

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Wisdom of the Cross

THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, O.P.

Thomistic Institute

Washington, DC

I

THE HUMAN BEING is an enigma difficult to understand, and the principal reason for this is the complexity of our nature. We are animals but rational animals: material, sensate creatures that are capable of seeking the truth, subject to our own free decisions, stricken with profound longings for happiness, subject to death. Our human existence can be experienced in ways that are more or less unified, or disintegrated. This is true on many levels, one of them having to do with the inner life of the human spirit itself. For this life emerges from within the core of our being as *two distinct spiritual powers or capacities*: those of the intellect and the will. It is possible to be primarily a person of the heart, moved above all by desire and love, who is very little interested in the exacting truth, or the stirring heights of contemplation. And it is also very possible to be a creature of the mind, bent on the clarity or rigor of the truth, very little given to love, compassion, or heroic virtue. So this duality of mind and heart can be problematic, oppositional, and can unfold in a way that is even fatal to the integrity of a human life.

Wisdom, however, is the attribute of the spirit that integrates the intense desire for truth with the ardor and aspirations of love. Wisdom is, in a certain sense, the truth placed at the service of love. The prudent person seeks to know how to live well, in view of the flourishing of the heart: happiness, friendship, love, moral stability. We can seek these things *in*

truth. But wisdom is also love placed at the service of the greater knowledge of truth for its own sake. The wise person is a seeker of the highest truths, one who wishes to make an inward ascent toward vision, toward the encounter with the highest good. Love for the truth ennobles the human heart and quickens the mind.

All of this—the search for wisdom in man—is but a shadow of the life of God, who is himself subsistent wisdom. For in God there exists no real distinction of knowledge and will, as is found in us. Nor is there in God a distinction between truth or love, on the one hand, and God's very being or essence, on the other. God just is his ineffable act of contemplation. God is he who knows himself eternally, and who knows all things in himself, comprehending all that is created without ever departing from his own self-knowledge. And God just is the ineffable act of love of his own essential goodness, a love without any taint or shadow of egoism, an ecstatic love for the good (for the good that is God himself), and which is at the source of every participated good that God creates. For it is from the sheer freedom of his perfect goodness, and ecstatic self-love, that God gratuitously gives being to all that exists, and not from any need of creation. God is, then, a knowledge and a love that are one in being and that are identical with God's own essence and being. That is to say, God just is subsistent wisdom.

All of this is true even if we have no immediate, direct perception of God in himself. For God is known to us only in and through his effects of creation and grace. We can conclude rightly from the consideration of all that God has made and done that God is wisdom, but *how or what* his wisdom is remains for us a mystery veiled in darkness. This apophatic truth (the veiled character of the divine essence) is displayed paradigmatically in Exodus 20:21 where Moses enters the darkness of God on Mount Sinai. Dionysius says that this symbol represents the human intellect in the face of the incomprehensible perfection of God. "The divine darkness is that 'unapproachable light' where God is said to live. And if it is invisible because of a superabundant clarity, if it cannot be approached because of the outpouring of its transcendent gift of light, yet it is here that is found everyone worthy to know God and to look upon him."¹

¹ Dionysius, *Letter 5*, 1073 A, trans. P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

If we consider the human being again, then, in light of these considerations concerning God, we can say that human life consists of a spiritual itinerary. The human being is moved inwardly by knowledge and by love, and is made for wisdom. He or she has the vocation to rejoin the wisdom of God, seeking to know God's truth and goodness in a way that integrates mind and heart. The human being is not the subsistent wisdom of the Creator, but is made from and for that wisdom, an Image of God, a pilgrim of the spirit who is meant to be turned forever toward the aboriginal light of the Father. "For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light" (Ps 36:9, RSV).

II

Thomas Aquinas speaks not of one, but of three forms of human wisdom cultivated in the pursuit of God. One of them is natural in form: the wisdom of philosophical contemplation of God. One results from both principles of nature and grace: the wisdom of theology or *sacra doctrina*, in which man reflects scientifically on divine revelation. One is given by grace alone: the gift of infused, contemplative wisdom, which comes from the Holy Spirit. We can consider each of these in turn. But first let us begin with a question. How should we understand this topic of Christian wisdom in light of a Biblical theme of fundamental importance, the wisdom of the Cross?

