

PERFECT CONTRITION AND PERFECT CHARITY

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THE persuasion that perfect contrition is not difficult seems to be growing in the Church of our twentieth century. Some three years ago, when our Holy Father asked the faithful to pray that the practice of perfect contrition might become a familiar one to them, he seems to have sanctioned this conviction.¹ And a number of spiritual treatises issued during the last decades have endeavored to strengthen it.² Yet a half-conscious, perhaps unacknowledged doubt lingers in many Catholic minds that an act of perfect contrition may not, after all, be so easy. All have heard or read that sorrow for sins, to be perfect contrition, has to be motivated by pure love for God in Himself. But how many will dare to say that they are sorry for their sins out of pure divine charity?

It is common theological teaching today that the love of God for His own sake is the motive that characterizes perfect contrition and distinguishes it from attrition or imperfect contrition, motivated, as this is, only by interested reasons. This common teaching is undoubtedly true. However, it has, I believe, led to a misunderstanding, which is perhaps at the root of the fear among certain of the faithful that an act of perfect contrition is, in point of actual practice, difficult to make.

The perfect contrition which justifies outside of, though not without reference to, the sacrament of penance is indeed to be motivated, "informed," or perfected, by love of God; but it does not have to be motivated by a love of God that is as perfect as possible—this is the point on which misunderstanding arises. Contrition is sufficiently perfect to wipe out all sins as soon as it is under the actual or virtual influence of charity, even though this charity may not be as perfect as possible. There are indeed degrees in the supernatural love of God which is charity, and any degree of this love will suffice as a motive for

¹ The general intention for the Apostleship of Prayer, November, 1943, approved by the Holy Father: "Ut familiare habeamus perfectae contritionis exercitium."

² Especially J. von den Driesch, *Perfect Contrition* (17th ed.; St. Louis: Herder, 1912); F. Rouvier, S.J., *The Conquest of Heaven* (Baltimore: Murphy, 1924); H. C. Semple, S.J., *Heaven Open to Souls* (New York: Benziger, 1916). This last work is more extensive than the others.

the contrition that justifies. On the other hand, a love of God, supernatural indeed, but not charity in the proper sense, is not a sufficient motive for perfect contrition.

Why have Catholic theologians been led to demand more than the minimum degree of charity for perfect contrition, and why, consequently, have they seemed, at times, to make this act appear to be one of great difficulty? The answer may perhaps be sought in their very notion of charity. During the history of theology, there have been, in fact, different conceptions of the third theological virtue.³ A necessary condition of charity, or of the benevolent love of friendship characteristic of it, is the disinterested love of God for His own sake. In this there is agreement among all Catholic theologians. But some have taught the necessity of a love of God developed to the point of perfect selflessness. With a number of other theologians, I should differ from this view. This high perfection of the love of God is found in great saints, but it does not seem to be an essential feature of the theological virtue of charity, as such. Hence it would not be required for perfect contrition.

Theologians today commonly oppose the love of benevolence (*amor benevolentiae*) to the love of desire (*amor concupiscentiae*). Those who for perfect contrition require the perfection of charity, in the sense explained, would exclude from real charity all love of desire; they conceive charity to be entirely disinterested. In their view, the love of benevolence should abstract from any consideration of oneself; any regard for one's own advantage, even one's spiritual advantage, would mar the purity of the love of God and destroy the essence of charity.⁴ In its application to perfect contrition, this doctrine means that only an entirely pure and selfless love of God can motivate the sorrow for sin that justifies. If this be true, one may well ask how many Catholics ever reach this peak of perfection. Surely, the desire of our Holy

³ Cf. J. de Guibert, S.J., *Études de théologie mystique* (Toulouse, 1930), pp. 241-53. The classical work of P. Rousselot, *Pour l'histoire du problème de l'amour au Moyen âge* (extract from *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Phil. des Mittelalters*, VI, 6 [Münster, 1908]), remains fundamental in this question.

⁴ This pure, disinterested character of charity and of perfect contrition is stressed by most authors, especially by moralists; e.g., Davis (*Moral and Pastoral Theology*, III, 355 f.): "Perfect contrition is sorrow that is elicited from the motive of disinterested love; imperfect contrition is a sorrow that is elicited from a less exalted motive, such as gratitude or fear of punishment."

Father that all should grow familiar with the practice of perfect contrition would suggest a different notion of charity.

It would seem, in fact, that the act of divine charity does not mean a love of benevolence for God that is absolutely disinterested. The love of God can be properly selfless, and yet not exclude, but in fact imply, a well ordered self-love; it is, therefore, interested as well as disinterested.⁵ Obviously, there does exist a love of self which destroys love for God—for instance, the love of self inherent in all mortal sin. But there is also a love of self which is a necessary part of supernatural divine charity. Were we to attempt to discard all self-interest from our love of benevolence for God, we should be striving for something unreal. Carried too far, this effort might lead to a practical error, the theoretical expression of which has been condemned by the Church as Quietism.

