

Aquinas on the Spirit's Gift of Understanding and Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*¹

BERNHARD BLANKENHORN, O.P.
Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas
Rome, Italy

THE LAST FEW DECADES have seen a renewed interest in Dionysius the Areopagite as mystical theologian and in Thomas Aquinas as spiritual master. *Ressourcement* figures such as Hans Urs von Balthasar resurrected Dionysius the mystical author, while Servais Pinckaers, Jean-Pierre Torrell, and others have deepened our vision of Aquinas's teaching on the spiritual life.² Curiously, the few studies that have compared Dionysius and Aquinas have been done by metaphysicians interested in divine naming.³ The favorite Dionysian theme

¹ Part of the present article includes modified excerpts from my recent study *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015). A previous version of this paper was delivered at the "Dominicans and the Renewal of Thomism" conference organized by the Thomistic Institute in Washington, D.C., on July 1–5, 2013.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Style* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 144–210; Servais Pinckaers, *La vie selon l'Esprit: Essai de théologie spirituelle selon saint Paul et saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Amateca 17.2 (Luxembourg: Éditions Saint-Paul, 1996); Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003); Torrell, *Christ and Spirituality in St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Bernhard Blankenhorn (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

³ Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, *Théologie négative et noms divins chez saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Bibliothèque Thomiste 57 (Paris: Vrin, 2005); Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

of union with God in the dark cloud of Mt. Sinai has received little attention from Aquinas scholars. Yet, the dark cloud has a clear place in Thomas's theology of union with God. That theology rests on multiple pillars, including the doctrines of the invisible missions of the Son and the Spirit, the virtue of charity, and the Spirit's seven gifts. Aquinas links the Areopagite's Moses on Mt. Sinai with the Spirit's gift of understanding and, likewise, the mystical experience of the Areopagite's teacher Hierotheus with the gift of wisdom. Yet, no one has studied in an extensive way how Thomas's teaching on these two gifts of the Spirit relates to the Areopagite's classic work, *The Mystical Theology*.

I wish to consider Aquinas's doctrine of the gift of understanding in relation to the Areopagite's Moses in darkness. I will argue that Thomas's theology of the gift of understanding includes a significant threefold transformation of the Dionysian doctrine of mystical union: first, Aquinas emphasizes the positive knowledge of God accessible to us (*kataphatism*); second, he reinserts concept-bound and image-bound thought within the height of cognitive union; and third, he shows how this summit of union can be attained by the saint who has not learned the technicalities of divine naming. However, I will argue that, despite these doctrinal modifications, Aquinas still owes much to the Areopagite for his own vision of hidden union with God.

This study proceeds in three steps. First, I will summarize the Areopagite's teaching on Moses being joined to God in darkness. Here, I follow the work of patrologists such as Ysabel de Andia, René Roques, and Paul Rorem.⁴ Second, I shall mention some key aspects of Thomas's theology of the Spirit's seven gifts in general. Third, I will analyze Aquinas's teaching on the gift of understanding in relation to the Dionysian Moses. I shall conclude by proposing some consequences of this teaching for Dominican spirituality.

Pseudo-Dionysius on Moses in Darkness

Dionysius employs the figure of Moses in the dark cloud on Mt. Sinai to symbolize union with God or the summit of the spiritual life. The *Mystical Theology* begins with a prayer: "O Trinity, beyond being,

⁴ Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite*, Philosophia Antiqua 71 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); René Roques, "Denys l'Aréopagite," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 3, ed. Charles Baumgartner (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1957), columns 244–86; Paul P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993).

beyond divinity, beyond goodness, and guide of Christians in divine wisdom, direct us to the mystical summits [*logion*] more than unknown and beyond light. There the simple, absolved and unchanged mysteries of theology lie hidden in the darkness beyond light of the hidden mystical silence.”⁵

Dionysius introduces his discussion of the disposition needed to receive the Trinity's uplifting power. God's gifts elevate the mind to contact with the divine reality that the sacred oracles reveal. In the Dionysian corpus, the mystical summits or oracles usually refer to the revelation transmitted in Sacred Scripture. The oracles can also refer to the words of the liturgy.⁶ Dionysius the hierarch guides the disciple to the right interpretation of Scripture's divine names and the correct understanding of liturgical symbols. He leads the disciple to a climax where all interpretation runs into a wall and the mind falls silent in the presence of God.

Dionysius then presents Moses ascending Mt. Sinai with the elders or priests. The context is liturgical, for the patriarch resembles a Syrian-rite bishop celebrating the Eucharist.⁷ In the Book of Exodus, chapter 24, the patriarch and priests go up to “God's place.” Dionysius explains this metaphor: “The most divine and highest of what is seen and intelligible are hypothetical *logoi* of what is subordinate to that beyond-having all. Through these is shown forth the presence of that which walks upon the intelligible summits of its most holy places. And then Moses abandons those who see and what is seen and enters into the really mystical darkness of unknowing.”⁸ God's

⁵ Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* 1.1 (PG, 3:997A–B); see *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones, Medieval Philosophical Texts in Translation 21 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980), 211. All English translations of Dionysius are taken from Jones's translation in this edition. For the critical editions, see Dionysius Areopagita, *Corpus Dionysiacum I: De divinis nominibus*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla, Patristische Texte und Studien 33 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), and *Corpus Dionysiacum II: De coelesti hierarchia, De ecclesiastica hierarchia, De mystica theologia, Epistulae*, ed. Günther Heil and Adolf Martin Ritter, Patristische Texte und Studien 36 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991). The best complete and literal translation of the Dionysian corpus, although based on the pre-critical edition, remains *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John D. Parker (London: James Parker, 1897).

