

THE STUFF OF GRACE

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GOD is too good to be used or fitted into our human schemes, and loving him above all means a complete outgoing from the frets of our creaturely condition.¹ Nevertheless it does not follow that the workings of grace in us have no material or texture, or, if these are present, then that they hold no theological interest. Hence the title is chosen deliberately.

I suppose one of the hydras haunting the spiritual life comes from misunderstanding the *all-or-nothing* principle. God is recognized as the infinite good, which indeed he is, but this infinity is made both so big and individualized that it elbows out all other goods. This emphatically God does not do, otherwise when we called him creator it would be only of a shadow world. Again, it is feared that if you love things, and especially if you enjoy doing so, you dissipate what should be reserved for him alone. As though the *other* from him were the *apart* from him, as though anything real could detract from him, as though he had to contend with other forces and therefore we had to take his side and love him exclusively if we were to love him at all. To hold creatures cheap, St Thomas remarks, is to slight divine power.² We have to purse our lips at nothing except our sins; these are certainly our own, as St Augustine says and adds, but even when we confess them let it be with praise of God.³

That is to speak of the depths, not of the surface where obviously we frequently have to choose one good instead of another and constantly have to limit ourselves to what is feasible. We may be under the precept of going to church and not listen to the Sunday morning concert; or under the counsel of being clubbable in a cloister rather than elsewhere, which obviously should not imply not loving the world as God loves it. Nevertheless the *all-or-nothing* fallacy still seeps into much religious writing, sometimes impressively, sometimes not.

The intense conviction that the Lord is high and above our

¹ THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, XII, 135, 137. September, November, 1957.

² III *Contra Gentes*, 69. For application of the principles see *Summa Theologica*, Ia. vi, 2, 4; xi, 3; xix, 2; xlv, 3, 4; xlix, 3.

³ *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, cv, 2.

thoughts, that his purity demands that we should worship him in a solitude where not only our wickedness has been left behind but also everything that belongs to the natural man, can lead to the conclusion that reasonable discourse about him, particularly in the manner of scholasticism, is so much waste of time if not worse. *For what intercourse hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?*⁴ Paradoxically this *docta ignorantia*, the protest against treating the mysteries like scientific data, can produce highly energetic theological writing, and differs sharply from the infantilism which considers hagiographical details and accounts of miracles mental nourishment enough for simple faith.

Neither belongs to the spiritual tradition for which this periodical stands. St Paul goes on to say, *For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them.*⁵ Then let us glance at the lodging and what may even be called the pedestrian course of divine grace. We are not seeking its why?—*not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us*⁶—nor its what?—*the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned*⁷—but more humbly its how?—*by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*⁸ Grace itself is beyond the categories we are going to apply when studying the psychological conditions of its existence and activity. If that sounds all very joblike and so much mechanics, remind yourself that a vintage-car enthusiast may just smile to himself if accused of tinkering with so much scrap-metal.

In a sense we are looking at ourselves as we are *used* by God, knowing all the time that if we are used by him it is in order that we may find and enjoy him: he does not seek his glory for himself but for us.⁹ Then questions of the practicable and the dutiful will not arise. Past deliberation about means to ends, past psychological introspection about whether we can and moral reflection about whether we ought, we shall be with God who is

4 II Cor. 6, 14-16.

5 II Cor. 6, 16.

6 Tit. 3, 5.

7 I Cor. 2, 14.

8 Tit. 1, 9.

9 2a-2ac. cxxxiii, 1, ad 1.

beatitude and joy.¹⁰ *When he shall appear we shall be like him,*¹¹ supremely active in the quiet of eternity.¹² Religion itself should already capture some of that ease, for it is the worship of him who sanctified the day, says St Augustine, not on which he began his labours nor on which he ended them, but on which he rested from them.¹³

Even now we should feel the abandon of perfect friendship, confident and not fearful, an interplay as of equals, not the subjection of a slave to a master.¹⁴ Thus may flourish the fruits of the Spirit, the *agape*, graciousness, sympathy, kindness and delight, *against which there is no law.*¹⁵ But the wonder and beauty of divine grace is not our concern at present, nor the heart of charity, although our purpose is that of St Augustine's prayer, 'O God who art ever the same, let me know myself, let me know thee'.¹⁶ Of that we need to remind ourselves when we seem to delay on the psychological structure entered, possessed and used by grace. We do not mind if the garden of the soul we are sketching appears to be not the *paradisus animae* but the kitchen-garden.

