



# LIGHT & LIFE

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Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P., *Director* Jul-Aug 2024, Vol 77, No 4 Western Dominican Province

## A More Perfect Union

We Americans tend to have a very reverential esteem for our Constitution, although we most *definitely* disagree on how to interpret it. Yet, few Americans seem to recall that this is our *second* Constitution. For eight years, from 1781-1789, the United States was governed by the *Articles of Confederation*, which was a looser organization of states, with a weaker federal government. Amusingly enough, this “league of friendship” (Article III) repeatedly stressed that this union was to be *perpetual*. Well, it was “perpetual” for not even a decade. But “perpetual” in a legal sense is not always how it is usually understood. Legally, it can simply mean, “without a definite end.” There may be explicit or implicit ways of dissolving said contract, such as by the competent authority of the Congress of the United States, in the case of a Constitution.

So after this failed experiment, Congress launched a new Constitution, and the word “perpetual” goes from being used six times in the Articles of Confederation to zero. Perhaps it was *not* such a good idea to stress that term. However, we then run into a most curious phrase that every school child learns at one point or another in memorizing the Preamble to the Constitution: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...” More... perfect? How can you have something be *more* perfect? Perfect is perfect, right? Well, yes... and no. Merriam-Webster gives multiple definitions that allow for change – for example, “satisfying all requirements,” or even in obsolete senses, “contented, satisfied,” and even “sane.” What I am trying to get at is that not all language is meant to be absolutely and invariably precise. That is not how language works, even in science. Science will often use models, and these models aren’t meant to say that this is *exactly* how something works, but rather, that this is a way of capturing the essence of something which we can’t grasp in an absolute way. Every schoolchild learns various atomic models, getting more and more complicated as they advance in understanding, and as their minds are able to capture more and more complex information. In Scripture, we don’t use models, but instead, we use parables and examples.

Now, our Lord commands us, “Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Certainly, no one *can* be entirely perfect as God *is*; that makes no sense. When Our Lord challenges our thinking like this, it is often an invitation to think on what He has just said before. In this context, He is talking about loving, not just our neighbor, or those we might *naturally* love, but loving even our enemies. In other words, that our love be not lacking for anyone. It is perfect, then, insofar as there is no limit as to whom it is “acceptable” for us to love, *within our capacity to love*. No one can love as much as God, for He IS love. The more we participate or share in His love, then, the more we *can* love.

Of course, spiritual analogies all fail at some point when we refer to the natural world, but think of your spiritual “potential” as a kind of gas tank. The bigger the gas tank, the more you can fill ‘er up. As we mature, and as we grow as Christians, then, we should be able to fill ‘er up even more. If we are wounded by sin, our capacity to love, or our capacity for grace, is also likewise limited. Our Blessed Mother is not wounded by sin, thus, her “tank” is also bigger. She is not only “full of grace” because her grace is “topped off” in her tank, but that even her reservoir is far beyond what we poor banished children of Eve are capable of filling. “Full of grace” for silly old me is a gallon. “Full of grace” for *her* is a mega oil tanker. Only God is capable of a truly limitless grace.

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THE ROSARY LIGHT & LIFE  
Rosary Center

P. O. Box 3617, Portland, Oregon 97208

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# THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

## In the Beginning

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

**Baltimore Catechism (edition 4):**

**3 Q. What is man? A. Man is a creature composed of a body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God.**

"Creature," i.e., a thing created. Man differs from anything else in creation. All things else are either entirely matter, or entirely spirit. An angel, for example, is all spirit, and a stone is all matter; but man is a combination of both spirit and matter--of soul and of body.

Here, I do want to take a moment to make, in typical Dominican fashion, a distinction. Other things in Creation *do* have souls, if we follow the traditional Aristotelian-Scholastic categories. All living things, more precisely, have souls. The Latin "anima" meant "breath" or "soul." So an animal is a thing that has breath, and is "animated," that is, it moves and acts.

The simplest soul is the vegetative soul, here meaning, not necessarily simply plants, but anything that seeks nutrition, growth, and generation of some kind. Next are the sensitive souls, that is, souls that can sense the world around them and its forms in some way, that we generally call animal souls. A crow, for example, can sense a hawk without direct material contact, instinctively and experientially know that it is a potential enemy, and can group with others of its kind to drive it away from its territory. A cat, by hearing and experience alone, can associate the sound of a can opener with food, and thus will move most quickly toward what she judges to be something good for her.

