

carried out and the cleansing waters poured. The white robe and lighted candle vividly symbolize the new life now given.

What better sermon could be preached than this drama of regeneration, the passage from the darkness of sin into the marvellous light of Christ? What better reminder of our own baptism, and the solemn obligations of our baptismal vows?



TOWARDS AN OBJECTIVE SPIRITUAL LIFE¹

II

THOMAS DEMAN, O.P.

The Theological Virtues

WITH the theological virtues, we move away from ourselves to attain the highest object set before human action. Wonderful as it seems, God becomes our object. No one calls in question the fact that the theological virtues are pre-eminent and people certainly do not dream of denying that they have a part to play in the spiritual life. It is doubtful, however, whether they are cultivated with the care they deserve and whether they are actually directed towards their object. Let us consider this direction which it is important they should take in practice.

Among the different virtues, *faith* bears a strongly marked objective character. Its purpose is to attach the mind to the truths God has revealed. These truths in no sense derive from us and are certainly not the fruit of our meditations. God has revealed them and they have entered into us through the medium of hearing. The initial attitude of faith is that of the ready ear. We listen to the word of *another*. We register everything about it that is new and hitherto unknown. We forget our own thoughts, to open the mind to those of God. *Faith is not a discovery but a welcome of acceptance.* The truths of the faith do not spring from the soul as a poem might do; they are introduced into the soul in conformity with the dictates of God. For this reason what is asked of any one

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of the faithful is not to be original, but to be docile. It is obvious that not all the faithful have the same turn of mind. Left to themselves, their thoughts would have turned out in each man's case to be different. Neither about God, about Jesus Christ, nor about man's destiny would they have professed the same opinions. Faith unifies such minds. It deposits the truth, which cannot vary, in all the faithful. *One faith.* We sometimes hear sincerity praised, as if a man's sovereign merit must consist in his imposing no constraint on the spontaneous expression of his nature. Nothing is more contrary to this attitude than that of faith, in which the subject consents not only to the interior discipline of his own reason governing the movements of every kind which arise within him, but adopts truths which have come from elsewhere, making of them the inflexible rule of his thought and, through his thought, of his conduct. The Catholic is attached not to what he experiences or conceives, but to what God knows and it has pleased God to teach him. He is irrevocably turned towards another, straining to catch, if one may so speak, the word of God.

The practice of the virtue of faith will be inspired by these principles. It will consist in the assiduous and fervent investigation of the word of God. *We shall strive to know and penetrate this word, just as God has proclaimed it in its pure, admirable objectivity.* We shall keep it as free as possible from any personal interpretation. It will only become ours through the joy we put into possessing it without changing anything in it. On our side, adhesion, as fervent as possible; but adhesion which bears on a truth not made by us and which we have no right to refashion. We boast of knowing and professing the same truth that the Apostles believed, that delighted St Augustine, that St Thomas Aquinas searched into, that the Fathers of the Councils of Trent and of the Vatican defined anew. We are doubtless very different from such people and we live in times which no longer resemble theirs. The needs of our souls, as we express it, have changed. Nevertheless we must set our minds to think exactly as they did and to find our heart's delight in this truth which was theirs before it was ours. The applications by which truth, which is eternal, will be adapted to solve the particular problems of an epoch will come afterwards. Neither should we reject the fact that within the ensemble of revealed truths, some particular one has the preference of an epoch or of an individual; through this means, too, though it is not the

only means, the development of the deposit entrusted to the Church is effected. *But everything must be done under the sign of unity and authenticity.* In dealing with the truths of faith disinterestedness must be safeguarded. Their value is primarily in themselves rather than in the use which can be made of them for the practical ends of life. There is no single one of them which can be isolated from the whole to form the subject of an exclusive consideration. It will always be to the advantage of the faithful to conform themselves to revelation in its universality and to set the interest of their lives in these truths, rather than to turn these truths to the service of the different interests of their lives. The fundamental law of contemplation, that privileged exercise of spiritual souls, is to observe the disinterestedness of which we have just been speaking. It is not improbable that the progress of a soul in contemplation is in proportion to the aptitude with which it braces itself to welcome the truths of faith as they are in themselves, independently of all connection with its subjective and personal preoccupations.

