

THE PATTERN OF PERFECTION

BY

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PERFECTION consists in the love of God, and this is independent of any particular way of life, and can reach the highest degrees where there is nothing demanding or compelling great perfection, through the subjective love which is put into the most ordinary everyday actions. But there is also an objective perfection, a life which, by its obligations and the activities it entails, of its nature requires a high degree of perfection; and where such a life is embraced by a solemn and perpetual obligation, it places a person in a state of perfection. While the Spirit breathes where it wills, and the subjective degree of love of God depends chiefly on individual grace, the objective means of perfection (namely, good works which, so to say, compel the exercise of a high degree of love of God and other virtues which accompany it) can be studied as a pattern of perfection, and organised as a means of perfection.

The state of perfection is usually considered to lie in the religious state and its three vows; yet St Thomas constantly teaches that it lies chiefly in the episcopal state, and that the religious life is an imperfect form, approaching perfection in so far as it approximates to the state of bishops, which is thus the norm and pattern of the state of perfection. The neglect of this element in his teaching easily leads to a diminished and one-sided idea of the state of perfection, and to misapprehensions within the religious life. The state of perfection is determined, not by interior charity, which is not readily measurable by reason, but, in an objective and determinable manner, by the good works to which a person is obliged, quite apart from the degree of charity with which they may be performed. The good works which, of their nature, demand the greatest degree of charity and of other virtues for their proper performance, are also the greatest means of perfection; and an obligation to perform them is also an obligation to possess or to acquire the perfection necessary for their performance. The state of perfection is thus a solemn and perpetual

obligation to perform things which imply perfection.

Now this is supremely the case with bishops. St Thomas takes the perfection of bishops very seriously, and treats of it extensively, especially in *De Perfectione Vitae Spiritualis*: it forms an essential element in his concept of the state of perfection, and of perfection itself. The bishop is the ultimate 'pattern to the flock' (I. Pet. v. 3).

The bishop binds himself solemnly and perpetually to the pastoral office, and so to works of great perfection. In the first place he is obliged to the perfection of the contemplative life. His chief office is that of teacher, legislator and judge in things divine. He must possess the faith fully, penetrate it deeply, be able to judge all things as God sees them. He needs the fullest contemplation of divine things, and a high degree of the gifts of understanding and wisdom which are the sources of infused contemplation. If he does not possess this in the beginning, the continual fulfilment of his duties of teaching, ruling and judging, together with the graces of his state, can and should lead him quickly to the perfection of the contemplative life, without which he cannot fulfil his obligations properly.

He also obliges himself to the perfection of the active life of love of others. He is bound solemnly and perpetually to devote his whole life to his flock. He must be ready to sacrifice everything and retain nothing for himself; even to abandon the sweetness of contemplation to serve God in his children. His life is a holocaust of love of his neighbour. The perfect charity which loves enemies is also required of him; there will always be many among his flock who hate him and harm him; these too he must love and serve. The actions to which he is obliged, and those which he is daily called upon to perform, are such that if done properly they will rapidly compel him to acquire the virtues which he lacks. The episcopal office is a continual and unavoidable exercise of all the virtues in a high degree of perfection, frequently reaching the heroic. It is thus a most powerful means of perfection.

This activity is of its very nature additional to the perfection of the contemplative life, not a distraction from it. St Thomas repeatedly calls attention to the elements of perpetuity and responsibility, as essential to the notion of the episcopate as a state of perfection. A person engaged in the active life in a subordinate capacity can leave the responsibility, and therefore legislation and judgment, to his superiors, and concentrate on the

active task for its own sake, not being compelled to accompany it with a high degree of union with God. But the bishop, who has the ultimate responsibility, and who has to teach, judge and legislate, can only act properly if he himself possesses the norm of his teaching, rulership and judgment by contemplation and union with God. Again, when the responsibility is lifelong, and the results of his actions have to be borne by himself alone, with no possibility of passing on the responsibility to others, this is a compelling force to act in the most perfect manner possible. For the bishop, whose task it is to stand between God and men, perpetual responsibility is an immense means of perfection, since it compels him to practise perfect contemplation, and perfect action proceeding from contemplation.

