

## DISPUTED QUESTION

*In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, and then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.*

*In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. While traditionally the dispute was settled by a master, here we will allow readers to form their own decision.*

### NATURALLY MANLY? NATURE AND GRACE IN MANLY VIRTUE

*Raymond La Grange, O.P. & Ephrem Reese, O.P.*

#### THE QUESTION

Man's happiness is twofold. One is proportionate to human nature, a happiness, to wit, which man can obtain by means of his natural principles. The other is a happiness surpassing man's nature, and which man can obtain by the power of God alone.

*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 62, a. 1

The distinction between natural and supernatural virtues is fundamental to moral theology: there are perfections of human life flowing from and attainable by human nature, and there are other perfections which are supernatural participations in the divine nature and made possible only by God's gifts. All virtues and perfections are, with the help of grace, possibilities for both men and women. Yet it is still true, in some way, to speak of peculiarly masculine perfections. These are manly modes of human virtue—strengths, characteristics, and ways of living to which good men *qua men* aspire—which have found diverse expressions throughout human and Christian history.

Are these manly perfections attainable by nature, or not? Can one achieve them on his own, or is it only possible when enabled by the supernatural work of God?

In other words: Does God's grace purify and perfect manly virtue, which is already naturally possible? Or does it more radically supply a supernatural manly perfection that is not otherwise attainable?

**Br. Raymond La Grange (RLG):** It would be an error to think that the Christian life introduces manly virtues and perfections that are inaccessible to the non-Christian. There are indeed perfections possible only as a gift of grace, but virtuous activities more proper to men do not fall within this category. The moral virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—were described by pre-Christian pagans like Aristotle, and are possible for all men and women. These can, however, find particular expression in manly perfections, for example, fatherhood and the characteristics associated with good fathers. I take the example of fatherhood because it is clearly rooted in biology. Men are born as men not by some special supernatural grace but because the body is gendered, and from that form of embodiedness there follows the possibility for fatherhood and all the virtuous living which that entails. From the manly perfection of fatherhood, certain activities

and lifestyles take on a masculine connotation, like providing for and protecting the family. Out of these arise the more shallowly stereotypical “manly things,” like eating large quantities of meat to support the physical strength required to protect. Of course, stereotypes are limited in value and can often be counterproductive. But on a serious note, since men are usually larger, stronger, and more aggressive, warfare has historically been their lot, and so the virtue of courage is associated with manliness—even though plenty of women are more courageous than many men.

The Christian life adds to the moral virtues the supernatural, theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity), as well as the infused moral virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and other perfections of the life of grace. The theological virtues have as their object God. It is true that men relate to God in ways proper to men, exemplified by the life of, for example, Christian fatherhood or priestly service. But the reason that these ways of relating to God are more proper to men is because men naturally have certain affinities to them, based (in part) on their particularly manly way of possessing the relevant moral virtues.

**Br. Ephrem Reese (ER):** You’ve begun to describe the moral and theological virtues. Now let me add a little nuance, because temperance is a virtue seated in the sense appetites, not in the muscles, nor in “lifestyles.” I’m glad you raised the topic of meat, because for hundreds of years, the strong have *abstained* from meat in order to protect the life of grace, as soldiers abstain from marital enjoyment to protect the life of their state. In order to rule the male body and its natural instincts, it takes a peculiar, graced form of discipline, which developed especially in the eremitic and monastic traditions. Thus vegetarian Christianity, if it is practiced prudently and for the sake of the kingdom of God, is an example of a manly perfection.

A precursor of this practice is Daniel, who astounded his enemies by his stubborn refusal to eat unclean meat, subsisting and thriving on a poor diet of vegetables and water (Dn 1). We see

this again in the elder Eleazar in the Second Book of Maccabees, who refused to even pretend to eat unlawful meat, was killed by his Seleucid persecutors, and was subsequently venerated as “a model of nobility and an unforgettable example of virtue not only for the young but for the whole nation” (2 Macc 6:31). While we are not, like them, bound by “sacred and respected laws” (2 Macc 6:28) regarding food, we follow a higher, spiritual law. That law has organically drawn Christian men to deny the flesh beyond naturally reasonable limits, developing, in the process, forms of masculine life conformed to the promptings of the spirit. This includes priestly governance, monastic spiritual “fatherhood,” and early Christian pacifist martyrdom. We may not be drawn to modern versions of these ancient forms of life, like modern vegetarianism or pacifism, which sap ancient asceticism of its spiritual power. But the lives of the early saints show how heroic they appeared to a youthful Christian audience, looking on at their example like the young Maccabeans looking on at the martyrdom of Eleazar.

