

solemnly in the name of the Church seven times a day; and private prayer in all its forms rising ceaselessly to God.

(c) ZEAL IN SELF-SACRIFICE (*Devovendi se Studium*): which will lead them to undertake works of self-denial, whether prescribed by the rule and constitutions or purely voluntary, in addition to the trials which arise from the communal life and faithful observance of the rule. In this way they generously fill up 'those things that are wanting to the sufferings of Christ for his body which is the Church'.

[The articles of the GENERAL STATUTES FOR NUNS which follow this Constitution will be published in the January, 1952, issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.]



## NOTES ON CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATION AND PERFECTION

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A CONVENIENT text for these notes is provided by 'A Challenge from the Cloister', printed in the May issue of the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT. It begins: 'A Carmelite life in the world does not seem to be really possible'. There is much confusion of mind implicit in this statement, but its elucidation does not call for any profound analysis of the nature of man or the nature of grace. The whole matter is stated quite simply and explicitly by St Thomas, in the *Summa*, not as a personal and novel view. What is found there is the traditional teaching of the Church.

'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.' The perfection of the Christian life is the perfection of charity. And this perfection is the highest possible; no one can do better than have perfect charity. Furthermore, perfect charity is the vocation of all, without exception. There is not a minimum charity to which all are called, and then over and above this a maximum charity, the vocation of the perfect. It is not only an invitation; it is a command. With the grace of faith, the obligation is laid on us all to seek the high perfection of union with God through love, and this is our happiness.

The life of charity is, of its nature, both contemplative and

active. St Thomas says: 'The last and perfect happiness which we await in the life to come consists entirely in contemplation. But imperfect happiness, such as can be had here, consists first and principally in contemplation, and secondarily in an operation of the practical intellect directing human actions and passions.' (I-II, 3, 5.) Life in this world in the body makes the vision of God impossible, but the charity that we have here transcends the limitations of bodily existence. Charity is not proper to this world, like faith and hope. But even here in the world it urges us to a union that shares the characteristics of vision of God in heaven. Charity in this world is primarily contemplative, prayerful. But even at its highest and noblest this is very far from being the vision of God, or even being the only proper union with God through charity. As if to compensate itself for its contemplative imperfections, it urges us, according to our own nature as well as its own, in another direction. It takes under its wing all those other non-contemplative spheres proper to our human nature. It is not Christian to regard eating and drinking, working and playing, etc., as nuisances to be tolerated so that for brief periods we can indulge in loving God by retiring to contemplate. Each moment of human existence is, by the power of charity, made part of our life of the love of God. Eating is not just a physical operation with us. It is human, it is noble; the virtue of temperance is there. The word temperance, like all the words we have to describe these great realities, is a poor instrument, but usage has beggared it beyond all reason. Temperance is not a niggardly, mean, shame-faced device that the fortunate are able to muster when animal weakness exposes them to the danger of becoming the slaves of bodily pleasure, rather like the dyspeptic who rushes from the table to the bath-room to take a little white tablet. Temperance is a noble thing; it is a theme of the Gospels. Temperance was present when the water was changed into wine. Temperance allows us to marvel at the holiness of bread and wine. Temperance came into its own at the last supper, when holy bread became the Holy Bread; when bread, as a sign of the love of God, (which it is), became the Love of God.

Temperance is noble because charity makes it so. St Thomas puts it, almost prosaically, when he shows how charity is the form of the virtues. 'Charity is said to be the form of the virtues, not by way of exemplar or essentially, but in so far as it moves them

to their end.' (II-II, 23, 8.) We call this active charity as distinct from the contemplative charity mentioned above. St Thomas makes it quite clear that contemplative charity is more perfect than active charity, the contemplative happiness possible in this world more perfect than the operation of the practical intellect directing human actions and passions; but it would be the greatest mistake to think that the latter is any the less a proper sphere of charity as we have it in this world. We find St Thomas saying, even of that high contemplative gift of the Holy Ghost called Wisdom, the gift that is so fully developed in the great mystics of the Church, that it is not solely directed to God as an object of contemplation. 'As Augustine says, (*De Trinit*, xii) the higher part of the reason is the province of wisdom, while the lower part is the domain of knowledge. Now the higher reason . . . is intent on the consideration and consultation of the heavenly, i.e., the divine types; it considers them in so far as it contemplates the divine things in themselves and it consults them in so far as it judges of human acts by divine things, and directs human acts by divine rules.' (II-II, 45, 3.) 'The higher a virtue is, the greater number of things to which it extends. . . . Wherefore from the very fact that wisdom as a gift is more perfect than wisdom as an intellectual virtue, since it attains to God more intimately by a kind of union of the soul with him, it is able to direct us not only in contemplation but also in action.' (ibid.) Wisdom, that stretches from end to end mightily and disposes all things sweetly.

