

DO WE OWE GOD ANYTHING?

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ONE of the greatest means of procuring earthly happiness, and eventually heavenly happiness, is the observance of the law of justice. Justice is nothing more than the giving to every one what is rightly his. This law has for its purpose order and harmony, and it disapproves and punishes disruptions of this harmonious balance. As members of society we have rights, as well as obligations towards our fellow-citizens. But, as we well know, our relations extend beyond human society.

Realizing that we are dependent on God for every instant of our existence, for everything that we possess, our reason informs us of a correlative obligation towards our Divine Benefactor. And what is more, we are bound *to act* in accordance with that reason. Of course, we are not physically compelled to conform to our reason, because we have free will. Nevertheless, it is not lawful for us to act contrary to our nature. There is a moral obligation resting upon our shoulders to follow our reason, because it is our guide in life. If we refuse to follow it, we are unnatural, irrational and guilty of sin. Just as it is reasonable to expect children to obey and respect their parents, so, too, it is quite reasonable that we should pay homage to our Creator and Supreme Master.

I

But "What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that He has rendered to me?"¹ That it is conformable to reason and human nature to give homage to God can be shown by two arguments: first, inasmuch as God is the First Cause of all things; and as such He is Supreme Lord, Benefactor and Lover. We cannot deny that it is in agreement with our rational nature to give to the Supreme Lord, upon whom all depends, adoration in acknowledgment of our dependence, and to make satisfaction if we offend that Supreme Being; to give thanks to the Supreme Benefactor, who has given us all that

¹ Ps. cxv, 12.

we possess; to return love to the Infinite Lover. For if it were not for God's great love, nothing would begin to exist. When we perform these actions, therefore, we are simply fulfilling our natural duties towards God who gave us life, keeps us in existence, moves and helps us to act, and confers on us countless benefits.

II

Secondly, it is in accordance with rational nature to pay homage to God from the fact that God is our Last End. We do not come into this world as perfect creatures, but rather as beings capable of perfection. All of us have a natural inclination to acquire that perfection for which we were created by God. We become perfect when we strive after that good towards which we are naturally inclined. When we act, we act for a definite purpose. And just as one act is directed towards one end, so all particular ends are directed towards one final end, of which we have at least an abstract and vague notion—the greatest possible happiness and the exclusion of all evil. That we have an ultimate end towards which we are tending is seen from the fact that there is in human nature a constant striving for happiness, not for a passing but a stable and perfect happiness. Experience proves that this desire or tendency cannot be satisfied by anything this world can give, such as honor, power or riches. They fail to satisfy, because they are of short duration, unstable and limited. Only God can fully satisfy our noblest faculties, our intellect and will, because He is the greatest Truth our intellect can know and the greatest Good our will can desire. Hence, to know and to love God as perfectly as we can is our ultimate goal. Accordingly, St. Augustine says: "You have made us for Thyself (O Lord), and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."² But it is quite obvious that we can not acquire our Last End without using the means, i. e., without fulfilling our obligations towards that Last End.

St. Thomas Aquinas says:

"By the very fact that we revere and honor God, our mind is subjected to Him; *and in this consists its perfection*, since a thing is perfected by being subjected to its superior, for instance, the body is perfected by being quickened by the soul, and the air by being enlightened by the sun."³

Some one may raise the objection that God does not need our services. That is true. Our wealthy creditors do not need what

² *Confessions* I, Chap. I.

³ *Summa Theol.* II-II q. 81, a. 7.

money we owe them, our generous benefactors may not need our gratitude. But their needs are not the standards by which we judge our obligations. Justice is the standard, and justice demands that we pay our debts, that we be grateful to our benefactors. God does not need our services of homage, but He is our Creator and our Last End, and justice obliges us to observe the order that exists between Creator and creature, Master and servant. The fulfillment of this obligation redounds to our benefit. For, says the Angelic Doctor:

"We do not offer anything to God on account of its usefulness to Him, but for the sake of His glory, and on account of its usefulness to us."⁴

Thus reason not only points out our relation and obligation towards God, but also *prompts* us to render to God both interior and exterior acts of religion. The interior are the primary acts of religion, because they tend directly and immediately to God. They are those free and internal acts of the will by which we honor God on account of His supernatural excellence—devotion and prayer. The exterior acts are secondary, because they must be directed to God by movements of the intellect and will, and because they help the mind to lift itself to God. They are sensible, external acts of the body, such as corporal adoration, external sacrifice, praise, vocal prayer, and so forth.

