

Blessed Are The Meek Of Heart

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ON THE SECOND BEATITUDE.

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“Blessed are the meek of heart, for they shall possess the land.”

THIS is the next feature of the Christian character brought out by our divine Lord. The Christian must be not only a man of faith — living for divine purposes — influenced by supernatural motives — grasping at the invisible beneath the forms of things that appear; but he must also be imbued with the virtue of meekness. Remember, gentlemen, that Christianity means perfection — the very perfection of man — of human nature in all its natural properties and powers — and, far beyond this — the perfection of human nature in all the supernatural gifts of divine grace. Life, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, is spontaneous motion. There are two kinds of motion — one produced by something external or extrinsic to the thing moved — as when the powerful attraction of the sun moves the inanimate earth. The other is caused by something internal or intrinsic, as when the human body is moved by the living soul or principle of motion within it. This, Saint Thomas calls, intrinsic or spontaneous motion.

If you reflect on the definition, you will find it comprehensive and pertinent, for surely, our idea of life is motion of some kind, and we naturally look upon perfect stillness as death. Now, all motion bears in its very essence the idea of a starting-point, of a point to be reached, and of an effort to pass from one to the other.

Now, the Catholic Church teaches us that God is the starting-point of man — that God is the point to be attained by him, and that our Lord Jesus Christ — God made man — is the way, the form, the model, the means, to conduct him to his end. “I am Alpha and Omega — the beginning and the end;” He says, and elsewhere, “I am the way, the truth, and the life;” for, says the Apostle, “there is but one God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.” The life thus proposed to us clearly involves all supernatural perfection of grace, for in “Christ abode all the fullness of the divinity corporally.” But, by an eternal law, that which is perfect in the highest order involves all the perfection of the lower; therefore, in seeking to be made conformable to the image of the Son of God, we come by all that is most perfect in the order of nature, and thus “godliness is profitable to all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.” Let us see how far the virtue of meekness conduces to the natural and supernatural perfection of man. First, then, what is meekness?

What is Meekness?

Meekness is the virtue or power by which the passion of anger is so moderated and restrained as not to rise within us except when necessary and in the measure that is necessary. It is then, as you perceive, an exercise of power in the reason of man over the inferior appetites and powers of the

soul. Man, as you know, is made up of body and soul — of matter and spirit — each with its own nature and its own powers — wonderfully united, and acting on each other in the one being. The soul has its own affections and desires, its own rational appetite, which is the will, guided and influenced by reason. But as this soul is joined to a material body, and depends for its impressions upon sense, there is also a sensual appetite; and depraved desire and passion in excess assail the soul. These sensitive appetites manifest themselves in two great master-passions in man, namely, concupiscence and anger; concupiscence, which prompts us to seek that which is or which we conceive to be desirable — anger, which disturbs and excites the soul, when that which is desirable is removed, or when we are impeded in its pursuit.

Here then is man — as far as we have to deal with him — made up of intellect, will, passion of concupiscence and anger; and, besides the theological virtues, which entirely regard the supernatural perfection of man, we have the cardinal virtues, which may be said to regard his natural perfection, and they affect these four powers or passions; for prudence is in the intellect, justice in the will, temperance regards the passion of concupiscence, and fortitude that of anger. The more these virtues govern and influence their respective powers, the more perfect is man, in the order of nature. “It belongs to human virtue,” says Saint Thomas, “to make a man perfect by reducing his every act to the dominion of reason, which is done in three ways. 1st, The reason itself is rightly ordered, and this is done by the intellectual virtues or powers. 2nd, Reason thus ordered or perfected becomes the guide and ruler of all human affairs, through the medium of the virtue of justice; and, 3rd, All impediments to such guidance or government of reason are removed, (a), by the virtue of temperance, which restrains the will when it is drawn aside in pursuit of that which right reason forbids, and, (b), by fortitude, which overcomes, by strength of mind and will, the difficulties that arise in the way of virtue, just as a man by strength and energy of body conquers and repels all bodily difficulties.”

Thus, we behold how all natural perfection in man consists in the perfect and absolute dominion of a well-ordered reason or mind. Perfection means order, for, observes Saint Thomas, the Angelic Master, the perfection and beauty of all creation consists in order. Now, our idea of order is that inferior things should be subject to things superior, and that what is supreme should govern all; but as the intellect or reason is the supreme power in man, it follows that man’s natural perfection must consist in the dominion of this reason over all the inferior powers of the soul and all the passions and inclinations of the man.

