

THE SPIRIT QUICKENETH

LAST May saw the publication by Messrs. Sheed & Ward in the *Heythrop Theological Series* of an important manual of *Moral and Pastoral Theology* by Father Henry Davis, S.J. This book undoubtedly deserves careful consideration for two reasons: for its notably good qualities and for the conception of Christian morality that animates it.

In four large volumes Fr. Davis treats of the principles of moral life (Vol. I); of the commandments of God and of the Church (Vol. II); and of the Sacraments (Vols. III and IV). His clarity of exposition, simplicity of expression and liveliness of style contribute towards making the work not only readable but even attractive—a rare quality in works of this sort.

Moreover, this ease in diction is made the vehicle of an accuracy of information, a thorough knowledge of Canon Law and the results of wide experience in dealing with souls that combine to make the book a work of real value. The treatise on the Sacraments has received the author's more special attention and is particularly successful. In it will be found, accurately and concisely set out, copious instructions and practical directions which will be of great service to the worthy and efficacious administration of the Sacraments and will be readily and profitably referred to by priests engaged in the active ministry. Finally, the author has courageously given unusually full treatment to more delicate questions; he has made considerable use both of papal encyclicals and the results of scientific research on such thorny subjects as education and the difficult problems that confront the consciences of physicians and surgeons.

These are all unquestionably good qualities; they will earn for the author the gratitude of the clergy and of all educated Catholics.

It is unfortunate that this work is also endowed with other and no less striking characteristics; characteristics which call, we think, for the most definite reservations. Fr. Davis is a wholehearted advocate of a morality which is essentially

—nay, exclusively—juridical, legalistic. For him moral theology—that science whose purpose is to explain how a Christian must conduct himself if he is to live in conformity with the Gospel and attain to eternal salvation—is essentially concerned with the study, interpretation and explanation of divine and ecclesiastical laws. “It is,” he writes, “precisely about law that Moral Theology is concerned. It is not a mirror of perfection showing man the way of perfection. It shows him the way of salvation, which will be attained by the observance of the Commandments of God and of the Church” (Vol. I, p. 4). It is true that he hastens to add “that a man who aims only at keeping within the four corners of the law will sometimes wander outside the pale and will find himself in a very perilous situation, may even jeopardize his salvation,” and that a shepherd of souls “must lead his people to aim at Christian perfection”; yet, strictly speaking and *de jure*, this is regarded as going outside the ambit of essential morals precisely as such, and as being an excursus into the domain of the supererogatory, and therefore of the optional.

We must say frankly that every ounce of Christian instinct urges us to react against such a conception of moral theology and of the Christian life. Admittedly this conception has been all too prevalent in contemporary theological literature; often, too, it has found its way into seminaries and even into our Catholic universities—this much we are forced to admit, and it goes some way towards exonerating Fr. Davis’s position. Yet such a conception is entirely alien to the traditional standpoint and the authentic Catholic theology of the Masters of the Middle Ages. It is a matter for thankfulness that the Christian instinct and realism of the younger generation of present-day Catholics is increasingly in revolt against it. The day is surely past for the “moral systems” of the legalists whose whole effort was directed to precise delineation of the boundaries between what is allowed and what is forbidden.

St. Thomas Aquinas viewed things very differently. It was St. Thomas who wrote the beautiful passage: “That which is foremost in the Law of the New Testament, and

that in which all its power and strength consists, is the grace of the Holy Spirit which is given by faith in Christ. Thus the New Law itself is first and foremost the grace of the Holy Ghost which is given to believers in Christ."¹ And St. Thomas has a magnificent conclusion to the article from which we have quoted: he tells us that whereas the Law of Moses was essentially a "written" law—that is to say, positive law externally imposed—the New Law of Christ is above all a law "inscribed" by the indwelling Holy Ghost in the very hearts of men in a state of grace; a living law which moves men from within and impels them forward to God their last End.

For it is St. Thomas's fundamental idea, as it was that of St. Paul, that a Christian, at the moment of being effectively justified or made pleasing to God, is given, as it were, a *new being*, a "new creature" of grace, which, as St. Peter teaches, makes us "partakers of the divine Nature" (II Peter i, 4), and which St. John boldly says abides within us as the "seed" of God (I John iii, 9). By grace we are truly regenerated, born of God into a new life (John i, 13; iii, 3).

