

“Pati Divina”: Mystical Union in Aquinas

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Tracing the development of modern atheism, Louis Dupré illumines a curious situation in which the Christian believer finds himself: Influenced practically, though not theoretically, by the surrounding culture’s fragmented, individualistic worldview, the Christian is obliged to turn inwards for the source of sacralisation, to confront a sacred “sense of absence”¹ and an existential emptiness within his own heart, in order to reach the transcendent. This confrontation of search and emptiness is for Dupré the “true significance of the believer’s current urge towards a spiritual life,”² and from it emerges an intensive revelation of the infinite and a revitalisation of his religion.

Dupré’s reply to a world which has lost its sense of divine presence is an apophatic model of mystical experience where spiritual emptiness, transfigured in the night of divine absence, becomes a space of transcendence. The transition from atheism’s pure negation of the sacred to the paradox of divine absence and presence in apophatic mysticism is a conversion from the modern “conquering, grasping” attitude towards the real to a contemplative receptivity to the core of being and selfhood at the heart of each creature. Dupré’s “mysticism of negation”³ may have its inspiration in traditional

¹ Louis Dupré quotes Simone Weil in his article “Spiritual Life in a Secular Age,” *Daedalus* (1982), p. 25.

² “The desert of modern atheism provides the only space in which most [believers of our age] are forced to encounter the transcendent. It is a desert that in prayerful attention may be converted into the solitude of contemplation” (Dupré, “Spiritual Life in a Secular Age,” p. 27).

³ “The more the awareness of God’s presence increases, the more the idea of a similarity between God and creature recedes. . . . Since the third century, the mystical tradition of Christianity has recognized a theology in which all language is reduced to silence. . . .” (ibid., p. 27). Dupré refers to Pseudo-Dionysius’s “Dark beyond all light” in this context, apparently distinguishing the night of closed ignorance (atheism) from a night of spiritual plenitude in apophatic Christian mystics (ibid., p. 27).

Christian spiritualities such as Pseudo-Dionysius's translucent darkness or Eckhart's silence of the Godhead,⁴ but emerges within an entirely different environment than traditional mystical theologies. In reply to the secularist rejection of the very possibility of a relation to the transcendent, Dupré stresses existentialist choice (the subjective pole of religious experience) and then grafts this attitude onto the objective system of interpretations—sacraments, Scripture and community, to structure the believer's living union with God.

An alternate account of the balance between the subjective and objective elements of mystical experience, and a different account of receptivity and passivity at the higher stages of religious consciousness, is found in Aquinas's spirituality texts, the theological precursors of John of the Cross's "science of love." For Aquinas, individual religious experience and the objective mysteries of faith are bound in a seamless unity, where the reference of experience is the mystery of God's love revealed in Christ. In Aquinas's thought, mystical experience is the natural crown of the life of grace, as a "shared similitude to the divine nature"⁵ and a participation in God's inner life.

Aquinas's mystical apparatus of the infused virtues, gifts of the Spirit and discussions of prayer and the contemplative life, is embedded within the content of his moral theology, and not confined to treatments of paranormal phenomena such as ecstasy and rapture. The rupture between theology and spirituality in the seventeenth century was foreign to the medieval mind, as was the division between "mystical" and "ascetical" theology.⁶ Mystical theology was pivoted on directing souls towards beatitude, through sharpening their contemplative gaze of love on divine beauty.⁷ For Aquinas, mystical experience thus drew less on human subjective experience, the paranormal and technique, than on the divine invitation and process by which humanity is exalted from grace to glory.

In the discussion of the nature of mystical union in Aquinas's texts, one is led naturally to ask whether Aquinas himself was a mystic, according to acceptable scholarly definitions of the term "mysticism." Here, we must distinguish any documented mystical events of his life from the role that mystical

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 62, a. 1 (hereafter cited as *ST*).

⁶ The divide between spirituality (itself both "mystical" and "ascetical") and theology is traced to the seventeenth century in "Spiritual Theology" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967–1989), p. 588.

⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 1. Cf. *ST* I, q. 12, a. 9: "God . . . is the fount and principle of all being and of all truth. He would so fill the natural desire of knowledge that nothing else would be desired, and the seer would be completely beatified."

theology plays in his writings. In his history of Western Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn defines the mystical element in Christianity as "that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God."⁸ For McGinn, there is no possible separation between mysticism and mystical theology, for there is an interdependence between experience and its interpretation.⁹ All mystical experiences are mediated by context, language and tradition, such that mysticism must be discussed under three aspects: as an element of religion, as a way of life, and as an expression of the direct consciousness of God's presence. Despite wide variation and interpretations, McGinn's definition of mysticism bears affinity with the definitions of Christian writers such as Carmody¹⁰ and Egan,¹¹ as well as with secular experts such as Ellwood.¹²

The few mystical events in Aquinas's life do represent instances of "mysticism" thus defined, or as defined more specifically by those trained in the

⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1: *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. xvii.

⁹ McGinn, *Foundations*, pp. xiii–xv. In this sense, McGinn falls under the "contextualist" school of mystical scholarship, as opposed to the "core/traditionalist" school. The former group sees mystical experience and interpretation as concurrent (since all mystical experience is mediated by a cultural and religious tradition); the latter group believes that a "core" identical mystical content can be found across all mystical experiences, regardless of religious tradition. On this distinction, see: Robert Ellwood, *Mysticism and Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 1999), pp. 18–19.

¹⁰ John and Denise Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 10: "[W]hat do we suggest as a working description of mysticism? We suggest: 'direct experience of ultimate reality.'" The Carmodys believe their approach to the study of mysticism to be more inclusive than the approach of McGinn. See *ibid.*, p. 27, no. 5.

¹¹ Harvey Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), p. 9: "My emphases and point of view agree totally with that remarkable scholar of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, when she writes: '... mysticism is no isolated vision, no fugitive glimpse of reality, but a complete system of life carrying its own guarantees and obligations. . . . It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. . . . It is an ordered movement towards ever higher levels of reality, ever closer identification with the Infinite.'" The quote from Underhill refers to E. Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1961), pp. 76, 81–82.

¹² See Ellwood, *Mysticism and Religion*, Preface, p. xi: "Mystical experience is experience in a religious context that is immediately or subsequently *interpreted* by the experiencer as a direct, unmediated encounter with ultimate divine reality. This experience engenders a deep sense of unity and suggests that during the experience the experiencer was living on a level of being other than the ordinary."

Thomistic tradition as a general thirst for the beatific vision,¹³ as “the secret wisdom communicated to the soul through love,”¹⁴ or as an “experimental knowledge of the deep things of God,”¹⁵ or finally, as the “identification” with the supreme principle that is the aim and fulfillment of the universal spiritual effort.¹⁶

The most important biographical sources for the life of Thomas are the 1319 Naples canonization process and his biography by William of Tocco.¹⁷ The few miracles associated with Thomas’s life include his companion Reginald’s cure from gout after Thomas gave him a relic of St. Agnes¹⁸ and two instances of levitation and hearing Christ’s voice in connection with prayer and devotion to the Sacrament.¹⁹ Later in his life, he was known to become

¹³ In his *A Preface to Metaphysics* (English translation of *Sept leçons sur l’être* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, A Mentor Omega Book, 1961), pp. 15–16, Maritain distinguished three kinds of intellectual thirsts: a thirst for the water of science, a thirst for the water of created wisdom (for the various modes of being), and a thirst for the water of uncreated wisdom, or a desire for the vision of God. As Victor Brezick explains in his article “St. Thomas Aquinas and the Thirst for God,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* 98, no. 9 (1998), p. 13, the thirst for uncreated wisdom bears fruit in the mystical wisdom of the saints, such that theology overflows into the mystical life.

¹⁴ Here, Johnston is quoting John of the Cross, in the Thomist tradition. See: William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 4. Johnston also defines “Christian” mysticism as “nothing but a living of the Gospel at a deep level of consciousness” (*Mystical Theology*, p. 9). Johnston also asserts that “mysticism is the core of authentic religious experience” (William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978], p. 20).