The *second theological virtue* is particularly in danger of becoming involved in subjectivism. People are generally prepared to hope in proportion as they feel they have in themselves greater resources in proportion to the objective pursued—to despair in the measure in which they feel they have less of such resources. In regard to eternal life, we similarly tend to hope for it when we know we are more virtuous, and our hope fails, on the other hand, when we realize our sins. It is quite true that the sinner and the just man are not in the same condition as regards hope, for the one has only to persevere in his present path to reach eternal life, whereas the other will only arrive there on condition of first of all turning aside from his present way. *One is, however, making a mistake when one measures hope merely by the dispositions in which one finds oneself.* To do so is to act as if God were not the object of this virtue. In reality, it takes its measure from God and is focussed on him. We hope for eternal life not because we have done what is necessary to win it, *but because God is disposed to grant it to us.* Hope derives from faith. It takes into consideration this truth, of which faith has put the marvellous certitude into our minds, that God has conceived the plan of saving man and that for this purpose he lends man the help of his arm. Affirmations in this sense abound in the Scriptures. Through the Scriptures we are also brought face to face with the awe-inspiring development of this divine resolve,

for, to save man, God has gone so far as to send into the world his only Son. On God's side it is certain that everything has been done that man may be saved. Hope asks for no more. It is precisely this affirmation of the faith that hope takes hold of and on which it is founded. *We hope for eternal life from God and not from ourselves.* In this resolve of God, with all the disposition he has taken to mark the force of it, is there not matter on which to found hope? Supposing we were ready to go forward into eternal life, if God had not prepared it for us what effect would our intention have? Our salvation depends primarily on God. Upon the pretext that we have our share in it and that it is the work of our freedom, we must never forget that God is its principal author, to the extent that we only work at it through his motion and under the effect of his grace. The difficulty we have in founding our hope on God, that is, in making our virtue exactly correspond with its object, comes from the difficulty we have in persuading ourselves that *our salvation has God as its cause before becoming our work.* It seems to us that all consists in saving ourselves by ourselves, the will of God to save us being a matter of course and calling for no special attention on our part. There lies the blunder. It is, on the contrary, absolutely essential to take into consideration that which is of the greatest importance in itself. Could God and his plan of salvation be a negligible reality? It is surprising that Christians, preoccupied to the point of scruple with the movements of their will, should fail to think of the will of God. In so doing they reverse the order of values. And they deprive themselves of giving to the virtue of hope in themselves the vigour which belongs to it of its own nature.

For hope of its nature is *certain*. And how could one have certitude if one based oneself on the will of man only? Hope is certain because *the will of God to save us is a truth of faith* and because hope is nothing other than the heart's acceptance of this affirmation of the mind. Nothing, absolutely nothing, limits the certitude of hope. It could only fail if God were to renounce his design or diminish its force: but that is precisely what is impossible. God's will is immutable. He wills for ever, and just as he has willed it, what he has once willed. How does it come about, then, that in all too many Christians hope finds so much difficulty in attaining certitude? The primary reason could very well be that they do not bring their hope to bear on eternal life at all, but on all sorts of

goods which they consider fitting and of which, nevertheless, there is no assurance that God has willed them for them. But even when eternal life is in question, many a hope is not certain because the object of hope is not retained in its complete purity. One thinks of oneself whereas one should then think only of God. One is taken up with one's sins past or present, one goes over in one's mind all the reasons one has for mistrusting oneself, one anxiously questions oneself as to one's strength and weakness: it may very well be that in all this one's judgment is correct, but what is wrong is to introduce this judgment into the constitution of hope. Whether we are weak or strong does not matter: for God is strong. And what is man's greatest strength in comparison with the strength of God? It is upon the latter that hope counts, because God has in fact placed it at the disposal of his creature. *If it is true that we are weak, it is infinitely more true that God is strong.* Again, what a loss not to be capable of a hope that is fully theological, because one remains too much occupied with oneself! In this way it happens that we allow the finest Christian realities to escape us: they are essentially objective and many a Christian is as yet scarcely detached at all from preoccupation with self. Can we imagine that the well-known *certus sum* of the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans would have been uttered if St Paul had not had the gift of fixing his attention on God, to the exclusion of self? That page was written that Christians might read and re-read it and make the fervour of it their own; but it is meaningless for those who refuse to allow themselves to be won over by the fascination of God and that alone.