The bishop has also the essential perfection of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. While the religious obliges himself to these in a definite manner limited by his rule, the bishop binds himself to a life which involves the perfection of the spirit of these counsels without any limit, and renders the vows unnecessary for his state. He must be ready to sacrifice all his worldly goods, and even life itself, for the service of God, his flock or the poor. He is bound to chastity by his solemn consecration to God and the Church. He is perpetually bound to serve the wants of others by devoting his whole life to be the servant of the servants of God. He has even, in a way, the perfection of the solitary life, since his office makes him a lonely man, and he must be self-sufficient. All these characteristics naturally apply in an even fuller sense to the supreme pastor of all, the Pope.

Hence the perfection of bishops excels that of religious. The religious state does not bind solemnly and perpetually to works of consummate perfection, but only to actions which are means of acquiring perfection; its obligations are also definite and specified, while those of bishops are universal and unlimited. The religious profession thus binds only to tend to perfection by performing certain specified works; to do these does not require consummated perfection, but only a lesser degree. The works to which a religious is bound are such as will, if properly done, steadily and necessarily lead him to perform acts of the virtues of the active and contemplative lives, which acts will lead him gradually to perfection. The bishop is therefore the natural master of religious, since he possesses in a universal manner what they

are only learning; commonly, however, in practice, this subjection of religious in their training in perfection to the episcopate is secured by direct subordination to the Pope only.

St Thomas, therefore, classifies the religious life in relation to the episcopate. Now the judicial and legislative office of the bishop is not transferable to others, at least in the perpetual and primary manner necessary to constitute a state of perfection; only the preaching and teaching office is thus transferable. Hence those religious whose institute aims at preaching and teaching from the abundance of contemplation, on the pattern of the bishop, share most fully in the perfection of the episcopal state, and are the most perfect form of religious institute. The works to which their members are solemnly and perpetually bound require a high degree of perfection to be performed properly, and the practice of preaching and teaching divine truth is a primary means of becoming perfect. Only a degree less perfect are those orders whose aim is divine contemplation, substantially the same as the contemplative perfection of bishops, only not requiring of its nature the same degree of perfection as a contemplation which overflows in action. Those institutes whose end is works of the active life, the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, differ even in kind; for these works do not of their nature require to be done from the fulness of contemplation, and hence oblige and produce, of themselves, a lesser degree of perfection. This is, of course, objectively considered; for subjectively speaking they can and should be done from, or lead to, the highest perfection. The means of perfection, the good works of obligation, are, then, in bishops and the first two classes of religious, primarily contemplative; and these orders share to some extent the freedom from exactly determined means of perfection which is the result of the bishop's responsibility and autonomy. It is characteristic of the contemplative orders (of both types) to produce contemplatives able to regulate to a large extent by their contemplation the details of their own life and work. The rules and life of the institute aim mainly at contemplation, whereas in the active institutes this normative element of contemplation is not part and parcel of the works aimed at; it comes from outside those works, and has to be provided in detailed legislation, derived ultimately from the contemplative life of bishops, which supplies the individual religious with the fruits of contemplation.

St Thomas denies the character of a state of perfection to the condition of subordinate pastors of souls. The supreme responsibility of the bishop cannot be shared; all other pastors are necessarily subordinate; the perfect direction of their pastorate is thrown back on the bishop, and they can be content to follow his directions. Hence the duties to which they are obliged are not of the same supreme perfection and perfecting quality as those of the bishop. Nevertheless, in so far as the work of the cure of souls is a real share in the bishop's office, and does approach the perfection of the bishop's work, it is a great means of perfection, greater than the obligations of religious. But it does not place a person in a state of perfection, since the obligation is not perpetual and solemn; pastors have an office of perfection, but not a state. It may be asked, however, whether in modern conditions in many countries, the average priest attached to the service of a diocese does not, practically speaking, bind himself to a perpetual cure of souls, since there is no real possibility of his abandoning that office except by death or incapacity, as is the case with a bishop. This seems to be true, and to this extent the diocesan priest is in a permanent office which obliges him to practice great perfection. The Pope's recent allocution to the Congress of Religious in Rome, in which he stressed the compatibility between the religious state and the cure of souls, might allow us to envisage a diocesan clergy which formed a religious institute whose proper end was the cure of souls by a solemn and perpetual obligation. Such an institute, on St Thomas's principles, would seem to approach most closely to the perfection of bishops.

