

A DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE

DAMIAN LEE, O.P.



AN AIR MAP OF THE PACIFIC hanging on the wall of a barracks at Hamilton Field, Sacramento, California had a thin pencil line drawn from Sacramento to a tiny island of the Pacific. At the middle of the line there was a small cross and next to it these few words, "the point of no return." The little phrase conceals many secrets. To some it tells the story of tragedy and death. To others it tells the story of courage, heroism, and magnificent success. But most of all the phrase, "point of no return" is a declaration of dependence.

Perhaps an explanation is necessary. The phrase "point of no return" indicates the midway point on a maximum range over-water flight on which accurate calculation of fuel consumption, perfect navigation, and agreeable weather are requisite. Up to the midway point on such a flight a defect in any of these requirements would necessitate returning to the point of departure. But when the midway point has been passed and more than half the fuel has been used it is impossible to return. The plane and crew are beyond "the point of no return." The little island must be found.

Once the pilot makes the decision to pass beyond the "point of no return" he steps into darkness. He severs contact with all the things behind. He cannot return though he knows every inch of the way by experience. His home is no longer a place of refuge from storm and trouble. Somewhere out ahead of him is his goal, somewhere beyond his vision, beyond his power to touch. Yet he must reach it or be lost in the endless waters of the sea. The pilot continues to employ his skill of flying but he has signed a declaration of dependence. The pilot is commander of his own plane, but beyond "the point of no return" he is completely dependent upon his navigator who directs the course, on his engineer who controls the flow of fuel, and on God to Whom all things are subject.

THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

Everyone who sincerely accepts the Christian life must make a cross on the path to God and mark it, "The Point of No Return." The

Christian must step out into darkness and cut himself off from all the things behind. He can no longer walk by the way of human experience. There is no earthly place of refuge where to flee. Somewhere out ahead of him is his goal, somewhere beyond his vision, beyond the touch of his hand and the call of his voice. Yet he must reach that goal or be lost in the endless suffering of hell. The Christian's goal is face to face union with God Himself. No human mind can plot the course. No human will can determine the means. It is only with faith in the truths revealed by God that man can approach the "point of no return" and make the life or death decision to go beyond. Every Christian must from the very depths of his soul sign a declaration of dependence on God.

The point of no return was inscribed on the path of St. Paul as if by a bolt of lightning. "And as he went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew near to Damascus, when suddenly a light from heaven shone round about him, and falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why dost thou persecute me?' And he said, 'Who art thou, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus'. . . ." Saul had reached the point of no return; "What wilt thou have me to do?" He manifested a willingness to go beyond, and Jesus directed him. "Arise and go into the city, and it will be told thee what thou must do . . ." And he entered into darkness. "And Saul arose from the ground, but when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing. And leading him by the hand they brought him into Damascus" (Acts 9: 3-9).

The physical blindness of St. Paul only accentuates the darkness into which he was cast. He could not turn back to the way of life he had known. He had walked that way without the aid of Christ's full revelations. But at the point of no return he could only ask, "What wilt thou have me to do?" He knew only that his goal lay somewhere ahead. Henceforth he would have to depend upon God to be his guide and his strength.

REALIZATION OF DEPENDENCE

The Christian's full realization of dependence on God is often impeded by the influence of the modern world. Modern thought so glorifies man and his potentialities that it rejects any and all need for God. The modern assiduously studies what he can accomplish by his own human power, skill, and ingenuity. He never seeks a goal beyond that. He zealously executes his own will to make the world to his own image and likeness. He prides himself on being a self-made man in a self-made world. He has signed a declaration of complete in-

dependence from God. But the accomplishment of the modern is mediocre because he has used a mediocre measure of what is good and true: his own mind, his own will. The philosophy of independence always bears fruit in mediocrity, and some of that mediocrity has even permeated the modern Christian's idea of perfection.

Christians must reject the materialistic philosophy of the world. This each Christian does by his profession of the true Faith. But even though Christians admit their dependence on God, they often understand neither the nature of that dependence nor the practical ramifications of it. It is perhaps the greatest tragedy of our age that Christians themselves, like the modern pagan, try to determine their own ideal of perfection in terms of their own ability. Some Christians will merely glance at the life of a saint and conclude, "This is not for me. It is beyond my power, skill, and ingenuity." Following this pattern, they will be satisfied to set up their own goal, a self styled perfection which they consider to be more conservative, more reasonable, more practical. While professing dependence on God in theory they are co-signers of the declaration of independence from God in practice. They set their own practical standards in the radius of their own natural range. They want to be a success, but in their own mediocre way.

