

Chapter 5

Perfection of the Christian Life

The word perfection signifies the state or condition of being completed or finished, without any excess or defect. In its Latin origin the word connotes the term of a process or activity (*per factum*), but in philosophy and theology the word has a wider application. The emphasis is rather on the aspect of ***totality or plenitude***, and consequently ***a thing is said to be perfect when it has all the fullness of being that is due to it by reason of its essence or nature.***

But anything is perfect to the extent that it is in act, and since existence is the "actuality of all acts," ***the concept of perfection is eminently existential. It applies to all things that exist*** and is therefore a transcendental concept. As such, it applies to beings that differ in species or degree, and therefore it is also an analogous term.

We need not discuss further distinctions of analogy, but we should note that in the existential order all analogous perfections are either dependent on the same source or are ordained to the same goal, however much they differ in other respects. Thus, all the perfections, of the created universe derive from God as their first cause; all morally good human acts are perfect in the measure that they are directed to God as an ultimate end.

Although the term *perfection*, taken in the abstract, is an analogous and transcendental concept, ***as soon as we speak of a particular kind or type of perfection, such as perfection of the Christian life, we are dealing with a concept that is restricted to that particular type of perfection.*** But the term is still an analogous one, and therefore ***if we are to define Christian perfection we must review the types of perfection that apply to the Christian life.***

The first distinction regarding perfection in general is that between absolute perfection and relative perfection. Absolute perfection is attributed to the being that has the plenitude of perfection to such an extent that it not only has the fullness of being proper to itself, but that it also possesses in an eminent degree all possible perfections. Such perfection is found only in God, who is for that reason called Pure Act by the philosophers and infinitely perfect by the theologians.

Relative perfection, as its name indicates, is attributed to finite beings, and since they were created by God, their perfections derive from the Primary Analogate who is God. Thus, we read in Genesis that God created us in his own image (Gen. 1:27).

Relative perfection has a threefold meaning, as St. Thomas explains in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book V, Chapter 18. It signifies, ***first, that a being lacks nothing due to its nature; second, that there is neither excess nor defect in its faculties of operation; and third, that it has attained its proper goal or end.*** Later, in the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas classifies this threefold perfection as essential perfection (*perfectio in esse*), operative perfection (*perfectio in operatione*), and final perfection (*perfectio in assecutione finis*). (1)

Note that operative perfection is not always a middle state between essential perfection and final perfection. Sometimes the perfection consists in an operation, and sometimes it consists in the attainment of an extrinsic goal. In the first case the operation is the goal; for example, the perfection of a violinist is to play the violin. In the second case the perfection consists in reaching a goal, as when a student receives a diploma. Both types of perfection may be found in one and the same person. Thus our formal beatitude consists in the operative perfection of the beatific vision; our objective beatitude consists in the final perfection of union with God in glory. In this respect beatitude and perfection are synonymous terms.

But we have not yet finished with the divisions of perfection. It can also be divided into primary perfection (*simpliciter*) and secondary perfection (*secundum quid*). The former signifies that which belongs to the very nature of a thing and, indeed, constitutes the very basis and source of its perfection. The latter perfection applies to the related but integral parts of the perfection of a thing; for example, docility is a secondary but integral perfection of prudence. Lastly we can distinguish between that which constitutes perfection essentially (*per se*) and that which constitutes perfection instrumentally, depending upon whether the element in question is necessary for perfection or serves as a means to foster perfection.

The Nature of Christian Perfection

We are now in a position to apply the various members of the division of perfection to Christian perfection. **It is common teaching that essential or substantial perfection consists in sanctifying grace, since sanctifying grace is the very soul of the supernatural life. Operative perfection, as we know from Scripture and theology, consists in charity.** either in its elicited act or as imperating the other virtues. Final perfection consists in the most intimate union with God through charity that is possible in this life, usually described as the mystical marriage or transforming union. Secondary perfection comprises the elicited acts of the virtues other than charity, while instrumental perfection is attributed to the evangelical counsels. Having seen the division of Christian perfection, we shall examine each element theologically.

Charity -- The Primary Element in Perfection

Christian perfection does not consist exclusively in the perfection of charity, but charity is its principal element, the most essential and characteristic element. In this sense the measure of charity is the measure of supernatural perfection so that one who has attained the perfection of the love of God and of neighbor can be called perfect in the truest sense of the word. This doctrine can be verified by testimony from Scripture, the Magisterium, and theology.

