

The Senses in the Relationship of Man with God

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GOD BEING pure spirit, human beings cannot see him with their senses. This holds as much for the beatific vision, where the divine essence is united directly to the intellect of the human being,¹ as it holds for life in this world. Nonetheless, in this life, “[t]hough we cannot reach God with the senses, our mind is urged by sensible signs to approach God.”²

In the economy of salvation, God is made known to us by employing our mode of knowing, which takes its starting point from sensible experience. In other words, God enters into relationship with human beings according to a mode that befits human beings, not according to a purely divine mode. In order to make himself known to us, he speaks our language and not only his, as it were.

Christian experience shows the presence of a number of sensible elements: the humanity of Christ, the members of the Church who proclaim their Savior, the sacraments, the Bible. This seems scandalous to those who desire a purely spiritual religiosity and who therefore accuse the Church of being unworthy of God. Such an accusation has been heard through the centuries, but it is not biblical: “The Holy Spirit engages the visible level. We are too accustomed to consider the spiritual life in mental categories that are not its own. The Spirit, in the biblical

Translation by Matthew Levering of “Les sens dans la relation de l’homme avec Dieu,” *Nova et Vetera* (French) 79 (2004): 7–35.

¹ Cf. Benedict XII, constitution *Benedictus Deus* (January 29, 1336), Denzinger, no.1000. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (ST) I, q. 12.

² ST II–II, q. 84, a. 2, ad 3.

sense of the word, makes himself visible in the body, in what exists. The Spirit becomes visible.”³

Our purpose here is to identify some of the sensible elements that belong to the relationship of human beings with God, and to reflect upon the significance of their existence.

Sensible Knowledge and Natural Theology

The first level to take into consideration is the possibility that, according to Scripture, God disposed the created order in such a manner that human beings could come by knowing the created order to a certain knowledge of its Creator. Karl Barth, reacting to the excesses of liberal Protestantism, denied such a possibility. James Barr has nonetheless remarked that the Bible itself obliges us to take seriously natural theology.⁴ One finds in the Old Testament an ensemble of texts that invites us to recognize God through his creation. The most famous, though not the most typical of the Old Testament, is Wisdom 13:1–5:

For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if men were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from

³ Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, *Des êtres sont transfigurés. Pourquoi pas nous?* (Les Plans-sur-Bex: Parole et Silence, 2001), 37.

⁴ Cf. James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 102–4: “To me the arguments of natural theology are not a congenial field. Even if natural theology should be a valid mode of procedure, I doubt if I would find it easy to practice it. . . . It may be, indeed, that through the effect of my own arguments I will be forced to become something of a natural theologian, but that was not the intention with which I started out. What really interests me is the effect that the whole question has upon biblical studies and upon the place of the Bible in theology. What I do find, after a long period of struggling with the problems, is that the Bible does imply something like natural theology and makes it impossible for us to avoid the issues that it involves . . . Barth’s rejection of natural theology was never really based on biblical exegesis, nor, as he himself, at least partially, admitted, was it really representative of Protestant tradition as it had in fact been, even in the great Reformers themselves. . . . The fact remains irrefutable: if you thoroughly reject natural theology, and if natural theology underlies the Bible in any significant degree, then you must judge that the Bible is inadequate as a theological guide.”

them how much more powerful is he who formed them. For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

Isaiah also calls us to be turned from the world to its Author: "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number" (Is 40:26).

One could cite other texts, notably from the Psalms, or from the discourse of God to Job.⁵ The fundamental reason why it is possible to see in the world a certain reflection of its Creator is that the creation is good. God has not only created the world good, but also he has preserved it:

For thou lovest all the things that exist, and hast loathing for none of the things which thou hast made, for thou wouldst not have made anything if thou hast hated it. How would anything have endured if thou hadst not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by thee have been preserved?" (Wis 11:24–25)

It is precisely this positive approach that is lacking in theological currents that promote a "pure spirituality," scorning the material dimension of religion, and indeed the entire material world.

In the New Testament, a certain natural theology appears at many places, notably in the speeches of St. Paul to the pagans.⁶ The most famous text is part of the first chapter of the Letter to the Romans:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that are made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. . . . Though they know God's decree that those who do

⁵ Cf. Job 38.

⁶ Cf. Acts 14:8–18; 17:16–34.

such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them. (Rom 1:18–26, 32)

It is necessary to look at the whole of this passage in order to apprehend its force: The knowledge of God is not only possible, but manifest, through the creation; not that one sees God directly, but one discovers God by a reflection on the world that one sees, and in this manner God is revealed. The fact that such a knowledge is possible is confirmed by the end of the passage: God condemns those who do not recognize him; it would be unjust to condemn someone for not having done something impossible. Certainly the passage is polemical, but within the polemic, St. Paul affirms an important dimension of the Christian faith.

Man as Such Contributes to Knowing God

Within the creation, the human being contributes uniquely to knowing God, because the human being is God's image. To speak properly, the image is not directly the human being's knowledge by his or her senses (even though such knowledge contributes to knowing God), because "it is according to his intelligence and reason, which are incorporeal, that man is said to be according to the image of God,"⁷ and the body alone is directly the subject of sensible knowledge.

Nonetheless, it is on the basis of sensible knowledge that one attains the intelligence and the reason of a human being, and to know the human being contributes to knowing God. For instance, seeing the perfection that the person represents in the creation, one can deduce that God must be personal:

Person signifies what is most perfect in all nature—that is, a subsistent individual of rational nature. Hence, since everything that is perfect must be attributed to God, forasmuch as his essence contains every perfection, this name person is fittingly applied to God; not, however, as it is applied to creatures, but in a more excellent way; as other names also, which, while giving them to creatures, we attribute to God.⁸

In his or her spiritual dimension, the human being contributes to the knowing of the Trinity itself: "[I]n rational creatures, possessing intellect and will, there is found the representation of the Trinity by way of image, inasmuch as there is found in them the word conceived, and the love proceeding."⁹ Certainly this knowledge necessarily requires faith and is

⁷ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2.

⁸ *ST I*, q. 29, a. 3.