III

Since God is our First Cause and our Last End, we have the obligation to exercise internal cult or religion. For without internal cult there is no religion. Without internal acts our worship of God would be purely pharisaical worship, which Christ condemned. We owe God a special honor because of His supreme excellence. To Him as our first Beginning and Supreme Lord we owe service. As our Last End, we owe Him our greatest love. All our actions should be directed towards Him. We must perform these acts not merely instinctively, as we brush away a fly, or raise our hand to ward off a blow, but we must perform them deliberately, as an acknowledgment of God's infinite perfection and our total dependence upon Him. For, in the words of the Angelic Doctor:

"It is He to whom we ought to be bound as to our unfailing principle; to whom also our choice should be resolutely directed as to our last end."⁵

⁴ *Ibid.* a. 6. ad 2.

⁵ *Ibid.* a. 1.

IV

Since God is the Creator of our bodies, as well as of our souls, we have an obligation to acknowledge this dependence of the body, and to excite ourselves to render to God internal cult more perfectly. But to do this, external cult is required. Therefore, we are bound to honor God with an external cult. Hence, cult may be considered from two aspects: first, in itself; secondly, in relation to internal cult.

As to the first. Not just a part of us, but our whole being, body and soul, depend on God as the First Cause. Therefore, we have the duty to show our subjection to God with our whole being. To do this, we must offer God corporal acts, as well as spiritual acts of religion.

"The voice is used in praying as though to pay a debt, so that man may serve God with all that he has from God, that is to say, not only with his mind, but also with his body."⁶

Furthermore, we are the lords of all sensible nature, and therefore we should praise and adore God in the name of all inferior creatures. As the microcosmos of all sensible nature each one of us can not do this better than by external cult, through bodily acts.

Let us now consider external cult in relation to internal cult. When we are obliged to some particular act, we are likewise bound to take the necessary means to place and to conserve that act. For example, if we must be present at a convention in another city, we must take a train or car to get there. So it is with religion. Being obliged to internal acts, we are also bound to external acts which are necessary for the perfection of the internal acts. St. Thomas says:

"Men perform certain works . . . such as prostrations, genuflections, vocal prayer and singing, which are not done as if God, who knows everything, needs them, but we do them so that through sensible (corporal) works our intention may be directed towards God and our affection may be enkindled."⁷

Moreover, referring to one form of external acts, the Angelic Doctor says that

"we have recourse to vocal prayer through a certain overflow from the soul into the body, through excess of feeling, according to Psalm xv, verse 9, *My heart hath been glad, and my tongue hath rejoiced.*"⁸

⁶ *Ibid.* q. 83, a. 12.

⁷ *Contra Gentiles* III, 119.

⁸ *Summa Theol.* II-II q. 83, a. 12.

Therefore, external cult is also a manifestation of internal cult. Ordinarily, our love for God cannot be very great if it is not manifested exteriorly. It is part of our nature that the interior acts of the soul should find expression in the exterior acts of the body. We know that human affection, when manifested externally, is strengthened and increased. For instance, the lover shows his affection for his beloved by a letter, a visit, a kiss, a smile, and so forth. When love is not manifested by external acts, it perishes. The same is true of internal acts of religion, of our love for God.

V

Not only the individual, however, but also society in general is obliged to pay homage to God, because God is the Creator and Last End of society. He is its Creator, because He is the Maker of individuals, and places in them a natural inclination to form a society. By His Providence He conserves and bestows upon society many benefits. God is the Last End of society, because He is the Last End of the individuals who make up society. Reason tells us that as members of society we must respect authority and pay homage to our rulers.

