

Importance of Humility and Charity and connection between them in Eastern and Western theology.

“Humility is the raiment of the Godhead. The Word who became human clothed himself in it. ... Until a man becomes humble, he will not receive a reward for his labour. Recompense is given, not for a labour, but for humility. ... And if she becomes ours, she will make us sons of God, and even without good works she will present us to God. For without humility all our works are vain.”

– St. Isaac the Syrian¹

“Now it is charity that unites us to God, Who is the last end of the human mind, since "he that abides in charity abides in God, and God in him" (1 Jn. 4:16). Therefore the perfection of the Christian life consists radically in charity.”

– St. Thomas Aquinas²

One who tries to understand and to engage the Eastern spirituality, and has also a relation with the Western spirituality, may come into following questions: “Why is humility so important and seems almost essential in the Eastern spirituality, while in the Western spirituality it is not so much discussed? What is the connection between humility and charity? Why does the Western spirituality put much more importance on charity? Are these two virtues complementary? Which one is more important?”

On the contrary with an eastern approach, humility is not listed among the most important virtues in Aquinas' Summa – it is not a cardinal virtue, neither a theological virtue. However, charity is discussed by Thomas much more deeply; questions 23-46 of ST II-II and questions about theological virtues in ST II-I deal with it.

On the first sight it might seem that eastern theologians understand the humility as the very base of every virtue and the “ladder to the heaven” since western theologians

¹ St. Isaac the Syrian, in Hilarion Alfejev. *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*. (Kalamazoo Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2000)

² ST II-II q183 a1

hold charity as the most perfect virtue. Is there any connections or explanation of such dissimilarity?

Before proceeding further to explanations, comparisons and conclusions, we must define some basic terminology; i.e. how is the virtue, charity, humility understood by both sides of theologians – by “the East and the West”. For the western theology, the church doctor St. Thomas Aquinas is the authority we will mainly use. For the eastern approach we will use many authors³, since there is no appropriate summarization and compilation of eastern teachings, as was made by St. Aquinas in his Summa⁴. On the other hand, there is a real beauty of eastern Fathers' speeches, and this is one of the reasons why they will be rather directly cited than paraphrased.

As we are trying to find the answers for the question about “most important virtue” and “about the similarities between humility and charity”, we need to follow logical rules of comparison:

- we need to know/define the things we are going to compare
- the compared things have to be of the same kind in the manner of comparison
- measurement for comparison has to be defined

Definition of virtue

According to Aquinas, “*the virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bed use, which God works in us without us*”⁵.

To find the definition of virtue in eastern theologians' teaching is more complicated. St. Maximos the Confessor in his *Four Hundred Text on Love* writes: “*In Scripture the virtues are called 'ways'*”⁶. St. John Damascene, in his text *On the virtues and the vices* does not put the exact definition of virtue, but he uses some kind of descriptive definition. According to him, the virtue is attained by

“unremitting effort .. to struggle all our life to pay close practical attention to such things as acts of compassion, self control, prayer, love... . He [the person practising virtues] may from time to time perform acts of compassion [virtue]; if he does so only infrequently we cannot legitimately

³ Maximos the Confessor, John of Damaskos (Damascene), John Climacus, Gregory Nazianzen, Isaac the Syrian, Basil the Great

⁴ St. John Damascene made some kind of summarization of the teaching: speeches and advices of many abbas (elders). St. Aquinas uses some of John's summarization in his Summa.

⁵ ST II-I q55 a4

⁶ St. Maximos the Confessor. 400 texts on Love, *On the virtues and the vices*, §74, in *The Philokalia, vol II.*, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, K. War (London; Faber and Faber Ltd, 1984), 109

call him compassionate [virtuous], especially if what he does is not done in a good manner and in a way that conforms with God's will. ... It is really good only if it is not done with the purpose of receiving some reward. ... God is interested in the purpose for which a thing is done”⁷

and later he continues:

“Virtue (areti) is so called because it is something we choose (to aireishtai). We choose it and will it in the sense that we do good by deliberate choice and of our own free will, not unintentionally and under compulsion. ... every man is said to be made in the likeness of God as regards his possession of the principle of virtue and as regards his imitation of God through virtuous and godlike actions”⁸

We can clearly see that Damascene's “description” points the same as St. Aquinas' definition. It is not about one act, but it is about the “*quality of the mind, by which we live*” it means “*to struggle all our life to pay close practical attention ...*”. We have to pay attention and practice it frequently, and we need to act with a good intention - “*no one can make bed use*”. Practical attention is about act, it is about our operations, in other words it is an operative habit.⁹ What is important in this definition is mention about “*likeness of God*”. The same understanding we can find in St. Gregory Nazianzen: “*God is called love and peace, and by these names he urges us to become transformed according to the virtues that qualify him*”. From these words we can understand the virtue as means of our deification (gr. theosis), it is a measure of it. Here we must make a notice, that deification is the very base of the eastern theology, the purpose and the goal of men even here on the earth as the process not yet perfected.