⁹ *ST I*, q. 45, a. 7.

not directly accessible to the senses. Nonetheless the knowledge of the spiritual dimension of the human being presupposes sensible knowledge of the human being, and sensible knowledge is therefore the starting point of a journey that, in faith, leads upward to perceiving the divine mystery.

Faith and the Observation of Historical Facts

The sensible perception of the presence of God also includes the observation of deeds and historical memory. The *credo* of the Old Testament is fundamentally based on history:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried out to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, has given me. (Dt 26:5–10)

Although what is involved in this passage is a distant memory and not a direct observation of deeds, nonetheless the events in themselves are accessible to sensible knowledge.

In the New Testament, the first confessions of faith are also expressed in relation to history, to the historical experience that the apostles had of Christ:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (1 Cor 15:3–7)

The Second Vatican Council insists upon the revelatory meaning of the historical events, in connection with the words:

This economy of Revelation is realized by deeds and words, which are intrinsically bound up with each other. As a result, the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine

and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain.¹⁰

St. Augustine was particularly sensitive to the knowledge of God and of the divine plan that one can draw from history.¹¹ In a general way, in the lives of individuals as well as in the life of the community, "Time is not inert. It does not roll on through our senses without affecting us. Its passing has remarkable effects on the mind."¹² Meditating on his encounter in Milan with St. Ambrose, Augustine finds the mark of God's action: "I was led to him by you, unaware that through him, in full awareness, I might be led to you."¹³ Past history should be for us a pledge of hope as regards the future:

Because both things past, which cannot now be seen, and things present which cannot be seen all of them, at the time which they were foretold, no one of these could then be seen. Therefore, since they have begun to come to pass as they were foretold, from those things which have come to pass unto those which are coming to pass, those things which were foretold concerning Christ and the Church have run on in an ordered series: unto which series these pertain concerning the day of Judgment, concerning the resurrection of the dead, concerning the eternal damnation of the ungodly with the devil, and concerning the eternal recompense of the godly with Christ, things which, foretold in like manner, are yet to come. Why therefore should we not believe the first and the last things which we see not, when we have, as witnesses of both, the things between, which we see, and in the books of the Prophets either hear or read both the first things and the things between and the last things foretold before they came to pass?¹⁴

For Augustine, history is so important that it is at the center of Christianity: "In this religion, the essential point to admit is the history and prophecy of the manner in which divine Providence accomplishes in

¹⁰ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, §2, in *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

¹¹ We could also cite St. Thomas. Cf. in this regard Giuseppe Marco Salvati, O.P., "Cristo e il tempo. Prospettive di teologia tomistica della storia," *Angelicum* 80 (2003): 527–37.

¹² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), bk. IV, ch. viii, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, bk. V, ch. xiii, 23.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *De fide rerum quae non videntur*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 3, trans. C. L. Cornish (1887; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), V, 8.

time the salvation of mankind, by restoring him and transforming him for eternal life.”¹⁵ History in fact belongs to God and is not only a collection of purely human deeds: “Although human institutions of the past are described in historical narration, history itself is not to be classed as a human institution; for those things which are past and cannot be revoked belong to the order of time, whose creator and administrator is God.”¹⁶

The Senses as Involved in the Relationship with Jesus

At the center of history one finds Jesus Christ. All the senses are involved in the relationship with him. It is evident that he preaches to the people, and the sense of hearing is therefore involved in the relationship with him. Given the danger of reducing the role of the senses to hearing alone, however, we wish to show how the other senses are also involved.

Certain people tried to touch Jesus: “And when the men of that place recognized him, they sent round to all that region and brought to him all that were sick, and besought him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well” (Mt 14:35–36). Furthermore, Jesus allowed them to touch him, and he sees in one such gesture a sign of faith.¹⁷ In addition, he himself touches them:

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see men; but they look like trees, walking.” Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. (Mk 8:22–25)

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *De vera religione*, VII, 13.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), II, 28, 44.

¹⁷ Cf. Mk 5:25–34: “And there was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years and who had suffered much under many physicians and had spent all that she had and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, ‘If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well.’ And immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, ‘Who touched my garments?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’ And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’”

The sense of smell is also implied in the relationship with Jesus. He allows his feet to be perfumed with ointment, because he recognized in this gesture a way of signifying love and respect.¹⁸ Christians are compared to the fragrance of Christ:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. (2 Cor 2:14–16)

Christ and Christians give off the fragrance of a good sacrifice,¹⁹ in a cloud of incense.²⁰ If the sense of smell can be invoked in such a context, it is because what is perceived exteriorly reflects an interior attitude.

Even the sense of taste belongs to the relationship with Jesus, beginning with his first sign, where he made himself known by the good wine.²¹ The history of salvation also involves taste, as in the taste of divine Word in the Old Testament.²² Christians are those who have tasted that the Lord is good,²³ those “who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4–5). Elsewhere, the accomplishment of salvation is represented as a banquet, and one finds again an image of tasting.²⁴

Lastly, Jesus is present to the sight:

¹⁸ Cf. Jn 12:1–11.

¹⁹ Cf. Eph 5:2: “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

²⁰ Cf. Phil 4:18: “I have received full payment, and more; I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”

²¹ Cf. Jn 2:9–10: “When the steward of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Every man serves the good wine first; and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now.’”

²² Cf. Ez 3:3.

²³ Cf. 1 Pt 2:2–3: “Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.”

²⁴ Cf. Lk 14:15–16; Rv 19:9.

Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. (Jn 1:38–40)

Jesus is looked at in different ways. There is a curious look that Jesus accepts,²⁵ as well as a curious look that Jesus rejects:²⁶ The look expresses diverse intentions of the heart. Expressing the intentions of the heart, the look can be admiring,²⁷ happy,²⁸ or malevolent.²⁹ In every case, the look engages the person: "But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into

²⁵ Cf. Lk 19:1–6: "He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zaccheus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully." For a different variant, cf. Lk 17:22: "And he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of man, and you will not see it.'"

²⁶ Cf. Mt 12:38–39: "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'"

²⁷ Cf. Mt 15:31: "The throng wondered, when they saw the dumb speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel."