The intention here is to show that: (1) the conception that includes in charity an interested love of God is traditional in the Church; it is found in St. Augustine and St. Thomas; (2) the traditional teaching, especially among spiritual writers, holds for a number of degrees of perfection in charity, and asserts that the minimum degree is required and sufficient for true divine charity; (3) intrinsic reasons drawn from the very nature of supernatural love of God demonstrate this conception. In conclusion, it will be briefly shown how this view of charity explains what is necessary for perfect contrition.

ST. AUGUSTINE AND ST. THOMAS

As one might conclude almost a priori from the two extreme interpretations that have been given of it, St. Augustine's doctrine on divine charity synthesizes both a disinterested love of God for His own sake and a well-ordered love of self—namely, an interested love of God as our Supreme Good. One interpretation stresses only the disinterested love of God; the other claims St. Augustine's patronage for the interested desire of God as the essence of charity.⁶ For example, the Quietists, who required for perfect charity an entirely selfless love of God, made

⁵ Interested love, or love of desire, as opposed to love of benevolence, is usually called *amor concupiscentiae*. When applied to God as its object, it is better designated *amor concupiscentiae amicabilis*. Cf. J. de Guibert, S.J., *Theologia Spiritualis* (Rome, 1937), p. 319.

⁶ Cf. E. Portalié, "Augustin (Saint)," *DTC*, I, 2436 f.

appeal to St. Augustine's theory of chaste love (*amor castus*), which abstracts from any reward: "Nos ergo Deum amemus, fratres, pure et caste. Non est castum cor, si Deum ad mercedem colit."⁷ This chaste love has its typical expression in the spouse who loves the bridegroom for his own sake and not for the treasures he may bring her. This interpretation has exaggerated the disinterestedness of charity, excluding from it all personal advantage. Another theory—that of Bolgeni and his followers—lays exclusive, or at least main stress on the aspect of an interested desire of God, as developed by St. Augustine, and concludes that he held disinterested love of God to be impossible for man, since charity is but the desire for our own beatitude, which can be found in God alone: "Si enim Deus est summum hominis bonum, . . . sequitur profecto quoniam summum bonum appetere est bene vivere, et nihil aliud est bene vivere quam toto corde, tota anima, tota mente Deum diligere."⁸ As a matter of fact, both aspects of the love of God are found in St. Augustine, but in an harmonious synthesis, which is perhaps most happily expressed in the *De doctrina christiana* "Charitatem voco motum animi ad fruendum Deo propter seipsum, et se et proximo propter Deum."⁹ In the very Augustinian formula, *frui Deo propter seipsum*, there is implied both an interested and a disinterested love of God.

From this rather explicit teaching of St. Augustine on charity as the desire of the Supreme Good, theologians have concluded that his concept of the virtue is broader than that of a later theology, comprising, as it does, both the love of benevolence or of friendship and also the love of desire for God as the Supreme Good.¹⁰ The conclusion may be correct. At all events, let it be noted that for St. Augustine a love of God which would be solely a love of benevolence, excluding all self-interest (as some later Scholastics conceive perfect love), would be unthinkable. According to him, the purity of the love of God excludes only that love of desire which seeks a reward other than God Himself. To desire God is in no way against the disinterested character of charity: "Deus noster laudetur voluntate, ametur charitate; gratuitum

⁷ In *Psalm. LV*, 17 (*PL*, XXXVI, 658).

⁸ *De moribus eccl.*, III, 25 (*PL*, XXXII, 1330).

⁹ *De doctrina christ.*, III, 10, 16 (*PL*, XXXIV, 72).

¹⁰ Cf. J. Scheeben, *Dogmatik*, III, 937 f.; J. Mausbach, *Ethik des hl. Augustinus* (Freiburg, 1909), I, 181.

sit quod amatur et quod laudatur. Quid est gratuitum? Ipse propter se, et non propter aliud. Si enim laudes Deum ut det tibi aliquid aliud, iam non gratis amas Deum."¹¹ And further: "Si amas, si suspiras, si gratis colis eum a quo emptus es [Iesum Christum] . . . noli extra eum aliud quaerere; ipse tibi sufficit."¹² And if it be asked how these two apparently opposed affections can exist together, the Augustinian answer undoubtedly lies in the notion of the fruition of God (*frui Deo*). The fruition of God is at once selfless and self-interested; it is equally a self-forgetting surrender to God and a self-perfecting beatitude. To obey the famous "Fecisti nos ad te . . ." is at once to empty and to fill one's heart.¹³