¹⁵ Maritain equates religious (vs. natural) mystical experience with Aquinas’s experimental knowledge of the deep things of God in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. G. B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), p. 247.

¹⁶ See Henri de Lubac, “Mysticism and Mystery,” in Henri de Lubac, *Theological Fragments*, trans. R. Howell Balinski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), p. 51.

¹⁷ The sources for the life of Thomas, Tugwell tells us, are contained in *Fontes Vitae Sancti Thomae Aquinatis*, eds. Dominique Prümmer and Marie Hyacinthe Laurent, published in fascicles attached to *Revue Thomiste* (1911–37). See *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 291. We will be referring to the collection found in Angelico Ferrua, *Thomae Aquinatis Vitae Fontes Praecipuae* (New York: Alba, 1968), cited as *Ferrua*.

¹⁸ *Ferrua*, pp. 363–4, cited in *Tugwell*, p. 233.

¹⁹ Tugwell relates the story: “The sacristan at Naples, while Thomas was working on the *Tertia Pars*, is said to have seen Thomas raised above the ground in prayer; then he heard a voice coming from the crucifix saying, ‘Thomas, you have written well of me; what reward will you take from me for your labors?’ Thomas replied, ‘Lord, nothing except you.’” (*Tugwell*, p. 265 and *Ferrua*, pp. 79–80, from Tocco). Tocco also told the account from Paris regarding Thomas’s answer to the Masters’ disputes over the Real Presence. Many of the brethren were called to witness Thomas floating in the air after some heard Christ assuring Thomas that his answer was as correct as was humanly possible. (*Ferrua*, pp. 100–101). Tugwell points to the questionable veracity of this second instance of levitation in *Tugwell*, p. 265.

so absorbed in the Mass that he had to be roused to continue, we are told.²⁰ The most famous mystical experience of Thomas is undoubtedly the divine encounter which occurred in or around December 6, 1273, during his celebration of Mass. Of this experience Thomas said nothing, but when urged to explain why he would neither dictate nor write another word, he replied, “Everything I have written seems like straw by comparison with what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.”²¹ As one scholar has noted, “straw” is a conventional image for the literal sense of Scripture. In his encounter with ultimate reality, Thomas approached the very object of theology, the reality to which the words of faith point but cannot grasp.²² For Thomas, this stepping into the silence of the unfathomable God was not a departure from an academic life of abstractions but rather the earthly culmination of his unique fusion of logic and devotion, both harmoniously mingled in the *Summa*’s graceful architectonic and embodied in his Eucharistic hymns.²³

Because Thomas’s theological vision is balanced with the way of mystery and prayer, proofs of his personal sanctity cannot be divorced from the nature of his theological reflection. Despite its high precision and lucid clarity, theology remains a struggle of both mind and heart for the infinite mystery of God’s light, the mystery which one does not master but adores. Torrell affirms that “growing reflection on the faith was a path to sanctity for Thomas,” and that theology overflows into the spiritual life and into mysticism.²⁴ More precisely, Aquinas’s mystical theology, that is, the apparatus of the mysteries of faith itself, including the gifts of the Spirit, is a branch of *sacra doctrina* as defined in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1, that sacred teaching which exceeds human reason in its origin and nature.²⁵ For Aquinas, theological and

²⁰ *Ferrua*, pp. 73–74.

²¹ The story is told by Tocco and found in *Ferrua*, pp. 318–20. See *Tugwell*, pp. 265–66.

²² See *Tugwell*’s interpretation of the event in *Tugwell*, pp. 266–67.

²³ “Adoro te devote, latens Deitas” (“Devoutly I adore you, hidden Deity”) expresses this union, as does “Verbum Supernum” and “Pange Lingua.” Aquinas’s hymns also support the view that his mysticism is Eucharistic and thus Christological, for the soul is called from a participation in the passion of Christ to mystical union.

²⁴ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Vol. 1: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. xxi.

²⁵ *Sacra doctrina*, or sacred teaching, comprises the revealed content of Christian faith necessary for salvation. Although it does contain some truths accessible to human reason, *sacra doctrina* is provided as a remedy for human frailty, and proves necessary due to the brevity of human life. Human reason is used within sacred doctrine to provide clarity, as well as extrinsic and probable arguments. See *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1; *ST I*, q. 1, a. 8, ad 1.

mystical contemplation coalesce in the unifying “contemplation of the truth of God,” which encompasses the moral virtues, the philosophical and theological contemplation of God’s effects, and the actual contemplation of the truth of God.²⁶ In the strictest sense, contemplation is not the struggle towards the light (theology) but a penetrating, direct gazing of the mind at the truth, which culminates in love.²⁷ All types of contemplation, however, are united in their first principle, and fulfill the intellect in view of the truth of God.²⁸ Thus, theology and the spiritual life are interdependent in Thomas’s writings: theology is the essential condition of the spiritual life, and the spiritual life gives theology its guiding themes, its longing for the eternal light and awareness of its limits as the *theologia viatorum*.

THE “SUFFERING” OF DIVINE THINGS

In contrast to the speculative knowledge of God possessed by theologians, connatural knowledge of divine things springs from the supernatural gift of wisdom, which delivers an affective, experiential contact with God as the result of charity.²⁹ It is by the gift of wisdom that the believer comes to “suffer” the things of God, to taste the sweetness of His inner life, and to enjoy the incomparable delights of the contemplative life.³⁰ As a sensitivity to divine things based on connaturality, wisdom is an experiential love for the reality

²⁶ This dovetailing of religious and mystical contemplation occurs in his treatise on the Contemplative Life (*ST II-II*, qq. 179–82). See *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 4: “. . . ad vitam contemplativam pertinet aliquid dupliciter: uno modo, principaliter; alio modo, secundario vel dispositive. Principaliter . . . pertinet contemplatio divinae veritatis, quia huiusmodi contemplatio est finis totius humanae vitae . . . Quae quidem in futura vita erit perfecta, quando videbimus eum “facie ad faciem”; unde et perfectos beatos faciet. Nunc autem contemplatio divinae veritatis competit nobis imperfecte . . . unde per eam fit nobis quaedam inchoatio beatitudinis. . . . Unde Philosophus *X Ethic.* in contemplatione optimi intelligibilis ponit ultimam felicitatem hominis. . . .”

²⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 179, a. 3, ad 1 and ad 3.

²⁸ *ST II-II*, q. 179, a. 4, ad 4.

²⁹ *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 2; cf. *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 4: “Dicendum quod sapientia quae est donum Spiritus Sancti, sicut dictum est, facit rectitudinem iudicii circa res divinas, vel per regulas divinas de aliis, ex quadam connaturalitate sive unione ad divina. Quae quidem est per caritatem. . . .”

³⁰ “Since, then, the contemplative life consists chiefly in the contemplation of God, of which charity is the motive . . . it follows that there is delight in the contemplative life, not only by reason of the contemplation itself, but also by reason of the Divine love. . . . Hence it is written (Ps. 33.9): ‘O taste and see that the Lord is sweet’” (*ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 7). Cf. *ST II-II*, q. 97, a. 2, ad 2; *ST II-II*, q. 162, a. 3, ad 1, and other texts that will be reviewed.

known, an affective experience of love and spiritual sweetness which enables the just man to know God and creatures from the divine standpoint. And it is charity that joins taste or affectivity to the knowledge of wisdom, adding the experience of delight and spiritual sweetness.³¹ In addition to the affective quality of wisdom which lends an "experimental" or "quasi-experimental"³² character to the mystical experience proper to wisdom, Aquinas views the idea of "suffering" divine things through the lens of different types of knowledge:

[W]isdom denotes a certain rectitude of judgment according to the Eternal Law. Now rectitude of judgment is twofold: first, on account of perfect use of reason; secondly, on account of a certain connaturality with the matter which one has to judge. . . . Accordingly . . . it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Ghost to judge aright about [divine things] on account of connaturality with them: thus Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* ii) that "Hierotheus is perfect in divine things, for he not only learns, but suffers divine things."³³

While wisdom is essentially in the intellect, it differs from the wisdom of philosophy in presupposing love as its principle,³⁴ which bathes the object in an intuitive light. Aquinas's understanding of the gift of wisdom as a dimension of experiential love of God, or "experimental" knowledge of God, then, is grounded in his division of the types of contemplation and wisdom.

