

QUESTION 182

The Comparison of the Active Life with the Contemplative Life

Next we have to consider the comparison of the active life with the contemplative life. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Which of the two has more importance or dignity? (2) Which of them has the greater merit? (3) Is the contemplative life impeded by the active life? (4) How are the two sorts of lives ordered with respect to one another?

Article 1

Is the active life more important than the contemplative life?

It seems that the active life is more important than (*sit potior quam*) the contemplative life:

Objection 1: As the Philosopher says in *Topics* 3, “What belongs to those who are better seems to be better.” But the active life belongs to greater individuals (*pertinet ad maiores*), viz., the leaders (*ad praelatos*), who have been established in honor and power; this is why, in *De Civitate Dei* 19 Augustine says, “In our actions we must not love honor or power in the present life.” Therefore, it seems that the active life is more important than the contemplative life.

Objection 2: In the case of all habits and acts, ruling belongs to the more important ones, in the way that the military art, as more important, rules over bridle-making. But it belongs to the active life to arrange and preside over the contemplative life; this is clear from what is said to Moses in Exodus 19:21: “Go down and warn the people, lest they should want to transgress the fixed limits to seeing God ...” Therefore, the active life is more important than the contemplative life.

Objection 3: No one should be taken from what is greater in order to be assigned to lesser things; for in 1 Corinthians 12:31 the Apostle says, “Strive after the better gifts.” But there are those who are taken from the state of the contemplative life and employed in the active life, as is clear in the case of those who are transferred to the state of being a prelate. Therefore, it seems that the active life is more important than the contemplative life.

But contrary to this: In Luke 10:42 our Lord says, “Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.” But it is the contemplative life that is signified by Mary. Therefore, the contemplative life is more important than active.

I respond: Nothing prevents a thing that is more excellent in its own right (*secundum se*) from nonetheless being surpassed by another in some respect. Therefore, one should reply that the contemplative life is better, absolutely speaking, than the active life. In *Ethics* 8 the Philosopher proves this with eight arguments:

First, the contemplative life befits man with respect to what is best in him, viz., his intellect, and with respect to its proper objects, viz., intelligible things, whereas the active life is taken up with exterior things. Hence, Rachel (Genesis 29), by whom the contemplative life is signified, is thought of as a *seen principle* (*interpretatur visum principium*), whereas the active life is signified by Leah, who was “weak-eyed” (*lippis oculis*), as Gregory puts it in *Moralia* 6.

Second, the contemplative life can be more continuous, even though, as was explained above (q. 180, a. 8 and q. 181, a. 4), not with respect to the highest level of contemplation. Hence, Mary, by whom the contemplative life is signified, is described as “sitting at the Lord’s feet” the whole time (*assidue*).

Third, the delight that belongs to the contemplative life is greater than the delight that belongs to the active life. Hence, in *De Verbis Domini* [Sermon 103] Augustine says, “Martha was agitated, Mary was feasting.”

Fourth, in the contemplative life a man is more self-sufficient (*sibi sufficiens*), since he needs fewer things for it. This is why Luke 10:41 says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many

things.”

Fifth, the contemplative life is more loved for its own sake, whereas the active life is ordered toward something else. Hence, Psalm 24:16 says, “One thing I have asked of the Lord, this will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life ... that I might see the delight of the Lord.”

Sixth, the contemplative life consists in a sort of free time and quiet (*consistit in quadam vacatione et quiete*)—this according to Psalm 45:11 (“Take your time and see that I am God.”)

Seventh, the contemplative life is in accord with divine things, whereas the active life is in accord with human things. Hence, in *De Verbis Domini* [Sermon 104] Augustine says, “‘In the beginning was the Word’—behold what Mary heard. ‘And the Word was made flesh’—behold the one whom Martha served.”

Eighth, the contemplative life is in accord with what is more proper to a man, i.e., in accord with the intellect, whereas in the operations of the active life the lower powers, which are common to us and non-rational animals, have a share as well. Hence, in Psalm 35, after it says, “You, Lord, will preserve men and beasts” (35:7), it adds what is special to men, “In your light we will see light” (35:10).

Our Lord adds a ninth argument in Luke 10:42 when He says, “Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her.” In expounding on this verse in *De Verbo Domini* [Sermon 103] Augustine says, “Not ‘You have chosen a bad part’ (*tu malam*), but ‘She has chosen the better part’ (*illa meliorem*). Listen to why it is better: ‘Because it will not be taken away from her. At some future time the burden of necessity will be taken away from you, whereas the sweetness of truth is eternal’.”