The mistake is natural — too natural. They regard the fruit of God's supernatural guidance and care, the life of a saint, in the light of their own natural ability. Certainly they cannot attain by their own human power what God by His Divine wisdom and love has attained in the docile soul of a saint. They cannot attain independently from God what the saint has attained by complete dependence on God. Any attempt to reach so high by one's own plan and energies exhausts the natural powers rather than perfects them, because such an attempt draws on the natural strength and not on the Divine strength which alone can elevate, sustain, and move the faculties of the soul in the attainment of perfection.

It is not human capability that has triumphed in the lives of the saints, but the grace of God. The saint is not a self-made man, but a man made God-like by the grace of God. The Christian who would truly seek perfection is not like the "practical" man of the world. He does not estimate his own power, skill, and ingenuity and then choose a mediocre goal that he can attain by his own ability. The saint has chosen to live in another world, a world beyond the point of no return, a world of dependence where God is in the center of all, and all dependent on God.

An age that is sick from self indulgence needs the cure of Divine

dependence. And there is a need in our age to reaffirm the truth of man's dependence on God, to regain the theocentric perspective that is essential to sanity and sanctity. The world needs to rediscover St. Thomas Aquinas, who, as the Prince of Theologians, can best teach the place of God in human life. The *Summa* of St. Thomas is a most perfect scale by which man can judge his advance toward or his recession from God, for God is the measure of everything contained in the *Summa*. The world needs to restore in its own life the clear, pure, profound concept of perfection envisaged in the theology and attained in the life of such an august child of God as St. Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa* as in his life God is the center of all, and all dependent on God.

DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE

The *Summa* of St. Thomas stands as a theological declaration of dependence on God. The subject of the *Summa* is God. It is a theological exposition of the existence of God; the nature of God as far as It is able to be known by the human mind under the light of faith; of God as He is the efficient, exemplary, and final cause of all things; of God as He is the cause of grace and of glory in rational creatures. The formal aspect under which everything in the *Summa* is viewed is the Deity and the order of all things to the Deity. Thus when St. Thomas treats of creatures they are seen in the light of the relation they have to God. That relation is fundamentally one of dependence: dependence in the order of efficient causality in as much as all things were created by God, are held in existence by God, are moved to perfection by God; dependence in the order of exemplar causality since all things are made according to the idea pre-existing in the mind of God, just as the work of art depends on the idea in the mind of the artist; dependence in the order of final causality because all things are ordered to the glory of God and find their perfection in the goodness communicated to them by God.

All things are made from nothing by the creative act of God. God is the cause of all being, all goodness, all perfection, all beatitude. Everything that exists depends on God for its existence, for being what it is, for having what it has, for attaining what it attains. No declaration of dependence could be more complete. Dependence on God is the inviolable principle which illumines every page of the *Summa*. It is the principle which ultimately gives meaning and clarity to every theological discussion of creatures, for it is the function of theology to consider all things other than God in the relation they have to God. It is also the theological principle, at least implicit, upon which

the spiritual life of all the saints has been based, from the "fiat" of the Queen of All Saints to the "little way" of St. Therese of Lisieux.

The complete dependence of creatures on God cannot be overlooked in theology without leading to serious error; nor can it be overlooked in the spiritual life, the loving spouse of sound doctrine, without great detriment to the soul. On the other hand if the doctrine of dependence is tenaciously adhered to in theology it sheds great light on the nature of the created world and if it is incorporated into the spiritual life it bears much fruit. So even though, at first glance, the thought of dependence might seem frightening or, at least, embarrassing to the creature, in truth it is the creature's greatest glory.

THE GREATEST GLORY

All things are made from nothing. Man has every reason to be humble concerning himself and his world. But the very fact that the world was created from nothing means that God must be present to all things holding them in existence. "God is in all things; not indeed as part of their essence nor as an accident; but as an agent is present to that upon which it works. For an agent must be joined to that wherein it acts immediately, and touch it by its power. . . . Now God causes this effect [being] in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being. . . . Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost" (*Summa* I, q. 8, a. 1). An artist can form a perfect statue from marble, but once the statue is completed it no longer depends on the artist to remain perfect. That is because the human artist's act is not truly creative. The statue was made from matter that has a certain stability and permanence not dependent on the artist. But the creative act of God is a production of being from nothing. The creature receives all from God, is completely dependent on God. If God should withdraw from it but for a single moment nothing would remain.