⁶ Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* 1.1 (PG, 3:587–88A); de Andia, *Henosis*, 1–3 and 240.

⁷ Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 102 and 190–92.

⁸ Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* 1.3 (PG, 3:1000D–01A; Jones ed., 214).

place stands for the summit of positive human knowledge about God. Such knowledge derives from God's operative presence in the world, also called the operative powers. These powers are the object of the affirmative divine names. Because the transcendent God is beyond every human concept and discourse, God's place does not represent the highest form of knowledge.⁹

The Old Testament patriarch then continues his ascent of the holy mountain, going beyond God's place or beyond the realm of God's powers, and penetrates darkness: "And then Moses abandons those who see and what is seen and enters into the really mystical darkness of unknowing; in this he shuts out every knowing apprehension and comes to be in the wholly imperceptible and invisible, being entirely of that beyond all—of nothing, neither himself nor another, united most excellently by the completely unknowing inactivity of every knowledge, and knowing beyond intellect by knowing nothing."¹⁰ Darkness signifies the silent state of the contemplative's intellect. Earlier in the text, Dionysius explains that the God hidden in darkness is beyond all affirmations and negations.¹¹ The positive divine names refer to God's action in creation, while the negations recall that God remains above his operations. The negative divine names are also employed below the stage of total noetic silence. The proper use of both affirmative and negative divine names is an essential precondition to attain union. Both types of naming fall short of union. For, any act of naming remains bound to a discursive mode of understanding, while union is beyond all mental discourse. Moses ascends by negations so as to transcend them.¹²

The patriarch leaves behind God's metaphorical place and goes out of himself in order to attain union. The contemplative's mind lets go of its own act of understanding, for this act cannot attain the divine mystery sought.¹³ In darkness, Moses knows God by unknowing. Darkness is also a paradoxical expression for God's transcendence, so

⁹ De Andia, *Henosis*, 345–47 and 358–59.

¹⁰ Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* 1.3 (PG, 3:1001A; Jones ed., 214).

¹¹ Ibid. (PG, 3:1000C).

¹² De Andia, *Henosis*, 392–93.

¹³ Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* 1.1 (PG, 3:1000A); René Roques, "Contemplation, extase et ténèbre chez le Pseudo-Denys," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 2.2, ed. Charles Baumgartner (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1949), cols. 1899–1900.

that darkness refers to a positive reality.¹⁴ God's light is called darkness because his limitless essence exceeds our grasp. Moses knows "nothing" insofar as unknowing surpasses all previous insights about God's operations. Hence, this is a knowing "beyond mind." Here, God directly teaches the mystic about divine incomprehensibility. This highest knowledge is not the result of a human noetic act, but of spiritual light flooding the mind.¹⁵

Union occurs in silence, for its "object" is the ineffable God. Dionysius describes union with God as a kind of cognition. As a good Platonist, he was convinced that knowledge is always participatory.¹⁶ The mystic moves beyond his or her own thoughts and words about God so as to be joined to the unutterable divine Word. The highest gifted knowledge causes union. Mystical contemplation is passive, not because the contemplative practices a passive method of meditation, but because the grandeur of the gift can only be received in a passive way. Active human knowledge remains stuck within human limitations. Thus, mystical union is a sheer gift that cannot be taught.¹⁷ God alone fully empties the mind by filling it with his light.

Let us note the anthropological foundation of the Areopagite's mystical doctrine. Partly inspired by Proclus, he proposes what we might call an "exterior anthropology." For Dionysius, the soul begins its ascent not by going to the God hidden within or to the memory of forms, but by grasping the meaning of the biblical divine names and liturgical symbols.¹⁸ Material mediations such as icons and biblical metaphors pertain to the *beginning* of contemplative ascent and serve the need of the soul's "impassioned" or lower part that naturally strives for symbols. Having satisfied the soul's lower part, contemplative ascent continues in the soul's higher or "passionless" part. Here, unified thoughts are the proper aim. Cognition mediated by the senses eventually becomes an obstacle

¹⁴ Dionysius Areopagita, *Epistula* 5 (PG, 3:1073A); Dionysius, *De mystica theologia* 1.1 (PG, 3:997B).

¹⁵ De Andia, *Henosis*, 351 and 431; Henri-Charles Puech, "La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys et dans la tradition patristique," *Études Carmélitaines* 23 (1938): 39–41.

