

IX

THE SUPERNATURAL LIFE

A GOAL ABOVE OUR NATURE

“**E**YE has not seen nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him.” So St. Paul tells the Corinthians, quoting Isaias. Until we reach heaven, we shall not know what heaven is. But, in the inspired word of God, we are given glimpses. In heaven we shall know God in a new way, and love Him according to the new knowledge.

We shall know, says St. Paul (1 Cor. xiii. 12), as we are known. It is a mysterious phrase, more dark than light, but soliciting our own minds powerfully. We are not to know God with the same knowledge with which He knows us—for He knows infinitely and we are incurably finite—but with a knowledge similar in kind to His, different from our present way of knowing.

In the same verse, St. Paul makes another attempt to express the difference between our knowing here and our knowing there. “Here we see through a glass in a dark manner, but then face to face.” St. John (1 John iii. 2) says: “We shall see Him as He is.” And we remember Our Lord saying of the angels (Matt. xviii. 10) “They see the face of My heavenly Father continually.” Seeing is the key to life in heaven.

We can approach the meaning in two steps. First, those in heaven shall *see* God, not simply believe in Him as now but

see Him. Here on earth we do not say that we believe in the existence of our friends, we see them; and seeing them, we know them. But, second, we shall see God face to face, see Him as He sees us.

The Church has worked out for us a first beginning of the meaning of this. Concentrate upon the way we know our friends. Our knowing faculty, our intellect, has taken them into itself. How? By the idea it has formed of them. By means of that idea, we know *them*. The richer the idea, the better we know them; if there is any error in our idea of them, to that extent we do not know them as they are. This is the way of human knowledge, the "seeing through a glass in a dark manner" which is the kind of seeing proper to human nature. It is the nature of our intellect to know things by means of the ideas it forms of them.

Here below we know God like that, by the idea we have formed of Him. But in heaven, our seeing will be *direct*. We shall see Him, not "through a glass", we shall know Him, not by means of an idea. Our intellect will be in direct contact with God; nothing will come between it and God, not even an idea. The nearest we can get to it, perhaps, is to think of the idea we now have of God: then try to conceive of God Himself taking the place of the idea.

That is why the very essence of the life of heaven is called the Beatific Vision—which means the seeing that causes bliss.

Just as our knowing faculty, the intellect, so our loving faculty, the will, is to be in direct contact with God, nothing coming between, God in the will, the will in God, love without detour or admixture. So it will be with every one of our powers—energizing at its very fullest upon its supreme object. And that, if you will think about it, is the definition of happiness.

But observe that all this is based upon doing something which by nature we cannot do. The natural powers of man's

intellect fall short of seeing God direct by a double limitation: as we have seen, our natural way of knowing is always by means of ideas, so that we cannot see anything direct; and God, being infinite, can never be within the hold of our natural strength, or the strength of any finite being whatever.

Putting it bluntly, the life of heaven requires powers which by nature we do not possess. If we are to live it, we must be given new powers. To make a rough comparison: if we wanted to live on another planet, we should need new breathing powers, which by nature our lungs have not got. To live the life of heaven, we need new knowing and loving powers, which by nature our souls have not got.

For heaven our natural life is not sufficient; we need supernatural life. We can have it only by God's free gift, which is why we call it grace (the word is related to *gratis*). Sanctifying grace will be our next topic. Everything the Church does is connected with it, and it can be understood but cloudily if we do not grasp what it is.

SANCTIFYING GRACE

When we come to die there is only one question that matters—have we sanctifying grace in our souls? If we have, then to heaven we shall go. There may be certain matters to be cleared, or cleansed, on the way, but to heaven we shall go, for we have the power to live there. If we have not, then to heaven we cannot go; not because we lack the price of admission, but because quite simply our soul lacks the powers that living in heaven calls for.

It is not a question of getting past the gate, but of living once we are there; there would be no advantage in finding a kindly gate-keeper, willing to let us in anyhow. The powers of intellect and will that go with our natural life are not sufficient: heaven calls for powers of knowing and loving higher

than our nature of itself has. We need super-natural life, and we must get it here upon earth. To die lacking it means eternal failure.

We must look at grace more closely if we are to live our lives intelligently.

Two things about it must be grasped.

