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TRANSFORMATION OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD The Moral Dimensions of Christian Sonship in the Doctrine of St John of the Cross

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Introduction and *Status Quaestionis*

This doctoral thesis, *Transformation of the Children of God: The Moral Dimensions of Christian Sonship in the Doctrine of St John of the Cross*, is a systematic study on the concept of Christian sonship undertaken in the field of moral theology. This study investigates the research question, 'what does really constitute the life of the children of God?' This basic question of the study is influenced by two factors. On the one hand, it tries to probe the concept of Christian sonship as understood by St John of the Cross and on the other hand, it tries to trace out the moral implications that he presents in his doctrine as a means to achieve the fullness of it. In this effort, the working proposition of this thesis is that the fullness of filiation involves a

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gradual moral maturity of the believer. Without a moral life it is impossible to achieve a solid spiritual life and the fullness of Christian sonship.

The main theme and content of the doctrine of St John of the Cross is the attainment of a high state of perfection, the spiritual marriage, in which takes place the perfect adoption of the sons of God. Although all Christians are made children of God by virtue of Baptism,¹ for St John of the Cross, one reaches the fullness of sonship only in the high state of perfection. This sublime state of Christian sonship is made possible only through a dynamic process of growth and a transition from evil to good. The process of this transition and integration takes place only on the basis of purification of human limitations and fundamental moral choices. Because of this, St John of the Cross very often speaks about a kind of heroism in the practice of Christian life and virtues. For, the transformation of the children of God is not possible without an adequate moral life and a tangible moral conversion of baptized who are in the initial stage of Christian life and live like the children of this world.

Sources and Areas of Interest

The study is based on the writings of St John of the Cross as the primary sources. St John of the Cross and his writings have been a subject of much study in the past, especially in the Carmelite family. Those materials are used as secondary sources. Relevant documents of the Church are consulted to highlight the authenticity of the teachings of the Saint. It also makes use of certain contemporary studies in the field of morality, grace and virtues and Christian sonship.

The methodology used for the study is hermeneutical, descriptive, analytical, theological and pastoral. It is hermeneutical since this study is mainly based on the Scriptural understanding of Christian life, especially Pauline corpus which speaks much about a life in Christ. It is descriptive and analytical since there is a deep study of the characteristic features of transformation in Christian life and how St John of the Cross understands them from different angles of human and spiritual experiences. It is theological, because this study tries to be faithful to the theological understanding of the Church on moral theology down through the centuries. It is pastoral, because it helps one to understand the different stages of growth and what kind

¹Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1262 & 1265.

of assistance to be provided in each of these stages of one's growth towards the perfection of filial life.

This study is an effort to present moral perspectives of Christian sonship as understood by St John of the Cross. Most of the time, the writings of St John of the Cross are used in the field of spirituality and mysticism. But his profound knowledge and teachings on human faculties, virtues and vices, the journey of human soul to God, etc. give him a place in the field of morality, psychology, anthropology and many other disciplines of philosophy and theology. Though it is possible to trace out the theme of Christian sonship in the writings of the Saint, it is a theme that was much neglected in a scholastic approach to him. For this reason, the attention of this study is limited only to the theme of sonship with a special emphasis on its moral implications. Therefore, it is not possible to undertake an extensive study of the whole doctrine of the Saint which speaks very much about the mystical and contemplative life. This study gives a special attention only to the two directions of human life – the sensual or the appetitive life of the children of this world and a grace-filled and virtuous life of the children of God. In this way, this thesis brings out different nuances and the full meaning of Christian sonship from the doctrine of the Saint.

Elaboration of the Theme

St John of the Cross, in his spiritual doctrine, systematically narrates step by step the origin and the life of man who is called to the fullness of filial life. God created man as a bride of His Son but little less than angels with a promise of future elevation to the status of sonship. In the project of creation, God desired that man would be exalted and made capable of sharing the life and the company of the Triune God. But there was deviation in this divine project due to human sinfulness and frailties. Therefore, the Son of God Himself had to come in aid of man, and the fruit of redemption achieved in the paschal mystery is subjectively shared and made appropriate to individuals in the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is God's first act of love that immerses an individual into the life and the company of the Triune God Whose head is the Father. This new opening into the family of God confers on man the status of sonship by participation which the Son of God possesses by nature.