This then is the pattern of the Christian life. It is inevitably contemplative and active. Charity is its root and ground and charity itself is neither contemplative nor active; it is potentially more perfect than either. And standing facing charity within us, our love of God, corresponding to it and the cause of it, is the Love of God itself, in the Sacrifice of the Mass. God so loved the world as to send his only begotten Son, and that great act of the Love of God, incarnate and sacrificed is present for us in the Mass. And that too, even more perfectly, transcends the division between contemplation and action. It is more perfect than either because it is the point at which both fuse, and are transformed into a simple participation in the Love of God. It is only when we leave that kind of participation and descend to this world that we seek to rediscover it, first in contemplation and then in action, first in prayer and then in eating. There is no Christian life that

can consist in either one or the other. The range of virtues, faith, hope, charity; prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, are not displayed before us so that we can choose from amongst them a weapon or weapons to suit our tastes or temperament. We not only possess them all with sanctifying grace, we are under an obligation to use them all, though the divinely appointed circumstances of our lives will dictate different emphasis for each one of us.

This is the pattern of the Christian life but it is not the whole story unfolded for us by St Thomas. The Church in this world is not a mere collection of individuals. It is itself a body, a person, the Mystical Body of Christ. It is the Mystical Christ in the world. Each one not only lives the whole life of Christ in his own person, but also does so by taking his place in the mystical life of Christ in the World. The place we are each called to take is different. 'There are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit. There are diversities of ministries but the same Lord. There are diversities of operations but the same God who worketh all in all.' As regards Christ present within us there are no diversities. Each has the same grace and range of graces, stemming out from charity, prayerfully and actively, the same one Sacrifice of the Mass, containing the high and perfect love of God to which we are called. In that context the only diversity is one of degree of charity. But from the standpoint of our place in the life of the Mystical Christ in the world there are these three points of difference: differences of graces, ministries and operations. In other words the divine circumstances in which we are each called to live the full life of Christ differ. We usually refer to these differences by speaking of the different vocation of each one. These different vocations can be compared amongst themselves in terms of the more perfect and less perfect. We say this vocation is more perfect than that, the office of the bishop is more perfect than the status of the lay man, the religious life is more perfect than the married life, the contemplative is more perfect than the active life. But it must be remembered that in so doing we are not talking of the more radical Christian vocation, which is the same for all, and we must also remember that to compare vocations in this second sense is to compare one place in the mystical life of Christ with another. The primary relation of *our* place in the Church is its relation to ourselves, and not to other people. And in that context, it is not only the best

for us, it is the only one. Any other vocation is less perfect. If in fact I am not a religious and not able to be a religious, then all hankering for the perfection of the religious state means possibly neglecting my own perfect vocation; a vocation that, whatever it is, contains for me the full perfection of the life of charity.

*Diversities of graces.* These provide no difficulty at all, when we see what St Paul has in mind: 'The word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, the grace of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, the discerning of spirits, divers kinds of tongues, interpretation of speeches'. These gifts have, from time to time, been given to individuals. But obviously the possession of them, or the use of them, does not in itself make that individual necessarily more perfect. They are for the good of others.

*Diversities of ministries.* 'God indeed hath set some in the Church: first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly doctors.' The place of some in the life of the Church is a vocation to fill an office. Some offices like that of bishop is in itself a state of perfection. But clearly being in that state of perfection is not identical with being in a state of personal Christian perfection. Nor does it imply that one with a vocation to such a state of perfection has a special vocation to a higher Christian perfection. These offices, like the graces, are primarily for the perfection of others.

Under diversities of ministries, St Thomas includes the religious state. And that itself is enlightening. In other words, the life of the vows is to be seen first of all as part of the life of the Church, and not as a call to certain individuals to a life more perfect than the Christian life of charity. It is a 'state', made so by the Church. It is the *state* that is in itself more perfect than the lay state. The individual religious strives after the perfection of his state, tries to make it his own by the exercise of the same charity that is common to all the faithful. Like the other ministries it has a functional purpose in the life of the Church. Its perfection consists in the richness it contributes to the life of the Church, not in isolation, but precisely as existing side by side with the lay state. The vow of virginity in the life of the Church is not a movement away from marriage; it contributes to the sanctity of marriage. The contrast is one of relation, not of opposition. It is true the two are mutually exclusive, but their very exclusiveness is complementary. They are for each other. The vow of virginity is what it is, not because marriage is a bad thing, but because it is a good thing. The social

value of the state of virginity is to make marriage more holy. In this sense, the perfection of the religious state is a thing that belongs to the whole Church and is shared by the whole Church.

