

St. Thomas Aquinas: Theologian and Mystic

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THE TITLE of this study may be surprising.¹ Thomas Aquinas is unquestionably a great theologian, but is he also a mystic? A preliminary answer to this question could be found in the fact that he is a canonized saint, and that, in one way or another, God was at the heart of his life, as is true of all saints. While this answer is certainly true, it is not specific enough. Since this saint is a theologian, we can disregard neither his understanding of theology nor the way in which he practiced it, lived it, and finally surpassed it. I would like to show here that the experience of God, which is essential to the mystical life, is as much at the heart of Thomas's knowledge as of his life. If this can be established, the title of this study will be validated: Thomas Aquinas can be counted among the mystics. But we must first avoid a false approach.

If we want to discover Thomas Aquinas's thoughts on what today is known as "mysticism," it is almost useless to seek such terminology in his work. He is certainly familiar with the word and frequently uses it; but he adopts it above all in two specific areas, fairly remote from the meaning reserved for it by the manuals of "ascetical and mystical theology," as this used to be called. He speaks of it, on the one hand, in relation to the Church as the body of Christ, which, he says, forms with its head one single mystical person. This signifies that, through the action of the Holy Spirit, Head and body constitute one single and unique organism of grace. This topic is certainly an essential dimension of his spirituality, but it is not necessary to dwell on it since it is a well-known topic and was

¹ Translation by Therese C. Scarpelli of "Théologien et mystique: le cas de Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 77 (2003): 350–65.

the subject of excellent recent studies.² On the other hand, Thomas also uses this word to refer to one of the four senses that he regularly employs in his interpretation of sacred Scripture, the mystical sense being one of the names given to the spiritual sense that he distinguishes from the literal sense. After having highlighted the literal sense, which he favors, Thomas, like all medieval theologians, extracts the applications to be derived from it for the life of the ecclesial body or of its members. Although he does this with more or less consistency for the different passages he examines, it is a part of his method.³ Nevertheless, this second meaning of “mystical” does not shed any greater light on what we are looking for.

Since this direct approach through terminology proves to be inconclusive, we must therefore seek for the reality itself rather than the words, and take up our question once again. Is there a way to verify whether Thomas Aquinas discusses what we designate as “mystical,” and can we say that he is himself a “mystic”? The answer to this question depends largely upon what we mean by the word “mystic.” If one does not restrict the meaning of this word to exceptional states accompanied by unusual phenomena, and if one agrees to use it in reference to the Christian experience of a high degree of exercise of the theological virtues (which seems today to be the common use of the word), we can certainly agree that Thomas Aquinas is truly a Christian mystic. But to content oneself with this statement is to risk banality; we must go further and try to understand why he is a mystic. Our task then is not simply to affirm that Thomas is at once theologian and mystic, as though these were two qualifications juxtaposed in his person and not specifically linked in any way. Rather, we must endeavor to show that he is a mystic in the manner of a theologian, that he is a mystic precisely because he is a theologian. There are numerous and explicit texts that support this conclusion; it will suffice to survey them and to extract the implications. For conclusion, a short review of the way in which Thomas ended his earthly existence should confirm our thesis.⁴

² Cf. Martin Morard, “Les expression ‘corpus mysticum’ et ‘persona mystica’ dans l’oeuvre de saint Thomas d’Aquin. Références et analyse,” *Revue Thomiste* 95 (1995): 653–64. The author has found eighty-nine uses of “corpus mysticum,” about half of which refer to the Eucharist; the term “persona” is used ten times to designate the “Christus totus,” specifically with respect to its unity.

³ See Marc Aillet, *Lire la Bible avec S. Thomas. Le passage de la littera à la res dans la Somme théologique* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1993); but there are numerous studies on this subject.

⁴ I have already discussed these ideas in greater detail; see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2, *Spiritual Master* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003); idem, “Théologie et sainteté,” *Revue Thomiste* 71 (1971): 205–21.