Thus it was with the first man as he came from the hands of God — a perfect being. “God made man right,” says the Preacher (Ecclesiastes 7:30); and elsewhere, “He filled him with the knowledge of understanding, and He created in him the science of the spirit, and filled his heart with wisdom.” (Ecclesiasticus 17:5-6) In that happy time, before sin found its entrance into the newly-created world, all was perfection, because all was order. The inferior animals and beings were perfectly subject to man. “Let us make man,” says the Lord, “to our image and likeness, and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that move upon the earth.” The senses, and all the inferior appetites in man himself, were under complete control of the will, which, in its turn was ruled by a reason that was in perfect subjection to God. But when this order was disturbed by sin — when man’s reason and will refused their obedience to God — then the inferior appetites and passions, in their turn, refused to be subject to the reason, and the creation of God, and the stubborn earth itself, rebelled against man.

In losing the supernatural gifts of grace and innocence, man lost also the very natural integrity and perfection of his being. Such was the connection between nature and grace, that when grace departed the integrity of nature was also lost, and humanity remained not only robbed and stripped of its divine clothing, but also mutilated and powerless. From all this it follows, first, that the passion which most directly and powerfully assails the dominion of reason — blinds it, overpowers it, casts it from its throne — is the greatest impediment to man's natural perfection. And, secondly, that the virtue or power which masters this passion — binds it down under the dominion of the mind, directs its energy, whilst it destroys its inordinate tendency — is the greatest safeguard of reason, and consequently most directly conducive to man's natural perfection.

What is Anger?

Now, gentlemen, that passion is anger, and that virtue is meekness. Well then may we conclude that Christ our Lord, in restoring to us the supernatural, and enabling us to acquire this virtue, has also given us back the integrity and natural perfection which Adam had lost.

What is anger? Anger is defined: An inordinate desire of revenge. The sensitive appetite, excited, inflamed by injury, real or imaginary, acts upon the will, inclining and inducing it to desire of revenge. It is no longer reason guiding and directing the will, but the sensitive appetite, that is, an inferior power of the soul, directing a superior — consequently, an inversion of order. The very nature of anger is to act and desire without right reflection. Hence, nothing is more common than to plead anger as an excuse for irrational acts. We say, a man did such a thing under the great excitement of anger, consequently he cannot be held accountable — we must excuse him. Yes — excuse him; but the very plea put forward in his defence shows how completely reason is destroyed, for the time being, by this passion, for, as the poet says, “ira furor brevis est” — ‘it (anger) is a temporary madness’. We sometimes hear the phrase, “maddened by anger;” and the very law speaks of the murder committed in anger, as manslaughter — one animal slaughtering another. We never speak of a man as maddened by pride, maddened by lust — but maddened by anger.

A man in anger is recognized as an unreasoning animal. He no longer answers to the definition of man, “rational animal.” In fact, if right reason were supposed to rule him, we should cease to look upon him as angry, for it is not the excitement, but the inordinate, unreasoning excess of it, amounting to perturbation of mind and subversion of reason, which constitutes the sin of anger. There is an excitement which has all the appearance of anger, and which even leads to terrible results, and yet is sinless, because under the control of a well-ordered mind. Saint Chrysostom says: “He that is angry without cause, sins; but he who has sufficient cause, sins not. Nam si ira non fuerit, nec doctrina proficit nec iudicia stant — nec crimina compescuntur.” {For if there was in fact anger but with a doctrine or reason offered (of sufficient cause), there will be no judgement standing — never will there be a crime for it is suppressed as non-existent.}

Such was the indignation of Moses, “the meekest of men.” (Numbers 12:3) He saw an Egyptian strike one of the Hebrews, his brethren... he slew the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. And again, “When he came nigh to the camp he saw the calf and the dances, and, being very angry, he threw the tables out of his hand and broke them at the foot of the mount... and standing in the gate of the camp he said: ‘If any man be on the Lord's side let him join with me’; and all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him, and he said to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel; put every man his sword upon his thigh; go and return from gate to gate through the midst of the camp, and let every man kill his brother and friend and neighbor.’ And the sons of Levi did

according to the words of Moses, and there were slain that day about three and twenty thousand men.” (Exodus 32:19-28) And yet what says the Holy Ghost? “Moses was a man exceeding meek above all men that dwelt upon earth.” (Numbers 12:3)

Such again was the noble indignation of Mathathias... “A priest of the sons of Joarib;” for “there came a certain Jew in the sight of all to sacrifice to the idols upon the altar in the city of Modin, according to the king’s commandment. And Mathathias saw and was grieved, and his veins trembled, and his wrath was kindled according to the judgment of the law, and running upon him he slew him upon the altar.” (1 Maccabees 2:23-24)

We can go far higher for an illustration of the word of the Psalmist, “Be ye angry and sin not.” “And Jesus went up to Jerusalem; and He found in the temple them that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting. And when He had made as it were a scourge of little cords, He drove them all out of the temple... and the money of the changers He poured out, and the tables He overthrew.”

