

# MATURITY: CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

By BARNABAS AHERN

**T**HIS MORNING, DURING a shopping sortie against chaotic roman traffic, I made a brief visit to the salesian church of Sacro Cuore. When about to leave, my eyes fastened on a statue which I had never seen before. It was a life-like representation of the boy saint, Dominic Savio, holding an open copy-book in his hand. What rivetted my attention were the disturbing words which covered the page with Dominic's favourite prayer, *O Signore, fammi santo!* (O Lord, make me a saint!).

Who says a prayer like that today? The post-conciliar years have focussed attention on the values of earthly justice and peace, on the benefits of fellowship in community, and on the claims which needy men and women press upon our concern. In a Church which has been renewed by abundant springs opened by Vatican II, many would feel uneasy in asking the Lord, 'Make me a saint!' To people today a prayer like that smacks of pietistic self-centredness and even of egoistical indifference to the complaints of the poor and suffering who form such a large part of the family of God.

The tidal wave of renewal has broken down walls which isolated people from one another; it has swept away the cluttering debris of yesteryear, and has irrigated vast stretches of dry earth with water poured out by the Spirit. Could it be that this same crest has submerged in oblivion God's insistent reminder that he deals with each person as an individual? His unchanging word teaches that, like the poet-father Longfellow, he cherishes his whole family because, first of all, he loves each one of his children personally – 'grave Alice, and laughing Allegra, and Edith with golden hair'. Even when our heavenly Father speaks to his whole family together, he expects his word to find its first resonance in the heart of each individual son and daughter. Only someone who is asleep spiritually could ever dream that mere membership in a community of christians makes a person automatically acceptable to God. The measure of all his dealings with his creatures is intransigently

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personal: 'House of Israel, I mean to judge each of you by what he does'.<sup>1</sup>

The prayer of Dominic Savio, therefore, is a profoundly christian prayer. To ask God to make us saints is the only authentic response which men of today, like men of all times, can make to the Father who 'chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless'.<sup>2</sup> With this plea our feeble creaturehood offers its faithful echo to the design which our creator planned from all eternity: 'This is the will of God, your sanctification'.<sup>3</sup>

*Perfection – an embarrassing word*

Because God's plan for holiness in his children encompasses every human life, it would be a pity if the pregnant phrase, 'to strive for perfection', were to be dropped from the christian vocabulary. Unfortunately, the rip-tide of some contemporary thought would tear this word out of the living tradition of the Church, submerging it under waves of talk about the sacredness of the secular, the holiness of being human, and the spiritual healthiness of compassionate concern for the needs of others. All of these elements are undoubtedly aspects of God's will. But for a christian to be perfect means something much larger, because much more in accord with God's total plan.

It is strange, then, that for one reason or another people have grown wary of speaking about perfection. Preachers often seem afraid to use this word lest their hearers disdain them as men benighted in pre-conciliar darkness. One wonders if this fear of appearing irrelevant prompted the translators of the *New English Bible* to avoid a literal rendering of the greek text of Matthew.<sup>4</sup> Instead of the trenchant original words, 'You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect', the *NEB* prefers the graceful paraphrase, 'There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds'.

Little is gained by this kind of circumlocution. Our present day boasts of its love for scripture and of its desire to make life genuine by shaping it to the revealed word of God. We should be the last ones, therefore, to alter the biblical text which speaks forty-two times of 'perfection' and 'the perfect'. If the New Testament emphasizes repeatedly the christian's need to strive for perfection, we should be the very people to cherish this phrase, to ponder what

<sup>1</sup> Ezek 18, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Eph 1, 4.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thess 4, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 5, 48.

it demands of us personally, and to make it a dominant and meaningful motif of our christian life.

