

## **IS IT POSSIBLE TO FULFILL THE LAW OF CHARITY?**

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There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test him and said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" He said in reply, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." He replied to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."<sup>1</sup>

How often have we not read this text ourselves or heard it read by others in church? Preachers have expounded it as stating the fundamental and primary motivation of the Christian life. Christ Himself, according to the text, approved of it saying, "Do this and you will live." It may be regarded catechetically as summing up implicitly the content of all the commandments.

But let us think about its requirements, particularly with respect to the love of God. Is it possible to fulfill them? Two questions readily arise from the text. First, the text says, "You shall love the Lord, your God." The question is: Can God Whom we cannot in this life know exactly as He is in Himself be loved by us in His very reality? Secondly, the text emphasizes a completeness or totality in our love. "You shall love with your whole heart and being." Totality here obviously refers in the first place to our complete capacity for loving. In other words, we are commanded to love God, without holding back any amount of our power of loving. Does the totality also refer to God as the object of our love? That is, is there anything in God or about God not included in our love of Him? So the second question is: To what extent can God who is infinite in goodness be totally loved by finite creatures such as we are? More precisely,

is our capacity for loving proportionate to such an exalted object of love as God is? Surely, we are not commanded to do the impossible. But what is the explanation?

In seeking answers to these questions, I have found most helpful two articles in the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas on which my response will rest.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Why should the first question be a problem? It is because human love is provoked by and follows upon knowledge and thus presupposes knowledge. For how can we love something that we do not know? And since God in this present life is not known to us as He is in Himself, that is to say, in His essence itself which accounts for His Deity, making Him, so to speak, to be what He is, how can we love Him in Himself, in His very reality? We seem to be restricted to loving Him as He is known to us through mental signs as intermediary. In other words, are we not limited to loving what we think God is rather than what He is in reality?

In our quest for an explanation let us first consider some characteristics of our human knowledge and then compare knowledge with love.

In this life, we normally know God through ideas or concepts of our mind which are drawn or abstracted from sensible things existing around us and then applied to God by reasoning from effect to cause. For instance, we observe and

are pleased by the beauties of nature and the works of art. We recognize the goodness of food and of innumerable other things which satisfy us. We are astounded by the might and power of the wind, rain, heat of the sun, and of other forces of nature. We admire the practice of justice among our fellow men.

Having formed these abstract concepts or ideas of beauty, goodness, power and other qualitative perfections from observing things around us, we notice by reflection that such concepts, whose significations are limited in the individual realities from which we conceive them, do not in themselves imply any limitation or imperfection. Our reason, therefore, tells us that we can rightly apply them to God. So, we say that God is good, almighty, just and so on, without limitation.

We call these qualities or perfections divine attributes, because what they signify must truly belong to God Who caused them to be in creatures. God is certainly good, powerful and just as He is also many other perfections by which we name Him. We also recognize that some other perfections found among things, such as having a body or possessing sense knowledge, because they are perfections implying imperfection, cannot as such be attributed to God to Whom we attribute perfection itself. Yet, even though we deny such mixed perfections to God, they, too, give us some knowledge of God, since they tell us what God is not and thus help us distinguish Him from creatures, for instance that God is not corporeal, and that God does not have senses.

In knowing God through these attributes, we truly know God, because our reason assures us that analogically these perfections do pertain to God.

Nevertheless, in knowing God in this way, we know Him, so to speak, from the outside as reflected by created things. As St. Paul affirmed, “Ever since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what He has made.”<sup>3</sup> But this knowledge, although certain, is far from perfect. As St. Paul elsewhere explained, “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, we know God through the intermediation of our limited concepts, not by seeing Him in His very essence. And since love follows upon knowledge, it seems that as we know God from the outside, as it were, so also do we fall short of loving Him as He is in His inner reality.

Such a conclusion would certainly be justified, if the order of knowledge and the order of love were the same. But this is not the case, as the example of a mother’s love penetrating beyond what is known by others about her delinquent child can convince us. Love does not simply run parallel to knowledge. St. Thomas Aquinas, developing the perception of Aristotle, explains why. Knowledge starts with things existing outside the mind and completes its act when the thing outside has come to exist and is expressed in the mind under the condition of the knower and as a mental sign or concept of the thing known. The movement of knowledge is thus inward toward the mind.

The movement of love, on the contrary, being the act of a power of tendency and inclination, namely “appetite” in scholastic terms, is outward toward the thing loved according to the conditions of its existence in itself. Knowledge of the goodness of apple pie, for example, is not enough to satisfy the appetite’s

love and desire. Such sensuous love tends toward the pie that actually exists on the pie plate. Thus, while knowledge starts with things outside and brings them, as it were, into the mind, love starts where knowledge ends, that is, with an object known by the mind as good and proceeds then by way of tendency or inclination toward that same good in its existing reality outside the mind.

Accordingly, in the operations of the two immaterial and spiritual powers of knowing and loving, the intellect and the will respectively, there is a kind of circle formed by the two movements of knowing and loving.

