

***“Spiritual Theology” by Jordan Aumann, OP***

**Study Questions - Chapter Five**

*by Mr. George H. Bercaw, O.P.*

*St. Cecilia Chapter of the Dominican Laity (Nashville, Tn)*

**-Perfection of the Christian Life-**

**References: CCC**

Perfection: 1704; 1710-1715; 1771-1774

**Other Suggested References:**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *“The Cost of Discipleship”*  
(Read Chapter One where he talks about “Cheap Grace.”)  
Thomas Dubay: *“Authenticity”*  
Francis de Sales: *“Introduction to the Devout Life”*  
Dom L. Scupoli: *“Spiritual Combat”*  
Thomas Merton: *“Life and Holiness”*  
Clarence J. Enzler: *“My Other Self”*  
Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection: *“Practicing the Presence of God”*  
Unknown Author: *“The Cloud of Unknowing”* (Fourteenth Century Writer)

**Scriptural References:**

The First Epistle of St. John	Deuteronomy 6:5
Matt.7:15-21	Leviticus (19:18 Matt. 22:
Matt. 25:31-46	Matt. 22:37-39
Matt. 22:35—40	Matt. 5:48
Mark 12:28-31	Eph. 1:4
Col. 3:14	1 Thess. 4:3.
Rom. 13:10	Matt. 5:48
1 Cor. 13:13).	James 3:2
Gal. 5:6	1 John 1:8
1 Cor. 13:1-3	Eph. 4:7; 11-13;

**Introduction**

The word perfection signifies the state or condition of being completed or finished, without any excess or defect. In its Latin origin the word connotes the term of a process or activity (per factum), but in philosophy and theology the word has a wider application. The emphasis is rather

on the aspect of *totality or plenitude*, and consequently a thing is said to be perfect when it has all the fullness of being that is due to it by reason of its essence or nature.

### Questions

1. Are all Christians *obliged* to seek perfection?
2. According to Fr. Aumann, “if we are to define Christian perfection we must review the types of perfection that apply to the Christian life.” Define the following “types”:

- a. Absolute Perfection vs. Relative Perfection

Absolute perfection is attributed to the being that has the plenitude of perfection to such an extent that it not only has the fullness of being proper to itself, but that it also possesses in an eminent degree all possible perfections. Such perfection is found only in God, who is for that reason called Pure Act by the philosophers and infinitely perfect by the theologians.

Relative perfection has a threefold meaning, as St. Thomas explains in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book V, Chapter 18. It signifies:

1. that a being lacks nothing due to its nature;
  2. that there is neither excess nor defect in its faculties of operation;
- and, that it has attained its proper goal or end. (Page 69)

- b. Essential, Final and Operative Perfection

St. Thomas classifies this threefold perfection as essential perfection (*perfectio in esse*), operative perfection (*perfectio in operatione*), and final perfection (*perfectio in assecutione finis*) (Page 70)

Sometimes the perfection consists in an operation, and sometimes it consists in the attainment of an extrinsic goal. In the first case the operation is the goal; for example, the perfection of a violinist is to play the violin. In the second case the perfection consists in reaching a goal, as when a student receives a diploma. Both types of perfection may be found in one and the same person..... In this respect beatitude and perfection are synonymous terms.

It is common teaching that essential or substantial perfection consists in sanctifying grace, since sanctifying grace is the very soul of the supernatural life. Operative perfection, as we know from Scripture and theology, consists in charity.

Final perfection consists in the most intimate union with God through charity that is possible in this life, usually described as the mystical marriage or transforming union.

3. In a continuing discussion on Christian perfection, Fr. Aumann notes “the degree of sanctity coincides with the degree of love. The greater the love of God and neighbor, the greater the holiness of the individual.” Relate this statement to I Cor. 13.