²⁸ Cf. Mt 13:16–17: "But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

²⁹ Cf. Lk 7:39: "Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.'" Cf. Lk 20:19–20: "The scribes and the chief priests tried to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people; for they perceived that he had told this parable against them. So they watched him and sent spies who pretended to be sincere, that they might take hold of what he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor."

hell" (Mt 5:28–29).³⁰ What one sees can open one to faith, both before³¹ and after³² the Resurrection.

The look of Jesus himself expresses the dynamic of his movement toward a person or a community: "And Jesus looking upon him loved him" (Mk 10:21); "And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it" (Lk 19:41). Those who know him recognize the significance of his look: "[A] man from the crowd cried, 'Teacher, I beg you to look upon my son, for he is my only child'" (Lk 9:38); "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times'" (Lk 22:61).

That the fact of seeing Jesus is important is expressed in his identification with the light: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:4–5).³³ One can refuse this light,³⁴ but if one accepts it, the look of faith goes above Jesus himself: "'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father'" (Jn 14:9).

The light that is Christ begets his disciples in the light: "'While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.' When Jesus had said this, he departed and hid himself from them" (Jn 12:36).

³⁰ Cf. also Lk 9:62: "'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'"; or again Mt 25:37–40: "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

³¹ Cf. Jn 6:2: "And a great multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased."

³² Cf. Lk 24:39–40: "'See my hands and feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this he showed them his hands and his feet."

³³ Cf. Mt 4:12–16: "Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.'"

³⁴ Cf. Jn 3:19–21: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."

They are from that point on charged to proclaim the light that they have contemplated³⁵ and to spread what they have become: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:14–16).

The First Letter of John can summarize faith and mission, therefore, in terms of vision, touch, and hearing:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete. (1 Jn 1:1–4)

St. Thomas Aquinas has well observed that all the senses are involved in the relationship with Jesus Christ:

Acquire by experience the mind “which you have in Christ Jesus.” It should be noted that we should have this mind in five ways according to the five senses: first, to see his glory, so that being enlightened, we may be conformed to Him: “Your eyes will see the king in his beauty” (Is 33:17); “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18); secondly, to hear his wisdom in order to become happy: “Happy are these your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom” (1 Kgs 10:8); “As soon as they heard of me they obeyed me” (Ps 18:44). Thirdly, to smell the grace of his meekness [Odorare gratias suae mansuetudinis], that we may run to Him: “Your anointing oils are fragrant . . . draw me after you” (Song 1:3); fourthly to taste the sweetness of his mercy, that we may always be in God: “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:9); fifthly, to touch his

³⁵ Cf. 2 Pt 1:16–19: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

power, that we may be saved: "If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well" (Mt 9:21).³⁶

Recognizing this sensible dimension of the communication of salvation, St. Thomas observes that:

Christ came to save the world, not only by divine power, but also through the mystery of his Incarnation. Consequently in healing the sick he frequently not only made use of his divine power, healing by way of command, but also by applying something pertaining to his human nature.³⁷

In accord with his salvific mission, Jesus makes himself seen and heard:

Christ's manner of life had to be in keeping with the end of his Incarnation, by reason of which he came into the world. Now he came into the world, first, that he might publish the truth; thus he says himself (Jn 18:37): "For this was I born, and for this came I into the world, that I should give testimony to the truth." Hence it was fitting not that he should hide himself by leading a solitary life, but that he should appear openly and preach in public. Wherefore (Lk 4:42, 43) He says to those who wished to stay him: "To other cities also I must preach the kingdom of God: for therefore am I sent."³⁸

He allows himself to be seen, heard, touched,, because this human familiarity strengthens communion:

He came that by him "we might have access to" God, as it is written (Rom 5:2). And thus it was fitting that he should give men confidence in approaching him by associating familiarly with them. Wherefore it is written (Mt 9:10): "It came to pass as he was sitting . . . in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with Jesus and his disciples." On which Jerome comments as follows: "They had seen the publican who had been converted from a sinful to a better life: and consequently they did not despair of their own salvation."³⁹

The Liturgy

The liturgical rites, too, depend upon sensible experience. The use of objects in the relationship with God can be done in two senses: the magical sense

³⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ad Phil.*, cap. 2, lec. 2, in idem, *Commentary on Saint Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and the Letter to the Philippians*, trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P. (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969).

³⁷ ST III, q. 44, a. 3, ad 2.

³⁸ ST III, q. 40, a. 1.

³⁹ Ibid.

that consists in wishing to compel God—or some other spiritual force—to act according to our plans; or the properly religious sense that consists in showing by means of objects that we place ourselves at the disposition of the divine plan. The Old Testament, like the New,⁴⁰ condemns magical rites,⁴¹ while at times integrating them provisionally by changing their meaning.⁴² David exemplifies the religious attitude by refusing to use the Ark of the Covenant in order to put pressure on God, preferring instead to resign himself to the divine will.⁴³ Objects and rites can be a legitimate mode of entering into relationship with God, in particular if God himself gives them to human beings and explains their meaning. This is the case with the sacrifices of the Temple, of which the people made good use.

In the life of the Church, the liturgy uniquely manifests the relationship between visible and invisible elements:

The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest . . . thus to show forth the Church, a sign lifted up among the nations, to those who are outside.⁴⁴

In the sacraments, the *raison d'être* of sensible signs in the transmission of spiritual grace appears. Such signs are fit for God because of their spirituality and are fit for human beings because of their sensible and spiritual dimension:

⁴⁰ Cf. Gal 5:19–21: “Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” See also Acts 8:9–24, 13:6–11, 16:16–18.

⁴¹ Cf. Ex 23:19; Lv 19:26–28; Dt 18:10–12.

⁴² By “domesticating” provisionally some objects like the Ephod (cf. 1 Sam 2:28) or the *urim* and *thummin* (cf. 1 Sam 14:41).

⁴³ Cf. 2 Sam 15:24–26: “And Abiathar came up, and lo, Zadok came also, with all the Levites, bearing the ark of the covenant of God; and they set down the ark of God, until the people had all passed out of the city. Then the king said to Zadok, ‘Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his habitation; but if he says, ‘I have no pleasure in you,’ behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.’” Saul had a different attitude in consulting Samuel through the medium of Endor, and Samuel reproached him for it: “‘Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy?’” (1 Sam 28:16).