At the start of his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul the Apostle contrasts a wisdom of the world with the wisdom of the Cross. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). The Cross is perceived as "foolish" by our contemporaries, and yet it contains the true wisdom of God, hidden from before all ages (1 Cor 2:7).

What, then, is the wisdom of the Cross? Why is it so precious? How does it relate to the Gentile wisdom sought by the ancient philosophical schools? "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:22-24). St. Paul seems to draw a contrast between the philosophical quest for understanding, and the

embrace of the Christian faith. Is the contrast real or apparent? Fathers of the Church, from Justin Martyr to Augustine, claimed that the disciple of the Cross is the true inheritor of the Greek search for wisdom, and not those who practice the Greco-Roman pagan religions. If this is the case, then how are we to understand St. Paul?

When he comments on this passage of 1 Corinthians, Aquinas notes that God does not destroy anything authentically good in the human person, including the powers of wisdom and prudence that are meant to guide our human life toward God. The human being is naturally capable of knowledge of God. "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them" (Rom 1:19). The grace of God does not act in such a way as to negate this natural dimension of the human person. What God does bring to an end by the power of the Cross are the false pretensions of disordered reason by which human beings strive blindly to live for this world only, and in view of the happiness procured by human self-interest. "Consequently, he does not say absolutely, 'I will destroy the wisdom,' because 'all wisdom is from the Lord God' (Sir 1:1), but I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, i.e., which the wise of this world have invented for themselves against the true wisdom of God, because as it says in Jas 3:15: 'This is not wisdom, descending from above; but earthly, sensual, devilish.' Similarly, he does not say, 'I will reject prudence,' for God's wisdom teaches true prudence, but the prudence of the prudent, i.e., which is regarded as prudent by those who esteem themselves prudent in worldly affairs, so that they cling to the goods of this world, or because 'the prudence of the flesh is death' (Rom 8:6)."²

In addition, Aquinas notes that our human loves can turn us away from any developed natural knowledge of God. We do not seek to understand what we have no interest in, or what we positively wish not to discover. Though the human being is naturally capable of philosophical contemplation of God, this capacity is often deeply compromised by the (ill-informed but tenacious) human desire to explain the world without reference to God. "Consequently, God brought believers to a saving knowledge of himself by other things, which are not found in the

² Aquinas, *Super I Cor.* I, lec. 3, 50, trans. Fabian Larcher; see <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm#13>.

natures of creatures; on which account worldly men, who derive their notions solely from human things, considered them foolish: things such as the articles of faith.”³ The Incarnation and atonement can appear as “foolishness [to Gentiles], because it seemed against the nature of human reason that God should die and that a just and wise man should voluntarily expose himself to a very shameful death.”⁴

This exegesis leaves us perched upon a precipice, in which we could fall one of two directions, either toward a profound partition of the wisdom of the Cross from the wisdom of the philosophers, or toward a theory of purification, in which the Cross exerts a mystery of healing upon the wounds and miseries of the human mind and heart. In this latter view, the Cross enacts a kind of ontological retrieval in the human soul, elevating our intellectual powers into a new life of cooperation with God.

It is in terms of this second understanding that St. John Paul II characterized the relation in his exegesis of this passage of St. Paul in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. Fallen reason is often given over to the stifling sclerosis of rationalism: the attempt to explain reality by purely natural causes, without any possible recourse to transcendent reality, or to the possible influences of divine revelation.⁵ The Cross, meanwhile, confronts, converts and heals this fallen human reason, opening it up to an authentic horizon of intellectual universality. This process of elevation is both natural and supernatural in kind, because the Cross opens human reason to the full expanse of the requirements of love. That love of Christ crucified, which is “catholic” in its scope, redeems the human mind by introducing it at once to the heights and depths of the mystery of the Trinity, and into the expansive, missionary reaches of the heart, open to the whole of the human race, open to every creature God has made.⁶ The soul under this new “weight” of charity is impelled from

³ *Super I Cor.* I, lec. 3, 55.