¹⁶ De Andia, *Henosis*, 401, 417–18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁸ Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 2:160–61 and 180; Paul P. Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis*, Studies and Texts 71 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), 56.

to union.¹⁹ Consequently, contemplative ascent passes through a highly structured series of symbols and names that reveal their luminous content to those who are properly disposed to receive them.²⁰

Aquinas on the Seven Gifts in General

Thomas learned the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology* from his teacher Albert the Great around the year 1250. Both Dominican friars displayed a fascination with Dionysius. Albert commented on the entire Dionysian corpus, while Thomas kept his notes of Albert's lectures for the rest of his life. Aquinas also composed a commentary on the *Divine Names*, yet he never commented on the *Mystical Theology*. Still, I will argue that Thomas's late theology of the Spirit's gift of understanding proposes a very original appropriation of Dionysian mysticism. But first, I need to review Aquinas's mature approach to the metaphysics of the Spirit's seven gifts.²¹

First, the seven gifts are seven distinct *habitus* that dispose various faculties of the soul to receive the Spirit's motion for the sake of assisting one of the virtues. These seven *habitus* or gifts may be described as an essential property or component of sanctifying grace. Hence, these gifts constitute an enduring metaphysical modification of the believer's faculties.²² Second, the Spirit's action in the gifts is gratuitous. This action does not occur according to our decision.²³ The Spirit blows where he wills. Here, the classic metaphor of the sailing ship remains instructive: the sails are like the seven gifts, while the Spirit's action is like the wind.²⁴ Third, like the virtues, the

¹⁹ Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* 4.11; Dionysius, *Epistula* 9.1; René Roques, *L'univers dionysien: Structure hiérarchique du monde selon le Pseudo-Denys*, Théologie 29 (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 202 and 235.

²⁰ Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* 3.3; Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 119, 203, and 209.

²¹ Recent scholarship has shown a considerable evolution in Aquinas's doctrine of the seven gifts in general. See, for example, Cruz González Ayesta, *El don de sabiduría según Santo Tomás: Divinización, filiación y connaturalización*, Teológica 92 (Navarra: EUNSA, 1998); Ulrich Horst, *Die Gaben des Heiligen Geistes nach Thomas von Aquin*, Veröffentlichungen des Grabmann-Institutes 46 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 41–69.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I-II, q. 68, aa. 1, 3, and 5 (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953; all citations from the *ST* are from this edition, and all English translation is my own).

²³ Aquinas implies this at *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 3, corp.; a. 4, corp.

²⁴ John of Saint Thomas, *Cursus Theologicus, In Iam-IIae: De donis Spiritus Sancti*,

gifts as *habitus* can increase or decrease in intensity.²⁵ That is, we can progress or decline in docility to the Spirit. Fourth, Aquinas refers to the gifts' operations as acts of the virtues *and* the gifts.²⁶ As Pinckaers has noted, Thomas implies that the Spirit's motion in the gifts strengthens the virtues.²⁷ Thus, greater docility to the Spirit leads to growth in the virtues, which enables a new spontaneity. Progress in the spiritual life involves the double spiral of an increasing docility to God and a greater capacity to act virtuously. This helps to explain why Aquinas's discussion of the seven gifts does not mention passive spiritual states.²⁸ The operation of any one of the seven gifts does not occur at a spiritual level beyond the virtues, nor does this operation substitute for the activity of the virtues. Finally, Thomas follows Augustine as he links each gift of the Spirit with a particular beatitude. The beatitudes are the Spirit's gifts in act. The beatitude of the pure of heart corresponds to the gift of understanding.

Aquinas on the Gift of Understanding

Now that we have an overview of the seven gifts and the Spirit's movement through them, we can consider the gift of understanding in particular. I will first signal some major themes in Aquinas's teaching on this gift and then proceed to a textual analysis of article 7 of question 8 in the *secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*.

First, Aquinas distinguishes the gift of understanding from other gifts of the Spirit by an appeal to the distinction between the intellect's first and second act (i.e., apprehension and judgment). The gifts of knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*) involve a cognitive judgment, while the gift of understanding involves apprehension.²⁹ This division has perplexed Thomas's commentators because apprehension is not a complete noetic act, for we do not attain truth without judgment. However, we can solve this problem if we consider that the gift of understanding sharpens apprehension, which in turn assists the virtue of faith in its act of judgment. Admittedly, this solution is not explicit in Aquinas, but it may be the only solution that does not contradict the text of Aquinas.

Collectio Lavallensis (Québec: Armand Mathieu and Hervé Gagné, 1958), no. 174.

²⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 3.

²⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 69, aa. 1–2; II-II, q. 19, a. 12, ad 1.

²⁷ Servais Pinckaers, *Plaidoyer pour la Vertu* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 321.

²⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 68, aa. 1, 3, and 8.

²⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 6.

Second, the gift of understanding's operation is not about reasoning from premises to conclusions. Rather, this gift's operation is characterized by the mind's completion or repose. It grants a better grasp of "the first principles of gratuitous cognition."³⁰ These first principles are essentially the articles of faith, by which Aquinas means the heart of Scripture's teaching. That is why question 8 of the *secunda secundae* often links the gift of understanding to a deeper cognitive penetration of the articles of faith.³¹ The Creed summarizes the articles of faith.

Third, we cannot yet directly grasp the greatest mysteries of faith such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, for this would require the face-to-face vision of God. Thus, Aquinas assigns to the gift of understanding a negative or "remotive" function: this gift enables us to see more clearly what the mysteries of faith are not.³² In other words, this gift's actualization removes errors and foreign accretions from our manner of conceiving the mystery of God and his central saving acts. We are dealing with a kind of negative apprehension, a rather paradoxical notion.

