

## THE FUNCTION OF MERIT IN CHRISTIAN MORALITY

Aristotle favors beginning the treatment of a problem by a survey of opinion regarding it. The role of merit in the moral life of man, propounded as a question, yields many and, at least apparently, contradictory opinions, even among Catholics. All Christians depend upon the merits of Christ. Protestants, at any rate traditional Protestants, deny any other merit. Catholics however also call upon the merits of the saints and normally seek help by the meritorious actions of one another. In terms of personal action, this latter attitude contains belief in our ability to earn from God his gifts to those we love and, furthermore, that such effort on our part is commendable. On the other hand, to view our own actions from the vantage point of merit for ourselves is often regarded rather dubiously. Does not the seeking of merit for ourselves reveal self-seeking, selfishness? Is it not a tarnishing of the desirable purity and selflessness of love? Many seem to think that perfection at any rate is the gift of self to God and to introduce the notion of merit is to put strings upon the gift, make it unworthy of God and, perhaps especially, of the giver.

An informal survey resulted in other and, I hope, interesting sidelights on the question. Many manifested a consciousness of sin to an extent that solely satisfactory and expiatory values of good works concerned them, to the exclusion, almost entirely, of any thought of merit. One person conceived of merit as a bonus given by God much in the manner of the green stamps beloved of certain housewives. Father Gerald Vann regarded this and other similar attitudes as revealing a "prevalent pluralism" whereby we speak of "merits" and "graces" rather than of "grace" and "merit." A quantifying, mathematicizing tendency has thus, in his eyes, obscured the essential vitality of grace as life and merit as caught up in love.

Writers on the spiritual life, as Fathers Garrigou-Lagrange, De Guibert and Arintero, do not devote themselves to any considerable

*ex professo* treatment of the role of merit.<sup>1</sup> Rather they consider it in the context of the primacy of charity in the perfection of the soul and, especially, as affecting the evaluation of the acts of the moral virtues under the influence of charity and the growth of charity itself. Even the nearly dozen pages of Father Tanquerey under the title of merit are similarly concerned with securing the universal dominion of charity in our moral life.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the approach of these writers is indicative of what shall concern us in discussion of the topic assigned.

Moral theologians consider merit in the tract dealing with human acts. Father Merkelbach, for example, treats of human acts first *secundum esse materiale et psychologium*, secondly *secundum esse morale*, and lastly *secundum esse supernaturale et meritorium*.<sup>3</sup> Only one special problem concerns him, as is also the case with other manualists, and it is that already mentioned in connection with the spiritual writers:<sup>4</sup> the role of charity in the meritorious action. Pastoral notes tend to be, as those of Father Davis, on the advisability of frequent renewal of the act of charity, the practice of the morning offering and the transformation of life by the love of God.<sup>5</sup>

St. Thomas also treats of merit and demerit among the questions dealing with the human act. Question twenty-one of the *Prima Secundae* inquires of the consequences of human action by reason of their goodness and malice. Here St. Thomas notes: "A good or evil action deserves praise or blame insofar as it is in the power of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*; St. Louis, Herder, 1939; 413f. *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*; St. Louis, Herder, 1948; I, 142.

J. De Guibert, S.J., *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*; New York, Sheed and Ward, 1953; 49ff., 94, 338.

J. G. Arintero, O.P., *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*; St. Louis, Herder, 1951; I, 223, 290-294.

<sup>2</sup> A. Tanquerey, S.S., *The Spiritual Life*; Westminster, Newman, 1947; nn. 228-248.

<sup>3</sup> B. H. Merkelbach, O.P., *Summa Theologiae Moralis*; Paris, Desclee, 1936; I, nn. 188-197.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fanfani, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis*; Prummer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis*; Aertnys-Damen, *Theologia Moralis*; Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*; etc.

<sup>5</sup> H. Davis, S.J., *Moral and Pastoral Theology*; New York, Sheed and Ward, 1949; 50-53.

will; it is right or sinful according as it is ordained to the end; and its merit or demerit depends on the recompense for justice or injustice towards another."<sup>6</sup>

While merit with God is also affirmed in question twenty-one, fuller treatment is reserved for the final question of the tract on grace, in the *Prima Secundae*, question one hundred and fourteen. I am sure that the notions exposed and the conclusions reached are familiar to you but may I briefly indicate them?