This helps us to understand how from an imperfect knowledge of something, one's love can surpass one's knowledge and reach out to the thing loved as it exists in itself. Since we are exploring the question of loving God by the love of charity which resides in the will, it also discloses how from an imperfect knowledge of God in this life, mediated through concepts and reasonings, and inadequate to express the inner reality or essence of God, love can reach the reality itself of God beyond our present imperfect and mediated knowledge of Him. It is only in heaven, St. Thomas claims,<sup>5</sup> that our knowledge of God becomes intuitive, that is, a vision without the intermediation of concepts, "face to face," as St. Paul says,<sup>6</sup> and only then shall we know God just as He is. Although our present imperfect knowledge of God, including the deeper but veiled knowledge of God by Christian faith, will in heaven give way to the perfect knowledge of the beatific vision, our present love of charity which even now goes straight to God as He is in Himself, will not pass away, as St. Paul assures us.<sup>7</sup> It

will remain. This fact is itself a confirmation that our charity attains God Himself even in this present life.

The actual question that St. Thomas asks is whether in this life it is possible to love God immediately?<sup>8</sup> As this question is asked in the context of his treatment of charity, he is obviously referring particularly to the love of charity. In his reply to the question, he compares love with knowledge, employing the two words “mediated” (*mediate*) for knowledge and “immediately” (*immediate*) for love.

God in Himself, as St. Thomas points out, is both knowable and lovable, since He is essentially the very truth and goodness which makes other things knowable and lovable.

On our part, since our knowledge starts with the senses and God is farthest removed from the senses, we come to know God *mediately*, that is through a knowledge drawn from things other than God, as the cause is known from its effects or by way of eminence which takes account of His transcendence over creatures or by way of negation which denies of God the imperfections found in created things.

On the other hand, since love is the act of a power of inclination (in the case of charity, namely the will), which tends to things in their own existence, charity, which is rooted in faith, loves God *immediately*, without having to love other things first (as knowledge, on the contrary, has to know other things first), and it loves things other than God *mediately*, namely through our love of God, since by charity we love everything we love in and for God.

In short, we do not rise from things to God in our love, as we do in our knowledge. Once known by reason or faith, we love God from the start or immediately and then through our love of God, we love other things.<sup>9</sup>

## II

Granting that this answers our first question, namely, that in this life even though we do not know God as He is in Himself, we can nevertheless love Him as He is in Himself, there remains the question of the totality of our love of God.

The initial problem here is that since love follows knowledge, to love God totally would seem to demand a total or comprehensive knowledge of God which only God has of Himself and which, therefore, lies beyond the limited knowledge possessed by a creature.

Besides, if God could be loved totally by a creature, such as man, then man could love God as much as God loves Himself. Surely, this is an unreasonable assumption.

Yet the law as stated in the *Book of Deuteronomy*<sup>10</sup> and accepted by Christ is plain: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart." Obviously, the answer to the question requires some distinctions and this is precisely the procedure St. Thomas adopts.<sup>11</sup>

St. Thomas points out initially two ways of looking at love; from the standpoint of the lover and from the standpoint of the one loved. So the question whether God can be wholly or totally loved may be understood in three ways.

First, loving totally may be considered with reference to the thing loved. In this way, God is loved totally, since man should love all that pertains to God.

Secondly, loving totally may be understood with reference to the lover. In this way, also, God ought to be loved totally, since man ought to love God with all his might and refer all he has to the love of God, fulfilling the commandment in *Deuteronomy*: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart.”

Thirdly, loving totally may be understood by way of comparison of the lover to the thing loved, so that the measure or mode of the lover will be equal to the mode of the thing loved. This, of course, is impossible, because a thing is lovable in proportion to its goodness, and since God’s goodness is infinite, God is infinitely lovable. But no creature can love God infinitely, for all the power of a creature, whether it be natural or infused, is finite.

Thus, man should love God totally in the sense of loving all that pertains to God. Man should also love God totally in the sense of loving with all his might. But since God is infinitely lovable, whereas man’s power of loving is finite, it is impossible for man to love God with a love that is equal to God’s love of Himself.

### III

These explanations should help us understand how it is possible for us to fulfill the commandment of charity. As to our first question, since love tends to the thing loved in its very existence, love can reach beyond the conceptual grasp

of things by knowledge. This applies to our love of God by charity in this life.

Our second question which concerns the totality of our love is answered by the three distinctions made by St. Thomas. In accord with these explanations, the conclusion is that it is possible to fulfill the commandment of charity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luke* 10: 25-28

<sup>2</sup> II. II. q. 27. aa. 4 and 5

<sup>3</sup> *Romans* 1:20.

<sup>4</sup> *I Corinthians* 13 : 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theologiae*. I. q. 12. aa. 9 and 11.

<sup>6</sup> *I Corinthians* 13: 12.

<sup>7</sup> *I Corinthians* 13 : 8.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae*. II. II. q. 27. a. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. St. Thomas *De Veritate*, q. 10. a. 12 ad 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Book of Deuteronomy* 6 :5.

<sup>11</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II. II. q. 27 a. 5.