

THE NATURAL DESIRE FOR BEATITUDE

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IN the Ia IIae, q. 114, a. 2, St. Thomas asks whether one can merit eternal life without grace. In the body of the article occurs the following statement: "Life eternal is a certain good exceeding the proportion of created nature, because it even exceeds the knowledge and desire of nature, according to what St. Paul says in I Cor. II, 9, 'Eye hath not seen nor ear heard nor hath it entered into the heart of man. . .'" Here we find St. Thomas introducing the baffling question of natural desires and apparently denying that there is in man a natural desire for his supernatural end. Again in Ia, q. 62, a. 2, St. Thomas says, "No rational creature can have a movement of the will ordained to that (supernatural) beatitude without being moved by a supernatural agent." And yet when proving that the created intellect can see God by essence, and when showing that the beatitude or final end of man consists in the vision of the divine essence, our Holy Doctor seems to say that there is in man a natural desire for the beatific vision. In Ia, q. 12, a. 1, we read, "There is in man a natural desire of knowing the cause when he perceives an effect." This principle is used also in Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 8. In both of these articles St. Thomas says that this natural desire extends even to the essence of the First Cause.

These quotations must in some way be reconcilable, since we cannot suppose that St. Thomas contradicts himself, or that he had nothing definite in mind. What exactly was the mind of the Angelic Doctor on this point may well be an insoluble question, but by definition and division and a consideration of the opinions of theologians, together with an examination of the above-mentioned articles, we shall try to present some of the more probable conclusions on the existence and nature of this perplexing desire.

Philosophers define desire or appetite, in general, as an inclination toward a convenient good. Desire is said to be innate or elicited according as it precedes or follows upon knowledge. It is sensitive if it follows sense knowledge; intellectual if it follows upon intellectual knowledge. An intellectual desire may be either necessary or free, depending on whether it proceeds from the will with or without deliberation. Lastly, a desire may be either efficacious or inefficacious.

If the desire is for a good naturally attainable, it is said to be efficacious. If it is for a good not naturally attainable, then it is inefficacious.

Obviously we are dealing here with an intellectual desire, since the divine essence is an intelligible and not a sensible thing. Equally certain is it that we are dealing with an inefficacious desire, for it is both heretical and unreasonable to suppose that any creature could, by its natural powers alone, attain to the vision of the divine essence. Hence, we need not consider the opinions of Baius and Jansenius, who held that the desire for the beatific vision is innate and efficacious. That it is innate, but inefficacious, is the opinion of Scotus, Durandus, Soto and Bellarmine. Considering man in the hypothetical state of pure nature, i. e., without any supernatural gifts and without the guilt of sin, these authors hold that to see God by essence is the ultimate end to which man by his very nature is ordained, in the sense that it is the highest good which he can and does naturally desire, but not in the sense that he can attain it naturally. A number of other commentators, including Bannes, John of St. Thomas, Billuart, Hugon and Garrigou-Lagrange, also consider man from this point of view, but conclude that the desire is only freely elicited and inefficacious—some sort of wish for the vision of the divine essence. On the other hand, Cajetan, Buonpensiere, and others, view man as he is raised to the supernatural order and ordained to the beatific vision as his end. They hold that to a man in this state the desire for the beatific vision is connatural, for it may be supposed that he knows some effects that God produces through grace and glory, and then, so to speak, naturally desires to see the divine essence. A serious objection to this last opinion is the fact that it involves an explicit knowledge of supernatural effects, whereas St. Thomas makes no mention of these in developing his arguments based on the natural desire. But in reply it has been suggested that St. Thomas is speaking not merely as a philosopher, but as a theologian who presupposes the great truths of revelation.

However this may be, only one conclusion seems justified in view of the great disagreement among the commentators, and it is that the whole question does not admit of definite settlement. Whatever opinion one adopts, it can be only more or less probable, for there will always remain high authorities against it.

Turning now to the *Summa*, we find that in Ia, q. 12, a. 1, St. Thomas first refers to the natural desire for beatitude. Here our Holy Doctor says that the human intellect can see the divine essence,

for if this were impossible it would follow either that man will never attain his beatitude, or else that his beatitude consists in something other than in God. But this is opposed both to faith and reason. It is contrary to reason because there is in man a natural desire of knowing the cause once he knows the effect. Perceiving the effect of an unknown cause, man is excited to admiration. Just as admiration arises naturally and spontaneously in these circumstances, so also, St. Thomas seems to say, there arises naturally the desire of knowing the cause. Hence he concludes that, if the intellect of the rational creature cannot attain to the First Cause of things, a desire of nature will be in vain.