From Sacred Scripture. Christ himself tells us that upon the love of God and of neighbor depends the whole law and the prophets (**Matt. 22:35--40; Mark 12:28-31**). The texts from St. Paul are explicit and abundant: "Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect" (**Col. 3:14**); "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (**Rom. 13:10**); "There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love" (**1 Cor. 13:13**). Even faith, according to St. Paul, receives its value from charity: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor the lack of it counts for anything; only faith, which expresses itself through love" (**Gal. 5:6**). Not even the charisms are of any value without charity (**1 Cor. 13:1-3**).

From the Magisterium of the Church. The same doctrine has been amply commented upon and developed by the Fathers of the Church and has been sanctioned by the Magisterium. Pope John XXII stated that "the perfection of the Christian life consists principally and essentially in charity, which is called the bond of perfection by the Apostle (Col. 3:14) and which unites or joins man in some way to his end."⁽²⁾

Theological Argument. The proof given by St. Thomas is that the perfection of a being consists in the attainment of its ultimate end, beyond which there is nothing more to be desired. But it is charity that unites us with God, the ultimate end of man. Therefore, Christian perfection consists especially in charity.⁽³⁾

The fundamental reason is that charity alone unites us entirely with God as the ultimate supernatural end. The other virtues prepare or initiate that union, but they cannot complete it. The moral virtues bring us to God only indirectly, by establishing the proper order in the means that lead to God. Faith and hope unite us with God, since they are theological virtues, but they do not unite us with him as the ultimate end or as the Supreme Good infinitely lovable in himself - the perfect motive of charity. Charity relates to God and unites us to him as our ultimate end; faith and hope relate to God and unite us to him as a principle. Faith gives us a knowledge of God that is necessarily obscure and imperfect, and hope is also radically imperfect, but **charity unites us with God even in this life.**

Charity establishes the mutual love of friendship between God and ourselves. For that reason, charity is inseparable from grace, while faith and hope are compatible even with mortal sin (unformed faith and hope). Beyond all doubt, therefore, charity constitutes the very essence of Christian perfection; it is the form and director of all the other virtues.

Charity and the Virtues

However, it is necessary to understand this doctrine correctly. From the fact that Christian perfection consists especially in charity, it does not follow that the role of the other virtues is purely accidental, or that they are not essential to Christian perfection. The moral virtues -- and with greater reason faith and hope -- have their proper excellency even when considered in themselves, independently of charity. For although all the acts of the Christian life can and should be imperated by charity, many of them are acts *elicited* by the other infused virtues. As a matter of fact, **when the Church wishes to judge the sanctity of a servant of God in view of possible beatification, she does not consider charity only but also the exercise of other virtues to a heroic degree. This means that the infused virtues are integral parts of Christian perfection.**

Christian perfection must be considered as a moral whole, integrated by the conjunction of those conditions that perfect the life of the Christian. It connotes a plenitude that presupposes the perfect rectification of our entire moral life. But this total rectification is not achieved by charity alone, which refers only to the end; it also involves the operations of the infused moral virtues that regulate the proper use of the means to the end. Therefore **the infused moral virtues pertain to the essence of Christian perfection considered in an integral manner.**

Nevertheless, one must not lose sight of the fact that the acts of the other infused virtues pertain to the essence of Christian perfection so far as they are imperated by charity, which is the form of all the other virtues. The proper function of charity as the form of all the virtues is to direct and ordain the acts of all the virtues effectively to the ultimate supernatural end, even those of faith and hope.

Growth in Christian Perfection

Christian perfection increases in the measure that charity produces its own elicited act more intensively and imperates the acts of the other virtues in a manner that is more intense, actual and universal. This statement constitutes a basic and crucial principle for understanding the role of charity in Christian perfection. First, Christian perfection increases in the measure that charity produces its proper elicited act more intensively. If Christian perfection consists primarily in the perfection of charity, it follows that, in the measure that this virtue produces its elicited act with greater intensity, the perfection of the Christian life is likewise intensified. Hence, **the degree of sanctity coincides with the degree of love. The greater the love of God and neighbor, the greater the holiness of the individual.**

Secondly, as the form of all the virtues, charity should imperate and direct the acts of all the virtues to the ultimate supernatural end. In the measure that it does so, the influence of charity on the other infused virtues will be more intense, actual, and universal. It will be more intense because charity imparts its fervor to them. The influence of charity will be more actual because the acts elicited by those virtues will be motivated by charity. **There is a great difference between an act performed simply for the specific motive of a given virtue, such as humility, and that same act performed for the love of God, which is the perfect motive of charity.** Lastly, the influence of charity will be more universal because to the extent that charity imperates more and more acts of more and more virtues, the integral perfection of the Christian life will likewise be extended and increased.