No amount of reading what others have written about scripture can take the place of our own prayerful study of God's word. Like our Lady, each one has to treasure this word and ponder it in his heart,<sup>5</sup> that, like her, he may be blessed for his living faith.<sup>6</sup> It may be of help, however, if we have some guide-lines to direct our meditative study. This is the purpose of the following points: to propose areas of reflection – especially in the pauline writings – for the strengthening of christian response to God's word, that we may be able 'to discern his will, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect'.<sup>7</sup>

### *Looking to the end-time*

All the writers of the New Testament were men who glanced often at the horizon where this life passes into eternity. Fully instructed by faith, they knew that God creates every person for a glorious and endless life with himself in heaven. For them this was the only true north of all human existence; to strive for that goal is the sure guarantee of mature development and constant advance. Unlike many today who fix their attention on the latest findings of sociological research, the authors of the bible refused to shape the future to the measure of man in the present and, instead, sought always to align contemporary life with the luminous and vast perspectives of future fulfilment.

Writing of his own christians, Paul emphasizes those elements in their life which prepare for what is to come: 'You have been set free from sin, you have been made slaves of God, and you get a reward leading to your sanctification and ending in eternal life.'<sup>8</sup> Though we speak most often of what the holy Spirit is doing for christians here and now, Paul prefers to see in the present activity of the Spirit a pledge and foretaste of the glorious risen life which one day will be ours.<sup>9</sup>

With such faith in the forward thrust of human life, he could not imagine a christian as merely walking a tread-mill. That anyone should be ready to settle for a destiny circumscribed by the confining limits of time was unthinkable to him. His very emphasis on concern for others and on charity to those in need draws its strength from his faith-conviction that all men must advance towards that final

<sup>5</sup> Cf Lk 2, 19. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Lk 1, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 12, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Rom 6, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Eph 1, 14; Rom 8, 11; 1 Cor 6, 14. 19.

salvation which spells God's consummate glory and man's total beatitude. Seen through Paul's eyes, 'the whole created universe is groaning in all its parts as if in the pangs of childbirth . . . while we wait for God to make us his sons and set our whole body free'.<sup>10</sup>

His one concern, therefore, from his first epistle to the very end of his documentary, was that the christians whom he loved should 'live lives worthy of the God who calls us into his kingdom and glory'.<sup>11</sup> Every encouragement he gave to strengthen his converts in holiness was intended to make sure that they would be worthy to face the just judgment of God: 'May he make your hearts firm, so that you may stand before our God and Father holy and faultless when our Lord Jesus comes with all those who are his own'.<sup>12</sup>

With this vision of what human life means, it came naturally to Paul to employ the greek vocabulary of 'perfection' as one of his preferred expressions for what a christian should be. In secular greek literature, the word 'perfect' (*teleios*) signifies full growth and mature development. In itself, therefore, this word aptly describes the spiritual adulthood and emotional maturity which characterizes everyone who takes his christian vocation seriously. But the early christians whom Paul follows found this word especially suitable for an additional reason. Because *teleios* derives from the greek word for 'end' (*telos*), it helped to stress that a christian is spiritually mature ('perfect' – *teleios*) only when he is ready to face that judgment of God which will usher in the end-time (*telos*). This special coloration is present in all the cognate forms with which the New Testament speaks of christian 'perfecting' (*teleioun, teleiosis, teleiotes*).

This part of the pauline vocabulary, therefore, is a compelling reminder of the only teleology of christian life, that dynamic finality which St Augustine, faithful disciple of the apostle, has expressed in memorable words: 'O Lord, thou hast made us for thyself; and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee'.

Some might object that Paul's preoccupation with the imminence of the Parousia, the Day of the Lord when Christ will come to judge the world, was without foundation. The centuries which have passed show that the Church and the world may long enjoy perennial youth. For some, then, the conclusion is obvious: let us be done with thoughts about the end-time, to concentrate on the here-and-now. This proposal of a variant form of marxist philosophy misses the whole meaning of Paul's doctrine. For him, eternity

<sup>10</sup> Rom 8, 22–23.

<sup>11</sup> I Thess 2, 12.

<sup>12</sup> I Thess 3, 13.

impinges on every day of this world's life, not because, quantitatively, there are only a few more days for the world to endure, but because, qualitatively, life with God is the only reason for man's present existence. We were made to live each day a life which God, the searcher of hearts, would find holy and blameless before the tribunal of his final judgment. Because St Aloysius understood this clearly, he often subjected his action to the searing question, 'What does this mean for eternity?'