This grace is as a life-giving principle within us, radiating into all our human faculties its own dynamic activity in the form of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity as well as the infused moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Because it is a "sharing in the divine Nature" it energizes us into God-like life and action. And it makes us, not merely externally or by a legal fiction, but in very truth the children of God (could we venture the comparison of a transfusion of blood, a communication of nature?), embedding in us tastes and desires like those of our Father in heaven and drawing us on to perfection because our Father in heaven is perfect.

The Thomist view is that the Christian life is, in its *essence*, the life of Christ's grace in our souls; Christianity's one essential law is the law of the basic aptitude and ten-

¹ "Id autem quod est potissimum in lege novi Testamenti et in quo tota virtus eius consistit est gratia Spiritus sancti, quae datur per fidem Christi. Et ideo principaliter lex nova est ipsa gratia Spiritus sancti quae datur Christi fidelibus" (Ia—IIae, cvi, 1).

dency of this life of grace to find expression in ordinary everyday human activity; its tendency, too, to harmonious growth—imperceptible perhaps, yet strong and unceasing—“unto a perfect man,” in such fulness as is freely fixed for each one of us “according to the measure of the giving of Christ” (cf. Ephesians iv, 7, 13). For in very deed the grace in our souls is that “fountain of water springing up into life everlasting” of which Our Lord speaks (John iv, 14); and this law of grace is not merely that of those Christians who are in fact called to perfection of charity (in the religious life for instance); it is the ordinary, common, universal law of all Christian living, of every single soul in a state of grace, however lowly, however slender that grace may be. The harvest of virtues and good works will, indeed, be richer in proportion as the seed is richer; yet in every single instance the living principle of the life of grace and its subsequent course will be of the same kind.

All other laws, whether coming from God or from the Church, are but external subsidiaries of the living inward law of grace. They can and do guide and lead us towards the more perfect accomplishment of this essential law of grace; yet their function is always secondary and derived—which is, clearly, far from saying that are of no importance.

So much for this inward law of grace which makes Christian life such an intense, profound reality. Yet it is precisely of this that Fr. Davis in his four big volumes has literally nothing to say. There is not even any definite mention of sanctifying grace as one of the principles of man’s moral activity. This, if we may be permitted to say so, is serious; it presents us with a singularly incomplete and impoverished conception of the Christian life. Christianity is before all things Spirit and Life; only secondarily is it obedience to external law. Sin is before all things a lack of virtue and vitality, an offence against *life*; only secondarily is it disobedience to external law. It is just this that has been left unsaid; and in consequence the whole work is permeated by an atmosphere, a spirit, an attitude which we deem quite unfitting to give a valid presentation of the Christian moral life. We find this most regrettable: Fr. Davis will forgive

us for speaking freely—for us the question is one of capital importance.

Fr. Davis is a convinced and militant probabilist. We will make no further complaint on that account; for the probabilist system for solving a doubtful conscience is simply the inevitable consequence of this legalistic morality. A very methodical and well-documented article, which is manifestly impartial and does full justice to the system, has just appeared in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie catholique* with the title *Probabilisme* over the signature of Père Deman, O.P. In it the author energetically vindicates against probabilist scepticism the claims of objective truth in the regulation of man's moral life; vindicates, too, the value of the virtue of prudence—so vital, so Christian, so educative—against the probabilist's subtle jurisprudence. We earnestly hope that professors of moral theology in English-speaking countries will give due attention to this conclusive and inspiring article.

It goes without saying that this legalism and probabilism constantly influence Fr. Davis in the manner in which he presents, judges and solves moral problems; though time and time again his Christian instinct and experience of souls triumph over the logic of his system.

In conclusion, we would express the hope that theologians who treat of moral matters, while bearing in mind that times have changed and utilizing to the full all that Christian experience has accumulated in subsequent centuries, will more and more return in all loyalty to the sane and lofty theology of the great teachers of the Middle Ages. From these great thinkers they will acquire a more profound, more organic insight into the life of grace; a more acute appreciation of the fact that grace is poured into our souls and makes vital demands of us; and that it is the friendship with God which it brings that is the hall-mark of Christian life here on earth and for ever.

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