These considerations have a practical bearing on religious life, for they show that the exercise of perfection to which religious bind themselves lies, not so precisely in the vows and rules themselves, as in the acts to which the vows and rules oblige; it is these which compel the practice of perfection. Hence the letter of the vows and rules may often be sacrificed in order to enable more perfect, and therefore more perfecting, actions to be performed. This is, for instance, the case in mission countries. Religious in missions are not regarded as living outside the cloister; yet they are frequently deprived of many or even most of the normal means of perfection of the cloister, and lead a life which causes, sometimes, dismay to visitors from normal countries. The fact, often not realised by these latter, is that the missionary religious

share to a large extent in the proper work of bishops, and that this activity replaces and compensates for the loss of their usual means of perfection. In fact the general standard of religious in mission countries is high.

To keep in mind that the perfection of bishops is the norm both of holiness and of the means of holiness is also useful for individual religious and also for the laity. It enables them to see that tasks given them which withdraw them from the direct pursuit of contemplative perfection, or which involve responsibility and worries, can be a greater means of perfection than tasks more congenial to the religious life, since they approximate more closely to the work of bishops.

It also shows that religious life is not an escape from responsibility, but rather a school of training in responsibility. Indeed, the characteristic of a permanent responsibility is found in the religious as in the episcopal state, in so far as, by his profession, the religious is perpetually engaged in a responsibility to make of his whole life a successful pursuit of perfection, and he alone can make or mar it. Only in these two states is there this element of permanent responsibility for every thought, word and deed, and all their effects, both on the individual acting and on the social group of which they are part. St Teresa of the Child Jesus is an excellent example of this responsible attitude to religious life.

To the layman also the fact that the standard of perfection, and the highest means of perfection, are placed in the life of bishops, and not in the life of monks and nuns, renders them more within his reach; the virtues and qualities of a bishop can be reproduced more easily in secular life than those of religious.

A last character of episcopal perfection is this: it is so exalted that no man can pretend to take it upon himself of his own initiative, but only if called by God and the Church. The same applies in its degree to all participations in it: the cure of souls, preaching and teaching sacred doctrine, all offices which give responsibility and authority over others in a spiritual sense. These are the most perfecting works; but they can only be adopted as means of perfection on the authority of bishops, to whom they properly belong. Without this call the available means of perfection are the normal works of the contemplative and active lives, to which a man can oblige himself solemnly and perpetually (with the acceptance of the Church) on his own authority, by

adopting the religious life. There are thus two degrees only of the state of perfection: the complete and master's one in bishops; the incomplete and learner's degree in religious. In both of these, and only in these, is there the characteristic of personal perpetual responsibility for living a life dedicated to perfection.



THE MONASTIC IDEA¹

BY

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IN the mind of the average Catholic, especially of the average cradle Catholic, a monk is someone who wears a habit. For this reason one constantly hears of Friars, Canons, and even Clerks Regular referred to as monks. Of course this is completely wrong. The only monks in the Church at present are the sons of Saint Benedict and Saint Bruno. Nevertheless, even the best instructed Catholic would find it hard to say what a monk is and in what way he differs from other religious. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a monk as 'a member of a community living apart under the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience'. The first part of this definition is all right, but it is hopelessly wrong over the vows. A monk takes a vow of obedience in common with other religious, but he does not take explicit vows of poverty or chastity; in their place he takes the vows of stability and conversation of manners.

These two vows need a little explaining as their import is not obvious at first sight, and it is to be hoped that the monastic idea will become plain in the course of the explanation. By his vow of stability a monk binds himself to persevere until death in the monastery of his profession. The reason for this is that a monastery is an independent family and the monastic vocation is to a particular house and not to an Order. This is true even in the case of the Cistercians. They are an Order in a very different sense from the modern religious orders. Each house is independent and only linked to the central house and mother house for purposes of

1. The summary of a lecture given to some men and women of London University on 27th February 1951.