We are now ready to consider our key *Summa* text (II-II, q. 8, a. 7). Here, Thomas explains the beatitude of the pure of heart and the knowledge of "what God is not." Aquinas fleshes out the details of the gift of understanding's negative or remotive function thus:

Two things are contained in the sixth beatitude, as in the other beatitudes: one by mode of merit, namely, purity of heart; another by mode of reward, namely, the vision of God, as was said above. And each pertains to the gift of understanding in some way. For purity is twofold. One is a preamble and a disposition for the vision of God, which is the affect's purification from disordered affections; and this purity of heart occurs through the virtues and gifts that pertain to the appetitive power. But the other purity of heart is as perfective in view of the divine vision; and this is the purity of mind purified of phantasms and errors, namely, that the things which are proposed about God not be taken by the mode of corporeal phantasms, nor according to heretical perversities. And the gift of understanding brings about this purity.³³

³⁰ ST II-II, q. 8, a. 6, ad 2.

³¹ ST II-II, q. 8, aa. 2–3.

³² ST II-II, q. 8, a. 2, corp.

³³ ST II-II, q. 8, a. 7, corp.: "in sexta beatitudine, sicut et in aliis, duo continentur: unum per modum meriti, scilicet munditia cordis; aliud per modum praemii,

Thomas divides the sixth beatitude into two parts: "Blessed are the pure of heart" signifies a purification of affect and intellect, while the phrase "they shall see God" designates this gift's reward (I will explain the term "affect" shortly). The first part of the beatitude signals a disposition for a reward, and the second part signals the reward itself. In this life, the saints already begin to receive a reward, for they see God indirectly. This vision is nothing other than knowing "what he is not," a phrase that evokes the Areopagite's Moses in the dark cloud. The saints in glory see God directly or face-to-face. The saints on earth enjoy an imperfect reward, while the saints in heaven have a perfect one. Those who have not yet attained heroic virtue must still pass through the Spirit's purifying action.

I now come back to the first part of the beatitude. Thomas treats purity of heart as the doorway to the vision of "what God is not." Aquinas proposes a two-fold purity. The first kind of purity comes through the gifts that pertain to the appetitive powers—namely, the will (or "rational appetite") and the passions. He summarizes these faculties or powers by the term "affect." For example, the Spirit's gift of piety helps to reorder the will's inclination by intensifying our filial affection for God as Father. The actualized gift of understanding presupposes that *some* spiritual progress has occurred in the will and the passions with the help of the Spirit's other gifts. The re-ordering of appetites (that is, various "affects") constitutes a first, essential step toward the vision of "what God is not."

A second kind of purity of heart perfectly prepares for the indirect vision of God, and this involves the removal of phantasms and errors. Here, Aquinas refers to the Spirit's motion in the gift of understanding that is available to all believers in grace.³⁴ Thomas applies the Avicennian notion of disposing and perfecting causality to the purification of the appetites and that of the intellect. The distinction between disposing and perfecting causes is primarily metaphysical, not temporal.

scilicet visio Dei, ut supra dictum est. Et utrumque pertinet aliquo modo ad donum intellectus. Est enim duplex munditia. Una quidem praeambula et dispositiva ad Dei visionem, quae est depuratio affectus ab inordinatis affectionibus; et haec quidem munditia cordis fit per virtutes et dona quae pertinent ad vim appetitivam. Alia vero munditia cordis est quae est quasi completiva respectu visionis divinae; et hoc quidem est munditia mentis depuratae a phantasmatibus et erroribus, ut scilicet ea quae de Deo proponuntur non accipiantur per modum corporalium phantasmatum, nec secundum haereticas perversitates. Et hanc munditiam facit donum intellectus."

³⁴ See *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 4.

The conviction that contemplative ascent requires progress in the moral virtues is omnipresent in ancient philosophy, patristic theology, and medieval thought. Certainly, Dionysian union presumes such moral progress. Aquinas links this progress with the first type of purification of the heart: the will and the passions are the proper seat of the cardinal virtues. Now, Thomas's *Sentences Commentary* explicitly links the beatitude of the pure of heart with the *Mystical Theology*'s exhortation to Timothy to be purified of "errors and phantasms and spiritual forms" so as to ascend to union with God.³⁵ Such language overlaps with our *Summa* text on purity of heart. More specifically, it overlaps with the second kind of purity. So Dionysius is a source for Thomas's explanation of perfected purity of heart. The actualized gift of understanding brings about this purity. But how Dionysian is Aquinas's Areopagite?

At the beginning of the *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius presumes that Timothy's "impassioned" part of the soul has been satisfied in its inclination to sensible images by contemplating God in material creation and liturgical symbols. The Areopagite also holds that the "passionless" part of the soul (the *noûs*) seeks knowledge beyond sensible images. For Dionysius, the mind can operate without images or phantasms.³⁶ The contemplation of sensible or image-bound objects such as icons or biblical metaphors ultimately constitutes an obstacle to mystical union. Such aids for contemplation are necessary stepping-stones to union, but as one progresses, these must be left behind. Likewise, Moses must wholly transcend the contemplation of God's names. He should surpass all thoughts and finite noetic objects that mediate knowledge of God.