*Diversities of operations.* St Thomas explains this as meaning what we usually call the 'contemplative life' and the 'active life'. It is a special use of the word 'life'. This distinction is not the same as that between the religious state and lay state, and furthermore it must be clearly distinguished from the Christian life of charity, which is both contemplative and active. These diversities of 'life', like the other diversities, belong primarily to the life of the Church as such, and contribute to its richness. Their difference consists in the different ways in which the basic element of the Christian life, the contemplative and the active, can be related and organised. Either the exercise of the moral virtues can be made directly to serve the practice of contemplative prayer, or prayer can be practised directly to serve a life of good works. It is open to anyone so to organise his life. There are many people who make the practice of prayer and meditation the principle thing in their lives; there are many more people who regard their faith and the practice of it as something to be passed on, and spend their energies and time in various apostolic works. But it is amongst the religious orders that these two 'lives' stand out and contribute much to the richness of the life of the Church, a richness shared by the whole Church.

Because the Church is a body, all these diversities can be called diversities of bodily organs, and as with the organs of the body, there is an order amongst them and an order that can be stated in terms of the more and less perfect. St Paul had to remind the Corinthians that if they were going to concern themselves with the special graces, then let them covet the best: 'I would have you all to speak with tongues, but rather to prophesy, for greater is he that prophesyeth than he that speaketh with tongues'. But all these diversities are centred round the office of the bishop; his is the most perfect 'life' in the Church. And this is particularly true of the Bishop of Rome, who, with the body of bishops, is the manifestation and organ of the Church in its essence, that is to say in its unity. He is the vicar of Christ, the Head of the Church. The head is the most noble organ of the body; it is the organ that directs, co-ordinates and uses the others. All these diversities take their place and fulfil their purpose by sharing in some way in the

perfection of the episcopal office, and by being fit instruments to be used by the head of the Church for the spread of the gospel.

It is comforting to note that in the very earliest days of the Church there was already confusion in the minds of the faithful between the perfections that belong to these diversities of grace, ministry and operation on the one hand, and the perfection of the life of charity on the other. 'God indeed hath set some in the Church: first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly doctors, after that the graces, of healing, helps, governments, kinds of tongues, interpretations of speeches. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all doctors? Are all workers of miracles? Have all the grace of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But be zealous for the better gifts. And I show unto you yet a more excellent way. If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and should know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I should have all faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.'

'A Carmelite life in the world does not really seem to be possible . . .' A Carmelite life is the Christian life, contemplative and active, lived in the religious state of perfection, and organised as the contemplative 'life'. It is not possible to be in the religious state and the lay state at the same time. But this is a very misguided and misleading statement if it means that the highest Christian perfection, contemplative and active, is not possible in the world. It is not only possible, it is of obligation. It can even take the form of the contemplative 'life'. To quote further from the 'Challenge from the Cloisters': '. . .for the essential "stripping" could never be accomplished outside the Enclosure or the rule, nor could it be born.' 'Stripping' is not a process peculiar to the enclosed, contemplative, religious life. It is part and parcel of the Christian life. All the vows have their corresponding elements in the life of Christian virtue: obedience, chastity, and detachment from things. We are not Christian till we are poor in spirit, chaste and obedient. Indeed in many ways the 'stripping' is more rigorous for those in the world. To think that it is 'rare for God to give grace to get rid of self in all its forms to people living in the world', shows a very limited experience of people living in the world, and a very contorted view of the nature of the spiritual life, and possibly a mistaken view of the power of grace.

To quote again from the 'Challenge': 'It seems a great pity that so much is made of the "Contemplative Life" in the world now'. Perhaps this is true. It is possible that too much is made of the 'Contemplative Life', and too little of the contemplative life that is the perfection of the Christian life. Our Lord's was neither a contemplative 'life' nor an active 'life'. It is with his eyes on the supreme model that St Thomas makes his final comment about the relation between contemplation and action: 'It is clear that when a person is called from contemplation to action, this is done not by way of subtraction, but of addition'. And again: 'The contemplative life is, absolutely speaking, more perfect than the active life because the latter is taken up with bodily actions; yet that form of the active life in which a man by preaching and teaching, delivers to others the fruits of his contemplation, is more perfect than the life that stops at contemplation because such a life is built on an abundance of contemplation, and consequently such was the life chosen by Christ'. (III, 40, 1.)

The perfect life is the Christ-like life and the pattern of it is *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*. No one can do this so fully as a bishop. But nothing but the original confusion in the minds of the Corinthians, and a lack of experience, could lead one to think that that pattern is not frequently repeated in the lives of ordinary people, usually quite unselfconsciously. For example, the father and mother, worried by the anxieties of family life, busy about the things of this world, but full of the love of God and his truth, leading truly contemplative lives, in which faith, hope and charity, the virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Ghost are the principles by which they live, and, 'stripping' themselves, devote themselves to the good of their children. And in so doing, they have at their disposal all the perfections that belong to other 'lives' in the Church. All the perfections and graces of the episcopate, the more noble life of the religious, the perfections of the 'contemplatives', all these exist in the Church only that everyone, even the 'lowliest' may the better be able to live a life of the love of God. 'And yet I show unto you a more excellent way . . . if I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity . . . I am nothing.'