Love of God and Neighbor

The perfection of the Christian life is constituted by the perfection of the double act of charity -- primarily in relation to God and secondarily in relation to one's neighbor. There is only one virtue and one infused habit of charity, by which we love God for himself and our neighbor and ourselves for God. All the acts that proceed from charity are specified by the same object, namely, the infinite goodness of God.

Whether we love God directly in himself or whether we love our neighbor or ourselves directly, if it is a question of the love that is charity, the formal motive of this love is always the same: the infinite goodness of God. **There cannot be any true charity for our neighbor or ourselves if it does not proceed from the supernatural motive of the love of God, and it is necessary to distinguish this formal act of charity from any love of neighbor that proceeds from a purely natural inclination.**

An increase of the infused habit of charity will provide a greater capacity in relation to the double act of charity. Indeed, the capacity to love God is not increased in the soul without a

corresponding increase in the capacity to love one's neighbor. ***This truth constitutes the central argument of the first Epistle of St. John, in which he explains the intimate connection and inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor.***

Nevertheless, in the exercise of love there is a priority that is demanded by the very nature of things. The perfection of charity consists primarily in the love of God, infinitely lovable in himself; secondarily it consists in the love of neighbor and ourselves for God. And even among ourselves and our neighbors it is necessary to establish a priority. The reason is that God is loved as the principle of the good on which the love of charity is based; man is loved with a love of charity so far as he shares in that supernatural good. One must therefore first of all love God, who is the source of that good, and secondly oneself, who shares directly in that good, and lastly one's neighbor, who is a companion in the sharing of that good.(4)

Affective and Effective Charity

Christian perfection consists primarily in affective charity and secondarily in effective charity. This is the way in which St. Francis de Sales explains it:

There are two principal exercises of our love of God: one ***affective*** and the other ***effective or active***, as St. Bernard says. By the first we are attached to God and to everything that pleases him; by the second we serve God and we do whatever he commands. The former unites us to the goodness of God; the latter makes us do the will of God. The one fills us with complacency, benevolence, aspirations, desires, longings, and spiritual ardors, so that our spirit is submerged in God and blended with him. The other places in us the firm resolution, the decided intention, and the unswerving obedience by which we fulfill the mandates of his divine will and by which we suffer, accept, approve, and embrace whatever comes from his divine will. ***The one makes us take pleasure in God; the other makes us please God.***(5)

Since Christian perfection will be greater in the measure that charity produces its elicited act more intensively and imperates the acts of the other virtues in a more intense, actual, and universal manner, it is evident that ***perfection depends primarily on affective charity*** and only secondarily on effective charity. The reasons are as follows:

1. Unless charity informs the soul, the internal or external acts of any acquired natural virtue, however perfect they may be in themselves, have no supernatural value, nor are they of any avail in relation to eternal life.
2. The acts of an infused supernatural virtue that are motivated by a charity that is weak and remiss have a meritorious value that is equally weak and remiss, however difficult the acts may be in themselves. ***The difficulty of an act does not of itself add any essential merit to the act. Merit depends on the degree of charity with which the act is performed.*** If the difficulty causes an increase of merit, it is because of the greater impulse of charity that is needed to perform the act.(6)
3. On the other hand, the acts of an infused virtue, however easy and simple in themselves, have great meritorious value if performed with a more intense movement of charity. ***As St. Teresa***

says: "The Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it."(7)

4. The same conclusion follows from the fact that Christian perfection consists especially in the elicited act of charity (affective charity) and only integrally in the acts of the other virtues imperated by charity (effective charity).