Contemplatio primae veritatis

The first question of the *Summa theologiae*, dedicated to the theory of theological knowledge, opens with an affirmation that today sounds somewhat surprising: “It was necessary for the salvation of the human race that besides the philosophical disciplines, works of human reason, there be a different doctrine received through divine revelation. The reason for this is that man is destined by God to an end which surpasses the capacities of his reason . . . and that it is necessary that this end be known to him in order that he might direct his intention and his actions towards it.” This assertion is insisted upon a second time at the end of the same text: “It was necessary that there should be . . . a sacred doctrine obtained from revelation.”⁵

This *sacra doctrina*, necessary for salvation, is a much broader reality than theology alone: In fact, in addition to revelation, which, properly speaking, is transmitted in Sacred Scripture, *sacra doctrina* incorporates all forms of Christian teaching at all levels. Theology is therefore not identical with *sacra doctrina*, but is rather its scientifically developed form. This is why, in order to distinguish it from metaphysics, the theology of the philosophers, Thomas designates it as *theologia quae ad sacram doctrinam pertinet*.⁶ At the same time, everything that he says about theology assumes that on its own level it participates in the necessity of *sacra doctrina* itself in relation to salvation.

This position results immediately in an obvious consequence: Since *sacra doctrina* is received from divine revelation, it must be received through and practiced in theological faith. Thus the subordination of theology to the science of God and of the blessed through faith is the first characteristic of theology, according to Thomas Aquinas. The theory of the subordination of the sciences, for Aristotle, verifies our own experience: Scientific disciplines are not all on the same level. Those sciences that proceed by way of knowledge acquired in other sciences exist in a relation of dependency on them, as in the case of optics in relation to geometry, or music in relation to the laws of mathematics. Without going into detail, it is enough to know that theology is in an analogous position, because the supernatural realities of which it speaks are not evident to us. The existence of God in his Trinitarian mystery and all that he has accomplished for the human race in the history of salvation are not evident except to the eyes of God himself; if they are made evident to the blessed by participation in the beatific vision face to face, men who are

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 1; for a more in-depth proof of what is proposed here, see my study, “Le savoir théologique chez saint Thomas,” in *Recherches thomasiennes* (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 121–57.

⁶ ST I q. 1, a. 1, ad 2; for the distinction between the theology of the philosopher and the *theologia sacrae scripturae*, cf. *Super Boetium de Trinitate* q. 5, a. 4.

still journeying cannot have access to them except through and in faith. The subordination of theology to the knowledge that God has of himself and that the blessed have of God is simply the technical expression of the necessity of faith for the practice of theology. This fact is of utmost importance. It signifies that theological faith is the spiritual locus where the ignorance of the theologian connects with God's own knowledge; it is only by faith that the theologian's science has real content, but it is also thanks to faith that theology finds itself situated on the path leading from the obscurity of this world to the full daylight of vision. Thus it is sufficient, but necessary, for the theologian as a scholar to direct the requisites of his knowledge right to their final end, in order to culminate by reaching him who is the ultimate end of his life as believer. Here, then, is the most profound reason why the theologian can also become a mystic.⁷

The second characteristic of theology, according to Thomas Aquinas, is that God is the "subject" of this unique science. We can leave aside the more technical aspects of what is implied by the Aristotelian notion of the subject of a science,⁸ but it is necessary to know at least why we speak here of subject and not of object. The subject is the extramental reality that the science seeks to know; the end of a science is no other than the knowledge of its subject. But this reality cannot exist in the soul, cannot be known, except through the mediation of concepts that are like so many holds upon it, and that constitute the object of this science. Thus the concepts do not exhaust the subject; they must be multiplied in order to render one's approach to the subject a little less inadequate. It even happens that the knower must admit that he is conquered and recognize that the object as known remains perpetually inadequate in relation to the reality that is to be known. This is indeed verified to an unequalled degree where God is involved. Thomas Aquinas means precisely this, then, when he speaks of God as the subject of theology. "Everything in *sacra doctrina* is considered in relation to God (*sub ratione Dei*), whether it has to do with God Himself, or whether it is related to God as principle or as end."⁹ It also means that in treating of God, the true theologian should never forget that the subject of his knowledge, the end which he pursues, is not the

⁷ For the theory of subordination, see *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 3; *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2; *Super Boetium de Trinitate* q. 2, a. 2, ad 5; cf. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*, 7–9; or *Recherches thomasiennes*, 140–44.

⁸ Cf. *Recherches thomasiennes*, 144–48.

⁹ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 7; the same expression is found in the *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 4: "Omnia enim quae in hac scientia considerantur sunt aut Deus aut ea quae ex Deo et ad Deum sunt"; each word of this definition is evidently weighted, since Thomas takes here a position relative to several other definitions current in his time, which he recalls in these two passages.

simple accumulation of objective facts about God the subject, but is rather the very knowledge of the living God of the history of salvation. In this regard, a mystic would naturally speak of a meeting with or experience of God; the theologian has no reason to repudiate such language.