There can be no doubt about the sense of this article. St. Thomas is considering something supernatural, for in the title he uses the words, "*Deum videre per essentiam.*" It is difficult to classify the desire that St. Thomas is speaking of here. It seems to be innate only in the sense that in certain circumstances it is naturally elicited, and necessary only in the sense that it is spontaneous. As Sylvius explains it, the assertion of St. Thomas "can be confirmed partly because any man of any religion whatsoever if asked whether he wishes to see God would respond that he does; and partly because our natural desire never rests until it comes to the vision of God, according to the expression of St. Augustine, 'Our heart is never satisfied until it rests in Thee.'" Moreover Sylvius says, "Nothing other than God can be assigned towards which the natural desire of man is borne as to its ultimate end." Yet Sylvius does not admit that the desire of seeing God is absolute. It is either conditioned, i. e., if it is possible; or else the indefinite desire of seeing God in so far as He can be seen. In this connection it is important to note that Sylvius denies the validity of an argument to prove the possibility of the beatific vision from the basis of the natural desire.

Still we find St. Thomas apparently going even further and showing that the beatitude of man actually consists in the vision of the divine essence. Again he uses the argument based on a natural desire. Of course, this argument alone cannot prove it. Something must be presupposed from faith, and apparently St. Thomas is supposing from revelation that man is really ordained to perfect happiness, to beatitude as a state. In Ia IIae, q. 3, a. 8, there is, in a more diffuse form, a line of reasoning similar to what we saw above. Here St. Thomas says that ultimate and perfect beatitude is found only in the vision of the divine essence. From the whole procedure in this question it is evident that he is speaking of supernatural beati-

tude, and the quotation in the *Sed contra*, from I John III, 2, is sufficient to arrest all doubts: "When He shall appear we will be like unto Him and will see Him as He is."

In beginning his proof St. Thomas lays down two principles: first, that man is not perfectly happy as long as there yet remains anything for him to desire or seek after; second, the perfection of any potency is determined according to its proper object. The argument then proceeds with relentless logic. The object of the intellect is the essence of the thing to be known. Hence the perfection of the intellect is in proportion to its knowledge of the essence of a thing. If, therefore, the intellect knows the essence of an effect and through it the existence, but not the essence of the cause, it does not yet really know the cause. Subjectively considered, its knowledge is still imperfect, for it knows the cause only under the aspect of its existence. There still remains in man the natural desire to know the essence of the cause. This desire St. Thomas here identifies with admiration. It stimulates man to investigate, to seek out the cause, and the intellect will never be satisfied until it arrives at a knowledge of the essence of the cause. Hence if man knows from a created effect that God exists, he has only an imperfect knowledge of the First Cause. There still remains the natural desire of knowing the essence of the Cause, and so man is not yet perfectly happy.

The reasoning here is more forceful than in the article above. We cannot doubt that St. Thomas is talking about a real natural desire of some kind or other, and saying that it extends even to the essence of the First Cause. Commenting on this article Sylvius says, "The desire of seeing God can be called natural because even if man, without the light of faith telling him that this vision is possible, cannot elicit such an absolute desire as 'I wish to see God,' nevertheless he can by his natural powers have a desire similar to this, 'I should wish to see God if, and inasmuch as, He can be seen.'" In a word Sylvius says that an absolute and perfect desire of seeing God is not natural to man, but a conditioned and imperfect desire is natural. Nor is he at all disturbed over the objection that the beatific vision utterly exceeds the powers of nature, for he says a natural desire can extend to something that cannot naturally be attained. He cites the examples of a separated soul desiring its body and of a blind man desiring sight. But of course these are natural perfections that are desired. A supernatural gift cannot properly be called a natural perfection, and yet St. Thomas seems to say that at least less properly it may be so called, for in Ia IIae, q. 113, a. 10, he says that the

justification of the impious is not a miracle because the soul is naturally capable of receiving grace from the very fact that it is made in the image of God.

But to return to Sylvius: the reason why he says that the desire for beatitude is conditioned is because he maintains that the possibility of the beatific vision is known only by faith. It would seem that one may without rashness disagree with him on this point, because in Ia, q. 12, a. 1, St. Thomas expressly declares that to say the created intellect cannot see the divine essence is contrary, not only to faith, but also to reason.