Nevertheless, the perfection of charity should be manifested by the practice of effective charity; that is, in the exercise of the Christian virtues for the love of God. ***Affective love, although more excellent in itself, may be subject to illusion or falsification. It is easy to tell God that we love him with all our heart, that we desire to be holy, and then fail to observe some precept.*** The genuineness of our love of God is much less suspect when it leads to the fulfillment of the duties of our state in life, in spite of obstacles and temptations.

Christ himself teaches us that a tree is known by its fruits (Matt.7:15-20) and that they will not enter the kingdom of heaven who merely say, "Lord, Lord," but only they who do the will of his heavenly Father (Matt. 7:21). The same doctrine is found in Christ's teaching on the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).

Charity and the Gift of Wisdom

In its complete expansion and development, charity is perfected by the gift of wisdom. This is a simple application of the general doctrine of the necessity of the gifts for the perfection of the infused virtues. Without the influence of the gifts, the infused virtues operate according to the rules of natural reason illumined by faith, according to a human mode. So long as the gifts of the Holy Spirit do not impart to the virtues the divine mode that should be characteristic of them and that they lack of themselves, it is impossible that the infused virtues should attain their perfect expansion and development.

Although this is true of all the infused virtues, it is especially true of charity. Being the most excellent of all the virtues, charity demands by a kind of inner necessity the divine atmosphere of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in order to give all that it is capable of giving. And in order that charity have a divine modality, the habit itself must be converted into a passive subject that receives without resistance the influence of the divine impetus that proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

Perfection and the Mystical State

It follows from this that ***the mystical state is necessary for Christian perfection, since the mystical state consists precisely in the actuation and predominance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is not and cannot be any perfection or sanctity that is purely ascetical and based on the human mode of the infused virtues.*** The full perfection of the Christian life is attained in the mystical state (see Chapter 6).

Moreover, the perfection of the Christian life requires the passive purgations. This question will also be treated later (see Chapter 8). For the time being, it suffices to quote the teaching of

St. John of the Cross, the doctor of the dark nights of the soul: **"However much the beginner in mortification exercises himself in controlling his actions and passions, he cannot ever control them perfectly until God mortifies the soul passively through the purification of the night."**(8)

The Increase of Charity

Charity can increase indefinitely in man as a wayfarer; consequently, Christian perfection has no definite terminus in this life. St. Thomas Aquinas states that there are three ways in which the increase of any form may have a limit or terminus. The first is on the part of the form itself, when it has a limited capacity beyond which it cannot advance without the destruction of the form itself. The second is by reason of the agent, when it does not have sufficient power to continue increasing the form in the subject. And the third is on the part of the subject, when it is not susceptible of a greater perfection.(9)

But none of these three manners of limitation can be attributed to charity in this life. As a participation in divine love and therefore a virtue supernatural in substance, the nature or form of charity is not limited. The agent or efficient cause of charity is God, and there is no limit to charity in that respect. Lastly, the human will, which is the subject of charity, has an unlimited obediential potency, and hence in the measure that charity increases, the capacity of the will for a further increase is likewise enlarged. Therefore, **there is no terminus to the development of charity in this life, and it can for that reason increase indefinitely.**

It will be quite different in heaven. There **the soul will have reached its goal, and at the moment of its entrance into heaven its degree of charity will be permanently fixed according to the measure of the intensity it has attained up to the last moment on earth.** It is true that even in heaven charity could increase indefinitely as regards the three points we have just enumerated, since in heaven the nature of charity does not change, the power of God is not diminished, nor is the obediential potency of the creature limited. But we know that charity will not increase in heaven because it will have been fixed in its degree by the immutable will of God and because the time of meriting will have passed.

Perfection and the Precepts and Counsels

Christian perfection consists essentially in the precepts and secondarily or instrumentally in the counsels. St. Thomas invokes the authority of Sacred Scripture to prove this doctrine.(10) We are told in **Deuteronomy (6:5)**: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Again in **Leviticus (19:18)** it is stated: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two precepts, says the Lord, depend all the law and the prophets (**Matt. 22:40**). Therefore, the perfection of charity, in which Christian perfection consists, is demanded of us by precept.

Moreover, Christian perfection consists principally in the love of God and secondarily in the love of neighbor. But both the love of God and the love of neighbor constitute the first and the greatest of all the commandments. This is confirmed by the authority of Christ, who stated that love of God is the first and greatest commandment, and love of neighbor is placed on a similar level (**Matt. 22:37-39**).