Thomas limits the Dionysian claim that one must let go of all sensible images in the ascent to knowing "what God is not." Instead, he calls for the avoidance of theological error in the way that we understand God. It is striking that Thomas shows little concern for the contemplative's mode of consciousness.

The doctrinal intention behind Aquinas's modification to Dionysius emerges more clearly by a consideration of the human subject being discussed in question 8, article 7. Dionysius addresses himself to a contemplative advanced in learning: the *Mystical Theology* follows the *Divine Names*, being composed precisely for those who have grasped the teaching of the *Divine Names*. It also presumes that

³⁵ *In III sent.* d. 34, q. 1, a. 4, corp.

³⁶ Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 235.

the same reader no longer needs images to contemplate God. The beginning of the *Mystical Theology* instructs Timothy on the proper reaction to the coming of God's light ("abandon all sensation and all intellectual activities"). Aquinas's exposition on purity of heart, however, refers to the Spirit's work available to all who are in grace. Avoiding heretical error with the Spirit's help precisely describes the gift of understanding's operation that is available to all in grace, not just to clerics or monks.

The new human subject of purification calls for a new reading of Timothy's noetic object. First, Thomas's discussion of the pure of heart sidesteps the Areopagite's counsel to let go of finite intelligible objects. Dionysius wants to transcend intelligible objects, for these represent God's powers active in the cosmos. The divine names refer to God's powers. But Thomas insists that these names refer to God's very own substance or essence.³⁷ Dionysius seeks union beyond naming, unlike Aquinas.

Second, for Thomas, the pure of heart avoid erroneous interpretations of the mysteries of faith contained in Scripture. Thomas posits a refined contemplation of Scripture whose object is broader than in Dionysius. Aquinas's contemplative ponders not just God's biblical names but all of Scripture, especially the central mysteries of faith. The pure of heart behold and correctly understand God's many saving acts, and not just his most perfect names. Suddenly, history and the creaturely, temporal realities through which God saves us take on a whole new importance.

Third, in Thomas, the removal of error leaves standing biblical affirmations. That is, remotions improve our grasp of the intelligible content that Scripture transmits by its description of God and his operation. For Aquinas, remotion only makes sense if it qualifies some type of affirmation.³⁸ Remotion does not negate the saving

³⁷ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 2.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, q. 7, a. 5, corp: "intellectus negationis semper fundatur in aliqua affirmatione: quod ex hoc patet quia omnis negativa per affirmativam probatur; unde nisi intellectus humanus aliquid de Deo affirmative cognosceret, nihil de Deo posset negare. Non autem cognosceret, si nihil quod de Deo dicit, de eo verificaretur affirmative. Et ideo, secundum sententiam Dionysii, dicendum est, quod huiusmodi nomina significant divinam substantiam, quamvis deficienter et imperfecte: quod sic patet. Cum omne agens agat in quantum actu est, et per consequens agat aliquo modo simile" ("An understanding of negation is always founded in some affirmation, which is thus clear, in that every negative is proven through an affirmative. Hence, unless the human intellect were to know something

mystery or divine name being contemplated. Rather, it corrects our misconceptions thereof. In this sense, ascent to God by the gift of understanding does not end the mind's gaze upon God's positive attributes or other mysteries of faith. Timothy's and Moses's silent mind almost drops out. Contemplation's object and its mode of operation go hand in hand. One needs an active mind in order to ponder biblical affirmations about God and his saving deeds.

Fourth, as already suggested, the function of phantasms changes. By the gift of understanding, the Spirit acts so that "the things proposed about God not be taken by the mode of corporeal phantasms, nor according to heretical perversities." Thomas shifts the focus from the direct object of the mind's gaze and its mode of operating to the intended *noetic content* or doctrine *about* God. By the beatitude of the pure of heart, the Spirit removes corporeal or finite modes of being from our way of understanding God's nature and action. Thomas's shift away from an image-free mode of noetic operation recalls that he cannot follow the Dionysian doctrine that *noûs* operates without images, a doctrine presumed in the Areopagite's advice to Timothy. Aquinas refuses to make an exception to the Aristotelian principle that the pilgrim's complete act of knowing must return to phantasms.³⁹ Even the Spirit's direct action in the seven gifts does not overcome the natural mode of knowing proper to an embodied rational being with one substantial form. The mind's operative capacity rooted in a single substantial form is proportioned to sensible things.⁴⁰ The Spirit's special motion in the seven gifts does not overturn nature's capacities, but rather stretches them. That

affirmatively about God, it could not negate anything of him. But it would not know if anything which it says of God could be affirmatively verified of him. Therefore, according to the teaching of Dionysius, it must be said that such [affirmative] names signify the divine substance, although deficiently and imperfectly, which is thus clear. Since every agent acts inasmuch as it is in act, and consequently acts something similar [to itself] "); in *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 2, ed. P. Bazzi, M. Calcaterra, T. S. Centi, E. Odetto, and P. M. Pession (Rome/Turin: Marietti, 1965); English translation is my own. See also Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 67 and 303.

