

THE RELIGIOUS STATE IN RELATION TO FRIENDSHIPS

Much has been written of late in ecclesiastical periodicals on the subject of the priest and his friends. Therefore it may not be without interest to consider the same topic in its relation to religious. Because of the peculiar obligations of the religious life it is clear that a mutual affection which could be cherished harmlessly by persons living in the world might become sinful if indulged in by persons in religion. Since friendship with God, or perfect charity, is the ultimate central object to which all things in religion converge, all that does not incline a religious toward this object is opposed to the perfection of his state. With the perfecting of charity between God and himself as the ground work of his endeavors, the religious coordinates and supernaturalizes all his human affections, and especially the most perfect of these friendship.

At the outset we must get a clear idea of what friendship is. St. Thomas lays down the nature of amity thus: "Not every love has the character of friendship, but that love which is together with benevolence, when, to wit, we love some one so as to wish good to him. Yet neither does well-wishing suffice for friendship, for a certain mutual love is requisite, since friendship is between friend and friend: and this well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication."¹ He gives as an example of this communication the happiness which God communicates to those who love Him.

Just how far amicable love is compatible with the religious state will appear after a brief consideration of the end of that ecclesiastical institution and the essential means employed to its attainment. Following the Angelic Doctor, we gather that "The end of the religious life is the perfection of charity. For the religious state has been formed for the attainment of perfection by means of exercises which remove the impediments to perfect charity. Now, it is clear that those who work for an end are bound in some way to tend thereto. And therefore he who gives himself to religion is not obliged at once to have perfect charity, but he is bound to tend to and labor for perfect charity."²

¹ S. Thom. 2a. 2ae., Q23, art. 3.

² S. Thom. 2a. 2ae., Q186, art. 2, and art. 1, ad. 4.

Just as an artisan has so many tools which he does not allow to lie idle, but uses them to make himself master of his trade or art, so, too, has a religious various exercises which are the tools requisite for perfecting himself in his profession. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are the means placed in his hands to detach him from the things of the world and fix his affections on the things of God. As the workman diligently considers the object of his trade and uses his tools to effect his work, so a religious should make use of the means placed at his disposal for attaining the object of his vocation. That object is union with God by perfect charity. "The vows are ordained to perfect charity, as to their end, and all other observances of religion are ordained to the vows."³

Poverty releases us from the embarrassments and distractions of temporal possessions. It permits us to have what is necessary, but forbids what is superfluous. The virtue of this vow inclines the heart to detach itself from all affection for temporal goods. Our souls are borne onwards the more perfectly to love God, in proportion as they are withdrawn from the love of earthly things.⁴ By surrendering temporal goods, we are free to go where men have most need of us. The soul is liberated from the weight of deadening earthly cares, and given liberty to bear more nobly the life of perfect charity.

Chastity has a certain close connection with the work of our perfection; for that the soul of man is hindered from giving itself freely to God not only by the love of external things, but much more by the impulses of interior passion. Now, among these none so absorbs the reason as the concupiscence of the flesh. And, therefore, the way of continence is more especially requisite for the attaining of perfection."⁵ The avoiding of sensual friendships is absolutely necessary for him who would preserve this vow inviolable. "For it is evident that carnal love darkens and divides the soul."⁶ This holy vow is meant to detach us from the inordinate love of creatures and the desires of the flesh in order that our affections and energies may be consecrated wholly to God, in view of attaining to His perfect love.

³ S. Thom. ut sup. art. 7.

⁴ S. Thom., Opusc. "de perfectione vitae Spirit." C7.

⁵ S. Thom. ut sup., C8.

⁶ S. Thom. ut sup., C8.

Obedience is the bulwark of the religious life. By it the soul surrenders its faculties. Christ gave us an example: "That as He renounced His human will, subjecting it to the Divine, so we also may subject our wills wholly to God."⁷ Superiors govern by the principle of God's love, and subjects obey for God and according to Him. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man shall hear My voice, and open to Me the door, I will come in to him."⁸ "Because when for the love of God we empty our souls of all affection for creatures that great God immediately fills them with Himself."⁹

Having in mind these few ideas on the obligations of the religious state, gleaned from the writings of masters of the subject, we ask the question: What properties should characterize a religious friendship? "In the first place every friend wishes his friend to be and to live; secondly, he desires good things for him; thirdly, he does good things to him; fourthly, he takes pleasure in his company; fifthly, he is one mind with him, rejoicing and sorrowing in almost the same things."¹⁰ It should be holy in its motive; that is, we should love our friend for the love of God. Just in its application; that is, we should love our friend for the purpose of helping him to do good, but never to do wrong. True in its aim; that is, we should love our friend not through any self-interest or personal satisfaction, but solely for the sake of his good; otherwise, our love for him would be nothing but disguised egotism. Moreover, the love of friend for friend should be fashioned after that of the Master. "Love one another as I have loved you."¹¹ Christ loved all men with an intensely tender affection, yet with an affection characterized by ineffable chastity. He was affability and courtesy itself, but He never stooped to levity. Who will accuse Him of duplicity, or say that the kiss and the endearing title "Friend," with which He greeted Judas, came not from His heart? Peter denied and blasphemed Him, still He gave to Peter the keys to His Kingdom and charge over all who loved Him. Lastly, a religious friendship should possess the quality of complete detachment. "All the counsels by which we are invited to perfection are directed

⁷ S. Thom. ut sup., C10.