Man alone, as far as we know, has the highest rational intellect. This is not to say that animals do not have some limited capacity to reason, but that human beings alone are capable of certain intellectual abstractions that go far beyond our limited corporeal bodies. And it is this power of the human soul that is immaterial and truly in the image and likeness of God.

**4 Q. Is this likeness in the body or in the soul? A. This likeness is chiefly in the soul.**

Certainly, God is spirit, and not material at all as He is. Nevertheless, the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, the Son, has taken unto Himself a human nature, which is brought to existence in an individual human body and soul. So we are like unto God in body, only in so far as we share a human body and human nature with Jesus, although this is very important for how He saves us, namely, by spiritual adoption into His Son, where we become truly children of God, and not only children, but "sons," that is, individual spiritual members of Him, "Who hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto himself: according to the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:5). God did not become Creation; He did not become an angelic being; He became man,

and it is in and through that human body and soul, united perfectly to His Divinity, that He worked our Redemption.

**5 Q. How is the soul like to God? A. The soul is like God because it is a spirit that will never die, and has understanding and free will.**

My soul is like to God in four things. (1). It is "a spirit." It really exists, but cannot be seen with the eyes of our body. Every spirit is invisible, but every invisible thing is not a spirit. We cannot see the wind. We can feel its influence, we can see its work--for example, the dust flying, trees swaying, ships sailing, etc.--but the wind itself we never see. Again, we never see electricity. We see the light or effect it produces, but we never see the electricity itself. Yet no one denies the existence of the wind or of electricity on account of their being invisible. Why then should anyone say there are no spirits--no God, no angels, no souls--simply because they cannot be seen, when we have other proofs, stronger than the testimony of our sight, that they really and truly exist?

(2). My soul will "never die," i.e., will never cease to exist; it is immortal. This is a very wonderful thing to think of. It will last as long as God Himself.

Here we come to that most hotly debated topic in our present day and age – will there be animals in Heaven? The basic answer is that we don't know. We can have valid theological opinions either way here. Our Holy Father Pope Francis has expressed his opinion that there are animals in Heaven, but this is an opinion (popes are allowed to have opinions!). Let me put my all my cards on the table here – I am a great animal lover, and anyone that knows me knows of my love for animals, even helping animal rescues, but I do not personally believe that there will be animals in Heaven, although I also regard this as an opinion. My basic reason for this is that God is everything good in Himself, and we will have no need of anything else, except in God. What kind of Heaven lacks something if it has God? Whatever is good in Creation is in its fullness and source in God.

However, Scripture *does* speak of a "new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation 21:1), and what this may be, exactly, has not been revealed to us. The Old Testament speaks of the time of the Messiah as one where "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb: and the leopard shall lie down with the kid: the calf and the lion, and the sheep shall abide together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6). Is this poetic language for a world of peace, even between natural enemies? Or is this a true, new Paradise, where we are as we were always meant to be?

But this begs the question: Well, we say only the human soul is immortal. Some people point out that St. Thomas Aquinas says that animal have souls as proof of their existence in Heaven, but again, every living thing

does, from giant squids to plankton. Will it be the same old animals, or will there be a truly new Creation? Will we see our same pets again? But then again, where is the cutoff for animals or plants or microscopic life forms? What of the dinosaurs? If God sees fit to have whatever other creatures in the world to come, so be it. If not, so be it. You want to find out? Be a saint, and get to Heaven.