Accepting St. Augustine's doctrine, but viewing things in different perspective, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and practically all the *veteres*¹⁴ do not exclude from divine charity the love of God as our Supreme Good. St. Bonaventure's position is unmistakable, and forms an appropriate introduction to that of St. Thomas. To the question about the reward at which charity is not to aim, St. Bonaventure answers: "Illud [*sc.*, the exclusion of reward] intelligitur de praemio creato, de praemio autem increato non habet veritatem, quia maxima caritas maxime desiderat uniri Deo et habere Deum."¹⁵ And still more explicitly: "Nullum est inconveniens dicere quod motus caritatis possit esse mercenarius, si dicatur mercenarius ex intuitu mercedis aeternae et increatae."¹⁶ According to St. Bonaventure, then, the interested desire to possess God is not against the purity of charity.

For his part, St. Thomas presupposes a certain love of desire as an intrinsic condition making divine charity possible for us. If God were not our Good, we would be unable to love Him: "Dato enim per impossibile quod Deus non esset hominis bonum, non esset ei ratio diligendi."¹⁷ And elsewhere: "Non esset in natura alicuius quod amaret Deum, nisi ex eo quod unumquodque dependet a bono quod est Deus."¹⁸ The so-called physical theory of love, which implies a fundamental self-interest in all love of God, is undoubtedly found in

¹¹ *In Psalm. LIII*, 10 (*PL*, XXXVI, 626).

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Cf. Scheeben, *op. cit.*, I, 945.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, d. 27, q. 2, a. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, q. 60, a. 5 ad 2m.

¹³ Cf. Portalié, *art. cit.*

¹⁵ *In III Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, ad 5m.

¹⁷ *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 16, a. 13 ad 3m.

St. Thomas.¹⁹ The most explicit text in the *Summa* occurs in answer to the question: "Utrum Deus sit propter seipsum ex caritate diligendus,"²⁰ and runs as follows: "*Ly propter importat habitudinem alicuius causae; est autem quadruplex genus causae, sc. finalis, formalis, efficiens, et materialis, ad quam reducitur etiam materialis dispositio.*" In terms of the first three kinds of causality, St. Thomas goes on, charity loves God for His own sake; but the fourth kind opens the door to interested love: "Quarto modo [Deus] potest diligi propter aliud, quia scilicet ex aliquibus aliis disponimur ad hoc quod in dilectione Dei proficiamus; puta per beneficia ab eo suscepta, vel praemia sperata, vel etiam per poenas quas per ipsum vitare intendimus." In a love of charity for God, therefore, one may also aim at whatever disposes one to love God better; and in doing so, one does not go against the purity of charity. To desire union with God is in conformity with disinterested love, since that union is but a disposition to love Him for His own sake. This particular interested love, therefore, is compatible with a love of benevolence; and in this sense charity may have a reward in view, and may desire it.²¹ In other places, St. Thomas takes for granted that both the love of desire and the love of benevolence are found in charity, though the latter is obviously the more important. Thus: "Maius est in se bonum Dei quam bonum quod participare possumus fruendo ipso, et ideo simpliciter homo magis diligit Deum quam seipsum."²² The same interested aspect is implied in the description of charity as a tendency to man's final end: "Caritas tendit in ultimum finem sub ratione finis ultimi; quod non convenit alicui alii virtuti."²³

From all this it seems safe to conclude that St. Thomas does not regard the pure disinterested benevolence of charity as being violated by desire for one's own highest spiritual good—by a desire of God

¹⁹ Rousselot, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

²⁰ *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 27, a. 3 c.

²¹ Cf. *In III Sent.*, d. 29, q. 1, a. 4, sol.: "... habens caritatem non potest habere oculum ad mercedem, ut ponat aliquid quodcumque finem amati, scilicet Dei . . .; potest tamen habere oculum ad mercedem ut ponat beatitudinem creatam finem amoris, non autem finem amati." This comes very near to the position of the *Summa*.

²² *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 26, a. 3 ad 3m.

²³ *Ibid.*, a. 1 ad 1m. Cf. I-II, q. 65, a. 5 ad 1m: "Caritas non est qualicumque amor Dei, sed amor Dei quo diligitur ut beatitudinis objectum ad quod ordinamur per fidem et spem." For St. Thomas as for St. Augustine, *amor finis ultimi* is identical with charity, and *finis* is necessarily *bonum amantis*.

Himself as our Supreme Good. Here we recognize St. Augustine's doctrine.

