

## NOTE

### ST. THOMAS ON PERFECT CONTRITION AND VENIAL SIN

In a Note on "St. Thomas on Perfect Contrition and Venial Sin,"<sup>1</sup> Fr. W. M. Davish, S.J., quotes seven lines of my article on "Perfect Contrition and Perfect Charity," in which he reads the "unusual doctrine" refuted long ago by H. Semple that "unrepented venial sin is an obstacle to perfect contrition."<sup>2</sup> Fr. Davish's surprise at finding this statement in an article whose purpose was "to show how easy perfect contrition is" was perhaps less great than the author's, when he discovered that he was supposedly holding a theory that would defeat this very purpose.

Taken by themselves, outside of their context, the lines quoted by Fr. Davish could yield the meaning he takes from them; this meaning might even be the more obvious one. However, I should like to point out what the lines actually mean, or were intended to mean, in their context. They touch only in passing on a point, quite secondary to the subject of the article, which did not in any way examine the question treated in Fr. Davish's Note.

The context in which the quoted lines occur tends to show that self-interest or self-love is not excluded by or from charity, but rather goes with it, and is in reality included in any act of charity and necessarily connected with the love of benevolence for God. This idea is, I believe, St. Thomas'; it is also held by other great Doctors of the Church. It was stressed and, I hope, proved, in spite of its being contrary to the conception, apparently more common today, that self-interest, even in spiritual matters, is foreign to the act of charity and can, at best, be only an act of the virtue of hope. However, while insisting on this idea, it was evidently imperative to point out that not just any self-interest is included in charity, but only that which is not sinful. And so it was stated that even venially sinful self-interest is incompatible with charity.

What did this mean? What else but that the act of charity cannot absorb or include in itself—cannot even "form" or "command"—anything sinful, even venially sinful, while at the same time it can and does imply a self-interest that is not inordinate. The reason for the exclusion of all venially sinful self-interest from the act of charity is not mysterious. The object of such self-love cannot fall within the formal object of charity, so that in it God cannot be loved above all things for what He is in Himself. The reason is that the object of any sinful, even venially sinful, affection is not loved for God's sake; otherwise, it would no longer be venially sinful. To this, I

<sup>1</sup> THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, VIII (1947), 127-35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

think, all theologians will agree, and see in it no unusual doctrine. In the context, therefore, conscious adherence to a venially sinful object, which was excluded from the act of charity, is to be understood of an actual venially sinful affection, which cannot be subsumed by, or found in, charity; while, at the same time (I repeat), unselfish self-interest is found in charity. Obviously, I admit—who would not?—that habitual venial sin can go together with the habit or act of charity, and that acts of venial sin do not exclude preceding or subsequent acts of charity.

Having made this much clear, I may state my agreement with all that Fr. Davish well says against such an interpretation of St. Thomas as would make him say that attachment to venial sin is incompatible with the act or habit of charity. Let it be said, however, that Fr. Davish's arguments against the lines quoted from my article miss their mark. There is no need here to discuss one or other point of interpretation of St. Thomas' texts on venial sin, which seem less in keeping with his general theology. But I wish to stress my perfect agreement with what Fr. Davish writes: "What we must ask is this: does St. Thomas identify the minimum-degree of charity, which is essential to perfect contrition, with the 'fervor of charity,' which excludes conscious affection for venial sin? And the answer is, he does not."<sup>3</sup> Fr. Davish has corroborated with detailed quotations from St. Thomas several of the points we wished to bring out; for instance, that "there are distinct degrees in the perfection of charity, even on earth";<sup>4</sup> and that "the lowest degree which remains true charity will suffice for justification outside the sacrament."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, his question: "Does [venial] sin constitute a preference for some creature to God, so that He is not loved above all things for His own sake?"<sup>6</sup> is, in the light of what was said above, ambiguous. It evidently does not constitute such a preference for a creature as would make the creature, and not God, the last end. That would be a mortal sin, and would exclude charity, actual and habitual. But it does constitute some sort of preference for a creature over God in the sense that something is chosen, desired, and loved not for God's sake but for its own, so that it cannot be referred to the end of charity. In this love of a creature, therefore, no love of God is to be found. Such an act is venially sinful, and on that account is excluded from charity. In other words, this kind of a preference of a creature to God cannot be included in the act by which God is loved above all things for his own sake.

Let this note end by subscribing unreservedly and gratefully to

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Fr. Davish's final conclusion: "a vindication of the facility of perfect contrition is not stopped short of its logical conclusions by the authority of St. Thomas."<sup>7</sup> The statement could indeed be put more strongly: St. Thomas not only does not oppose but positively favors the facility of perfect contrition. At all events, it happily confirms and complements what our article endeavored to show

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.