But there is yet another answer to those who would make light of Paul's preoccupation with the end-time: God's act of definitive judgment upon each of us is much nearer than we think. No matter how long delayed may be the end of this world, each man personally enters upon the *telos* at death. Wishful thinking would like to postpone that day. But all of scripture and tradition (and the obituary notices in the daily newspaper!) bear clamorous reminders that death is near at hand for all of us. To live now as we want to be at that hour means that the thought of our end (*telos*) is helping to make us perfect (*teleios*).

### *Perfection and faith*

The day of judgment will bring full illumination: 'My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me'.<sup>13</sup> In God's light we shall see and judge all things just as he sees and judges them. The daring new opinions we boasted of, the pet-ideas we nursed, all the 'way out' views we loved to quote from pundits with fertile imaginations: these human thoughts, if they are not authentically God's thoughts, will be seen as shifting sand on which no house of God could be built. The only christian who will be approved by God in judgment is the person who, like Paul, has 'kept the faith',<sup>14</sup> and has built the house of his life on the solid rock of that word which Christ always teaches through his Church.<sup>15</sup> The truths of faith may be as dim as a reflection in the imperfect mirrors of Paul's day,<sup>16</sup> but they authentically present the full substance of what we shall know clearly at the end-time, and they 'make us certain of the realities that at present remain unseen'.<sup>17</sup>

To live by faith, therefore, is a dominant characteristic of the christian who is striving to be perfect, well-prepared for the end-time. On several occasions Paul explicitly affirms the bond between

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor 13, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Cf 1 Cor 13, 12.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Tim 4, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Heb 11, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf Mt 7, 24-27.

faith and perfection.<sup>18</sup> But more important than these statements is the whole burden of his apostolate. His constant concern was to fill men's minds with the thoughts of God through faith, that they might become full-grown christians, mature with the very spirit of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

Faith is bound to have this effect, for it vitalizes one's whole person with the intimate awareness and loving commitment which the biblical phrase, 'to know God', always implies.<sup>20</sup> Hence, faith involves both intellectual certainty of the truths which God teaches and wholehearted fidelity in living them. This appears clearly in the passage which Paul wrote to the corinthians about the eucharist.<sup>21</sup> He not only expected his converts to understand what the eucharist means,<sup>22</sup> but he also urged them to pattern their conduct on the exigencies of this knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

At times he had to deal with christians who had a penchant for tailoring the truths of faith to their own comfort and caprice, and who loved to indulge their flair for flashing about novel ideas which distorted the clear directives of God's word. This was the type of christian with whom he had to deal at Corinth, spiritual parvenus who strutted about like peacocks in their man-made finery. For Paul, people like this were not living by faith and, therefore, they did not think the thoughts which God would expect to find in them when the end-time came. Hence, the apostle told them in no uncertain terms that, though mature in physical age, they were mere babies in the spiritual life.<sup>24</sup> Not to grow through faith in the knowledge which some day should become vision is to remain a spiritual dwarf, stunted in development because not nourished with the bread of God's word which alone brings true christian maturity.

People who prefer the thoughts of men to the thoughts of God would do well to read the writings of St Catherine of Siena. Living in a day when doctrine was impugned and when even important churchmen gave little example of living by faith, Catherine constantly nourished her own spirit with the word of God and faithfully fulfilled that word, no matter what she saw or heard. Whenever she wrote of the supreme pontiff (Pope Urban was hardly a courageous christian), she was impelled by her faith to speak of him with love and esteem as *il dolce Cristo in terra*. At times she had to

<sup>18</sup> Eph 4, 13-15; Phil 3, 10-20; Col 1, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Cf Jer 31, 31-34; Jn 10, 14-15; Phil 3, 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Cor 11, 23-26.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor 3, 1-4; Cf Heb 5, 11-14.

<sup>19</sup> Cf 1 Cor 2, 6-16.

<sup>21</sup> Cf 1 Cor 11, 17-34.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Cor 11, 17-22, 27-34.

receive the sacraments from unworthy priests; but faith carried her through these distressing experiences. No matter who was the minister, she saw in every sacrament only the life, strength and pardon which came to her directly from Christ himself. Just as Catherine cherished the letters of St Paul, whom she lovingly called her 'Paoluccio', so too the apostle must have been very proud of his 'perfect' daughter, whose faith was an anticipation of the vision which comes at the end-time and whose whole personality was rich with the maturity of Christ.