For St John of the Cross, what is given in the sacrament of baptism is the status of Christian sonship in a germinal form. When the Saint speaks about this divine life that is merited in the paschal mystery and shared in the sacrament of baptism, he uses two phrases – that

which is attained *at God's pace, immediately* and that which is attained *at the soul's pace, little by little*.² What is attained *at God's pace* is all about the grace of adoption that is realized in the Christ event and shared with individuals in baptism. But that which is attained *at the soul's pace* is all about a kind of dynamic character of Christian life after the reception of baptism and a responsible growth towards the freedom of the children of God. For the gift of divine life or filiation imposes on man a responsibility of possessing an attitude and behaviour of a son after the example of Christ, the Son of God, which is achieved gradually through different stages of growth in Christian life. Christian morality exists in this subjective march towards the fullness of divine life in three different stages of growth – the Beginners, the Proficients and the Perfect. The first two stages are notably moral. They presuppose that any growth in prayer and holiness require a moral conversion. That means, to become holy, one must be truly good. That is why the Saint says, “an unsettled soul, which has no foundation of moral good, is incapable as such of receiving spiritual good.”³

Slowly deepening an immersion into the life of God is a great work and part of a moral responsibility of each and every baptized. For St John of the Cross, “Moral good consists in the control of the passions and the restriction of the inordinate appetites.”⁴ Thus, growth in divine life always presupposes a journey that is assisted by grace and human cooperation. According to the Saint, “He conferred the power of becoming the children of God only to those who are born of God, those who, in their rebirth through grace and death to everything of the old man, rise above themselves to the supernatural and receive from God this rebirth and sonship which transcends everything imaginable.”⁵ God continues to be here the main cause and the lover Who does not want to leave His work incomplete. Grace that is given to the soul at different occasions of life is part of divine pedagogy that keeps the rhythm of human activity in accordance with His will and desire.

For St John of the Cross, the soul in the final state of Christian perfection resembles God Himself, for she is taken fully into the status of the divine. This likeness with God is the heart of Christian

²Cf. *The Spiritual Canticle*, 23, 6.

³*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3, 5, 3.

⁴*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3, 5, 1.

⁵*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 5, 5; Cf. Jn 1:12-13 (“He gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God”).

perfection. A likeness or resemblance to God indicates a basic agreement with God in life and actions. Christian life is destined to this complete likeness with God. Human cooperation in the process of growth consists in the elimination of everything unlike or unconformed to God. For St John of the Cross, growth in Christian life is nothing but making the perfect image of Christ within. In the initial stages of Christian life, the soul is like a sketch or a first draft of the image which is to be made perfect or complete. When it is made perfect in union with God in the final stage of perfection, the soul resembles God Himself and is able to say together with St Paul: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).⁶ This likeness with God is the heart of Christian perfection. A likeness or resemblance to God indicates a basic agreement with God in life and actions. Christian life is destined to this complete likeness with God. But the perfect engraving of the image of Christ is not possible unless cast out from within all that is unlike to God. The purifying of everything ungodly is a moral responsibility of the soul that pertains to the first stage of beginners.

The starting point of growth in Christian life is the stage of beginners in which the soul purifies all imperfections that are in the soul in the form of inordinate affections and craving for the things of this world. The process of purification is an essential requirement for one's growth in the gifts of filiation. That is why the Saint says, "To be reborn in the Holy Spirit during this life is to become most like God in purity, without any mixture of imperfection."⁷ For, it is the pure of heart that really see God (cf. Mt 5:8). The act of purification is basically exercised in the practice of detachment since the experience of attachment makes man a slave of the things he is attached and forbid him experience the freedom of the children of God.⁸ Detachment is not a negative act but a positive act of love which enables a person to grow into the being of God.

St John of the Cross presents Christ as the foundation and the highest ideal for a life of renunciation and the formation of the soul.

⁶Cf. *The Spiritual Canticle*, 12, 1 & 6.

⁷*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 5, 5.

⁸Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1, 4, 6 ("All the sovereignty and freedom of the world compared with the freedom and sovereignty of the Spirit of God is utter slavery, anguish, and captivity. A person, then, because he is attached to prelacies, or other such dignities [...], is considered and treated by God as base slave and prisoner, not as a son. For such a one, the royal freedom of spirit attained in divine union is impossible, because freedom has nothing to do with slavery. And freedom cannot abide in a heart dominated by the appetites – in a slave's heart; it dwells in a liberated heart, which is a son's heart").