Contemplatio is a term used analogously by Thomas to refer to three levels of intellectual vision: natural, revealed contemplation ("acquired" contemplation), and supernatural or "mystical" contemplation. In all cases, contemplation refers to divine truth and its related effects, and is the work of the speculative intellect.³⁵ Natural contemplation is the work of the philosophers, and ascends from creatures to grasp metaphysical truths about God. Revealed contemplation is the fruit of theological study, and attains God in Himself

³¹ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2, and ad 1: ". . . Augustinus loquitur de sapientia quantum ad suam causam. Ex qua etiam sumitur nomen sapientiae, secundum quod saporem quemdam importat." See *Scriptum super Sententiis* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1956), Bk. III, q. 35, a. 2, q. 1, ad 3.

³² A just man, Aquinas says, possesses a "quasi-experimental" knowledge of the divine Persons in his soul: *I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3; *I Sent.*, d. 15, q. 2, ad 5; *ST* I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2. A good study which proves both historically and contextually that Aquinas designated "quasi-experimental" knowledge as *affective*, and not as cognitive, is the article of John Dedek: "Quasi Experimentalis Cognitio: A Historical Approach to the Meaning of St. Thomas" *Theological Studies* 22 (1961), pp. 357-90.

³³ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2. See *ST* I, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.

³⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2; *III Sent.*, d. 35, q. 2, a. 1.

³⁵ *ST* II-II, qq. 179-82.

from revealed principles, but through the imperfect medium of faith.³⁶ Mystical contemplation, the preserve of those sanctified souls infused with charity, also attains God's inner life, but through a supernatural mode. Both the principle and term of this contemplation is in the appetite, for charity animates the mind and establishes immediate union with the object, and the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life is delight in the object loved.³⁷ Finally, the beatific vision, or the science of the blessed, is the knowledge of God through His own essence.³⁸

For an understanding of Aquinas's mystical thought, an understanding of the divisions of wisdom and contemplation are central. Some scholars confuse mystical and natural contemplation in the claim that Aquinas's metaphysical discussions of God as *Ipsum Esse* are in fact apophatic mystical meditations.³⁹ Both Maritain and Garrigou-Lagrange, however, clearly grasp

³⁶ On the distinction between the contemplation of the *philosophi* and the *sancti*, see, e.g. *I Sent.*, prol.: "Contemplatio autem Dei est duplex. Una per creaturas, quae imperfecta est, ratione iam dicta, in qua contemplatione Philosophus, *X Ethic.*, cap. ix, felicitatem contemplativam posuit, quae tamen est felicitas viae. . . . Est alia Dei contemplatio, qua videtur immediate per suam essentiam; et haec perfecta est, quae erit in patrie et est homini possibilis secundum fidei suppositionem. . . ." See *ST I*, q. 1. a. 6; *III Sent.*, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2. On the division of theology into natural and revealed, see *In Librum Boethii de Trinitate*, ed. Decker (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), q. 5, a. 4, ad 7 (Hereafter cited as *In de Trin.*). Although theology grasps God in Himself, it is not a quidditative knowledge, since Aquinas holds that in the present life it is impossible to know the essence of immaterial substances by either natural knowledge or by revelation (*In de Trin.* q. 6, a. 3; cf. John Wippel, "Quidditative Knowledge of God" in John Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* [*Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 10] (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), pp. 215–41.

³⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 1: ". . . vita contemplativa illorum esse dicitur qui principaliter intendunt contemplationi veritatis. Intentio autem est actus voluntatis. . . . Et ideo vita contemplativa quantum ad ipsam essentiam actionis, pertinet ad intellectum; quantum autem ad id quod movet ad exercendam talem operationem, pertinet ad voluntatem, quae movet omnes alias potentias, et etiam intellectum ad suum actum. . . . Et propter hoc Gregorius constituit vitam contemplativam in 'caritate Dei,' in quantum scilicet aliquis ex dilectione Dei inardescit ad eius pulchritudinem conspiciendam. Et quia unusquisque delectatur cum adeptus fuerit id quod amat, ideo vita contemplativa terminatur ad delectationem, quae est in affectu, ex qua etiam amor intenditur." On the immediate union with God effected by grace, see *I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 1; *I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 3; *II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 2, a. 2 and ad 4; *ST I*, q. 38, a. 1.

³⁸ *ST I*, q. 2 ad 3: "The object of the heavenly vision will be the First Truth seen in itself, according to 1 John 3:2: 'We know that when He shall appear, we shall be like to Him: because we shall see Him as He is. . . .'" On the impossibility of the wayfarer's quidditative knowledge of God, see, for example: *ST I*, q. 12, a. 11; *ST I-II*, q. 5, a. 3 (See n. 17 above).

³⁹ William Johnston implies this association in his book *Mystical Theology*: "The central problem of Greek philosophy—as it is the central problem of *mystical theology*—was the celebrated paradox of *the one and the many*. . . . How do we reconcile

Aquinas’s distinction between an intellectual view of the First Cause, accompanied by wonder,⁴⁰ and infused contemplation, which operates according to the superhuman mode of the gifts of the Spirit.⁴¹ The metaphysical gaze on divine truth stands “at the summit of the created world, and from that vantage point, it looks upon the inaccessible entrance towards which all created perfections converge.”⁴² Mystical contemplation, on the other hand, attains God’s nature and selfhood and thus is the partial fulfillment of the experience of faith, and an affirmation of the promise that grace makes us sharers in the divine nature.⁴³

The gift of wisdom, like the Aristotelian virtue of wisdom, has three functions, all of which permeate the interior life.⁴⁴ First, the gift of wisdom *contemplates* divine reality, for the Spirit moves the intellect to penetrate the deep things of God.⁴⁵ Because the motive and result of contemplation is charity (the love of God above all things), the process is one of ceaseless interaction of intellect and will, manifesting itself in an intuitive, loving gaze on divine beauty.⁴⁶ Thomas calls this act a “sight of the Beginning,”⁴⁷ a

the experience of unity with the experience of multiplicity? . . .” (W. Johnston, *Mystical Theology* [London: Harper Collins, 1995], pp. 47–48). Johnston goes on to describe the real distinction between existence and essence and their identity in God, and the inaccessibility of God’s nature through human cognition. Richard Woods locates Aquinas’s mystical thought in his “threefold way” (*via affirmativa, negativa* and *supereminetia*) in the attempt to illumine Aquinas’s Dionysian heritage (Richard Woods, *Mysticism and Prophecy: The Dominican Tradition* [New York: Orbis, 1998], pp. 67–72).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., *ST I*, q.1, a. 6.

⁴¹ See Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation according to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, trans. Thomas Doyle (St. Louis, Missouri: Herder, 1954), pp. 221–23; p. 323, no. 44: “It would be a gross error to confound this infused contemplation with the philosophical meditation in which one thinks that the divine essence surpasses all our concepts.” See Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), pp. 248–51.

⁴² Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 251.

⁴³ See *ST III*, q. 62, a. 1: “. . . grace is nothing else than a certain shared similitude to the divine nature.” See *I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 1; *I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 3; *I Sent.*, d. 18, q. 3, a. 6; *ST I*, q. 38, a.1.

⁴⁴ For the three functions of the gift of wisdom, see *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 1. The three functions are outlined well in *St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologiae* [Blackfriars ed.] (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), vol. 35, appendix 4, pp. 200–02. Henceforth, all references to this edition of the *Summa* or to appendices therein, will be cited as *Blackfriars*, with appropriate pagination.