*Living the truth in love*<sup>25</sup>

The fact that the mature christian, Paul's 'perfect' man, clings to God with the unfailing tenacity of faith involves the inseparable corollary of an abundant charity in his heart. The more carefully one studies what Paul has written of faith, hope and charity, the more convinced one becomes that Paul saw these three virtues not as distinct and separable but as conjoined vital attitudes of every person whose life is centred in God. For this reason there is a remarkable fluidity in his treatment of these facets of the christian character; what he says of one he says equally of the others. Because each aspect is an essential feature of our orientation to God, each one necessarily contains the Godward thrust of the other two.

Yet among these three there is a precise relationship. If through faith we think rightly about the things of God and fulfil carefully all that he wills, it is hope of attaining to him and abiding trust in his help which makes this faith-commitment strong and constant. At the same time, this orientation of life to God, if it is to be real, involves an all-inclusive exercise of charity, modelled on the tender, compassionate, saving love which God has for all his children. For if we cling to God by faith, and sincerely hope to spend eternity with him, then we must become like him in the love which he shows to every creature. This love of his 'is poured forth into our hearts by the holy Spirit'<sup>26</sup> at the very moment when the same Spirit gives us light and strength to believe and hope. This charity must be ever operative if, at the end-time, God is to find us men and women 'made to his image and likeness',<sup>27</sup> and 'conformed to the image of his son'.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note that our Lord's own description of the

<sup>25</sup> Eph 4, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Rom 8, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Rom 5, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Gen 1, 26.

final judgment centres entirely on the active exercise of charity.<sup>29</sup> Meditating on this dramatic scene which ushers in the end-time, St John of the Cross uttered a sentence which sums up everything: 'In the evening of life they will examine you on love'. The time will come when, in heaven, man will cling to God with the eminent fidelity of a faith which no longer gropes in obscurity, but holds fast in the light of vision. The hope which achieved salvation will now rest peacefully in the very possession of the God for whom we hoped. In that end-time, the most distinctive characteristic of our total orientation to the One whom we shall see face to face will be our abiding love for him and for the children whom he cherishes, our brothers and sisters in Christ. As St Paul expresses it, 'There are three things that last: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love'.<sup>30</sup>

This abundance of charity in the life of the end-time (*telos*) must mark the life of everyone who, while on earth, is constantly moving towards eternity. Active charity, like faith, is a dominant characteristic of one who is perfect (*teleios*), ready and prepared for God's judgment. The gospel of Matthew makes this crystal clear, where the evangelist quotes the words of Jesus on the need to love all men even as God loves them.<sup>31</sup> There are to be no limits to this love. Whether people are friendly or hostile, whether they repay or disdain our charity, we must continue to put love where there is no love, so that, eventually, we may fill them with love. Only in this way do we effectively imitate God, who 'causes his sun to rise on bad men as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest men alike'.<sup>32</sup> It is significant that Matthew concludes these words with a logion of Jesus, which emphasizes that the mature christian must show forth the love which he shall see in God at the end-time: 'You must be perfect (*teleios*) as your heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*)'.<sup>33</sup>

Paul, therefore, does not hesitate to call charity 'the bond of perfection'.<sup>34</sup> Unfailing love for others makes real and holds intact the orientation to God which lies at the heart of all faith and hope. Just to read Paul's description of what charity demands is to glimpse the perfect character of a mature christian who looks always to God with faith and yearns for him with enduring hope.

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take

<sup>29</sup> Cf Mt 25, 31-46.

<sup>32</sup> Mt 5, 45.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor 13, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Mt 5, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Mt 5, 43-47.

