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IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, those twin lights of the Church, St. Dominic and St. Francis, founded their institutes on the solid basis of evangelical poverty. Both Patriarchs recognized the value of a life of poverty if the work to which they were consecrated—the preaching of the doctrines of Faith and the call to penitence—was to be successful. They not only required poverty of the individual members of their Orders, but they also renounced the right to temporal possessions for their Orders corporately. In this they were characteristically Christ-like, for poverty was the condition of Christ's life. It was the leaven permeating His teaching. Into this living, vibrant tradition St. Thomas Aquinas was born on entering the Dominican Order, and under its influence he soon grew to perfection. In a number of writings his keen, analytic mind set down in the beauty of scholastic clarity and succinctness the thought of the Christian ages on the position which detachment from material goods holds in the scheme of Christian living. In reading these passages, we can perceive how far the modern world has parted from the spirit of Christ, how true religious poverty is a folly comparable to the Cross.

Christ, who had "not a place where He may lay His Head,"¹ prescribed for the generality of His followers a life of poverty, at least in spirit. That is to say, no one can hope to enter Heaven who places his affections in temporal external goods. For the Jews, success in this life was considered the mark of divine favor. In the Christian way of life, solicitude for the goods of this life, riches, is

¹ Matthew, VIII, 20.

outlawed. In the designs of Providence, riches are for man's prudent use, to aid him in reaching Heaven and to help his fellow men do likewise. The ultimate foundation for this obligation of detachment is, of course, contained in the First Commandment. No temporal good of this life, is to be compared with the Sovereign Good, Who is God. The Old Testament unceasingly proclaimed this truth, exhorting the Israelites to place their whole trust, hope and affection in God alone. It was a teaching re-iterated by Christ. He said: "But seek first the Kingdom of God and His holiness, and all these things shall be given you besides,"² and; "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."³

If we look for a more proximate source of poverty of spirit, it will be found rooted in true humility and fear of the Lord. Poverty of spirit is nothing more than the abandonment of one's own excellence and greatness caused by pride or the possession of temporal goods. It springs from the virtue of humility by which we justly estimate ourselves, that all we are and all we have is from God—"and what hast thou that thou hast not received? And if thou hast received it, why should thou boast as though thou were not a receiver?"⁴ It receives its driving force or motivation from the gift of fear of the Lord, filial fear, by which we show due reverence and subjection to God," because he who reverences God and is subject to Him, does not take delight in things other than God."⁵ For St. Thomas⁶, this despal of earthly goods is a prime step in the perfection of the spiritual life which consists in the perfect participation in spiritual goods. Not that perfection is achieved by this detachment, but it is the road to perfection. St. Thomas followed St. Augustine who considered humility and fear to be the parents of poverty—"Fear of God is suited to the humble, about whom it is said: Blessed are the poor in spirit."⁷ "It must be said that poverty of spirit properly accords with fear. For since to show reverence to God and be subject to Him pertains to filial fear: that which follows from this subjection pertains to the gift of fear. From the fact that one is subjected to God, he ceases to seek to be esteemed great either in himself or in something other, but in God. For this would be repugnant to a perfect subjection to God. . . And therefore, from the fact that one perfectly fears God, it follows that he does not seek to be

² *Ibid.*, VI, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, V, 3.

⁴ I Corinthians, IV, 7.

⁵ II-II, q. 19, art. 12, ad 2^{um}.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ad 1^{um}.

⁷ In Lib. I De Serm. Domini in Monte (cap. IV).

considered great in himself through pride, nor does he also seek to be esteemed great on account of exterior goods, namely honors and riches; both of which pertain to poverty of spirit, according as poverty of spirit can be understood as the breaking down of a haughty and proud spirit, as Augustine explains, or as also the abandonment of temporal goods, which is done in spirit, that is, by one's own will, through the incitement of the Holy Ghost, as Ambrose . . . and Jerome . . . show."⁸

In inculcating this withdrawal of the affections from earthly things, Christ often sounded the dangers which lay in riches and the solicitude for the things of this world. "Indeed, I tell you that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I tell you further: It is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!"⁹ This does not mean, of course, that one cannot be well off and still attain Heaven, because Christ immediately added: "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."¹⁰ St. Thomas explains Christ's meaning in this way: "This should be understood of him who actually possesses wealth: for He says of him who places his affection in riches, that this is impossible, . . . when He next states (24): 'It is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.' And, thus not simply the rich man is said to be blessed; but 'he that is found without blemish and has not gone after gold.' And this, indeed, because he has done a difficult thing: whence it goes on: 'who is he and we will praise him? For he hath done wonderful things in his life,' namely, that being placed among riches he did not love riches."¹¹ Therefore, since in the nature of things, care and anxiety always accompany material possessions, the owner will experience parallel difficulty in maintaining a poverty of spirit. He must rely heavily on help from God with whom "all things are possible."¹²