First: It *is* supernatural, it is wholly above our nature, there is not even the tiniest seed of it in our nature capable of growing, there is nothing we can do to give it to ourselves. We can have it only as God gives it, and He is entirely free in the giving. That, as we have seen, is why it is called grace; and because its object is to unite us with God, it is called sanctifying grace.

Second: Even the word *supernatural* does not convey how great a thing it is. It is not simply above our nature, or any created nature. It enables us to do—at our own finite level, but really—something which only God Himself can do by nature: it enables us to see God direct. That is why it is called “a created share in the life of God”. That is why those who have it are called “sons of God”; a son is like in nature to his father; by this gift we have a totally new likeness to our Father in heaven.

Giving us this new life, God does not give us a new soul with new faculties. He inserts it, sets it functioning, in the soul we already have. By it our intellect, which exists to know truth, is given the power to know in a new way; our will, which exists to love goodness, is given the power to love in a new way.

We get the supernatural life here on earth. Not until we reach heaven will it enable us to see God face to face and love Him in the direct contact of the will. But even on earth its elevating work has begun; it gives the intellect a new power of taking hold of truth—by faith; it gives the will new powers of reaching out to goodness—by hope and by charity.

Faith, then, does not mean simply feeling that we believe more than we used to; hope does not mean simply feeling optimistic about our chances of salvation; charity does not mean simply feeling pleased with God. All three may have their effect on our feelings; but they are not feelings; they are wholly real.

The supernatural life in our souls is a new *fact*, as real as the natural life we have to start with. The powers it gives are facts too; they enable us to do things which without them we could not do: they are as real as eyesight, and considerably more important. Without eyesight, we could not see the material world. But without sanctifying grace we should not be able to see God direct, which is the very essence of living in heaven.

Not only that: here below we should not be sharers of the divine life, sons of God, capable already of taking hold of God by faith and hope and charity, capable of meriting increase of life. This increase of life must be realized; one can be more alive or less, and our life in heaven will differ according to the intensity of faith and hope and charity in our souls when we come to die.

We shall go on to consider these three virtues in detail. Meanwhile concentrate upon one truth: grace is not just a way of saying that a soul is in God's favour; it is a real life, with its own proper powers, living in the soul; and he who has it is a new man.

A soul with sanctifying grace in it is indwelt by God. Here the reader may raise a question. Since every created thing has God at the very centre of its being, maintaining it in existence, surely all things whatsoever are indwelt by God: in what can God's indwelling the soul by grace differ from that?

That first presence of God by which we exist is not called indwelling: for this word means God making Himself at home in the soul, and it is not merely fanciful to think that

this can only be by invitation. About the first presence we have no choice: we did not invite God to bring us into being, and it is not because we ask Him that He keeps us in being. The choice is wholly His. No request of ours would move Him to withdraw His presence: in the depths of hell He is there, maintaining each spirit in existence. It is a fearful thing to have nothing of God but His presence, to have existence from Him and nothing more, refusing all the other gifts that the creature needs and only God can give.

But the indwelling *is* by invitation. If we receive sanctifying grace in infancy, the sponsor extends the invitation on our behalf; as we come to the use of reason, we make the invitation our own. At any time we can withdraw it, and God's indwelling ceases, leaving us only His presence. The God who indwells is the Blessed Trinity. Father and Son and Holy Ghost make the soul Their home, acting upon the soul, energizing within it, while it reacts to Their life-giving, light-giving, love-giving energy. That essentially is the process of sanctifying grace.

FAITH, HOPE, CHARITY

By it the soul has new powers—the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity; the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude; the Gifts of the Holy Ghost. We shall here speak only of the first three.

They are called “theological” because they have God not only for their end but for their object. It is worth our while to pause upon the distinction. All our actions should have God for their end or goal; that is, they should be aimed to do His will, to praise Him and thank Him and bring us closer to Him. But they cannot all have God for their object. The organist plays for the glory of God, the cook bakes a cake for the love of God; God is the end of their action. But He is not

the object. The object of one is the organ, of the other the cake; the organist who makes God and not the organ the object of his playing will produce strange noises; the cook who makes God and not the cake the object of her action will produce an inedible mess; neither will glorify God.

The moral virtues have God for their end, but for their object they have created things—how we shall best use these to bring us to God. But for the theological virtues, God is object as well as end. By faith we believe in God, by hope we strive towards God, by charity we love God.