**RLG:** You are right that revelation has organically drawn men beyond what is there by nature, but your use of the word “organic” suggests that this drawing of Christian men beyond natural reasonableness is nonetheless founded upon what is natural. Grace elevates nature, rather than arbitrarily changing it. God bestows his graces in accord with the nature that is already there. Grace is, in that sense, a supernatural and unmerited change that is nonetheless not contrary to the nature upon which it builds.

When we look at a supernatural act or form of life that a man undertakes, it’s important to recognize and differentiate the distinctly masculine character of the act from the supernatural dimension of the act. The temperance of ascetic vegetarianism, for example, is fundamentally supernatural, having God as its object, but it is not properly masculine. We know this because there are also women equally called to such expressions of asceticism. A similar analysis applies to celibacy and martyrdom; women and men are equally called to such lives. On the other hand, something



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like spiritual fatherhood is certainly manly, but what makes it manly? Try to imagine a woman who is somehow a spiritual father. This would at the very least be somewhat odd—a woman does not have the natural, bodily potencies upon which fatherhood is based. On the other hand, we can imagine a female celibate as easily as a male celibate, because the call to give up the good of the family for the Kingdom of God is not attached either to maleness or to femaleness.

This may sound like hair splitting, but it is of critical importance. For example, if the priestly life was bestowed by God as a supernatural addition to nature without reference to that nature, why would Jesus not have instituted the ordination of women to Holy Orders? On the contrary, it is precisely because a

man possesses the characteristics leading to a natural fatherhood, that he is capable of receiving the supernatural vocation of spiritual fatherhood in the priesthood. This is why a priest is able to look to the character of his father as an example for his priestly ministry, in a way that he cannot look to his mother. It is also why a woman cannot take on the priestly charism. If God were to reserve to men “masculine” virtues that were not masculine by nature, he would be arbitrarily excluding women from certain forms of supernatural life. The intelligibility of God’s decision to institute Holy Orders only for men rests on this understanding.

**ER:** I grant you an intelligible natural order, and a life of grace universally available to human beings of either sex. But the distinction of man and woman needs special consideration. Part of the intelligibility of male religious leadership comes out of religious phenomena that are specific to God’s elect people, and are not expressions of natural fatherhood, natural kingship, or even the priesthood of natural religions. I have in mind the fact that the fatherliness of God in his Jewish cult cuts against the grain of other ancient religious movements like female fertility cults and male temple prostitution. Freud famously emphasized the abstract, law-establishing severity of the righteous God who demands righteousness and is seared into the subliminal workings of our Jewish and Christian minds. Make what you will of Freud. What I mean to point out is that God (who is neither male nor female in himself) takes masculine images to himself, and thereby gives to masculinity an aura of special transcendence. I would argue that this masculine transcendence, which does harmonize with natural relationships in marriage and in the natural family, is unique to Jewish and Christian religion, because it develops within the order of grace.

What does this mean in the concrete? We begin with St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. “The husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church” (5:23). Moreover, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up with the

training and instruction of the Lord” (6:4). One remarkable thing to note here is that the *average Christian man* is being called upon in a special way as a minister of God. Even though, as everyone knows, women are usually better religious instructors, a mystical burden is laid on the men of Jewish and Christian households to be like God.

**RLG:** Christianity and Judaism are certainly unique religions, flowing from God’s direct revelation of himself. But we must be careful not to see their uniqueness only in how much they soar above the natural plane. The true revelation does indeed tell us things that are far beyond nature, but one of Christianity’s great claims to credibility lies in just how perfectly it fulfills the natural order. Thus, the new forms of life given to us by Christian revelation give supernatural perfection to nature, rather than abrogating it.