If such was the position of the greatest of the Fathers of the Church and of the two princes of medieval Scholasticism, how have many later theologians come to exclude from charity all interested love of God, and to restrict the name of charity solely to the love of benevolence?²⁴

The change—for change there has been—began with Scotus. In his commentary on the *Sentences*, he teaches that the constituent characteristic of charity is a disinterested love of God which would continue to exist even in the impossible hypothesis that God were not man's Good: "Actus eius [caritatis] non est concupiscere bonum amanti, in quantum est commodum amanti; sed tendere in obiectum secundum se, etiamsi per impossibile circumscriberetur ab eo commoditas eius ad amantem. Hanc virtutem effectivam perficientem voluntatem in quantum habet affectionem iustitiae voco caritatem."²⁵ With the proper characteristic of charity thus put in the affection of justice (the love of the other as other), all desire to possess God as our Supreme Good has to be eliminated from charity proper. Consequently, Scotus will refer the desire of God to the second theological virtue, hope.²⁶

The new conception of charity did, in fact, go with a parallel shift in the conception of hope, and with a different way of explaining the proper formal object of this virtue.²⁷ St. Thomas' view was this: "Spes habet rationem virtutis ex hoc ipso quod homo inhaeret auxilio divinae potestatis ad consequendum vitam aeternam . . . Formale obiectum spei est auxilium divinae potestatis et pietatis."²⁸ For St. Thomas, the desire of possessing God as the object of our beatitude

²⁴ For this evolution of the Catholic conception of charity, cf. J. de Guibert, *Études de théol. myst.*, pp. 245 ff.

²⁵ *In III Sent.*, d. 27, q. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, d. 26, nn. 17-18: "Dico igitur quod caritas perficit voluntatem in quantum est affectiva affectione iustitiae; et spes perficit eam in quantum est affectiva affectione commodi."

²⁷ J. de Guibert, *Études de théol. myst.*, pp. 245 ff, notes this change in the conception of the virtue of hope. He imputes the alteration of the notion of charity to an excessive assimilation of divine charity as friendship with human friendship, or to a neglect of the metaphysical aspect of charity (pp. 249 ff). The historical study of the development and change in the Catholic conception of the theological virtue of hope doubtless prove interesting and valuable.

²⁸ *Q. disp. de Spe*, a. 1.

does not belong to the virtue of hope, but to that of charity. However, after Scotus and his influential school, and especially after the thinkers of the seventeenth century—Suarez, Ripalda, and others—the desire to possess God was regarded as incompatible with the pure disinterested love of charity. Consequently, this desire was said to be part of the virtue of hope.²⁹ And this transposition once made, and charity “cleansed” of all interested love of God, an entirely disinterested love for God in Himself and for His own sake emerges as the single content of charity.

This concept of charity has made its way into the greater number of our theological treatises,³⁰ perhaps largely in consequence of Suarez’ influence. Nevertheless, it remains true that the older traditional doctrine, found in St. Augustine, St. Thomas, and St. Bonaventure, which is today more commonly, but not universally overlooked, does not exclude from divine charity the interested love of God as our Supreme Good.³¹

DEGREES OF PERFECTION IN CHARITY

If not all interested love of God is excluded from charity, it remains to be examined, what kind of self-interest does actually come into conflict with the purity of charity, and, furthermore, what kinds of self-love are incompatible, not indeed with charity as such, but with the higher degrees of perfection in charity. In this connection, some historical data are in order.³²

St. Augustine discards from charity the mercenary love which has in view a reward other than God Himself: “Si enim laudes Deum; ut

²⁹ Suarez, *De Spe*, disp. I, c. 3, nn. 20–21.

³⁰ However, Schiffini (*De Virtutibus*, nn. 219–23) exposes and defends the traditional concept of hope; his thesis on charity is stated as follows: “Concupiscentiae ille amor quo Deum nobis optamus, si principaliter excitetur ex ipsa infinita perfectione, secundum quam Deus est finale nostrae beatitudinis obiectum, habendus est ut actus a caritate elicitus, non quidem primarius, sed secundarius.” Cf. also Palmieri, *De Paenitentia*, thesis 22.

³¹ Cf. J. de Guibert, *Études de théol. myst.*, pp. 252–53: “Il me paraît certain que pour eux [les grands docteurs de l’amour, ss. Augustin, Bernard, Thomas, Bonaventure] . . . désir de Dieu et charité ne font qu’un.”

³² A complete review of the history of this theological point is not attempted here. These few historical notes may serve, in spite of their fragmentary character, as an indication of, and an introduction to, the doctrinal conclusion which they are meant to illustrate.

det tibi aliquid aliud, iam non gratis amas Deum.”³³ St. Thomas at least insinuates that a love of God which would not be charity is conceivable: “Caritas non est qualiscumque amor Dei”;³⁴ it would not be charity, if God were not loved as the object of beatitude, toward which we are directed by faith and hope. Later on, the common view of theologians was expressed by the Council of Trent, which takes it as an established doctrine that before justification the soul does come to the “beginnings” of a supernatural love of God. The famous “diligere incipiunt” in chapter six of Session VI implies a supernatural love of God which is not charity;³⁵ it likewise implies that there is a self-interest in this initial love of God which puts it below the level of true divine charity.

