

## THE ANATOMY OF BEATITUDE

*Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him. But to us God has revealed them through his spirit (I Cor. 2:9).*

THE MYSTERY of beatitude is the mystery of man. If we really knew what we were, we would know where we are going and how to get there. We do know that we crave a life of fruition which we call happiness, the secret fruit we seek in everything we do. It drives us to heights of nobility and to depths of perversity. Neither pleasure, nor wealth, nor honors, nor power, nor anything else we can find on this earth can satisfy us. Here is the weakest point of all our human philosophies, for they can only teach us that wisdom accepts with resignation an inevitable failure.

But for those whom God has chosen, the tragic mystery of *what* is replaced by the blessed mystery of *how*. They know that the goal of their striving and the fulfillment of their longing will be the eternal vision of God "face to face." Can such a thing be? Only faith can answer yes, on the promise of God Himself. How can this come about? The full answer is imbedded in a luminous obscurity. It is too brilliant for our owlish intellects; we will only understand when it is accomplished.

However theological reflection can trace faint patterns in the blinding light. Human reason beginning with the fundamentals of faith and our knowledge of human nature can penetrate the mystery far enough to establish a few certain truths about this vision. The process might more correctly be called one of deepening the obscurity; for we find that theology, as always, rather than reducing divine mysteries to human intelligibility, uncovers to the mind new and measureless profundities of God's mercy and goodness. And the result is that another truth of faith, once carelessly passed over, seizes hold of the mind and heart as a vivid reality, and we take a giant step forward on the way to God. The method of theology is to ask itself certain questions for which faith already has the answers, in order to draw from the faith as much understanding as possible.

*Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee (St. Augustine, Conf. Bk. 1, ch. 1).*

The first question, then, is: Can we find our happiness in nothing else but God alone? Remember we are considering only ultimate and perfect happiness. It would be a disparagement of the Creator of all good and all joys to refuse to admit that we find many moments of happiness in many things. But they are always transitory and imperfect. Ultimate and perfect happiness must be a state of fruition so complete that there is nothing else to be desired and so stable that there can be no anxiety that it will diminish or be lost.

The answer to the question is yes, and the theological proof is based upon the very nature of our human will. The will is the power behind all human actions, desiring all good things for man and impelling and moving the other faculties in the pursuit of them. But these good things are all limited. Their goodness is restricted to a particular kind, pleasure, for example, or utility, or even nobility. The will can go out to all of these different kinds of goodness because by nature it is not directed exclusively to a particular kind, as the sense appetites are, but to all good. But because by its nature it is directed to all good or universal good, its desire cannot be satisfied by anything less. The only thing which can fill this appetite of man is one that possesses united in itself all the goodness and all the perfection parcelled out among creatures. Such a thing, of course, can be nothing else but God Himself. Therefore, the desire for the good which is the very nature of the will can be satisfied by no created and, hence, partial good, but by God alone.

*This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God (Jn. 17:3).*

Let's ask ourselves the next question: In what does the state of perfect beatitude consist? We already know that the fruition of the will in God has something to do with it, but let's leave that aside for the moment. First, beatitude must be some kind of action on our part; for obviously we are not perfectly happy just by existing, otherwise we would not still be pursuing happiness. Happiness is our perfection; and the perfection of anything which is able to do something, is actually to do it. The piano player might be a fine man in other respects, but until he is actually playing the piano he is not perfect as a piano player. Moreover, our senses are only capable of contacting bodies, material things. Thus since happiness for us is found completely only in God, it can only result from the action of our spiritual powers, which reach to purely spiritual immaterial things. Nor is it an act of the will, which either desires happiness when we do not have it or delights in it when we already possess it; just as the miser either wants money

which he does not have or gloats when he can run it through his fingers.

The only human activity left is knowledge. We are ready to say, then, that happiness consists in knowing God—not any knowledge of God but only a completely satisfying knowledge. The philosopher knows quite a bit about God: that He is the maker of all things, one, subsistent being, immutable, etc. The believer knows all this and more: that he is triune, loving, saving. But neither the philosopher nor the Christian has perfect happiness, so there must be something wanting to their knowledge. We can see that this is true, because the more the philosopher and the Christian know about God, the more they want to know. The reason for this lies in the very nature of the intellect. Just as the will is made to desire all goodness, so the intellect is made to know all truth. It has both the appetite and the capacity to know all that is knowable in everything. Philosophy and faith know something about God, some of His attributes in an indirect way from His effects of nature or of grace. But neither of them knows all about Him. They do not know His essence, what He is in Himself apart from His effects. As long as this supremely knowable being, this ultimate truth, remains unknown, the natural longing of the intellect will be unsatisfied. And as long as the intellect is unsatisfied, perfect happiness is impossible. Therefore perfect happiness must consist in knowing the essence of God.

Before continuing the theological investigation, let's pause to reflect on what we have done to see if we have really learned anything by asking questions that the simplest of the faithful can answer without a moment's thought.