⁴ *Super I Cor.* I, lec. 3, 58.

⁵ John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §23: “The crucified Son of God is the historic event upon which every attempt of the mind to construct an adequate explanation of the meaning of existence upon merely human argumentation comes to grief.”

⁶ *Ibid.*: “Reason cannot eliminate the mystery of love which the Cross represents; while the Cross can give to reason the ultimate answer which it seeks . . . The wisdom of the Cross . . . breaks free of all cultural limitations which seek to contain it and insists upon an openness to the universality of the truth which it bears. What

within toward the whole expanse of being and beyond, from the most modest of creatures to the ineffable, uncreated mystery of God who has given us the gift of being. Here reason is not only invited to engage with the mystery of God, but it is also obliged to accept the burden of its own native capacity for universal knowledge and even for natural knowledge of the Creator.

Thematically, it is within this context of the consideration of reason redeemed by love that St. John Paul II speaks of the three wisdoms of Thomas Aquinas.⁷ The Cross redeems human wisdom so that philosophical knowledge of God can be placed at the service of faith. The grace of Christ makes possible an authentic theological wisdom centered on the mystery of the Holy Trinity that seeks to understand all other mysteries in the light of the mystery of God. The mystery of the Cross makes possible an infused wisdom: a friendship with Christ crucified

a challenge this is to our reason, and how great the gain for reason if it yields to this wisdom! Of itself, philosophy is able to recognize the human being's ceaselessly self-transcendent orientation towards the truth; and, with the assistance of faith, it is capable of accepting the 'foolishness' of the Cross as the authentic critique of those who delude themselves that they possess the truth, when in fact they run it aground on the shoals of a system of their own devising. The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. Here we see not only the border between reason and faith, but also the space where the two may meet."

⁷ *Fides et Ratio*, §44: "Another of the great insights of Saint Thomas was his perception of the role of the Holy Spirit in the process by which knowledge matures into wisdom. From the first pages of his *Summa theologiae* (ST I, q. 1, a. 6) Aquinas was keen to show the primacy of the wisdom which is the gift of the Holy Spirit and which opens the way to a knowledge of divine realities. His theology allows us to understand what is distinctive of wisdom in its close link with faith and knowledge of the divine. This wisdom comes to know by way of connaturality; it presupposes faith and eventually formulates its right judgment on the basis of the truth of faith itself: 'The wisdom named among the gifts of the Holy Spirit is distinct from the wisdom found among the intellectual virtues. This second wisdom is acquired through study, but the first 'comes from on high,' as Saint James puts it. This also distinguishes it from faith, since faith accepts divine truth as it is. But the gift of wisdom enables judgment according to divine truth' (ST II-II, q. 45, a.1, ad 2; cf. also II-II, q. 45, a. 2). Yet the priority accorded this wisdom does not lead the Angelic Doctor to overlook the presence of two other complementary forms of wisdom—*philosophical* wisdom, which is based upon the capacity of the intellect, for all its natural limitations, to explore reality, and *theological* wisdom, which is based upon Revelation and which explores the contents of faith, entering the very mystery of God."

effectuated by the Holy Spirit, a bond of charity that unites the mind to God by connatural knowledge. Each of these forms of wisdom is respectful of the others, each inferior wisdom being open to the superior and each superior respecting and integrating the inferior. The Christian philosopher, if genuinely reasonable, is open to the mystery of divine revelation, just as the theologian is open to truths that are articulated by the mystic. However, the theologian also has need of a sound practice of sapiential philosophy, just as any person with a genuine, elevated interior life is aware of his or her need for the sound insights and prudential guidance of theologians. It is this threefold integration of wisdom that remains perennially at the heart of the Church's intellectual life, a wisdom that is the fruit of the Cross.

