HEROIC VIRTUE: THE SPLENDOUR OF HOLINESS

THE PHRASE 'heroic virtue' appears to have made its entry into theological language through the Englishman Robert Grossteste, who became bishop of Lincoln in 1235 and witnessed the signing of the Magna Charta. He used the phrase *virtus heroica* in his latin translation of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. It was adopted by Albert the Great, St Thomas and the other scholastics. But its main importance is the prominence it acquired in ascetical and mystical theology, in particular with regard to Causes of Beatification and Canonization. It became a key-phrase in the treatise of Prosper Lambertini, mentioned above.

Christian heroism is, of course, manifest in a special manner in martyrdom, 'love's sweetest mark', 'which makes the disciple like his Master who freely welcomed death for the world's salvation, and is conformed to him by the shedding of his blood' (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). Heroicity of virtue describes the attitudes and dispositions of the Christian who is fired by a love so intense and profound as to bring him to the threshold of the charity of martyrdom. The doctrine of the heroicity of christian virtue has its rightful place in the theology of holiness and particularly of charity. Each and every human person is called, in Christ, to the life of the closest possible union with the most Holy Trinity and hence to share in the divine Life and Love. Even though this union can come to its fulness only when this present life reaches its completion, it is a reality in the here and now, since every man by his baptism is grafted into Christ and has thus already begun to live this unitive life through the working of the Holy Spirit. The process of radical transformation is already begun in baptism, and through the power of divine love is designed to bring a person to an ever closer intimacy and more perfect identification with the person of his Redeemer, the Incarnate Word.

Such a transformation is radically and essentially the work of God's own love; it is not, nor could it ever be, the result of the human will. At the same time, since it is a matter of a real relationship on a personal level, it is equally impossible for the human person to be purely passive. Clearly he must respond to the

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loving invitation of God — who indeed provides him with the wherewithal — with a reciprocally unconditional love, itself active and creative.

When we look at the actual conditions in which the average human person lives, it is obvious that this transforming process is the reverse of the quick and the facile. The way to it is strewn with obstacles of varying gravity and difficulty: not least among which is the fact that man is a sinner. He is affected in the very roots of his being by egotistical tendencies; instinctively he tends to see and judge everything from the vantage point of the self. Automatically the 'I' is the centre of his world and of all his conscious and unconscious activity. Such instinctive attitudes are, of course, diametrically opposed to the invitation to open the depths of his thought and feelings to God, his partner; to transcend the bounds of his own nothingness and to hand himself over to the God whose one desire is to turn him round, so that he can see all things as God sees them, and love them as he loves them. Thus we are presented with the demands of the divine love, whose purpose is to bring a man to surrender the whole of himself, holding nothing back; so that he no longer clings to this complexity of selfish human tendencies which expose him continually to what Scripture calls the sin of the world (Jn 1, 29), and to the insidious influences of the prince of darkness. It follows, then, that those who wish to live a life worthy of the name of Christian, find themselves embroiled in a bitter and constant struggle which itself asks for an effort of heroic proportions (Eph 6, 11ff; 1 Pet 5, 8ff, etc).

This heroism must find its primary source in the theological virtues — faith, hope and charity. To engage in the human struggle against personal selfishness, the sinful world and the powers of darkness, is possible only for those whose faith in the existence of a personal God remains firm and unshaken. It demands a calm acceptance of his ways, and a wholehearted conviction that he is infinitely wise and good. Such faith and trust is single-minded; it endures through all the ups and downs of human existence, and is content to leave all things in his merciful hands. People of this calibre know that they are embraced by a love that is stronger than death; and their one desire, their heartfelt longing, is to love God and all that is his with the same fervour and generosity.

The radical transformation of the sinner into the man of God begins and is completed in this same environment of faith, hope and love, in which the personal contact, though it asks for such heroic response, enables him to live the relationship at a progressively

deeper level. He must, of course avail himself of all the means which are designed to build up the relationship: the frequent meetings in personal and liturgical prayer, the sacramental encounters in which God communicates his life-giving Spirit.