The arguments are based upon what we may call the natural desire of the intellect for truth or knowledge and of the will for goodness. We do not say merely that the mind already knowing something about God wants to know more or all, nor that the will already loving Him somewhat wants to possess Him fully. We mean that entirely apart from whatever is actually known or loved, each of these faculties in itself is by nature an insatiable hunger for truth and goodness, and that God is in fact the only being Who can satisfy that hunger, because He is Himself all truth and all goodness. We can see, then, how deep within us is our longing for God. It is He alone that we really want as we flit from one creature to another, even if we do not know it. We can also catch a glimpse of how terrible hell must be where these hungers are endured without even a crumb of divine truth or goodness to feed upon. We should also remember that God Himself made our nature. It was He who built into us this hunger for Himself. At the very moment of letting us go from His creating hand He began pulling us back

to Himself. He must be serious then about wanting us to be happy in Him. Therefore we have no reason to be shy or deferential about it ourselves. We should long for this happiness with our whole hearts and not be infected by false attitudes of disinterestedness.

It also can be deduced from the theological arguments that in beatitude we will find complete self-fulfillment and fruition as human beings. The intellect and the will are man's highest powers, and knowing and loving God are their most perfect activities. Even on earth we say that a full life is a life of activity and not of bare existence. How rich will be the life in which, unclouded and unceasing, we act to the limit of our capacities and beyond. For it is we who will know and we who will love.

The next question is an important one: Is it possible for us to know God as He is in Himself? The difficulty is not on God's side. He is pure being, pure actuality, and therefore completely knowable. The difficulty is with the human intellect: is it really capable of knowing the essence of God? Not by its own natural powers for these are limited to knowing the essences of material things. God, because His manner of existence is above that of any creature, is above the natural power of any created intellect.

Though man cannot achieve this vision by his own efforts, he does possess an innate, passive capacity to receive it if it is given to him by God, just as a glass cannot fill itself with water but can be filled by a higher power. There is no intrinsic contradiction between the human intellect and the vision of God, and therefore the power of God can effect it. A sign of this capacity is the ability of the intellect to know being or existence separately from the knowledge of this or that being or kind of being. If it can arrive at the knowledge of existence as such, it can receive the knowledge of that essence which is identical with its existence, God.

Another argument for the presence of this passive capacity is found in the natural desire of the intellect. If the intellect were by its very nature to have a natural hunger to see God as He is in Himself, though it could in no way be satisfied, then this hunger would be inane and futile. God would have created a desire impossible to fulfill, as if He had created an animal with an appetite for food but no food for it or no digestive system to assimilate the food. Such an act would be either utterly stupid or utterly malicious. Of course animals sometimes do not find food and starve; and some men do not arrive at the vision of God. But the creation of an appetite which by nature desires to possess a certain object and also by nature is intrinsically incapable of possessing that object is repugnant to the divine wisdom and goodness. The conclusion is that the human intellect can know

the divine essence as it is in itself, not by its own natural efforts but by being elevated by the power of God.

*We see now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as I have been known (I Cor. 13:12)*

The next question is the most difficult of all: How does the vision of the essence of God come about? First we must understand how any knowledge comes about. Knowledge is a union of intellect and reality. The medium through which this union is accomplished is the concept or idea, a likeness or representation of the form or essence of a real thing plucked out of its actual existence and given a new kind of existence in the mind. Thus we say that knowledge occurs by the presence of the thing known in the knower. The abstractive power of the intellect is this ability to separate and draw out an intelligible essence or aspect from concrete material things in the world about it, and shape it into an idea. This is the fundamental operation of the mind upon which all reasoning is based. The perfection of knowledge, its truth and penetration, depend upon the accuracy with which the idea represents reality. Some ideas are clear and precise; some are vague and general. And the process of forming, refining and revising them is continuous. The concept determines what we know, and without it there is no knowledge.

The knowledge of God as He is in Himself demands a union between the intellect and the divine essence. Is this too through the medium of a concept? The answer must be no. Any concept, no matter how perfect, even one placed in the mind by God Himself, would still be something created. And though all creatures bear some likeness to God, none can be a perfect representation; for God is infinite and beyond all determinations, and possesses united in Himself all the perfections scattered among creatures, while anything created is necessarily limited and determined and possesses but partial perfection. Therefore if we were to know the divine essence through some created idea, we would know it through some infinitely remote likeness. We would still not know it as it is in itself, and consequently we would not really know the divine essence. But if the union is without any created medium, this means that God unites his own divine substance immediately and directly with the intellect—Himself, as it were, taking the place of a concept.

This union is similar in a faint manner to the way God understands Himself simply by being Himself. It is entirely supernatural, and the natural strength of the intellect can no more endure it than the eye can endure the

light of the sun. It must be fortified by a new power elevating it to the supernatural level and disposing it to receive the divine substance. God infuses a special grace into the intellect, called the light of glory, through which we are divinized, made God-like. It strengthens the intellect and enables it to produce a supernatural act of knowing.

*And they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more, and they shall have no need of light of lamp or light of sun, for the Lord God will shed light upon them (Apoc. 22:5).*

This vision, though a free gift of God, will be our possession in a way far more intimate than we possess any good in this life. It will be entirely internal to our souls, He in us and we in Him. It will be always actual without a shadow of diminution or interruption, so that the fruition of the will united to the infinite good will be a joy and a delight beyond measure. We will be taken out of ourselves and yet possess ourselves in the tranquillity of infinite peace.

