

CHARITY

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HE kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field. Which is the least indeed of all seeds; but when it is grown up, it is greater than all herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come, and dwell in the branches thereof.”¹

St. Jerome commenting on this passage remarks that the *birds of the air* may be understood to be the souls of the faithful whose minds and hearts being raised in meditation upon the things of God dwell in the branches of the tree of life. The tree of life represents the New Law, which for the average soul is synonymous with the Ten Commandments of God and the Six Commandments of His Church; but which for the souls who have been called to the higher life embraces, in its higher branches, even the evangelical counsels. What, you ask, is the vital principle of this great tree? The sap, the vitalizing force of the tree of life, is *Charity*. “Owe no man anything,” says St. Paul, “but to love one another. For he that loveth his neighbor, hath fulfilled the law. . . . Love therefore is the fulfilling of the law.”²

The word *love* is a generic term overshadowing, as it were, several species. It is evident from the Greek original of the text alluded to above that the Doctor of the Gentiles is referring to a specific kind of love, namely *charity*. What is charity? When we consider charity objectively we say with St. John that God is Charity.³ But when we define charity subjectively, that is, precisely as it is diffused in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, we say that charity is a virtue divinely infused by which we love God above all things for His own sake and ourselves and our neighbor for God’s sake.

Charity is a species or a particular kind of love. Charity regards the beloved object as being very dear, very costly. . . . “You were

¹ *Matt.*, xiii, 31-32.

² *Rom.*, xiii, 8-10.

³ *I John*, iv, 8.

not redeemed," says St. Peter, "with corruptible things as gold and silver, . . . but with the precious blood of Christ. . . ." ⁴ Since charity is a species of love, and since we cannot accurately gauge any subject in one of its particular aspects until we shall have orientated ourselves by discussing the general background of that subject, let us, with St. Thomas, define *love*. Love, says the Angelic Doctor, is the first change in the appetitive faculty (in its highest manifestation in man this is the free-will) caused by the appetible object. ⁵ We apprehend an object. If for one reason or another that object, upon being apprehended, seems to be able to bridge over the chasm of one of our individualistic needs, that object immediately sets up in the will a certain sense of complacency. And just because that object is vested with this appeal we desire to possess it. In view of the fact that our will now goes out in desire towards that object, the object assumes a very definite role. It is in our own estimation now lifted out of the class of boring indifferentism. It receives our special consideration, for it has become for us a desirable object. Love is consummated when the will rests in the actual possession of the desirable object.

Daily experience teaches us that in the ordinary ebb and flow of human affairs the objects which fall within the scope of our desire are indeed numerous. But what is that supreme object to which we all tend by reason of those longings for eternal life which surge through the human breast? What is that transcending object towards which we are, in the words of Saint Augustine, borne, as it were, by the gravity of our hearts? That supreme object is God. "Oil poured upon the water," says St. Augustine, "is raised above the waters. Water poured upon oils sinks under the oil. They are propelled by their own weights, they seek their own places. Out of order they are restless; restored to order, they are at rest." ⁶ "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee." ⁷

From the analysis of the movement of love as sketched above we can readily see that the motion of love received its first impetus from the appetible object and that it achieved its fulfillment when the will was soothed and quieted by being in actual possession of the desirable object. In other words, the movement of love ends where it

⁴ *I Peter*, i, 18-19.

⁵ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 26, a. 2.

⁶ *Confess.*, lib. xiii, cap. 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, lib. i, cap. 1.

began. It is with this in mind that St. Thomas, following in the wake of Aristotle, describes love as a circular motion.

Love is a circular motion. When we lift this principle from the merely natural order of love and endow it with a more resplendent dignity and charm by applying it in the spiritual realm to charity, how illuminating and how entrancing is the result! Let us suppose, for instance, that we are very reverently assisting at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. As the time for the actual reception of Holy Communion approaches we turn to our Beloved. On our lips are those enthralling words of the Canticles: "Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one and come."⁸ Looking in upon ourselves we ask when does it come that we are able to utter so sublime a declaration of our love? The answer is given us in the third verse of the very first chapter of the Canticles: "Draw me: we will run after thee to the odour of thy ointments." St. John in his version of the Holy Gospel reiterates this same truth: "No man can come to me, except the Father, who hath sent me, draw him."⁹ The oft repeated reflection upon the principle that love is a circular motion is of great practical advantage for us in the spiritual life. It disposes us to become more profoundly humble by forcibly reminding us that even if it should happen that we are earnestly running after our Beloved this is due to the fact simply and solely that our Beloved, mindful of our utter poverty of spirit, has given us the grace to track Him down.