The Salmanticenses define merit in the concrete and abstractly.<sup>7</sup> In the concrete it is an action to which recompense is due in justice; in the abstract, it is the right to a reward. Opposed to it is the sin deserving of punishment, the guilt demanding punishment.

Condign merit is based upon justice as affirmed by the definition. Supernaturally merit *de condigno* in strict justice is realized solely in the merit of Christ. Only in His actions, as of a divine person, was there absolute equality to the reward. Condign merit *de condignitate tantum* is also in the order of justice involving a strict right. Nevertheless the value involved is not equal to the reward but rather proportionate according to a divine ordination and promise.

Congruous merit, on the other hand, is not founded on justice. Merit *de congruo* strictly speaking is based on friendship or the friendly right to reward. Merit *de congruo* broadly speaking is based on the bounty or mercy of God. The former presupposes the state of grace whereby friendship is established between God and the just man; the latter does not.

Father Garrigou-Lagrange notes the importance of awareness of the analogical nature of the division. Nonetheless he is equally emphatic in affirming that merit refers properly and intrinsically to condign merit and congruous merit strictly speaking although by analogy of proportion. Merit *de congruo* broadly speaking is so by analogy of extrinsic attribution or metaphorically.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the conclusions of St. Thomas regarding merit are matters of defined faith. Father Walter Farrell, O.P. summed these up as follows.

<sup>6</sup> I-II, 21, 3 c.

<sup>7</sup> Salmanticenses, *De gratia*; disp. I, dub. IV, n. 53.

<sup>8</sup> R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *De Gratia*; Turin, Berruti, 1946; 293. *Grace*; St. Louis, Herder, 1952; 369.

1. The just truly merit. IV Lateran Council, chapter I (D. 429). Council of Trent, Sess. VI, chapter 16 and canon 24 (D. 809, 834).
2. The power of meriting is from the mercy of God and the merit of Christ. Council of Trent, Sess. VI, chapter 16 and canon 26 (D. 809, 836).
3. Our merits give us a true right to reward. II Council of Orange, canon 18 (D. 191). Council of Trent, *ibid.*, canon 32 (D. 842).
4. No one can merit for himself the first actual grace. II Council of Orange, canons 3 and 5 (D. 176, 178). Council of Trent, Sess. VI, chapter 16 (D. 798), chapter 5 (D. 797).
5. No one can merit the first habitual grace *de condigno*. Council of Trent, Sess. VI, chapter 16, chapter 8, canon 32 (D. 809, 801, 842).
6. Man cannot merit reparation after a future fall. *Ibid.*, chapter 8 (D. 801).
7. Man can merit an increase in grace and charity. *Ibid.*, canons 24 and 32 (D. 834, 842).
8. Man can merit eternal life. *Ibid.*, chapter 16 and canon 32 (D. 809, 842).<sup>9</sup>

Also pertinent to our present inquiry are the conclusions regarding the role of charity and the conditions for meritorious action. The former is the concern of the fourth article: Grace is the principle of merit principally by charity. The familiar words of St. Paul may be recalled: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision: but faith that worketh by charity" (Gal. 5,6). "And if I should have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing . . . and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Cor. 13,2). Our Lord Himself has said: "He that loveth me, shall be loved of my Father; and I will love him and will manifest myself to him" (Jn. 14,21). St. Thomas points out that human acts

<sup>9</sup> W. Farrell, O.P., *A Companion to the Summa*; New York, Sheed and Ward, 1938; 437. Cf. *The Formulation of the Tridentine Doctrine of Merit* by Bro. C. Stephen, F.S.C. (mss. in library of Catholic University, Washington, D.C.).

have the nature of merit chiefly on the part of the divine ordination to the supernatural end of man, union with God, and secondly, on the part of man, that such actions are done voluntarily. Charity unites with God and "what is done out of love we do most willingly."

So also we make beginning of the conditions necessary that an act be meritorious. These are usually enumerated: The meritorious work must be 1. free; 2. good; 3. in submission or obedience to the rewarder; 4. the work of a wayfarer; 5. proceeding from sanctifying grace and charity; and 6. ordained by God to a promised reward.<sup>10</sup> These apply in their entirety to merit *de condigno*. As mentioned above, congruous merit broadly speaking does not require the state of grace. Also congruous merit in the strict sense does not require the sixth condition.