St. Thomas then shows that perfection consists secondarily and instrumentally in the counsels. All of them are ordained to charity, as are the precepts, but in a different way. The precepts legislate against the things contrary to charity; the counsels remove the obstacles that impede the facile exercise of charity, although these things are not incompatible with charity. It is evident, therefore, that the counsels do not constitute Christian perfection, but are only instruments for attaining Christian perfection.

The counsels do not oblige all Christians, but all Christians ought to sanctify themselves by the conscientious observance of the precepts in the spirit of the counsels. The effective practice of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) is not universally obligatory, but the affective practice or spirit of the counsels obliges everyone who desires to be perfect. The first is usually verified by public vows (as in the consecrated life); the second affects all Christians in a manner compatible with their state in life.

It should also be noted, that, in addition to the three evangelical counsels, there are many other particular or private counsels that proceed from interior inspirations of the Holy Spirit and pertain to works of supererogation. Such counsels represent a particular invitation or a concrete manifestation of the will of God for an individual person, and as such they cannot be ignored without committing an act of infidelity to grace, which is difficult to reconcile with the concept of Christian perfection.

The Universal Call to Perfection

If the striving for Christian perfection is of precept, it follows that it obliges all Christians. It is not restricted to priests and religious, but is rooted in the fundamental obligations assumed at baptism in the commitment to God.

All Christians are obliged, and not simply "invited," although this obligation is to aspire or strive. By this we mean that one is not obliged to be already perfect at the beginning of the Christian life or even at any determined moment in that life, but simply to aspire positively to Christian perfection as an end that one seriously proposes to reach. Moreover, the perfection to which we refer is not simply the substantial perfection of the state of grace but the eminent development of the entire supernatural organism of sanctifying grace, the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Let us recall the words of Christ: "You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect". (Matt. 5:48). These words are addressed to all who believe in Christ. The apostles insisted on the commandment of the divine Master. St. Paul stated that God has chosen us in Christ, that we should "be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4). He says likewise: "It is God's will that you grow in holiness" (1 Thess. 4:3).

The Church has proclaimed this teaching through the documents of Vatican Council II:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48) The followers of

Christ called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God

It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.[\(11\)](#)

Love is commanded of us in all its extension: "with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength" ([Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37](#)). Of all the spiritual elements in the Christian life, charity alone has the role of end or goal. Not only is it the goal of all the other precepts, but it is also a goal for us because by charity we are united to God, our ultimate end.

An important conclusion follows from the foregoing doctrine. The perfection of charity is commanded as an end or goal to which one must tend and not as something to be achieved at once. Consequently, those who have not yet reached perfection do not transgress the precept so long as they possess grace and charity and do not deliberately refuse to advance in holiness. The doctrine can be summarized in the following statements:

1. All Christians are commanded to love God above all things and, consequently, to tend to perfection by using the means offered them in their state of life.

2. In addition to this general obligation, religious or members of a secular institute contract a special obligation by reason of their public vow, which obliges them to strive for perfection by the practice of the evangelical counsels in the manner determined by their constitutions.

3. The diocesan priest, although not in the canonical "state of perfection," is obliged, in virtue of his priestly ordination and his ministerial office, to tend to perfection and to surpass in perfection ("the nonclerical or lay religious").[\(12\)](#)

Special Questions

The perfection of the Christian life raises some "special" problems, such as choosing the better good, imperfection and venial sin, grades of perfection, the possibility of attaining perfection, and God's will and Christian perfection.

Choosing the Better Good

A person would transgress the precept of charity if, satisfied with possessing charity in its lowest degree, he would disdain the higher grades and the total perfection of charity.[\(13\)](#) "If one does not wish to love God more than he [already] loves God, he does not fulfill the precept of charity."[\(14\)](#) Is it then necessary to aspire to the greater good and to practice it in reality? St. Thomas replies:

“We are not obliged to the greater good on the level of action, but we are obliged to it on the level of love. The reason is simple. Every rule of action demands a determined and precise

material. But if one were obliged to practice the greater good, he would be obliged to that which is undetermined. Therefore, as regards external actions, since we cannot be obliged to that which is undetermined, neither are we obliged to the greater good in all its extension.”(15)

