

VII Sunday after Pentecost – Good and Bad Fruits

In the name of the Father ...

Today's epistle and gospel both speak of the fruits of our works.

God constituted man to be *a creature of habit*, i.e., to form habits. A habit is a stable and enduring disposition to act in a certain way. Reinforcing and refining the natural dispositions given by the Creator ordering a creature to its proper end or perfection, a habit in accord with nature is a *virtue* which is *that quality of soul which makes a man good and his acts good*.¹ By contrast, a habit contrary to nature, weakening natural dispositions and disposing a man to evil, is a *vice*.

As I spoke of last week, man is ordered to an end, a natural happiness, commensurate with his rational nature, i.e., with unaided reason. That end is to live a life in accord with reason which culminates in the contemplation of the principle of the natural order, God as known through his creation.

And as I also spoke of last week, God in his gratuity has called man to an end utterly surpassing the unaided powers of his rational nature – indeed the unaided powers of any creature actual or conceivable - which end is the face-to-face vision of God no longer hidden behind his creation.

Man's two-fold end – natural and supernatural – means that he also is the subject of two distinct types of virtues, for an instrument – and its acts – must be proportionate to the end to be attained.

Man is first the subject of natural habits which are acquired by repeated acts. If those acts are in conformance with nature - with reason - man grows in natural virtue and becomes more proportioned to attaining his natural end. Conversely, if those acts are contrary to nature, he accumulates vices, vitiating his ability to achieve perfection, happiness.

In addition to facilitating or frustrating attainment of the end, natural habits also prompt a man to act in accord with them, thus reinforcing his habits. Virtues prompt a virtuous man to act so as to progress in virtue: vices prompt man to act so as to compound his problems.

Man may also be the subject of supernatural habits which, exceeding the unaided capabilities of nature, cannot be acquired by any human effort. Rather, God gratuitously infuses them, primarily through the sacraments, proportioning us to attain that supernatural end – the face-to-face vision of God. It is in this context that St Paul exhorts: *Work out your salvation*.

Although the supernatural virtues impart a radical ability, proportioning us to attain the end, they do not impart facility or ease of action. That facility comes principally from natural virtues acquired through repeated acts and which the infused virtues utilize.²

¹ [ST Ia IIae 55, 3, sc](#)

² Aquinas does not appear to treat directly of the relationship between the two types of virtue: this is taken from Fr Reginald

We see the relationship between the two most clearly in the case of the penitent sinner steeped in vice on account of long-standing sinful behavior. If he makes a good confession of his sins and is absolved, the supernatural virtues which he had destroyed by his mortal sin are restored to him. In so far as this penitent is now ordered to God by infused supernatural virtue he is good and proportioned to attaining eternal life. However, he does not thereby attain any facility for placing virtuous acts. Indeed, he remains in the grip of his vices which, although they do not make him evil, nonetheless - according to the pattern of his sinful choices - dispose him to evil, to act in a way contrary to the natural and supernatural orders, thus uprooting those supernatural virtues infused by God. If the life of grace is to be retained in stable fashion, those remaining vicious dispositions must be uprooted, which St Paul describes as putting the old man to death.

We can make two further observations. First, the natural order is inherently open to the supernatural order. That is, although the supernatural order is beyond the natural order, it is not at variance with it but rather presumes it.³ Thus someone who acts contrary to the natural order necessarily acts contrary to the supernatural order. One cannot be at variance (in any grave way) with the natural order and hope to attain heaven.

Second, these two orders - participated in by virtue - are described by law. That is, the moral law puts into words what it is to be virtuous, to be properly disposed to the end - happiness. Our Lord teaches: *If you would enter into life, keep the commandments ... you shall not kill, you shalt not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness,*⁴ commandments which articulate the Natural Law and – being negative – articulate the minimum standard, binding always and everywhere on everyone without exception.⁵ Thus, noting that the sixth commandment does not admit of light matter, one cannot be at variance with it and claim to be well ordered with regard to the supernatural order, i.e., to be in a state of grace.⁶

Garrigou-Lagrange.