III

When he considers the intellectual *habitus* of philosophical wisdom, Aquinas notes that it has two properties. Unlike every other *scientia*, or discipline of natural learning, this knowledge—*sapientia*—considers the ultimate principle and cause of all things, God.⁸ Philosophical science develops organically as it seeks to analyze the cause of things. This seeking blossoms, however, only when we arrive at knowledge of the truly primal source of being.⁹ Not that philosophical reasoning might grasp what God is directly, for it cannot. God, as Aquinas notes, is in some real sense beyond both being and “not being,” just insofar as he is the unknown giver of all that exists.¹⁰ God is veiled and concealed by the same

⁸ Aquinas, *In Meta.* I, lec. 2; *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 1. When John Paul II speaks about the prerequisites for a genuinely “sapiential philosophy” in *Fides et Ratio* (§§81–83), he notes three characteristics that must be present: (1) a fundamental realism that understands philosophy as a search for the truth about the nature of things, (2) an openness to the ultimate questions regarding the nature of existence and the meaning of human life, and (3) a genuine metaphysical range of reflection that passes beyond the sensible as such to the question of essence, causes, and the ultimate transcendent origins of existence. Evidently, these features of perennial philosophy are to be found in Thomism but are present in other venerable philosophical traditions as well.

⁹ Aquinas, *In Meta.* I, lec. 3, 64; *Summa contra Gentiles* II, ch. 4.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *In Meta.*, Prologue: being is ascribed more properly to creatures than to God. Consider in this respect Aquinas's commentary on Proposition 4 in the *Book of Causes*: “The first of created things is being, and there is nothing else created before it.” St. Thomas interprets it by recourse to Proposition 138: “Of all the principles which participate in the divine character, the first and highest is being,” and by the

creation that also partially and indirectly manifests his hidden presence.

Second, however, philosophical wisdom offers an ultimate perspective that is practical. It is not only about knowledge of the first cause, God, who remains known philosophically only indirectly and apophatically. It is also about the *knowledge of all creatures understood in light of God*.¹¹ For if God is, and is an ineffable mystery of contemplation and love, hidden from the eyes of men, then we are obliged to reconsider all that exists in the light of God, as caused by God, and in some mysterious way governed by him. Philosophically, one can even speak of providence—of the Logos and love of God governing the world—if only in a limited way.¹² Most certainly one must say that the human being who is capable of reasoning about God and thinking about reality in light of him, is *naturally* called upon to seek perspective, to see all things sapientially in the light of the first cause.¹³ Human reason acquires a *religious* depth *naturally and philosophically* once the human person is considered in relation to his or her transcendent origin.

Likewise, this knowledge is directive of practical action. For if we know God obliquely but really to be the transcendent, uniquely perfect goodness who has given being to all other goods, then we also know that

use of Dionysius's analogical theory of divine naming: "Now what is common to all the distinct intelligences [i.e., created angelic substances] is first created being. Regarding this [Proclus] presents the following proposition: *The first of created things is being, and there is nothing else created before it*. Proclus also asserts this in Proposition 138 of his book, in these words: 'Being is the first and supreme of all that participate what is properly divine' and of the deified . . . Dionysius did away with the order of [platonic Ideas], maintaining the same order as the Platonists in the perfections that other things participate from one principle, which is God. Hence in Chapter 4 of *On the Divine Names* he ranks the name of good in God as the first of all the divine names and shows that its participation extends even to nonbeing, understanding by nonbeing prime matter . . . But among the other perfections from God that things participate, he puts being first. For he says this in Chapter 5 of *On the Divine Names*: 'Being is placed before the other participations' of God 'and being in itself is more ancient than the being of *per se* life, than the being of *per se* wisdom, and than the being of *per se* divine similitude.'" (Aquinas, *In de Causis*, Proposition 4.) Translation by Vincent A. Guagliardo, O.P., Charles R. Hess, O.P., and Richard C. Taylor, *Commentary on the Book of Causes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996) 30-31.

¹¹ ST I, q. 1, a. 6; SCG II, ch. 4.

¹² SCG III, chs. 64.