This brief recapitulation of the familiar teaching of the Church and of St. Thomas on merit implies some insights into the role of merit in the moral life of man. I would indicate some of these as follows.

I. The role of merit in the life of man is, on the part of God, the role of the divine mercy; upon this is founded the role of the divine justice. St. Thomas puts this very clearly: "The work of divine justice always presupposes the work of mercy; and is founded thereupon. . . . So in every work of God, viewed at its primary source, there appears mercy. In all that follows, the power of mercy remains and works indeed with even greater force; as the influence of the first cause is more intense than that of second causes. For this reason does God out of the abundance of His goodness bestow upon creatures what is due to them more bountifully than is proportionate to their deserts; since less would suffice for preserving the order of justice than what the divine goodness confers; because between creatures and God's goodness there can be no proportion."<sup>11</sup>

The effect of mercy is to dispel the misery of those we love. The defects causative of misery can be removed only by the communication of the perfection of goodness. The mercy of God to men in the misery of sin is shown first in that effect of grace which is justification, the communication of a sharing in the life of God. Yet the

<sup>10</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace*, 379-383.

<sup>11</sup> I, 21, 4 c.



divine mercy is abundant. As Father August Brunner, S.J., points out, God also granted a true fulfillment of the quest for independence which was at the source of man's sin, the cause of his misery.<sup>12</sup> That fulfillment is to be found in the divine ordination by which God bound Himself to reward the works of man.

In so acting, it is true, as St. Thomas points out, "God is not made our debtor simply, but His own, so far as it is due to Him that His ordination should be fulfilled."<sup>13</sup> So there is no basis for vain-glory or any tendency to make ourselves equal to God. Yet there is a profound basis for gratitude in the role thus given men in their own sanctification. By the divine mercy the image of God in man is perfected.

II. The role of merit in the life of man is the role of man himself in his own sanctification. Father Brunner, quoted above, does not hesitate to call this "the gift of self-redemption." Merit means that man has a positive contribution to make to his own sanctity, his own glory, his own eternal life. This is made possible by the gift that mercy gives, the life of grace, the ability to love by charity. Yet grace is in man, of man, and the love of charity is his love freely given. The works of man become the service of God, acceptable to Him, promised infallible reward by Him.

III. The role of merit is in the life of man the role of Christ. Merit stems from the life of grace in the soul and our grace is the grace of Christ. He is the Head, we the members; he the Vine, we the branches; in him we are reborn.<sup>14</sup> As members we live by the life of the Head, by the mind of Christ, by the love of Christ. Our actions are ours but they are also his. As branches we bear fruit and the fruit is ours and the fruit is Christ's. We are regenerated, born again in baptism; we have "put on Christ" (Gal. 3,27). Our living is Christ living in us (Gal. 2,20). He merited all graces for all men; in him we merit to grow in that grace, to grow in him, to be Christ.

St. Thomas notes: "Christ's Passion, according as it is compared

<sup>12</sup> A. Brunner, S.J., "The Gift of Self-redemption," *Theology Digest*, VI, 3 (autumn 1958) 131-135. Cf. P. De Letter, S.J., *De Ratione Meriti*, Rome, *Analecta Gregoriana*, (19, Series Facultatis Theologicae, B, n. 9).

<sup>13</sup> I-II 114, 1 ad 3.

<sup>14</sup> III, 19, 4.

to his godhead, operates in an efficient manner; but insofar as it is compared with the will of Christ's soul it acts in a meritorious manner; considered as being within Christ's very flesh, it acts by way of satisfaction inasmuch as we are liberated by it from the debt of punishment; while inasmuch as we are freed from the servitude of guilt, it acts by way of redemption; insofar as we are reconciled with God it acts by way of sacrifice."<sup>15</sup>

"Insofar as it is compared with the will of Christ's soul it acts in a meritorious manner." The will of Christ's soul is the will of love, the love of God, the love of man, a selfless love, an obedient love. Herein is the key to the understanding of the role of merit.