Just as every creature is dependent on God for its very being, so too every creature is dependent on God for its operations. A very perfect automobile may be parked in front of your home, but for all its perfection in being, it remains potential with regard to its operation. It cannot start itself and operate as it should without someone to start it and someone to operate it. So too every creature has a certain perfection as a nature, but no created nature is perfect in the order of operation. "And hence, no matter how perfect a corporeal or spiritual nature may be it cannot proceed to its act unless it be moved by God" (*Summa* I II, q. 109, a. 1. c.). Nature of itself would remain inert unless it received from God the motion that enables it to act. And

having been moved, any natural being can defect in its operation unless aided by God. Every perfection, then, whether in the order of being or operation, comes from God as from a First Cause.

God is present to all things. God is everywhere by essence, presence, and power. "God is in all things by His power inasmuch as all things are subject to His power; He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to His eyes; He is in all things by His essence inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being" (*Summa* I, q. 8, a. 3). There is a continual contact between God and His creatures, a contact in which God is actively communicating to the creature a perfection of being according to its own proper nature, while the creature is receptive, passive, subject to, and dependent on God. This is the creature's greatest glory. The creature is at all times a reflection of the goodness of God. Every created being not only tells us that there is a God of infinite Wisdom, Power, and Love, but that He is ever and everywhere present, that He is ever carrying out the designs of His Wisdom through the exercise of His Power and Love.

TO MAN ALONE

"God by a common mode is in all things by His presence, power, and substance: still He is said to be present more familiarly in some by grace."¹ To man alone among all earthly creatures God can be present not merely as the cause of being, but as an intimate Friend and loving Father. God is present to all things by His creating and conserving power, yet no creature by its natural endowments can turn back to know and love Him with the intimacy of friendship. Unaided reason can bring man to a knowledge that God exists and that all creation has a natural dependence on God, but it cannot achieve knowledge of God as He is in Himself. The natural powers cannot grasp the mysteries of the ineffable life of God, the truths of the supernatural life of grace, or the sublime glory that is man's ultimate beatitude. By the natural light of reason man can know that he is being held in existence by the Author of nature, but he cannot possess God the Author of grace and of glory. He can know that God is ever present, but by no human power is man able to embrace the fulness of his God.

Only the soul that is adorned with grace can enjoy intimate friendship and loving communion with God. "No other perfection, except grace, added to substance, renders God present in anything as the object known and loved. Therefore only grace constitutes a special mode of God's presence in things" (*Summa* I, q. 8, a. 3). By grace

¹ St. Gregory (Homily viii, in Ezech.)

God is said not only to be present, but to dwell in the soul. By sanctifying grace then God dwells in the soul of the just in a new way, as the source on Whom it depends for its participation in the Divine life, and as the object of supernatural knowledge and love. By this supernatural presence God elevates the soul to a supernatural plane, infuses the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity by which the mind can know and the will can embrace with love the source of all being, all goodness, all perfection. "Faith makes us adhere to God as the source whence we derive truth. While hope makes us adhere to God as the source whence we derive perfect goodness, i.e., in so far as, by hope we trust to the Divine assistance for obtaining happiness. . . . Accordingly charity makes us adhere to God for His own sake, uniting our minds to God by the emotion of love" (*Summa* II II, q. 17, a. 6).

Though all things come into being by the Wisdom, Power, and Love of God only those creatures who are wise with the wisdom of faith and strong with the virtue of hope can return love for the Love Who dwells in their soul. Having come forth by the power of the creative hand of God, man can only return to God by the power of grace in his soul. Perhaps the simplest expression of the advance to perfection can be stated in these terms. Perfection consists in coming more and more to know and love Him Who is present by His power and essence, Who dwells by His grace in the soul and upon Whom the soul depends for all that it is and possesses. In the degree to which we come to know and love God Who dwells in the soul, to that same degree do we begin here on earth to live the life of heaven. For the beatitude of eternal life is nothing more than the clear vision of God, Who even now is present, even now dwells in the soul, but Whom we know now in an obscure manner.

