

IT COULD HAVE BEEN OTHERWISE

AUGUSTINE CATALANO, O.P.



OD HAD BEEN ALONE. From all eternity there had been no other being; but God had not been lonely. Loneliness stems from an absence of communication between persons. God, however, never suffered from lack of friendship; God was never lonely. For God is Love and in Him the Trinity of Persons eternally enjoys an incessant communication of infinite love.

When finite creatures like ourselves think of eternity we are apt to think of it in terms of millions and millions of years. We conceive of it as a long period of time passing slowly with nothing new happening and we are tempted to think that God might have been bored.

But God was not bored; and eternity is not a long time. God was not bored because He is infinitely perfect. There is no perfection conceivable that He did not already possess, no truth that He was not thoroughly comprehending, no goodness that He was not loving, no beauty that He was not contemplating. Because He is God, He had but possess Himself to possess all that could be truly enjoyed. Completely self-subsisting, He is utterly independent in His existence, even from the limitations of time. God *is*. He had no beginning and will have no end. His existence is in no way limited by, or measurable by time. Strictly speaking, we cannot refer to God as living *in* time at all. But to understand the reasons for this we need to look briefly into the nature of time.

NO CLOCK IN HEAVEN

Time is the measure of motion. We perceive time when we become sensibly aware of objects in motion and more or less consciously number that motion. An elderly man in the midst of the noonday traffic, seen from a window above the street, seems to move with agonizing slowness. He steps down from the curb and picks his way between the cars. The observer becomes so time-conscious that he literally counts the man's individual steps, silently urging him to accelerate his pace. But when, on the contrary, awareness of the successive stages in local motion is not so striking, consciousness of time fades out. Thus fascination with a piece of music blots out the consciousness of time, the awareness of the numerous and varied movements of the musicians.

Our life is said to take place in time, because human actions are successive; our joys and sorrows fade and are replaced by ever new ones. We do not possess all of our life at once. In God, however, there is no movement or change. There is no question of joy turning into sorrow nor even of one joy succeeding another. There is only the one perfect joy that leaves nothing more to be desired.

Boetius summed this all up in his classical definition of eternity: "the total and perfect simultaneous possession of endless life." He used the words "total and perfect" to show the infinite perfection of God; the word "simultaneous" because there is no succession in God; and the words "endless life" to indicate the fact that God's life has neither beginning nor end. God's eternity is somewhat like—but of course infinitely more perfect than—a person's possessing all the happiness of a lifetime in a single moment, and yet having that moment endure forever.

God, then, was eternally happy. Eternity was not too long a time to be with Himself; He was not, as it were, waiting for the moment of creation to arrive to give Him an added happiness. The act of creating was a most liberal act, for God in no way needed creatures. God created not to add to His happiness, which is infinitely perfect, but to share it. He freely decreed, from all eternity, that creatures would come into existence, at the beginning of time, solely because of His divine goodness and not from any motive of personal utility.

A CHEERFUL GIVER

If there is one truth which should be before the mind of the creature it is that of the divine liberality. Had God not freely, out of His infinite, perfectly disinterested goodness, decided to create, no creature would now be. The entire universe, the galaxies, the stars, our sun with her planets, the multitude of angels and men—all—everything and everyone, ourselves included, would never have been.

The moment creatures come into existence they begin to glorify God, who brought them out of nothingness, by manifesting something of the divine goodness. By their very existence, and by the marvelous but often inscrutable way in which they fit into the divine plan, they show something of the infinite perfection of God, revealing in part the internal and hidden divine glory. But since creatures are not all alike, this glory is given to God in diverse ways. Some creatures simply mirror certain aspects of God's goodness and blindly follow the laws the Author of nature imposes on them. Others reflect His beneficence too, but beyond this they receive at His hands the gift of seeing and recognizing the order of the Creator's handiwork.

Thus the moon, sun, stars, and galaxies show forth the goodness and wisdom of God by following the laws of change and motion, an obedience given through necessity. Angels and men, however, over and above this give glory to God by their power freely to accept or reject the laws of morality. Theirs is the faculty of turning toward their Creator in gratitude for His merciful condescension, or arbitrarily disregarding Him who is their Principle and End. The Earth *must* revolve around the sun, but man does not have to make God the center of his life, although He is truly that. God respects the freedom He has bestowed on the human will. No one is ever forced against his own will to love God. But even the sinner who rejects repeated offers of divine mercy will eventually accept the eternal penalty imposed by divine justice. In life he turned away from God in apparent enjoyment but, if unrepentant, he will remain without even the slightest semblance of joy after his death. Thus the external glory of God is always attained; by the blind obedience of the infra-rational creature, by the just men and angels, who show forth particularly God's mercy, and by the sinners, who in a special way manifest His justice.

. . . FOR THESE AND ALL THY GIFTS

By one act of adoration man can give more glory to God than the whole universe does by its magnificent, but necessary, obedience. In fact, with a single sweeping gaze of the understanding and one free embrace of the will, he can give back to God, as a personal gift, all the beauty, hidden and known, of the universe. He can supply a tongue for the mute stars, as the Psalmist does: "Praise Him, O Heavens of heavens . . . for He commanded and they were created" (Ps. 148). He can offer all the actions of his life for the glory of God: "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory" (Ps. 113). Finally, he can adore, in the intimacy of his personal life, the God who, although He could have remained alone and happy in His eternal Companionship, chose to bring others into existence.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.