¹³ SCG I, chs. 1-9.

for which we exist, or that ultimate good that alone can satisfy human reason and human desire.¹⁴ The goodness of God is not a rival to the creation that issues from him, and that participates in him, but the knowledge of God is architectonic with respect to practical reason.¹⁵ The person with a religious mind orders his life differently from others, practically speaking, because he understands all other goods, real and necessary as they may be, to be good and enjoyable only in view of and as subordinate to the transcendent ineffable goodness of God. In thinking this way, sapiential thinking gives rise to a religious rationality of *gratitude*.

Because God is approachable for the human mind and heart only indirectly, opaquely, and behind the veil of creatures, this philosophical wisdom is itself deeply imperfect. It cannot obtain directly to the divine essence, even as it awakens a desire for what is absolute. This desire and its imperfect accomplishment leave the heart only imperfectly fulfilled. As St. Thomas notes, there is within the human being an innate desire to know the truth about the first cause as perfectly as possible, even immediately were this possible.¹⁶ This is not a natural desire for the supernatural (the formally revealed mystery of the Trinity as such), but a natural desire to see the First Cause of all that exists.¹⁷

It is within this internal structure of human reasoning, as at once open to the transcendent, and as incapable of attaining to the truth about God adequately, that the grace of divine revelation is addressed. This activity or address of grace need not presuppose that any particular person who receives the revelation of Christ has an already-awakened philosophical appetite, let alone a developed metaphysical understand-

¹⁴ *ST I-II*, q. 2, a. 8.

¹⁵ *ST I-II*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3, and q. 13, a. 3, ad 2.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *De Virtutibus*, q. 1, a. 10, corp.

¹⁷ *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1; *ST I-II*, q. 62, aa. 1–3; q. 114, a. 2. Here we may rightly object that such “religious” philosophical speculation might never have come into being except on Christian soil, and even within the high cloistered walls of specialized medieval theological disputes about the nature of the human being. Let us concede this for the sake of argument. As important as this point is, it is not determinative, for we began our inquiry by asking how the Cross has redeemed our broken human nature and reoriented the deepest recesses of human reason back toward their perennial source. If this rejuvenation of philosophical wisdom has taken place only in and through a prolonged history of cruciform grace (and the religious life that goes with it), then we should not be surprised at the theological and religious setting in which genuine natural knowledge of God should arise in the human mind and heart.

ing of God. We might even be surprised if the latter were the case.¹⁸ But the address of grace *does* affect—or even confront and convict—the human person precisely within this deepest “sphere” of his or her spiritual powers of intellect and will, within this ineffaceable locus of *capacity* for God, which remains always present in *potency* even when covered over by secularization, sin, ignorance or indifference. And so it is in the depths of the self open to what is so *uniquely interesting* to the human person (the *Deus absconditus*) that grace calls out to our deepest self, even as it calls us up to the higher wisdoms, of theological revelation and the mystical life of the Holy Spirit. “You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness.”¹⁹

IV

At the center of all theological wisdom is the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God has revealed himself truly to the Church in the mystery of Jesus Christ. That is the central premise of all Christian theology, and its genuine starting point. At the beginning of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas treats the question of *sacra doctrina*, the nature of theology. And here he asks, “whether theology is the same as wisdom?”²⁰ His answer is affirmative, because wisdom is that science that pertains to knowledge of what is ultimate in reality, and divine revelation communicates to the human race *supernatural* understanding of the primary truth. That is to say, in Christ, we have received genuine knowledge of who God is in his eternal life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we have received the understanding that God wishes to share this Trinitarian life with us by a participation in his grace. Here, as St. Thomas points out, we find our two criteria of philosophical wisdom transposed into a higher, supernatural key. For the revelation of the mystery of the Holy Trinity grants knowledge of the First Cause now unveiled to us by grace, higher than that procured by philosophers. And it is also an invitation to a way of life oriented toward our ultimate final end: the mystery of eternal life, an incomparably higher end than anything man might aspire to effectively

¹⁸ ST I, q. 1, a. 1, corp.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), X:27.