An opinion more conformed to the letter of St. Thomas is that of Franciscus Ferrariensis. He makes a distinction between the knowledge of the divine essence naturally desired by the intellect and that promised to man in the state of supernatural beatitude. He says that God can be considered in two ways: as He is the First Cause of all effects, and as he is the object of supernatural beatitude. Hence it follows that the vision of the divine essence can be taken in two ways: inasmuch as it is the vision of the essence of the First Cause, and as it is the vision of the object of supernatural beatitude. According to this distinction Ferrariensis concludes that when St. Thomas says that there is in us a natural desire to see the divine essence, he is to be understood as meaning that there is in us a natural desire of seeing God inasmuch as He is the First Cause of natural effects, and not inasmuch as He is the object of supernatural beatitude. Moreover Ferrariensis says that this natural desire of seeing the divine essence is an act of the will that is necessary in regard to its object, because it follows necessarily upon the knowledge by which we know from created effects that God exists.

According to this opinion, then, there is in man a natural desire to see the divine essence that is not founded on revealed knowledge. Since the object of the intellect is universal truth, it cannot be said that the intellect, considered in itself, will ever be satisfied until it arrives at a knowledge of the divine essence. If it were ordained to natural beatitude it would be satisfied therewith, because it would limit its desires according to the will of God. But natural beatitude is like sufficient grace—on the supposition that it is all a man is to get, there is still much left to be desired. This desire of seeing God by essence is potential in rational nature, and is actively and freely elicited by reflection on the unknown cause. It amounts to a natural but inefficacious desire for something that is supernatural. Yet since it is founded on our limited natural knowledge, it is very different

from the desire for supernatural beatitude that is based on revealed truth.

But Cajetan finds many difficulties in such an explanation as this. He denies that man, unaided by revelation and grace, naturally desires the vision of God. He says that there is not in us a natural inclination toward an object which cannot be attained by all the powers of our nature. It seems a contradiction to say that nature gives us a desire for the vision of the divine essence, and at the same time hold, as we must, that nature cannot give the means to attain the object of that desire. Moreover, man is not naturally ordained to supernatural beatitude, but obedientially or supernaturally. And even granting that we do naturally desire to know God, this does not mean that we desire to know Him absolutely, as He is in Himself, but only inasmuch as He is the Creator and Supreme Lord of all things.

Cajetan then goes on to explain that the rational creature can be considered in two ways: simply in himself, and inasmuch as he is ordained to supernatural beatitude. Considered in himself, man does not naturally desire what he cannot naturally attain, and hence man does not naturally desire to see the divine essence. But if we consider man raised to the supernatural order, and with revelation presupposed, then we can say that the desire to see God is natural—or, more properly speaking, connatural. Cajetan excuses St. Thomas for not explaining that he is talking about man as he is ordained to supernatural beatitude on the ground that in theology creatures are considered only inasmuch as they are ordained, directed and predestined by God to Himself as the ultimate end of all things.

It is not our intention to compare or judge these opinions. If all are not equally probable, at least each has something in its favor and is supported by good authority. The apparently conflicting quotations from St. Thomas, given in the first paragraph above, can be more or less satisfactorily reconciled on the basis of any one of these interpretations. In choosing to explain them according to the opinion of Ferrariensis we do so, not because his opinion is more probable than the others, but because it seems to be more conformed to the letter, and not altogether foreign to the spirit of the Angelic Doctor.

In Ia, q. 62, a. 2, we must, then, distinguish the movement of the will ordained to supernatural beatitude of which St. Thomas there speaks. It is evident that he intends an efficacious movement toward the vision of God as the object of supernatural beatitude. He does not necessarily exclude a natural and inefficacious desire to know the

divine essence following on a natural knowledge of God's existence. Similarly in *De Veritate*, q. 7, a. 2, where St. Thomas says it is necessary that something be added to man whereby his desires might be inclined to his supernatural end, he may be understood as requiring something supernatural to move man efficaciously. Finally, we can distinguish what St. Thomas says in Ia IIae, q. 114, a. 2, "Life eternal exceeds the knowledge and desire of created nature," if by "life eternal" we understand the state of supernatural beatitude—and this is certainly what St. Thomas is speaking of here. But if by "eternal life" we understand the vision of God inasmuch as He is the First Cause of natural effects, then we can say that it does not exceed the knowledge and desire of created nature. Moreover in the first objection of this article we read that "man by his very nature is ordained to beatitude as his end, and hence he also naturally desires to be perfectly happy." If it were the doctrine of St. Thomas that man does not naturally desire to see the divine essence, we should expect to find in the response a distinction between natural and supernatural beatitude. Instead, he answers that God has ordained human nature to an end that must be attained by the help of grace and not by its own powers. Hence it would seem that St. Thomas probably left room here for the natural desire to see the divine essence that is based on the natural knowledge of God's existence.

June

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The land has smiled beneath the May;
The year has reached its golden noon,
And Nature spreads in grand array
Her blossoms born of gentle June.

Who has not longed for summer's hour,
Who has not loved its treasures rare,
Who has not found in June, a flower—
The Season's Heart—the rose of prayer?