⁴⁴ Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §2.

Signs are given to me, to whom it is proper to discover the unknown by means of the known. Consequently a sacrament properly so called is that which is the sign of some sacred thing pertaining to man; so that properly speaking a sacrament, as considered by us now, is defined as being the "sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy."⁴⁵

It is necessary to emphasize that "the sacraments of the New Law not only signify, but effect what they signify."⁴⁶ The external sign—the sensible dimension—unveils a real and active interior dimension.

The Relationship to Religious Images

A certain mentality that claims to be spiritual would decry the use of religious images as not spiritual enough. The New Age is in this regard but a new variant of the iconoclasm that is continually being reborn (not even from its ashes, but from its embers!). Although attachment to religious objects is not without ambiguity, nonetheless in themselves images can assist interior conversion:

Thus it is in looking upon the crucifix that we each day withdraw from our heart the germs of idolatry. "Would I not therefore make," says St. John Damascene, "the image of the One who, because of me, has been seen in the nature of flesh?" Moreover, he says in the same place, if there is fault in making images, the first culprit is God who has made man to his image and who, even more, has himself become incarnate! Here there are, indeed, some evidences of a Christian understanding. Who would believe that the Christian who painted the Virgin on the wall in the catacomb of St. Priscilla, that the sculptures or the stained glass windows of Chartres, that Giotto or Blessed Fra Angelico have transgressed the divine precept?⁴⁷

The absolute rejection of images can contain, in germ, a rejection of human communication in general:

The iconoclast error is, furthermore, anti-human. If it is permitted to use literary and poetic images in order to speak of the mysteries of God, it should be permitted, by the same principle, to use pictorial images: they also are a language. But if one proscribed the latter, it would be necessary equally to proscribe the former and no longer to seek to render in the language of imagination the truth about God. This

⁴⁵ ST III, q. 60, a. 2.

⁴⁶ ST III, q. 84, a. 3, ad 5.

⁴⁷ Charles Journet, *Les images* (Fribourg: Saint-Paul, 1950), 11.

would be the silencing and the end of all apostolate. This position is so anti-human that it is impossible.⁴⁸

The rejection of images is ultimately the rejection of a divine economy, and thus has implications beyond itself:

The iconoclast error is a manifestation of the eternal Manichean temptation. One protests first against images, then against the sacraments, then against the supreme one among them, namely the Eucharist, then against the appearance of the Word in the flesh. It is the whole sensible economy of the Incarnation that one is engaged in misunderstanding.⁴⁹

If the use of images in prayer is acceptable, it is because it is human and also because it corresponds to the economy of Revelation. In this regard it is necessary to be precise: God alone is God, and creatures should not be adored in his place. God alone is the object of a cult of *latria* (adoration), creatures can at best be venerated (*dulia*). It is this idolatrous use that the interdiction of images in the Old Testament above all wishes to avoid (“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth”: Ex 20:4). Following Aristotle, St. Thomas explains that the image returns us to what it represents. The first case to take into consideration is that of the particular “image” that is the humanity of Christ. Should it be adored? St. Thomas gives a nuanced response:

The adoration of Christ’s humanity may be understood in two ways. First, so that the humanity is the thing adored: and thus to adore the flesh of Christ is nothing else than to adore the incarnate Word of God: just as to adore a king’s robe is nothing else than to adore a robed king. And in this sense the adoration of Christ’s humanity is the adoration of *latria*. Secondly, the adoration of Christ’s humanity may be taken as given by reason of its being perfected with every gift of grace. And so in this sense the adoration of Christ’s humanity is the adoration not of *latria* but of *dulia*. So that one and the same Person of Christ is adored with *latria* on account of his divinity, and with *dulia* on account of his perfect humanity.⁵⁰

Even in Christ, the humanity is solely an object of veneration. What then as regards images of Christ? St. Thomas applies clearly the Aristotelian understanding of images:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14–15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰ ST III, q. 25, a. 2.

As the Philosopher says (*De memor. et remin.*, 1), there is a twofold movement of the mind towards an image: one indeed towards the image itself as a certain thing; another, towards the image in so far as it is the image of something else. And between these movements there is this difference; that the former, by which one is moved towards an image as a certain thing, is different from the movement towards the thing; whereas the latter movement, which is towards the image as an image, is one and the same as that which is towards the thing. Thus therefore we must say that no reverence is shown to Christ's image, as a thing—for instance, carved or painted wood: because reverence is not due save to a rational creature. It follows therefore that reverence should be shown to it, in so far only as it is an image. Consequently the same reverence should be shown to Christ's image as to Christ himself. Since, therefore, Christ is adored with the adoration of *latria*, it follows that his image should be adored with the adoration of *latria*.⁵¹

Here again, what is accessible to the senses is not God himself, but a help given by God so that human beings could have access to him.

The Bible and Preaching as Sensible Signs

A certain iconoclasm, or a certain minimalization of the sensible dimension of the life of the Church, is sometimes made in the name of the Bible. Thus Calvin, as is well known, banned images from the churches. Following the intention of the interdiction on images in the Old Testament,⁵² his goal was to avoid idolatry; his intention was irreproachable. He reread the history of the Church to present the recourse to images as a decadence, and he therefore wished to limit their religious use to "images" chosen by Christ:

Let us here consider, whether it is expedient that churches should contain representations of any kind, whether of events or human forms. First, then, if we attach any weight to the authority of the ancient Church, let us remember, that for five hundred years, during which religion was in a more prosperous condition, and a purer doctrine flourished, Christian churches were completely free from visible representations (see preface, and IV, IX, 9). Hence their first admission as an ornament to churches took place after the purity of the ministry had somewhat degenerated. . . . And from the fearful infatuation under which the world has hitherto labored, almost to the entire destruction of piety, we know too well from experience that the moment images appear in churches, idolatry has as it were raised its banner; because the folly of manhood cannot moderate

⁵¹ ST III, q. 25, a. 3.

