

## JOHNNY'S PREDICAMENT

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JOHNNY was in a predicament. To make his story short, he had perpetrated no less villainous an act than the one here narrated. His dad had given him a huge puzzle map of the United States. Now Johnny had a keen sense of how things should be, and he soon became disgusted with a certain apparent falsity in that map. New York was a dog's head. His mother had told him so and he himself had recognized the fact. Moreover, he saw the incongruity. A dog's ears should be perked up. After a few days, Johnny fell prey to temptation and set about rectifying the error. New York was swung around and the dog's nose pointed directly at the mighty Atlantic. This procedure demanded a bit of whittling on several other states of the Union, but this was of no concern to Johnny. He was delighted with his masterpiece. He showed it to his brother. Much to his chagrin, he was laughed to scorn. No wonder,—for he had whittled off the map the very ground upon which he stood! Now he recognized the masterpiece for what it was, a mess. It looked nothing like the geography map.

So it had happened, and Johnny all atremble feared what his angered Dad might do if anyone told him. He tried to rectify the mistake, but to no avail. He merely made matters worse. There was but one thing to do: he must courageously face the difficulty.

Bethinking himself, he decided on contrition and penance. His timid and stammering confession and promise of amendment were soon over. The matter was well weighed, the decision was favourable: Johnny was to help his brother reportion and reface the map. He was most docile to his brother's every command, and soon the work was done. Once again the map recognized the home town, and all the pieces fitted together. Johnny had learned much in the restoration of the map. Geography was very easy for him after that, and he was

always content to leave maps as they were, because he had learned the reason for the map and its essentials.

How like to Johnny's predicament is that of many another mortal! There is another map, far more wonderful even than any map of the world, a map that has depth as well as length and breadth. This is the map which exists in the mind of Almighty God alone. It is the map of all creation, so closely interwoven in itself that it allows for no waste. All creation has a definite place in this mighty plan; every creature is restricted to a certain sphere. Whatever man is guilty of disrespect for the limits or bounds of another creature, in a sense whittles away something from the state of that creature. This defect however is for the most part to his own loss. His relation to that particular creature was in some way to benefit him, but because he violates its use, he renders impossible to himself the acquisition of that benefit.

Who among men are not guilty of such violation, slight though it be? It must be admitted that even the just fall. Yet, this is to the glory of the creature's capacity for perfecting itself. Complete perfection will never be realized in this life. Men can always go higher. But those who spend their energy in attempts to realize the truth of their lives are already on the high road to happiness and freedom. In such freedom all fetters are broken, and the gifts of God flourish to the good of the soul concerned. It is obvious then that a true understanding of our map is indispensable. But to what avail is the mind of man when things so far above it are concerned? Reason, although generous enough in its own order, can play no part in judging truths that are above it. The dog's ears perked downwards stare reason out of countenance. Without aid, reason will lead man astray in his judgment of the things above nature. He must admit that of himself he cannot cope with the difficulty. He is in a predicament. But his condition is not as bad as Johnnie's was; for he knows from the very beginning that the Heavenly Father has given him not only His Omnipotent Son to direct and save mankind, but also the Holy Spirit to complement his vain efforts. Of him the only thing required is an earnest effort at self-discipline and docility to his Director.

Rolling back the curtains of time, and traversing the wide world with the speed of thought, we come to rest on the summit that shades the Lake of Genesareth and the city of Capernaum. We harken to a Voice that breaks the silence: "Blessed

are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."<sup>1</sup> And again: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."<sup>2</sup> It is the Master, our Director. Is He speaking to us? He speaks indeed to His Apostles, the Salt of the earth. Here, then, is food for a Thomas Aquinas and all others who would be salt of the earth. But many others are present,—rich and plebeian, Jew and Gentile. To them also Christ is speaking. His word is meant not only for His hierarchy, nor for His saints alone; even Judas is there. We must not lose the significance of that varied audience; *we also are represented there*. Let us give ear, even as the Angelic Aquinas did. He saw the all important member represented there,—himself. His Master spoke. Thomas was a part of the great map of creation. It was important that he know his bounds.

We, too, must listen with him. Any other action will of necessity withhold our progress in the spiritual life, and deaden somewhat a lively hope that is ours. Let us without loss of time ponder with St. Thomas the Master's Words.

"Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." In each of the beatitudes, Our Blessed Lord blessed those of a certain virtue, and then by way of encouragement pointed out to them what their reward should be. Here Our Lord extols the clean of heart. The heart is used to signify the will, the source from which man's desires flow. Now, the human will is a very strong factor in the acquisition of a free mind. Therefore, that the mind may see the whole object upon which it is working, the will should be in perfect accord with the intellect. Thus it is that the most impossible men to convince are those who *will* not be convinced. Our Lord, then, promises that if all wilful impediments are removed, the soul shall see God. According to St. Thomas, this reward is effected through the Gift of Understanding.<sup>3</sup> By removing wilful impediments to understanding, we render the intellect docile to the purging powers of the Holy Spirit.