This second characteristic entails a third, concerning the nature of theology, which Thomas enunciates rather disconcertingly by saying that since it has God as its subject, theology is more a speculative than a practical science.¹⁰ This affirmation, which may seem rather esoteric to twenty-first century readers, is also of great importance, since among the scholastic theorists of the science of theology who preceded him, Thomas Aquinas occupies, in this regard, a place entirely apart. Although those scholastics all admitted that theology is a speculative science, they also held that it was primarily practical, that is, essentially ordered to the perfect attainment of charity. Starting with his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Thomas is the first to affirm, on the contrary, that “the ultimate end of this *doctrina* is the contemplation of the first truth in the fatherland (*contemplatio primae veritatis in patria*).”¹¹ And thus, given that each science must be judged in relation to the end which it pursues, we may conclude that this science, theology, is “principally speculative.”

It can be immediately understood that in this context “speculative” in fact means “contemplative.”¹² This is not to say that theology is nothing more than contemplative; Thomas likewise acknowledges that it is also “practical” and that it has the task of guiding human action according to the Gospel within sight of the beatitude that is to be attained, but this is not its determining attribute: “Action is not what is ultimately pursued in this *scientia*, but rather the contemplation of the first truth in the fatherland, to which we will attain once we have been purified by our good works, according to Mt 5:8: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God.’ This is why it is more speculative than practical.”¹³ In other words, God is not the object of human action, of “something that is to be done.” The theologian does not have God at his disposal: He can only situate himself in relation to God, see in him his origin and his end, bring back to God everything in the universe as well as his own actions, and finally, pray to him, adore him, humble himself before him in contemplation.

This supreme finality serves to express the fact that theology is a knowledge completely apart. This idea needs no more emphasis, but

¹⁰ ST I, q. 1, a. 4; *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 3.

¹¹ *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 3.

¹² Cf. Servais Pinckaers, “Recherche de la signification véritable du terme ‘spéculatif,’” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 81 (1959): 673–85.

¹³ *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 3, ad 1.

another dimension remains to be revealed: The end pursued by theology is identified in fact and by rights with the final end of man and of the universe. Indeed, if Thomas Aquinas, not only as Christian but also as thinker, is certain of one thing, it is that the entire universe, including man himself, can neither find its meaning nor be understood except in relation to God. This is not simply an affirmation but a well-reasoned and ceaselessly repeated conviction, the most beautiful illustration of which is found in the structure of the *Summa theologiae*: It begins with God and returns to God according to the well-known schema of “departure–return” (*exitus-reditus*).¹⁴ This generic truth is expressed in a manner that is just as universal, but also specific to man himself, from the very first words of the *Commentary on the Sentences*, where Thomas categorically states, “All those who think rightly recognize that the end of human life is found in the contemplation of God (*Omnes qui recte senserunt posuerunt finem humanae vitae Dei contemplationem*).”¹⁵

It is significant that this statement immediately precedes the discussion on the end of theological knowledge, a clear sign that the latter extends and further defines the former. The same perspective, this time argued more at length, is found in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, where after having rejected everything which does not cause happiness (riches, satisfaction of the sensible appetite, good of the soul, or of the body, and so on), Thomas concludes forcefully, “Thus the ultimate beatitude of man resides in the contemplation of truth.”¹⁶ And again at the end of the *Summa theologiae*, practically at the close of his life, the author repeats unhesitatingly, “The contemplation of truth . . . is the end of the whole of human life (*contemplatio divinae veritatis . . . est finis totius humanae vitae*).”¹⁷ Clearly, Thomas sees no difference between God and the First Truth, and can make a transition between the two easily.

We have just seen why theology occupies such a unique position in the organization of knowledge according to Thomas Aquinas: It is the sole body of knowledge whose end as a science (*finis operis*) is identical with the end of him who practices it (*finis operantis*). This much cannot be said of any other body of knowledge, but it can be said of theology.

¹⁴ Cf. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*, 53–58.

¹⁵ *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 1.

¹⁶ SCG III, ch. 37 (Marietti ed., no. 2152); this thought is rendered more precise several lines later: “At the end of our reasoning by induction it is thus shown that the ultimate beatitude of man can consist in nothing else than the contemplation of God” (no. 2160); cf. *Super Boetium de Trinitate* q. 5, a. 1, ad 4: “(finis) beatitudinis, ad quem tota vita humana ordinatur.”

