

FREEDOM AND THE ACTIVE LIFE

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ST THOMAS puts very briefly the difference between a free-man and a slave, when he says: 'a free-man is one who is the cause of what is his, but a slave owes everything he has to another'. (*De Reg. Prim.* I, 1.) Thus in a sense we are all the slaves of God. Our Lord brought friendship into that relation; yet for all that, we did not cease to be God's servants. Terms like 'military service', 'civil service' and 'foreign service' are apt to create the impression that 'divine service' is likewise limited to a particular kind of work, such as going to church on Sundays. It is easy to miss the real meaning of what Christ said—'You cannot serve two masters', or of what St Paul said—'All whatsoever you do in word or in work do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him'. (Col. 3.)

That we should remain the friends of God and at the same time his servants is not unexplainable. God has surely made us his friends. We are far more than mere *pen friends*, since besides messages, he has sent his Son as well. God is so much nearer to us since then, and we are nearer to him. By faith and charity we live in his presence; and hope reminds us always of his absence. We hope, with his help, to attain to a closer friendship. Eventually we shall see him in his own house, and shall enjoy the social life of the three divine Persons. Of course, this promise of a greater intimacy is something more than we deserved or expected. It is a prize, and even more than a prize, because we could never be worthy of it, unless God made us worthy. That is why St Paul speaks of God's qualifying us 'to share in the inheritance of the saints in light'. (Col. 1.)

We are indeed the friends of God—'I have called you friends because everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you' (John 15). We are too intimate with God to be just his servants. Nevertheless the fact remains that he has set joy before us as *prize*. Eternal happiness must be thought of as something we have to work for.

'Brought under servitude to God, you have for your fruit the increase of sanctification; and the result, eternal life' (Rom. 7, 22).

No matter where its doctrinal source may be divined, it is not the least of modern problems that people think that they are not committed in any way to this divine servitude. Yet for St Paul it takes in 'all whatsoever you do'. How frequently one meets even young married men with growing families who fail to find in their work a way of serving God? Perhaps that is the fault of some preachers who stress too much the need of 'offering up' one's work as penance for sin. Undoubtedly work has its thorny side; but there is more to it than that. Work has normally a relation to the family, and a father who works is really serving God, if only he tries to embody God's design into the family life. He is making acts of virtues that are named and unnamed, and are peculiar to the head of the family society. Interesting or uninteresting, his work is more than a penance. It is certainly a divine service, and in a way, it is even a gift. For we cannot forget that we are all the time friends of God; it is the love of him that urges us to serve. That service is accomplished in more things than bending the knee. Work in the broad garden of God's Providence is a service of love; it is the gift of *oneself*.

Though we are God's servants, we are never swamped by him. There is nothing 'totalitarian' about God's interest in humanity. Every movement of the soul towards God is free in the liberty of divine grace. Otherwise we could not consider the joy set before us as a prize to be won or lost, and our sufferings and actions would lack the essential quality of being meritorious, were we merely God's slaves and not also his friends. Though it is true that God himself has put us into the state of being able to merit eternal happiness, he does not at the same time withdraw the power, and indeed, the necessity of making steps of our own in that direction. How God and we work together is a mystery. Examples from our ordinary life tend to cheapen the mystery and it could easily become a shabby and heretical misrepresentation. His way of working with us is incomprehensible. But one thing is certain—if we are capable at all of

human acts, we ourselves must make a movement Godwards. That movement must be our own. No property is more precious than a man's dominion over his own actions. That dominion is priceless when it claims as 'ours' all actions that lead one to God.

A movement of the soul which will merit eternal happiness must be a movement of love. No wonder St John could speak of Christianity in terms of nothing else but love! Still, I suppose, there is something to be said for dividing Christianity into the two lives, 'the Active' and 'the Contemplative'. The danger lies where people measure Christian progress towards eternal joy by other movements and not by movements of love. Nevertheless, we still have this great division into the active and the contemplative life. For all the illogical conclusions it can lead some people to deduce, it does force on one the idea that an active life can be a real expression of love for God. However much it distracts one from thinking of him, it need never undo the friendship between us. Our Lord made that point clear when he rewarded the just man for being good to his neighbour—'as long as you did it to one of these least, you did it to me'.

What a pity that the active life is considered so much in terms of nursing sisters, lay-catholic actionists and so on! This idea is altogether too narrow. Most people live and die in the active life; so did their parents before them. Their activity was golden, because it was done out of love for God. They loved God and gave themselves up to his service within the broad mansions of his earthly household. If there are so many mansions in Heaven, there must be as many here. The door of every house could be an entrance to a mansion where people live on earth as friends of God and dedicated to his service.

Now this is the fundamental christian objection to state domination: it cuts one off from a full active life. Aristotle distinguished three lives—'the Contemplative, the Active, and the Voluptuous'. Now one of the dangers is that if ordinary people are left without a full active life with all the opportunities for the exercise of virtue it affords them, then they may quite easily degenerate. All the tendencies of fallen nature will incline them towards the voluptuous

or pleasure existence. Left with one talent, they may bury it, as St Ambrose says, 'in the mire of carnal pleasure'. At any rate, their lives will tend to be more and more sensuous.

St Thomas reminds us that if one chooses to live the active life, one needs much of this world's goods. For in this active life, a person has to show forth his love for God in an exterior way—in corporal works, not only of mercy, but also of justice, social and personal, of liberality, magnificence and other virtues. But if the state takes away one's property, great or small, if it burdens itself with the responsibilities which really belong to parents in the home, if it leaves no insecurity to the mercy of ordinary people, then in what manner are millions of people to exercise those virtues which must manifest their love for God? It might be argued that they have still the virtue of legal justice! 'Are they not free to obey the new laws and regulations? Is there not a wide field for the active life in simply obeying the dictates of bureaucrats?' But it is hard to make virtue of necessity. Having become a slave in the servile state it is hard to hold on theoretically to one's liberty and make of each necessary fulfilment of civic duty a free choice.

This point of view is worth considering. Too often, catholic sociologists bemoan the loss of personal freedom and human dignity without being precise about what is meant by such words. God has made us free—not only as men—but also with 'the liberty of divine grace'. Each of us is a cause of what is his. And in so far as we put forth human actions under the impulse of divine grace, we are causing for ourselves an eternal beatitude. We are freely meriting it. And the more one is capable of doing quite freely and within the garden of God's Providence, the greater is one's opportunity of exercising the moral virtues, and so much the greater is one's merit. Happiness from the christian point of view is a prize. We must not deliberately choose a way of life, which for all the advantages it may have in bringing about a certain type of worldly happiness, would withdraw from us many possible ways of meriting what is eternal.