### I COR. : CHAPTER 13\*

<sup>1</sup> If I speak in human and angelic tongues\* but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal.<sup>a</sup> <sup>2</sup> And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.<sup>b</sup> <sup>3</sup> If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>4</sup> \*Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated,<sup>d</sup> <sup>5</sup> it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury,<sup>e</sup> <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.<sup>f</sup>

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\* This chapter involves a shift of perspective and a new point. All or part of the material may once have been an independent piece in the style of Hellenistic eulogies of virtues, but it is now integrated, by editing, into the context of 1 Cor 12–14 (cf. the reference to tongues and prophecy) and into the letter as a whole (cf. the references to knowledge and to behavior). The function of 1 Cor 13 within the discussion of spiritual gifts is to relativize all the charisms by contrasting them with the more basic, pervasive, and enduring value that gives them their purpose and their effectiveness. The rhetoric of this chapter is striking.

\* An inventory of gifts, arranged in careful gradation: neither tongues (on the lowest rung), nor prophecy, knowledge, or faith, nor even self-sacrifice has value unless informed by love.

<sup>a</sup> 8:1; 16:14; Rom 12:9–10; 13:8–10.

<sup>b</sup> 4:1; 14:2 / 1:5; 8:1–3; 12:8 / Mt 17:20; 21:21; Col 2:3.

<sup>c</sup> Mt 6:2.

\* This paragraph is developed by personification and enumeration, defining love by what it does or does not do. The Greek contains fifteen verbs; it is natural to translate many of them by adjectives in English.

<sup>d</sup> Eph 4:2 / 1 Cor 4:6, 18; 5:2; 8:1.

<sup>e</sup> 10:24, 33; Phil 2:4, 21; 1 Thes 5:15.

<sup>f</sup> Prv 10:12; 1 Pt 4:8.

<sup>8</sup>\*Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. <sup>9</sup>For we know partially and we prophesy partially, <sup>10</sup>but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. <sup>12</sup>At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known.<sup>g</sup> <sup>13</sup>\*So faith, hope, love remain, these three;<sup>h</sup> but the greatest of these is love. <sup>1</sup>

4. What is the difference between an act of charity that is motivated by a supernatural act of love God vs. that of a purely natural inclination?

There is a great difference between an act performed simply for the specific motive of a given virtue, such as humility, and that same act performed for the love of God, which is the perfect motive of charity.

There cannot be any true charity for our neighbor or ourselves if it does not proceed from the supernatural motive of the love of God, and it is necessary to distinguish this formal act of charity from any love of neighbor that proceeds from a purely natural inclination. (Page 72)

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\* The final paragraph announces its topic, *Love never fails* (1 Cor 13:8), then develops the permanence of love in contrast to the charisms (1 Cor 13:9–12), and finally asserts love’s superiority even over the other “theological virtues” (1 Cor 13:13).

<sup>g</sup> 2 Cor 5:7; Heb 11:1 / 2 Tm 2:19; 1 Jn 3:2.

\* In speaking of love, Paul is led by spontaneous association to mention faith and hope as well. They are already a well-known triad (cf. 1 Thes 1:3), three interrelated (cf. 1 Cor 13:7) features of Christian life, more fundamental than any particular charism. *The greatest ... is love*: love is operative even within the other members of the triad (1 Cor 13:7), so that it has a certain primacy among them. Or, if the perspective is temporal, love will remain (cf. “never fails,” 1 Cor 13:8) even when faith has yielded to sight and hope to possession.

<sup>h</sup> Col 1:4; 1 Thes 1:3; 5:8.

<sup>1</sup> *New American Bible*. 2011 (Revised Edition) (1 Co 13). Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

5. How does St. John explain the intimate connection and inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor? (See the First Epistle of St. John)

The author affirms that authentic Christian love, ethics, and faith take place only within the historical revelation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The fullness of Christian life as fellowship with the Father must be based on true belief and result in charitable living; knowledge of God and love for one another are inseparable, and error in one area inevitably affects the other. Although the author recognizes that Christian doctrine presents intangible mysteries of faith about Christ, he insists that the concrete Christian life brings to light the deeper realities of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

[Now] this is how we shall know that we\* belong to the truth and reassure our hearts before him<sup>20</sup> in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.<sup>21</sup> Beloved, if [our] hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God<sup>22</sup> and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.<sup>n 23</sup> And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us.<sup>o 24</sup> Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.<sup>p</sup>

6. The text states that *“Christian perfection consists primarily in affective charity and secondarily in effective charity.”*

Define the following terms:

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<sup>2</sup> *New American Bible*. 2011 (Revised Edition) (1 Jn). Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

\* This difficult passage may also be translated “we shall be at peace before him in whatever our hearts condemn, for ...” or “and before God we shall convince our hearts, if our hearts condemn us, that God is greater than our hearts.”