¹⁷ ST II–II, q. 180, a. 4.

With fear and trembling, certainly, the theologian lives in the humble awareness that the practitioner does not always measure up to his own knowledge, but also in the peaceful certitude that the one who practices his science in theological faith permeated with the love, which is charity, according to all the demands of the integral method required by its “subject,” can become a mystic in the manner of Thomas Aquinas. This first approach must nevertheless be supplemented, because not all contemplation is theological contemplation, and the latter must not be confused with nontheological contemplation.

Contemplation of the Philosophers, Contemplation of the Saints

Following a method for which he has great affection and which he employs every time he discusses his theory of theological knowledge, Thomas situates theology in relation to philosophy. A re-reading of the first pages of the *Commentary on the Sentences* demonstrates why. “All those who think rightly” certainly agree in seeing contemplation of the first truth as the final end of human life, but it must be acknowledged that there are two kinds of contemplation. Given up to the powers of reason alone, the philosophers were limited to seeking a contemplation of God starting from the created world. They could thus only attain an imperfect beatitude, restricted to this life. On the other hand, thanks to the theological faith that leads it as though by the hand (*manuducatur*), *doctrina theologiae* makes it possible to pursue another contemplation, likewise temporarily incomplete, at least as long as it remains on this earth, but which will blossom into the perfect contemplation by which God will be seen in His essence in the everlasting fatherland.¹⁸

Here we can immediately see the two differences between philosophy and theology to which Thomas constantly refers.¹⁹ First of all, although they are not in themselves opposed to each other, they represent two intellectual ways in opposite directions. The first starts from creatures to culminate in God at the end of an inductive inquiry. The second, conversely, begins with God and, even if on occasion its reasoning proceeds exteriorly in the manner of the first, it remains under the influence of this divine origin that gives meaning and consistency to all its search. It is this that

¹⁸ *Sentences* I, Prol. a. 1; cf. *Super Boetium de Trinitate* q. 6, a. 4, ad 3.

¹⁹ In addition to the passage here in question, see *Sentences* II, Prol. *S. Thomae* (first lines); SCG II, ch. 4 (Marietti ed., no. 876); I have discussed this comparison at length in “Philosophie et théologie d’après le Prologue de Thomas d’Aquin au *Super Boetium de Trinitate*. Essai d’une lecture théologique,” in *Documenti e Studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 10 (1999): 299–353.

allows Thomas to state that *sacra doctrina* is “like a certain imprint of the divine science.”²⁰ Although this statement appears extravagant at first sight, it is merely one more expression of theology’s relationship of dependency on the revelation received from God. The privilege belongs less to theology than to the faith that is its very soul, since it is faith that ensures the continuity between the theologian’s knowledge (*savoir*) and God’s own knowledge of himself, enabling in this way the birth and growth of theological knowledge.²¹ The second difference is no less evident: Assuming that it succeeds (Thomas is not very optimistic about the potential of reason left to itself), the philosophical path can only end in an imperfect contemplation limited to this life, while because of the continuity established by faith, theological contemplation already procures, as it were, a foretaste of eternal beatitude, a *praelibatio quaedam* of the divine goods that we shall enjoy in the beatific vision.²²

Besides these two characteristics linked to the very nature of things, philosophical contemplation is characterized by a more serious deficiency to which Thomas alludes here and there, but which he explains in more depth in a rare text deserving to be better known. Far from digressing from our topic, the clarifications that this text provides can definitely contribute to our progress:

The contemplative life consists in an act of the cognitive power directed (*praeacceptatae*) by the will. Now, the operation is in a certain way the midpoint between the subject and the object; it is a perfection of the knowing subject, and is qualified by the specifying object. It follows therefore that the operation of the cognitive power can be qualified by affectivity (*affectari*) in two ways. On the one hand, *insofar as it is the perfection of the knower*, and in this case the affective quality of the cognitive operation proceeds from love of self; *and this was the kind of affectivity in the contemplative life of the philosophers*. On the other hand, *insofar as it ends in the object*, and in this case the desire of contemplation proceeds from love of the object, for where love is found, there also is found the gaze; cf. Mt 6:21: “Where your treasure is, there also is your heart.” *And this is the kind of affectivity in the contemplative life of the saints of which we speak*. Thus contemplation consists essentially in an act of the cognitive [power] which requires charity for the reason we have just mentioned.²³

²⁰ ST I, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2: “velut quaedam impressio divinae scientiae.”