Considering St. Thomas’ view, we find that a minimum standard is required and sufficient for charity proper. It is expressed where he deals with the perfection proper to charity as such: “Est de ratione caritatis ut Deus super omnia diligatur, et ut nullum creatum ei praeferatur in amore.”³⁶ Therefore, a love in which there is not this preference of God above all created things is not charity; it may at most be an initial love of God. In post-Tridentine theology, this preference was indicated in the phrase, “dilectio Dei appetitativa summa.” Of the exclusion of interested views or desires St. Thomas has not a word; from what we know of his concept of charity, this is not surprising. Perhaps the reason is his conviction that all love of God which is supreme in its appreciation of its object is already a love of benevolence, as Bellarmine will likewise hold.³⁷ At all events, this essential element of charity is to be found, naturally enough, in the three degrees of perfection which St. Thomas distinguishes in charity—*incipiens, proficiens, et perfecta*.³⁸ These degrees are distinguished in perfection, not by any difference in disinterestedness, but by the different activities which charity at its various stages inspires: “. . . secundum diversa

³³ In *Psalm. LIII*, 10 (PL, XXXVI, 626).

³⁴ *Sum. Theol.*, I-II, q. 65, a. 5 ad 1m.

³⁵ *DB*, 798. Cf. M. Premm, *Das tridentinische “Diligere Incipiunt”* (Graz, 1924); J. Périnelle, O.P., *L’Attrition d’après le Concile de Trente et d’après s. Thomas d’Aquin* (Kain, 1927), pp. 20–34, where a not unbiased discussion of the text according to historical documents is to be found.

³⁶ *Q. disp. de Caritate*, a. 10 ad 4m.

³⁷ *Controversiae, De Paenitentia*, II, 11.

³⁸ *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 24, a. 9.

studia ad quae homo perducitur per caritatis augmentum." In the first degree there is the avoidance of sin and of what leads to it: "ad recedendum a peccato et resistendum concupiscentiae eius"; in the second degree there is progress in good actions: "ad hoc quod homo in bono proficiat"; in the third degree there is union with God and enjoyment of Him: "ad hoc ut Deo inhaereat et eo fruatur."³⁹ Does this gradation in charity imply a growing disinterestedness? St. Thomas does not say so, and is seemingly indifferent to the point. The very highest degree of charity seems to be expressed in terms of interested love—the fruition of God.

Furthermore, in other authors who discuss the degrees of perfection in charity we find little about increase in its selflessness; few indeed seem to have gone into the matter. St. Augustine, for example, speaks thus of the degrees of charity: "Sed numquid mox ut nascitur, iam prorsus perfecta est? Ut perficiatur, nascitur; cum fuerit nata, nutritur; cum fuerit nutrita, roboratur; cum fuerit roborata, perficitur."⁴⁰ Charity, therefore, grows in perfection; but its differences at different stages are not expressly indicated. Elsewhere St. Augustine distinguishes the "initium, augmentum, et perfectionem."⁴¹ But he throws no more light on our problem.

St. Bonaventure distributes growth in perfection over the three ways of the spiritual life that were to become traditional in spiritual theology—the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways.⁴² Under various names, this threefold division (which undoubtedly implies, but does not make explicit, a difference in disinterestedness in the love of God) will become the common property of subsequent ascetic writers and theologians. St. Francis de Sales, for instance, is worth citing. In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, he thus classifies the degrees of charity: (1) in souls recently freed from sin, who love vain and dangerous things together with God; (2) in souls who no longer love dangerous things but only good things, at the same time that they love these with excessive affection; (3) in souls who love neither anything superfluous nor good things in an excessive way, but only what God wants

³⁹ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁰ *In Ep. Ioann.*, tr. 5, 4 (*PL*, XXXV, 2014).

⁴¹ *Sermo CCCLXVIII*, 4 (*PL*, XXXIX, 1654).

⁴² *De Triplici Via, Prologus* (*Opera Omnia* [ed. Quaracchi], VIII, 3).

them to love, as He wants them to love it; they love many things besides God, but only in Him and for His sake; (4) finally, in souls who not only love God above all things, but in all things love nothing but God; this degree is perfectly possessed by the Blessed Virgin Mary alone.⁴³ In this gradation, the increasing disinterestedness of charity is obvious and real.

These few examples may suffice to show that growth in the perfection of divine love is not explicitly measured by an increase in disinterestedness; this element is implied, but it is apparently considered a secondary element. In the light of the teaching of St. Thomas and St. Augustine, this fact will cause no surprise. The differences in perfection in the ascending degrees of charity derive from other sources—from the increasing range of objects to which charity extends, from its hold on man's affections, etc. Perhaps it could be shown that these reasons for a distinction of degrees go together with a steady growth in selflessness of love; but this aspect has not been brought out.

