

GRACE BUILDS ON NATURE

BY

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CERTAIN definite effects of divine grace operative through the Church may well be marked off; for in the Church the liberating and redemptive process is to be seen in full career. The Catholic axiom that grace does not mar nature but perfects it, is no empty phrase; nay rather, it epigrammatically states the exact Catholic doctrine, or the Catholic claim, in the teaching of the Church.

A first element in that doctrine declares that divine grace is a healing, a remedial principle in human life; and any impartial and reasonable examination of the Sacraments at work in the Church, of the purpose of daily Communion to which she urges her children, of the guidance for social conduct and international relations that periodically is given from the See of her supreme Head upon earth, will reveal more than enough evidence of the medicinal activity and the corrective influences which Christ authorised in the Apostolate which he committed to his Church. The evils in individuals, in human society, and in social relationships arise from no blind destiny moulded by material environment. Even if the Calvinism of the past still lingers sufficiently in our Western tradition to impose something like a mood of despair upon most men outside the Church, it is none the less an error of the mind, all the more apparent when it produces, as so often it does, a kind of paralysis hindering all serious reform.

But the evils in human society arise solely from private individual wills, men bound down by their own evil choice; and the cause now, as in all times, has been the human infirmity called sin; and the only serious reform, individual, social, political, must first deal with that. Christ came to heal that. All his precepts, all his counsels, all his divine tasks were to deliver men from that. To the woman in the Gospel he said: 'Where are they that accuse thee? Hath no man condemned thee? Who said: no man, Lord. And Jesus said: neither will I condemn thee; go, and now sin no more.' (John 8, 10-11.)

This same personal address, the same individual contact, the same rescuing process still continues wherever the Church sends her priests, and while world-wide she preaches the divine reproaches, world-wide she distributes the divine mercies and pardons of her Master, Christ. She is often feared; in this country generally by

those who have no experience whatsoever of her, save through the legends of her enemies. But she is also reasonably feared and sharply hated, and always by those who would oppress mankind, the powerful agents of the wealth of the world, the corruptive agents trading on the weakness of the flesh, the purveyors of sophistries whose delight is to dazzle and mislead mankind. But this experience of hatred has been familiar to her from the beginning, and she grows stronger as her persecutors seem to prevail. Then in her memory she best understands the divine promise in which Christ for all time identified her with himself: 'Who hears you, hears me; who despises you, despises me'. And in the immovable strength and mercy of her divine Founder she goes forward on her healing mission, not always and at once concerned with the material needs of men, but always and immediately concerned with the moral and material failures; rescuing, redeeming, forgiving, reconciling, healing with the *Gratia Sanans* of her divine Master, whose life and work on earth she continues.

But not only is the grace of Christ thus remedial of our individual sin, and reconciling the souls of men to God; it is furthermore a high sanctifying agency exalting the human will, informing the mind with his supreme purpose in human life, and divinely ennobling our whole being. By it is guarded and nourished the hidden life of personal unity with Christ. Through the sacramental system of the Church her children are led individually first to their own interior unity with their divine redeemer, and then to a full participation in his redemptive mission on earth. Here again her birthright is by sanction from the Father, and of the Eternal Word. The small group in which he first gathered his church together grew quickly to a vast throng encircling the earth: universal in time, universal in space, and similarly universal in gathering up all human effort into the living activity of the Word made flesh. 'I am the Vine, you are the branches; he that abideth in me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit, for without me you can do nothing. If any one abide not in me, he shall be cast forth as a branch and shall wither; and they shall gather him up, and cast him into the fire and he burneth. If you abide in me and my words in you, you shall ask whatever you will; and it shall be done to you. In this is my Father glorified, that you bring forth very much fruit and become my disciples.' (John 15.)

By the real presence within this mortal frame of this divine principle of action, a messianic nobility, a spiritual dignity and an immeasurable value give honour to every good and just action of human life. With this vocation in view it is difficult here not to

recall the ancient distinction of the Greeks between the measurable and the unmeasured, between the ordinary and the heroic, between the careful prudence of man and the inspired impulse that came from the divine. Aristotle has distinguished the small and earth-bound actions by which the ordinary man of reasonable prudence sought the common rewards of such effort from the noble and generous acts by which rare individuals could be lifted up into immortal rank, dedicated in the pursuit of supreme virtue, crowned in their deeds with divinity. These were the Heroes whose activities exceeded mere human measurement, whose achievements were superhuman, whose fame was not of man but of God.