Though faith, hope and charity provide the inspiration, the fulcrum as it were of all christian activity, human life cannot consist simply in formal acts of the theological virtues. We must bear in mind that though he is possessed of a fundamental spiritual unity, the human person is bound by earthly and material conditions of space and time. Relationships with the rest of humankind are essential to him; nor can he dispense with the material world into which he is organically integrated. The divine invitation and his response to it, far from stripping him of these complexities of human existence, takes full account of every aspect of his human nature, which is also Christ's. It is because of this that the transformation from sinner to saint has been called becoming an *alter Christus,* another Christ; for man's goal is to reach the same perfect unity and total harmony under the impulse of the Holy Spirit of Christ, endowed with the same qualities, progressively exercised with the same intensity of 'the three things that last for ever: faith, hope and love' (1 Cor 13, 13). If he is to achieve this goal in the course of his pilgrimage, he must 'excel himself' in every department of his human activity. This is why the christian ideal demands the heroic exercise of all his authentically human powers — or 'virtues' as they are traditionally called.

First, then, if the Christian is truly living in the context of his calling, consistently open to the transforming union, so that it is no longer the 'old Adam' that is living and acting, but the Spirit of the living Christ operating in him, then his relationship with his neighbour will faithfully reflect the attitudes and dispositions of the Lord himself. His entire behaviour will be marked by Jesus's own love; it will radiate the splendour of his goodness. This is why 'heroicity of virtue' may properly be described as 'the splendour of holiness'. It is not for nothing that the Council declares:

> In the lives of those who, whilst sharing fully our human nature, are nevertheless more perfectly transformed into Christ's likeness, God reveals his presence, his own countenance, in a remarkably vivid manner (*Lumen Gentium*, 50).

The above considerations can perhaps help us to bring into proper perspective what is meant by heroicity of virtue, so often wrongly

conceived in the popular imagination. First of all, christian heroism tends to be identified exclusively with human feats of exceptional difficulty, which also smack of the spectacular and sensational. It is true that in every Christian's life it does happen that he or she may be faced with fundamental choices, which clearly involve the great commandment of wholehearted love of God and neighbour to the point of an heroic personal sacrifice. Yet such 'privileged choices' are not only very rare, but they normally occur in the midst of everyday life; and it is in the daily round, the grinding monotony which is the staple of ordinary human existence, that true heroism will be found. Here are the real opportunities for that constancy and honesty in welcoming God's will which is another thing altogether from the occasional 'heroic' gesture. To live like Christ in the ordinary human circumstances of every day: this is what is meant by heroicity of virtue.

It is obvious, then, that such heroism is the result of a gradual progress to spiritual maturity, whose measure is the ordinary human life-span. No one is born a perfect Christian; a person becomes so through a life of long 'laborious days', whose term is the final entry into Christ's glory. As long as he is a pilgrim, so long is the Christian subject to human error and human weakness. Heroism in this context — no matter how negative it may sound — consists in taking deliberate precautions against the mindlessness which leads to mistakes and the self-indulgence which occasions the semi-deliberate imperfections, and all the while knowing that one is only half succeeding. In fact, one of the really mature and essential manifestations of this heroism is being able to accept the current situation with that healthy realism which does not give in to despondency, pessimism and other forms of self-pity, concentrating one's determination on recovering quickly and keeping moving along the Lord's road with fortitude, humility and serenity (and with a sense of humour!).