Does this mean that the aspiration to the more perfect is limited to a simple affective tendency on the level of love, without ever reaching the energetic and definitive "I will"? Let us turn again to the Angelic Doctor: "The will is not perfect unless it be such that, given the opportunity, it realizes the operation. But if this proves impossible, as long as the will is so perfected as to realize the operation if it could, the lack of perfection to be derived from the external action is simply involuntary."(16)

This principle gives us the key to the solution of the problem. There are many things we could do each day that are better than the things we actually do. But they are so numerous and indefinite that we cannot be obliged to do them. As a result, ***we frequently choose to do that which is objectively a less perfect act. However, the less good or less perfect act is still a good act.***

On the other hand, if something presents itself to us as a particular better good, and, taking into account all the circumstances, as a concrete good to be chosen here and now, we are obliged to practice that good. Not to do so would be to resist grace, and to resist grace without a reasonable cause constitutes a fault, however light. Therefore, the obligation to choose the better good applies only when a particular good is presented here and now, and in view of all the circumstances one considers that ***the choice of that good is morally imperative.***

Imperfection and Venial Sin

There are two theological opinions on moral imperfections. The first opinion holds that all positive imperfections are true venial sins. The second opinion maintains that venial sin and imperfection (even positive imperfection) are distinct and that there are imperfections that are not venial sins.

Imperfection is the omission of a good act that is not of obligation or the remiss performance of an act, that is, with less perfection than that of which one is capable. For example, if he possesses the habit of charity with an intensity of sixty degrees, but performs an act of only thirty degrees of intensity, he has performed a remiss act and has on that account committed an imperfection. But it does not follow necessarily that the individual has committed a venial sin. Venial sin is evil, but the act performed is good, even though it is less good than it could have been. In this case we have to look for another element that would make the act a venial sin, for example, contempt, sinful sloth, or deliberate resistance to grace.

Moreover, we should not demand perfection in each and every human action, but should take into account the weakness of our human condition. ***The most that can be demanded is that individuals do the best they can under the circumstances and then leave the rest to God.***

Cardinal Mercier has written as follows on the distinction between mortal sin, venial sin, and imperfections:

Mortal sin is the repudiation of the ultimate end. Venial sin is the fault of a will that does not depart completely from the end but deviates from it. Imperfections are not opposed to the end nor do they depart from it, but they are merely a lack of progress in the direction of the end.

Venial sin is the failure to do a good that could and ought to be a, done; it is, therefore, the privation of a good and for that reason it is an evil, since evil is by definition the privation of good.

Imperfection is the nonacquisition of a good, the simple absence of a good, the negation of a good; and hence, in a strict sense, it is not an evil.⁽¹⁷⁾

Grades of Perfection

Christian perfection consists formally and primarily in the perfection of charity; therefore, to speak of the grades of Christian perfection is to speak of the degrees of charity. In discussing the various degrees of charity, ***St. Thomas uses the classical division that is based on the three ways or stages of the spiritual life, but he uses the terms beginners, proficient and perfect rather than the more common division into purgative, illuminative, and unitive.***

In the physical and psychological growth and development of human life, one can distinguish three basic stages: infancy, adolescence, and maturity. These are characterized by the appearance and exercise of vital activities that are more and more perfect. Something similar occurs in the growth of charity, although one could distinguish in this growth an indefinite number of degrees.

The various degrees of charity are distinguished according to the different pursuits to which man is brought by the increase of charity. For at first it is incumbent on man to occupy himself chiefly with avoiding sin and resisting his concupiscences, which move him in opposition to charity. This concerns beginners, in whom charity has to be fed or fostered lest it be destroyed.

In the second place, man's chief pursuit is to aim at progress in good, and this is the pursuit of the proficient, whose chief aim is to strengthen their charity by adding to it.

Man's third pursuit is to aim chiefly at union with and enjoyment of God, and this belongs to the perfect, who desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ.⁽¹⁸⁾

The three stages or degrees of charity are nothing more than divisions that characterize in a general way the infinite variety of aspects in the Christian life. ***The path of the supernatural life is a winding path, and its stages offer a variety of transitions and levels that will differ with each individual. We must never think that the three basic stages are self-contained compartments, and that those who are at a given time in one stage will never participate in the activities of another stage.***

A soul in the purgative stage may experience the graces of the illuminative stage. ***Sometimes God gives to souls in the ascetical state the graces that are proper to the mystical state.***

Likewise, advanced souls may sometimes find it necessary to return to the exercises and practices proper to a lower stage through which they have already passed. The Spirit breathes where he will and therefore one should avoid rigid classification.