<sup>34</sup> Col 3, 14.



offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other men's sins, but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.<sup>35</sup>

Charity like this is the only real proof that a man truly loves God whom in the present he does not see.<sup>36</sup> If, then, we are to stand before God's judgment as perfect men, there is much here for self-examination. How easy it is to pick and choose those to whom we will show love. Often enough we pity people who suffer from racial discrimination and harsh exploitation, yet at the same time we may be condemnatory of those who happen to be white or rich. It comes easy to express sympathy for the silent laity and bedevilled clergy; but we may bridle against speaking a kind word for a beleaguered pope and harassed bishops who are striving daily to be true pastors of the flock committed to them. We may be prepared to support every liberal cause, while we feel only contempt for those whom we have tagged 'conservatives'. Or – the other way around – we may count every reactionary stance as the work of God to safeguard the faith, while we judge contemporary adaptations as the work of the devil. Obviously, there is little striving for perfection (*teleiotes*) when our selective charity is so unlike the universal love of the God whom we shall meet in the end-time (*telos*).

The *Dialogues* of St Catherine of Siena present a pertinent lesson which this perfect woman learned from the eternal Father and put into practice with a fidelity which brought her to full spiritual adulthood. After explaining how all christian virtue in this world finds its only concrete expression in our contacts with human situations and human persons, the eternal Father concludes with a pointed reminder of the need for charity. 'Daughter Catherine', he said, 'I have put you into the midst of your brethren that you may do for them what you cannot do for me, that is, love them with the unmerited graciousness with which I have loved you. And whatever you do for them I shall count as done for myself'.

In this lesson one hears an echo of the words which the divine judge will utter to those whom he accepts as his own: 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me'.<sup>37</sup> If one is to be judged by God as a mature christian at the end-time (*telos*), the evidence of charity which God will look for must even now make the christian a perfect man (*teleios*).

<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor 13, 4-7.

<sup>36</sup> Cf 1 Jn 4, 20-21.

<sup>37</sup> Mt 25, 40.

*The perfecting of Jesus*

In three separate places, the New Testament emphasizes the close bond between christian perfection and the following of Jesus. When the rich young man asked him how he could attain eternal life, the Master replied by saying that he could secure the necessary spiritual maturity by spending himself in charity and by faithfully following the Son of God: 'If you wish to be perfect (*teleios*), go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, . . . and come, follow me'.<sup>38</sup> In a second logion Jesus translated this invitation into an imperative rule for all christian discipleship. Fortunately, his word is reported in different ways in the two texts where it occurs, so that the complementary sentences give us his full thought. Matthew emphasizes that faithful discipleship requires christians to endure what Christ endured: 'The pupil should be content to share his teacher's lot, the servant his master's'.<sup>39</sup> Luke, on the other hand, stresses the rich reward which comes to the perfect disciple of Christ: 'A pupil is not superior to his teacher; but everyone, when his training is complete, will reach his teacher's level'.<sup>40</sup>

St Paul lived these words to the hilt. He offers, therefore, a third text in which christian perfection and the following of Christ are inseparably connected. In an intimate and touching personal confession, he declares that the sole preoccupation of his life is 'to know Christ, to experience the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death, if only I may arrive at the resurrection from the dead'.<sup>41</sup> For him this intimate union with Christ spells the perfection for which he is always striving.<sup>42</sup> Because, however, such union with Christ will come to him only when he experiences in himself Christ's death and resurrection, Paul presses on to that moment, with constant concern to share more and more of the spirit with which Jesus died for us and returned with love to the bosom of his Father. Moreover, Paul recognizes no other possible mentality for true christians who, living with faith in the God of the end-time (*telos*), are even now perfect (*teleioi*), alive with the mature spirit of those whom the Father will find in Christ Jesus at the hour of judgment.<sup>43</sup>

In this autobiographical piece, Paul unfolds what it really means for the disciple to follow his master.<sup>44</sup> The union with Christ which brings perfection is to be found in sharing the mystery of his death

<sup>38</sup> Mt 19, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Phil 3, 10ff.

<sup>44</sup> Cf Mt 10, 25; Lk 6, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Mt 10, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Phil 3, 12ff.

<sup>40</sup> Lk 6, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Phil 3, 14-15.

and resurrection. More than this Paul does not say. He leaves unexplained the bond between our being perfected through following Christ and our being perfected through living faith and fervent charity.