Such growth in virtue follows the general law of life according to the disposition of God's loving providence. It does not happen by leaps and bounds; rather it develops under an harmonious and organic dynamism of the spirit. Each step along the way is both an invitation to go further as well as a response to the previous movement. This means that heroicity of virtue (or of human behaviour) is not measured according to some abstract ideal, but is in line with the actual conditions of the person's development. Any assessment, then, of this gradual growth towards holiness must necessarily take into account the specific environment of the individual as well as

each stage of his human development. Of especial importance are the elements which differentiate one individual from another. Every one of us possesses characteristics which mark us out from the rest of humankind, qualities which go to make each one unique; for no one has a 'double' in any real sense of the word. This diversity finds its origin in the irreducible neucleus of each one's spiritual being, which affects the capacity to love and to be loved, to allow the self to be transformed by the divine charity, to live a christian life to the extent to which we have been trying to describe.

One of the most marked constitutional differences is that of sex. It is a truism to say that men and women act and react differently in every serious human situation. They will thus have a different viewpoint about the same fundamental human values and therefore about the love of God and neighbour — the spiritual atmosphere in which a person is led to a life of christian heroism. Another important factor which modern psychology has investigated to our advantage is the extent to which human behaviour is affected by the environment, personal and otherwise, into which a man is born and lives his first years. This is particularly true in terms of the circumstances, favourable or unfavourable, which surround the infant's innate tendencies to love. The early family background, the influences to which he is subjected in his first contacts with the outside world; the context of his early education; the compensations and frustrations in adolescence; the possibilities for making his first choices with regard to his future; and, in the case of marriage, the effect husband or wife has on the whole tenor of the other's life; the presence or absence of a real friend (Sir 6, 14-17); the success or otherwise of finding suitable spiritual direction. These and a host of other factors have a profound impact on every human life and the concrete possibilities of being able to live it on the level of heroism.

In making these observations we have no intention of drawing any sort of parallel between favourable human circumstances and the achievement of a Christ-like existence; we are simply pointing up the enormous variety of individual human personalities and some of the elements which emphasize this diversity. In fact, it is oftener than not the case that where the circumstances are right the grace of God fails to make its mark because of human indolence, of the tendency to be content with a measure of material comfort or to put God's gifts to selfish uses. Equally adverse influences and circumstances can provide both the occasion and the very stimulus required to enter into the hidden splendours of holiness. 'God never denies his grace to the one who does all that lies in his own power' (*facienti*

quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam), said Augustine in one of his many reflections on the mystery of grace and free-will. No one of us is predetermined to a specific reaction; and our own goodwill, which is our inalienable share in the goodly will of God, is never overlaid; it is always enough and more than enough for him to work with.

In fact, here we touch on the most crucial element of all in our assessment of the complexity of christian heroism: the very diversity of the supernatural endowments which the Holy Spirit apportions to each one as he so desires (1 Cor 12, 11), and which each one receives according to the measure of faith which God has granted him (Rom 12, 3). Over and above the essential and temperamental differences of each individual, and the complexities that go to make up the environment in which he must live, work and develop, we must take into account the varieties inherent in the Divine call, each of which is personal in the fullest possible sense. It cannot be stressed too much that the vocation of each and every human being is unique and inimitable. The point at issue is God's invitation of love to each person as he or she is; and it demands the quality of response described as loving with all one's heart and soul and mind (Mt 22, 37). This loving invitation is an inner movement by which the Lord is at work fashioning the heart, as the potter works the clay between his hands (Jer 18, 1-6).

Clearly, these various kinds of divine call and of the graces which accompany them are closely bound up with the personal and environmental differences which typify and individualize human existence, without, however, conditioning these latter. The identification of the order of nature with that of grace is a theological error which makes nonsense of any true understanding of christian heroism and its attainment. It must be emphatically stated that neither psychology, sociology nor any purely human science, no matter how necessary or useful in assessing human behaviour, can ever succeed in bringing into adequate relief the mystery of a human being and human life; nor, indeed, of presenting us with efficacious means of living it to the fulness it demands. The behavioural sciences are totally incapable of identifying or of measuring its supernatural dimensions. They can have nothing to offer on the level of grace; and it is grace which constantly urges on the person towards an ideal which is out of reach of his natural possibilities, and lifts him up to achieve it.

