

Topic 27: The Action of the Holy Spirit: Grace, the Theological Virtues, and the Commandments

The Christian life is our life as children of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The action of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's soul, besides giving sanctifying grace and the theological virtues, communicates inspirations and actual graces, and has a specific manifestation that the Church calls the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Decalogue contains a set of serious duties, but it is also and above all an instruction, a teaching on how to live.

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The mission of the Holy Spirit and his action in the Church has been dealt with earlier. Now we will consider the action of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life and journey towards holiness.

Sanctifying grace

Christian life is our life as children of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Through Baptism, we are freed from sin and receive a true participation in the divine nature.^[1] What does participation in the divine nature mean? It can be understood, always within the limits of our present

knowledge, by considering that the Father communicates his nature entirely to the Son and the Holy Spirit, but He cannot create other “gods” or other persons to whom he communicates his own nature entirely. Nevertheless, He can and has willed to create other persons in order to communicate to them “partially” the divine nature, his goodness and happiness. That is why we speak of “participation” in the divine nature. This participation is sanctifying grace, which makes a person a child of God.

Christian holiness is thus rooted in the gift of the Triune God to mankind. We are included by grace in the intimate dynamic of the divine life, in which each divine Person possesses the same nature, but in a different way, a difference which makes the divine Persons distinct from one another. Hence the Christian has a different relationship

with each of the divine Persons: the Father adopts us as his children, so that the Son is the model with whom we identify ourselves and our “door” of entry into the Trinity; while the Holy Spirit, the bond of love between the Father and the Son, is the “light and power” that impels us to identify ourselves with Christ in order to live with Him for the glory of the Father, fulfilling his will in all things.^[2]

Sanctifying grace is therefore much more than a help from God to do good works. It is a new vital principle, an elevation of our nature, almost like a second nature, a radical beginning of a new kind of life: the life of the children of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Another kind of grace, called actual grace, is a specific divine help to perform a good deed.

The theological virtues

Since human nature has faculties that enable us to live as human beings, namely, the intellect, the will, the external and internal senses and the sensitive appetites, the divine life made possible by sanctifying grace requires certain faculties or, more precisely, the elevation of our faculties so that they can be the principles of the acts proper to the divine life in which we participate. The elevation of our human faculties comes about through habits infused with sanctifying grace, which are the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that “the theological virtues have God himself as their origin, motive and direct object. Infused with sanctifying grace, they bestow on one the capacity to live in a relationship with

the Trinity. They are the foundation and the energizing force of the Christian's moral activity and they give life to the human virtues. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being.”^[3] —

This brief description contains the key features of the theological virtues. They are virtues given by God, together with sanctifying grace; they have God himself as their object, enabling us to know Him as the Triune God, to desire and love Him; and they inform the human moral virtues, enabling them to regulate the use of human goods in a way that is appropriate to the life and condition of the children of God, and not only with regard to the purely human good.

The virtue of faith

“Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and all that he has revealed to us and that the Church proposes for our belief because God is Truth itself. By faith the human person freely commits himself to God. Therefore, the believer seeks to know and do the will of God because ‘faith works through charity’ (Gal 5:6).”^[4]

Faith is the knowledge that guides the whole life of the children of God. Without faith it is not possible to live as God’s children, just as, without intellectual knowledge, human life could not be lived. Faith consists in a firm adherence, made possible by grace, to all the truths that God has revealed to us, to all that God has told us about Himself and about his saving plan for mankind and for the world, not because these truths are self-evident or fully comprehensible

to us, but because they have been revealed by God, supreme Wisdom and supreme Truth. By faith we participate in God's knowledge of Himself and of the world, and that participated knowledge is the supreme rule of the Christian life.