Thus even in the sound common sense and plain ethics of the Greek philosopher there was already foreshadowed in the gropings of human reason a distinction whose significance and applications might be transferred into spheres of life which Aristotle had no reason to divine. There would be no purpose in his imagining how *all* human action could be saved to God, how *all* mortals might be raised to immortality, how any man's days might be, in daily communion, consecrated by God. For there needs now no learned study of the doctrine of the Incarnation to discover how that act of God was to touch and beatify all human activities with the splendour of the divine. Since the coming of Christ nothing henceforth could be trivial or common, for Christ had died to redeem all. When 'he who was in the form of God, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of man, and in habit found as a man', he achieved a revolution in human conditions which potentially raised up all human action to his own divine level.

His consubstantial Sonship was no mere figure of speech, and the adoptive sonship to which he called mankind was a super-human exaltation of human life in all its articulations, to which created nature of itself could make no claim, from which human nature by its mere natural powers was excluded. Henceforth, the man in whom Christ's grace dwells, who now in divine grace lives, moves and has his being, such a man is no longer tied down to the frontiers imposed on him by earth. There lives within him a principle of thought and movement which links him through Christ to the eternal Fatherhood of God, rescuing his life from merely mortal significance, and informing his every action with a motive, a spirit and an effect which are infinite and eternal. 'I am come that they might have life, and life more abundantly.' Henceforth, by this principle, all human action is called to be heroic; all human endeavour is given an aim and a power that are beyond the dreams of this world. And it is to be particularly observed that this trans

forming activity of God is not by the Church restricted to the lives of those renowned in her annals by the public and formal canonisation of their virtues. Of these saints raised to her altars, she does indeed guarantee and affirm the heroic quality of their religious life. But the same principle is declared to be at work in every soul that, by prayer, and communion in the sacraments of Christ, enjoys a living and personal unity with him.

The grace of this unity is principally in the mind by faith, and by charity in the will directive of all the human faculties. The charity of Christ is during our life on earth the source or spring from which all action and all work are to be consecrated; and the point to be emphasised here is that by this divine grace the soul with all its faculties of mind and body is brought up to a status and a mode of being that is real participation of the incarnate Word of God. If there now continues a dualism of elements in the converted soul, it is a dualism far different from that condemned by the writer quoted earlier. It is simply not the fact that some events and some states of mind are natural and others supernatural, or that every agent and every state of mind is either one or the other. The truth rather is that charity, faith, grace are essentially divine gifts in the supernatural order; and therefore in the human being now endowed with these every faculty is given a new orientation and is supplemented and caught up into a mode of being infinitely superior to the nature thus hallowed. It is at once both natural and supernatural, natural as the living subject which receives, supernatural by the motive and the life received; and it is the more perfectly natural, the more complete is its supernatural elevation by grace. For the gift is given not to destroy nature but divinely to perfect it.

Probably this truth will appear most unexpected to the modern groups outside the Church, whose partial abandonment of the Christian creed has led them to assume a real antithesis and opposition between the activities which are called secular and those which are known as religious. By many such people it does seem to be accepted that the religious element in one's life is a thing apart, a side-issue, or a department of the individual's being hardly connected at all with his other activities. 'Religion' is taken to be an unimportant private affair, or the assessment of a man's emotional preferences, of no evident connection with his trade or profession, his politics or sport. To those who inherit such an idea the news which the Church announces will come as a strange surprise, but it is news that will satisfy rather than repel the intelligent mind. 'Secular' and 'religious' will no longer be terms in opposition. By 'religious'

will be meant attention and action given immediately to God; by 'secular' will be meant those temporal and material duties and tasks which not immediately but mediately are ordained to God, for immediately they are ordained to proximate and temporal ends, but subordinately and ultimately they are ordained to the final end who is God. But all things are then in order, and all activities are then honoured with ultimate significance, for all things are restored in Christ.

To understand this truth is to explain and wholly to justify the zeal of the missionary, who conceives his vocation not simply as organised philanthropy, or a mere agency for some national, local and temporal civilisation; still less as a channel to further political prestige or commercial advantage; but strictly and solely as a divinely conceived and authorised mission to gather all men of all nations with all their native concerns into the redemptive and divinising company of Christ. Lest such phrases as these may seem too general to bring home the change in life that divine grace would achieve, it will always be necessary to keep in view the way of harmony between grace and nature which God perfects in his saints. His instituted sacraments were to be the means by which he initiates first the children, received into his fold through baptism, sheltered already in infancy by the cherished tradition of the Holy Family in which God himself had been the Child. Within that living tradition a mother's daily domestic round of toil became immediate worship that made honourable the mother because it gave full adoration to God. From this spring came the Christian tradition of the Catholic home, in which the human task of motherhood is dedicated by nuptial grace; where husband venerates wife and wife honours husband; and children are born to them to be prepared in the grace of a human home, for the eternal home of Heaven. Christ growing up, a child, a youth, took his place easily enough among the craftsmen of the village, and all work was good because all work was the doing of his Father's will. In a thousand Christian workshops for centuries after that tradition endured, and the unknown artists of Christendom who covered Europe with the splendours of stone and wood and fine glass might well all have lived and worked under the motto of the last of the prophets: 'He must increase and I must decrease'. In this they found a worthy motive for their labours; not merely human gain or human applause but first to praise God, and honour their divine Fellow-craftsman who was his son. They were artists all, heralds of the splendours of God; and in giving praise to his name they discovered true inspiration in their hearts and in their hands. Western Europe still shows