With *charity*, the soul's orientation towards the divine object receives its supreme force. It is clear that this virtue would disappear if, in the spiritual life, one were to be occupied only with oneself. *To love has no meaning except in relation to another*, and the marvel of love is precisely the transfer of the interest of one's life to a being hitherto a stranger to us. *Charity transfers it to God.* In the case of hope, it is God from whom we expect eternal life; and because this eternal life brings man the final perfection to which he aspires, a reference to the subject subsists in the most objective hope. Beatitude, centred in God, is none the less the concern of the blessed, and it is beatitude at which the essential movement of hope aims. Charity, which is love, takes interest in God for his own sake. It no longer considers him as the principle of beatitude

for the subject, but in relation to his own goodness, as the one who is worthy of being loved *because he is himself, because of what he is*. In love, the self-forgetfulness of the subject is complete. He does not think of drawing any advantage from love, even were it of the highest order. He is wholly in this act of love, and it is only through an effect of love itself, of which it cannot be deprived, that he tastes an overwhelming joy in this act. It is given to him in the measure in which he refrains from seeking it. Consequently it takes away nothing from the radical disinterestedness of love, although no self-interested seeking is capable of bringing a comparable pleasure to the soul.

When the object of love is God, a singular reinforcement of this general characteristic of all love is produced. For in the love of creatures, the attachment one contracts for them is inevitably founded upon the greater attachment one naturally has for oneself: there would be no love of the other at all, if there were not first of all what one is led to call the love of self. In this sense, each of us loves himself more than he loves any other creature whatsoever; and this is so even in the case of a love great enough to inspire the uttermost devotedness. To die for someone one loves is not yet in actual fact to love him more than oneself: for one only loves a creature to this extent in so far as one has identified him with oneself. This must be so. As it is I who love, I can only love in function of what I am and in function of that to which I remain invincibly attached. The love of creatures can thus reconcile the most utter disinterestedness, the purest devotedness, with a preference which one does not cease to grant oneself; love itself and its disinterestedness would vanish if this preference were to disappear. *God is the only one whom one truly loves more than oneself.* For our relationship with him is a singular one. He is in plenitude what we are in participation. With regard to other creatures, our being is, as it were, a whole distinguished from another whole. With regard to God, it is a part. It derives from God, depends on God, cleaves to God. We are ourselves in God more than in ourselves. Whence the natural aspiration of every created being to rejoin God and rediscover in him the plenitude which he certainly has not in himself. We love God more than ourselves because our being is of God more than of ourselves. This cannot be thus expressed of any creature. If we love a particular creature, we refer it back to ourselves; whereas *to love God is in very truth to cast*

oneself into him. Disinterestedness is not the characteristic of the love of God, but it receives a new significance in this love, so that one says with good reason this time and with perfect truth, that one loves God more than oneself. The highest of the virtues to which the spiritual life may lay claim is thus the one of which the objective nature is most strongly marked. It is clearly impossible to attain to charity if one does not agree, if we may be pardoned the expression, to be dis-occupied with oneself.

From this sovereign love of God there will not fail to spring other loves in which charity acquires its full extension. Among the latter it is very true that the *love of self* figures in the first rank. But how it is transfigured now! *Loving oneself in virtue of the natural attachment one has for oneself is quite different from loving oneself when the basis is God.* We love ourselves in charity inasmuch as we are caught up in some way in the divine object which has captivated our heart. How could we refuse to love someone whom God loves? How could we fail to recognize that by the very fact that we love God we have entered into association with him, and that thus we are so to speak constituted objects of the very love which we vow to God? There is no return upon oneself in such a mode of loving oneself. In virtue of this love, it is true that we shall seek for ourselves the greatest good, for we shall want to become increasingly worthy of God and to tighten the association in which we are with him; and yet we shall not fall into any egoism. Even the man most extravagantly taken up with himself will not succeed in procuring for himself advantages comparable to the good one is assured of when one no longer wishes to be taken up with anything but God. The reward of disinterestedness. It is in the nature of things. It shows clearly that the royal way is indeed the one we are indicating. The Gospel proclaimed this: he who seeks to save his soul shall lose it, but he who has first of all agreed to lose it shall save it. One never loses one's soul so much as when one has begun to love and assigned to oneself God as the object of love.

