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Charity as adherence to God

“Mihi autem adhaerere Deo bonum est.”
(Psalm 73: 28)

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I. INTRODUCTION

“*Desiderium habens dissolvi et cum Christo esse, multo magis melius*” (Phil. 1: 23).

Although in our days this “*dissolvi*” is associated with a great fear, with the despair of the suicide or with the joy of the mad, Saint Paul expresses in the words quoted above what for a Christian should be the *perfect charity*, perfect as much as it is possible in this life. This charity moves one to desire so much to be totally united with God so that he finds all the joys of this life as nothing, because “*dum praesentes sumus in corpore, peregrinamur a Domino*” (II Cor. 5: 6). This “distance” between us and God in this life is due to the fact that “*per fidem ambulamus et non per speciem*” (II Cor. 5: 7), and only the *visio beatifica*, that is, seeing God face-to-face “as He is” (I Jn. 3: 2), will completely fulfil our desires. However, while we are still on our way to God, by charity “*contendimus sive praesens sive absens placere illi [Domino]*” (II Cor. 5: 9).

In the Tradition of the Church this dynamic of love was very often expressed as an *adhesion* to God, as the psalm says: “*mihi autem adhaerere Deo bonum est*” (Psalm 73: 28). In this essay, using mainly Saint Thomas’ *Summa Theologiae, IIIa*, we will analyze the relationship between *caritas* and *adhaerentia/inhaerentia*, and especially the relationship between the degrees of perfection in charity and the different degrees of adhesion to God. In the first chapter we will treat of *charity and the last end of man*, in the second chapter we will analyze *charity as adhesion to God* and in the third chapter we will speak about *adhesion and the perfection of charity*. Obviously, the essay will end with some conclusions.

II. CARITAS ET HOMINIS ULTIMUS FINIS

As Saint Thomas Aquinas proves, since nature is determined to one, all men have just one final end, namely, happiness. Their will necessarily wills happiness and moves them always

in accordance with this last end. That is, all their actions are directed as real or apparent means to reach happiness. But, as Saint Thomas shows further, this happiness consists in *visio beatifica*, in seeing God face-to-face. We speak here about *visio* not only as an abstract intellectual understanding, but as a understanding that transforms the person by uniting it completely and eternally to God through love. However, the human nature is not capable to reach this final end by itself, it necessarily needs some supernatural gifts. As for attaining his natural end a man needs some principles of movement (the natural principles of the intellect and the natural inclination of the will towards the good), in the same way he needs some additional principles that would move him towards his supernatural end. But, since this latter end is above his natural powers, the principles moving him to attain this end must also be *supernatural*.¹ Consequently, he has to receive these principles from above. Furthermore, he can receive these principles because the human being is *capax Dei*, that is, he *can be* raised by the Divine power to the loving union with God. Thus, by the gift of supernatural grace, the powers of the soul are perfected by different specific virtues, some called theological virtues and others called moral virtues. These virtues are the principles of this supernatural movement towards God, among which the theological virtues work like the first principles.

Looking now in particular to the power of the will, which is responsible for moving someone towards his final end, this power will be also perfected by some specific virtues. Some of these virtues will have as their specific object God Himself – therefore they are called “*theological virtues*”, and one of them will be the principle of “a certain spiritual union, whereby the will is, so to speak, transformed into that end [God].”² This virtue is called *charity*, and as theological virtue it has two other³ essential properties: it is *infused by God* (as the first fruit of grace) and is *known only by revelation*.⁴ However, we will not stop now on these properties; rather, we want to analyze more closely what charity is.

¹ Vide Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 62, a. 1, corpus.

² Saint Thomas, idem, a. 3, corpus. In a similar way, the will tends to its natural end having a certain conformity with that end.

³ The first property was enounced above: its specific object is God Himself.

⁴ Saint Thomas, op. cit., Ia IIae, q. 62, a. 1, corpus.