Man, in sin, reached out by love of self to be master of his own perfection. Thereby he lost possession of himself, became divided within himself and fell into servitude. Christ was in perfect possession of his humanity; in him was no disunity; by his love he made total gift of himself to God. Merit is the possibility for man to gain from God the possession of himself, to overcome the divisive forces within him, and so to be able to make gift of himself in Christ to the heavenly Father. God thus gives man what he sought, self-mastery, that man may fulfill most perfectly God's will that he make self-donation. Then truly is he Christ.

IV. Thus, in Christ the conditions for the meritorious action are seen in the fulness of their meaning.

a. The meritorious work must be free. By his freedom man is the author of his act, offers that over which he has dominion and so is worthy of reward. By sin his freedom is abused and as a result restricted; he is slave. By grace his freedom is renewed; he is released from slavery. Merit opens to him the possibility of perfect freedom, the freedom of Christ. As Christ by his grace penetrates the deepest being of man, man is progressively released from the servitude to his body, his passions, his pride. He thus by the exercise of his freedom grows ever more free.

b. The meritorious work must be performed in submission or obedience to the one rewarding. Otherwise, as the authors put it, "there would be no reason to expect a reward of God."<sup>16</sup> The selfless

<sup>15</sup> III, 48, 6 ad 3.

<sup>16</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace*, 380.

submission to the will of his heavenly Father characterized radically the life of Our Lord. "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent Me" (Jn. 4,34). "Father . . . not My will but Thine be done" (Lk. 22,42). Therein was the perfect exercise of his freedom, the perfect exercise of his complete mastery of his humanity in the total gift of himself. The term sought by meekness is the possession of self; the essential act of humility is abasement before God unto annihilation of self. So did Christ say: "Learn of Me, because I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt. 11,29). The spirit of sacrifice, the act of the will from which sacrifice proceeds, is that of devotion. As the principal interior act of the virtue of religion it is, in the poet's words, "eagerness to the high hests of divinity." So the sacrifice of Christ, on Calvary, in the Mass, is the climax of submission and obedience to which grace carries us by merit.

c. The meritorious work must proceed from grace under the influence of charity. Thereby is proportion established between work and reward. No one seriously challenges the need of grace by which the supernatural order is achieved. Difficulties have arisen in analyzing the mode whereby charity exercises its influence over the works of other virtues. St. Thomas says: "It belongs primarily to charity to merit eternal life, and secondarily, though indispensably, to the other virtues, inasmuch as their acts are commended by charity."<sup>17</sup> In the Commentary on the Sentences he affirms: "In him who has charity, every act is either meritorious or it is a sin; no act is indifferent."<sup>18</sup> Controversy has long raged over the way in which charity extends its command over the life of virtue. Vasquez and Suarez, and later Noldin and Vermeersch, are cited as maintaining the sufficiency of habitual charity; Merkelbach and Prummer that charity is exercised virtually; St. Alphonsus and St. Bonaventure as requiring the frequent repetition of acts of charity. Father Gilleman, S.J., is concerned with an analysis of the situation psychologically as it relates to the ontological and moral aspects. He finds at least an implicit activity of charity *in actu exercito* in the performance of good works and so the qualification of the latter as meritorious.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> I-II, 114, 4.

<sup>18</sup> In II, 40, 1, 5.

<sup>19</sup> G. Gilleman, S.J., *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*; Westminster, Newman, 1961; 181ff.



Practically all would concur with Father De Guibert, S.J.: "Whether the virtual influence of charity is required to make an act meritorious or whether the habitual influence suffices, it is certain that the more actual the influence of charity, the greater the merit, since the motive of charity is more perfect and more meritorious than all others."<sup>20</sup> In this we reach again toward the limit that is Christ. "Wherefore when He cometh into the world He saith: Sacrifice and oblation Thou wouldst not, but a body Thou hast fitted to Me. Holocausts for sin did not please Thee. Then said I: Behold I come; in the head of the book it is written of Me: that I should do Thy will, O God" (Heb. 10,5-7). By love he was sent, in love he comes, out of love he lives and dies. Charity pervades the life of Christ; charity is the life of Christ in the soul.

d. The meritorious work must be good. An evil work is deserving of punishment; an indifferent work does not exist in the concrete order. Many considerations are connected with this condition and some difficulties. The role of the moral virtues, acquired and infused, is obviously indicated. As cited above, St. Thomas gives them secondary but indispensable place. They pertain to the integrity of the supernatural life of man. Unlike the angels, man secures his beatitude by a succession of acts in a variety of circumstances, individual and social, and dealing with means as well as with the end itself.