First let us insist that grace, if less evident, is no less real than anything else that happens to us. In fact theologians have not hesitated to apply the epithet *physical* to its processes to show that it meant more than a purely moral certification. They were not employing the term in its bodily sense, as when we speak of physical culture, but rather as in jurisprudence when physical or natural denotes what is not merely a legal or fictitious entity. Unlike later writers they accepted no deep gulf between the physical and the psychological, or between the psycho-physical and the ethical, and they were right. Nevertheless we can grant that their use of the term was unhappy if it pictured grace as a kind of dose which was injected into the soul, particularly by the sacraments.

They set up a reaction which, exclusively stressing the Pauline sense of divine favour, swung to the extreme of denying that any real change was effected in us, righteousness being merely imputed to us through Christ's vicarious substitution. Without following

¹⁰ 1a. xxvi, 1, 3.

¹² 1a. x, 2, 3; xii, 8; 1a-2a. iii, 2, 6, 8; v, 4.

¹³ IV *de Genesi ad litteram*, xv, 26.

¹⁴ 2a-2a. xix, 10; xxiii, 1; clxxxiii, 1; clxxxiv, 1, 2.

¹⁵ Gal. 5, 23; 1a-2a. lxx, 1, 2.

¹¹ I John, 3, 2.

¹⁶ *Soliloquia*, II, ii, 1.

the ins-and-outs of post-Reformation theories of justification, we may reflect all the same that when God looks graciously at us it is as if a friend smiles at us. You feel different. You are different. Even in your blood-stream. Many a doctor will say there is no physic like happiness, and some, speaking medically, will complain an imaginary disease is the worst. In other words, because grace is all God's abounding mercy it does not follow that we have nothing to do.

At all events when St Thomas comes to explain how grace exists, he begins by asking quite bluntly whether it puts anything in the soul.¹⁷ His answer is yes. Was he lacking in the sense of the mystery of divine choice beyond human doing and deserving? Did he think we could gain it from our own efforts as a pilgrim could trudge his way to the pardon of Compostella? Far from it, for the gist of his argument is summed up in the difference between divine and human favour: things *are* good because God loves them, whereas we love them because they are good.¹⁸ His love for others is always effective; ours can be an idle liking which affects nobody but ourselves, and that perhaps very little.

*For thou lovest all things that are, and hatest none of the things which thou hast made; for thou didst not make or appoint anything hating it.*¹⁹ This creative favour, which St Thomas calls God's *dilectio communis*,²⁰ moves below the primordial depths of things—consider them basically or basely, and call them atoms, slime, libidos or what you will—and builds up their organic integrity in admirable array. We are born good from God's graciousness, and there is nothing real anywhere that is not from him, nothing too murky, nothing too quirky, nothing too needy, nothing too greedy—everything but sin, and that is negative and never reaches to where his mercy begins.²¹

But we are not born thereby children of grace, as the term is understood in the light of the Christian revelation of being recreated by the Spirit.²² That is the effect of God's *dilectio specialis* which draws, *trahit*, rational creatures out of their natural conditions to intimacy with himself, of that true love without reserve which imparts the eternal good which is God himself.²³

17 1a-2ae. cx, 1.

18 See also 1a. xx, 2. On preparation for grace, 1a-2ae. cix, 6.

19 Wisd. 11, 25.

20 1a-1ae. cx, 1.

21 1a. xxi, 2, 4; 1a-2ae. lxxxv, 1, 2.

22 John, 3, 1-8.

23 1a-2ae. cx, 1.

