

THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MYSTICISM

By

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ST THOMAS did not write a special treatise on mystical theology. In the golden age of Scholasticism there were no hard and fast divisions between systematic, moral, ascetical and mystical theology; but systematic theology furnished the rules by which to deal with the practical questions of the spiritual life. And so the Angelic Doctor gives us the principles of mystical theology, embedded in the *Prima Secundæ* of his *Summa Theologica*, which deals with man, made in the image of God, and with his virtues and vices in general (especially question 68, on the Gifts of the Holy Ghost) and in the *Secunda Secundæ*, which treats of particular virtues and states of life (especially questions 180 to 182, on the Contemplative and Active Life) and in his whole teaching on Grace and the Virtues.

The mystical life is nothing less than the life of grace lived at its highest level. For there is only one principle of the supernatural life, sanctifying grace, which is, as it were, the beginning of eternal life here below (*quædam inchoatio vitæ æternæ*), and it is by this principle that all souls must live, whether they be newly baptized infants, converted sinners, or saints practising the virtues in a heroic degree. For just as the whole plant is contained in the tiny seed, so that no external addition is needed to produce leaves, flowers and fruit in their season, so in the supernatural "seed" of grace there is already present in germ the whole organism of the mystical life which needs, therefore, no other principle to explain it. For the life of grace unfolds itself principally in the virtues, more particularly in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and in the Seven Gifts of the Holy Ghost, enumerated in Isaias (11:2). Both, as St Thomas proves (*Prima Secundæ* q. 68 a. 2), are necessary for salvation, for without the Gifts the life of Grace would be incomplete. The reason for this is that, practising the theological virtues, man still acts in a human manner, for, with his reason and will, though informed by faith, hope and charity, he can know and love God only imperfectly; in order to become capable of his supernatural end he must be moved in a superhuman manner, and this is done by the motion of the Holy Ghost.

Yet, the infusion of the Gifts at Baptism or at the return to the state of grace in conversion does not mean that we are immediately guided in this superhuman manner. In fact, in the beginning of the spiritual life, that is to say in the purgative way, the gifts are still, so to speak, in an embryonic state. They are there, but they are hardly noticeable—just as there is no trace of a flower before the bud becomes visible, though the plant already contains all

that is necessary to produce it. In the purgative state there are still far too many obstacles in the way of the Holy Ghost; as long as self-love is yet strong, uncreated Love cannot take over the government of the soul. This, therefore, is the time when she has to do most of the work herself—always aided by grace, that goes without saying. She meditates to incite in herself hatred of sin and love of virtue, she reflects and weighs her motives before she acts, she performs penances, and generally employs all the means recommended by the Church and by her spiritual guide to wean herself from the ill-regulated love of creatures. Her whole spiritual life is very active, dominated by reason and will under the influence of grace.

But, as St Thomas says, the active life prepares for the contemplative life, as the imperfect leads to the perfect, "for the contemplative life is directed to the love of God, not of any degree, but to that which is perfect" (II-II, 18, 4 ad 1). Therefore, if we would be perfect, we must be contemplatives. Not that we need to become members of Contemplative Orders, but our spiritual life, whatever our "state," whether active, contemplative or mixed, must have the signs of contemplation.

Now contemplation develops under the progressively increasing influence of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost, especially the gifts of understanding and of wisdom. As it is brought about by the action of the Holy Ghost and not by our human activity it cannot be reached by our own efforts, but we can prepare for it by prayer, penance and good works, or, in other words, by faithfully following the purgative way. Then, in the normal course of the spiritual life, a day will come when the Holy Ghost will begin to take the lead and to introduce the soul into the "passive" ways, beginning with the "Night of the Senses," so vividly described by St John of the Cross in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. This "Night" is very painful because the soul suddenly finds herself deprived of her own activities in which she found pleasure. Now she kneels down to pray and not a thought, not an image presents itself—for the work of man has now to give place to the work of God, the Gifts begin to perfect the faculties of the soul to make them pliable to the action of the Holy Ghost (cf. I-II, 68, 8). This is the beginning of the Illuminative Way, to which corresponds St Teresa's Prayer of Recollection and especially the Prayer of Quiet, i. e., the first forms of contemplative prayer properly so called.

Now contemplation is a term often very vaguely used, almost as vaguely as mysticism. According to St Thomas, who follows Pseudo-Dionysius, it is essentially an operation of the intellect. The human mind, after being purified (by penance and meditation) from its two defects of clinging to external things and to discursive reasoning, abandons the latter and is introduced to the "simple contemplation of intelligible truth" (II-II, 180, 6). In this operation there can be no error, because it has to do with first principles,

which are known by simple intuition (*simplici intuitu*), so that the soul becomes like the angels, having abandoned all else and resting in the sole contemplation of God, as far as is possible for an embodied spirit, whose contemplation, it must be borne in mind, can never be entirely freed from all imagery. This simple contemplation, however, is not a joyless intellectual exercise; on the contrary, it is the one perfectly satisfying human activity, because it pertains to the essence of man as *animal rationale*, whose very nature demands the contemplation of Truth (II-II, 180, 7) and is therefore accompanied by exquisite delight. Now if this is so on the natural plane, how much more on the supernatural, when the soul is moved to the contemplation of God by charity! For "this is the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, namely, that the Divine Truth be not only seen but also loved" (*Ibid.*, ad 1). In this it differs profoundly from the contemplation of the pagan philosophers and all other "natural contemplation," which lacks this ultimate perfection, because the soul of the unbeliever is not joined to the object of her contemplation by charity, the *Vinculum perfectionis*.

For as contemplative prayer progresses, charity grows and the work of the Gifts becomes more apparent. The soul, though, of course, always under obedience to her director, tends more and more to act under inspiration instead of following her own devices, just as the form and contents of her prayer no longer depend on her choice. Yet at this stage the supernatural plant has brought forth only flowers; it has not yet yielded its fruit. The soul is still full of imperfections, which are seen the more clearly the more she progresses in contemplation. As St Thomas says, "when man attains to the contemplation of truth he loves it yet ardently, while he hates the more his own deficiency and the weight of his corruptible body" (II-II, 180, 7, ad 2). St John of the Cross gives a terrifying list of these imperfections, corresponding to the Seven Deadly Sins. In order to rid the soul of these last obstacles to the full action of the Gifts she is now introduced into the "Night of the Spirit"—a series of most painful purifications which may continue for a long time, even while the soul already enjoys full union and ecstasy, that is, when she has emerged from the illuminative into the unitive way. It is only after these last purgings that she is brought fully under the domination of the Gifts. In the "transforming Union," the immediate prelude to the Beatific Vision, her almost uninterrupted union with God enables her to judge all things by the wisdom of the Holy Ghost. With her own reason and will in complete subjection to the Divine action, she can truly say that she lives, no longer herself, but that Christ lives in her. The seed sown by the Divine Sower has brought forth its fruit and will soon be ready to be gathered into the barn, and the soul will at last hear the long-desired words: "Euge, serve bone et fidelis . . . intra in gaudium Domini tui."