abundant evidence of their achievements; and admittedly since the catastrophic apostacies of the sixteenth century no like inspiration has been found. By the grace of God Catholic workmen could excel themselves in the work that was worship, and beauty flourished, flowered, simply so to say occurring, when an absolute and divine motive led their desires.

In other spheres of human action a similar order could prevail. By effect of the Confessional avarice could be rebuked and restrained. In public esteem justice could be effectively invoked, and the social pressure of charity guide its rule. The material and social inequalities that necessarily accompanied the varieties of status and function within the community could be neutralised and mitigated by communion in the Mass where individuals of all ranks were immediately united in prayer with the divine Redeemer inviting all immeasurably to himself. From the real tradition which he inaugurated, continued and developed in the lives of his saints, there was always a standard by which the arrogance of wealth could be corrected, and a ministry maintained, upholding the dignity of the poor. There is nothing utopian in the conception of such a society, and neither the efforts of agnostic historians unwittingly depreciating the ages of the faith, nor the zeal of Catholic writers honouring their genius, can conceal the spiritual ideas directing their life. Even to some modern reformers who would own no allegiance to the Church, the legends of the Catholic period have seemed worthy of study; and amid the babel of opinions clamouring in contemporary England, even non-Catholic writers have remembered the old Guilds of craftsmen, and have dreamed of a state whose lawyers would be vowed to poverty, whose doctors would be priestly, and their citizens free-men, owning their own homes and their workshops.

Such a state can be brought about, the Catholic Church affirms, by restoring all things in Christ, by treasuring afresh the grace of God, by man becoming receptive, inspired, moved by the living Redeemer.

This perfecting by grace, this rescue of the native thing which God came on earth to effect, this consecration and sanctification of all human toils by the redemptive sacrifice of Christ: this is the enduring good news which the Church will proclaim. The marrying of grace and nature is not a material juxtaposition of alien, incompatible and irreconcilable elements. The one God who created our nature is the same one God who brings it healing grace.

In subsequent articles an effort will be made to show how this unity of the two orders may be possible. No human reasoning, nor

merely human effort can bring it about. But in plain reason we shall maintain that if God so wills, and man would receive, then by divine power this can be done; with no incongruous or artificial separation of spheres; but rather with added power and honour to man who receives, and a more perfect manifestation of the mercy of God given; who out of nothing created the world, out of evil draws good, out of error draws the truth, and out of our human weaknesses and failings can raise saints to his own celestial company.



A NOTE ON THE FAMILY SPIRIT

IN the recent discussions in these pages on the nature of perfection and its bearing on religious life, one aspect of this life has not, perhaps, been sufficiently stressed. We are experiencing in our times a remarkable renaissance of the contemplative spirit. Many souls in all walks of life are thirsting for God. Some, interpreting this thirst in the terms of religious vocation, offer themselves to one or other of the religious orders, only to find after a period of probation that they are not suited to religious life.

The Catholic girl of today, while keenly interested in the doctrine of the Mystical Body, capable of grasping its implications and discussing it from all points of view, nevertheless, on entering religion, often finds it difficult to adjust herself and to live in harmony with the other members of the family. Perhaps one of the reasons for this may be that her previous background and training have not prepared her for living in a family. In the old days—and not so very old either—a girl growing up in a large family learned to give and take as a matter of course. She acquired many of the moral virtues by rubbing up against the other members of the family. Consideration for others, tact, a certain good-humoured acceptance of home-truths formed part of her everyday life. She learned to be loyal to the family code of honour. At the cost of personal inconvenience, social engagements had to be fulfilled through courtesy to the hostess, who would not be let down at the last moment and so on. Now, all these conditions of family life find their exact counterpart in religion. The difficult character in the family is also a difficult character in the community; personal eccentricities are just as tiresome in religious life as in home life—for religious life is essentially family life, lived on a supernatural level and for a supernatural motive, but still family life *par excellence*.

It is a truism to say that the school cannot do what home-training has failed to do; neither can the noviciate compensate for the lack