²⁰ ST I, q. 1, a. 6.

by his natural powers. The wisdom of Christ grants us the most ultimate knowledge about where we come from, and what we may finally hope for. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13).

The unity of theology as a science derives from this starting point. Whether the Church seeks to understand the calling of Abraham, the ethics of stock-market trading, the sacrament of marriage, or the mystery of the Resurrection . . . she does so always in relation to this primal mystery of the Triune God. This is the case even with regard to the Incarnation of the Lord. It is true that Catholic theology is "Christocentric" in a fundamental sense. The person of Christ, the God-man, is at the heart of all Catholic thinking about God. As Aquinas notes, however, the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation are the two most basic truths of Christianity.²¹ One because it concerns the essence of God himself, and the other because it concerns the principal means by which we are given to know God and to approach him. The Son has become human so that we might know the Father, and so that he might send us the Spirit. The "Christocentric" character of revelation is possible only because of the more fundamental mystery of the Trinity. Theological wisdom is Trinitarian before all else.

What should we say, then, of the relationship between this contemplation of the theologians and the wisdom of the philosophers, mentioned above? Just as grace does not destroy nature but heals and elevates it, so too *sacra doctrina* does not abolish the philosophical inclination toward wisdom, or natural knowledge of God, but integrates these into the contemplative work of theology. This integration is not dissolutive. Even in an entirely Christian environment, philosophy retains a relative integrity of its own. It has its own natural starting points, subject matter, means of argument, characteristic *aporia* and proper discoveries. The integration of philosophical wisdom into theological contemplation can be likened (by proportional analogy only) to the assumption of human nature by the eternal Logos. The human nature of Christ is perfected by the hypostatic union, not harmed or diminished. So, likewise, philosophical wisdom is challenged by theological revelation to soar toward its utterly highest possibilities. And even more to

²¹ Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 2.

the point, theological contemplation is itself deeply dependent upon philosophical realism for its own internal health. Even if theological wisdom is concerned with revealed truth, it is still a form of knowledge developed in a natural rhythm, through human habits of reflection, language, and understanding. A deformed philosophical intelligence cannot rightly cooperate with the demands of revelation, nor can an anticontemplative philosophy be the fitting instrument for the sound pursuit of theological understanding.

V

Theology is not only open to wisdom “from below,” that of the philosophers, but also that which comes “from above”: the gift of wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit. When he discusses this highest form of wisdom, Aquinas draws on an analogy from Aristotle’s ethics, the notion of “connatural knowledge” or affective understanding.²² In the natural sphere, this is the kind of intuitive knowledge we can acquire over time regarding a close friend or loved one. The human being can sense intuitively in friendship how a person is likely to react to a given idea or proposal, what he or she likes or hates, is capable of or resolutely opposed to. One friend develops knowledge of the heart of another. Analogous things can be said of our understanding of God effectuated by grace. Charity, Aquinas says, is like a friendship.²³ It creates a supernatural life in common with God, and fills the human person with an inward instinct of charity, conforming us inwardly to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and to the heart of Christ.²⁴ The gift of wisdom, then, is that special activity of the Holy Spirit by which he attunes the saints to the desires of the Father, to the wisdom of the Son, and to the love of the Spirit himself. Here is the wisdom of the Cross: the life of Christ prolonged into the human heart by the irradiating effects of grace, expanding the Christian heart from within to give it the “catholic” universality of love that St. John Paul II speaks of. This wisdom invites the human mind to perceive in faith the new heights and depths to which the love of Christ aspires, he who animates his Church from within by

²² Aristotle, *Ethics* I, ch. 3; *ST* II-II, q. 45, aa. 1–2.

²³ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 45, a. 6.

the mystery of his charity, pressing his friends and servants forward into the service of his Kingdom.