(3). My soul "has understanding," i.e., it has the gift of reason. This gift enables man to reflect upon all his actions--the reasons why he should do certain things and why he should not do them. By reason he reflects upon the past, and judges what may happen in the future. He sees the consequences of his actions. He not only knows what he does, but why he does it. This is the gift that places man high above the brute animals in the order of creation; and hence man is not merely an animal, but he is a rational animal--an animal with the gift of reason. Brute animals have not reason, but only instinct, i.e., they follow certain impulses or feelings which God gave them at their creation. He established certain laws for each class or kind of animals, and they, without knowing it, follow these laws; and when we see them following their laws, always in the same way, we say it is their nature. Animals act at times as if they knew just why they were acting; but it is not so. It is we who reason upon their actions, and see why they do them; but they do not reason, they only follow their instinct. If animals could reason, they ought to improve in their condition. Men become more civilized day by day. They invent many things that were unknown to their forefathers. One man can improve upon the works of another, etc. But, we never see anything of this kind in the actions of animals. The same kind of birds, for instance, build the same kind of nests, generation after generation, without ever making change or improvement in them. When man teaches an animal any action, it cannot teach the same to its young. It is clear, therefore, that animals cannot reason. Though man has the gift of reason by which he can learn a great deal, he cannot learn all through his reason; for there are many things that God Himself must teach him. When God teaches, we call the truths He makes known to us Revelation. How could man ever know about the Trinity through his reason alone, when, after God has made known to him that It exists, he cannot understand it? It is the same for all the other mysteries.

Next, the soul is like God because it has understanding, but not the kind of understanding, as impressive as it may be, that animals may have. The mere fact that we are discussing these things which go so far beyond ourselves and our world points to the eternal and immense capacity for reason that we have. Note also, that it is not in what we are understanding that we are like unto God, but in our human capacity to understand, according to our human nature. An unborn child, a boy with Down's Syndrome, a man sleeping, a woman in a vegetative state in the hospital – all of them are fully in the image and likeness of God. "At that time Jesus answered and said: I confess to thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to the little ones" (Matthew 11:25).

We are able to act, not just according to the Natural Law, but according to the Divine Law.

This is also part of the reason why drunkenness and intoxication can be sinful, since it impedes, at least temporarily, our capacity for reason and human understanding. There are times, of course, when we may need to be "under the influence" of something, such as anesthesia for a surgical procedure, or even taking some good swigs of a strong whiskey to be able to take the pain in an old battlefield, but in this case, we are not seeking to intoxicate ourselves, but to make a medical procedure bearable.

Ignorance can also remove or lessen guilt. It is possible, especially in sweeter mixed drinks, to not really realize the alcoholic content, at least at first, or if your friends are trying to get you sloshed without you knowing it.

But to merely choose to drink specifically in order to "get hammered" can be sinful, even mortally so. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that:

On this way drunkenness is a mortal sin, because then a man willingly and knowingly deprives himself of the use of reason, whereby he performs virtuous deeds and avoids sin, and thus he sins mortally by running the risk of falling into sin. For Ambrose says (De Patriarch. [De Abraham i.]): "We learn that we should shun drunkenness, which prevents us from avoiding grievous sins. For the things we avoid when sober, we unknowingly commit through drunkenness." Therefore drunkenness, properly speaking, is a mortal sin. (Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 150, a. 2)

This is why we can legally charge a drunk driver for all the subsequent actions of driving while intoxicated. I do not imagine any drunk driver intends to kill or maim someone else while behind the wheel. While being stupid is not a crime, freely and recklessly choosing to make yourself stupid by intoxication, knowing full well that something very horrible can go wrong, is.

(4). My soul has "free will." This is another grand gift of God, by which I am able to do or not do a thing, just as I please. I can even sin and refuse to obey God. God Himself--while He leaves me my free will--could not oblige me to do anything, unless I wished to do it; neither could the devil. I am free therefore, and I may use this great gift either to benefit or injure myself. If I were not free I would not deserve reward or punishment for my actions, for no one is or should be punished for doing what he cannot help. God would not punish us for sin if we were not free to commit or avoid it. I turn this freedom to my benefit if I do what God wishes when I could do the opposite; for He will be more pleased with my conduct, and grant a greater reward than He would bestow if I obeyed simply because obliged to do so. Animals have no free will. If, for example, they suffer from hunger and you place food before them, they will eat; but man can starve, if he wills to do so, with a feast before him. For the same reason man can endure more fatigue than any other animal of the same bodily strength. In traveling, for instance, animals give



up when exhausted, but man may be dying as he walks, and still, by his strong will-power, force his wearied limbs to move. But you will say, did not the lions in the den into which Daniel was cast because he would not act against his conscience, obey the wicked king and offend God--as we read in Holy Scripture (Dan. 6:16)--refrain from eating him, even when they were starving with hunger? Yes; but they did not do so of themselves, but by the power of God preventing them: and that is why the delivery of Daniel from their mouths was a miracle. It is clear, because the same lions immediately tore in pieces Daniel's enemies when they were cast into the den.