⁴⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 3, ad 3.

⁴⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 1. See *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 6 on Aquinas’s interpretation of Dionysius’s threefold movement of the soul in mystical contemplation.

⁴⁷ *ST II-II* 180, q. 1, ad 2, where Aquinas quotes Gregory’s phrase, “visio primi principii.”

“sight of God’s beauty,”⁴⁸ the “contemplation of divine truth”⁴⁹ or the “contemplation of divine things in themselves.”⁵⁰

The second function of the gift of wisdom is *judgment* of both divine and creaturely things, from the viewpoint of an affective experience of divine things.⁵¹ In its function of speculative judgment, the intellect judges, through internal experience, the divine attributes, such as God’s goodness, mercy or justice. As one scholar puts it, the soul becomes convinced of God’s power because “it has been brushed by that power and sometimes almost crushed by [it],” or the soul understands God’s peace by being immersed in that peace.⁵² In its practical function, the intellect judges human actions in relation to the soul’s participation in ultimate goodness, through tasting the mystery of God and drawing from the well of divine friendship.

Wisdom’s third function is to put an *order* into things.⁵³ Thus, wisdom aligns the thoughts and actions of persons to ultimate beatitude according to priority and posteriority, and generates the peace which is the tranquillity of order.⁵⁴ Regarding all the functions of wisdom, it is by appreciating and entering into divine love that one is disposed to operate under the impulse of the Spirit, and exercise this supernatural gift.

MODE OF UNION WITH GOD

Through contemplation, God is present to the soul not in the order of substance or causality, but in an immaterial union of operation which is the intellectual act. While He is present to the whole of nature by essence, presence and power in a union of causality,⁵⁵ His personal gift of love to man is a Self-communication and call to share in His inner life, through becoming a new creation in grace.⁵⁶ In addition to willing the good of the rational being’s

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 3.

⁵¹ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

⁵² *Blackfriars*, vol. 35, appendix 4, p. 201.

⁵³ “Sapientis est ordinare,” *In Duodecim Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1964), Proemium. Cf. *ST* I, q. 1; *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 1.

⁵⁴ Augustine’s definition of peace as the tranquillity of order is found in *ST* I, q. 103, a. 2, obj. 3; *ST* II-II, q. 29, a. 1, ad 1; *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 6. In the final text, Aquinas says that the seventh beatitude corresponds to the gift of wisdom, precisely in the fact that the role of the peacemaker is to create an order.

⁵⁵ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 3.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., *ST* I-II, q. 110, a. 4; *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4, ad 7–8.

nature, God wills His very self, His eternal goodness, to us,⁵⁷ so that He comes to dwell within the soul (*habitare in ea cum sicut in templo suo*), as the known is within the knower and the beloved within the lover.⁵⁸ Of the grace-relationship Thomas says,

God is said to love all creatures in that he bestows on them the goodness of their natures. But there is love literally and completely, as being like friendship, when he loves a creature not as an artisan loves his work, but . . . as a friend loves a friend; a love by which God draws the creature into the fellowship of his own joy, so that the creature's glory and blessedness become those by which God himself is blessed.⁵⁹

God calls the creature into glory, then, through the unconditional gift of Himself,⁶⁰ for love is the first gift we give to the one we love, and love is the first gift through which all gifts are given.⁶¹ It should be noted that in positing a gulf between God's mode of presence to man and to nature, Aquinas is not denying the immanent causality of God in creatures through His constant willing of their being and operations, but rather distinguishing *nonrational* "imaging" of God from *rational* "participation" in the divine life through the human acts of knowing and loving, which are the highest conceivable imitations of God.

While contemplation and the exercise of supernatural wisdom are intellectual operations, both start and end in charity and thus in the appetitive power. Since God can be loved better than He can be known in this life,⁶² the affective union with God is more noble and yet more mysterious than the cognitive union, and is the most intimate.⁶³ As an effect of divine friendship, the connatural operation

⁵⁷ *ST I-II*, q. 110, a. 1: "According to that special love God draws the rational creature above the condition of his nature to share in the divine good. On the basis of such a love God is said to love someone in a literal sense (*simpliciter*), because in this love God wills to the creature literally the eternal good which is himself." See *ST I-II*, q. 26, a. 4 and ad 4; *II Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2.

⁵⁸ See *ST I*, q. 43, a. 3 on the indwelling of the Trinity in the soul: "There is one common way in which God is in all things by essence, power and presence, as a cause in the effects that share in the perfection of the cause. Over and above this common way, there is one special way that belongs to the rational creature, in whom God is said to be present as the known in the knower and the beloved in the lover. And because in knowing and loving the rational creature by its act reaches God himself, according to this special way God is said not only to be in the rational creature, but also to dwell there as in his temple."

⁵⁹ *II Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2. The translation is from *Blackfriars*, vol. 31, appendix 2, no. 14, p. 189.

⁶⁰ *ST I*, q. 38, a. 1.

⁶¹ See *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2.

⁶² *ST I*, q. 8, a. 3.

⁶³ *ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3: "Knowledge is perfected by the thing known being united, through its likeness, to the knower. But the effect of love is that the thing itself which is loved is in a way united to the lover. Consequently the union caused by love is closer than that which is caused by knowledge." See *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 2, ad 2; *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1.

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of infused wisdom attains an immediate union with God, but is nonetheless an obscure, indirect knowledge of His essence, for it also rests on faith.⁶⁴ Like John of the Cross's "secret wisdom" infused into the soul through love,⁶⁵ Aquinas's divine contemplation is free from imagery, and passive not with respect to bodily forms but only with respect to the promptings of the Spirit.

In a text on the divine missions, Aquinas deftly combines the notions of the presence of God, the "experimental" or affective knowledge which is the Gift of Wisdom, and participation in the nature of God:

The soul by grace is made like to God . . . and since the Holy Spirit is love, the soul is made like the Holy Spirit by the gift of charity. . . . The Son is the Word—not any kind of word, but a Word breathing forth love . . . knowledge with love . . . and that enlightenment of the intellect . . . breaks forth out into love. . . . And so Augustine says, "the Son is sent when he is known and perceived by anyone." Now perception denotes an experimental knowledge, and this is Wisdom, properly speaking.⁶⁶

The language of *cognitio experimentalis* has received diverse interpretations by Thomistic scholars, but Thomas clearly says that the knowledge of the Son is followed by the love of charity, which gives experimental knowledge an *affective* meaning, not a cognitive meaning of being "quasi-perceptual."⁶⁷ John Dedek argues persuasively that the "quasi-experimental" knowledge of God attained by the gift of wisdom is experimental in a cer-

⁶⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 65, aa. 2–3; *ST* I-II, q. 66, aa. 2 and 6; *ST* II-II, q. 23, aa. 7–8, for example.

⁶⁵ John of the Cross gives several reasons for the "secrecy" of the wisdom which is divine contemplation: the wisdom is nonconceptual and infused into the soul through love; its effects are ineffable and not clothed in sensory or imaginative imagery; and it has the characteristic of "hiding the soul within itself," engulfing the person in a "secret abyss." See John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Book II, chaps. 17–18 (in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, eds. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, trans. K. Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies Publications, 1973), pp. 368–73).

⁶⁶ *In De Trin.* Bk. IX, chap. 10. Many medieval writers, as also John of the Cross, are known to define contemplation as a "loving knowledge."