Still, in a certain respect, and in a particular case, the active life should instead be chosen, because of the necessities of the present life—just as in *Topics* 3 the Philosopher likewise says, “Being a philosopher is better than becoming rich, but becoming rich is better than suffering want.”

Reply to objection 1: It is not just the active life that belongs to leaders (*ad praelatos*); they should be excellent in the contemplative life as well. Hence, in *Pastoralis* Gregory says, “A director (*rector*) should be outstanding in action and more elevated than others in contemplation.”

Reply to objection 2: The contemplative life consists in a sort of freedom for the mind. For in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “The contemplative life moves toward a sort of freedom for the mind, thinking about eternal things and not about temporal things.” And in *De Consolatione* 5 Boethius says, “Human minds have to be more free when they persevere in thinking about the divine mind, but less free when they stoop to bodily things.” Hence, it is clear that the active life does not directly rule over the contemplative life; instead, by disposing one for the contemplative life, it rules over certain works of the active life. In this, it *serves* the contemplative life rather than *ruling over* it. And this is why in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “The active life is called *servitude*, whereas the contemplative life is called *freedom*.”

Reply to objection 3: Because of the necessity of the present life, an individual is sometimes called away from contemplation to the works of the active life—yet not in such a way that he is forced to abandon contemplation entirely. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 19 Augustine says, “*Charity with respect to truth* seeks a holy idleness, while *the demands of charity* undertake honest work,” that is, the work of the active life. “If no one imposes this latter burden on us, we must free up time to look for and ponder truth. On the other hand, if it *is* imposed on us, we have to bear it because of the demands of charity—yet not in such a way that our delight in the truth is altogether abandoned, lest that sweetness be subtracted and these present demands oppress us.” And so it is clear that when an individual is called from the contemplative life to the active life, this is done not in the manner of a subtraction, but in the manner of an addition.

Article 2

Does the active life have greater merit than the contemplative life?

It seems that the active life has greater merit than the contemplative life:

Objection 1: Merit bespeaks a reward. But merit is owed for labor—this according to 1 Corinthians 3:8 (“Each individual will receive his own reward in accord with his labor”). But labor is attributed to the active life, whereas rest or quiet (*quies*) is attributed to the contemplative life; for in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “When an individual turns toward God, he must first sweat away in labor, i.e., accept Leah, in order that he might afterwards come to rest in the embraces of Rachel, so as to see the principle.” Therefore, the active life has greater merit than the contemplative life.

Objection 2: The contemplative life is a sort of beginning of future happiness. Hence, in commenting on John 21:22 (“So I will have him remain until I come ...”) Augustine says, “This can be said more explicitly: ‘Let perfect action follow me, informed by the example of my passion, but let contemplation begun here remain until I come, to be perfected when I arrive’.” And in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “The contemplative life is begun here in order that it might be brought to completion in the heavenly homeland.” But in that future life there will be no state of meriting; instead, there will be a state of receiving [a reward] for our merits. Therefore, the contemplative life seems to have less of the character of *meriting* than does the active life, but more of the character of a *reward*.

Objection 3: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “No sacrifice is more acceptable to God than zeal for souls.” But through zeal for souls an individual turns himself toward the pursuits of the active life. Therefore, it seems that the contemplative life does not have greater merit than the active life.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 6 Gregory says, “The merits of the active life are great, but the merits of the contemplative life are greater.”

I respond: As was established above (q. 83, a. 15 and *ST* 1-2, q. 114, a. 4), the root of meriting is charity. Now since, as was likewise established above (q. 25, a. 1), charity consists in love for God and neighbor, it follows, as is clear from what was said above (q. 27, a. 8), that to love God in His own right is more meritorious than to love one’s neighbor. And that which directly involves loving God is more meritorious by its genus than that which directly involves loving one’s neighbor for the sake of God.

Now the contemplative life involves the love of God directly and immediately; for as Augustine says in *De Civitate Dei* 19, “The charity of truth,” i.e., of divine truth, “seeks a holy idleness,” i.e., the holy idleness of the contemplative life. For as was explained above (q. 180, a. 4 and q. 181, a. 4), the contemplative life resides above all in divine truth. The active life, on the other hand, is ordered more directly toward love of neighbor, since, as Luke 10:40 says, “it is busy with much serving.” And so by its genus the contemplative life has more merit than the active life. And this is what Gregory says in *Homily* 3 on Ezechiel: “The contemplative life is greater in merit than the active life, since the active life labors under the stress of present work,” i.e., work in which it is necessary to assist one’s neighbors, “whereas the contemplative life with heartfelt relish has a foretaste of the coming quiet,” viz., in the contemplation of God.