Since love is the first change in the will (as an *adaptation to* or a *complacency in* the object willed),⁵ it is clear that charity, which adapts the will to its supernatural end, falls under the genus of love. Moreover, since the will wills the last end *for its own sake*, charity will enable the will to love God for His own sake and not for the sake of something else. This is a very important conclusion, which helps us to proceed further in understanding what charity is. Love can be *twofold*: love of *friendship*, when the object is loved simply and for itself, and love of *concupiscence*, when the object is loved for something else.⁶ It is clear therefore that charity belongs to *love of friendship*. Furthermore, since “nos ergo diligamus quoniam Deus prior dilexit nos” (I Jn. 4: 19), it is clear that there is a mutual love between God and those loving Him.⁷ This reciprocity allows one to say that charity is friendship, more precisely, a supernatural friendship. But, since love of friendship implies to love someone as to wish good to him, one might ask what good do we wish to God and what good does God wish to us; the answer is not difficult: we wish God to be loved and God wishes eternal happiness to us.⁸ Likewise, some people might be troubled on account of the *different meanings* we found for charity: if charity is love, then charity is an *act of the will*; if charity is friendship, then it is *like a habit*. But, as Saint Thomas says, “charity can be taken in either way,”⁹ for by “charity” is meant both the supernatural habit of the will and the act performed through that habit.¹⁰

Considering now charity *in comparison* with the other infused virtues (theological, intellectual and moral), it can be said that charity is more excellent than all of them, on account of its specific object – God as He is in Himself. As Saint Thomas says,

faith and hope attain God indeed in so far as we derive from Him the knowledge of truth or the acquisition of good, whereas charity attains God Himself that it may rest in Him, but not that something may accrue to us from Him. Hence charity is more excellent than faith or hope, and, consequently, than all the other virtues, just as prudence, which by itself attains reason, is more excellent than the other moral virtues, which attain reason in so far as it appoints the mean in human operations or passions.

⁵ Ibidem, q. 26, a.2, corpus.

⁶ Ibidem, a. 4, corpus.

⁷ Although God’s love is infinitely higher than the love His creatures could have for Him.

⁸ Although it might sound strange for some people to say “God *wishes*”, the term is used here as to make the distinction between the *antecedent* and the *subsequent* will of God (see Saint John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*). This distinction accounts for the human freedom, but the term “wishes” does not express here a mere wish, but a conditional willing.

⁹ Saint Thomas, op. cit., q. 26, a. 3, corpus.

¹⁰ The same principle applies to the other two theological virtues.

In fact, all the other virtues depend on charity as regards their finality. In human acts one can distinguish between the *last end* (the ultimate good) and the *intermediary ends* (some real or apparent intermediary goods). Charity directs one to his ultimate good, while the other virtues direct him to some intermediary goods, which are really and not apparently good only inasmuch as they are ordered to the ultimate good. Thus, if charity is missing, the will does not move towards the true supreme good; consequently, any other virtue, though it might direct one to some true *particular* good, it would be *imperfect*, for it would not serve to the attainment of happiness. In other words, charity perfects all the other virtues, and therefore it can be said that it is the form of all virtues.¹¹

III. ADHAERERE DEO ET CARITAS

Before proceeding to unfold the meaning of “adhaerere Deo”, we should have some terminological clarifications with respect to the words used. The Latin “adhaerere” is a verb composed from the preposition “ad” [usually translated in English by “to”] and the verb “haerere” [which means “to stick firmly to”, “to bond to”, “to hold fast to”]. In fact, the particle “ad” just stresses the aspiration of the verb for an indirect complement. The English nouns “adhesion” [French “adhésion”, Italian “adesione”] and “adherence” [Latin “adhaerentia”] can have the following meanings: the *act* of adhering, the *state* or adhering, or a steady and firm *attachment*.

Coming now back to our expression, “adhaerere Deo” means to stick firmly to God. But how could someone stick to God? In what sense is that possible? First, since God is immaterial, it is clear that nobody can think to corporeal or sensitive adherence. However, inasmuch as through love one is said to be *united* to the one he loves, it is possible to speak about a *union of affection*. As Saint Thomas says, love itself is that union, which is *caused formally* by love.¹² This bond or union of affection “is likened to substantial union, inasmuch as the lover stands to the object of his love, as to himself, if it be love of friendship.”¹³ In fact, there is a *mutual*

¹¹ Vide Saint Thomas, op. cit., IIa IIae, q. 23, a. 8, corpus.