The luminous Epistle to the Hebrews, written by an author who shared Paul's insights, is the document which fully explains the bond. Because this letter was written to those who had grown weary in spiritual striving, the author emphasizes truths which writers before him never had occasion to unfold. Jesus is truly our blood-brother,<sup>45</sup> a man like ourselves in weakness and temptation,<sup>46</sup> who had to be 'perfected' by the experiences of human life in order that he might become our faithful and compassionate high priest.<sup>47</sup>

In all these experiences, the commitment of his human will to God's will never swerved from what the Father wanted, even when the divine will thwarted the legitimate desires of his human nature. His complete trust in God never faltered, even when he felt the full burden of his weakness and the overwhelming pressure of events which challenged this trust. His love for his brothers, whom he saw as men and women created by his Father's love, always held fast in devotedness even when these brothers rejected him and filled his heart with disappointment and suffering. Because his life was totally centred in his Father, he was ever free of sin and of every taint of moral weakness. He had no need, therefore, of that progressive moral perfecting which is an essential element in our advance to God.<sup>48</sup>

If, then, the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the 'perfecting' of Jesus,<sup>49</sup> the author has in mind the progressive extension of the Lord's devoted fidelity into every area of human experience. Our brother had to pass through all the successive experiences of our poor life – all its joys, all its weaknesses, frustrations and sufferings – in order that every facet of his sinless existence could come alive with his vibrant cry of complete commitment, 'Yes, Father!' This kind of 'perfecting' went on until the symphony of his life, pulsing with the motif of his love for the Father, reached its ultimate crescendo in the word he spoke from the cross, 'The end has come!' (*tetelestai*).<sup>50</sup>

This whole process of his 'being perfected' is summed up in the words of scripture itself: 'Son though he was, he learned obedience

<sup>45</sup> Heb 2, 11–14.

<sup>47</sup> Heb 2, 10. 17–18; 4, 14–16.

<sup>49</sup> Heb 2, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Heb 2, 17–18; 4, 15; 5, 7–8.

<sup>48</sup> Cf Heb 4, 15.

<sup>50</sup> Jn 19, 30.

in the school of experience'.<sup>51</sup> This 'perfecting' was so pleasing to the Father that he raised his 'perfected' Son from the dead to receive him lovingly, in the wholeness of his human nature, into the *telos* of eternal glory.

But even this picture of Jesus as the model of our being perfected is not the most precious part of the epistle. In speaking of God 'perfecting' his Son, the author knows that he is using a verb (*teleioun*) which the greek Pentateuch employs for translating the phrase used in the hebrew text to describe the consecration of levitical priests: (*mille' yadim*), 'to fill the hands'.<sup>52</sup> By using the verb *teleioun*, therefore, the inspired writer affirms that the 'perfecting' of Jesus has made him our priest to fill us with the strength of his own unfailing commitment to God. With good reason this epistle names him 'the perfecter of our faith', to whom we must look with unfaltering trust.<sup>53</sup>

During his life upon earth, this brother of ours was weak like us; now in heaven, he who is our priest is powerful with all the gifts of the Spirit to save us. In him we find everything we need for our own perfecting – example, comfort, strength.

Ours is not a high priest unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who, because of his likeness to us, has been tested every way, only without sin. Let us therefore boldly approach the throne of our gracious Lord, where we may receive mercy and in his grace find timely help.<sup>54</sup>

There is yet something more. Through baptism we have begun to share in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. He has woven into the fibre of our being the priestly consecration of his own 'perfecting': 'With Christ I have been nailed to the cross: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me'.<sup>55</sup> It is God's will that every day of our earthly stay should deepen in us greater likeness to him – through the fidelity of faith, the aliveness of hope, and the activity of a charity which is 'all things to all men to gain all for Christ'.<sup>56</sup>

Though this perfecting belongs intimately to ourselves, it means also a rich participation in the efficacy of Christ's priesthood. No christian is an isolated island. The very share which we have in the death and resurrection of Jesus fills our lives with his power to

<sup>51</sup> Heb 5, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Cf Exod 28, 41; 29, 1; Lev 8, 22–33; Num 3, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Heb 12, 2–3.

<sup>54</sup> Heb 4, 15–16.

<sup>55</sup> Gal 2, 20.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Cor 9, 22.

save others. Whether we think of it or not, our every effort to strive for perfection makes the priestly prayer of Jesus a reality in our life: 'For their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth'.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Jn 17-19.

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