When we come to speak of the very delicate subject of growth in christian virtue, which depends on the mutual exchange of love between God and the person who is responsive to his prompting, no

less important than those discussed above is the use a person makes of his gift of freedom. Here above all it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the person who freely responds with courage and constancy to the dictates of God's love can be led by him to a completion which transcends all natural and purely human understanding.

At the same time we must notice that the hardened sinner, or one long accustomed to a life of drifting and of mediocrity, can confound every possible human calculation and be converted under the impulse of divine grace, so that he begins to live a zealous christian life. These very special graces, which demonstrate God's sovereign liberty in his dealings with humanity, will always be the exception: it would be presumptuous to reckon otherwise. In the normal course of events, the concrete possibilities of achieving the ideal of christian heroism and the various ways in which this might happen depend on the use man has made of his freedom in all the circumstances surrounding his life: whether and precisely how he has been open or closed to the grace-filled opportunities with which God has presented him. Hence it is not simply a matter of a person's having done all in his power to observe God's commandments and to avoid sin. Christian heroism asks whether one has contented oneself with the indispensable minimum, or whether one has remained open to the ever-increasing demands of the divine love.

In fact, even though the faithful observance of the commandments and the decisive will not to commit sin presuppose a wholehearted love of God, the internal dynamic of that love can never stop there. This is why God is always asking from the one who has a real desire to belong to him for further loving manifestations which do not concern any divine precept and do not bind under sin. This interior law of love discloses the very essence of christianity and hence of the heroism which owes its name to Christ himself. It was he who, moved by the Spirit, poured himself out for our salvation with a love that knew no bounds. It is now his desire to continue to live such love in all Christians, transforming their hearts and feelings and urging them on to a gift of self which is endless. The Christian who has no comprehension of this truth, closing himself off from the inexorable demands of a love which never cries 'Enough!' but is ever anxious to move forward, in spite of never sinning seriously and of performing the occasional heroic action, condemns himself in the last analysis to a life of mediocrity: one which seen in its entirety is far from heroic.

When one assesses at its true value the pre-eminent role freedom

has to play in a human life, and also makes full allowance for the fact that God in his infinite goodness offers to each not simply sufficient help but a superabundance of grace, the conclusion is inevitable. The most important factor affecting heroicity of christian virtue is man's use of his freedom, in virtue of which he is capable of responding to God with a loving spontaneity and of loving to the very end, or of refusing such love.

This question of freedom brings into focus a final consideration. Man is capable not only of choosing to respond to the divine call or of remaining deaf to it. He is also capable of sinning. We must ask then whether the sin a person commits, or, to push the matter further, habitual sin, excludes the possibility of achieving heroicity of christian virtue; and if not, what effects does sin have in the pursuit of the ideal.

Without wishing to play down the effects of venial sin, particularly of the habitual kind, we are restricting our consideration to mortal sin: that is, an act by which a person, with full knowledge of what he is doing and acting under no constraint, goes against God's manifest will in a serious matter, and thus betrays and destroys the relationship of love which exists between himself and his Lord. If we are to judge the consequences of such an action in terms of the future capabilities of the sinner with regard to christian heroism, there are two extreme and diametrically opposite stances to be avoided.

First, it is clear that it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the effects of a single mortal sin, in so far as this deals a massive blow at the psychic and moral equilibrium of the sinner, and thereby creates a disposition towards committing other sins, and not only of the same kind. Nor can these consequences be overcome simply by an act of contrition or by the forgiveness divinely granted in sacramental absolution. The point must be made, if only because there is a current tendency to soften it down or gloss it over in the name of a so-called theology of love, the outcome of erroneous psychological assertions, or, and perhaps worse, of vague theological ideas of God and man, of the nature of their reciprocal love, and of the conclusions deriving from it. (In this context one might elaborate on the true meaning of penance according to which the reconciled penitent seeks to travel along a road in the opposite direction to the one which led him into sin.)