²¹ It is indeed in a discussion of faith that Thomas employs a formula very similar to the preceding quote; cf. *Super Boetium de Trinitate* q. 3, a. 1, ad 4: “Lumen . . . fidei . . . est quasi quaedam sigillatio primae veritatis in mente.”

²² *Compendium theologiae* I 2; cf. ST II–II, q. 4, a. 1; *De veritate* q. 14, a. 2.

²³ *Sentences* III, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 1; see also qc. 3.

Despite its apparent serenity, this passage is a battle-text. It must be interpreted in the polemical context of the era, during which a whole philosophical current was born in the Paris faculty of arts, asserting that it was possible for philosophers to attain perfect beatitude already in this life.²⁴ What Thomas disputes here is not philosophical research per se, nor the love of truth by which it may be inspired, nor the beatitude, no matter how limited, which it can procure; rather, he argues against an inaccuracy that he believes he has identified in Aristotle and in those who claim to follow Aristotle alone. For Aristotle, the happiness of the philosopher consists in contemplation, not by virtue of the object contemplated, but rather because contemplation is the highest activity of man, who finds his perfection therein. This strictly intellectual activity achieves its perfection in immanence, not in a transcendent object.²⁵ Thomas could only disdain this enclosure of self in pure humanism, and it is this that he rejects under the name of contemplation of the philosophers. He certainly admits that contemplation is an act of intelligence, but he warns against what he calls “the love of knowledge for its own sake,”²⁶ and explains that “the delectation which the contemplative life procures does not come only from the contemplation itself.”²⁷ More than that, it is rooted in the love of the reality contemplated and it can only be fulfilled in this same love. In speaking of “contemplation of the first truth,” we must therefore not allow ourselves to be drawn into error as though we were dealing with a purely intellectual activity. Thomas speaks more precisely: “The end of contemplation as contemplation is nothing else than truth; but when contemplation becomes a way of life it also has the account of affectivity and the good.”²⁸

It already happens likewise in relation to philosophical contemplation: Disinterested love of the truth sought and attained should suffice to prevent the temptation of becoming wrapped up in self, so that in this way the practice of philosophy could be an authentic springboard toward

²⁴ Cf. my “Philosophie et théologie,” 339–43, for further details and the necessary bibliography.

²⁵ Cf. R.-A. Gauthier, *La morale d'Aristote* (Paris: 1958), 101–4; nevertheless, the author underlines that Aristotle occasionally seems to raise himself to a more mystical view of contemplation.

²⁶ *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 1: “propter amorem ipsius cognitionis quam quis ex inspectione consequitur.”

²⁷ *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 7: “in vita contemplativa non solum est delectatio ratione ipsius contemplationis.”

²⁸ *Sentences* III, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 1, ad 1: “finis contemplationis, inquantum contemplatio est veritas tantum; sed secundum quod contemplatio accipit rationem vitae, sic induit rationem affectati et boni.”

the love of God.²⁹ For an even greater reason, the same applies to Christian contemplation: “The contemplative life of the saints presupposes love of the reality contemplated and proceeds thence.”³⁰ Here the saints are simply the faithful, among whom theologians clearly rank; theological contemplation thus can benefit from what is said of contemplation in general. The faith that is at the source of this very particular knowledge is itself already permeated with affectivity; it is “faith which works by charity” (Gal 5:6). But Thomas insists on further defining the place of theological affectivity: “Since the contemplative life consists principally in the contemplation of God to which charity impels . . . , it follows that the delectation of the contemplative life does not result only from contemplation itself, but from the very love of God.”³¹

Although it resides essentially in the intellect, the contemplative life finds its origin (*principium*) in affectivity, since it is charity which impels towards the contemplation of God. And since the end corresponds to the beginning, it follows that the term and end of the contemplative life are equally found in affectivity, since we find joy in beholding the reality which is loved, and the very delectation which we feel therein further arouses our love for that object. This is why Gregory says in his commentary on Ezekiel that when the lover beholds the object of his love he is inflamed even more towards it. In this is truly found the ultimate perfection of the contemplative life, when the truth be not only known, but also loved.³²

This perspective enables us to better comprehend how Thomas can speak of contemplation as though it were the beginning of a process that will only find its perfection later: “Here on earth the contemplation of divine truth is only possible for us in an imperfect way, ‘in a mirror and dimly’ [1 Cor 13:12], but in this way there appears in us the incipience, as it were, of this beatitude (*inchoatio beatitudinis*) which begins here on earth and will be completed in the age to come.”³³

²⁹ Cf. *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 7, which connects the delectation procured in the contemplation of truth, with the desire for knowledge that all men have by nature. The background context is clearly as much Aristotle’s affirmation at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* as Thomas’s own statements about the natural desire to see God.