Even on this earth, God begins to fulfil the promises His Son made to those who practice the Beatitudes. Yet the Scriptures tell us that no man has seen God. Is Christ's promise in the sixth Beatitude, then, rendered vain with regard to the present life? By no means. The Scriptures speak of that perfect

<sup>1</sup> *Matthew*, v, 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 8, a. 7.

vision with which we shall see God in Heaven. There is another vision with which we can see God even in this life. This is the vision or sight which pertains especially to the intellect. In Christ's promise, it refers to something more than simple knowledge; it refers to that deeper knowledge which realizes what is behind the object known,—the knowledge we commonly call *understanding*. It enables man to see more clearly the plan of the Mighty Architect of the Universe. The traveler comes upon a replica of the guillotine; he sees it and therefore feels himself a competent authority on that sort of instrument. The revolutionist looks upon the same thing, and would like to inspire all men with the beauty he discerns in it. The young divinity student comes closer to an appreciation of it, and knowing that what the revolutionist calls beauty is treachery, he sees the true beauty it signifies. In the first two cases we have examples of the knowledge which man can attain concerning the things of earth. In the third case, that of the divinity student, we have an example of the understanding of God and the things of Faith given to the clean of heart,—to men living in the state of grace.

Some knowledge of God is possible to the man who is without Faith. But for that higher knowledge which understands the mysteries of God to a much greater degree, though still imperfectly and by no means comprehensively, supernatural Faith is required. This is obvious, for the man refusing to assent to the truth of God has no grounds for understanding it. Since, as St. Paul teaches us,<sup>4</sup> Faith is living and active only when it is founded on Charity, sanctifying grace, the principle of charity, is necessary also for such understanding. It is men in the state of grace who are the clean of heart, to whom Christ promised that they would see God. How is this promise to be fulfilled on earth? Man cannot penetrate further than his powers will, and these things are above the natural powers of reason. The only possible solution is found in the gift of the Holy Spirit that is called Understanding. It is in this gift that we are enabled to pierce further the depths of the mysteries of creation. Almighty God deigns to give this gift to all who are in the state of grace; its cultivation depends on the will of man to increase the life of grace in his soul, and upon the Holy Ghost. Man prepares himself by prayer and a steadfast practice of the moral virtues. Thus he strengthens his Faith, which may be said to be the source of the gift of Understanding.

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor., xiii, 2.

It is, then, by this gift of Understanding that a man is enabled to penetrate deeper into the things of Faith, without, of course, arriving at a comprehension of the mysteries. And he truly may be said to understand these things, endowed as he is with spiritual keenness similar to that of the divinity student who understood more truly the replica of the guillotine. He can penetrate more deeply words, signs, appearances; he sees the cause in the effect and the effect in the cause.<sup>5</sup> For him the action of the priest in elevating an apparent piece of bread over his congregation is a petition to the King of kings to bless the poor wretches, for whom at the will of the Father and by the power of the Holy Spirit He deigned to become incarnate of a Virgin. He understands this in a way that would be impossible to human reason unaided by the Holy Spirit.

This gift must not be confused with that other gift which is known as Knowledge, to which corresponds Christ's other promise: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." St. Thomas gives us a very beautiful explanation of this Beatitude.<sup>6</sup> He sees in the mourner not the selfish soul who feels himself certainly numbered among the blessed because he accepts crosses which he could in no way avoid, but rather the soul who has failed in the appreciation of the gifts and creatures of God, who, dissatisfied with his situation in the map of creation has whittled it down in his efforts to embellish it, but now with contrite heart seeks after a true appreciation, that he may be joined again to God. To such mourners Christ promises comfort. This is given in a knowledge of the true order of creatures to God. Joy is given to the sorrowing heart and knowledge to the intellect of the mourner. This Knowledge is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Like Understanding, it comes to the soul with Sanctifying Grace and is, as it were, an intuition of the spiritual order. By it the soul is empowered to make a true judgment concerning created things in their relation to God,—a judgment that is not arrived at through the reasoning powers of man alone.

It is by no means our contention that the less favoured in intellect will by the cultivation of these gifts flower forth in lengthy processes of reasoning that will shame the genius of the day, nor would we give the impression that every genius is

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<sup>5</sup>Tanqueray, Adolphe, S.S. *The Spiritual Life* (2nd ed., Tournai, 1932), n. 1345.

<sup>6</sup>*Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 9, a. 4.

the product of the workings of the Holy Spirit. But we do contend that in these gifts the most ignorant will find illumination with strong conviction, that every man of genius would be more firmly established in truth if the Holy Spirit worked within him.

Who dares question the fact that many a dog's ear seems topsy-turvy in the great map of creation? It is foolish to deny it. When all mankind fell in Adam, the Heavenly Father decreed that man was to suffer. But against this decree, aggressive temptations are everlastingly arising to infringe on the rights of other creatures animate or inanimate, temptations luring man to augment his importance in the world. This incessant urge to "whittle" tends to wipe God out of man's life. One who has whittled and whittled in an attempt to throw off the burden of his restrictions finds himself yet more fettered. Because he refuses to suffer, he is made to suffer more. To him the glory of the guillotine is the suppression of God, the Judge, on the earth. But well may his misconception be laughed to scorn, for the guillotine is an inverted dog's head made straight in the plan of God.

Why remain in our blindness? When will we throw off the fetters of pride and the restriction of self-esteem? When will we admit the glory of our own humble place in the map of creation? In that day, the light will be given us to see the God of freedom, in Whom alone, Truth can be known.