Nevertheless, when today we think of charity being more perfect, we are inclined to postulate a greater disinterestedness in it. We almost take for granted—and this fact would suggest a shift in our viewpoint, as contrasted with that of the *veteres*—that perfect charity means a perfectly selfless love. Some would even say that all charity must reveal this perfect disinterestedness—a view to which I do not subscribe. It is, then, proper to ask the question: What kind of freedom from selfish motives is characteristic of the higher or highest degrees of charity, and is not found in the less perfect degrees?

De Guibert proposes the following explanation, based on the doctrine of St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure.⁴⁴ Dealing with the charity of the perfect (*caritas perfectorum*), he says that divine charity has a threefold act: (1) the love of pure benevolence, in which the will finds pleasure in God's own supreme goodness, without thinking of union with Him; this is the highest act of charity; (2) the desire of union with God, the infinite Good; this is the secondary act of charity, expressed by St. Thomas as "inhaerere Deo et ultimo fini"; (3) the love by which we wish our neighbor the same union with God. This threefold act is essential to divine charity and therefore always to be found in it, even

⁴³ *Treatise on the Love of God*, X, 4-5.

⁴⁴ *Theol. Spiritualis*, pp. 317 ff.

in the perfect charity of heaven, where this threefold activity of charity is only one act. Here on earth, *in via*, these three acts can never reach such perfect unity; they are necessarily distinct and distinguished. A high intensity of one ordinarily does not simultaneously allow an equal intensity of the others; only successively can one make intense acts of the three. Consequently, whatever energy of love is spent on the last two acts seems to diminish the intensity of the first and primary act of charity, the love of pure benevolence directed at God Himself. We say "seems" to diminish; the three acts belong to the same habit of charity, and there is no opposition between them. But in our pilgrims' stage we are unable to unite them in equal intensity; progress in the perfection of charity will consist in coming closer to the uniting of them, as they are united in heavenly charity; it will see the pure love of God—the primary act of charity—absorb more and more, and unite in a fuller synthesis the desire for union with Him and the love of one's neighbor. The growing disinterestedness of charity, as charity becomes more perfect, consists in a more real and more felt dominion of the disinterested love of benevolence over the secondary, though likewise essential, acts of charity.

If I understand this doctrine correctly, a real growth in disinterestedness does take place, as charity moves to higher degrees. However, it is not a growth that excludes the "interested" acts of charity; if these are essential to the very nature of supernatural charity, they must remain always. The growth, in fact, is towards the unification of all affections in the one object, God Himself. The primary act of charity then stands out more than the secondary acts, and in perfect charity the love for God appears and is more disinterested than interested. This constitutes a real progress, for whose achievement there is no need of any artificial effort so to love God "as if" one did not want union with Him; the progress comes about spontaneously from the sheer growth in charity itself. The more intense charity becomes, the closer it approaches the simplicity of the synthesizing love of benevolence, as this will exist in heaven. Perfect synthesis is not for this earth; here one reaches only a predominance of the love of benevolence over the other two acts, secondary, but essential to charity. When this predominance becomes quite marked, it would appear that

all interested desires are excluded; however, their exclusion is more apparent than real, and is never complete. Charity here on earth can never reach the perfection wherein attention would be paid solely to the love of benevolence, and the other two acts neglected; the false assertion of Quietism in this regard has been condemned.⁴⁵

Still less can this perfection of disinterestedness be postulated as the specific difference of divine charity. As has been already shown,⁴⁶ St. Thomas conceives the supernatural love of God for His own sake independently of this accidental perfection; the theological virtue of charity is present and active in a soul long before this perfection is reached. Charity will be present whenever, together with the interested desire of God, a true love of benevolence towards Him is had—whenever our Supreme Good is loved more for what it is in itself than for what we are able to possess of it.⁴⁷

When will this love of benevolence not be present, even in a supernatural love for God? In other words, what is an “initial” love of God, that does not come up to the level of charity?⁴⁸

St. Thomas would answer that love is “initial” as long as something else is preferred to God, so that God is not really loved above all things. This will be the case as long as any sinful affection, even if be only venially sinful, is consciously adhered to; for in that case, as reflection will reveal, God is not loved for what He is in Himself—the *Supreme* Good. He is indeed loved, but somehow in His reference to man, not “for His own sake,” as He is in Himself; for, as He is in Himself, He is *the* Good, to be loved above all other goods. So long as He is not loved *super omnia*, He is not loved *propter seipsum*; love is only “initial.” It still lacks the element of a supreme “appreciation” of God, and still fails to imply an element of genuine and objective disinterestedness; it therefore remains below the level of true divine charity.