³⁰ *Sentences* III, d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, qc. 3.

³¹ *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 7.

³² *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 7, ad 1; the same doctrine, together with the same quotation from St. Gregory, is found in *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 1.

³³ *ST* II–II, q. 180, a. 4; a similar expression in another context shows the degree to which such language is familiar to St. Thomas and how much he is concerned with the totality of theological life: “per gratiam acceptam et nondum consummatam (fuit) in eis [homo et angelus] inchoatio quaedam speratae beatitudinis quae quidem inchoatur in voluntate per spem et caritatem, sed in intellectu per fidem.”

It could not be clearer: Contemplation is not merely concerned with intellectual vision, but engages the whole theological affectivity of the one who gives himself to it; and it engages not only his intellectual affectivity (will), but also his sensible affectivity, as Thomas does not hesitate to clarify at times.³⁴ Contemplation, then, is an arduous experience that embraces the totality of the person who desires to follow his intention through to the end. Of course, all this is not said directly about theology, and we should be careful not to infer that all theologians show themselves worthy of the noble science that they practice. But it is no less certain that it is in practicing theology in this way that Thomas Aquinas himself became a saint.

Theological Contemplation, Infused Contemplation

Another clarification is necessary in order that these texts not be interpreted wrongly. As all-encompassing as it may be, this description of contemplation does not extend to the reality to which the same name normally refers after the sixteenth century. Beginning with St. John of the Cross, the word “contemplation” is used in a more distinctly specialized and restricted sense than that which characterizes its use in St. Thomas. For the latter, contemplation is the highest act of a mode of life (religious, philosophical, theological), which it defines and polarizes; and it is such a difficult act that it cannot be constantly sustained, so that one could speak more naturally and with greater exactitude of the contemplative life rather than of contemplation. Nevertheless, this supereminent act, which requires all the intellectual and affective powers of the person dedicated to it, all the resources of a graced nature open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, remains an activity within the capacity of human potential. The religious, theologian, or philosopher is responsible for living in conformity with his ideal and for sharpening his capacity for intellectual intuition to the point that, at least at certain moments, he can free himself from all rational and conceptual baggage, in order to lift a purely contemplative gaze to the reality that he pursues. The goal of his knowledge or of his life is not reasoning itself, but rather the contemplation of the reality to be known and loved.

Mystical contemplation operates in a different way. This kind of contemplation is not within the capacity of human potential: It is purely a grace. It too doubtless requires preparation, but this preparation derives from asceticism and prayer rather than science or intelligence. And this preparation can never be such as to procure in an assured fashion, much

³⁴ Cf. Disputed question *De Virtutibus* a. 5, ad 8; *ST* II–II, q. 181, a. 1.

less automatically, the gift of contemplation. In this area, the initiative returns to God “who provides for his beloved as they sleep” (Ps 127:2). This is why we speak of infused contemplation, while for theological contemplation we speak rather of acquired contemplation.

Although Thomas does not use this terminology himself, he is familiar with the distinction and uses it in his own way.³⁵ Thus, when he questions whether theological science is the same as wisdom, he recalls that it is proper to wisdom to judge all things according to the highest causes, and since the “subject” of theology is the highest cause of all, God himself, theology is therefore wisdom *par excellence*. Nevertheless, he clarifies that there are two types of wisdom: one, theological wisdom, which is obtained through study (*per studium*); the other, the effect of the gift of wisdom of the Holy Spirit, which is obtained by infusion (*per infusionem*). It is true that the principles of the first are found in revelation, but its manner of judging derives from science in a human way; one is more or less wise to the degree that one is more or less learned about divine things. The second is the fruit of a freely granted divine gift, and the judgment which it procures derives from a knowledge by connaturality. In the way that the virtuous make right judgments about good and evil quasi-spontaneously, the one enlightened by the gift of wisdom possesses an intimate familiarity with divine things that the theologian cannot procure merely by his pure science. According to Dionysius, whose statement Thomas willingly applies to his own theme, “Hierotheus became wise not only by studying, but by experiencing the divine (*non solum discens, sed patiens divina*).”³⁶