⁶⁷ On the debate among scholars this century, see Dedek, "*Quasi Experimentalis Cognitio*," especially pp. 383–85. Aquinas calls the knowledge of wisdom "quasi-experimental," Dedek argues, not to distinguish it from ordinary discursive knowledge, but to transfer the proper sense of *experientia* in the senses to its locus in the will, where an act of the appetite delights in its object: "Since the act of an appetitive power is a kind of inclination to the thing itself, the application of the appetitive power to the thing, insofar as it cleaves to it, gets by a kind of similitude, the name of sense, since, as it were, it acquires direct knowledge of the thing to which it cleaves, insofar as it takes complacency in it" [*ST* I-II, q. 15, a. 1] (p. 385).

tain sense (*quodammodo*)—in as much as it is joined to an *affective* experience of love and taste.⁶⁸

Supernatural wisdom thus attains to a more intimate union with God than is possible through the mere virtue of wisdom, transforming the bitter into the sweet and labor into rest in human acts,⁶⁹ and springing from love, its effect is to melt the hardness of hearts.⁷⁰ While casting its rays across the soul's path, wisdom acts like the variety of colors reflected through a prism. It arrays a spectrum of realizations from a bright unknown world, extending and illumining one's consciousness, sometimes deliciously, sometimes painfully, in the process of revealing the divine mystery.

PASSIVITY AS RECEPTIVITY TO THE SPIRIT

Aquinas's doctrine of the infused virtues and gifts stands in stark contrast to the modern idea of mysticism as a set of supernatural experiences. The latter idea has been traced to Teresa of Avila⁷¹ and the general cultural shift in the West away from mystical theology and the objective participation in the mystery of Christ, to an interest in individuals' subjective feeling states. The gifts are not transitory experiences but rather habits which perfect the infused virtues and render the soul more docile to the promptings (*instinctus*) of the Holy Spirit.⁷² Two points stand out in Aquinas's study of the gifts in this connection: first, his insistence on the soul's passivity and receptivity in the texts on the gift of wisdom, and second, the difference between the apophatic emptying that is required for mystical ascent for Aquinas and the engrossment in subjective, supernatural phenomena that dominates modern accounts of mysticism and masquerades as interiority.

Regarding the first issue (the soul's receptivity to the Holy Spirit as an effect of the gift of wisdom), an explanation of the meaning of the "divine mode" as applied to the operation of the Gifts of the Spirit, is in order. Regarding this original teaching of Thomas,⁷³ various scholars have noted the similarity between Aquinas's teaching on the soul's surrender to the impulses of divine grace and John of the Cross's notion that higher mystical states are

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 385.

⁶⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1-3.

⁷⁰ On the four effects of love as a passion, see *ST* I-II, q. 38, a. 5.

⁷¹ See Andrew Louth, "Mysticism" in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 273.

⁷² *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 3: "The gifts of the Holy Spirit are habits (or essentially supernatural, permanent qualities) whereby man is perfected to obey readily the Holy Spirit." Cf. *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 2, ad 1; *III Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 1.

⁷³ On the development of this notion of docility to the Spirit, see *Blackfriars*, vol. 24, appendix 4.

marked by an increased passivity, occurring in the stage of ascent called the passive night of the spirit.⁷⁴ The passivity of the soul with respect to the movement of the Holy Spirit flows from the superhuman or divine mode of perfection of the Gifts: “In the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the position of the human mind is of one moved rather than of a mover.”⁷⁵ And:

The mode of an act is determined by its proper measure. Since the Gifts are for the sake of a superhuman mode of action, their activity must therefore be measured by a standard that is different from that of human virtue. This measure is the Divinity itself, in which man participates in his own mode so that he no longer acts humanly, but as one who has become God by participation.⁷⁶

The type of inspiration is characterised as one of operating grace, by which the soul receives with docility the direction of the Spirit, which the soul could not produce by its personal efforts merely aided by grace.⁷⁷ Garrigou-Lagrance illumines the issue of the soul’s docility under the influence of operative grace:

When the divine predominates in an act or a state to such an extent that this act and this state cannot be produced by our industry or human activity aided by the actual grace required for the exercise of the virtues, then that state is called passive. For example, when the wind blows with such force that a boat advances without the necessity of rowing, its progress does not depend on the activity of the oarsmen.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ On this comparison, see Leonard McCann, *The Doctrine of the Void as Propounded by St. John of the Cross in his Major Prose Works and as Viewed in Light of Thomistic Principles* (Toronto: Basilian Press, 1953) pp. 123–32; Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, pp. 343–44, quoting from John’s *Spiritual Canticle*: “Even as the breeze stirs the hair and causes it to flutter upon the neck, even so does the breeze of the Holy Spirit move and excite strong love that it may make flights to God; for without this Divine wind, which moves the faculties to the practice of Divine love, the virtues work not. . . .” He says that John’s teaching here echoes that of Aquinas and identifies this docility to the Spirit with the stage of spiritual betrothal in John’s *Spiritual Canticle* (p. 343). Maritain also notes Teresa of Avila’s connection between mystical ascent and passivity, noting that for Teresa, the “prayer of recollection” is still only “acquired” contemplation, since it follows the natural mode, in that it is still active, and not passive (p. 280).

⁷⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 52, a. 2, ad 1.

⁷⁶ *III Sent.*, d. 34, q. 1, a. 3.

⁷⁷ Garrigou-Lagrance, *Christian Perfection*, pp. 325–26, no. 51, in reference to *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2: “Hence in that effect in which our mind is moved and does not move, but in which God is the sole mover, the operation is attributed to God, and it is with reference to this that we speak of operating grace.”

⁷⁸ Garrigou-Lagrance, *Christian Perfection*, p. 326. This mode differs in order, not degree, from the human mode, which accompanies the exercise of the infused virtues. In the latter case, divine inspiration operates like a breeze facilitating the labor of the oarsman (p. 326).

While the human exercise of virtue takes *reason* as its measure, man's participation in divinity confers a higher measure in the case of the Gifts, namely, the Spirit Itself. By imparting a divine mode to human activity, the Gifts exceed even the infused virtues, perfecting them by means of their elevated measure.⁷⁹ However, human reason and free will continue to operate during the exercise of the Gifts, since God moves each being according to its mode, says Thomas.⁸⁰ An analogy helps to show that the passivity with respect to the Spirit is not to be understood as "pure" passivity, but rather in the Aristotelian sense of "receiving," presupposing natural powers: Aquinas says that receptivity to the Spirit is the fruit of the Gifts, just as appetites' obedience to reason results from practising the moral virtues.⁸¹ In both cases, reason and free will are operative, though under the influence of a higher source. Just as the moral virtues make the appetites obedient to reason, so the Gifts make the intellect and will amenable to the movement of the Spirit, and capable of performing the works called the "beatitudes."⁸²

Connected to Aquinas's insistence on passivity at the higher reaches of spiritual development is the relative absence of supernatural phenomena in his accounts of mystical ascent. From the soul's special receptivity follows a gentle interiority that generates a deep peace, even in the midst of troubles, which radiates to others.⁸³ The gift of wisdom thus corresponds to the beatitude of the peacemakers, who contemplate all events within the hidden face of God, and communicate the tranquillity of order in proportion to their degree of charity. Far from a preoccupation with paranormal states or even with the charismata, Aquinas's ruling concern is the attainment of the freedom of surrender to God's action in the soul, and the soul's entrance into God's intimate inner life.⁸⁴

In scholastic language, "sanctifying grace" is nobler than "gratuitous graces" or the charismata⁸⁵ on three counts, all of which involve the idea that

⁷⁹ See *ST I*, q. 34, a. 1; See *ST I*, q. 36, a. 3. Although the gifts exceed the infused virtues according to their divine *mode* (which confers passivity to the Spirit), they do not exceed the infused virtues in their nature. See *ST I-II*, q. 68, a. 8: "As the intellectual virtues . . . regulate the moral virtues, so the theological virtues . . . regulate the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

⁸⁰ *ST II-II*, q. 52, a. 1: "God moves each being in accordance with its mode. But it is proper to the rational creature to be moved to action through the enquiry of reason; and this enquiry is called counsel. . . ."

⁸¹ For this analogy, see *ST I-II*, q. 68, aa. 3-5.

⁸² See *ST I-II*, q. 70, a. 2 on the beatitudes.

⁸³ *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 6.

⁸⁴ On this subject, see *In Librum Beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio*, ed. C. Pera (Turin: Marietti, 1950), chap. 7, lect. 4; *I Sent.*, d. 8, q.1, a. 1, ad 5.