⁸ Apoc. III. 20.

⁹ S. Teresa, "Int. Castle," M7, C2.

¹⁰ S. Thom. 2a. 2ae., Q25, art. 7.

¹¹ John XIII, 34.

to this, that the soul of man may be withdrawn from the love of earthly things so as to be enabled the more freely to tend to God by contemplating Him, loving Him, and doing His will."¹² A religious through the three vows makes a complete holocaust of himself, his possessions, his life, his affections, to the Omnipotent God, hence he cannot bestow these upon creatures without withdrawing them from God.

St. Thomas gives us a notion of detachment when he says: "It belongs to the perfection of friendship sometimes to leave the presence of our friend, in order to engage ourselves in his service. Accordingly, he has a greater love who sacrifices the enjoyment of his friend to serve his interests, rather than another who will not leave the presence he enjoys. But if he were willingly and easily to leave his friend, and find a greater pleasure elsewhere, his love then would be of little worth. So also it is in charity. God is to be loved above all. But there are some who willingly, or without much difficulty, leave the contemplation of Divine things and turn aside to creatures. Such as these show but little charity. Others there are so delighted with contemplation as to be unwilling to leave it even to serve the Divine interests in the work of souls. But others rise to such a height of charity that, although the contemplation of God be their greatest delight, they are ready to forego its enjoyment for the Divine service in the salvation of souls. Such a one was St. Paul, who was willing to be anathema (i. e., detached) from Christ for his brethren. And this is the perfection proper to priests and 'praedicatores,' and others who give themselves to the service of their neighbor. And they are signified by the angels on Jacob's ladder, ascending by contemplation and descending by action, in the care they have of the salvation of their brethren."¹³

The great commandment: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbor as thyself"¹⁴ is the law of friendship as of all else in the spiritual life. Love of neighbor is but a stepping-stone to Divine love. The joy of heaven is to consist in partaking of a banquet of love—the Beatific Vision. Since union with God in the bond of charity is to be the reward of the just, we on earth should love our

¹² S. Thom., Opusc. "de perfectione vitae Spirit.," C6.

¹³ S. Thom., Quodl. "de Carit.," art 11, ad 6.

¹⁴ Luke X, 27.

neighbor and endeavor to make ourselves lovable lest we be a hindrance to souls in fulfilling the great command of the law.

Further, man, as long as he is man, whether religious or no, must needs be human. The desire to love is implanted in the soul of every human being. It is natural for him to seek an object upon whom to spend that love, and from whom he may receive love in return. Nothing finite can satisfy that craving of the heart, for it was intended to find its rest only in the Infinite. "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts cannot find rest until they rest in Thee."¹⁵ We have all experienced the feeling of that missing something which impedes the perfect enjoyment of human loves. There is a void in the most perfect affection of creature for creature which can only be filled by the Infinite, that is, by loving them in God. "God deifies those who are turned to Him. Deifies, I say, that is, He makes them gods by participation of His likeness, not by the property of nature."¹⁶ It is a property of friendship to give rather than to take. The nearer the soul becomes like unto God, the more like unto the Infinite will it become in its acts and in its gifts. Christ—perfect God and perfect Man—whose human nature was always subject to the Divine, was the most perfect of friends.

How shall we attain to perfection? The call to the religious life is an extraordinary mark of God's love. It is not because a man is good that God comes into a soul to teach it the way to perfect charity. "It is God who worketh in you both to will and to accomplish."¹⁷ God first gives a soul the grace to be good, then He comes to make it better, and so on until He makes it perfect. "I am the vine; you the branches: he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing."¹⁸ We must pray that we be made fruit bearing branches of that vine drawing the sap of life from the Root, "in quo vivimus, movemur, et sumus." The soul especially of the religious must be made to feel the abiding presence of the Deity. He must begin to feel that intimate union with God by charity even in this life. Love must become the very essence of religion for him. For without it the vows and the exercises of religion are a burden.

¹⁵ S. Aug., "De Civitate Dei."

¹⁶ S. Thom., Opusc., "in Div. Nomin., C2.

¹⁷ Philipians II, 13.

¹⁸ John XV, 5.

To the religious who makes charity the soul of his every action, the body of this death will be as a bark set afloat on a river of love. A river rising from the Infinite, and emptying into that ocean of charity—the Triune God. The soul, as pilot, will ever keep the bow directed towards the port of Perfection, never allowing the ripples of “fleshly loves and fears” to disturb the placid waters of the stream, but delight exceedingly in the companionship of other barks bearing aboard them the friends of God, and hence its friends.

To those religious who find life unbearable without continually seeking the consolation of human friendship, we recommend meditation on the following maxim of St. Teresa:

“Let nothing trouble you!
Let nothing frighten you!
All things pass away,
God never changes.

“Patience gains all things.
He who possesses God
Wants nothing.
God alone suffices!”¹⁹

¹⁹ Found written in her own hand in her Breviary.

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