Thomas returned to this distinction several times, and he clearly considered the topic an important one. Beginning with the *Sentences*, in discussing the gift of wisdom he recognizes immediately that if one can only judge well that which one knows, it is no less true that this capacity for judgment is actualized in a different way in each person. For some, it derives from

³⁵ To my knowledge, the term *infusa* is used near the word *contemplatio* only once in his writings, in his commentary on the verse: “No one has ever seen God.” He declares that amid the different ways of “seeing” God, there is one which comes “by a certain light infused into the soul by God during contemplation; it is in this way that Jacob saw God face to face [cf. Gen 28:19], in a vision granted to him, according to St. Gregory, through elevated contemplation” (*In Ioan.* 1:18, lect. 11 [Marietti ed., no. 211]; see the complete translation of this text in *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*, 49–51).

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 6 and ad 3; this manner of distinguishing between the two types of wisdom, acquired and infused, is one of the points on which Thomas is most clearly distinguished from his contemporaries, for whom theological wisdom was in itself a delightful knowledge [*connaissance*]; cf. *Recherches thomasiennes*, 135–37.

study and knowledge, together with a certain penetration of intellect; in this case, wisdom is an intellectual virtue. For others, this capacity derives from a certain affinity to divine things, as Dionysius expressed with regard to Hierotheus, who “learned divine reality through his experience of it.” According to Thomas, it is this wisdom to which St. Paul refers when he affirms that “the spiritual man judges all things” (1 Cor 2:15); and St. John, in asserting that the “anointing [of the Holy Spirit] will teach you all things” (1 Jn 2:27). This passage, which serves to better clarify the difference between the two types of wisdom, is followed by another that characterizes the knowledge obtained through the gift “as an intuitive grasp (*cognitio simplex*) of the realities of the faith which are at the origin of all Christian wisdom [hence knowledge through the supreme cause]. The gift of wisdom thus culminates in a deiform and in a certain sense explicit contemplation (*deiformem contemplationem*), of the realities which faith holds implicitly in a human manner.” Here, unequivocally distinguished from theological contemplation, is an exact description of the reality designated as mystical contemplation: While theological contemplation, primarily directed by theological faith, remains available to human initiative, mystical contemplation, without separating itself from faith, is primarily directed by the gift and depends entirely on divine generosity.³⁷

The comparison between the two types of wisdom does not end there, and when it comes time to make definitions according to essence, Thomas never forgets to clarify more exactly the relationships that intelligence and will enjoy in this regard. He says that one can judge of divine things from the point of view of the inquiries of reason, and this derives from wisdom as intellectual virtue, but the perception of these things “by connaturality” belongs to that wisdom that is a gift of the Holy Spirit, as in the case of Hierotheus who had perfect knowledge of divine things because he had learned them by lived experience: “This ‘compassion’ or connaturality with divine things is the work of charity which properly unites us to God: ‘he who unites himself to God is one spirit with Him’ (1 Cor 6:17). Thus the cause of wisdom as gift is found in the will, i.e., in charity; but its essence is found in the intellect, to which it pertains to judge rightly.”³⁸

Here, one may notice not only the continuity with the immediately preceding texts, but also the parallel with previously cited texts concerning theological contemplation: In either of the two cases, the objective analysis that identifies contemplation as an act of the intellect does not take precedence over Thomas’s concern to uphold its status as all-encompassing

³⁷ *Sentences* III, d. 35, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 1, ad 1.

³⁸ *ST* II–II, q. 45, a. 2

act that lends full value to the status of its affectivity. One last text will provide a deeper understanding of this difference: “(Besides speculative knowledge), there is also an affective or experiential knowledge of the divine goodness or the divine will; one experiences in oneself the taste of the sweetness of God and the lovability of the divine will, according to what Denys says of Hierotheus who learned divine things from having experienced them in himself. We are thus invited to experience the will of God and to taste His sweetness.”³⁹

Thus although he does not directly use the terminology of mystical contemplation, which would become widespread only after his time, Thomas is very familiar with the reality meant by these words. But his particular approach to things further has the advantage of better clarifying the existence and requirements of the other reality, which is theological contemplation. He therefore distinguishes the wisdom of the mystics that blossoms into infused contemplation, from the wisdom of the theologian that merely grants an acquired contemplation. Although he repeats that one who theorizes about divine things does not have the same kind of competence as the one who practices them, he does not preclude the theorist’s experiencing divine things as well. It is even possible to add without the risk of erring that the very demands of the wisdom that the theologian practices make it desirable for him not to remain a pure theorist. His knowledge could only become sharpened by this experience and thus increase in penetration. Without extrapolating too much outside the limits of the texts, we may even say that this is what happened for St. Thomas himself.