Now we have a common understanding of virtue for our next discussion.

Definition of charity/love

According to Aquinas the charity is love which is based on communication between man and God, “*Charity is the friendship of man for God*”¹⁰, “*Charity is love*”¹¹

Not surprising, much longer eastern “definition” of love, is given by St. John Climacus by these words: “*God is love. (1 John 4:16). But someone eager to define this is blindly striving to measure the sand in the ocean.*”. He continues:

⁷ St. John of Damaskos. *On the virtues and the vices*, in *The Philokalia*, vol II., p.339

⁸ Ibid, p.341

⁹ ST II-I q55 a2

¹⁰ ST II-II q23 a1

¹¹ ST II-II q25 a2

“The man who wants to talk about love is undertaking to speak about God. ... Angels know how to speak about love, but even they do so only in proportion to the light within them. ... Love, by its nature, is a resemblance to God, insofar as this is humanly possible. ... Love is the banishment of every sort of contrariness, for love thinks no evil”¹²

We can find these above definitions very similar, and we can deduce that they are about the same: In ST II-II qq114 Aquinas defines friendship as affability. It is clear that affability/friendship is about relation between people which [friendship] requires to have something in common, as friends usually share at least one common object. This sharing, or having common make them similar in some way – it is resemblance between them, by the manner of common thing. So friendship is a relation of resemblance. By using our developed idea in Aquinas definition of charity “Charity is“ the relation of resemblance ”of man for God”, we get the exact definition of charity given by John Climacus: “*Love by its nature is a resemblance to God.*”

Talking about resemblance, we will see later, that this is the most crucial point in the importance of humility in the eastern spirituality.

Definition of humility

Thomas defined humility by these descriptions:

“to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately; and this belongs to the virtue of humility”; *“that a man restrain himself from being borne towards that which is above him. ... Knowledge of one's own deficiency belongs to humility”*; *“humility makes a man a good subject to ordinance of all kinds and in all matters”*.¹³

St. Climacus gathered and wrote down some understandings of humility from blessed Fathers, and put his own definition for his readers:

“Humility is a grace in the soul and with a name known only to those who have had experience of it. It is indescribable wealth, a name and a gift from God. 'Learn from me,' He said; that is, not from an angel, not from a man, not from a book, but 'from Me,' that is, from My dwelling within you, from My illumination and action within you, for 'I am gentle and meek of heart' (Matt.11:29) in thought and in spirit, and your souls will find rest from conflicts and relief from evil thoughts.”¹⁴

¹² John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 30, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, USA: Paulist Press, 1982), 286

¹³ ST II-II q161 a1, a2, a5

¹⁴ John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 25, p. 219

And the sweetness of the words of St. Climacus continues:

“Repentance lifts a man up. Mourning knocks at heaven' gate. Holy humility opens it. This I say, and I worship a Trinity in Unity and a Unity in Trinity. .. Humility reaches across everything done according to reason. Where there is no humility, all is rotten. ... In the entire universe there is a unique place that saw the sun just once. And there is a unique thought that has given rise to humility. There was a unique day on which the whole world rejoiced. And there is a unique virtue the demons cannot imitate - humility”¹⁵

Fathers emphasised, based on Scripture – Matt.11:29, that Christ is the model of humility. To follow him is to make oneself humble. The importance of humility is fully shown here and accepted by Fathers.

In one of the homilies St. Isaac the Syrian made really helpful distinction between natural and supernatural humilities. This rarely seen distinction is useful for spiritual life but also for understanding the humility as the act and the gift:

“Do not adduce for me as an example those who are humble by nature, saying that there are many such people whose very nature testifies that they are humble They do not possess this discerning lowliness which consists in lowly thoughts, discerning and painstaking reflection, the insignificance in which a person regards himself, his heart broken, and the flow of tears stemming from suffering of mind and discernment of the will. You will find, that have none of these, no meditation that causes them real suffering, no real concern over their consciences. ... they are not pierced by the sharp pain that comes from knowledge of their sins”¹⁶

We can notice that a self-knowledge is very important for the real humility. St. John Climacus says:

“The man who has come to know himself with the full awareness of his soul has sown in good ground. ... And anyone who has acquired knowledge of self has come to understand the fear of the Lord, and walking with the help of this fear, he has arrived at the doorway of love. For humility is the door to the kingdom, opening up to those who come near.”¹⁷

Charity and humility as virtues

¹⁵ After reading these lines, it is now easier to understand why we try to find a link and connections between love and humility. It is because talking about them we are talking about supreme God, about Trinity itself, about his presentation among people and in the heavens. It is indescribable, incomprehensible, infinite mystery and getting closer to this mystery makes us more humble and more loving, because of the presence of God.