The Son of God is the law and the model of man's striving for perfection. Christ himself demands: "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11:29). A life of detachment that Christ lived is a model for all who grow towards the fullness of divine life. Christ always maintained a filial disposition and sought only the Father's will all through His life. Therefore, for the Saint, Christ is the gate and the way that lead to eternal life. Only through Him, one can enter into the life of God. For He is the supreme norm and the rule of life for all who seek the will of God. The entire truth and the fullness of grace is established and revealed in Him. It is in and through Him that man is drawn to the perfection of filial life.

In the second stage of proficients, the soul goes through a rigorous process of purification in an experience of dark night, especially in the spiritual faculties. God empties the spiritual faculties of the soul – intellect, memory and will – in order to fill them with divine goods in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Faith frees the intellect from merely human ways of knowing and infuses it with divine wisdom. The wisdom of God does not cancel out an intellectual understanding of God, but it fills the soul with enlightenment and a loving awareness of God. Hope empties the memories of the past and fills it with a desire for the possession of eternal life. Charity frees the will from its false love and fills it with a love and desire for lasting joy and happiness in God. Thus, with a heart and mind freed from all temporalities and limitations of this world, the soul will be able to cling to God and be transformed in Him.

The final state of Christian perfection is the fulfilment of the divine plan of creation. Throughout his writings, St John of the Cross continuously had in mind the concept of this final stage of union with God. The goal of creation is basically directed to this supernatural union with God in which man experiences fully the divine life that is given in Christ. The state of perfection is nothing but a total transformation into the intimate life of the Blessed Trinity. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as possible in this life. What takes place in this state of perfection is union of two natures – divine and human – into one spirit and love. Man does not live here with his own life, but with the life of Christ and becomes altogether a new creation.

The state of life in union with God is characterized by the purity of life. The sacrament of baptism makes man a new creation and the state of perfection confers on him the fullness of that newness of life. The prime gift of baptism is the purity and the original innocence of

the first parents. Baptism confers these gifts in a germinal form with a responsibility to make it grow to the full stature of this purity and innocence without having even a slight motion or habit of evil. He is freed and protected in this state of life from all worldly concerns and attachments. It does not mean that there is no joy in created goods. But it does mean that man gives his prime place to God. The practices of virtues in this state of perfection makes visible the uprightness and moral excellence of the soul. The soul practices theological virtues such as faith, hope and charity and other moral virtues like humility, meekness, temperance, fortitude, etc. in a manner surpassing all human strength. The Saint calls these virtues heroic virtues as they are practiced in a heroic degree. The soul practices these virtues heroically even in a difficult situation.

St John of the Cross, without any doubt, is a mystic. But his doctrine is filled with moral wisdom in line with filiation, a theme little discussed. His teaching on mysticism and prayer is directly meant to guide a person to perfection and the transformation of Christian or filial life itself. So, a comprehensive understanding of St John of the Cross is possible only when his doctrine is taken in the unity of moral and spiritual dimensions of Christian existence. There is no artificial division between spirituality and morality, prayer and action, ethics and grace, the law of nature and the law of the spirit in the teaching of the Saint, but only a possibility of finding integration between them in a lived experience of Christian faith. Therefore, this work is aimed at giving an exegesis of key texts to show how moral maturity is a necessary dimension of filiation. The discipline of moral theology is always at the service of helping man in living the life of God in its fullness. Vatican II's *Decree on the Training of Priests* presents an alarming call for a renewal of moral theology on the basis of "the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ."⁹ For, Christian life is basically a lifelong response to God's self-offer in Christ. A genuine response of Christian faith takes its basic shape in good moral living. In moral life, Christians strive to live a life and to perform actions that are conformed to the response Jesus Himself made to the Father.

Conclusion

Filial dignity of man is the fundamental basis of Christian life and actions. Man morally acts because of his belief that he is called and destined for a higher status of life and relation with God. The theme of Christian sonship, in the doctrine of St John of the Cross, takes its hinge from the sacrament of baptism. A fundamental truth of

⁹*Optatam Totius*, 16.

Christian life is that it is through baptism that man enters into filial relation with God and starts living the life of the children of God. In the teaching of the Saint, the fullness of Christian sonship implies a growth in moral life which supports Christian life all through the journey. Basing its foundation on the mystery of Christ and history of salvation, the doctrine of St John of the Cross points out a lofty vocation of all baptized and invites them to the fullness of it. As a person grows in Christian life, his life is marked by a greater simplicity and deeper integration. A journey of Christian life that begins with external practices of good moral life ends with an engraving of internal moral traits. Therefore, regardless of the state of life, every Christian is obliged to strive for perfection.