As we shall see later, St. Thomas points out that Christ did not teach that all the cares and troubles of this life can be avoided but not to be "anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself. Quite enough for the day is its own trouble."¹³ If the duty of the present moment is faithfully accomplished, trust in God for the future will banish all undue anxiety and solicitude. Only in this way

⁸ II-II, q. 19, art. 12, corpus.

⁹ Matthew, XIX, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ II-II, q. 186, art. 3, ad 4^{um} c. fin.

¹² Matthew, XIX, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, VI, 34.

will one's spirit escape the inevitable downward pull of material goods.

A large percentage of Christians in every generation have said with the rich young man in the Gospel: "All these I have observed; in what am I still deficient?"¹⁴ They received their answer and unlike the Gospel character have surrendered all their possessions and advantages in order to possess a treasure in Heaven. To imitate Christ more perfectly and gain Heaven more surely, they have become poor in fact, the more easily to be poor in spirit. They have taken the vow to preserve the virtue. A life of such actual deprivation received its sanction from Christ Himself. Poverty, obviously, is nothing new. Except in certain instances in the Old Testament, it has always been the sad lot of a certain portion of mankind, the result of God's curse on the race of Adam. As such, and this we well realize today, enforced poverty like its opposite, too much wealth, has been the occasion of much evil. "A superabundance of wealth and want seem to be shunned by those who choose to live virtuously, inasmuch as they are occasions of sin. For as abundance of wealth is the occasion for being proud; poverty is the occasion of theft, lying and perjury. Because Christ was not capable of sin, for this reason, . . . they were not shunned by Christ. Not any poverty is the occasion for theft and perjury, . . . but only that which is contrary to the will, to avoid which a man steals and commits perjury. But voluntary poverty does not have this danger: and such poverty Christ chose."¹⁵ Voluntary poverty assumed for Christ's sake is an instrument of perfection. The early Christians in Jerusalem realized this as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁶ Their mode of common life was special and not prescribed for all Christians, as St. Thomas remarks, anticipating the so-called reformers of later ages and modern Communism. "For all to live in common from the money realized from the sale of possessions is sufficient, but not for a long time. And thus the Apostles instituted this manner of life for the faithful in Jerusalem, because through the Holy Ghost they foresaw that they were not to remain long together in Jerusalem, both because of the persecutions and injuries they would receive from the Jews, and also because of the imminent destruction of the city and the nation. Therefore, it was not necessary to provide for the faithful except for a short time; and on this account, it is not written that they instituted this manner of life when they went to the Gentiles among whom the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XIX, 20.

¹⁵ III, q. 40, art. 3, ad 1^{um}.

¹⁶ Acts, IV, 32-37.

Church was established and was to endure."¹⁷

For St. Thomas, poverty, like riches, is something indifferent by nature. It receives its morality solely from the purpose for which it is used. "And because neither riches nor poverty nor any exterior good is of itself the good of man, but only as it is ordained to the good of reason, there is nothing forbidding some vice from arising from any of them, when they do not come into man's use according to the rule of reason: nor on this account should they be judged simply bad, but their bad use; and thus neither is poverty to be abandoned because of some vices which sometimes accidentally proceed from it."¹⁸ "Riches are good insofar as they assist in the use of virtue. If this mode is exceeded so that the use of virtue is impeded, they are no longer to be computed as good but as bad. Whence it happens that it is good for some who use them for virtue to possess riches; for some other who are withdrawn from virtue by them, either through too much solicitude or too great affection for them or even because of the arrogance springing from them, to have them is evil. . . . Therefore, such poverty is praiseworthy, when a man, unshackled from earthly cares, has more leisure for divine and spiritual things; in such a manner that with it [poverty] he has the faculty of supporting himself in a licit manner, for which much is not required; and the less solicitude the manner of living in poverty requires, and not the greater the poverty is, the more praiseworthy is the poverty; for poverty is not good in itself, but insofar as it frees from those things which impede a man from aiming at spiritual things: whence, the measure of its goodness is in accordance with the manner in which a man is freed by it from the aforesaid impediments. And this is common to all exterior things, because they are good insofar as they are of advantage to virtue, not indeed in themselves."¹⁹ "Riches are a certain good of man according as they are ordained to the good of reason, not however, by their nature; wherefore, nothing hinders poverty from being better, if through it one is ordained to a better good."²⁰