⁵² Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), II, VIII, 17, 330.

itself, but forthwith falls away to superstitious worship. Even were the danger less imminent, still, when I consider the proper end for which churches are erected, it appears to me more unbecoming their sacredness than I well can tell, to admit any other images than those living symbols which the Lord has consecrated by his own word: I mean Baptism and the Lord's Supper, with the other ceremonies. By these our eyes ought to be more steadily fixed, and more vividly impressed, than to require the aid of any images which the wit of man may devise.⁵³

It is interesting to see that he recognized that baptism and the Last Supper are images, because they consist in sensible signs. Yet he remains, even with regard to these two sacraments, attentive to avoiding an overly sensible approach: "The presence of Christ in the Supper we must hold to be such as neither affixes him to the element of bread, nor encloses him in bread, nor circumscribes him in any way (this would obviously detract from his celestial glory)."⁵⁴

We would like to pose a question to Calvin: Why not extend to the Bible itself, and preaching, this mistrust regarding that which is material and sensible? Certainly he would respond that the Bible is a divine gift, which is not necessarily the case with the statues in the churches. But the basic presupposition, which is a fear with regard to the sensible dimension as such, even in the Eucharist which is also a divine gift, can go beyond that which Calvin envisaged, namely to the rejection of Scripture itself—a visible sign in itself and as preached—in the name of a pure spiritualism.

Not only the Bible is a sensible sign, but also human beings participate in its redaction, because "in sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion";⁵⁵

To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more.⁵⁶

This human dimension within the very redaction of the Word of God as a revealed text continues, in another manner, in the transmission of

⁵³ Ibid., I, XI, 13, 101. One discerns at times a certain irony in his remarks: "Indeed, brothels exhibit more chastely and modestly dressed than churches do images intended to represent virgins. The dress of the martyrs is in no respect more becoming" (I, XI, 7, 96).

⁵⁴ Ibid., IV, XVII, 19, 571.

⁵⁵ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, §12.

⁵⁶ Ibid., §11.

Revelation by human beings. Thus the passing on of faith, in the “method” chosen by God, passes through human beings.⁵⁷

The intention of presenting the pure Bible was without doubt commendable. But the manner of doing it was based on presuppositions which, although they were not consciously grasped at the beginning, ended by arriving at their conclusion: if the sensible and human elements are not truly worthy of God, the Bible itself is human; and it is necessary to search elsewhere for spirituality. For a significant number of biblical interpreters today, an axiom is that “the biblical text has lost its status as a sacred text. It is comparable to any other text of world literature and ought therefore to be read according to the methods in use in the literary and historical disciplines.”⁵⁸ If on the other hand one sees Revelation in an incarnate manner, it would be necessary to be able to discern the divine action within what our senses perceive, including the biblical text and its proclamation (by sight or hearing).

The Church or the Visibility of Grace

All that we have said so far can be summarized in the work of the Church. In the Church, divine grace is rendered visible by its effects. The diverse names or images of the Church that Vatican II enumerated refer to visible realities: sheepfold, flock, the tillage of God, the building of God (house, dwelling, tabernacle of God, sacred temple), the Jerusalem that is above, our mother, the immaculate spouse of the spotless Lamb, mystical Body of Christ, People of God.⁵⁹ The forms of the Christian life, which are visible, are signs of the divine action, each in its own manner:

Religious give outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the

⁵⁷ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 6, a. 1: “Two things are requisite for faith. First, that the things which are of faith should be proposed to man: this is necessary in order that man believe anything explicitly. The second thing requisite for faith is the assent of the believer to the things which are proposed to him. Accordingly, as regards the first of these, faith must be from God. Because those things which are of faith surpass human reason, hence they do not come to man’s knowledge, unless God reveal them. To some, indeed, they are revealed by God immediately, as those things which were revealed to the apostles and prophets, while to some they are proposed by God in sending preachers of the faith.”

⁵⁸ Presentation of the developments of the historical-critical method by Jean Zumstein in his article “Bible,” 4.2, in *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, ed. Pierre Gisel (Paris-Geneva: Cerf-Labor et Fides, 1995), 125 (certainly one can use the historical-critical method without denying the inspiration of Scripture). Cf. Charles Journet, *De la Bible catholique à la Bible protestante* (Paris: André Blot, 1930), 54–60.

⁵⁹ Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §§6, 7, 9.

beatitudes.⁶⁰ But by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence.⁶¹ There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity they must manifest Christ to others.⁶²

In the Eucharistic celebration, the priest acts "in persona Christi" and proclaims his mystery.⁶³ The martyrs render visible the love of Christ.⁶⁴

The faith can take root through this visible comportment of the community of disciples, as an admirable text of St. Thomas explains:

not [due to] the violent assault of arms or the promise of pleasures, and (what is most wonderful of all) in the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors, an innumerable throng of people, both simple and most learned, flocked to the Christian faith. In this faith there are truths preached that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of the world should be spurned. Now, for the minds of mortal men to assent to these things is the greatest of miracles, just as it is a manifest work of divine inspiration that, spurning visible things, men should seek only what is invisible.⁶⁵

Certainly the Church is not only visible, because her Head—Christ—is no longer directly visible to us after his ascension; neither the angels nor the souls in paradise and in purgatory are visible. If our faith is based on what we see of the Church, it has by definition an invisible object.⁶⁶ It

⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, §44.

⁶¹ Cf. *ibid.*, §41: "Christian married couples and parents . . . present to all an example of unfailing and generous love, they build up the brotherhood of charity, and they stand as witnesses and co-operators of the fruitfulness of mother Church, as a sign of and a share in that love with which Christ loved his bride and gave himself for her. In a different way, a similar example is given by widows and single people, who can also greatly contribute to the holiness and activity of the Church."

⁶² *Ibid.*, §31.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, §28

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 42.

⁶⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (1955) (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I, ch. 6.