Finally, we come to free will. Our free will here on earth is never perfectly free. We are moved by our emotions, by our appetites, by our situations, by duress, and so forth. Yet, we can freely and rationally choose to lay down our lives in martyrdom, something that goes against the most basic living tenet of self-preservation, because we seek something greater than this present life. We can likewise freely choose to turn away from God. We have free will because true love and holiness demands it as a necessary precondition. The only way a choice or act can be said to be morally good is if there is an option to choose a lesser good or some evil in its place. Otherwise, we are acting out of instinct, or out of an irrational fear, or some neutral preference or option. We can sleep, for example, simply out of physiological necessity and we just collapse, but we can also choose to follow our parents' instructions to go to bed at the right time out of love and obedience to them.

This is also why we say that true love resides in the will, and not in the emotion or appetite. We may be initially attracted by something or the good we perceive in something, but when times become tough, or when familiarity begins to breed contempt, then we *must* choose, freely and completely. This is the only way we can truly love our enemies. No animal would love something actively trying to kill it, and yet Our Lord does from the Cross, choosing death, even death on a Cross, not because He likes crucifixion, but because He loves us. "Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by His life" (Romans 5:10).

This is why so many saints, I believe, loved to meditate on the Passion of Our Lord, to see and experience that real and profound love that Our Lord has for us, and to thus be moved to imitate Him in that great love. The Passion is a school for love, and every time we imitate Him, even in some small way, in choosing love over a lesser good, we grow in our capacity to love, and thus, in our spiritual perfection.

In the next issue, then, we will begin by examining the most famous and beloved question of all the Baltimore Catechism. *Stay tuned!* ■

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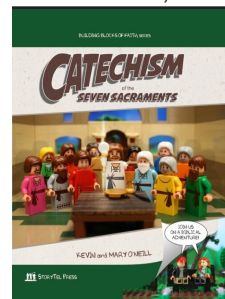


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He is not "full of grace" – He IS grace. Instead of gas tanks, then, let's use that biblical reference of wineskins. Filling up new wine into old wineskins fails, because the old wineskin has no give; it cannot grow in size, and so as the new wine ferments, the old skin breaks and leaks.

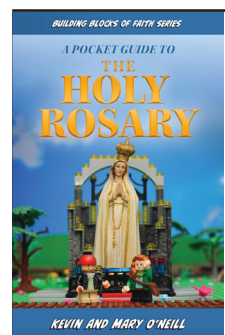
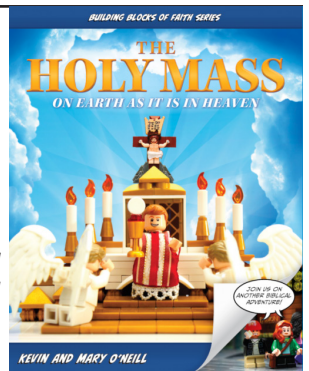
Now, the grace of God is not "quantifiable," as such. It is a spiritual reality, *not* a material one. This is where our model fails. I was once at Mass distributing Communion, and our Hosts were running low, so I started dividing them as folks came up for Communion. One sweet lady asked that I give her an intact host instead of a divided one, saying, "More Jesus, more grace!" I was a little taken aback, and did not feel like arguing in a Communion line, but really, every particle of the Host that is still a visible sign of the Sacrament contains, not three grams of grace, but truly infinite and limitless grace – it contains the fullness of Divinity within that one tiny piece. The limit is not in the Eucharist – *the limit is in us*. We don't have the spiritual "stomach" to take in all the grace that God could give us at once.

So we can be "more" perfect, then, as we have more and more "give" or "space" for the grace and love of God in our souls. This is what a lot of our spiritual life should be directed towards – never being fully satisfied, having a stomach, a hunger – a deep, abiding, spiritual hunger, always ready, and always eager to consume more and more good spiritual food in a steady life of prayer and the Sacraments, all within our capacity and state of life. ■



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