

PERFECTION AND IMPERFECTION

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IT is a commonplace to say that charity is the fulfilment of the law. Did not St Paul say that charity is 'the bond of perfection'? Charity is to the soul as the soul is to the life of the body, since it is the well-spring of our love of God, which in its expansiveness goes out to all others who claim our love. The love of God cannot stand still if it is not to become retarded and to lose its grip on the spirit. 'In the way of God, he who does not go forward falls backwards.'¹ It is within human power, with the grace of God, to desire a greater love of God. As St Francis of Sales said, 'The disgusted sick man has no appetite for eating, yet has he an appetite to have an appetite; he desires no meat, but he desires to desire it.'² This desire for perfection is the combined action of God's grace and the human will. But the desire itself may easily weaken, or be absent altogether. According to St Bernard, the way of loving God is to love him without measure.³ So that to love God perfectly is something more than to remain in a state of grace; but charity may only be called perfect when it is active, prompt and ardent.

St Paul has disclosed one of the secrets of Christian living in his injunction, 'whether you eat or drink, or whatsoever else you do, do all to the glory of God'. (I Cor. 10, 31.) Actions like eating and drinking can be done without any very explicit conscious motive or religious purpose. Are such actions or any others so done of no moral worth whatsoever? And are they devoid of merit and irrelevant to the pursuit of a perfect charity? These are more weighty questions than they at first appear to be.

St Gregory the Great in his *Pastoral Care* recalls to mind the severe teaching of our Lord when he said, 'Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall render an account for it in the day of judgment.' (Matt. 12, 36.) St Gregory explains that 'a word is idle that has no justification of real necessity, or no intention of pious

¹ St Thomas on Ephesians, c. iv, lect. V.

² *Treatise on the Love of God*, Bk. xii, c. II.

³ *De diligendo Deo*, cap. I.

usefulness'.⁴ These few concise words gave rise to a stream of theological speculation and a more precise determination of Christian tradition. St Thomas Aquinas adopts the thought of St Gregory, and makes his own personal contribution: 'A word is idle that has no intention of a pious will, or the justification of real necessity'.⁵

The way of perfection can only be safely followed by means of a good conscience, which requires the power of careful discrimination between good and evil.

When a child arrives at the age of discretion he begins to discern the difference between right and wrong, though not in all its fullness until he is properly instructed, and has attained to a realization of the implications of life. But many adults remain in a state of arrested development and may lack a sense of values with regard to right and wrong. This may be due to ill-instruction, and ignorance of various kinds, not always devoid of culpability, or to the general process of indoctrination to which we are all submitted in the modern world, and which penetrates even into the privacy of family life through the radio and television.

Reason is a rich endowment given to man by God, enabling him to direct his life to his end in accordance with God's divinely established order. This faculty is like a beam of reflected light derived from God's intellect. 'The light of thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us', says the psalmist (Ps. 4, 7). By the light of reason man is enabled to see what is good, and to be guided in his will in the accomplishment of what is right, because in harmony with the eternal law. But in addition to this reflected light God has looked to the need of wayward man, and given to him further enlightenment by means of the ten commandments and other revelation.⁶ Thus the world has not been left to its own devices to discover unaided what is right and wrong in human behaviour. And none but the feeble-minded and the half-wits can fail to see at a glance the most elementary and basic principles of moral conduct, which are applied as axioms in daily life.

There are many actions which are done as spontaneous movements without the slightest deliberation or thought. Many of these are not under the mastery of the will at all, and we shall not

⁴ St Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis, S.J. Ancient Christian Writers, vol. XI, p. 133. Pt III of the *Regula*, c. 14.

⁵ In II Sent. d. 40, a. 5, ad 8.

⁶ St Thomas, *Summa*, I-II, 91, 4.

be charged with responsibility with regard to them, unless through negligence or lack of due care they could have been prevented. Thus the driver of a car who exceeds the speed limit and so undeliberately drives dangerously, cannot be judged entirely free from guilt if he knock down a pedestrian crossing the road.

But all calculated wilful action must be either good or bad, i.e. morally right or wrong, for which the person doing it is held answerable before God and in his own conscience. There is no room for an action in between the two, an action that is indifferent and without any moral value. Even actions which are in themselves neutral such as eating and drinking, or taking a walk, are in reality and in the concrete either good or bad according to the purpose for which they are undertaken. They must needs be either in harmony with reason—the standard and gauge of morality—in which case they are good; or they are out-of-harmony, and evil. They will either be in accordance with virtue, and therefore good, or they will be contrary to virtue, and so vicious. There is no medium. The determining factors in deciding the appropriateness or otherwise of any action are the nature of the thing that is done, why it is done, and the circumstances in which it is done. It will appear to reason that to take another's property is wrong. It will likewise be seen as wrong to cultivate another's friendship in order to commit fraud. Both faith and reason indicate that deliberately to think of other things at prayer time, or to talk needlessly in church are wrong. There is a time and place for everything!

