



### *Catholic Cogitations by Dr. Joseph. J. Plaud, KM*



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As we begin 2024 amid a fresh set of “new year resolutions” and promises to ourselves, to our families and even to our friends and colleagues to make a better go of it in life, I invite you to consider what our aspirations, goals and hoped for achievements this year and beyond really mean for us as Knights and Dames of Malta. No matter what we aim to accomplish this new year it may be instructive to take a step back and focus on the end goal of all our strivings in life: *the desire to see God*. Whether we typically think of it this way or not, a foundational element of Catholic theology is that the *Vision of God* is the end to which we are all called. It charts our courses through a Christian life.

Modern secular philosophical positions on the relationship of God and humanity generally posit that God and the supernatural order are little more than manifestations of the alienation of man from himself (e.g. Rationalism, Fideism); or that self-expression and personal freedom based upon one’s own judgment alone is sufficient to attain meaning and happiness. Social and technological “progress” based upon an anthropocentric foundation seemingly deprives us all of God, even at times in Christian contexts. For example, take the words of Saint Irenaeus, who famously stated that “the Glory of God is man fully alive.” The force of these words appears to rest upon the activities of human beings, not God. This quotation, however, does not stop there. The second part of Irenaeus’s words continue: “but man fully alive is man when he sees God” (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book 4, chapter 20). What Irenaeus is really telling us in this patristic passage taken as a whole is that *communion with God is not only important but necessary to the perfection of human life*. In other words, the natural end of human perfection is attaining the visio beatifica, the beatific Vision of God.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reinforces this centrality: “God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (CCC, n. 27). A major difficulty arising in theological debates within the Church concerns whether God’s grace perfects or destroys nature in ultimately attaining the Vision of God. This debate emanates principally as a misconception that the desire to see God comes from the will and not the intellect in the powers of the soul. For Saint Thomas Aquinas the natural desire to see God resided in the intellect, and our nature is perfected through grace, given to us both free and undeserved from God. To Aquinas – as a universal principle – we all desire to know the cause of the things we see, the experiences we encounter. Taken to its natural conclusion, the first cause of that which we experience therefore extends and finds its fulfillment in our desire for the first and ultimate cause of things, that being God. Aquinas writes that “by the name of beatitude is understood the ultimate perfection of rational or of intellectual nature; and hence it is that it is naturally desired, since everything naturally desires its ultimate perfection” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae I*, q. 62, a. 1).

Therefore, the power of the intellect cannot be satisfied, cannot reach its own potential, short of ultimately desiring to see God. This desire, and this desire alone, fulfills our nature and is both a truth of faith and a truth of reason. Since we are called to this end in the power of our intellects, grace is an essential requirement for the soul to perform all of its actions in perfect harmony in order to pursue the ultimate end: the natural desire to see God. Grace is therefore the indispensable means required to see God. In the power of the intellect the desire to see God emanates from our nature itself and our nature is therefore perfected and not destroyed by grace.

What this means for us and our “new year resolutions” for 2024 is that for each of us to commit ourselves to more virtuous decision-making in 2024 as Catholics, it does not so much concern us what the object is that is willed – what we “want.” Rather, for the will to move to the universal and ultimate end in God is the wheelhouse of the intellect, and as such the will is a rational appetite – as long as we devote our will to the service and love of God as well as our neighbors as ourselves. Pope Benedict XVI noted that “Saint Paul speaks of faith that works through love (Gal 5:14). Paul knows that in the twofold love of God and neighbor the whole of the Law is present and carried out. Thus in communion with Christ, in a faith that creates charity, the entire Law is fulfilled” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Saint Paul*. Ignatius Press). In order to make a commitment to one or more of our personal resolutions that also represent virtuous choices in this new year of 2024, its very foundation rests on making and acting in virtuous ways; *to love God and love your neighbor in real and practical ways*. This is the way in which we all ultimately achieve the Vision of God. Happy new year!