¹² Vide ibidem, Ia IIae q. 28, a. 1, corpus.

¹³ Ibidem, ad secundum. A thing is named according to its form (for example, somebody is said to be a man because he has a human form).

indwelling of the lover and the beloved, both with respect to the apprehension and with respect to the appetite.¹⁴ Speaking about the apprehension, the beloved is in the intellect of the lover inasmuch as the latter thinks to the former and receives him as an intelligible object of the mind, and therefore it can be said that the beloved *dwells* in the lover. Likewise, since the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but tries to know more whatever pertains to him, it can be said that *on account of this projection into the other's self* the lover dwells also in the beloved. Furthermore, considering now the appetite, the beloved is an object of complacency for the lover, and on account of this complacency present in the will it is said that the beloved dwells in the lover. Likewise, since the lover regards the beloved as his other self (as if what affects the beloved would affect himself), it can be said that the lover dwells in the beloved.

Therefore, coming back to the adherence between the human soul and God, we see that here “adhaerentia” implies an “inhaerentia,”¹⁵ each of these terms suggesting a different aspect of the reality. The first expresses *the act or the state of the union* of the soul with God, while the second expresses *the act or the state of indwelling* in God. Moreover, because God is also the efficient Cause of this movement¹⁶ and the Being in which all other beings exist,¹⁷ this adherence and inherence reach also an ontological level. In fact, there are *two main differences* between the way in which this adhesion and indwelling occur between friends and the way in which they occur between the soul and God: in the latter case they are both a *supernatural* and an *ontological act or state*. They are supernatural because they are the effects of supernatural grace (which “divinizes”¹⁸ the human nature) and they are ontological because they are *ordained to* and *constitute* the fulfilment of human nature, its perfect state of existence.

¹⁴ Though “apprehension” and “appetite” are more general terms, which can work both for a sensual love and for an intellectual love, here we take “apprehension” in reference to the intellect and “appetite” in reference to the will.

¹⁵ The Latin “in-haerere” means to stick in, to dwell in, to remain in, to be established in something else.

¹⁶ See the previous chapter, when is treated of the supernatural end of man.

¹⁷ Vide Acts, 17: 28: “In Him we live, we move and we exist.”

¹⁸ That is, it unites it through love with God, it recovers and increases the likeness with the Divine Nature. “The mind is transformed in what it contemplates,” says Evagrius the Pontic, and God is the object of contemplation first through faith (in this life) and afterwards through vision (in the life everlasting).

A legitimate question might arise at this point: how is the virtue of charity related to adherence and inherence? It is clear from what was said above that adherence refers to a *spiritual union*, which is a union of intellect and will. Thus, since charity is a virtue that perfects the will and not the intellect, generally speaking “adhrentia” seems to be a term that has a greater extension than charity, for it refers to the intellect as well as to the will. In this way adherence would be *the effect* either of all the theological virtues or of one of them (in this earthly life),¹⁹ or it will be the name for the *final union* with God – the effect of *visio beatifica*. On the other hand, *inherence* is the same as *indwelling*, which is *the effect of charity* both in this life and in the life to come. As a conclusion, since charity is the form of all virtues and the first principle of every true union with God, it can be said that both “adherence” to God and “inherence” in God are *effects of charity*. Happiness itself consists in this eternal and complete adherence/inherence, and man is ordered to this supreme good by charity.²⁰

IV. ADHAERENTIA ET PERFECTIO CARITATIS

While still a wayfarer, man is however in a continual process of spiritual growth. Every human being is born in sin,²¹ and he struggles all his life to purify his soul and to let the image of Christ shine in him. The virtue of charity, though received as a gratuitous gift from God, finds very often many obstacles in its tendency of perfecting the soul, and the task of those dedicated to God’s love is to let this virtue grow in them day by day. Properly speaking, charity considered in itself *can increase indefinitely*, for it is “a participation of the infinite charity which is the Holy Ghost,”²² its effective cause is God Himself and there is no limitation on the part of the human nature that would prevent such an increase of charity. In fact, every act of charity either increases or disposes to an increase of charity. Even those who are said to be perfect in charity (in this life)²³ are still open to such an increase. Saint Thomas (and almost all

¹⁹ For example, by faith man adheres to God as to the First Truth, by hope man adheres to God as to the First Helper and by charity man adheres to God as to the Supreme Good.