The Possibility of Attaining Perfection

The doctrine that states that charity can increase indefinitely in this life is certainly sublime, and it appeals to the aspirations of generous souls; but it seems to imply a serious contradiction. If charity never reaches its terminus in this life, then Christian perfection is impossible of attainment in this life, where there is no degree of charity so perfect that it could not be more perfect.

This difficulty did not escape the attention of St. Thomas. He establishes the thesis of the possibility of perfection by using a proof from authority. The divine law cannot command the impossible; but Christ commands us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48); therefore, it is certain that perfection is attainable in this life:

The perfection of the Christian life consists in charity. But perfection implies and presupposes a certain universality, since, as the Philosopher says, that is perfect to which nothing is lacking. Hence we may consider a threefold perfection. One is absolute, and answers to a totality not only on the part of the lover but also on the part of the object loved, so that God be loved as much as he is lovable. Such perfection as this is not possible to any creature, but is [appropriate] to God alone, in whom good [exists] wholly and essentially.

Another perfection answers to an absolute totality on the part of the lover, so that the affective faculty always actually tends to God as much as it possibly can; and such perfection as this is not possible so long as we are on the way, but we shall have it in heaven.

The third perfection answers to a totality neither on the part of the object loved nor on the part of the lover as regards his always actually tending to God, but on the part of the lover as regards the removal of obstacles to the movement of love toward God, in which sense Augustine says, "Carnal desire is the poison of charity; to have no carnal desires is the perfection of charity." Such perfection as this can be had in this life, and in two ways. First, by the removal from man's affections of all that is contrary to charity, such as mortal sin; and since there can be no charity apart from this perfection, it is necessary for salvation. Secondly, by the removal from man's affections, not only of whatever is contrary to charity, but also of whatever hinders the mind's affections from tending wholly to God. Charity is possible apart from this perfection, for instance in those who are beginners and in those who are proficient.⁽¹⁹⁾

Consequently, to be perfect in this life requires the exclusion of anything that impedes the totality of the affective movement toward God. At first glance, it would seem that St. Thomas is content with requiring very little, but if one penetrates the meaning of his words, it becomes evident that he is referring to a sublime perfection. The totality of the affective tendency toward God demands that the soul work to its full capacity. It does not mean a constant and ever actual manner of operation, which is not possible in this life, but the habitual tendency to the practice of

the more perfect, excluding, so far as human weakness permits, the voluntary imperfections and remiss acts.

It does not follow from this that, if there exists the slightest voluntary imperfection, one could not be said to be perfect. Christian perfection does not demand this much. ***Even in the heights of perfection there are voluntary faults and failures***, and theologians who admit the confirmation in grace of those souls who have attained the transforming union are accustomed to make the reservation that this confirmation refers only to mortal sins and not to venial sins, and much less to positive imperfections. As **St. James (3:2)** states: "We all make many mistakes," and St. John adds: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (**1 John 1:8**). Only the beatific vision completely exhausts the capacity of the soul and thereby prevents it from the slightest deviation or distraction to anything other than God. Even the slightest imperfection is impossible in heaven, but ***on earth it is impossible to avoid all imperfection***.

It is clear that these imperfections and venial sins do not cause the transformed soul to descend from its lofty state, because they are transitory actions that leave no trace in the soul and are rapidly consumed by the fire of charity. They are like drops of water that fall into a blazing fire and are evaporated in an instant; they may even cause the fire to burn more brightly, because on encountering something contrary to itself the act of charity comes forth with greater force to destroy it.

God's Will and Christian Perfection

If the degree of charity that constitutes perfection is not limited by the nature of charity itself, by its relation to its proper object, or by its relation to the subject, what is it that determines the degree of charity for each soul? No other answer is possible but the will of God.

We are dealing now with one of the most hidden aspects of divine predestination. ***God distributes his graces among creatures in various degrees and without any other determination but his own free will***, as St. Paul teaches: "Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift" (**Eph. 4:7**).