<sup>n</sup> 5:15; Mt 7:7–11; 21:22; Jn 14:13–14.

<sup>o</sup> Jn 13:34; 15:17.

<sup>p</sup> 4:13; Jn 14:21–23.

This is the way in which St. Francis de Sales explains it: (Page 73)

a. Affective charity

1. we are attached to God and to everything that pleases him;
2. unites us to the goodness of God;
3. fills us with complacency
4. places in us the firm resolution, the decided intention, and the unswerving obedience by which we fulfill the mandates of his divine will and by which we suffer, accept, approve, and embrace whatever comes from his divine will.
5. makes us take pleasure in God

b. Effective or Active charity

1. we serve God and we do whatever he commands.
2. makes us do the will of God. The, benevolence, aspirations, desires, longings, and spiritual ardors, so that our spirit is submerged in God and blended with him.
3. makes us please God

7. Fr. Aumann states that charity is the primary element in perfection. He offers three sources from which this can be argued. What are those sources? (Pages 69- 71)

**a. Scriptural References:**

The First Epistle of St. John Matt.7:15-21 Matt. 25:31-46 Matt. 22:35—40 Mark 12:28-31 Col. 3:14 Rom. 13:10 1 Cor. 13:13). Gal. 5:6 1 Cor. 13:1-3	Deuteronomy 6:5 Leviticus (19:18 Matt. 22: Matt. 22:37-39 Matt. 5:48 Eph. 1:4 1 Thess. 4:3. Matt. 5:48 James 3:2 1 John 1:8 Eph. 4:7; 11-13;
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b. From the Magisterium of the Church

See the References (below) from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

c. From Theological Argument

See the *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 184, a. 1.

8. What is the relationship between charity and the virtues?

Christian perfection must be considered as a moral whole, integrated by the conjunction of those conditions that perfect the life of the Christian. It connotes a plenitude that presupposes the perfect rectification of our entire moral life. But this total rectification is not achieved by charity alone, which refers only to the end; it also involves the operations of the infused moral virtues that regulate the proper use of the means to the end. Therefore the infused moral virtues pertain to the essence of Christian perfection considered in an integral manner. (Page 71)

9. Reflect on the following statement:

“St. Teresa of Avila says: "The Lord does not look so much at the magnitude of anything we do as at the love with which we do it..."”

Illustrative examples would include: (a) the widow’s mite; (b) the publican’s prayer in the Temple

10. Reflect on the following statement from the text: *“There is no terminus to the development of charity in this life, and it can for that reason increase indefinitely. It will be quite different in heaven. There the soul will have reached its goal, and at the moment of its entrance into heaven its degree of charity will be permanently fixed according to the measure of the intensity it has attained up to the last moment on earth.”* What are the implications of this with respect to spiritual journey here on earth; that is, our daily activities?

Everything we do here on earth will have its consequences in heaven.

11. What relevance do the Evangelical Councils of *“poverty, chastity, and obedience”* have to the Lay Dominican?

The counsels do not oblige all Christians, but all Christians ought to sanctify themselves by *the conscientious observance of the precepts in the spirit of the counsels*. The effective practice of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, and obedience) is not universally obligatory, but the affective practice or spirit of the counsels obliges everyone who desires to be perfect. The first is usually verified by public vows (as in the consecrated life); the second affects all Christians in a manner compatible with their state in life.