Conclusion: Thomas Aquinas, Theologian and Mystic

Relatively little is known about the life of St. Thomas apart from his own writings, and it must be honestly stated that the witnesses are hampered by the factor of uncertainty common to such documents, closer to hagiography than to history. I have nevertheless attempted elsewhere to unearth the solid kernel of what has been handed down to us, and I believe that we can say that these documents are for the most part credible enough, since they transmit scarcely more than the portrait of an exemplary religious “of great contemplation and prayer.”⁴⁰ Without

³⁹ ST II-II, q. 97, a. 2, ad 2; these little-known texts on a delightful knowledge through experience connect with an authentically Thomistic theme that is developed somewhat in *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*, 90–99.

⁴⁰ Cf. J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1, *The Person and his Work* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 267–89 (here 286); cf. C. Le Brun-Gouanvic, *Ystoria santi Thome de Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco (1323)* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996).

taking this up again here, it seems that we can retain as unquestionable three principal traits of Thomas's religious life and in particular of his prayer: first of all his devotion to the crucifix, of which we have numerous moving testimonies,⁴¹ then his great veneration for the Eucharist, of which the most eloquent example is surely the prayer *Adoro Te*,⁴² and finally the link connecting Thomas's prayer to his intellectual work. Under rigorous inspection—if there were any—the first two aspects could be imagined to be simply parallel to his theological research, but the third takes us directly back to this theological research and is frequently highlighted: We see Thomas engaging in prayer in the moments when he had to study, teach, write, or dictate, and in particular when he had to treat of difficult topics. His biographer has captured very well the stakes involved in the qualities that characterized Thomas and his confreres in this regard; in attacking their way of life, the secular masters of the university of Paris showed that they had not understood that one could reach salvation *in sola studii contemplatione*.⁴³ When we recognize the concept that this phrase signifies in Thomas, we can better grasp its import and reasonably suppose that he effectively practiced what he taught. Thomas should be reread from this point of view in order to see how his contemplation as friar-preacher-theologian found its natural expression in his work.⁴⁴

A reading of the life of Thomas reveals how he practiced theological contemplation, but it also manifests that his life ended in a confession-in-act of the insufficiency of this first form of contemplation. Novelists and historians have made the most audacious and sometimes incredible suppositions about the death of St. Thomas. While remaining within the bounds of history, it can be said with certitude at least that the final months of his life were marked by repeated ecstasies, the last-known occurrence of which provoked the cessation of his writing activity. It was around the feast of St. Nicholas, December 6, 1273, and the author was still in the midst of composing the *Summa*.⁴⁵ To his secretary who bemoaned this interruption, it is said that he simply replied, "I no longer can. Everything that I have written seems straw in comparison with what

⁴¹ Cf. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Person and His Work*, 287–88; idem, *Le Christ en ses mystères*, vol. 1 (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 325–27.

⁴² The authenticity of this prayer is now unquestioned: cf. Torrell, "Adoro Te. La plus belle prière de saint Thomas," *La vie spirituelle*, no. 726 (March 1998): 29–36.

⁴³ Cf. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Person and His Work*, 283–87.

⁴⁴ This is precisely what I have attempted to accomplish in *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master*.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Saint Thomas Aquinas, The Person and His Work*, 289–95.

I have seen.” These words have sometimes been interpreted as Thomas’s repudiation of his work as theologian. This is highly improbable. It would be closer to the truth to remember that straw is merely the support and the sheath of the grain. The words of the *Summa* or of his other works are very clearly not the reality of which they speak; they do not limit this reality, but they point it out and lead to it. Elevated by a special grace to contemplate the reality itself, Thomas had good reason to feel detached from the words he had employed until then, but this does not imply that he considered his work worthless. Simply, from that moment on, he had passed beyond it. In words relating back to our theme, we are assured that theological contemplation—without having thereby lost its merit—having played the role of a preparatory *manuductio*, could now give way to infused contemplation. N V