There can be no doubt about this. According to St. Paul, the unequal distribution of graces has a finality that pertains to the totality of the Mystical Body of Christ (cf. **Eph. 4:11-13**). Everything is subordinated and orientated to Christ in order that the whole Christ -- both Head and members -- may give glory to God, the supreme finality, the alpha and omega of the works of God ad extra. As St. Paul says: "All things are yours... and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (**1 Cor. 3:21, 23**). "When, finally, all has been subjected to the Son, he will then subject himself to the One who made all things subject to him, so that God may be all in all" (**1 Cor. 15:28**).

Granting the inequality of the distribution of graces, ***is there any way in which we can verify the degree of perfection and charity determined by God for a particular soul? In no way***. Since there is neither on the part of the creature nor on the part of grace itself any title that would require a determined degree of perfection, it is utterly impossible to verify that degree or even to conjecture what it might be. It depends entirely and exclusively on the free will of God, which cannot be known except by divine revelation.

God does not predestine all of us to one and the same degree of perfection. Moreover, it is a fact that many Christians die without having reached Christian perfection. Indeed, some die impenitent and showing the signs of reprobation. Does this mean that they were not called by God to perfection or to eternal life? Not at all. To hold this would be an obvious error in regard to perfection, and it would be close to heresy in regard to eternal life. St. Paul expressly tells us that God "wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). This same teaching has been taught by the Church,⁽²⁰⁾ and is the unanimous doctrine of all Catholic theologians. Moreover, we have already established the doctrine that all are called to the perfection of the Christian life.

Then how can one explain the fact that many Christians die without having attained Christian perfection? The key to the solution lies in the distinction between the call and predestination, and between the antecedent and the consequent will of God. Prescinding from the problem of predestination to glory (which is not the purpose of our study but can be resolved with the same principles that we are going to lay down), and confining our investigation to the universal call to Christian perfection, we find that the solution seems to be as follows:

It is certain that we are all called to sanctity and perfection in a remote and sufficient manner by the antecedent will of God. But in a *proximate* and *efficacious* manner, as an effect of the *consequent* will of God (to which predestination pertains), ***each person is assigned a degree of perfection by God, and the person's degree of glory in heaven will correspond to this degree.***

Those who are predestined to the summit of perfection will infallibly reach that degree, since the consequent will of God cannot be frustrated. Those who do not reach the heights of perfection have failed, for one reason or another, to correspond with the remote and sufficient call to perfection. In other words, according to the antecedent will of God, all are called to Christian perfection and to all are offered sufficient graces to obtain it if they freely cooperate with the divine action. But according to the consequent will of God, all souls are not predestined to the heights of Christian perfection. It is one thing to be called, and it is another thing to be selected, as we read in the Gospel: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

This mystery in no way compromises the teaching that all are called to Christian perfection and that this perfection is the eminent development of the initial grace received in baptism. The majority of Christians die without reaching Christian perfection, but this does not mean that they were not called to perfection, according to the antecedent will of God, or were not offered the graces to attain perfection. ***It is not God's fault if Christians resist those sufficient graces and do not attain the degree of perfection that they could have reached.***

CHAPTER NOTES

1. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 6, a. 3; q. 73, a. 1.
2. Cf. Joseph de Guibert, *Documenta ecclesiastica christianae perfectionis studium spectantia* (Rome: Gregorianum, 1931), n. 266.
3. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 184, a. 1.
4. *Ibid.*, q. 26, a. 4; q. 184, a. 3.

5. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, trans. B. Mackey (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1942), Chap. 6.
6. Cf. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 27, a. 8, ad 3.
7. St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4.
8. St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book I, Chap. 7.
9. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, q. 184, a. 3.
11. Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, n. 40.
12. Pope Pius XI, Rerum Omnium. January 16, 1923, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, XV (1923), p. 50.
13. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 184, a. 8.
14. St. Thomas Aquinas, *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 6:1.
15. *Ibid.*, In Evangelium Matth., 19:12.
16. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 20, a. 4.
17. Cardinal Mercier, *La vie intérieure, appel aux âmes sacerdotales* (1919).
18. *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9.
19. *Ibid.*, q. 184, a. 2.
20. Council of Valence (855), *De praedestinatione* (Denz.-Schön. 625-633).

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