¹⁶ St. Isaac the Syrian, in Hilarion Alfejev . *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 116

¹⁷ John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 25, p. 223

Another questions, which can arise, is whether charity and humility belong to virtues. Aquinas' answer is clear – charity¹⁸ and humility¹⁹ are virtues.

Basil the Great considers love to God as a virtue which contains and fulfils all commandments²⁰, and love to brothers, he considers, as “worthy of the deprivation of God's grace”²¹ according to the Romans 9:3²²

From quotation from St. Climacus about humility, “*there is a unique virtue*” we can see that humility is also understood as a virtue. St. Basil in his *Monastic rules* describes humility as “the all virtuous”.

Now we should consider relations of charity and humility with other virtues.

Connection of charity to other virtues

In the East we can notice the “fruity” description of comparison of love to other virtues. Love is always understood as the best way, most beautiful, ruling everything:

“The greatest of all the virtues is love. That is why St. Paul said, “Now I will show you the best way of all (1 Cor 12:31). ... Love of God is opposed to desire, for it persuades the intellect to control itself with regard to sensual pleasures. Love for our neighbour is opposed to anger, for it makes us scorn fame and riches.”²³

“Love grants prophecy, miracles. It is an abyss of illumination, a fountain of fire, ... the condition of angels, and the progress of eternity. ... Most beautiful of all the virtues, tell us where you feed your flock, You rule everything, ... You make humble the proud thought as a wounded man”²⁴

In last Climacus' quotation, love is even personificated, which gives her a special role as the cause of acting virtuously. We can find a great personification of Wisdom in the Old Testament. Personification makes its object a person, person can act of its own, it adds importance to the object. And this is indeed the intention of holy fathers, “God is love.” (1 John 4:16).

St. Thomas says that there is no true virtue without charity; either all acts without charity are sinful or these which are not sinful are generically good, but not perfectly

¹⁸ ST II-II q23 a3

¹⁹ ST II-II q161 a1

²⁰ St. Basil the Great. *Monastic rules*. Reply to the second question

²¹ Ibid., Reply to the third question

²² “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh” (Rom 9:3)

²³ St. Maximos the Confessor : 400 texts on Love, in \$75, in *The Philokalia, vol II*, p. 110

²⁴ John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 30, p. 289

good, because they lack their due order to the last end.²⁵ Why can he say that? The answer is in his understanding of love as the form for other virtues:

“In morals the form of an act is taken chiefly from the end. ... in morals, that which gives an act its order to the end, must needs give the act its form. Now it is evident, ... that it is charity which directs the acts of all other virtues to the last end, and which, consequently, also gives the form to all other acts of virtue: and it is precisely in this sense that charity is called the form of the virtues”, “Charity is compared to the foundation or root in so far as all other virtues draw their sustenance and nourishment therefrom”²⁶

This exact specification of the relation between charity and other virtues is very important as it explains that without charity our acts have no right direction, they can be of great deeds, but at the end they are vain, as they are not formed by true love.²⁷ This fundamental knowledge will help us also to understand humility in its connection to love in later discussion.

Connection of humility to other virtues

St. Isaac says that, humility is accompanied by

“modesty and self-collectedness: that is, chastity of the senses; moderated voice; self-belittlement; pour raiment ... superabundant mercy; ... a contrite heart; imperturbability to anger; undistracted senses; few possessions, moderation in every need; endurance; patience, fearlessness; patient endurance of trials, deliberations; extinction of thoughts; guarding of mysteries; chastity; modesty; reverence ..”²⁸

He listed it as the “inner and outer signs” of humility. This accompaniment is clearly not a cause of humility, but it is along with 'being humble', therefore being humble is necessary condition for these signs – virtues. We need to be careful and not to make incorrect conclusion that humility is a cause of these virtues. We can only see from it that the signs of humility can be an abundance of virtues.

²⁵ ST II-II q23 a7, reply to first objection

²⁶ Ibid., a8

²⁷ Once I had a discussion with non-believer but religiously open person, and he was impressed by “rastafarians” and how some of them left everything – left all their properties and lived as poor as was possible. It is indeed impressive, but on my question, what was the purpose of their act, he replied, “just to live this way”. My objection was that if their act has had the end in itself, then it was vain, as acting for the act itself is not even logical, nor meritorious. And this was a good start to point his attention to the acts from love to love. It is – only love gives the form to our acts.