⁸⁵ *ST I-II*, q. 111, a. 5. In *ST I-II*, q. 111, a. 1, Aquinas lists the charismata as found in 1 Cor. 12:8-10.

sanctifying grace unites a person immediately to God: This grace is at once more necessary, useful, and permanent than are graces *gratis datae*, he says.⁸⁶ The mystical life flourishes in the ardor of love, tasting and suffering the hidden life of God through an apophatic emptying of self. Aquinas says that the fusion of the soul to God, produced by love, “takes place when the soul, leaving all things and forgetting itself, is united to the splendors of the divine glory and . . . is illumined in the splendid depths of divine Wisdom.”⁸⁷ This entry into what Dionysius termed “the transluminous darkness”⁸⁸ occurs through prayer and mortification, not through phenomenologically observed esoteric psychological states.⁸⁹ Aquinas sometimes even uses the term “dissolution” with respect to the soul’s union with God,⁹⁰ and would thus agree with Turner’s statement that “experientialism is . . . the ‘positivism’ of Christian spirituality. It abhors the experiential vacuum of the apophatic, rushing to fill it with the plenum of the psychological.”⁹¹

For Aquinas, the apophatic element is found in the contemplation which joins us experimentally to a hidden God, Who discloses Himself through the new modality of the gifts and joins us to Himself connaturally through charity. Aquinas rejects the intellectual certitude so often craved by religious fundamentalists and asserts that the divine presence in the soul cannot be known with certainty in this life, but only through certain signs, which confer a security of the affections.⁹² The apophatic element is also found in Aquinas’s agreement with Dionysius’s rejection of physical imagery and discursive reasoning in the three movements of contemplation.⁹³

As well, Aquinas’s apophaticism is located in his adoption of Augustine’s and Dionysius’s threefold way of purification, illumination and perfection⁹⁴

⁸⁶ On this topic, see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace: Commentary on the “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas, Ia IIae, q. 109–14*, trans. The Dominican Nuns (St. Louis, Missouri: Herder, 1952) pp. 157–81.

⁸⁷ *In Librum Beati Dionysii de divinibus nominibus expositio*, chap. 7, lect. 14.

⁸⁸ “Mystical Theology,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, ed. and trans. John Jones (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1980).

⁸⁹ In this sense, Aquinas bears some similarity to the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, for the latter also denounces the varieties of what Denys Turner calls “experientialism.” See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 259.

⁹⁰ *ST II-II*, q. 24, a. 9

⁹¹ Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, p. 259.

⁹² *ST I-II*, q. 112, a. 5 on whether a man can know that he has grace.

⁹³ *ST II-II*, q. 180, a. 6.

⁹⁴ See Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,” in *Pseudo-Dionysii Aeropagitae De Caelesti Hierarchia*, ed. P. Henddrix (Leiden: Brill, 1959), chap. 5, *passim*. Like Dionysius, Aquinas applies the distinction to the diaconate, priesthood and episcopate (*IV Sent.*, d. 4, q.1, a.1).

which dovetails into his analysis of the three progressive degrees of charity exercised by the sanctified soul. The first stage in charity is exercised by beginners, whose main effort is to strive against sin (the purgative way). The second stage is practiced by those making progress in the virtues by the light of faith (the illuminative way). The third stage belongs to the perfect, who live in union with God through charity (the unitive way).⁹⁵ These three stages constitute the infancy, adolescence and adulthood of the spiritual life, and denote a gradual increase in the soul's passive purification and docility to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Although Thomas lacks John of the Cross's elaborate apparatus of the active and passive nights of sense and spirit, his direct correspondence of the degrees of charity with the degrees in the moral virtues, as well as in the gifts and in contemplation,⁹⁶ derives from a similar insight. In both cases, the soul voids itself of all possible obstacles to complete union with God, and ascends from the level of self-interested passions⁹⁷ to complete similitude with God (and self-forgetfulness) through an initial mastery of the "social" virtues to a habit of the "perfecting" virtues and finally to the attainment of the "perfect" virtues.

One's success in negotiating this way of perfection is directly proportionate to one's degree of charity, which in turn corresponds to one's docility to the direction of the Spirit through the gifts. In this way, the infused virtues take on a divine character: prudence, for example, counts as nothing the things of the world, while the virtue of temperance neglects the needs of the body.⁹⁸ The radical exclusion of everything that would hinder the soul from belonging completely to God appears with equal clarity on the level of fraternal charity. In the most perfect degree of charity towards one's neighbor, one forsakes not only external goods, but also one's spiritual goods, and one's life if necessary.⁹⁹

In conclusion, Aquinas's mystical theology can be said to labor under a double purification or negation. First, among his theological statements we find that the *intellect* labors under a darkness of "learned ignorance,"¹⁰⁰ to

⁹⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 9; *II Sent.* d. 9, q. 2, ad 8.

⁹⁶ Aquinas speaks of the degrees of charity in *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 9; of the degrees of the moral virtues in *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 5, and of the movements or varieties of contemplation in *ST* II-II, q. 180, a. 6.

⁹⁷ The passions are progressively checked and silenced by these various virtues: *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 5 and ad 2.

⁹⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 61, a. 5.

⁹⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 184, a. 2, ad 3, quoting *2 Corinthians* 12:15.

¹⁰⁰ The notion of *docta ignorantia* or "learned ignorance" (such that we fail to know God as He is in Himself) was developed in the fifteenth century by Nicholas of Cusa; and fourteenth century mystical writers such as the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* also based their apophatic brand of mystical prayer on the unknowability of God, and the consequent failure of speech in reference to Him.

the effect that God cannot be known *sicuti est* even through the revelation of grace, so that we are united in this life with God as with something unknown to us.¹⁰¹ Aquinas is equally insistent that infused contemplation is more perfect in proportion as it is freed from all sensible imagery.¹⁰² Second, there is the progressive voiding of the *will* in its project of self-denial,¹⁰³ on two levels: first, in the self-motivated active asceticism of the way of purgation, where the gift of knowledge creates a night of the senses by illuminating the vanity of all creatures;¹⁰⁴ second, in the exercise of the higher, contemplative gifts of the Spirit, namely, understanding and wisdom, which render the soul progressively more passive and open to spiritual trials and consolations. In the gift of understanding, the mysteries of faith are penetrated by a supernatural light, strengthening faith, opening the soul to God's infinite grandeur and the depths of human wretchedness, and pointing to the excess of divine intelligibility.¹⁰⁵ In the gift of wisdom, the Spirit guides one's perception and ordering of human affairs, and unites the soul by experimental knowledge to the most exalted mysteries of faith.¹⁰⁶ This night of the spirit culminates in a participation in Christ's passion such that it experiences a divine peace and order amid tribulation, and wishes for complete self-transformation, rejoicing in infirmities and persecutions for Christ, and desiring only union and dissolution in Christ.¹⁰⁷

One can begin to illumine the apophatic dimension of Aquinas's theology of spiritual transformation through its metaphysical moorings in the concept of love, which involve a dialectic of presence and absence of the beloved. Love both relates the appetite to the object in itself¹⁰⁸ and yet as an end or good which moves the will and draws it to itself,¹⁰⁹ the loved object escapes complete analysis, such that the unknown is still loved in the beloved.¹¹⁰ The

¹⁰¹ See *ST I*, q. 12, a. 13, ad 1; *ST I*, q. 13, a. 1, ad 2.

¹⁰² *ST II-II*, q. 15, a. 3.

¹⁰³ In his theology of the infused virtues and supernatural gifts, Aquinas both complements the *via negativa* tradition and lays the theological framework for John of the Cross's development of the notion of active and passive nights of sense and spirit (which void the soul of inordinate desires).

¹⁰⁴ *ST II-II*, q. 9, a. 4.

¹⁰⁵ *ST II-II*, q. 8 *et passim*.

¹⁰⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 45, aa. 4–5.

