sect. IV, ch. iv, n. 14.

⁹ *cf.* M. Maritain, *Les Degrés du Savoir*, p. 867.

¹⁰ *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, p. 263.

¹¹ *Western Mysticism*, by Dom Cuthbert Butler, p. lxxv.

of the French original have been left out without the reader being in any way advised of the fact. In spite of other slight liberties the work of translation has been on the whole faithfully done. It is a little unfortunate that one passage which includes a definition of infused contemplation has been substituted by some original lines of the translator, particularly as other writers have thought it sufficiently important to quote it in full.

Following closely St. Thomas the accepted teaching of his most recent exponents is, that in the souls of the just, besides being present by immensity, God is present to them as the object of knowledge and love, and that this new mode of indwelling may give rise to mystical experience. The word "experience" here denotes the knowledge of an object present, when the soul is made patient of an activity exercised upon her by the object, and becomes aware of its presence by the perception of the passion actually sustained. The experience may be called "immediate" in the sense that it takes place without the intermediary of any images of creatures, since it is outside the range of concepts and analogy. No new revelation is implied but a perfecting of faith in the mode of knowing but not with regard to an enlargement of the object known.¹² Under the influence of the Holy Ghost procured through the gifts of understanding and wisdom, love in the soul is transformed into a condition of the *objectum quo*, in and by which a close intimacy is felt between God and the soul. It is not however only the soul's love for God that is experienced, but it is God Himself Whom the soul experiences through its own love.¹³ As Father Garrigou-Lagrange insists in the French edition, God really present, makes His presence felt and is really experienced. This realisation is consequent on the immediate union of the soul with God by charity. It is attained by a faith illuminated through the Gifts of the Holy Ghost in the manner described by St. John of the Cross. Because but few souls are completely docile and responsive to the promptings of

¹² *cf.* M. Maritain, *op. cit.* p. 522.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 517, 518.

divine grace, the normal perfection of the Christian life is rarely found.

“Although in this life wisdom remains in the obscurity of faith, without seeing God as He is, nevertheless it contemplates Him in His intimate life in the measure in which we have experimental knowledge of Him as the soul of our soul, the life of our life. As we take cognizance of our soul in our actions, so, in a certain way, we have a quasi-experimental knowledge of God by the action He exercises in us and by the spiritual joy and peace we experience therefrom.”¹⁴ In this way the gift of wisdom is seen to be the most perfect of all, and exerts the same influence over the other gifts as charity does over the virtues. But often it displays itself in a practical form in those given to an active life, such as St. Vincent de Paul, enabling them to behold in the poor, the sick, and the abandoned, the suffering members of Christ’s mystical body.

We cannot but be grateful that this authoritative work has at last been made accessible to English readers, that they may learn the great ideals of Christian perfection after which they may aspire without presumption. They will likewise have the opportunity of learning that discursive meditation with its mechanical processes need not be the only and life-long prayer to be aimed at.

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¹⁴ *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, p. 305.