²⁸ St. Isaac the Syrian, in Hilarion Alfejev . *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 117

Special position has humility in recognition of spirits, as we could see in quotation from Climacus' definition of humility, “*there is a unique virtue that demons cannot imitate*”. Story about one monk who faced a demon without kneels, gives the same explanation: because demon can pretend to be everything and act in likeness of every virtue, but one thing he can not do and imitate – to kneel down in humility. So since without love the acts have no right direction and have no right form, humility can strictly distinguish the intention of acting that gives specification to an act; it makes a basement for good acts.

Pride, the opposite to humility, destroys all good works, all virtues, “*pride looses the profits of all hard work and sweet*”²⁹, “*humility, even without works, gains forgiveness for many offences; but without her, works are of no profit to us and instead prepare for us great evils. What is salt for any food, humility is for every virtue, and she can mightily obliterate many sins ...*”³⁰

St. Thomas Aquinas also says that pride is the beginning of all sins³¹.

In other words, according to the Eastern fathers, humility makes the solid ground for exercising virtues. What more, even without any works, the true humility “*make us sons of God*”³². Some angels failed in one act of humility and became demons; man can by humility become son of God.

One of the strongest thoughts with deep spiritual meaning about importance of humility was given by ascetic abba St. Silouan the Athonite³³. Once when he was threatened by demons, which tried to disturb him in his prayer, he asked Jesus for help, and he received the solution from Christ: “*Keep your mind in hell and despair not!*”, in other words: be humble as the worst sinner and have hope for heaven.

Aquinas gives us the great discussion³⁴ about humility in its relation to other virtues. He refuses some objections proclaiming that humility is the greatest virtue. These objections contain mainly the ideas of church fathers about humility. He points that “*humility makes a man a good subject to ordinance of all kinds and in all matters; while every other virtue has this effect in some special matter,*”. He holds the position

²⁹ John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 23, p.208

³⁰ St. Isaac the Syrian, in Hilarion Alfejev . *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 113

³¹ ST I-II qq84 a2

³² Ibid.

³³ * 1866, + 1938

³⁴ ST II-II q161

that the virtue which stands closer to the end is the higher virtue. According to this order, humility stands after the theological and intellectual virtues, and after justice. He however makes the same observation as we did in our conclusion from the teaching of Eastern fathers, i.e. in one way, the humility is the foundation in the acquisition of virtues, as it [humility] remove the obstacles, and so in this way, the humility has the first place among virtues.³⁵

Connections between charity and humility

After our long journey through definitions, understandings and comparisons of charity and humility, we can see that both charity and humility are virtues of high importance.

One can make an objection that the connection is not visible. As a reply to this objection we can use already mentioned quotations: “*Humility is the raiment of the Godhead. The Word who became human clothed himself in it, Everyone who has been clothed with humility has truly been made like unto Him [Christ].*”³⁶ and “*Love, by its nature, is a resemblance to God, insofar as this is humanly possible.*”³⁷ In both cases we see that Fathers understand humility and love as “being like”, “being similar to God”.

We have also shown that charity and humility provide man different aspect of resemblance – aspect of perfection of acts (charity) and aspect of foundation for acts (humility). The same though is said by St. Climacus, “*Love and humility make a holy team. The one exalts. The other supports those who have been exalted and never falls.*”³⁸

St. Thomas Aquinas makes a connection between humility and charity in the same way:

“Hence our Lord, in order to remove an obstacle to our spiritual welfare, showed by giving an example of humility, that outward exaltation is to be despised. Thus humility is, as it were, a disposition to man's untrammelled access to spiritual and divine goods. Accordingly as perfection is greater

³⁵ ST II-II q 161 a5

³⁶ St. Isaac the Syrian, in Hilarion Alfejev . *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 112

³⁷ John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 30, p. 286

³⁸ John Climacus. *The ladder of divine ascent*, Step 25, p. 224

than disposition, so charity, and other virtues whereby man approaches God directly, are greater than humility.”³⁹

Conclusion

To sum up Aquinas teaching about these two virtues and their connection: love is the form and the perfection of all virtues, but the disposition to all virtues is humility. None of them can be without another one.

Our conclusion, with help of St. John Climacus, is following: Love are the wings which elevate man to heaven, and humility is a solid ground under his feet, so he is not able to fall down from the high he has reached. Without love we can not fly up to heaven, and without humility we are to fall down to Sheol.

Though there are many others quotations and teaching about love and humility, and each of them deserves our attention and contemplation, the aim of this short essay was only to explain the importance and connection of charity and humility using Eastern and Western theological approach.

“Without any words”⁴⁰: to be in the likeness of God requires to clothe our charity into humility.

³⁹ ST II-II q161 a5, reply to objection 4

⁴⁰ Dr. fr. Brachet Jean-Yves

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