⁶⁶ Cf. John of St. Thomas, *In Iam*, q. 1, disp. I, art. 3, in *idem*, *Cursus theologicus*, *In Summam theologicam D. Thomae*, new ed., vol. 1, in *Primae Partis Quaestiones I–VII* (Paris: Vivès, 1883), 442: "We believe that the Church is visible, but we do not

is necessary therefore to avoid the mistake of stopping at the most immediately visible object, as if it were the end of our striving rather than being a stage.⁶⁷ The spectator of the life of the Church risks not perceiving in it its deeper reality. Augustine himself for a time could not understand what truly animated St. Ambrose, because he ignored his relationship with God:

Ambrose himself I thought a happy man as the world judges things, for he was held in honor by the great and powerful. Only his celibacy seemed to me painful. But I had no notion nor any experience to know what were his hopes, what struggles he had against the temptations of his distinguished position, what consolations in adversities, and the hidden aspect of his life—what was in his heart, what delicious joys came as he fed on and digested your bread.⁶⁸

This kind of incomprehension is frequent among those who observe the Church without spiritual experience. If Augustine could go beyond this level, this movement did not however take place in a purely interior

believe something because it is visible, since the objects of faith are not visible. [We believe] because in this visible thing, the gathering of human beings of which the Church is composed whose head who is a visible man, there is not only a natural and political authority, but supernatural government and the assistance of the Holy Spirit and the graces of the sacraments and many other invisible realities without which the Church could not subsist; and it is good that human beings who compose the Church are visible. Similarly we believe that Christ is a visible man, although we do not believe the visibility, but that this visible element is united to the invisible divinity. And the sacraments are sensible signs, which does not stop us from believing that they are sacraments and have an invisible efficacy.”

⁶⁷ Cf. Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, vol. 2 (Saint-Maurice: S.-Augustin, 1999), 37–38: “The Church can be known from outside by three aspects that arise from three superimposed levels: 1) at the phenomenal, empirical, statistical, historical level, she is seen on the surface, as a human community among other human communities; 2) at the level of moral and metaphysical values, she is seen more profoundly, as a human community of exceptional quality, even as a moral miracle; 3) at the level of revealed realities, which alone manifest her adequately, she is no longer seen by reason but believed by divine faith, and she appears, in her likeness to Christ, as a mystery in which are indissolubly united the visible, namely his body, and the invisible, namely his created soul, and the Spirit, his uncreated Soul, which moves and indwells her. It is from this third point of view that the theologian speaks of the body of the Church, which he defines, for instance, as: the visible and exterior behavior of human beings insofar as it is informed by the outpouring of Christ’s capital grace, that is to say, the priesthood, the kingship, and the holiness of Christ.”

⁶⁸ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), bk. VI, ch. iii, 3.

manner, but rather was also and again thanks to encountering flesh-and-bone Christians: "There were large numbers of boys and girls, a multitude of all ages, young adults and grave widows and elderly virgins. In every one of them was Continence herself, in no sense barren but 'the fruitful mother of children' (Ps 112:9), the joys born of you, Lord, her husband."⁶⁹

Thus, the vision of the people of God can be too superficial, but this superficial level itself contributes to moving beyond this level. It is necessary to hold to the equilibrium between the visible dimension and the invisible dimension:

[T]he society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element.⁷⁰

Sensible Knowledge Requires a Purification

To see the Church assists in believing, but the sight, as we have said, should go beneath the more superficial appearance. In a general manner, all our sensible knowledge requires to be purified in order that one can approach it as a sign of the divine action.

First, it is clear that the senses do not enable one to see God in an unmediated way. On the natural level, they can furnish the starting point of a knowledge that, after reflection, rises to the author of that which one observes in existence. The sensible given is also used in faith, but the object of faith is not itself sensible. According to Hebrews 11:1, which for St. Thomas is the most complete definition of faith:⁷¹ "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Even those who saw the risen Christ have not seen directly the object of their faith: "Thomas 'saw one thing, and believed another': he saw the man, and believing him to be God, he made profession of his faith, saying: 'My Lord and my God.'"⁷²

St. Augustine explains that the error would be to stop at creatures, and not to go beyond them, thereby cutting short before its goal the path to God:

⁶⁹ Ibid., bk. VIII, ch. xi, 27.

⁷⁰ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §8.

⁷¹ Cf. Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2. For Aquinas's commentary on this definition, see also *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 1.

⁷² *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 4, ad 1.

Suppose we were wanderers who could not live in blessedness except at home, miserable in our wandering and desiring to end it and to return to our native country. . . . But if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country whose sweetness would make us blessed. Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the “invisible things” of God “being understood by the things that are made” may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual.⁷³

The description of the famous vision in Ostia shows that creatures speak of God if one keeps silent and hears them above themselves:

Therefore we said: If to anyone the tumult of the flesh has fallen silent, if the images of earth, water, and air are quiescent, if the heavens themselves are shut out and the very soul itself is making no sound and is surpassing itself by no longer thinking about itself, if all dreams and visions in the imagination are excluded, if all language and every sign and everything transitory is silent—for if anyone could hear them, this is what all of them would be saying, “We did not make ourselves, we were made by him who abides for eternity” (Ps 79:3, 5)—if after this declaration they were to keep silence, having directed our ears to him that made them, then he alone would speak not through them but through himself. We would hear his word, not through the tongue of the flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, nor through the obscurity of a symbolic utterance. Him who in these things we love we would hear in person without their mediation. . . . If only it could last, and other visions of a vastly inferior kind could be withdrawn! Then this alone could ravish and absorb and enfold in inward joys the person granted the vision. So too eternal life is of the quality of that moment of understanding after which we sighed. Is not this the meaning of “Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Mt 25:21)? And when is that to be? Surely it is when “we all rise again, but are not all changed” (1 Cor 15:51).⁷⁴

Given that the senses do not give us an immediate perception of God, and that we should meditate silently on the message that they transmit to us, we can either go beyond, or refuse to go beyond, the level of appearances. Our experience leads us to God on the condition that we will it. This

⁷³ St. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, I, IV, 4.

⁷⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. IX, ch. x, 25.

works at the level of the natural discovery of the existence of God, but especially at the level of faith itself. As St. Thomas says, citing St. Augustine:

Thus, too, we are moved to believe what God says because we are promised eternal life as a reward if we believe. And this reward moves the will to assent to what is said, although the intellect is not moved by anything which it understands. Therefore, Augustine says: "Man can do other things unwillingly, but he can believe only if he wills it."⁷⁵

This will to believe involves a certain renunciation.