However, it can happen that one individual merits more in the works of the active life than another merits in the works of the contemplative life—for instance, if, because of the abundance of his love for God and in order that God’s will might be fulfilled for the sake of His glory, he might now and then endure a separation from the sweetness of divine contemplation for a time. Similarly, in Romans 9:3 the Apostle said, “I wished to be accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren,” and, in expounding on this in *De Compunctione*, Chrysostom says, “The love of Christ so immersed His whole mind that, even though being with Christ was more desirable to him than anything else, he despised even this, because he would thus be pleasing to Christ.”

Reply to objection 1: *Exterior labor* contributes to an increase of *incidental* reward, but an increase of merit with respect to the *essential* reward consists principally in *charity*. One sign of this

charity is exterior labor tolerated for the sake of Christ, but a much more explicit sign of it is that an individual, having left aside everything that has to do with the present life, should delight in freeing up time for divine contemplation alone.

Reply to objection 2: In the state of future happiness a man arrives at what has been completed, and so no place remains for making progress through merit. But even if such a place did remain, the merit would be more efficacious because of the greater charity.

By contrast, the contemplation that belongs to the present life comes with a certain incompleteness, and one still has the means to make progress. And so contemplation does not remove the character of meriting, but instead makes for an increase of merit because of a greater exercise of divine charity.

Reply to objection 3: A sacrifice is offered to God spiritually when something is presented to Him. Among all the goods of man God finds especially acceptable the good of the human soul insofar as it is offered to Him in sacrifice.

Now an individual should offer to God, first of all, *his own soul*—this according to Ecclesiasticus 30:24 (“Have mercy on your own soul, pleasing God”); and, second, *the souls of others*—this according to Apocalypse 22:17 (“Whoever hears, let him say, ‘Come!’”). Now to the extent that a man brings his own soul or the soul of another into closer union with God (*quanto homo animam suam vel alterius propinquius Deo coniungit*), his sacrifice is more acceptable to God. Hence, someone’s applying his own soul or the souls of others to contemplation is more acceptable to God than his applying them to action.

Therefore, the merit of the active life is not being preferred to the merit of the contemplative life by the fact that [Gregory] says that no sacrifice is more acceptable to God than zeal for souls; instead, it is being shown that it is more meritorious for an individual to offer his own soul and the souls of others than to offer any other exterior gifts.

Article 3

Is the contemplative life impeded by the active life?

It seems that the contemplative life is impeded by the active life:

Objection 1: What is necessary for the contemplative life is a sort of freeing up of the mind (*quaedam vacatio mentis*)—this according to Psalm 45:11 (“Take your time, and see that I am God”). But the active life involves restlessness (*habet inquietudinem*)—this according to Luke 10:41 (“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things”). Therefore, the active life impedes the contemplative life.

Objection 2: Clarity of vision is required for the contemplative life. But the active life impedes clarity of vision; for in *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “[The active life] is weak-eyed and fertile, since when it is occupied with works, it sees less.” Therefore, the active life impedes the contemplative life.

Objection 3: One of two contraries is impeded by the other. But the active life and the contemplative life seem to have contrariety with respect to one another, since the active life is occupied with many things, whereas the contemplative life persists in contemplating a single thing; hence, they are divided by an opposition. Therefore, it seems that the contemplative life is impeded by the active life.

But contrary to this: In *Moralia* 6 Gregory says, “Let those who desire to hold on to the fortress of contemplation first prove themselves on the battlefield by the exercise of works.”

I respond: There are two respects in which the active life can be thought of:

First, with respect to *the very application to and exercise of actions*. And on this score it is clear that the active life impedes the contemplative life, since it is impossible for an individual to be simultaneously occupied with exterior actions and free for divine contemplation.

Second, the active life can be considered with respect to the fact that it *aggregates and orders the interior passions of the soul*. And in this respect the active life is an aid to contemplation, which is

impeded by disorder in the interior passions. Hence, in *Moralia* 6 Gregory says: “Let those who desire to hold on to the fortress of contemplation first prove themselves on the battlefield by the exercise of works, in order that they might carefully ascertain whether or not they still inflict evils on their neighbors; whether or not they bear with equanimity evils inflicted by their neighbors; whether or not their mind is in any way overcome with joy because of good temporal objects; whether or not they are wounded by excessive sadness if such goods are withdrawn. Then they will carefully consider, once they have drawn back within themselves in order to explore spiritual things, whether they are any longer carrying with them the shadows of corporeal things or, perhaps, whether they are by their discretion driving away any shadows that they have already carried with them.” Thus, the exercise of the active life contributes to the contemplative life by quieting the interior passions out of which arise the images by which contemplation is impeded.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: From this the reply to the objections is clear. For these arguments all concern the occupation with exterior acts, but not the effect of those acts, viz., the moderation of the passions.