He draws us—we are not made to jump out of our skin. We are not jerked out of our wits. Personal identity remains, though the new Adam begins to lose the old Adam's proclivities. We are lifted above the reach of our natural faculties, but we are not like a fish out of water, left floundering and gasping because we are not equipped for a sudden fresh world. The process is kindlier, or, to use St Thomas's term, more *connatural*. *Ought* supposes *can*. He sees grace no less furnished than nature with proper abilities, as when he argues against the view that charity is just the soul's response to the breath of the Spirit and not also part of our new character. For we are in a condition of lasting friendship, and to rule us out as lovers, he says boldly, does not enhance but diminishes the dignity of charity.²⁴

He is guarding against the *all-or-nothing* principle, the *either or* fallacy, referred to earlier. He does not admit that grace breathes best when everything natively congenial to us has been pumped out. If nature abhors a vacuum so does supernature. Grace is not lived loneliness at a rarified height; it is not limited even to what is technically spiritual. St Thomas, for instance, does not regard the infused virtues of fortitude and temperance as qualities of our higher selves or habits of will-power, but rather as transfigurations of emotion: fortitude is a temper dogged or high-mettled according to circumstances, temperance is passion and pleasure none the more mitigated because mastered.²⁵ Yet what funny creatures we can be, when we leave undone what God invites us to do and strive for what he does not fit us.

The natural and the supernatural merge together, not that nature can climb out of itself but that grace descends into it. Catholic theology keeps the two orders clear, but the distinction between them is rather of abstractions than of historical situations. In the living man the core of his being is created and conserved by divine power, and his activity is set and kept going by the same power as it wells up through every level and expands through every part of his organic personality.²⁶ We cannot arrest the process at a certain moment, call a halt, and say: nature has done so much, now let us hope that grace will take over. If that is bad enough as biography it is even worse as theology to add:

²⁴ 2a-2ae. xxiii, 2.

²⁵ 1a. xcvi, 2, ad 3; 1a-2ae., lvi, 4; lix, 2, 5; 2a-2ae; cxli, 3; cxlii, 1; clv, 1.

²⁶ 1a. xlv, 1, 4; civ, 1; cv, 5.

and if and when grace does take over that will be without regard to what has gone before.

Divine causality can be seen building up its effects by a kind of evolutionary process. We have spoken of the fish out of water, so let us take an analogy from comparative anatomy which shows the agreements between the respiratory system of mud-fish and human lungs. *And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that have life.*²⁷ To them we are linked through the amphibia. After the same manner heaven is joined to the world in which we are born through grace acting in the darkness of faith—and the glimmer of theology. Hence the propriety of treating it as that kind of effect which under one aspect is an object of rational inquiry. In itself, as entering into relationship with the Persons of the Blessed Trinity, it is marvellously more than that, but as embodied in human beings it enters the categories of natural philosophy together with such ordinary matters of good health, being happy, thinking, smiling, walking to the post.

After deciding that grace is real and positive in the soul, St Thomas next asks whether it is a quality.²⁸ By that he means a real condition of a thing supplementary to its substance, a condition that is not just a special reading of quantity, though once our imagination gets to work it is difficult to avoid quantifying grace; indeed there have been theologians who have been prepared to grade it according to a scale.²⁹ We can skip such questions, and turn to St Thomas's reply which brings out the important distinction between acting for God and being with God. Later we shall see its bearing on the state of prayer which, continual and confident, is content to stop saying prayers. Devotion need not fuss. *Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful.*³⁰

When we speak of God's grace in a person we signify a certain effect of God's free and generous will which aids us in two ways (see 1a-2ae. cix, 1). First, in so far as we are divinely stirred to know, love, or do something; this gratuitous effect is not a settled condition but a movement of the soul. Second, when God's unforced will infuses a lasting gift, *habituale donum*, into the soul.

27 Gen. 1, 20.

28 1a-2ae. cx, 2.

29 For principles see 1a-2ae. lii, 1, 2; 2a-2ae. xxiv, 4, 5, 6.

30 Luke 10, 41.

How fitting we should work that way, for God is no less provident for those who will to have supernatural good than for the things to which he wills natural good. These last he sets in motion, and also imparts the dispositions and abilities which are the principles of their activity. They themselves have a propensity to be moved by him, and so the result is easy and congenial. *He reacheth from end to end mightily and ordereth all things sweetly* (Wisd. 8, 1). With all the more reason then does he grant to those he sets going to the attainment of supernatural and eternal good certain dispositions or supernatural qualities which ensure that their progress is prompt and smooth. Hence the gift of grace is a certain quality.