Other ancient religions had ruling father-gods, like Zeus; ancient societies, tending to be ruled by kings rather than queens, instinctively fashioned their supreme god as a father. Goddesses came to represent fertility and maternity, both of which are indisputably natural goods. This mythos stemmed from the very structure of society. Beyond this, however, things became more twisted. The mythologies told tales of violence, betrayal, adultery, and debauchery—often without clear moral reflection. Human sacrifice and temple prostitution became the religious expressions of deformed nature. Zeus and Ba’al were tyrants demanding sacrifice and worship. Aphrodite and Astarte were symbols of lust, infidelity and abandon. Paganism is wrong not because it is only natural; it is wrong because it is nature gone awry.

This order existed because man, for the ancients, was created haphazardly, often as some side effect of a war between the gods. But our scriptures teach the truth that in the beginning God said “let us make man in our image and likeness” (Gen 1:26). Our nature is somehow in the image of God, though we have strayed. In the divine wisdom, man and woman were created to reflect the relation of God to his creation. In Mary the Mother

of God, Christian piety received an icon not of promiscuity, as the pagans with their fertility cults, but rather an icon of fidelity and maternity. In the beginning, man was created first and it was his job to pass on to Eve all that God had given him. This form of headship was replaced, after the fall, with a dysfunctional domination (see Gen 3:16). Christianity lays upon the heads of households this “mystical burden” to be like God, not because it is added to nature, but in order to restore nature to what it was in the beginning. Because Christianity restores nature, as well as elevates it, we expect Christian perfection to consist, in part, in the perfection of that restored nature. What is masculine becomes perfected without losing its masculinity, but what by nature men and women aspire to equally is equally perfected in them by grace.

**ER:** It is right to insist that grace is a supernatural perfection of nature, not a revision of God’s original human creature. Supposedly “natural” ways of living are often corruptions of nature, “but in the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8). Grace heals and purifies our natural inclinations, which include the worship of the God whose effects we find in nature.

Although God is a mocker of idols, he is not embarrassed to be found, by trace and suggestion, in their mythic personalities. Yet idols “have eyes but do not see,” and are subject to human hands (Ps 115). In Jesus Christ, however, God even became a man. He took on a body, with eyes that did see, and hands that healed; and, moreover, with a kingdom and a priesthood. In his deity, he “knew what was in man” (Jn 2:25). In his humanity, he exercised that human nature for the sake of carrying out a particular work: the redemption of the world.

Could he have chosen to come as a woman? It seems that he could have. Was the Father *bound* to send the Son as a male human being? It seems not. The way your argument is proceeding, I imagine you would agree that it was *fitting* that God present himself as a male. I would say the same. But there is nothing in



human nature that demands this, nor is God revealing a male determination of his own nature by this choice.

As the Second Vatican Council famously stated, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). “Man” in this context means “humanity.” Would you agree to all this?

**RLG:** As I understand, you are saying that, by his coming as a human, God redeems nature by taking it on perfectly. He refuses the false distortions that have accrued through sin, but raises up the true nature that is still present. In doing so, he could have come as woman, but it was most fitting for him to come as man. I must agree wholeheartedly.

**ER:** Then, over and above this conception of renewed humanity in Christ, we have his particular masculinity. We also have the affirmation of the Father as the first person of the Holy Trinity. These two realities, essential parts of the Nicene Creed, have secondary effects determining Christian life and culture, determinations which are not essential but very important. This is where we see a certain paradigm shift from the Jewish to the Christian dispensation. The exemplary man is no longer the father blessed with many children, but celibate (see Ps 127; Mt 12:19). The apostles find themselves radically committed to an extravagant apostolate, which is best served by a celibate life that imitates Jesus’ own unattached state—thus, St. Paul speaks of how it is “better” to be unmarried, like him (1 Cor 7). While it was somewhat ambivalent whether the “inheritance” of the Old Testament was worldly or spiritual, it now takes on a decidedly heavenly character. Fatherhood is exercised more perfectly by the abbot than by the head of the household. Such inessential but important features of the Christian life have a real effect on the Church’s sacred history, and produce various forms of Christian manliness which determine our collective search for and realization of holiness.

