

SUNDAY CATECHISM / 19

The virtue of Charity

ECCLESIA

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**Luisella
Scrosati**

Sunday Catechism



The theme of this lesson concerns the **THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE OF CHARITY**. To understand the **meaning of charity**, a term over generalised today, we will refer to the Summa Theologica, keeping to the great Tradition of the Church merged with the Exposition of St. Thomas, but also with reference to other sources and other texts.

St. Thomas dedicates many questions to charity (in II-II), from 23 to 44. Below, a **general and synthetic summary**

is drawn and this will provide the course taken for this lesson.

- In the first part we ask what exactly charity is, or the **ESSENCE OF CHARITY** (*Questions 23 and 27*).
- *Questions 24 and 25*, on the other hand, are respectively dedicated to the **SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF CHARITY**. **Subject**, being the charity inherent in humankind, in its will; the **object**, being who the recipient is of this charity.
- *Question 26* speaks of the **ORDER OF CHARITY**, because in charity there is a very precise order, according to what is passed down to us from Scripture and the Tradition of the Fathers.
- The *Questions from 28 to 33*, refer to the **EFFECTS OF CHARITY**, such as joy, benevolence, mercy ...
- And finally a long overview, from 34 to 43, deals with the **VICES OPPOSITE TO CHARITY**, or rather hatred, schism, sedition ...
- *Question 43*, the last, speaks of the **PRECEPTS OF CHARITY**

WHAT IS CHARITY?

This refers to the first article of *question 23* ; St. Thomas explains to us that charity takes the nature of **FRIENDSHIP** as referred to in chapter 15 of the Gospel of St. John, where Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants, but friends". Charity therefore is friendship by nature:

" If we do not wish good to what we love, but wish its good for ourselves, (thus we are said to love wine, or a horse, or the like), it is love not of friendship, but of a kind of concupiscence. "

For example, lust which today is called love has nothing to do with love and charity. In fact, lust is love of concupiscence, moreover flawed: it uses the person for the fulfilment of sexual desire, in the act of adultery or in fornication. Charity, on the other hand, is not love of concupiscence, neither illegitimate nor legitimate, it is instead the love of friendship and benevolence.

- Friendship is a commonality, but then we ask ourselves: how can there be friendship and commonality, or a certain equality, between humans and God?

To answer St. Thomas gives a text from the first letter to the Corinthians, verse 1, 9:

" God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Unlike human friendship, which is a friendship of equals by nature, charity is a particular friendship, because it requires that God in some way raises us to divine life. Therefore

charity is first of all possible insofar as God first loved humankind, elevating humankind to Himself.

- St. Thomas also asks : how is it possible to speak of love between friends if charity also asks to love one's enemies?

" Friendship extends to a person in two ways: first in respect of himself, and in this way friendship never extends but to one's friends: secondly, it extends to someone in respect of another, as, when a man has friendship for a certain person, for his sake he loves all belonging to him, be they children, servants, or connected with him in any way. Indeed so much do we love our friends, that for their sake we love all who belong to them, even if they hurt or hate us; so that, in this way, the friendship of charity extends even to our enemies, whom we love out of charity in relation to God, to Whom the friendship of charity is chiefly directed. " (q. 23, a. 1, ad 2).

Charity is the love of God and one's neighbour in relation to God, and it is precisely this love of friendship, of benevolence, is possible only because God has elevated us to a higher order and created a sort of community between us and Him.

In article 2, St. Thomas asks whether **charity is something created in the soul.**

In this article, St Thomas aims at something very important. One might think that, being God Himself charity, charity in humankind is nothing other than the presence of God. It's true God is present, in the sense in which the whole Tradition speaks of the Most Holy Trinity dwelling in the soul by grace.

However, the question that St. Thomas poses is another:

- Since God is charity, in what sense is a Christian's act of charity the life of God in us? Is God working in us apart from us, or does He work in us, making use of human faculties according to their nature? Consequently, can we say that as such the will of man is free?

St. Thomas states:

"Given that the will is prompted by the Holy Ghost to the act of love, it is necessary that the will also should be the efficient cause of that act."

Otherwise it would not be the person who lives and performs acts of charity, but God would be the subject and humankind would be a mere instrument. Instead,

" Wherefore God, Who moves all things to their due ends, bestowed on each thing the form whereby it is inclined to the end appointed to it by Him; and in this way He "ordereth all things sweetly" (Wis. 8:1). But it is evident that the act of charity surpasses the nature of the

power of the will, so that, therefore, unless some form be superadded to the natural power, inclining it to the act of love, this same act would be less perfect than the natural acts and the acts of the other powers; nor would it be easy and pleasurable to perform. And this is evidently untrue, since no virtue has such a strong inclination to its act as charity has, nor does any virtue perform its act with so great pleasure. Therefore it is most necessary that, for us to perform the act of charity, there should be in us some habitual form superadded to the natural power, inclining that power to the act of charity, and causing it to act with ease and pleasure."

Charity is therefore a supernatural virtue that inclines the will to love God and neighbour, respecting the nature of the will itself, which is elevated, not destroyed.

St. Thomas adds:

"The Divine Essence Itself is charity, even as It is wisdom and goodness. Wherefore just as we are said to be good with the goodness which is God, and wise with the wisdom which is God (since the goodness whereby we are formally good is a participation of Divine goodness, and the wisdom whereby we are formally wise, is a share of Divine wisdom), so too, the charity whereby formally we love our neighbor is a participation of Divine charity." (q. 23, a. 2, ad 1).

This text introduces a cardinal principle of the philosophy of St. Thomas: the **principle of participation**. Humankind is good insofar as it shares in God's goodness, Humankind is wise insofar as it shares in God's wisdom, Humankind is charitable insofar as it shares in God's charity ...

Finally, St. Thomas dedicates some articles (from 4 to 8) to describe charity as a special virtue.

1. CHARITY IS THE NOBLEST OF VIRTUES.

"Among the theological virtues themselves, the first place belongs to that which attains God most. Now that which is of itself always ranks before that which is by another. But faith and hope attain God indeed in so far as we derive from Him the knowledge of truth or the acquisition of good, whereas charity attains God Himself that it may rest in Him, but not that something may accrue to us from Him. Hence charity is more excellent than faith or hope, and, consequently, than all the other virtues" (a. 6)

2. Every virtue has its end and its objective, but to put each virtue in order according to its ultimate end cannot be done by the single virtue. **A VIRTUE IS NEEDED TO ORDER ALL THE VIRTUES TO ITS ULTIMATE END. THIS VIRTUE IS CHARITY.**

" it is evident that simply true virtue is that which is directed to man's principal good [...] in this way no true virtue is possible without charity. If, however, we take virtue as being ordered to some particular end, then we speak of virtue being where there is no charity, in so far as it is directed to some particular good. But if this particular good is not a true, but an apparent good, it is not a true virtue that is ordered to such a good, but a counterfeit virtue. (*a. 7*)

3. Finally, in article 8, St. Thomas says that **CHARITY GIVES SHAPE TO THE ACTS OF ALL THE OTHER VIRTUES AND IN THIS SENSE IT IS SAID THAT IT IS THE FORM OF THE OTHER VIRTUES.**

The ultimate good of humankind is God, the ultimate end of humankind is God; charity orders all human virtues to God. In this sense it gives form to all the other virtues, and the other virtues without charity lose any value. Precisely because charity is the love of God and the love of neighbour for and in order to God, it is the ultimate good of mankind.