But faith is not just a body of knowledge held to be true. Since what is believed is that God is our Creator and Saviour, faith presupposes a full openness of our soul to God's saving action in Christ, an act of trust and surrender to God's action in us. Because faith is the acceptance of the salvation that God works in us, Saint Paul teaches that we are justified by faith, that is, that there is no other salvation than that which God gives us in Christ, and that after original sin there is no other way to be righteous before God than to open ourselves to the action by which God makes us righteous through Christ. No man can justify

himself. That is why the Church teaches that “faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification; without it, it is impossible to please God and to reach the fellowship of his children; and we are said to be justified freely, because nothing that precedes justification, whether it be faith or works, merits the very grace of justification; for if it is grace, it is no longer by works; otherwise (as the Apostle himself says) grace is no longer grace.”^[5] —

Grace and faith are not produced by our good works, but once grace and faith have been received, in order to be saved we need to live as God’s children and avoid deeds incompatible with the life of grace.

Whoever consciously and deliberately does not accept God’s revelation commits the sin of unfaithfulness. The Christian who

abandons the faith commits apostasy, and the one who changes or distorts the revealed truths commits the sin of heresy.

The virtue of hope

“Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire and await from God eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit to merit it and to persevere to the end of our earthly life.”^[6] —

The virtue of hope transforms and elevates our deepest desires, making God's promised beatitude the ultimate object of our desires, the Supreme Good willed for its own sake and for the sake of which everything else is willed. Hope enables us to give to all human goods and activities their true value: that

which they have in order to achieve beatitude.

Since beatitude can only be obtained by God's grace and help, the virtue of hope comprises the trust that God will always give us the necessary help to save us, forgiving our sins when we ask for forgiveness, giving us strength to overcome trials and dangers, and always accompanying us with his merciful omnipotence.

Those who become discouraged at the sight of their sins or the difficulties in life, distrusting God's goodness and mercy and his saving power, as if everything depended on our own human strength, sin through despair. On the other hand, those who think that their human strength and merits are enough to save them, or who think that their salvation is assured by their race, by the fact that they are Catholic or baptised, or for other reasons, are

guilty of presumption, and therefore neglect the means of salvation established by God and offered by the Church.

The virtue of charity

“Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves for love of God. Jesus makes charity the new commandment, the fullness of the law. It is ‘the bond of perfection’ (Col 3:14) and the foundation of the other virtues to which it gives life, inspiration, and order: Without charity ‘I am nothing’ and ‘I gain nothing’ (1 Cor 13:2-3).”^[7] —

Charity consists first of all in loving God as the Supreme Good, above all things. It is a love of friendship, which unites us to Him. As a love of friendship it involves a certain reciprocity: we love God and we know that we are loved by Him, and

we love Him in response to the love with which He loves us. The Holy Spirit is called Uncreated Charity, and the created charity we possess is the main effect of his action in our soul. Somehow through the virtue of charity we love God with a divine love, with the love that the Holy Spirit puts in our soul. Charity impels us to know God, to strive to do his will with full availability, as Christ did,^[8] to love our neighbour for the love of God, that is, to love others as God loves them, and to treat things according to the value they have according to God's plan.

It is also the form, driving force and root of all the moral virtues, because charity refers them to God as the Supreme Good, and constitutes their ultimate motivation (justice, generosity, chastity, etc. are practised for the love of God); and it unites us to God through the practice of the moral virtues. This is why Saint

Augustine says that in a certain way the Christian moral virtues are, as it were, forms of the love of God.^[9]

Charity is the essence of Christian holiness, the bond of perfection, and it determines the degree of holiness of each person: one has as much holiness as the charity one possesses.