³⁹ See *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7; q. 86, a. 1; II-II, q. 15, a. 3; q. 180, a. 5, ad 2.

⁴⁰ Richard Schenk taught me years ago that the doctrine of the unicity of substantial form is crucial for Aquinas's entire theological project. See also Gilles Emery, "The Unity of Man, Body and Soul, in St. Thomas Aquinas" in *Trinity, Church, and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays*, trans. Therese Scarpelli (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007), 209–35.

is precisely what we would expect from Aquinas, given his way of relating grace and nature.⁴¹

Article 7 of question 8 continues with a discussion of the reward given to the saints through the gift of understanding. Thomas thus proceeds from the first part of the beatitude to the second, from purity of heart to the vision of God, from the removal of errors and phantasms to the obscure height of contemplation. He now explains the gift of understanding's perfect act here below. The text parallels Moses's ascent of Mt. Sinai in the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology*. Aquinas's *Sentences Commentary* makes this parallel with Dionysius explicit, while it remains implicit in the *Summa*. The last part of the corpus in our main article reads thus:

The vision of God is twofold. One is perfect, through which God's essence is seen. The other is imperfect, through which, although we do not see what God is, we still see what he is not; and in this life the more perfectly we know God, the more we understand him to exceed whatever is comprehended by the intellect. And each vision of God pertains to the gift of understanding, for the first [vision pertains] to the consummated gift of understanding, as it will be in heaven; but the second [vision pertains] to the imperfect gift of understanding, as it is possessed on the way [by the pilgrim].⁴²

This passage closely resembles the *Sentences Commentary* text on the same beatitude, which mentions the *Mystical Theology*.⁴³ The *Sentences*

⁴¹ We cannot say with certitude whether or not Aquinas *clearly* perceived the distinct stages of contemplative ascent as conceived by Dionysius. Given the medieval scholastic way of treating authorities, disagreements often remain under the surface. Still, I strongly suspect that Thomas had a fairly complete grasp of the Areopagite's own doctrinal intention. Also, I maintain that Thomas's extensive modification of Dionysian mystical doctrine (whether conscious or not) bears much fruit, as will become evident below.

⁴² *ST II-II*, q. 8, a. 7, corp: "duplex est Dei visio. Una quidem perfecta, per quam videtur Dei essentia. Alia vero imperfecta, per quam, etsi non videamus de Deo quid est, videmus tamen quid non est; et tanto in hac vita Deum perfectius cognoscimus quanto magis intelligimus eum excedere quidquid intellectu comprehenditur. Et utraque Dei visio pertinet ad donum intellectus, prima quidem ad donum intellectus consummatum, secundum quod erit in patria; secunda vero ad donum intellectus inchoatum, secundum quod habetur in via."

⁴³ *In III sent.* d. 35, q. 2, a. 2, q1a. 2, corp.

Commentary states that Moses knows God as separated from all and above all. Our *Summa* text mentions knowing “what God is not” and that God exceeds our comprehension.

The present passage quietly appropriates at least three key elements of the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology*. First, our text presents maximum apophatic cognition as a gift, a key Dionysian doctrine. For the Areopagite and for Aquinas, God directly acts in the mystic’s intellect in a new way. Indeed, the *Summa* doctrine of the Spirit’s seven gifts emphasizes in a special way our dependence on God’s immediate motion to attain perfect knowledge of God. The Spirit’s efficient causality directly causes the act of negation or remotion, as he infuses remotions into the saint’s mind. These remotions are not infused intelligible species, but infused acts of negation that sharpen our grasp of what is known via revelation. Thomas’s doctrine of infused negations is almost certainly original. We find it neither in Albert nor in other thirteenth-century commentators of Dionysius.

Second, the context of our passage shows that Aquinas remains focused on the gift of understanding as a means to penetrate more fully the articles of faith. Therefore, knowing “what God is not” with the Spirit’s aid surpasses the metaphysician’s knowledge that God’s quiddity exceeds all that we understand of him. Like Dionysius, Thomas posits a properly gifted or supernatural form of knowledge, even as he uses highly philosophical terms and concepts. For Aquinas, Jesus’ baptism, passion, and resurrection, Pentecost, and other revelatory events provide the most excellent divine effects whereby our graced minds attain indirect glimpses of Christ’s divinity and the Trinity.⁴⁴ Our illumined grasp of these effects must itself be purified of misleading notions. Thus, knowing “what God is not” can involve more than acknowledging that God exceeds whatever we know of him or that he is incomprehensible. Indeed, the metaphysician can already know this without faith. Yet, knowing God’s *quid non est* perfectly in this life means knowing *all* of his attributes attained by reason *and* grace. Revelation unveils the Trinity and other perfections that, in turn, enable us to know God as greater even than our mode of understanding *these* perfections. Hence, we come to know ever more fully the God-creation difference. By the Spirit’s work, the saint knows the divine mystery correctly, even though he or she may not be able to explain it as well as the theologian.

⁴⁴ ST I, q. 12, a. 13. See the luminous comments on this theme by Charles Journet, *Connaissance et Inconnaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Egloff, 1943), 93.