Commenting on the definition of the First Vatican Council according to which the knowledge of the existence of God by natural reason is possible,⁷⁶ Pope Pius XII takes into consideration the question of atheism: Does not the fact of the existence of atheists deny the value of the conciliar definition? He responds that some obstacles are opposed to this knowledge of God:

For though, absolutely speaking, human reason by its own natural force and light can arrive at a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, Who by his providence watches over and governs the world, and also of the natural law, which the Creator has written on our hearts, still there are not a few obstacles to prevent reason from making efficient and fruitful use of its natural ability. The truths that have to do with God and the relations between God and men, completely surpass the sensible order and demand self-surrender and self-abnegation in order to be put into practice and to influence practical life. Now the human intellect, in gaining the knowledge of such truths is hampered both by the activity of the senses and the imagination, and by evil passions arising from original sin. Hence men easily persuade themselves in such matters that what they do not wish to believe is false or at least doubtful.⁷⁷

The knowledge of God, whether natural knowledge or the knowledge of faith, requires that the person consent, accept the sacrifices that follow, and accept the action in the person of the purifying grace of God.

In addition, given that sensible perception requires to be extended by reflection, the intelligence itself has need of formation and eventually purification. Pius XII indicates this also, after the text that we cited above:

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1.

⁷⁶ Cf. Vatican I, constitution *Dei Filius* (April 24, 1870), ch. 2: "The same holy mother Church holds and teaches that God, the source and end of all things, can be known with certainty from the consideration of created things, by the natural power of human reason: 'ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made' [Rom 1:20]."

⁷⁷ Pius XII, encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950), §2.

It is well-known how highly the Church regards human reason, for it falls to reason to demonstrate with certainty the existence of God, personal and one. . . . But reason can perform these functions safely and well, only when properly trained, that is, when imbued with that sound philosophy which has long been, as it were, a patrimony handed down by earlier Christian ages, and which moreover possesses an authority of even higher order, since the magisterium of the Church, in the light of divine revelation itself, has weighed its fundamental tenets, which have been elaborated and defined little by little by men of great genius.⁷⁸

The purification of the intelligence requires not only a purification of the principles of thought, but also a purification of memory: The images present in memory can weigh down the inclination of the will, as they restrained Augustine at the threshold of faith:

Vain trifles and the triviality of the empty-headed, my old loves, held me back. They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered: "Are you getting rid of us?" And "from this moment we shall never be with you again, not for ever and ever." And "from this moment this and that are forbidden to you for ever and ever."⁷⁹

Memory should therefore be purified by a focus turned toward God, which demands an ascesis and sacrifices.

Sacrifices contribute to orienting the heart toward the Creator rather than toward creatures. By means of sacrifice, the person recognizes that his or her goods come from God as origin (or as efficient cause): "Now in order to direct his mind to God aright, man must recognize that whatever he has is from God as from its first principle, and direct it to God as its last end. This was denoted in the offerings and sacrifices."⁸⁰

He or she recognizes also that these goods should be offered to God as final cause: "And since, for the human mind to be directed to God aright, it must recognize no first author of things other than God, nor place its end in any other; for this reason it was forbidden in the Law to offer sacrifice to any other but God."⁸¹ They are therefore an instrument of purification, already at the natural level; and it is normal that for this purification the person has recourse to sensible means, which are suited to him:

Natural reason tells man that he is subject to a higher being, on account of the defects which he perceives in himself, and in which he needs

⁷⁸ Ibid., §29.

⁷⁹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. VIII, ch. xi, 26.

⁸⁰ ST I-II, q. 102, a. 3.

⁸¹ Ibid.

help and direction from someone above him: and whatever this superior being may be, it is known to all under the name of God. Now just as in natural things the lower are naturally subject to the higher, so too it is a dictate of natural reason in accordance with man's natural inclination that he should tender submission and honor, according to his mode, to that which is above men. Now the mode befitting to man is that he should employ sensible signs in order to signify anything, because he derives his knowledge from sensibles. Hence it is a dictate of natural reason that man should use certain sensibles, by offering them to God in sign of the subjection and honor due to Him, like those who make certain offerings to their lord in recognition of his authority. Now this is what we mean by a sacrifice, and consequently the offering of sacrifice is of the natural law.⁸²

Thus, if the tendency of human beings to take creatures for the ultimate end in the place of God is an obstacle to faith or at least to believing in God, these same creatures can be a means of expressing the recognition of God as Lord; they can assist the purification of the human heart and thus foster belief and the desire for God.

Fundamentally, the disordered attachment to creatures, which is opposed to the ascending movement toward God, is corrected by the very movement of faith:

Now it is evident that the rational creature is more excellent than all transient and corporeal creatures; so that it becomes impure through subjecting itself to transient things by loving them. From this impurity the rational creature is purified by means of a contrary movement, namely, by tending to that which is above it, namely, God. The first beginning of this movement is faith: since "he that cometh to God must believe that He is," according to Hebrews 11:6. Hence the first beginning of the heart's purifying is faith; and if this be perfected through being quickened by charity, the heart will be perfectly purified thereby.⁸³

The movement toward God comes from the grace of faith itself, which can be given in anticipation of faith. When the person believes, the process of the purification of the heart continues.

In the movement of purification in view of union with God, the mystical life involves a purification of the senses. If God uses our senses in order to communicate himself to us, he remains above what our senses can perceive; and sensible attachment draws the person toward what is lower. Jacques Maritain summarizes this purification of the senses, a

⁸² *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 1.