God is their object. God is also in a special sense their cause. They are wholly from Him. By faith we have a new power in the intellect, enabling us to accept whatever God reveals simply because He reveals it. We may see it as mysterious, we may feel that it is beyond us, we may not see how to fit it in either with some other of His revealed truths or with our own experience of life. But we do not doubt that what He says is so. By faith the soul accepts Him as the source of truth. And it does so, not by its own power but His. He gives the power, not our own reasoning. He sustains faith in us. Our hold upon anything we have arrived at for ourselves can never be surer than the mental process by which we got to it. Our faith rests upon God who initiates and sustains it.

Faith is the root of the whole supernatural life. With it come hope and charity and the rest. The soul is alive with them. To its own natural life of intellect and will, there is now added this new and higher life. The new life, like the old, is actually *in* the soul, as the power of sight is in the eye. And it never leaves the soul unless we withdraw the invitation.

Next we shall look more closely at hope and charity, with a glance at sin, by which the invitation is withdrawn.

Faith is directed to God as supremely truthful, hope to

God as supremely desirable, charity to God as supremely good. Faith we have already glanced at; it is the simple acceptance of God as our Teacher.

Hope is more complex. There are three elements in it: it desires final union with God, sees this as difficult, sees it as attainable. The nature of hope comes out more clearly as we see the two ways of sinning against it, by presumption and by despair. Despair will not believe in the *attainability*, the sinner seeing himself as beyond the reach of God's power to save. Presumption ignores the *difficulty*, either by assuming that no effort on our part is necessary since God will save us whatever we do, or by assuming that no aid from God is necessary since our own effort can save us unaided. The answer to both is St. Paul's "I can do all things in Him that strengthens me."

Charity is simple again. It is love of God. As a necessary consequence it is love of all that God loves, it is love of every image or trace or reflection of God it finds in any creature. Whatever the soul in charity loves, it loves for what of God is in it, the amount of God's goodness it expresses or mirrors. This is true love, since it means loving things or persons not for what we can get out of them but for what God has put into them, not for what they can do for us but for what is real in them: it means loving things or persons for what they are, and it is rooted in loving God for what He is. (This we have already noted is the strongest reason for *learning* what He is—that is, for studying theology.)

SUPERNATURAL HABITS

Faith, hope and charity are called *habits* by the theologians, and this is not simply a technicality. If we think over our natural habits, we see that there is a real change in ourselves after we acquire them, something in our very natures leading

us to act in certain ways—to drink cocktails, for instance, or answer back sarcastically. We say that a given habit grows on us. Really it grows *in* us, becomes second nature. The theologians apply the word to any modification, whether in body or soul, which disposes us either to do things we did not do before or do more easily or competently things we did. The skill of a pianist is a habit.

It is in this sense that the theological virtues are habits. They are really *in* our very souls, and they enable us to do things which without them would be impossible for us. They differ from natural habits in the way we acquire them. A natural habit is acquired gradually, as we repeat some particular action over and over again; supernatural habits are given to us in an instant by God. They differ again in the way they are lost. To be rid of a natural habit—drinking cocktails again—we must make a long series of efforts; supernatural habits are lost by one mortal sin against them. But while we have them, habits they are, in the meaning just given.

The drama of the Christian life is that, in acquiring the supernatural habits, we do not lose the natural habits. Our soul has the supernatural power to act towards God, but it has a natural habit of acting for self, ignoring God. It has the supernatural ability to make the unseen its goal, but a natural habit of being overwhelmed by the attractions of the visible. By steadily acting upon such natural habits as run counter to the supernatural we may, with our own efforts and God's grace, bring our nature and its habits wholly into harmony with supernature and the habits that belong to it.

For all of us it is a lifelong struggle. And its scene is the will. The will is that in us which *decides*, and it decides according to what it loves. In obedience to God, our will is the point of contact through which the supernatural life flows to us. A mortal sin—a serious and deliberate choice of our

own will as against God's—breaks the contact, we lose the virtue of charity, supernaturally we are dead. We may still have the habits of faith and hope, which can be lost only by sins directly against them; but they are no longer life-giving. Only charity makes the soul and its habits come alive. That is why "the greatest of these is charity." (Now read I Cor. xiii.)