Here too the relative value of various good works comes into question. Emphasizing always the dependence of the degree of merit upon the degree of charity, distinction is nevertheless properly made, in terms of object, of the excellence, nobility and goodness of a particular work. The circumstance of difficulty in performance must be similarly evaluated although here the warning is often sounded not to confuse difficulty with necessarily greater merit nor facility with lesser.

Father Gilleman, in common with most spiritual writers as well as moralists, poses the problem arising from egoism and naturalism even in the acts of the moral virtues. He considers the acts of these virtues to be "mediations of charity." Resting in these actions for

<sup>20</sup> De Guibert, *op. cit.*, 50.

their own sake, for self-centered pleasure, in egoistic self-realization, we render these mediations "opaque." To restore and maintain "transparency" we must be "constantly rectifying our intention of charity." Hence he would require "frequent explicit intentions, not as a theoretic condition of merit and of the efficaciousness of charity, but as a practical condition of the presence of charity in us."<sup>21</sup>

Our Lord in his life on earth manifests the unifying action of love. His every work was quickened by love of his Father. Each was rendered extraordinary by the fact that he, the Son of God, accomplished it. Nevertheless, each was also perfect in its own right, as an act of virtue. So was each work perfectly subject to charity, instrumental in fulfilling the will of the Father. The inward nature of the richness of Christian living is made clear, as well as the dominion of the man in grace over all circumstances and contingencies. No act, save sin, is unworthy to be meritorious; the least deed possesses a present and an eternal echo. As the Son of God perfectly possessed his humanity so would he possess ours. The life of grace and merit is one of total commitment to and involvement with Christ, through Christ to and with God.

e. The merit of man depends on divine preordination. "Man has no right before God unless he receive such a right from God."<sup>22</sup> The last condition is, in reality, the first. It is a reaffirmation of the gratuity of salvation, of God's part, of man's part as from God. The delicacy of divine love is evidenced in the dignity conferred on man and respected in him. God gave himself freely and could be received only in open generosity. What has man that he has not received? "Who has first given to God and recompense shall be made to him?" (Rom. 11,35). In grace and the consequent capacity to merit, man finds in himself the continued truth of the words: "By this hath the charity of God appeared toward us, because God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we may live by Him. In this is charity: not as though we had loved God, but because He hath first loved us . . ." (1 Jn. 4,9). By grace we are reborn but also by grace man is himself another Bethlehem. The journey to the Cross is

<sup>21</sup> Gilleman, *op. cit.*, 185ff; cf. 310ff., 316ff.

<sup>22</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace*, 382.

begun again. The divine preordination upon which merit is based is also the will of God that we each work out our own salvation, that to each of us is given the vocation of Christ. In him we must overcome the world; with him we must live for all eternity the life of God.

Charles Journet remarks that, if instructed, many Protestants might find they fully accept the reality of merit but have been put off by the name.<sup>23</sup> Much the same may be true of good and fervent Catholics who are reluctant to speak of merit. A taint of Quietism or of Fenelon's doctrine of pure love may linger; more likely accurate knowledge may simply be lacking. Likewise the stress on expiation may be due, as E. I. Watkin long ago pointed out, to the development of the doctrine of "victim souls" during the first quarter of this century. Perspective has been, in great part, restored.

Father Vann's point seems well taken. Grace must be presented as life and merit as caught up in love. Then the function of merit in the moral life of man becomes, as it should, the role of the Christ life in man. Merit is thereby an integral, vital part of man's perfection, a challenge to his freedom and his love, a source of constant encouragement, a means to perfect union with God, here and forever.

FERRER SMITH, O.P.  
487 Michigan Ave., N.E.  
Washington 17, D.C.

<sup>23</sup> C. Journet, *The Meaning of Grace*; New York, Kenedy, 1960; 58.