

CORRESPONDENCE

RELIGIOUS OBEDIENCE.

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,

In an article on 'Religious Obedience' in the October number of BLACKFRIARS, Fr. Vincent McNabb quotes the following passage from the *Summa Theologica* :

Non semper aliquis obedit legi ex bonitate perfecta virtutis; sed quandoque ex timore poenae, quandoque autem ex solo dictamine rationis, quod est quoddam principium virtutis (Ia IIae, 92, 1 ad 2am).

It is not always through perfect goodness of virtue that one obeys the law; but sometimes it is through fear of punishment, and sometimes from the mere dictate of reason, which is a beginning of virtue.

On this passage Fr. McNabb makes the following comments :

St. Thomas has very finely noted the chief obstacles to an act of perfect virtue (a) fear of punishment; (b) a dictate of right reason (prudence).

To obey merely in order to avoid punishment is not obedience; yet it is not disobedience. To obey a command merely because we judge that the act commanded is a prudent act is not obedience; yet it is not disobedience. It is prudence.

Hence the two great obstacles to an act of perfect obedience are (a) fear of punishment for disobedience; and (b) a judgment that the act commanded is, in itself, a wise act to command. (P. 605 There are other comments to the same effect here and there in the article).

I venture to assert that the meaning which is here put on St. Thomas's words is not at all the meaning St. Thomas had in mind. I will, with your permission, try to justify this assertion as briefly as possible.

Let us put back the passage into its context. St. Thomas is treating of the effects of law, and he says that one effect is to make men good. He discusses various objections against this thesis. The first runs thus: It is virtue whereby a man is good. But it is God who gives him virtue. Therefore his goodness is not due to law. St. Thomas replies: Virtue is of two kinds, acquired and infused. Accustoming oneself to the relevant acts plays a part in both kinds, though a different part. For it actually produces an acquired virtue, but, in the case of an infused virtue, it prepares the way for it, and, once the virtue has been infused, preserves and fosters it. Now a law serves to regulate human acts, and regulating these acts it can make men to be good because, and in so far as, virtues depend on acts.

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The second objection goes farther back : Only when he obeys it, is law of service to a man. But he would not obey it, unless he were already good. Hence it is not the law which makes men good. St. Thomas's reply is contained in the extract given by Fr. McNabb, and to anyone acquainted with St. Thomas's (and Aristotle's) theory of virtue the meaning is, in the light of the context, perfectly evident.

Anyone reading the extract by itself is, of course, at a disadvantage, and Fr. McNabb places such a reader still more at a disadvantage by omitting at the end three or four words which show that St. Thomas is referring to certain points in his teaching on virtue. Those words are : ' as was shown above,' and in all editions, Leonine included, the reference is correctly given as Q. 63, a. 1.

In this latter place St. Thomas discusses the origin of virtues, and he points out that nature does not plant in us virtues fully formed from the beginning ; we start with certain naturally known principles of action, and with a natural appetite in our will for the good thus made known by our reason, and it is only by acting consistently according to the dictate of our reason that we gradually form in our will or in our lower appetitive faculties, as the case may be, that disposition to good, that good habit, that state of subjection to right reason, which we call a virtue.

In the beginning, then, we do the act simply from the dictate of our reason, and we do it with difficulty. The virtue when formed does not change the nature of the act, it makes it easier.

The meaning of the extract under discussion will now be obvious. To the objection that law does not make a man good, since he would not obey it unless he were already good, St. Thomas replies : He can obey it without having in himself the fully developed goodness of the virtue. He may obey it, for instance, from fear of punishment. Or he may obey it at first solely from the dictate of his reason, that is, without having as yet in his will or in his lower, sensual, appetite, that formed habit or state of subjection to right reason in which virtue consists and which renders the act easy. But if he continues resolutely to follow the dictate of his reason and to obey the law, the result in time will be a fully formed virtue, and the law will thus have had a hand in making him virtuous, or more stably good. And obedience will be easier to him. St. Thomas has not a word suggesting that he is thinking of any difference in *motive* between the act which proceeds ' from the

perfect goodness of virtue ' and the act which proceeds ' solely from the dictate of reason.'

St. Thomas, says Fr. McNabb, has here very finely noted a dictate of reason as one of the two great obstacles to an act of perfect virtue. A great obstacle! Not only is the dictate of reason of which St. Thomas is speaking not an obstacle, it is the first, essential, step towards acquiring the fully formed virtue; as he says, *est quoddam principium virtutis*, it is some beginning of the virtue. And, moreover, this dictate of reason is not only essential at the beginning, *it is just as essential to the perfect goodness of the virtue as well, and must be present in every act*, though, of course, when a man has formed the virtue he acts, not from the dictate of reason alone, but also helped by the inclination the virtue gives him.

The English translation quoted by Fr. McNabb: 'from the mere dictate of reason' is apt to mislead, and it would be better to substitute: 'from the dictate of reason alone.'

I have said nothing of the fear of punishment. But even this St. Thomas is not here regarding as one of the two great obstacles to an act of perfect virtue. We have only to go on to the next article to see what was in his mind: 'Through getting accustomed, at first, to avoiding evil and doing good from fear of punishment, a man is sometimes led on to act in the same way of his own free will and with pleasure. And, in this way, law, even by punishing, leads men on to be good.' (Art. 2 ad 4^{um}).

I need hardly point out, in conclusion, that on Fr. McNabb's interpretation St. Thomas would make no reply whatever to the objection; instead of explaining how law can play a part in making a man good or virtuous, the saint would simply mention, quite irrelevantly, two motives which are obstacles to perfect obedience.

Yours, etc.,

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