It should also be noted, that, in addition to the three evangelical counsels, there are many other particular or private counsels that proceed from interior inspirations of the Holy Spirit and pertain to works of supererogation. Such counsels represent a particular

invitation or a concrete manifestation of the will of God for an individual person, and as such they cannot be ignored without committing an act of infidelity to grace, which is difficult to reconcile with the concept of Christian perfection. (Page76)

12. Reflect on the following statement from the text: *“If the striving for Christian perfection is of precept, it follows that it obliges all Christians. It is not restricted to priests and religious, but is rooted in the fundamental obligations assumed at baptism in the commitment to God. All Christians are obliged, and not simply “invited,” although this obligation is to aspire or strive.”*

The only thing that is really different between priest, religious, and laity, is with respect to how the striving for Christian perfection is to be accomplished; that is, one’s state in life. To be chaste, for example, would mean that the priest or religious would remain chaste in all circumstances of their life; whereas, for the single lay person, it would mean to remain chaste as long as he or she is single, and the married person, to restrict any and all sexual activity to their spouse.

13. Fr. Aumann writes *“It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.”* In light of this statement, reflect on that passage of scripture which says: *“To whom much is given, much is expected.”* Should Dominican Laity be held to higher expectations than the so-called *“average church goer”*?

I would answer, “yes”, because as Dominicans we have been well catechized and “formed” spiritually to a life that is indeed “enlightened.”

14. What are the grades of perfection?

Beginner – Proficient – Perfect

Developmentally equivalent to:

Infancy – Adolescence - Maturity

15. What must the Christian do to achieve perfection in this life? Is that possible?

1. All Christians are commanded to love God above all things and, consequently, to tend to perfection by using the means offered them in their state of life.
2. In addition to this general obligation, religious or members of a secular institute contract a special obligation by reason of their public vow, which obliges them to strive



for perfection by the practice of the evangelical counsels in the manner determined by their constitutions.

3. The diocesan priest, although not in the canonical "state of perfection," is obliged, in virtue of his priestly ordination and his ministerial office, to tend to perfection and to surpass in perfection ("the nonclerical or lay religious). (Page 77

...to be perfect in this life requires the exclusion of anything that impedes the totality of the affective movement toward God. (Page 80)

16. Is there any way in which we can verify the degree of perfection and charity determined by God for a particular soul?

"No way." (Page 81)

17. Reflect on the following statement: *"It is not God's fault if Christians resist those sufficient graces and do not attain the degree of perfection that they could have reached."*

It's all about our "choices" .... You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it take a drink!

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### **Catechism References**

**1704** The human person participates in the light and power of the divine Spirit. By his reason, he is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free will, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good. He finds his perfection "in seeking and loving what is true and good."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> GS 15 § 2.

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed.) (425). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

## IN BRIEF

- 1710** “Christ ... makes man fully manifest to man himself and brings to light his exalted vocation” (*GS* 22 § 1).
- 1711** Endowed with a spiritual soul, with intellect and with free will, the human person is from his very conception ordered to God and destined for eternal beatitude. He pursues his perfection in “seeking and loving what is true and good” (*GS* 15 § 2).
- 1712** In man, true freedom is an “outstanding manifestation of the divine image” (*GS* 17).
- 1713** Man is obliged to follow the moral law, which urges him “to do what is good and avoid what is evil” (cf. *GS* 16). This law makes itself heard in his conscience.
- 1714** Man, having been wounded in his nature by original sin, is subject to error and inclined to evil in exercising his freedom.
- 1715** He who believes in Christ has new life in the Holy Spirit. The moral life, increased and brought to maturity in grace, is to reach its fulfillment in the glory of heaven.<sup>4</sup>
- 1771** The term “passions” refers to the affections or the feelings. By his emotions man intuits the good and suspects evil.
- 1772** The principal passions are love and hatred, desire and fear, joy, sadness, and anger.
- 1773** In the passions, as movements of the sensitive appetite, there is neither moral good nor evil. But insofar as they engage reason and will, there is moral good or evil in them.
- 1774** Emotions and feelings can be taken up in the virtues or perverted by the vices.
- 1775** The perfection of the moral good consists in man’s being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his “heart.”<sup>5</sup>

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*GS Gaudium et spes*

*GS Gaudium et spes*

*GS Gaudium et spes*

*GS Gaudium et spes*

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed.) (426). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed.) (437–438). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.