⁴⁵ *DB*, 1327, 1328.

⁴⁶ Cf. *supra*, pp. 514–16.

⁴⁷ This is St. Thomas’ consistent teaching; cf. *Sum. Theol.*, II–II, q. 26, a. 3 ad 3m; and elsewhere; St. Bonaventure (*In III Sent.*, d. 29, a. unic., q. 2 ad 4m [*Opera Omnia*, ed. Quaracchi, III, 642]): “Per caritatem diligo summum bonum Deo et summum bonum mihi, ita quod volo, quod Deus habeat summum bonum et sit summum bonum *per essentiam*, mihi vero *per participationem*; et multo magis opto sibi quam mihi.”

⁴⁸ We leave aside the historical consideration of the Tridentine “diligere incipiunt.” But it surely stands for a supernatural love of God which is not elicited by the theological virtue of charity. This virtue is given only in justification and not before.

THE NATURE OF DIVINE CHARITY

From all that precedes, the conclusion is that divine charity does not exclude all interested love. One may now ask, "Why not?" The reason will lie in the very nature of charity itself.

Charity is indeed divine in a true sense; for its specifying object is God as He is in Himself, and its co-principle in man is the Holy Spirit. However, charity is also human, and therefore necessarily imperfect. It is *we* who through divine charity love God for His own sake; hence our purest love of benevolence in God's regard cannot but be of "interest" to us, and imply an advantage to us. This follows from the very nature of all created activity. Every action of a finite being is meant to actuate its potentialities, to increase its being and perfection; it is unavoidably "interested." Purely disinterested action, whereby the agent would gain no perfection, is for God alone, because He alone is pure perfection—pure Act; having no potentiality in Him, He can acquire nothing. But all finite beings necessarily acquire some perfection from their activity.⁴⁹ It follows, therefore, that divine charity in us, being a created activity, will necessarily imply some acquisition of perfection on our part; it cannot be totally "disinterested."⁵⁰

Nevertheless, divine charity in us is a created activity of a very particular sort, and for this reason, it can be, and essentially is, more disinterested than interested. Since charity is the tendency of the supernaturalized will towards the supreme supernatural end—God as He is in Himself—it wills and loves that end in itself more than it desires and loves the acquisition of it. For man's fruition of God through charity can never be exhaustive;⁵¹ it is always finite and limited. Hence, metaphysically speaking, charity tends more funda-

⁴⁹ Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 44, a. 4 c.: "Sunt autem quaedam quae simul agunt et patiuntur, quae sunt agentia imperfecta; et his convenit quod, etiam in agendo, intendunt aliquid acquirere. Sed primo agenti, qui est agens tantum, non convenit agere propter acquisitionem alicuius finis."

⁵⁰ The disinterested intention, by which we would make abstraction, so far as our conscious desire goes, from the spiritual gain which is implied in every act of charity, would evidently not change this objective fact.

⁵¹ Cf. *In II Sent.*, d. 3, q. 4, a. unic., ad 4m: "Est quidam finis per se subsistens, non dependens secundum esse a re quae est ad finem: et iste finis magis desideratur quidem acquiri; sed amatur supra id quod acquisitum est ab illo; et talis finis est Deus."

mentally and really to God as He is in Himself than to the limited fruition of Him; for God, as the subsistent, infinite Good, is the source of all participated and finite good, and the acquisition of God which charity intends is such a participated and finite good.⁵² In the psychological order, this truth will be expressed in a consciousness of the predominance of the disinterested love of benevolence in God's regard; selflessness will appear as more fundamental to, and characteristic of, charity than any desire for what we may acquire of Him.⁵³ When charity grows more perfect, this conscious predominance of the selfless element may even seem to exclude all self-interest; but, as has been said, here the appearances do not reveal the whole of the interior reality.

The disinterestedness of charity appears still more fundamental when one considers the supernatural character of man's last end, and, in particular, the personal relation in which charity places us in regard of the infinite Good, an eminently personal Being. Before the personal God, or rather, before the divine Persons, the only real and truthful attitude is a self-forgetting love of benevolence. Even a created person is loved for his own sake, on account of his absolute, spiritual value; apart from sin, he can never be loved as a mere means to an end. So much the more, then, must God, the Absolute in dignity and worth, be loved for His own sake; if He is loved otherwise—*sc.*, primarily in view of the profit to be derived from His love—He is not taken for what He is, nor loved as He is in Himself.