⁸³ *ST* II-II, q. 7, a. 2.

necessary preparation for perfect peace in the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross:

To heal the . . . impurity which comes in the wake of the senses and which prevents the union of love and contemplation by a mist of creatures, there is but one remedy: night, the void. St. John of the Cross deals most fully and completely with this purification (which belongs properly to mystical theology) in his teaching on the Night of the Senses. This is a twofold night, both active and passive, or rather perhaps a twilight into which those souls penetrate who have heard the call to contemplation. . . . In the one case, the soul exerts itself on its own initiative, turning down the taste of the senses and the force or their attractions, lulling the appetites to sleep. In the other case, God works in the soul, purifying it Himself with an incomparably greater efficacy. Without this divine scouring of the passive night, the soul would never be cleansed of those all-too-visible stains which are imperceptible to it: of the desire for consolation, the spiritual presumption, sensuality, impatience, avarice, gluttony, envy, and sloth which are the ordinary faults of apprentices in perfection. Distinguishing spiritual realities from sensible representations, passing beyond phantasms, beginning to know itself and to understand that the divine will fill it just insofar as it is empty, the soul begins also to glimpse the peace of God, enters into the prayer of quiet, the beginning, the tiny beginning of infused contemplation.⁸⁴

If it is without doubt erroneous to undervalue the role of the senses in the Christian life, it is at the same time necessary to avoid confusing the mystical life and sensible feeling: Such a confusion can only lead to deception, because it confuses God with a being of this world, and it forgets that our path to beatitude passes through the Cross.

Conclusion: Why Does God Have Recourse to Sensible Means?

We have seen from different points of view that God has recourse to sensible means in his relationship with human beings: man himself, history, the Church, the liturgy, the sacraments, images, and, indeed above all else, the humanity of Jesus Christ. Would it not be more worthy of God to have recourse to a purely spiritual contact? For St. Thomas, such could be the case before sin, but no longer.⁸⁵ To reject sensible signs in

⁸⁴ Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, 4th ed., trans. Gerald B. Phelan et al. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 384–85.

⁸⁵ Cf. *ST* III, q. 60, a. 5, ad 3: “[J]ust as under the state of the law of nature man was moved by inward instinct and without any outward law, to worship God, so also

the communication of God with human beings would deny the impact of original sin. St. Thomas explains that “the effect of the divine power is manifested especially in material realities, since spiritual realities are less known to us.”⁸⁶ Regarding the sacraments, he explains that their simultaneously spiritual and material dimensions correspond to the human being: “The Church’s sacraments are ordained for helping man in the spiritual life. But the spiritual life is analogous to the corporeal, since corporeal things bear a resemblance to spiritual.”⁸⁷ The liturgical cult is celebrated in ways that befit not God as such, but rather the human being, and that are dependent on the economy of the Incarnation:

The divine worship regards two things: namely, God who is worshipped; and men, who worship him. Accordingly God, who is worshipped, is confined to no bodily place: wherefore there was no need, on his part, for a tabernacle or temple to be set up. But men, who worship him, are corporeal beings: and for their sake there was need for a special tabernacle or temple to be set up for the worship of God, for two reasons. First, that through coming together with the thought that the place was set aside for the worship of God, they might approach thither with greater reverence. Secondly, that certain things relating to the excellence of Christ’s divine or human nature might be signified by the arrangement of various details in such temple or tabernacle.⁸⁸

It is therefore not on account of God himself, but on account of human beings that God uses sensible signs. St. Thomas gives three reasons for this economy: human nature, the Incarnation, and the fact that corporeal reality

the sensible things to be employed in the worship of God were determined by inward instinct. But later on it became necessary for a law to be given (to man) from without: both because the Law of nature had become obscured by man’s sins; and in order to signify more expressly the grace of Christ, by which the human race is sanctified. And hence the need for those things to be determinate, of which men have to make use in the sacraments. Nor is the way of salvation narrowed thereby: because the things which need to be used in the sacraments, are either in everyone’s possession or can be had with little trouble.”

⁸⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Psalm 17*.

⁸⁷ *ST* III, q. 73, a. 1.

⁸⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 102, a. 4, ad 1. See also *ST* II–II, q. 81, a. 7: “Now the human mind, in order to be united to God, needs to be guided by the sensible world, since ‘invisible things . . . are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,’ as the Apostle says (Rom 1:20). Wherefore in the divine worship it is necessary to make use of corporeal things, that man’s mind may be aroused thereby, as by signs, to the spiritual acts by means of which he is united to God. Therefore the internal acts of religion take precedence of the others and belong to religion essentially, while its external acts are secondary and subordinate to the internal acts.”

can otherwise lead to sin. We conclude with this text, containing all the elements of our question:

Since, however (as has already been said [ch. 55, n. 29]), the death of Christ is, so to say, the universal cause of human salvation and since a universal cause must be applied singly to each of its effects, it was necessary to show men some remedies through which the benefit of Christ's death could somehow be conjoined to them. It is of this sort, of course, that the sacraments of the Church are said to be. Now, remedies of this kind had to be handed on with some visible signs. First, indeed, because just as He does for all other things, so also for man, God provides according to his condition. Now, man's condition is such that he is brought to grasp the spiritual and intelligible naturally through the senses. Therefore, spiritual remedies had to be given to men under sensible signs. Second, because instruments must be proportioned to their first cause. But the first and universal cause of human salvation is the incarnate Word, as is clear from the foregoing. Therefore, harmoniously the remedies by which the power of the universal cause reaches men had a likeness to that cause; that is, the divine power operates in them under visible signs. Third, because man fell into sin by clinging unduly to visible things. Therefore, that one might not believe visible things evil of their nature and that for this reason those clinging to them had sinned, it was fitting that through the visible things themselves the remedies of salvation be applied to men. Consequently, it would appear that visible things are good of their nature—as created by God—but they become damaging to men so far as one clings to them in a disordered way, and saving so far as one uses them in an ordered way. Thus, of course, one excludes the error of certain heretics who want every visible thing of this kind removed from the sacraments of the Church. Nor need one marvel at this, for the very same men maintain that whatever is visible is evil in its nature and is produced by an evil author. And this we rejected in book II. Nor is it unsuitable that by things visible and bodily a spiritual salvation is served. For visible things of this kind are the instruments, so to say, of a God who was made flesh and suffered. Now, an instrument does not operate by the power of its nature, but by the power of its principal agent who puts it into operation. Thus, also, then, do visible things of this kind work out a spiritual salvation—not by a property of their own nature, but by Christ's institution; and from the latter they receive their instrumental power.⁸⁹ N V

⁸⁹ *Summa contra Gentiles*, IV, ch. 56. See also the very similar text of *ST* III, q. 61, a. 1.