**RLG:** Jesus, as the second Adam, certainly comes in a particularly masculine way. As such, he reveals something about how a man will live, not only a redeemed life, but a redeemed masculine life.

But I want to return to a theme I mentioned earlier. What is masculine always comes from what is natural, and it is this natural masculinity that is elevated to a supernatural plane, lest grace nullify nature. Now, Jesus may seem to be a completely new thing. As God, he gives peculiar expression to humanity both in that his human nature inheres in the Word and in that he has the highest degree of grace possible and imaginable. And so, in this sense, there does seem to be a way that man can go “outside nature” to find a model of masculinity, because God is certainly outside nature.

On the other hand, Jesus is not something completely alien to man. As God, he is an icon of what man should be exactly because man is made in the image of God and Christ; as man, he gives perfect expression to that identity and destiny. Therefore, natural man does not see in Jesus something entirely beyond his nature as an example of masculinity; rather, he sees his nature fully revealed as the most it could ever be (within the aforementioned bounds). What Jesus does offer us that really is beyond nature is a relationship with God in a life of grace.

This relationship with God in grace is something beyond the capabilities of human nature, both male and female, and in Christ Jesus there is “no male or female” (Gal 3:28). Therefore, the masculinity of certain forms of Christian life flow, not directly from the relationship with God, but from a graced elevation of some kind of natural perfection, founded upon natural manly characteristics. The fatherhood of the abbot grows from the same natural characteristics as natural fatherhood. As far as these forms of life are supernatural, they reach a perfection that looks beyond nature, and so the celibate religious consecration of the abbot has little natural analogue; its object is God himself. Of course, an abbot is fully a father of the monastery and fully a consecrated religious. These two aspects of his life cannot be pulled apart. In

this way, it is certainly right to speak of a spiritual fatherhood that is a new kind of life, beyond natural fatherhood, possible only in the order of grace. But the natural and supernatural aspects are also always distinct, even as they are inseparable. I think to confuse the natural and supernatural aspects of the new life does the same kind of damage as to confuse what makes Jesus man and what makes him God, even though he is not one without the other.

We can make a “Chalcedonian analogy” here, drawing upon the Council of Chalcedon’s formulation of Christ’s divine nature and human nature. The natural and supernatural characteristics of manly virtue parallel the humanity and divinity of Christ. Like Christ’s divinity and his humanity, the natural and supernatural aspects of masculine perfection are both distinct and joined, never mixed or confused and at the same time never separated. That is why I insist on the naturalness of masculine virtue. At the same time, it is still important to recognize just how much natural life is elevated by a supernatural calling.

**ER:** I believe that, in this argument, you have chosen the better part. Your Chalcedonian trump card gives me pause, and I agree with you that we must tremble to confuse the divine and human natures of the Lord. Likewise, we must be careful not to confuse the natural and supernatural characteristics of redeemed man.

On a practical note, it is also important that we, as Christians, be able to insist on true masculinity regardless of religious or confessional differences; the public square needs an open defense of virtuous masculinity, from Christians and whoever will join us, to a culture whose categories are confused at a deep level.

In appealing, however, to the unity of Christ’s person, I want to emphasize one important nuance, pertaining to his masculinity. The tradition of “following Christ” *changes* the dominant forms of life for men. Whatever precedents he may have had in the ancient world, Jesus’ celibate kingship determines a new and unique kind of spiritual fatherhood and brotherhood, not by

law, but by example. This is true even in the Old Testament. Before his coming in the flesh, God already gave to his people a life of grace which elevated their natural life. The sometimes-strange men of the Old Testament, by interrupting the fallen “natural” course of sinful human history, become a blessing to the world through their denial of the flesh, for the sake of faith. In grace, so can we.

**RLG:** Though I cling mightily to my Chalcedonian commentary, I certainly see the value in your analysis. Christ does indeed elevate nature by becoming the perfect man, and truly a man; he does so, nevertheless, in such a way as to introduce to men some very novel forms of life. These forms of life following from his example are unattainable to natural man without divine aid. They are, ultimately, both extraordinarily supernatural and thoroughly manly.

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