Nevertheless, this selfless love of God is at the same time interested. As it is expressed in acts of our supernaturalized wills, it produces an actuation of our growing being, an increase in supernatural perfection; for it cannot but be a perfection and a gain for us, when we love God in Himself, without return on ourselves. The greater the charity of a man, and the purer the benevolence of his love for God, the more does He acquire from his love, and the more perfect, too, does the selflessness of his love become—there is action and interaction here. This kind of

⁵² Compare the principle for the *Quarta Via* of proving the existence of God (*Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 2, a. 3 c.): "Quod autem dicitur maxime tale in aliquo genere, est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis."

⁵³ Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, II-II, q. 26, a. 3 ad 3m: "Magis autem amamus Deum amore amicitiae quam amore concupiscentiae: quia maius est in se bonum Dei, quam bonum quod participare possumus fruendo ipso."

self-interest, by which charity grows more perfect in man and, accordingly, also more truly selfless, is not opposed to the purity of divine charity; rather, it is the condition that makes possible the pure love of God, and enables it to grow in disinterestedness. And, as we have seen, it is the teaching of St. Thomas that the altruistic benevolence of charity is not marred by a love of whatever disposes man to love God better.⁶⁴ Obviously, this self-interest remains subordinate to the benevolent love which is the primary and proper act of charity; it is justified only inasmuch as it is a condition of selfless love.

From all this it follows that the purity of charity is marred by any desire to acquire from our love of God aught else but what makes that love possible and real. And if self-interest were to succeed in subordinating the love of God as He is in Himself to the gain sought for in loving Him, it would become sinful.

However, it can never be a condition of more perfect charity that we should endeavor somehow to forget, or even to deny, the very real good that we inevitably acquire from the pure love of God. To act "as if" we did not profit spiritually from the love of God, when we know that this love is our greatest good, would be the highest insincerity, and no kind of perfection or condition of perfection. On the contrary, we have to take reality for what it is, and build on the true nature of charity. In this way we establish a hierarchical order between the disinterested love of benevolence for God and all other loves, for whatever objects, which this love commands, and which it subordinates to itself, as the primary act of charity.

Psychologically, of course, as far as explicit consciousness may reveal the hidden reality of grace, this dominion of selfless love may seem to, and to some extent will, exclude selfish interest. It does, in fact, have to banish from man's heart any self-interest that is incompatible with charity—any grievously or venially sinful self-interest. However, this purity of selfless love does not depend on the framing of artificial motives, or on any effort to act "as if" no good came to us from our love of God; it is simply the connatural outcome of the very nature of charity.

It is clear, therefore, wherein consists the true disinterested love of God which is characteristic of charity. It consists in subordinating

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, q. 27, a. 3 c.

all desire for personal gain to a selfless benevolence for the Supreme Good, in such wise that one does not wish to acquire anything from one's love but what will help this love. This manner of disinterestedness is found even in the lowest degrees of true charity. Obviously, it does not exclude desire for God, for our growth in grace and charity, even for other things inasmuch as they help us to grow in grace and charity; for all these things do assist us to the pure love of God.

PERFECT CONTRITION

In the light of what has been said, what is perfect contrition, whose motive is the love of God for His own sake? From its motive there have to be excluded all selfish desires that are harmful to, or unnecessary for, the love of benevolence for God; but any motive may be admitted which is necessary or helpful towards such a love. Perfect contrition, therefore, need not be motivated by that perfection of charity wherein its disinterestedness has become so dominant as to appear to be the sole element, to the apparent exclusion of all interested motives. Once it is clear that contrition proceeds from a love of God for His own sake, and therefore above all things—above all desires and attachments that would infringe on the supreme “appreciation” due to God for what He is—once this much is clear, there is no need to force conscience or imagination to build up seemingly lofty motives whereby one might set aside even desire for one's spiritual good. A self-forgetfulness of this sort would be fictitious. Only that disinterestedness is genuine which flows naturally from an increasingly intense love of God, as this love more profoundly penetrates man's whole being and psychology.⁵⁶

Sincere Christians, then, especially those who live habitually in the state of grace, will not find it hard to grow familiar with the practice of perfect contrition. Perfect contrition will not be difficult for them,

⁵⁶ It may be well to note that, as we said in the case of charity, so in the case of perfect contrition there will be degrees of perfection measured by the perfection of charity that motivates it. And the more perfect the contrition, the more effective will it be in destroying sin, and in remitting the temporal punishment due to sin, or in wiping out the *reliquias peccati*. While insisting, then, on the relative facility of perfect contrition, and the minimum required for the essential forgiveness of sins, it will always be worth while to exhort the faithful to try and make their contrition as perfect as possible.

because the essential charity required for it, when given by God, will find in them the necessary selflessness. Their habitual disinterested love for God, expressed in their devotion to duty, will connaturally produce, when needed, the sorrow for sin which flees from moral evil as from the greatest evil, because it goes against the Supreme Good—the God whom they love or desire to love for His own sake above all things.