Article 4

Is the active life prior to the contemplative life?

It seems that the active life is not prior to the contemplative life:

Objection 1: The contemplative life directly involves the love of God (*directe pertinet ad dilectionem Dei*), whereas the active life directly involves the love of neighbor (*ad dilectionem proximi*). But the love of God precedes the love of neighbor, since the neighbor is loved for the sake of God. Therefore, it seems that the contemplative life is likewise prior to the active life.

Objection 2: In *Super Ezechiel* Gregory says, “One should note that just as it is a good order of living to go from the active to the contemplative, so, too, the mind many times returns in a useful way from the contemplative to the active.” Therefore, it is not true absolutely speaking that the active life is prior to the contemplative life.

Objection 3: Things that befit diverse individuals do not seem to have a fixed ordering with respect to one another (*non videntur ex necessitate ordinem habere*). But the active life and the contemplative life befit diverse individuals; for in *Moralia* 6 Gregory says, “Oftentimes those who had been able to contemplate God in quiet circumstances have fallen when pressed into some occupation; and oftentimes those who might be good at living lives occupied with human affairs have been destroyed by the sword of their quiet circumstances.” Therefore, it is not the case that the active life is prior to the contemplative life.

But contrary to this: In *Homily 3* on Ezechiel Gregory says, “The active life is temporally prior to the contemplative life, since one goes from good works to contemplation.”

I respond: There are two ways in which something is said to be prior:

In one way, *by its nature*. And on this score the contemplative life is prior to the active life, since it consists in what is prior and better. Thus, it both moves and directs the active life, since, as Augustine explains in *De Trinitate* 12, higher reason, which is given over to contemplation, is compared to lower reason, which is given over to action, as a man to a woman who is to be guided by the man.

In the second way, something is prior *with respect to us*, i.e., prior *by way of generation*. And on this score the active life is prior to the contemplative life, since, as is clear from what was said above (a. 3 and q. 181, a. 1), the active life disposes one toward the contemplative life. For in the way of generation the *disposition* precedes the *form*, which is prior absolutely speaking and by its nature.

Reply to objection 1: A contemplative life is ordered not toward just any sort of love of God, but toward *perfect* love of God. By contrast, an active life is necessary for *any sort of love of neighbor at all*.

Hence, in *Homily 3* on Ezechiel Gregory says, “Those who do not neglect to do the good works that they are able to do can enter the heavenly homeland in the absence of a contemplative life, whereas without an active life they are unable to enter, i.e., if they neglect to do the good works that they are able to do.” From this it is clear that the active life also precedes the contemplative life in the way that what is common to everyone precedes by way of generation what is proper to the perfect.

Reply to objection 2: One goes from the active life to the contemplative life *according to the order of generation*, but one returns from the contemplative life to the active life *by the way of direction*, i.e., the active life is directed by contemplation—in a way similar to that in which, as described in *Ethics 2*, a habit is acquired through actions and the individual acts more perfectly through an acquired habit.

Reply to objection 3: Individuals who are prone to the passions because of their impetus toward acting are similarly more adept at the active life because of their restlessness of spirit (*propter spiritus inquietudinem*). Hence, in *Moralia 6* Gregory says, “Some individuals are so restless that when they are free from labor, they work even harder, because the more free time they have for thought, the worse the interior turmoil they have to bear.”

By contrast, some individuals naturally have a purity and quiet of mind through which they are adept at contemplation, and if they are set aside totally for action, they sustain damage. Hence, in *Moralia 6* Gregory says, “The minds of some individuals are so calm (*otiosae mentes sunt*) that if the hard work of an occupation springs up upon them, they succumb at the very outset of the action.”

However, as he himself adds afterwards, “Oftentimes love stimulates reluctant minds to work (*pigras mentes ad opus excitat*), and fear restrains minds that are uneasy in contemplation.” Hence, those who are more adept at the active life can be prepared for the contemplative life through the exercise of the active life, and, by the same token, those who are more adept at the contemplative life can undertake the exercises of the active life in order to be thereby rendered more prepared for contemplation.