Grace, then, is more than a transient motion, but also a settled disposition responding to the abiding presence of the Holy Ghost in the soul. It does not flit over the surface, but stays, and stays, moreover, in our very being, at a stage before thought or volition begin. For St Thomas goes on to show that it is rather a settled disposition *to be* in a certain way, rather than a settled disposition *to perform* in a certain way.³¹ In other words, it dwells more deeply in the soul than do the supernatural virtues, and *a fortiori* is not to be resolved into 'making acts'.

His analysis of what virtue must be is left to a following article on the dynamism of grace; it is enough at present to note that virtue is conceived of as making the doer good as well as the deed.³² Virtues, however, are good active habits, endowments of our abilities of faculties, and there is something behind them, namely, the substance they express.³³ A thing acts in character; we can be consciously rational because we are unconsciously intelligent, and similarly we can act supernaturally because we are reborn of the Spirit. Active faith, hope and charity show that we are living according to the *great and precious promises, that you may be made partakers of the divine nature*.³⁴ Consequently St Thomas concludes that sanctifying grace by which we are children of God is other than the supernatural virtues which issue from and serve it: *You were sometimes darkness, now are you light in the Lord. Walk as the children of light*.³⁵

How one would like to pause here, and meditate on the doctrine, which draws from the high theology of St Augustine's

³¹ 1a-2ae. cx. 3.
³⁴ II Pet. 1, 4.

³² 1a-2ae. lv. 2; lviii, 1.
³⁵ Eph. 5, 8.

³³ 1a. lxxvii, 1.

books *de Trinitate*, of being 'mindful' of God in whatever we do that is not sin. In the state of grace, deeper than our introspection and awareness, there is the meeting of I and Thou; we are loved, and the intercourse continues through speech and silence, wakefulness and sleep, prayer—and through distractions too. It comes out as a kind of memory, like the sentiment of the *déjà vu*, so that you wake with Mother Julian knowing that all will be well. It fears God and yet is 'unscrupulous', having no hankering for a reassurance of his acceptance, stamped, signed, and delivered.³⁶ *I know nothing by myself, yet am I not thereby justified, but he that judgeth me is the Lord.*³⁷ Who better?

Sanctifying grace lies—in some contexts one might say lurks—behind the practice of the virtues and behind the powers of mind and will, of sense and emotion. An endowment of the soul itself, it is that sort of quality called a habit—a pretty stable modification of a substance affecting its inner consistency and its adaptation to environment.³⁸ *Habitus*, what we have, a possession.

Ordinarily when we speak of habits we mean active beings formed to do something, *operative habits* as they are called. The virtues belong to this class. But habit can also stand for the quality of being something, a settled humour, complexion, spirit, state. It is then called an *entitative habit*.³⁹ Do not be put off by scholastic nomenclature; it has its uses, like referring to a forget-me-not as *myosotis scorpioides*, a wood-warbler as *phylloscopus sibilatrix* or a weasel as a *mustela nivalis*. We may catalogue grace with the entitative habits, yet never forget it is a lovely reality, a glow of soul, says St Thomas, no less actual than beauty of body.⁴⁰

Habitus also names another category of things, namely those that are put on like clothing, which invests us but never becomes an intrinsic part of us. That a religious should become attached to his or her habit is all very well, but not that it should so become second nature that ordinary humanity is inhibited. There are religious habits and religious habits, and the ones of which we are speaking enter into and improve the very texture and tenor of our lives. In itself grace opens out to heaven, it is the seed of the tree, the *inchoatio gloriae in nobis*, the beginning of the wedding-feast.⁴¹ But even as we are considering it, that is, according to the

36 1a. lxxix, 7; lxxxvii, 1, 2; xciii, 4, 7; 1a-2ae. cxii, 5; cxiv, 8.

37 I Cor. 4, 4.

38 1a-2ae. cx, 4; xlix, 1, 2, 3.

40 1a-2ae. cx, 2, *sed contra*.

41 2a-2ae. xxiv, 3, *ad 2*. Disputations, XXVII *de Veritate*, 2, *ad 7*.

39 1a-2ae. l, 1, 2.