Third, because the reward of each beatitude belongs to holy men and women, Thomas follows Dionysius as he assigns to a spiritual elite the divinely given cognition of “what God is not.”⁴⁵ Yet, within this doctrinal similitude, a key difference emerges. For Aquinas, the Spirit infuses a knowledge of God’s excellence in all who have progressed well in grace. The Areopagite’s mystic must learn how to affirm and negate all divine names before penetrating darkness. Thomas sees the need for purification from erroneous notions about God before coming to know “what he is not,” but he does not maintain the need to attain an explicit understanding of *all* divine names before reaching the mystical summit. For Dionysius, the highest union seems to belong mostly (or perhaps exclusively) to bishops and monks, a stance that Thomas does not take up. Clearly, Aquinas considers the contemplative and religious life better dispositions for union than lay life, but he does not place perfection in the Spirit’s gifts beyond the reach of the laity. They too can arrive at the top of Mt. Sinai, the place that symbolizes knowing “what God is not.” The Spirit’s motion in the gift of understanding is not directly linked to theological study, although study constitutes a precious aid along the way. Aquinas thus arrives at a major accomplishment—namely, a doctrine of mystical ascent *by knowledge* that is available to all.⁴⁶

As noted previously, Thomas insists on the intellect’s need to return to phantasms. This stance is linked with his refusal of the Areopagite’s meta-conceptual contemplation. That is, even though the height of graced knowledge in this life is not *limited* to the intelligible content communicated by concepts, Thomas is convinced that our cognitive acts always *employ* concepts in some way. This distinction is crucial: the concepts we use in contemplative ascent are not adequate, yet their function is essential. That is why Aquinas does not call for an active suppression of concept-bound noetic activity in mystical ascent. Nor does he present the Spirit’s action in the gift of understanding as a graced silencing of concept-bound knowing.⁴⁷ Indeed,

⁴⁵ See *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 7, ad 3, which seems to refer to I-II, q. 69, a. 2.

⁴⁶ On this point, one might compare Aquinas to Meister Eckhart, whose vernacular preaching proposed a path toward perfect mystical knowledge for the laity and the unlearned, a knowledge not simply caused by charity (though inseparable from it).

⁴⁷ I thus argue against the interpretation of Jacques Maritain, *Distinguish to Unite or the Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1959), 688–93, and Charles Journet, *Connaissance et Inconnaissance de Dieu*, 116–18 and 138. For a critique of Maritain on this point, see Charles

such total noetic silence is incompatible with Thomas's doctrine of the *imago Dei*, where the perfect knowledge of God involves the production of an interior word.⁴⁸ This "word of the heart" necessarily includes concepts and concept-bound truth judgments.

But why does Thomas quietly insist that the summit of contemplation must include image-bound and concept-bound ways of knowing? The ultimate answer to that question comes in his essentially *kataphatic* theology, which is wholly centered on God's revelation. Thomas holds fast to the Aristotelian principle that every negation presupposes an affirmation. As we saw above, without affirmations, remotions are meaningless. In mystical ascent, the affirmative names of God are qualified, not cleared away. Such a doctrine Dionysius cannot accept. Now, in the context of Aquinas's theology of the gift of understanding, the affirmations especially concern the articles of faith revealed in Christ. The gift of understanding perfects the virtue of faith. This gift sharpens faith's grasp of God's revelation, of God's self-manifestation that truly gives us a glimpse of the divine face. A refined knowledge of God's historical revelation in Christ presupposes cognitive acts that employ phantasms and concepts, since public revelation occurs in the sensible world, especially in the life of Jesus. The Areopagite's Moses moves beyond history and into a new knowledge that is no longer derived from God's visible coming in the flesh, even though Dionysian interior illumination never contradicts God's public revelation.

For Aquinas, *Scripture and the Creed are like the enfleshed voice of God without which the mystic cannot hear anything at the summit of knowledge.* For Thomas, the highest knowledge about God integrates acquired and infused cognition. At the summit of Mt. Sinai, the contemplative ponders the affirmations about God and his saving deeds as transmitted in Scripture and the Creed, yet God's interior light enables an ever-sharper penetration of those revealed mysteries. Aquinas brings the entire economy of salvation into the contemplation that occurs in the dark cloud! To my knowledge, no interpreter of Dionysius before Thomas had ever done that.⁴⁹

Morerod, "La mystique dans l'épistémologie de Jacques Maritain," *Nova et Vetera* (French) 83 (2008): 121–50. I agree with Ambroise Gardeil, who posits concept-bound cognition for the gift of understanding; see his *La Structure de l'Âme et l'Expérience Mystique*, vol. 2 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1927), 161–64.

⁴⁸ ST I, q. 93, a. 7.

⁴⁹ The function of the articles of faith in the theology of the gift of understanding shows that Aquinas's modification of Dionysian mystical ascent involves

Aquinas's Moses in darkness thus ponders the heart of Scripture and the Creed with the full engagement of his intellect and imagination. Such contemplation provides the perfect prelude for Moses's descent to the people of Israel at the bottom of Mt. Sinai, where the patriarch transmits God's law. In other words, Aquinas's Moses looks very much like the friar preacher who contemplates and then passes on to others the fruits of his contemplation. Because Aquinas's mysticism grants an essential role to Scripture and the Creed at the height of contemplation, he can offer a mysticism for the preacher.