²⁰ Saint Thomas, op. cit., IIa IIae, q. 23, a. 7, corpus.

²¹ Of course one would exclude the Lord Jesus and Mary from this category.

²² Saint Thomas, op. cit., q. 24, a. 7, corpus.

²³ According to Saint Thomas (op. cit., IIa IIae, q. 24, a. 8, corpus), there are *three ways* in which somebody is said to be perfect in charity: (1) when he actually gives all his thoughts and acts to God (in heaven), (2) when he gives to God almost all his time giving attention to the earthly things only inasmuch

the spiritual masters) distinguishes *three degrees of charity*, corresponding to the three states of the spiritual perfection: the charity of the *beginner*, the charity of the *proficient* and the charity of the *perfect*. The beginner is the one who strives to avoid sin and to resist his concupiscence, in order to prevent charity to be lost, and his state is called the *purgative way*. The proficient is the one who advances in the good and strives to increase his charity, and his state is called the *illuminative way*.²⁴ Finally, the perfect is the one who aspires to the mystical union with God, as a bride aspires to be united with her bridegroom, and his state is called the *unitive way*.²⁵

Another way of understanding the different degrees of the spiritual life belongs to the *Carmelite School of Spirituality*,²⁶ which sees the spiritual journey as a progressive advancing into *the seven mansions of the interior castle*. In this understanding, following a more detailed analysis of charity throughout the entire spiritual journey, it can be said that this virtue is *paralyzed* in the first two mansions, *triumphs through reason* in the third mansion, it realises the *imperfect and intermittent union* in the fourth mansion, accomplished *the union of will* in the fifth mansion, it leads the soul through purification to the *spiritual betrothal* in the sixth mansion and finally realises the *transforming union* in the seventh mansion.²⁷ Consequently, coming now back to “adherence” and “inherence”, it can be said that these effects clearly appear beginning from the fourth mansion and are perfect²⁸ only in the seventh mansion. However, speaking absolutely, the perfect adherence and inherence occur only in the final consummation of love, that is, in the *visio beatifica*.

V. CONCLUSION

as is necessary for him to survive and (3) when he gives all his heart habitually to God, by neither thinking nor desiring anything contrary to the love of God.

²⁴ In this state the soul, being purified from the desires of the flesh, can now be raised to the contemplation of the Divine truths and in this way it can progress more easily in virtue. This way is called illuminative because God, having prepared and taught the soul to be more obedient to His inspiration, can now enlighten it with His wisdom.

²⁵ Saint Bernard de Clairvaux and many other saints call the beginner “*the servant*”, the proficient “*the friend*” and the perfect “*the spouse*” or “*the son*”.

²⁶ Of which pillars are St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, St. Theresa of Lisieux, St. Elisabeth of the Trinity and ultimately Fr. Eugène-Marie de l’Enfant Jésus.

²⁷ See Père Marie-Eugène de l’Enfant Jésus, *Je veux voir Dieu* (Editions du Carmel, 1998), pp. 144, 273, 557, 649, 940, 989.

²⁸ Perfect as much as it is possible in the earthly life.

We have seen that, in order to attain his supernatural end, the human being needs to receive from God some theological virtues, among which is *charity*. This is the virtue of virtues, the form of all virtues, for it perfects them all and it gives them the right direction: the union with God, for God's own sake. Some of the principal effects of charity are union - *adhaerentia* and indwelling - *inhaerentia*, effects which increase with every increase of charity throughout the entire spiritual journey and culminate with the final union of love in heaven, when, as the Apostle says, "*qui autem adheret Domino unus spiritus est*" (I Cor. 6: 17).