

What Is Spiritual Theology?

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Translator's Introduction

The text being presented here in translation is meant to facilitate discussion concerning, specifically and primarily, the noetics of supernatural knowledge and, more broadly, of the speculative and the practical. The essay, “Qu’est-ce que la théologie spirituelle?,” written by the Toulouse moral theologian Father Michel Labourdette (1908–1990) and posthumously published in 1992 by the *Revue thomiste* in an issue dedicated to his memory, is focused on what we might call the epistemology—or, as I will prefer here, the “noetics”—of spiritual theology. The terms “mystical,” “mystical theology,” and “spiritual theology” have been subject to significant variations in the history of theology. In its ancient acceptations, it broadly refers to the apophatic experience of the Christian believer touched by grace and the Holy Spirit, obscurely savoring the revealed mysteries. But, under the same title, “mystical theology,” a reflective mystical theology would come to be developed, at times rhetorically close to the experiential foundation of mysticism (e.g., the *Mystical theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius or the works of Ss. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila) and at other times quite technical, abstract, Scholastic, and scientific treatments of the states of prayer and contemplation, as can be found in works such as the *Mystica theologia* of Thomas de Vallgornera, O.P. (ca.1595–1665) or the *Summa*

theologiae mystica of Philip of the Blessed Trinity, O.C.D. (1603–1671).¹ Moreover, there was the modern deviation that would separate ascetical and mystical theology from moral theology, with the latter being concerned with the way of the moral requirements incumbent upon all, and with ascetical and mystical theology pertaining to the direction of more generous souls, perhaps subject to certain extraordinary experiences. This modern conception of ascetical and mystical theology was successfully combated by a number of theologians in the twentieth century (including Labourdette) and should, today, be considered defeated.²

However, the history of the term *theologia mystica* is beyond the purposes of this translated text and the competencies of its translator. However, the particular noetic proposals made by Labourdette are not. To that end, I wish to outline for the readers, very briefly, the basic structural topics at issue.

The genealogical root of the present article can be found in a series of comments made by Jacques Maritain in *The Degrees of Knowledge*, where he develops the notion of “practically practical” conceptualization and science, in distinction to “speculatively practical” scientific analysis.³

¹ For a fine overview of the various understandings of spirituality in the West, see Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985). One will note, especially in the footnotes, the gradual growth of the more analytic use of the term “spiritual theology” in the West. Although the works of someone like Vladimir Lossky or Dumitru Stăniloae might be cited as introductions to Byzantine Orthodox spirituality, a more comprehensive overview treatment can be found in: Tomáš Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East*, 2 vols., trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Cistercian, 1986 and 2005). On the separation of spiritual theology as a separate discipline and its relationship to moral theology, see Antoine Lemonnier, “Théologie spirituelle comme science particulière,” *Vie spirituelle supplement* 30 (1932): 158–66; J. Périnelle, “Théologie Spirituelle,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 21, no. 4 (1932): 686–94; (1935): 734–42. Emmanuel Doronzo also cites as providing a suitable exposition and bibliography of the relevant debates at the time Gabriele di S. Maria Maddalena, “Teologia della mistica,” in *Problemi e orientamenti di teologia dommatica*, vol. 2 (Milan: C. Marzorati, 1957), 1017–51. See Emmanuel Doronzo, *Theologia dogmatica*, vol. 1 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1966], 91n1).

² See Sylvio Hermann De Franceschi, “La contemplation selon la moderne École dominicaine de spiritualité: La querelle mystique au temps de la suprématie des thèses Garrigou-Lagrangiennes (1923–1928),” *Archivum Fratrum Predicatorum* 6 (2021): 349–76; Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, trans. M. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1938), 1–47; Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Spiritual Life: Prelude to Eternal Life*, vol. 2, trans. M. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1948), 628–43, 652–54.

³ See Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald Phelan et al, ed. Ralph

Specifically within the noetic domain of moral philosophy, the “practically practical” would designate the insights that can be gleaned from thinkers such as Montaigne, Pascal, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and others.⁴ In a brief overview, we can only introduce Maritain’s point, allowing him to speak in his own words:

These powerful observers of men are not merely observers, they are not “psychologists.” Properly speaking, they are moralists—not philosophers but practitioners of the science of morals. No doubt, they do not concern themselves with this science taken as a whole, right down to the formulation of its rules and precepts. They deal, above all, with the experiential matter of this science (sometimes sadly defective from the point of view of its regulative truths). What they do study is really the dynamism of the human being, the use of free will, and consequently, man’s situation in face of his ends. Thus, the accuracy and depth of their views do not depend only upon their keenness of sight, but also upon their idea of good and evil and the dispositions of their heart toward the sovereign good. They draw upon admirable psychological riches, but within a knowledge which is the practically practical science of human action, not psychology.⁵

The affective component is precisely what marks such knowledge as distinct,⁶ and due to the role of charity in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit,

McInerney (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 263–374 (esp. 329–58) and the important appendix 8 (481–89). For brief remarks on the term “speculatively practical,” see Matthew K. Miner, “Appendix II: On the Speculative, the Speculatively-Practical, and the Practically-Practical,” in Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “Remarks Concerning the Metaphysical Character of St. Thomas’s Moral Theology, in Particular as It Is Related to Prudence and Conscience,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 17, no. 1 (2019): 266–27. The history of this vocabulary merits further scholarly investigation.