At the same time, it is equally erroneous to conclude that, at least in practice, the effects of a single mortal sin are such as to prevent the person from attaining any outstandingly virtuous behaviour,

much less of living a life wholly inspired by heroism. Though such an opinion is not held, as far as we know, by any modern theologian, we meet with it, in practice, in attitudes which imply that a real reform is not possible: that a person cannot overcome the harmful effects of his sinful past on the whole of his personality.

It belongs to the mercy of God that he should wish for all his children the same intimate relationship of love to exist between himself and each one of them. Thus he offers to the sinner as well (we leave aside the question of the 'sin against the Holy Spirit') his invitation of love and the graces which enable us to respond to it. This invitation, as has been repeated, is of its very nature a proffer to a wholehearted loving, and hence to a life of heroism. It follows then that the sinner is always capable under grace of reaching the ideal of christian heroism; even though the road to it will be more difficult in proportion to the gravity of his sins and their frequency. It is not for us in so short a space to penetrate more deeply into this extremely delicate matter. We would, however, insist that we should all of us, theologians included, strive for a humble and reverent disposition when confronted with the mystery of grace and of God's free initiative. It is he alone who can read with accuracy the hearts of his creatures. Nor can any of us take it upon ourselves to hold as impossible what is not so, as far as God is concerned (Lk 1, 37; Mt 19, 26). Nothing could be of greater consequence pastorally than this message, full of encouragement and consolation to us sinners: that for the one who wishes to be reconciled with God, the way is open to the fullest possible christian life. It is true that the going will be difficult at first; but one will be sustained by the truth that God has forgiven because he loves. The history of christian holiness shows that the sincere conversion of many who have lived as strangers to God is often the foundation for a life of exceptional heroism.

As a confirmation and clarification of what we have tried to say here, we need only refer to the chapter V of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which is entitled, 'The universal vocation to holiness in the Church'.

Each one in his or her own way is called to this heroism and has the capacity to live it. Children who have reached the age of discretion become gradually more able to build their lives on the love poured out in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. Young people, as their awareness grows, discover the beauties of life in the Spirit, as well as its difficulties. Men and women who experience the heat and the burden of the day, can experience also the call to live it through with

serenity and a real sense of responsibility. Old people, to whom the world has nothing more to offer, have still before them the encounter with the Lord in the moment of death, when each one, with the deep knowledge that they are profitless servants and come with empty hands, can still find union with Christ in that ultimate 'yes' to the Father, as they commend their spirit into his hands.

No doubt this ideal of christian heroism is one of wondrous beauty, but it is also one whose achievement engages all one's energies all the time, activating all the powers of loving a person possesses. Even for those who know well that God never asks the impossible, the demand recurs; for they are precisely the people whose lives are effectively inspired and properly guided by such love. As long as they draw breath they always experience the desire to respond to the invitation.

In looking at the multitudes of those beatified or canonized by the Church across the ages because of this heroism, we find that they come from all walks of life; from an incredible variety of circumstances which runs across the limitless spectrum of human possibilities. Nor indeed has the Church ever pretended that she has been able to bring forward for the edification of the faithful any but a fraction of those who have attained to this heroicity of virtue. For it is not only an ideal, but a reality: an outstanding proof that God continues to live in the midst of his people and to make his presence known, to reveal his countenance in those who have lived, and live now, as untarnished reflections of his wisdom and goodness.

Those who still see humanity through the eyes of faith, whose hearts respond to the things of God, are well aware that there are many in our times as well who live out this heroism in circumstances which have nothing remarkable about them on the outside. They are people who know how to love as Christ has loved; for he is the centre of their lives: he *is* their life. Such a love cannot remain hidden: the sheer goodness, the harmony which he confers on the being and doing of those who love in this way can hardly go unnoticed: 'It is he himself who speaks to us in them, he parades them before us as the sign of his kingdom, and with them as its great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12, 1), and a wondrous testimony to the truth of the gospel, it acts like a powerful magnet on us' (*Lumen Gentium*, 50).

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