None of this is to say that charity is secondary in Thomas's mysticism.⁵⁰ We have only pondered one pillar of Aquinas's mystical theology. Indeed, Thomas holds that the height of union with God also requires acts of charity, yet charity needs to be guided by the intellect. The gift of understanding constitutes a most excellent and necessary help in the ascent of love. Perfect union includes graced *acts* of knowledge and charity.

Practical Consequences for Dominican Spirituality

A synthetic and historical analysis of Thomas's theology of the Spirit's gift of understanding sheds light on what Aquinas can contribute to Dominican spirituality. Here, I would like to accentuate some elements that are already present in the Dominican spiritual tradition.

First, unlike Dionysius, Thomas seems remarkably unconcerned with the contemplative's mode of consciousness. Aquinas spends little time on the technicalities of pondering God through images or on how to avoid a great multiplicity of thoughts. He remains remarkably silent about the Areopagite's highly structured way of ascent through distinct stages of contemplation, from images to words to the wordless gaze.

Second, the doctrine of the gift of understanding seems tailor-made for a spirituality centered on *lectio divina*. Here, I take the term *lectio divina* to refer both to a prayerful study of God and his saving deeds and to a meditation on Scripture. Thomas reminds us that silent, wordless prayer need not constitute the height of contempla-

far more than the substitution of Aristotelian anthropology for Dionysian anthropology. Rather, the transformation is caused by philosophical and theological doctrines, including a vision of the purpose of the Incarnation and of God's Word. Aquinas's mystical theology is firmly rooted in Christology and a theology of revelation.

⁵⁰ Charity's essential place in a doctrine of union emerges in many parts of his corpus, including *ST* II-II, qq. 23, 27, and 45.

tion. Of course, sometimes charity burns more fervently in silence, yet with an anthropology centered on the unicity of substantial form, we should have no inferiority complex when, during a time of *lectio divina*, we find ourselves constantly coming back to the words and images of Scripture in order to focus our minds. The pilgrim's mode of knowing always remains bound to concepts and images, for it remains bound to mediations. The mediations are good; they are for us!

Third, Thomas's doctrine of the gift of understanding helps us to grasp how preaching (especially liturgical preaching) can be a form of *mystagogia*. For Aquinas, mystical ascent comes through progress both in love and in knowledge: the two advance together. While spiritual progress also requires continual purification of the passions, such growth ultimately remains a disposition for greater charity and saving knowledge. The mind's ascent into the dark cloud comes through an ever-sharper grasp of the central mysteries of faith. If preaching is to assist the lay faithful in their spiritual progress, then preaching cannot have moral instruction or moral exhortation as its sole focal point. Rather, preaching must also be focused on the great mysteries that are summarized in the Creed. Preachers assist the Holy Spirit's interior work of noetic purification that comes in the gift of understanding by correctly expounding on the doctrines of the Trinity, Creation, the Incarnation, and the Paschal Mystery. As preachers unfold Scripture's and Tradition's positive teachings about the triune God and his saving work, they make accessible the biblical affirmations concerning God and his saving design. The Spirit then infuses negations so as to wipe away believers' misconceptions of the saving mysteries being proclaimed. The Spirit crushes the intellectual idols that linger in the minds of the faithful. Yet, these infused negations need affirmations in order to function. Consequently, the more preachers expound on the central mysteries of faith, the more they offer platforms from which the Spirit-guided believer can ascend to noetic union with God, and hence to loving union as well.

In other words, preachers function somewhat like hierarchs. They first contemplate the great mysteries revealed to Israel and in Christ and seek the guidance of the Spirit who smashes their own conceptual idols. They then pass on the fruits of contemplation by explaining the way in which Scripture and Tradition affirm who God is and what he has done to save us. Such learning and docility to the Spirit's motion already purify these affirmations from various errors.

Yet, preachers cannot crush every conceptual idol in the minds of their hearers, since the latter's backgrounds and experiences are often different from those of the preacher. Only the Spirit can complete the work of removing from believers' minds diverse misconceptions about God's public revelation. Then they too can enter the dark cloud, even if they have not studied the doctrine of analogy. And like contemplative preachers, they need not simply remain on Mt. Sinai and ponder the ineffable God. Since the Spirit still engages their minds and imaginations in the dark cloud as they ponder the divine mystery, the highest contemplative knowledge about God is not just a secret for the mystic alone, but also an infused word or a wise insight that can be shared. For, any believer who advances in holiness can imitate Moses and descend the holy mountain so as to pass on the message of the saving mysteries. They can transmit these mysteries more effectively through the help of the highest mystical encounter, for union with God usually brings a knowledge that can be partly put into words. Thus, mystagogical preaching forms contemplatives who evangelize.

I suspect that most Dominicans (and others) already live this Thomistic spirituality. Aquinas's theology of the gift of understanding helps to articulate with greater insight and clarity that which the Dominican heritage proposes.⁵¹ N&V

⁵¹ I am grateful for the helpful comments of an anonymous reviewer, which allowed me to improve this essay.