¹⁰⁷ *ST II-II*, q. 45, a. 6 explains the connection between the gift of wisdom and the beatitude of the peacemakers; the text on dissolution is *ST II-II*, q. 24, a. 9.

¹⁰⁸ As opposed to proportioning the object to the intellect's power, although some initial knowledge is required for love; see *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 6, ad 1.

¹⁰⁹ See *ST I-II*, q. 26, a. 2: ". . . the appetible object moves the appetite, introducing itself, as it were, into its intention. . . ."

¹¹⁰ See *ST I-II*, q. 27, a. 2, ad 2: "[A] thing is loved more than it is known; since can be loved perfectly, even without being perfectly known. . . ."

non-analytic character of appetite along with the existential unity of the appetible object require that the beloved be embraced as a totality, even in its factors which escape our gaze. The spirit's efforts at self-transformation through purgation or voiding are thus not a futile aim at making God the object of consciousness,¹¹¹ but are instruments aimed at creating a receptive passivity whereby the soul attunes itself to the divine action within it, rendering it docile to its inspirations (which proceed from a higher principle than human reason), and emptying it in order to be filled with the spiritual sweetness of quasi-experimental knowledge.

MYSTICAL UNION AND CHRISTIAN INTERIORITY

The hidden, detached, and dark aspects of the soul's simple gaze on divine truth are tempered by Thomas's depiction of mystical experience as both affective and as an ordinary part of the interior life of every Christian. Far from the notion that interiority is the product of technique or the manifestation of secondary phenomena, Aquinas speaks of the "mutual indwelling" of God and the soul as an effect of love, as an intimate response to the divine invitation,¹¹² and as the cause of ecstasy which impresses the beloved upon the soul.¹¹³

The contemplation which refers the soul directly to God increases in proportion with the degrees of charity,¹¹⁴ and is the natural result of exercising the virtues and gifts in a life of grace.¹¹⁵ Human sanctity, Aquinas says, requires the exercise of the infused virtues and the gifts,¹¹⁶ and, as Garrigou-Lagrange explains, the basic principles of the interior life structure the mystical life as well.¹¹⁷ Garrigou-Lagrange follows the lead of authors such as Saudreau, Lamballe and Arintero to reject the seventeenth and eighteenth century trend to separate "ascetical" from "mystical" theology. In that view, mystical union is not the culminating point of the normal development of the

¹¹¹ The soul can never know for certain whether it is experiencing union with God, but knows it is in a state of grace through certain signs (*ST I-II*, q. 112, a. 5).

¹¹² See *ST I-II*, q. 28, aa. 1-2 on love and "mutual indwelling."

¹¹³ See *ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 3.

¹¹⁴ See *ST II-II*, q. 24, a. 9, where Aquinas distinguishes three degrees of charity: that of the *incipientes*, the *proficientes* and the *perfecti*. This accords with his division between the levels of virtue in *ST I-II*, q. 61, a. 5.

¹¹⁵ Both Maritain and Garrigou-Lagrange agree with this view. See Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, p. 259: "[M]ystical experience and infused contemplation are, indeed, seen to be the normal, rightful end of the life of grace . . . human life tends towards the Christian life since every man belongs by right to Christ, the head of the human race; and Christian life itself . . . tends to the mystical life." Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, pp. 345ff.

¹¹⁶ *ST I-II*, q. 61, a. 5; *ST I-II*, q. 68, a.1, ad 1.

¹¹⁷ Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, pp. 354ff.

life of grace, virtues and the gifts, but rather the province of a privileged spiritual elite.¹¹⁸ Mystical theology is an integrated path towards spiritual perfection growing from an initial struggle against sin, through the practice of the virtues, towards perfect docility to the Holy Spirit. The human person is by nature oriented towards God, and the image of God inheres in humanity at three levels: nature, grace and glory.¹¹⁹

Four points converge to illustrate Aquinas's championing of the ordinary Christian in his mystical theology: First, his assertion that mystical union is the natural fulfillment of the life of grace; second, his non-Augustinian notion of prayer; third, his theory of charity as friendship with God; and fourth, his location of mystery in the ecclesial life of believers, specifically, in their participation in the objective reality of Christ through the Word and sacraments.

Regarding the first point, we cite Garrigou-Lagrange's two reasons for identifying the goal of the ordinary life of grace with mystical union: First, the basic principle of the mystical life and of the common interior life is the same, viz., the grace of the virtues and the gifts. While the interior life is dominated by the human exercise of the virtues, the mystical life is predominated by the superhuman mode of the gifts. Both the infused virtues and the gifts are possessed in degrees corresponding to charity, and in the normal progress of the life of grace, the superhuman mode of the gifts ends up dominating the individual's actions in a habitual manner.¹²⁰ Garrigou-Lagrange's second reason for identifying the two ends of the mystical and interior lives is that the spiritual purification required in the interior life requires the passive purifications proper to the mystical life.¹²¹ Passive purification consists not in self-imposed mortification ("active" purification) but in spiritual cleansing flowing from the divine action within us.¹²² The virtues of the purified soul are, for Thomas, refinements of the spirit, raising it from mere belief in the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 42: "[W]e find not only a continuity between ascetical and mystical theology, but also a certain compenetration. They are not two distinct divisions of theology, but two parts or two aspects of the same branch, which shows us spiritual life in its infancy, adolescence, and maturity."

¹¹⁹ *ST I*, q. 93, a. 4.

¹²⁰ Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, p. 349. Garrigou-Lagrange is quoting *ST II-II*, q. 184, a. 3 and *I-II*, q. 66, a. 2. He asserts a remote and general call of all souls in the state of grace to the mystical life.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 356.

¹²² *ST II-II*, q. 8, a. 7; *I-II*, q. 69, a. 2, ad 3. Garrigou-Lagrange quotes the latter text, showing the connection between passive purification and the gift of understanding (ibid., p. 356). Of course it is John of the Cross who develops this notion and explores the active and passive purifications of the senses and spirit in *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

mysteries to a penetration and taste of them, so that one judges all things in them and lives in them with habitual docility.¹²³

Aquinas's notion of mystical union also reflects a non-Augustinian idea of prayer which revives the original meaning of prayer as petition. One can point to three features of Thomas's idea of prayer which illustrate its direct application to the everyday Christian. First, he eschews the Augustinian tradition of prayer as an affective act of the will, which linked a prayer's efficacy to fervor and feeling. Second, he replaced this Augustinian understanding of prayer as affection with his own theory of prayer as an act of practical reason; and third, he opts for a theory of "parts" of prayer, whose end is impetration, over and against the tradition of "types" of prayer as a commentary on 1 Timothy 2:1, the classic text on the divisions of prayer. Now an analysis of these three points is in order.

While Augustine and the Franciscans identified and described prayer as an act of will consonant with the desire for beatitude,¹²⁴ Thomas broke with this tradition and described prayer as an act of practical reason, because it is in essence petition.¹²⁵ Of three effects of prayer (merit, consolation and impetration), only impetration is proper to prayer, he says,¹²⁶ while rejecting Augustine's idea that the efficacy of prayer is proportionate to one's fervent feelings, since prayer is an act of worship extending reverence to God.¹²⁷ Tugwell has noted that Thomas thus sets the stage for the sixteenth-century Dominican promotion of ordinary Christian piety, against the "encroaching

¹²³ On the virtues of the purified soul, see *ST I-II*, q. 61, a. 5: "There are the virtues of those who have already attained to the divine likeness: these are called the perfect virtues. Thus prudence sees nothing else but the things of God; temperance knows no earthly desires; fortitude has no knowledge of passion; and justice, by imitating the divine mind, is united thereto by an everlasting covenant. Such are the virtues attributed to the blessed, or in this life, to some who are at the summit of perfection."