Every grave sin entails the loss of charity, of the union of friendship with God. Specific sins against charity towards God are hatred of God and lukewarmness; sins against charity towards oneself are, neglect of one's own spiritual life, exposing oneself to grave dangers to the soul or body, suicide and selfishness as disordered love of self; sins against charity towards others are hatred and discord, scandal, denying spiritual or material help that can be given to one's neighbour, voluntary co-operation with the sins of one's neighbour.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit

The action of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's soul, besides giving sanctifying grace and the theological virtues, communicates inspirations and actual graces, and has a specific manifestation in what the Church calls the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are “permanent dispositions that make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”^[10] The Church teaches that these gifts are seven: “wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of God. They belong in their fullness to Christ, the Son of David (cf. Is 11:1-2). They complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations,”^[11] although naturally there is no intent to classify or limit to these seven gifts the very broad and pluriform action of the Holy Spirit in souls. The Church also

speaks of the fruits produced by the action of the Spirit in souls: “The fruits of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: “charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity” (Gal 5:22-23, vulg.).”^[12]___

The commandments of the law of God

Our Lord said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”^[13]___

When the rich young man asked Him: which commandments?, Jesus answered: “You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honour your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”^[14]___ Our Lord is referring to the Decalogue, the ten “Words” of the Old Testament,^[15]___

which contain a summary of the main elements of the natural moral law. Our Lord himself attributes to these ten Words a divine origin, distinguishing them from merely human precepts,^[16] and the Church follows the order of these ten commandments to expound Christian morality in catechesis, naturally adding some specific teachings of the New Testament.

The Decalogue contains a set of serious duties,^[17] but it is also and above all an instruction, a teaching on *the way of life* that is consistent with the covenant between God and the Chosen People. The Church's exposition of the Decalogue is a teaching about the "lifestyle" that is consistent with charity, with friendship between God and man. This teaching constitutes a valid instrument for the moral formation of younger or less educated persons, and is for everyone a necessary

external guide to overcome the moments of inner darkness that we can all go through at times in life, because generally the inner light of grace already allows us to distinguish what is good from what is evil. The Decalogue, seen in the light of the New Testament and in its connection with charity, is like a set of signposts pointing the way to salvation.

Basic Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1996-2005, 1810-1832, 2052-2074.

Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 422-425, 384-390, 434-441.

Pope Francis, “Catechesis on the Ten Commandments.”

[1] Cf. 2 Pet 1:4.

[2] Jn 6:38: “For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” Cf. also Jn 4:34; 5:30.

[3] *Compendium*, 384.

[4] *Compendium*, 386.

[5] Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, ch. 8: Dz-Sh 1532.

[6] *Compendium*, 387.

[7] *Compendium*, 388.

[8] “Jesus said to them: My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn 4, 34).

[9] “Since virtue leads us to true happiness, I would affirm that virtue is none other than the supreme love of God. And the fact of saying that virtue is quadripartite is said, as I understand it, in consideration of the

variety of dispositions which love itself assumes. These four famous virtues, whose strength heaven would have them be in all souls as their names are in their mouths, I would not hesitate to define them also thus: temperance is the love which is wholly given to what is loved; fortitude is the love which bears all things for what is loved; justice is the love which serves exclusively what is loved and which, because of this, rules with rectitude; finally, prudence is the love which distinguishes with sagacity what is useful from what is prejudicial. This love, we have said, is not the love of any object, but the love of God, that is to say, of the Supreme Good, the Supreme Wisdom and the Supreme Peace. For this reason, if we make the definitions a little more precise, we can say that temperance is the love that keeps itself whole and incorruptible for God; fortitude is the love that endures everything without

sorrow, with its eyes fixed on God; justice is the love that serves only God, and therefore exercises lordship, according to reason, over all that is inferior to man; prudence, finally, is the love that knows how to discern what is useful for going to God from what may lead him away from Him” (Saint Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae*, I, 15, 25: NBA 13/1, 53).

^[10] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1830.

^[11] *Ibid.*, 1831.

^[12] *Ibid.*, 1832.

^[13] Jn 14:15.

^[14] Mt 19:18-19.

^[15] Cf. Ex 20:2-17 and Dt 5:6-21.

^[16] “Thus you have made void the word of God by your tradition. You hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy

of you when he said: ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, while they teach doctrines that are human precepts’ (Mt 15:7-9).

^[17] “Since they express man's fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, grave obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. The Ten Commandments are engraved by God in the human heart” (*Catechism*, 2072).

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