But in all these and the like examples, a high and perfect motive of reason governed and directed the acts; as in Moses, the inspiration of God; in Mathathias, the “judgment of the law;” and in our blessed Lord, a devouring zeal for the glory and honor of His Father’s house.

There is then, as you perceive, a good and a bad anger; one anger justifiable and another unjustifiable. Hence Aristotle says, “He is worthy of praise or of blame, who is sometimes angry.”

When is anger sinful, when is it not? It is sinful, first, when we desire vindication or revenge for its own sake, and not for the lawful end of correction of our neighbor; or when we wish to see the innocent punished or to have excessive punishment inflicted on the guilty; or when we wish to subvert the legitimate order and course of justice; in a word, when the desire is contrary to right reason. Secondly, anger is sinful when the motion or excitement is allowed to become too vehement, so as to be rage, either internal or external, for thus it takes the place of reason; and Saint Gregory the Great says, “All care must be taken lest anger, which should be the handmaid of virtue, be allowed to predominate in the mind; lest she should become mistress, who, like an obedient servant, should stand behind reason.”

But no passion more completely destroys reason, as we have seen, than inordinate and sinful anger; nay, more, it deforms even the exterior man, making him like to a demon; hence Saint John Chrysostom says, “Nothing is more frightful than the face of an infuriated man;” for, says Saint Gregory, quoting indeed from Seneca, “The excited heart throbs — the body trembles — the senseless tongue pours forth incoherent words — the inflamed countenance fires with rage — the furious eyes sparkle again!” and, concludes the mild philosopher, “What must the angry soul be whose external image is so foul and deformed!”

Glories of meekness.

If such be anger, how high and glorious must that virtue be which conquers, moderates, and restrains it — which either represses it altogether, so as to preserve perfect peace of soul and body, or permits it to rise only as far as reason permits or demands, and thus makes a virtue of what may be so hideous a vice — and such is meekness. Many persons, particularly the young, look upon meekness as something unnecessary and superfluous — a virtue of the cloister, or of females, and of the old. And thus blinded and misled, they allow an evil, impetuous temper and passion to enslave them. And yet, surely, there is no virtue more manly or ennobling than that which enables a

man to govern himself and his own passions. How can a man rule others who is unable to rule himself? How can a man associate with others who is powerless and unable to live with his own soul in peace?

He truly is fitted to be an Anax Andron — a king of men — who has learned by meekness to keep the little kingdom of his own soul and body in the proper order of subjection to reason. Every virtue is a power — the very word virtue means power; and what is more terrible in its power than meekness? We admire the strength of Samson, quietly turning aside into the vineyard and tearing the lion as he would have torn a kid in pieces: far more wonderful is the strength of him who can seize the demon of anger, and chain him down as the archangel chained Lucifer.

Saint Thomas asks the question whether meekness be the greatest of moral virtues? After some distinctions he answers: “In one sense, meekness has a peculiar excellence amongst the virtues; for as anger, on account of its impetuosity and suddenness, deprives the soul (more than any other passion) of freedom and of the power of judgment, so meekness, which governs anger, preserves unto man (beyond all other virtues) the possession of himself;” hence Ecclesiasticus says, “My son, keep your soul in meekness and give it honor according to its deserts. Who will justify him that sins against his own soul? Who will honor him that dishonors his own soul?”

How powerless is the angry man when he is confronted by one who holds his soul and his temper in meekness! How futile was the rage of the Pharisees and priests in presence of the meekness of Jesus Christ!

We have seen how far this virtue contributes to our natural perfection; let us now consider its supernatural excellence. The perfection of man in the supernatural order of grace is to be made like to the Lord Jesus Christ, by grace here — by glory hereafter. “Those whom He foreknew and predestinated to be made conformable to the image of His Son, the same also He called, and whom He called the same also He justified, and whom He justified the same also He glorified.”

The resemblance of grace here reveals itself in virtues, and foremost of these is meekness, because our divine Lord Himself puts it first, saving, “Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart.”