*This is eternal life . . .*

The promise of eternal life will be consummated in a manner far beyond our power to conceive; for we will share in the very eternity of God. This means not merely existence in time without end but, as Boethius defined it, the simultaneous whole and perfect possession of interminable life. The existence of God is a *perpetual now* without succession, a life expressed in one act of perfect knowledge and perfect love. In a similar manner the blessed in heaven will know him in one perfect act of vision and one perfect act of love, unchanging and perpetual, entirely transcending time.

*Let us make man in our image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).*

*We shall be like to him, for we shall see him just as he is (I Jn. 3:2).*

We know that the finite perfections of all created things mirror faintly the infinite perfections of God, and that the whole process of change, living and inanimate, tends toward a fuller realization of the divine likeness in the universe as a whole and in each individual. But in a special way God has impressed His likeness upon man, so that in literal truth man is an image of God. A creature of intelligence and will who has dominion over his own actions possesses in his nature a likeness, though remote, to the very nature of God. The life of knowledge and love is of the same kind, an infinite proportion being preserved, as the intimate life of the Trinity. In beatitude this image will achieve the closest possible approximation to

the Exemplar. Intellect and will will produce one perfect act of knowing and loving, just as God *is* one perfect act of knowing and loving. The object will be the same, the divine essence in itself. The human intellect will be divinized by the light of glory. Our human personality remaining, our nature will be made as God-like as possible, after the pattern of our Head and Brother, Jesus Christ, in Whom human nature is joined to the divine in the unity of one Person.

A life of intellectual perfection suggests a beatitude for philosophers and theologians, a heaven for intellectuals. But we should remember that, whether or not we are intellectuals, it is human intelligence which adds specifically human values to our life and makes our relations with one another different from the casual contacts of animals. Possession of personality is by reason of possession of intellect. All of the warmth of life is found in intrapersonal relations; and the conversation of friends and lovers has for its purpose the exchange of personality, or better, the interpenetration of personalities which love longs for. We should not forget that God, besides being subsistent existence and the rest, is also personal, in fact tri-personal. The divine life in itself is the only fully successful interpenetration of personality, a perfect interchange of knowledge and love. He has deigned to reach down and raise us up to share in this intense life of personal love, not as mere spectators but as participants, so that in a manner of speaking we are each caught up in the inner life of the Trinity. He dignifies us by giving Himself wholly to us, and so reverences our personalities that He asks us to give ourselves freely in return.

Our beatitude is not something with no relation to our life on earth. We do not win heaven the way a track star wins a trophy or a scholarship, something with no intrinsic connection to the feat he has performed. Rather it is the full flowering of our human struggles and especially of the virtues we have cherished and developed. Above all it is the perfection of faith, hope and charity, by pure vision, firm possession and loving fruition. Consequently we should regard Christian morality less as a code of precepts and prohibitions than as a way and a preparation, a training ground. Instead of suppression and restriction our ideal should be a supernaturalization of our whole being, for the life of grace is the seed of glory.

We have said nothing about the trinitarian aspects of the vision of God or about union with Christ, each of which would take as much space again. There are other things to speak of as well: bodily resurrection, the society of the saints, the perfection of natural knowledge and many more. But we have touched on some of the essentials. We are successful if we

have managed to deepen the mystery, not by creating confusion, but by disclosing the infinite vistas of God's promises.

We ought to think on these things often and study them more deeply. We ought also to cling to them with a firm hope, knowing that we need not rely on our own weakness, but on the power of God, who is faithful to his promises: "Him who overcomes I will permit to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of my God" (*Apoc.* 2:7).

—Urban Sharkey, O.P.

## THE THEOLOGY OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

**F**EW PEOPLE have said their piece in this world in a voice loud enough to be heard. Fewer still have delivered such a ringing message that it is today as sharp and clear as it was five hundred years ago. But when the voice belongs, as St. Catherine of Siena's belonged, to a young, uneducated woman, sometime nurse and domestic servant, then our very capacity to wonder at the marvel is stunned.

The durability of St. Catherine's message comes from many things. One of them is its simple, uncluttered design. It is as likely to go out of commission as a block of marble. St. Catherine tells us how we can be saints. Our aim must be to obtain light. If we gain access to the light God pours out everywhere, we can become saints. St. Catherine tells us how to reach the light. This, too, is simple, though very painful. It demands a fierce, violent attack on our own love of ourselves. St. Catherine kept her message as simple as possible. She taught it to her mother, to Blessed Raymond, her spiritual director and a theologian of no small intelligence, and to the vast and vastly different group she gathered about her; she taught it to anyone who would listen, and if they wouldn't listen, she taught them anyway.

Another reason St. Catherine's message has endured is the authority the saint exercises. The root of the authority, of course, is that St. Catherine does not speak for herself but for God. She did not learn the things she said in the usual way, but she had them poured into her mind by God. Her message is not some new revelation, but only the ancient truth made new