The fact of the matter is that good and evil are more opposed to each other than light is to darkness, or sight to blindness. Even one who is not in a state of grace can still perform acts which are morally good and worthy of praise, as for instance an act of mercy in giving an alms, a good act though it is not meritorious without grace. So too the hardened sinner who knowingly perpetrates a crime commits sin and is held blameworthy by God, even though he may have grown insensible and unaware of religion.

Furthermore, all good acts which are performed by one in a state of grace are meritorious for eternal life. Because every act of virtue performed by one in a state of grace is charged with the efficacy of charity which turns every virtue Godwards. And so

the simplest acts in life, when performed with due moderation and with a sense of doing what is right, are not only good but meritorious. And even eating and drinking and the playing of games are brought under the control of the special virtues of temperance and eutrapelia, to secure virtuous moderation in all things in response to right reason.

There is another type of action which goes by the name of 'imperfection', which too often receives a large measure of tolerance, on the plea that an imperfection is not a sin. This may be an easy solution but not a true one. Doubtless there are many human shortcomings and weaknesses which are in no sense wilful, though had they been wilful they would be sinful. A case in point would be involuntary distractions in prayer, not due to negligence or sloth. Similarly some awkwardness of manner hurtful to others, or entering noisily into a church and so disturbing others. Certainly these defects are imperfections but not sins, though we should try to lessen their number by a better awareness and a charitable consideration for others.

But there is still another kind of so-called 'imperfection' which consists in the deliberate omission of a work of counsel. St Thomas does not dwell on this particular moral defect, for the simple reason that he does not recognize a morally defective act which is not sinful. Every deliberate action is either good or bad, and as we have said, there is no such thing in real life as an indifferent act which is neither good nor bad. It is difficult to excuse from sin the deliberate omission without justification of a work, although only of counsel, which the reason has declared to be the best, here and now. When this is due to apathy it is a venial sin.⁷

The omission of an undertaking which is not of precept cannot certainly be in itself wrong. But it does not thereby follow that all such omissions are free from blame. The perfection of charity falls under precept, and imposes an obligation to use the necessary means for its attainment. Nobody, however, unless he is pledged to God in a very special way, is bound at all times, when confronted with alternatives, to take the best or most perfect course. Though to refuse to do what is of counsel for no good reason, merely because it is not an obligation would be 'an idle choice having no justification of pious usefulness or real necessity'.

One of the most touching scenes in the Gospel is that of the

⁷ *Summa*, II-II, 54, 3.

rich young man who, when called upon by our Lord to renounce his worldly possessions and to follow him, went away sad. Although our Lord's words do not contain more than an invitation, the young man does not appear to be entirely free from guilt. (Cf. Matt. 19, 21.) And so it may be with those who reject the religious or priestly vocation, or who without good motive do not answer the voice of conscience urging them in matters of counsel, such as the hearing of Mass on a week-day, or the saying of morning and night prayers, or the more exact keeping of a religious rule.

The intimate relationship of the soul with God as a living person, described by Francis Thompson in *The Hound of Heaven*, cannot be measured simply by the foot-rule of casuistry. St John of the Cross, whilst distinguishing between imperfections and venial sin, clearly teaches that voluntary imperfections may be venial sins, preventing not only the attainment of divine union, but also progress in perfection.⁸ And he adds, giving a comparison, 'it is the same thing if a bird be held by a slender cord or by a stout one; since, even if slender, the bird will be as well held as though it were stout, for so long as it breaks it not and flies not away. It is true that the slender one is easier to break; still, easy though it be, the bird will not fly away if it be not broken.'

What has been written is not intended to create a needless scrupulosity, by making mountains out of mole-hills, or by turning the innocent into guilty. But the warning of Holy Writ cannot be ignored, that the just man shall fall seven times in the day and shall rise up again (Prov. 24, 16). And a sensitive conscience is a gift of God, which like a precision instrument must be followed lest the soul become deaf to divine inspirations.

That which is in itself best may not be so in fact for each individual. Yet without good cause to withstand the dictate of a properly informed conscience in matters of counsel is to repudiate the known will of God, the gravity of which will depend on circumstances and the nature of the case.

⁸ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, ch. xi, 4.