NEVER CLOSER

Like still waters, our dependence on God runs deep. So complete is our dependence that God ever remains present to our innermost being, yet it is so deep that we do not always recognize it or the presence and action of God. We are inclined to imagine God as being very far away. In the natural order man does not experience the power of God holding him in existence or moving him to act. He is more conscious of his dependence on food, shelter, and clothing, than on his continual dependence on God. In the practice of the supernatural virtues man is usually more impressed with his own virile efforts than with the necessity and action of grace. Man often imagines that what he accomplishes is totally from his own head, heart, and hands. In view of this, the lesson of man's total dependence on God is not always easy

to learn. But it is one that each Christian must learn, in order to appreciate his most fundamental relationship with God. There is an example from the life of St. Catherine of Siena which strikes at the very heart of the difficulty. She was once subjected to severe temptations to impurity. She fought hard and successfully against them. Yet she was so acutely aware of her own efforts that later in prayer she lovingly though sincerely complained to Jesus, "O Lord, where were you when my heart was filled with such impure thoughts?" She received this answer from her Lord, "I was in your heart. . . . Had I been absent the thoughts that penetrated there would have given you pleasure, it was my presence that rendered them insupportable to you. I was acting in you, I defended your heart against the enemy. Never have I been closer to you." She had been conscious only of her own action, not that God was with her, aiding her. Yet God was not far away. He was with her, dwelling in her soul and it was He Who preserved her in grace, for without Him she would have fallen into grave sin.

One reason we are not always aware of our dependence on God is that we are usually too engrossed in sensible experience. All knowledge begins with the senses, but if we rest in this knowledge we can never perceive the whole of reality. At a glance we can see the color, size, and shape of a book. There is no process of abstraction, reflection, or reasoning involved in this sense experience. The sensible features of the book are immediately known. But we hardly know all about the book. We have only examined the surface. In order to know the whole truth about the book we must open it and read it word for word, page by page. Only by reading, reflection, judgment, and reasoning can we draw proper conclusions about the book. The book's existence declares that the author had something to say, something to give, something of the intelligible order to communicate. Therein lies the depth, the richness, the beauty, the truth of a good book. Only the mind can appreciate it.

The created universe is something like a book. There are some things that can be known by the immediate perception of the senses. But we do not thereby know the whole of reality. The most sublime and fruitful truths of reality can only be known by the mind. The mind alone can discover the meaning of the universe and man's place in it. But this is not known immediately. The mind must open the book of reality and read it, reflect on it, reason about it. Only then is it possible to understand what the author of nature intended to communicate. Only then can man grasp that all things in their very nature are a reflection of the "depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom. 11: 33), that all things have come from God and depend

on God. Reason, not sensible experience, tells us of our natural dependence on God.

The order of the supernatural is beyond all our natural powers of knowing. We cannot in any natural way experience or reason to the special presence of God by which the Trinity dwells in the souls of the just. We do not experience the infusion of the theological virtues or the grace that moves them to operation. We can only know our complete and continual dependence on God by a reason that is enlightened by faith. Though God is immediately present to the soul, the mind even enlightened by faith does not have immediate knowledge of God. Our knowledge of the Divine is still veiled. God is more present to the soul than a book before our face, but to find God in the depths of the soul, to enjoy communion with Him neither open eyes nor a searching mind suffice. The mind must be illumined by faith and the heart sustained by hope to achieve union with the God of love.

The intellect, elevated by faith, is enabled to know Divine truth which no human process of knowledge could attain and know it with a certainty that no human knowledge could afford. The will perfected by hope is enabled to "tend to God as to a good finally to be attained, and as a helper strong to assist. The will perfected by charity, makes us tend to God by uniting our affections to Him, so that we live, not for ourselves but for God" (*Summa* II II, q. 17, a. 6). God Himself dwelling in the soul is the only adequate cause of such perfection. God is the source of all good that man is, has, and attains. Man will ever remain conscious of his own efforts in the practice of the virtues, for he must act and of this he has immediate experience. But he only perceives the whole truth when he reflects that God is the principal source of every operation and perfection. Man only perceives the whole truth about himself when he sees himself not as master of his own eternal destiny but as he truly is, a child in the hands of God.