The absolute poverty to which the religious binds himself clears the ground for building the skyscraper of perfection which is charity. "The state of religion is a certain exercise and discipline through which the perfection of charity is attained. For which it is necessary that one totally remove his affection from earthly things: . . . From

¹⁷ C. Gentes, IV, 135, resp. 1^a.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 134, rep. 5^a.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 133, passim.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134, resp. 4^a.

the fact that one possesses worldly goods his affection is lured to the love of them . . . And thence it is that to acquire the perfection of charity the first foundation is voluntary poverty, in order that one live with nothing of his own, as the Lord says, (Matthew, XIX, 21): 'If thou desirest to be perfect, go, sell thy possessions and give to the poor, and thou shall possess a treasure in Heaven; and come, follow Me.'"²¹

St. Thomas intimates that this counsel of Christ cannot be undertaken lightly, since it requires that they become "men perfect in virtue, such as they ought to be who pursue voluntary poverty."²² For poverty escapes the realm of the ordinary offerings and sacrifices of religion. Like its companion vows of religion, chastity and obedience, it is a true holocaust. "The renunciation of one's own riches is compared to the bestowal of alms, as the universal to the particular, and a holocaust to a sacrifice."²³

The Angelic Doctor proves that evangelical poverty really effects what it purposes, namely, to remove the obstacles to perfection arising from the possession of material goods. "He who leaves all he has for Christ's sake does not expose himself to danger, neither spiritual nor corporal.—For spiritual danger arises from poverty when it is not voluntary: because from the desire of amassing wealth, which they feel who are involuntarily poor, a man falls into many sins, according to the passage in I Tim. (VI, 9): 'But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and snare.' However, this desire is removed by those who pursue voluntary poverty; but it is more dominant in those who possess riches, as is evident from the aforesaid.—Also corporal danger does not threaten those who with the intention of following Christ leave all they possess, entrusting themselves to divine providence."²⁴

Lest an extreme view be taken, in treating of a virtue, St. Thomas is always careful to emphasize its reasonableness and its proper relationship to other virtues. "The mean of virtue is obtained in accordance with right reason; not according to the quantity of the thing. . . It would indeed be against right reason, if one should consume all he had through intemperance or uselessly. But it is according to right reason that one dispose of his riches, in order to be free for the contemplation of wisdom; which it is written even certain philosophers have done. . . Whence it is much more in accord

²¹ II-II, q. 186, art. 3, corpus.

²² C. Gentes, IV, 135, resp. 4^a.

²³ II-II, q. 186, art. 3, ad 6^{um}.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, ad 2^{um}.

with right reason that a man leave all he owns, for the purpose of perfectly following Christ . . ."²⁵ "Therefore one does not act contrary to virtue through voluntary poverty, when he forsakes all; nor does he act prodigally when he does this for a due end and preserving all the other necessary conditions; for it is greater to expose oneself to death (which one does through the virtue of fortitude, under due circumstances) than to leave all one has for the due end."²⁶ Nor are the benefits accruing from poverty solely for the individual. The different states in life have been so ordered by Providence that society as a whole may more easily attain its end.²⁷ "Thus those who assume voluntary poverty in order to follow Christ, indeed leave all for this, that they may serve the common utility, by enlightening the people with their wisdom, erudition and example, or by sustaining them with prayer and intercession."²⁸

The reward which the poor of Christ undoubtedly receive in this life is the marvellous care which Divine Providence showers upon them in all their needs. Recalling the promise of Christ²⁹ that the Father will watch over those who abandon themselves to Him, St. Thomas concludes: "Although the support of those who live on what they receive from others depends on the free-will of the givers, not on this account is it insufficient for sustaining the life of Christ's poor. For it does not depend on the will of one but of many; it is indeed not probable that, in the large number of the faithful, there are not many who should promptly relieve the necessities of those whom they hold in reverence because of the perfection of their virtue."³⁰

As we have pointed out, this by no means obviates all cares, but merely reduces them to a bare minimum. "It is an entirely irrational error of those who think that all solicitude about seeking support has been forbidden them by the Lord. For every act requires care; if man should have no care about temporal matters, it follows that he ought not to do anything temporal; which is neither possible nor rational to observe. . . . Man is made of a spiritual and a corporal nature. . . . It is not then a manner of human perfection that he do nothing corporal. . . . To expect help from God in those things in which one can help himself through his own action, and yet to omit this action is the part of the fool and one tempting God. . . . For this

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ad 3^{um}.