¹²⁴ St. Augustine interpreted St. Paul's precept to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes. 5:17) with reference to the desire for beatitude as meaning that the very desire to pray is one's prayer and if one's desire is continuous, so is one's prayer. By the twelfth century, the popular definition of prayer was a "devout inner affection towards God," and the tendency among thinkers is to replace the original meaning of prayer as a form of petition (see 1 Tim. 2:1, where prayer is comprised of "entreaties, prayers, pleas and thanksgiving") with a notion of prayer as an act of the will. While Francis connected prayer closely with "devotion," Bonaventure said that prayer should culminate in a fervent jubilation. For references and further explanation, see Simon Tugwell, "Prayer, Humpty Dumpty and Thomas Aquinas," in Brian Davies, ed., *Language, Meaning and God* (London: Biddles, Ltd., Guildford & King's Lynn, 1987), pp. 34-35.

¹²⁵ He goes against the "affectivity" emphasis and opts for identifying prayer as an act of reason in both *IV Sent.*, d. 15, q. 4, a. 3 and in *ST II-II*, q. 83, a.17.

¹²⁶ *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 13.

¹²⁷ See *IV Sent.*, d. 15, q. 4, a.1; *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 3. In these texts, Thomas details the meaning of prayer as an act of worship which is part of the virtue of religion.

tyranny of the new interioristic understanding of spirituality” flourishing among Carmelites and later among Jesuits.¹²⁸ Thus, in his gloss on 1 Timothy 2:1, which describes prayer as including “entreaties, prayers, pleas and thanksgiving,” Thomas rejects the notion of “stages of prayer” or mystical stages of ascent¹²⁹ and takes Paul’s division to refer to the “parts” of a “complete” prayer, exemplified by the parts of the Mass.¹³⁰

Aquinas’s theory of charity as friendship with God also illustrates his notion of mystical union to be one consonant with the ordinary Christian life of grace. Aquinas couches his discussion on charity as a union of perfect friendship with God in the language of the appetitive versus intellective powers. While *in se*, the intellect has a higher, simpler, and more universal object (being), in this life, the will’s union with its highest object (God) is higher, for three reasons: First, it is the nature of the appetitive power to grasp things *in se*, whereas it is the nature of the intellect to grasp things in proportion to itself; second, where the object transcends the power, it is better to love it than to know it; and third, while knowledge ascends to God through creatures, love cleaves to God first, and then to other creatures through him, in the exercise of charity.¹³¹ In the love which is divine friendship or charity, there is a sharing (*communicatio*) of God with us through a participation in His happiness,¹³² which is concretized and affirmed by the Incarnation and celebrated in ecclesial life. Thus, it is the free reciprocation and delight of

¹²⁸ See Tugwell in Davies, *Language, Meaning and God*, pp. 47–48.

¹²⁹ The view that takes the biblical text as developing different levels of progress within prayer was introduced by Cassian and taken up by thinkers such as Bernard, William of St. Thierry, and Hugh of St. Cher. On the development of the idea of “stages of prayer,” see Tugwell in Davies, *Language, Meaning and God*, pp. 28–29.

¹³⁰ *IV Sent.*, d. 15, q. 4, a. 3; *ST II-II*, q. 83, a. 17. Thomas adopts the traditional association between the list in 1 Tim. and the parts of the Mass. Tugwell has noted that Thomas’s goal in his treatise on prayer is to explain its nature as an authentic religious activity. Thomas thereby “shores up prayer, precisely in the sense in which all Christians are commanded to practice it.” See Tugwell, ed., trans., *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 278. While Aquinas does not use the “stages of ascent” properly speaking, he does implement the various stages of charity in *ST I-II*, q. 24, a. 9 and *II Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 8. The “purgative” way would correspond to the initial stage of striving against sin; the “illuminative” way would correspond to the progress in the virtues and initiates in contemplation; the “unitive” way would be reflected in the lives of the perfect, who live in union with God through the highest degree of charity. But the summit of charity is also the fulfillment of normal spiritual development and belongs not to the lower order of “gratuitous” graces (graces *gratis datae*, or charismatic graces such as prophecy, miracles, etc.) but to the ordinary order of sanctifying grace of the virtues and the gifts, which relate the soul directly to God.

¹³¹ *ST I*, q. 82, a. 3 and *ST II-II*, q. 27, a. 4.

¹³² *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 1.

God's love that grounds mystical union and is the property of all souls in grace: Aquinas depicted charity as divine friendship, not as a rarefied, individualized mystical state isolated from the trials and concerns of the ordinary Christian journey or separated from the external communal expressions of ecclesiastical life.

The fourth indication of the appeal of Aquinas's mystical thought for ordinary Christians is his location of mystery at the heart of the ecclesiastical life of the believer. Christian mystical experience is essentially a deepening of faith for Aquinas, and a participation in, and interiorization of the reality of the objective mystery of Christ.¹³³ As de Lubac has asserted, "The mystery always surpasses the mystic. It dominates his experience, specifies it, and is its absolute norm."¹³⁴ The mystical life is entirely incarnational and sacramental for Thomas, and the basis of his mysticism is the stream of divine life that flows to man through a sacramental union. The Prologue to the *Tertia Pars* clearly states that union with God is effected by entering into the mystery of the Incarnation, and elsewhere he shows the path to union through contemplation of divine things in the humanity of Christ.¹³⁵ The ordinary believer's participation in the sacraments (the extension of the Word made flesh) launches the soul into the sacred mystery in the same way that a diamond, bending the sun's rays towards one's eyes, refracts breathtaking light, causing the stone to gleam. As the foundation of humanity's exaltation, it is the Incarnation which brings us to beatitude and a share in divinity,¹³⁶ and it is Christ's Passion, Thomas says, that opens the gates of Paradise and calls the exiles home.¹³⁷ Unlike pragmatic and psychologistic spiritualities of our times, satisfied with subjectivist varieties of "experience," Thomas's confidence in mystical ascent springs from a commitment to the traditions and strategies characterized by speculative theology and embodied in the whole of Christian life.

¹³³ Biblical texts which assert that the mystery is Christ Himself include Col. 1:27; 2:3; 1 Tim. 3:16, for instance. Louis Bouyer develops this point in *Introduction à la vie spirituelle* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1960).

¹³⁴ De Lubac, "Mysticism and Mystery," p. 54. De Lubac notes that mysticism is not "an attempt to escape through interiority, it is Christianity itself" (pp. 55-56).

¹³⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 28, a. 3, ad 9.

¹³⁶ *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2.

¹³⁷ *The Sermon-Conferences of St. Thomas Aquinas on The Apostles' Creed*, trans. Nicholas Ayo (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), chap. 7, p. 70: "Sed Christus passione sua ianuam paradisi aperuit, et revocavit exules ad regnum. Aperto enim latere Christi, aperta est ianua paradisi; et effuso sanguine eius deleta est macula, placatus est Deus, ablata est debilitas, expiata est pena, exules ad regnum, revocantur."

CONCLUSION

Aquinas's mystical thought can serve as a corrective to introverted, individualist trends in both classical and modern spirituality. Harkening back to the patristic ideal of mystical theology, Aquinas's mystical thought unites the spiritual and doctrinal elements of his theology. Thomas balances the subjective and objective poles of religious experience in having his sacramental and theological architectonic play its delicate counterpoint to the still voice of the Spirit's promptings. And throughout the soul's journey he entwines the thread of wisdom in its full range of characteristics—the affective or experimental union with God attained by the soul through charity and understanding; the receptive and apophatic emptying of self; and the diffusive peace stimulated by the sweetness of interior order. For Thomas, it is the divine Self-disclosure that initiates, guides and completes the mystical path, flooding the human plane with silent love and illuminating the inner eye with supra-conceptual wisdom. In gathering up the aspects of Aquinas's mystical thought, spiritual landscapes open up that seemed hidden by discontinuity and crisis. For Aquinas, we have seen, the suffering of divine things radiates within a trans-luminous obscurity—a darkness not felt in the rarefied atmosphere of a mystical elite, but configured in ordinary acts of Christian believers, and unveiled to hearts rooted in both detachment and freedom in a loving responsiveness to the divine mystery.