"Honor is due to some one by reason of excellence. But to God belongs a singular excellence, since He infinitely surpasses all things and exceeds them in every way. Wherefore special honor is due to Him; even as in human affairs we see that different honor is due to different personal excellences, one kind to a father, another to a king, and so on."⁹

The same reasons which have been adduced to show the individual's obligation to practice external cult hold also for groups of individuals. Man is a social being and as such his worship should be public and in common with others.

Yes, there is an even greater obligation upon society to exercise external cult, because there is a greater need of exciting and conserving internal cult in society than in the individual. Society must publicly promote religion to conserve its existence, because religion alone will protect and efficaciously conserve the principles of justice, of good morals and of authority, which are so vital for the existence of society. They who deny the necessity of religion usually consider authority and the rights of others of no great importance. Their ultimate end is temporal felicity, even if it be at the expense of the rights of others. The consequence is some form either of tyranny or anarchy, a disruption of the order of justice.

⁹ *Ibid.* q. 81, a. 4.

VI

Man is by nature religious-minded, and the only reason why this religious-mindedness does not come to full growth is because serious obstacles are placed in its path.

"There is in man a natural inclination to set aside a certain time for each necessary thing, such as refreshment of the body, sleep and so forth. Hence, according to the dictate of reason, man sets aside a certain time for spiritual refreshment, by which man's mind is refreshed in God."¹⁰

"It is the dictate of natural reason that man should do something towards divine reverence. But that he should do this or that determined thing is not the dictate of natural reason, but is established by divine or human law."¹¹

Natural law, or reason, does not command any particular day to be set aside for the worship of God. It simply says that we must worship God. In the Old Law, observance of the Sabbath was commanded by divine positive law. Cardinal Cajetan, a renowned Dominican philosopher and theologian, says that this precept literally referred not to the interior but to the exterior cult of God; that God was given homage on the Sabbath by the exterior cessation from servile works because they rested in commemoration of the Lord's rest on the seventh day; that in the New Law, however, exterior cult consists chiefly in the saying or hearing of Mass; that cessation from servile works is for the removal of impediments to the quiet of the mind in God.

VII

The first Christians changed the day of public worship from Saturday to Sunday, "the day on which Jesus rose again from the dead." Sunday is also the birthday of the Church, for it was on this day that the Holy Ghost descended upon the Apostles giving them the necessary courage to preach the new religion of Christ. At present, our obligation to worship God publicly is stated in the first commandment of the Church: To hear Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation. Does this restrict our homage towards God? By no means. Rather this commandment indicates the minimum of our public obligation. In the words of St. Paul: "All whatsoever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him."¹² In answer to the

¹⁰ *Ibid.* q. 122, a. 4, ad 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.* q. 81, a. 2, ad 3.

¹² *Coloss.* iii, 17.

question "What shall I render to the Lord for all the things that He hath rendered to me?" may we all say with the celebrant of the Holy Sacrifice: "I will take the chalice of salvation and will call upon the name of the Lord. Receive, O Holy Trinity, this offering, which I present to Thee in memory of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ: and grant that it may ascend to Thee worthily in Thy sight, and may bring about my eternal salvation and that of all the faithful."¹³

¹³ *Offertory of the Mass.*

PRIESTHOOD

Unto eternity a sacrifice of praise thine hands shall send—
 Thy heart no other love than Mine shall know.
 O'er My chosen ones in benediction let thine hands extend
 Through thee the saving waters of My grace shall flow.

By thy paternity an offering of incense rare shall rise in praise
 Unto My throne: more precious than the purest gold.
 My wayward ones from malediction by thy virtue raise;
 Guard well their hearts lest alien shepherd reign within My fold.

Envoi:

To Thee this day these newly unctioned sons give their command:
 To Thee alone henceforward do they pledge their fealty.
 Thy strength impart to heart and mind of this Thy band
 Of soldiers—pledged only to defend Thy Majesty.

—Anselm Vitie, O.P.