²⁶ C. Gentes, IV, 134, resp. 6^a c. fin.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, resp. 1^a.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 135, resp. 4^a. Also, cf. seq.

²⁹ Matthew, VI, 25-34.

³⁰ C. Gentes, IV, 135, resp. 4^a. Also, cf. 134, resp. 3^a.

is repugnant to the divine ordination and goodness. . . . The Lord commanded that we must not be solicitous of what does not pertain to us, namely, the results of our actions; He did not forbid us to be solicitous of what does pertain to us, namely, of our deed."³¹ In religious communities, the necessary care of temporalities is assumed by the institution of procurators. Answering an obvious objection, St. Thomas, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, seems to sympathize with these officials. "For it can happen through the care of one or many that possessions are procured in due manner; and so the others, who are without the care of temporal things, can freely concentrate on the spiritual, which is the fruit of voluntary poverty. Nor indeed do they lose anything of the perfection of the life who assume this care for the others; for what they seem to lose in the lack of peace of mind they regain in the service of charity, in which indeed the perfection of life consists."³²

The supreme model of poverty is Christ Himself. He is the Way to perfection, the Truth we must practice, the Life we hope to attain. Just as He demonstrated a perfect obedience by "becoming obedient unto death—even the death of the Cross,"³³ so He exemplified for us perfect humility by assuming abject poverty. This is the virtue which, for St. Thomas, radiates from the Poor Man of Nazareth. "In him who is poor by necessity, humility is not greatly commended; but in him who is voluntarily poor (such as Christ was) such poverty is a mark of the greatest humility."³⁴ The Angelic Doctor assigns four reasons why Christ should have thus humbled Himself: "First, because this was suited to the office of preaching, on which account He says He has come (Mk. I, 38): 'Let us go elsewhere to the neighboring village-towns so that I may preach there also; for I have come forth for this purpose.' It is necessary that the preacher of the word of God be entirely released from the care of secular things, so that he may be entirely free for preaching; which those who possess wealth cannot do. . . . Secondly, just as He assumed corporal death in order to bestow spiritual life on us, so He maintained corporal poverty that He might bestow on us spiritual riches. . . . Thirdly, lest if He should possess wealth, His preaching would be ascribed to cupidity. . . . Fourthly, so that more greatly would the power of His Divinity be shown, the more abject He seemed by reason of His poverty. . . ."³⁵

³¹ *Ibid.*, 135, c. fin. passim.

³² *Ibid.*, resp. 1^a.

³³ Philippians, II, 8.

³⁴ III, q. 40, art. 3, ad 3^{um}.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, corpus.

Christ, then, has promised Heaven to every Christian who lives in a spirit of detachment from the things of the world and of firm attachment to God. But, He makes it evident that this is not the perfect way. Some souls He leads along the surer road of perfection through apostolic poverty. These who have forsaken all for His Name's sake, He promises "shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit life everlasting."³⁶ The benefits of poverty in the spiritual life are thus enumerated by St. Thomas: "Note about the expression: 'I have chosen thee in the furnace of poverty,' that poverty confers many things. Firstly, a recognition of sins. Secondly, the observance of the virtues, (Eccli. X, 33): 'The poor man is glorified by his discipline and fear.' Thirdly, peace of heart, (Tob. V, 25): 'For our poverty was sufficient for us, that we might account it as riches, that we saw our son.' Fourthly, fulfillment of desires, (Psal. IX, 17): 'The Lord hath heard the desire of the poor.' Fifthly, a participation of divine sweetness, (Psal. LXVII, 11): 'In thy sweetness, O God, thou hast provided for the poor.' Sixthly, exaltation, (I Kings II, 8): 'He raiseth up the needy from the dust.' Seventhly, a heavenly heritage, (Matth. V, 3): 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.'"³⁷

³⁶ Matthew, XIX, 29.

³⁷ Com. super Isaiam, cap. 48.