

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

BECAUSE it expresses the ideal at which all must aim, the idea of perfection has always found its place in Christian thought. In the first centuries of vigorous faith strengthened in persecution there was less need for the intellectual systematization that was to come much later. Our Saviour did not present His disciples with a complete and coherent body of abstract truths. His doctrinal discourses and discussions had the practical purpose of teaching the way to salvation, and it was the first preoccupation of the Church to preach Jesus crucified. In the course of the centuries the living Church, faced with controversies and doctrinal extravagances, would find it necessary—relying on the promise of divine assistance—to define the implications of the teaching of Christ, and this in turn would make a fuller synthesis possible and even necessary. In the meantime the different obstacles to the Christian life encountered by men of different ages and cultures inevitably led them to stress different elements in the fullness of the Christian life. The Fathers of the Desert had escaped from a profoundly corrupt society, and as a consequence they emphasized the need for penance, and purity of heart, and avoidance of sin, so that the conception of perfection which can be disengaged from their lives and writings is of a more negative character; the positive side of Christian life is not absent, but it is less in relief. St. Augustine more explicitly than his predecessors connected all the elements of the spiritual life in the positive ideal of perfect justice, and the genius of his thought threw light on the Christian tradition which was to find its most complete and definitive formulation in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

It was to the question, 'What is yet wanting to me?' that our Lord began His answer: 'If thou wilt be perfect . . .' A thing is perfect when it is not deficient in any particular. In the most absolute sense God alone is per-

fect, for in Him no nobility or excellence is wanting; He is perfect in every respect and without any limit. Created beings can be perfect only in a qualified way and according to a certain measure. They are perfect of their kind if they have the essential elements, qualities and characteristics, so that nothing is wanting to the integrity of their nature; but the final perfection of any created being is reached when it achieves the purpose for which it was made. Man was made to share the divine life and happiness hereafter in the Vision of God, and only when he reaches this goal will he fully attain perfection; nothing will then be wanting to him according to the measure of his supernatural state, and even the higher degree of glory which might have been his had he lived a holier life on earth, being then no longer a present possibility, its absence will not be a defect to mar his perfection.

In this world the life which our Lord lived is the complete type to which all human perfection must conform. In His human nature, as a man like ourselves, He lived the divine life in human form, realized in human activities. First and foremost He gave an example, and to be a Christian is to follow Christ, imitating His virtues: 'I am the Way.' The *Imitation of Christ* is a formula which expresses the whole Christian life: we must 'be made conformable to the image of His Son.' But in the teaching of our Lord and of the Apostles charity stands out pre-eminently among the many elements which are required to give to the Christian character its completeness in the conditions of its earthly environment.

The first and greatest commandment is that we love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and second only to this we must love our neighbour for His sake. 'On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets' as being the end to which they lead, for 'the end of the commandment is charity.' It was after teaching the need to love others that in the Sermon on the Mount our Lord added: 'Be you therefore perfect, as also your

heavenly Father is perfect.' In his great hymn of charity St. Paul proclaims it as the one thing necessary, without which nothing will avail: 'If I speak with the tongues of men, and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I should have prophecy and know all mysteries, and all knowledge, and if I should have faith so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.'

Since life has not its full or principal value here below, success is measured by whether or not we so live as hereafter to reach the goal for which we were made, and by the greater or lesser degree of perfection in which we do so. But heaven is only the full unfolding of the divine life begun in this world, so that the perfection of life in this world, as in heaven, consists of union with God, our final end, as with One known and loved. But there is a difference. In heaven we shall be united to God in clear and immediate Vision, and the union by charity will then be only a necessary consequence of the full knowledge of Him Who is infinitely lovable. But in this world union with God as with one who is the object of our unselfish love is closer and more perfect than any union by knowledge can be, so that here below it is in charity especially that the perfection of the Christian life consists. Knowledge by faith is of things not seen, and hope is possible only of something not yet attained. Of their nature faith and hope suppose a certain distance from God, but by charity even in this world we love God and are united immediately to Him as He is: 'He who abides in charity, abides in God and God in him.' Love supposes some knowledge, for we can neither love nor hate the unknown. But the lover is drawn towards the object of his affection, and it is possible to love with all one's strength an object which the mind grasps only imperfectly. We then love the ob-

ject as it is in itself, all that is in it, even those hidden perfections which we know only confusedly. In this case love is more complete and perfect than knowledge, and the union by love is greater than that by knowledge. So by charity are we united in intimate friendship with God Whom in this world we can know only under the veil of faith. God is present within us, possessed as the object of our affection.

It is not that the practice of the other virtues is unnecessary for the completeness of the Christian life. Charity presupposes faith and hope. The moral virtues ensure purity of mind or detachment without which God cannot be loved. Our Lord put before His disciples in no uncertain terms the conditions on which alone they could be recognized as His, and the eventualities they must be prepared to face: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me'—let him be prepared to treat himself as someone rejected, and even be prepared to walk to execution. To love God above all things indispensably requires a preparedness of soul to give up and forfeit any created good, material or spiritual, or life itself, should circumstances arise in which these things can be had only by offending God. Charity is a love of preference by which we give God the first place in our affections, caring for His interests more than any other thing; the Christian must be prepared to sacrifice all for a stronger and higher love.

The supreme end and perfection of man in this world, therefore, consists in loving God as intensely as possible. Ultimately all things else are good for man to the extent that they help him to do this, and they are harmful and evil in the measure that they impede him from doing so. At the end of life it will be by our charity alone that we shall be judged, and the degree of our blessedness for eternity will be measured by the degree in which we love God at the moment of death.

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