One's *neighbour* is in turn reached by charity. He has within him that by which he can be loved *in virtue of the love one has for God.* He enters with a certain measure of justification into this association which the soul forms with God whom it loves. What numerous outlets, if one may so speak, are thereby offered to charity! Nothing is more diverse than one's neighbour. In every

possible way he constrains each one of us to go out of himself. Saint or sinner, rich or poor, relative or stranger, friend or enemy, he sets love in motion. He arouses feelings and stimulates actions. Thanks to one's neighbour, the heart will experience a vitality and a power of loving which would otherwise not come to light. The contrast between the man who is only occupied with himself languishing in his egoism and the man whose every breath is for others and who finds his own plenitude in this forgetfulness of himself, is striking. We came across this reflection before, in connection with justice. It recurs naturally in connection with charity. The two virtues have this in common, that they turn us towards others and make us take them as objects—which also means that there are two ways open to draw us out of ourselves and establish us in relationship with the rest of men: so that if we were not to take either of them, we should show to what extent we are clinging to ourselves. But there are differences between justice and charity. It can be said that the first of these virtues imprints an objective character upon our life less forcefully than the second. Justice prompts actions, it does not spread abroad in our hearts feelings of which the person of our neighbour has the benefit. The interior part of ourselves would not yet be resolutely turned towards others, whereas our actions might be irreproachable and in conformity with the requirements of the common good. Charity, on the contrary, is first of all interior and this time it is from our sentiments that the actions spring. It makes us interested in others from the heart. Through it, our neighbour penetrates our life to a point where simple justice cannot reach. The word 'neighbour', accordingly, properly belongs to the language of charity. The motive of the two virtues, in particular, distinguishes one from the other. In justice, one concurs in the good order of human society and it is on this count that one treats others according to their rights. In charity, *one gives place to the consideration of God* and it is because one rediscovers him in some sort in others that one comes to love them. The divine object, that which draws us most strongly out of ourselves, remains the sole object of charity in all its manifestations. Besides justice, then, the Christian has at his disposal a virtue which, when he applies it to the other than self, is a guarantee for him of the highest spiritual realizations. There is nothing better than to love God; and *in loving one's neighbour, it is still God whom we love.*

In what sense one should take care of one's soul

Anyone who applies himself to the spiritual life shows that he has understood that his soul is worthy of care. Such an intention is praiseworthy. So many men content themselves with taking care of their body or their fortune. But from the preceding explanations it follows that a certain fashion of taking care of one's soul by-passes the best. *The mistake, in point of fact, consists in treating the soul as if it were an end for man, whereas it is only that by which he attains his end.* This discernment is essential. However noble it may be among created things, the human soul is not in itself of sufficient excellence to merit to be the end of man. We have better things to do than to cherish our soul as the object of our care *par excellence*. *Our soul will in point of fact be beautiful and perfect when we have reached through it a good which is different and better.* It belongs to our soul to attain this good in us and it thereby becomes perfect; but this good is something different from the soul itself. When we say that we work at our perfection, we do not always avoid the ambiguity which we are condemning; for what is sometimes meant by that is a spiritual life orientated towards the soul, whereas what should be understood is a spiritual life orientated towards the objects for which the soul is made and from which perfection will come to it. The expression 'interior life' would present the same danger if one were to interpret it in a purely subjective sense. It is very true that one should withdraw from distracting objects and recollect oneself interiorly; one only does so, nevertheless, in order to occupy oneself with other objects, those which will nourish the soul instead of dissipating it. If the latter are absent, it will not be long before we begin to wilt. For, once more, no good will make it possible to infringe with impunity the natural laws of life. In recalling the soul's necessity to apply itself to certain *objects*, we have been pleading for the most primary and essential requirement of the spiritual life. The harm there would be in failing to recognize this, is only equalled by the benefit one would ensure for oneself by observing it.