True theology cannot do without this most elevated wisdom of charity, that which comes from the heart of Christ. This must be the case because theology is practical as well as speculative: it seeks knowledge of the Holy Trinity, but as we noted above, it also seeks union. The wisdom of the theologians is about our final purpose in life, and this is nothing other than the beatific vision, the immediate knowledge of God possessed by the saints. Why do we study theology? Because one day we wish to see God, face to face. In this life, all knowledge of God rightly pursued in faith is ultimately ordained toward this end. This means that theology aspires by its very nature, in charity, to go out beyond itself into a more immediate contact with God. In the darkness of faith, this occurs primarily through the mystery of charity. The highest elevations of charity that characterize Christian contemplation in this life elevate the intellect into a mysterious affective proximity to God. They permit a dark vision made possible only by love, both clear and obscure. In doing so, they anticipate—in however hidden and imperfect a way—the final beatitude of Christian life.

At the same time, we must resist the pseudospiritual temptation to seek a realm of mystical life somehow “above” or “beyond” the truths of dogmatic theology. There is no such transcendence, or rather, any such claim only serves to promote some kind of obscurantist and false transcendence. The person who seeks to know God intimately, in the light, can come to him only by the way that is Christ crucified. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). “For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The truths of theological wisdom regarding the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, the sacraments, and all else that God has revealed: they permit us to know directly the ontological mystery of God in himself, and his authentic activity in the world. It is a great error to oppose the determination of dogma and the infinity of the mystery of God. The mystery of God the Holy Trinity is infinite, and it is also known only through determined means. The light of faith draws us into an increasingly profound knowledge of the mystery of

God.²⁵ The truths of the faith point us toward this essential “content” of the mystery, and are anticipatory of the even more determinate experience of the life to come. There is nothing indefinite about our personal judgment, and the reality of the beatific vision. John the seer on Patmos in the *Apocalypse* does not encounter God in any vague experience, but in the clamoring of trumpets, and in the luminous intensity of the resurrected Christ, the Lamb who was slain.

VI

The opposite of wisdom is folly, the disorientation of the human mind that lacks true perspective, and that fails to understand all things in light of God. “The fool has said in his heart there is no God” (Ps 14:1). To be sure, this fool is in us, the human being weighed down by the wounds of ignorance and sin, incapable without grace of desiring rightly to find knowledge of God. But this fool is also the subject of grace, the recipient of mercy poured forth in abundance upon the world from the Cross. “God can raise up children of Abraham from these stones” (Mt 3:9). “Wisdom is vindicated by her children” (Lk 7:35). The wisdom of the Cross is sufficiently powerful to redeem the world in every age. Its definitive victory has already been declared. It redeems the natural sphere of human understanding, capable of the philosophical contemplation of God. It opens the human mind to knowledge of the Trinity, and invites the theologian to contemplate the inner life of God. It conforms the human person to the Cross, initiating his or her heart into the ever expansive charity of Christ crucified. Such wisdom cannot be extinguished

²⁵ St. Catherine of Siena, that paradigmatic ecclesial mystic, gives us to understand in her *Dialogue* that this determined character of truth about God is not a limitation to be suffered by the mind, but a liberation to the soul offered life under grace. Speaking to her about the illumination of the soul, the Father states: “Sometimes she seeks Me in prayer, wishing to know My power, and I satisfy her by causing her to taste and see My virtue. Sometimes she seeks Me in the wisdom of My Son, and I satisfy her by placing His wisdom before the eye of her intellect, sometimes in the clemency of the Holy Spirit and then My Goodness causes her to taste the fire of Divine charity, and to conceive the true and royal virtues, which are founded on the pure love of her neighbor.” Trans. A. Thorold, *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena: A Treatise on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 91. Available at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/catherine/dialog/dialog.html>. The mystery that “specifies” the created intellect also calls it out into the horizon of God’s eternal life.

by any created power. It is effulgent from before the foundations of the world and it is perseverant until the end of ages. In each generation it raises up saints, causing human hearts to turn anew toward God, and to heed inwardly the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Church possesses this wisdom from God as an inextinguishable patrimony, to be preached and communicated to every creature. The *sermo sapientiae*, the word of wisdom that redeems the world: this is our heritage, our challenge and our privilege. We need not be afraid. “Do not be anxious, for the Holy Spirit will teach you what you are to say” (Lk 12:11–12). “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

N&V