³ The supernatural order presumes the natural order, elevating it but not destroying it, ordering it to something beyond itself: grace builds on nature. The *supernatural inclination* to the face-to-face vision of God (afforded by grace) perfects the (elicited) *desire* of the rational creature to know the first cause in its essence, a *desire* which goes beyond its *natural inclination* to know the first cause through its effects, i.e., creation.

⁴ [Mt 19:17-18](#)

⁵ [ST Ia IIae 100, 1, c](#) & [3, c](#); Note that adultery (6th Commandment) is enumerated between killing the innocent (5th Commandment) and stealing (7th Commandment). As part of the Natural Law, these are things which a rational creature cannot not know to be prohibited. This is even truer for those who were raised within the bosom of the Church.

⁶ To be properly ordered to the supernatural law (be in a state of grace), one must be properly ordered to (not contravening in any grave way) the Natural Law which the supernatural law presumes. The Decalogue articulates the Natural Law, so that someone who is living in an adulterous union is in grave violation of the Natural Law (the sixth commandment does not admit of light matter) and therefore necessarily cannot be properly ordered to the supernatural law (be in a state of grace). The only exception to this would be – *per impossible* – on account of a divine revelation, a direct command from God to violate the law.

In today's epistle, St Paul writes of those who *yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity*,⁷ recalling the runaway captivity of vice. He asks: *What fruit did you have in those things whereof you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death*.⁸ That is, if you engage in vicious behavior, you reap the reward of that behavior.

By contrast, Paul writes: *But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life*.⁹ That is, having extirpated the old man and been clothed in virtue – been made holy – you reap the end, the fruit, of that holiness, eternal life.

Our Lord speaks similarly in the gospel: *You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? Even so every good tree brings forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit*.¹⁰ That is, the man who is vicious brings forth evil works – bad fruits – in accord with his vicious dispositions, works contrary to the happiness of man, contrary to the moral law. Contrariwise, the virtuous man brings forth good fruits in accord with his virtuous dispositions, in accord with the moral law, works ordered to man's happiness, his perfection.

The penitent sinner – having been absolved and restored to the life of grace – does have the radical ability to perform good works which can be ordered to eternal life, but with difficulty on account of his contrary vicious dispositions acquired by long-standing sinful behavior. His absolution, however, is dependent upon his being willing to put to death the old man, to root out those vices and to put aside the works contrary to God's law which engendered those vices. We celebrated yesterday the prime example of the penitent who put aside her evil works, did penance and was raised to great sanctity: St Mary Magdalene.

The impenitent sinner, however, who will not root out vices and put aside the works contrary to God's law – e.g., one who continues to live in an enduring state of fornication or adultery – on account of living contrary to the Natural Law such a one altogether lacks supernatural virtue and is radically incapable of working out his salvation. One cannot claim that God's grace is at work in him.

Bad fruits come from an evil – vicious – disposition opposed to God's order, God's law – fruits which are incapable of attaining the end of that order, that law. St Augustine teaches that virtue cannot be used for evil,¹¹ echoing Our Lord's words: *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit*, adultery indisputably being an evil work. Evil works spring only from an evil disposition.

Our Lord warns against those who would contradict him, teaching that evil fruits – works

⁷ [Rom 6:19](#)

⁸ [Rom 6:21](#)

⁹ [Rom 6:22](#)

¹⁰ [Mt 7:16-17](#)

¹¹ [ST Ia IIae 55, 4, ad 5um](#)

contrary to the commandments - can come from a good tree, that God's grace can be at work in someone living in grave contradiction to the Natural Law. He describes such as ravenous wolves who come disguised as sheep, looking - perhaps even smelling - like sheep.

Men are not judged by their words but by their works: *Wherefore by their fruits you shall know them. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven,*¹² expressed by St Paul as the necessity to be conformed to the just requirements of the law. Every man will reap the fruits of his works. Those who refuse to reform will reap eternal death: *Every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.*¹³ Those who strive to be conformed to the just requirements of God's law will reap the good fruits of their works, eternal life.

St Mary Magdalene, pray for us.

In the name of the Father ...

¹² [Mt 7:20-21](#)

¹³ [Mt 7:19](#)