RECOLLECTION

St. Thomas in his *Summa* presents all things in the light of their fundamental relationship to God. He sees all things both natural and supernatural as dependent on God. He sees things as they really are. The theological principles that permeate the *Summa* are the greatest truths about the world in which we live. They give a perspective of reality that can bring sanity and sanctity to human life. Yet since these truths do not fall within the scope of our immediate experience, we cannot make them living principles of our daily life, we cannot see our own lives as they truly are without the practice of recollection.

Only the recollected soul perceives the whole of reality. No matter

how accomplished one might be in the arts and sciences, no matter how brilliant, skillful, or powerful one might be in worldly matters he does not grasp the most fundamental and most fruitful truth in his life unless he recognizes his profound dependence on God and sees all the events of his life as coming from and ordered to the glory of God and his own spiritual perfection. The recollected soul is not only conscious of the world of things about him, but always seeks to understand them in their relationship to God. There is a richness and fruitfulness in his life that is given to no other.

The recollected soul finds extraordinary joy in the simplest and most ordinary pleasures of daily life, not because they are born of sensible delight, but because they reflect at least a little of the infinite perfection of God and a great deal more about this Infinite God's minute concern for His creatures. No distress or sorrow can destroy the peace of the recollected soul. The deep sorrow at the loss of loved ones, the physical sufferings that drain the strength of the body and leave it helpless can be endured tranquilly by the recollected soul for even these things are subject to the all wise, all powerful, all loving providence of God. Pain, sickness, suffering only point more sharply to the all pervading dependence of the creature on God. The hurt inflicted by an ungrateful or apparently ungrateful friend, the pain of not being understood by others, the loneliness one feels at the loss of a loved one, are all things through which God acts to give Himself to the soul at every moment, by which He intends to purify the soul, lift it up to His embrace and sanctify it with His breath. The recollected soul sees that the very things one holds at any given moment, whether they be the smallest pleasures or the greatest sorrows, are stepping stones to sanctity. There is nothing in life so ordinary or so distressing that God in His wisdom, power, and love cannot make it work for the good of the loving, faithful, recollected soul. "For those who love God all things work together unto good" (Rom. 8: 28).

The recollected soul will joyfully give up any confidence or pride in his own actions and see them as they really are; small, mean, worthless unless they are united to the will of Him Who dwells in the soul. He will give up any self-made plans for a self-made sanctity he may have confected in his imagination and conform his life to the designs of his Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter. It is at this source that he will draw his light, his strength, and his love. Divine truth will be his light, the omnipotent God his strength. The Source of all goodness, all perfection, all holiness will be his love. By the light of faith he will see the will of God in all that he must do or endure, and accept His coming under the appearances of duties, trials, consolations, and sorrows with

the same love he receives Him sacramentally under the appearances of bread and wine.

CONCLUSION

Only God Who made us, and holds us in existence, Who gives us faith, hope and love, Who Himself dwells within the soul knows the length and breadth of the perfection possible there. Only God can direct and move the soul, inspire the mind and move the will freely to that perfection. It is for this reason that man, very reasonably and most practically, can strive beyond his own ability, can hope for things unseen, can lean on God as his strength, and seek God Himself as his love. It is for this reason that man, to attain perfection, can and must step out into the darkness, pass beyond "the point of no return" where he can no longer depend on himself but only on God. The soul that seeks perfection must sometime sincerely say, "Be it done unto me according to Thy word." God's will is the best, the perfect, the only, the loving way to sanctity. He is always present, always operating, always giving what the soul needs whether this be a trial to purify it, a consolation to strengthen it, a duty to exercise it, an inspiration to uplift it, an embrace to sustain it. The moments of life are more truly His than our own. He has designed them, He has created them, He has power over them. Yet He uses each moment He has created to give Himself to the creatures He has made. The recollected soul, turning to Him Who dwells in the soul, seeking to know and love Him more, will learn that "it is God Who worketh in you both to will and accomplish, according to His good will" (Phil. 2: 13).

The only thing extraordinary about sanctity is that it is lived by so few. It might be called extraordinary because it is rare, but the means are at our fingertips, closer than the air we breathe, for God's holy will is upon us, working in us and through us. It remains for the soul to become docile to His design, to accept what He gives at every moment with love, to unite the mind and will by loving recollection with Him Who dwells within, to recognize the littleness and helplessness of our human ways, and depend on the greatness and love of His Divine way. "For the eye hath not seen, nor the ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him. . . . So the things also that are of God no man knoweth, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of this world, but the spirit that is of God; that we may know the things that are given us from God" (I Cor. 2: 9-12).