To study love in its causes is almost as intriguing as is the analysis of the motion of love in itself. St. Thomas tells us that one of the fundamental causes of love is likeness.¹⁰ Likeness, as we know from our dictionary, is the quality or state of exhibiting a resemblance. There are various kinds of resemblances. For example, love may be founded upon the fact that two individuals share the same specific nature. Hence Holy Scripture says: . . . "every man shall associate himself to his like."¹¹ The resemblance may consist in the fact that the two persons in question claim the same country as their birthplace, or the resemblance may be etched in sharper relief if the individuals are of the same parental stock. The love of friendship, as we usually understand it today, is based upon kinship of either character or temperament. Thus two friends, although of

⁸ *Canticles*, ii, 10.

⁹ *John*, vi, 44.

¹⁰ *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 27, a. 3.

¹¹ *Eccli.*, xiii, 20.

disparate character, are alike in temperament; or although of dissimilar temperaments, they resemble one another along the lines of character. When the lover and his beloved claim kinship both in character and in temperament, their love is stronger, since it is built upon the basis of a twin resemblance.

Upon what resemblance is charity, that most perfect friendship, established? The friendship of charity is constructed upon that resemblance which our adopted sonship bears to the natural sonship of the Second Person of the Most Adorable Trinity. "Behold what manner of charity the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called, and should be the sons of God."¹² This adopted sonship which is set up in our souls through the infusion of sanctifying grace is like all the other works of the Most Adorable Trinity which have their effect outside of the Triune God-head, common to all Three Persons. But by way of appropriation we assign this adopted sonship to God the Father as Cause; to God the Son as the Exemplar (or the Divine Pattern of our adopted sonship); and to God the Holy Ghost as to the One Who, by reason of the sanctifying grace which He diffuses in our hearts, impresses upon the soul this adopted sonship.¹³ Has God called your earthly father to his reward? Even so, you can turn in a more detached manner to God, that most benign Father of us all and cry: "Abba, Father." Listen to those soothing words of the Apostle ". . . You have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba (Father)."¹⁴

The minds and hearts of the faithful, says St. Jerome, dwell in the branches of the living tree of life. There have been in the Church since its very infancy those souls marked by a special predilection of Almighty God and succored by His grace who have built their nests in the highest and the most inaccessible branches of the tree of life. These souls are, in truth, the exalted lone eagles of Christianity. St. John the Evangelist may be chosen as a type of these souls. Let us then turn to St. John's life and see how his magnanimous soul reflected the spirit of Christianity—the virtue of charity.

Holy Scripture tells us that many waters cannot quench charity, neither can the floods drown it.¹⁵ We might reverently add that the winter of life cannot chill its ardor. St. Jerome tells us that the Beloved Apostle towards the sunset of his life was so freighted down

¹² I *John*, iii, 1.

¹³ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 23, a. 2, ad 3.

¹⁴ *Rom.*, viii, 15.

¹⁵ *Canticles*, viii, 7.

with the infirmity of years that he had to be carried into the church, and being too old to speak at any length, was accustomed in addressing the Church to use this simple phrase: "Little children, love one another." How vital and glowing must be that expression of the habit of charity which, when in practice, it addresses the various individuals, leaves upon that address the inimitable appeal of its pristine warmth; and which even when it is extended to the universal brotherhood of man, loses nothing of its original vigor, "Little Children." On another occasion St. John, looking down through the years to the unborn generations of Christians calls you "My dearest"—"My dearest, if God hath so loved us, we also ought to love one another."¹⁶

¹⁶ I *John*, iv. 11.