⁴ For interesting indications in this same direction, though without fully entering into Maritain’s language, see Stephen Chamberlain, “Literary Knowledge: Story as a Kind of Science,” in *Facts are Stubborn Things: Thomistic Perspectives in the Philosophies of Nature and Science*, ed. Matthew K. Miner (Washington, DC: American Maritain Association, 2020), 80–94. Moreover, although within the unity of theology, Journet sought in Pascal an example of apologetics in the “practically practical” register, as a kind of supplement to the speculative and Scholastic mode of proceeding found in a work like Garrigou-Lagrange’s *De revelatione*. See Charles Journet, *Verite de Pascal: essai sur la valeur apologetique des Pensées*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 12 (Paris: Lethielleux and Desclée de Brouwer, 2011), 23–229.

⁵ Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 335.

⁶ Though doubtlessly related to Maritain’s particular position regarding affective knowledge

this affective component provided an important point of contact for Maritain's attempt to harmonize the vocabularies of St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas. Even if historically inaccurate, his attempt merits consideration, for it does at least point to this capitally important point: the *formal objects* of various degrees of moral and supernatural knowledge deserve careful elaboration and distinction.⁷

The broad outlines of Maritain's position, especially regarding the

of moral truths, this could also be connected to the more traditional Thomistic manner of speaking about the discursus of moral knowledge and the various relations between intellect and will in the orders of intention, choice, and execution. See Matthew K. Miner, "Ius Gentium as Publicly Articulated Moral Science," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 21, no. 3 (2023): 1043–58 (here, 1056–57); Miner, "Introduction" in *Conscience: Four Thomistic Treatments* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2022), 51–75.

- ⁷ Doubtless, here is where a realistic phenomenology can offer significant resources to Thomistic speculation in setting forth the conditions of objectivity for each of the various *habitus* in question.

In his early work *A Critique of Moral Knowledge* (trans. Ralph McNerny [New York: Fordham University Press, 2002]), Yves Simon basically concurred with Maritain's position. See Simon, *A Critique of Moral Knowledge*, trans. Ralph McNerny (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 50–57. For some critical reappraisals, joined to correspondence with Maritain, see Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, ed. Robert J. Mulvaney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), 79–114. In the supernatural order, it is important to remember that there are many formal objects that are essentially supernatural (and hence concerned with the *Deity* as such) and yet still specified variously (as regards their *ratio formalis obiecti ut obiectum*), thus there are distinct yet supernatural formal objects for faith, hope, charity, acquired supernatural theology, the various gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the infused moral virtues.

It should be noted, of course, that Maritain's position was not universally accepted by all Thomists in his day. See Thomas Deman, "Sur l'organisation du savoir moral," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 23, no. 2 (1934): 258–80; Deman, "Questions disputes de science morale," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 26, no. 2 (1937): 278–306; Santiago María Ramírez, "La science morale pratique: La philosophie morale adéquate (Comptes rendus)," *Bulletin Thomiste* 4 (1935): 423–32; Ramírez, "De Philosophia Morali Christiana," *Divus Thomas* 50 (1936): 87–122, 181–204; William Wallace, *The Role of Demonstration in Moral Theology: A Study of Methodology in St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Thomist Press, 1963), 92n82, 106n42, 154–62, 199–202, and 216n146. The only qualification I would register here regarding Wallace's response to Maritain (in the final note) would be to note that, even if Maritain does not fully explain the unity of theology as speculatively practical and practically practical, he does not, however, deny the *de iure* unity of theology. Note also that the debates in the aforementioned texts also engage the topic of "adequate consideration of moral philosophy."

For Maritain's responses to Ramírez and Deman, see his *Science and Wisdom*, trans. Bernard Wall (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), 137–241. Regarding a small but very important translation issue in this volume, see Matthew Miner, "Wisdom Be

vocabulary used by St. John of the Cross, was accepted by Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange in an essay that was incorporated into the very beginning of his discussion of the “illuminative way” in his *Three Ages of the Interior Life*.⁸ In Garrigou-Lagrange’s opinion, Maritain’s proposal provided an apt instrument for harmonizing the works of spiritual authors and Thomism. Even if one may justly critique his insensitivity to the ultimate irreducibility of certain thinkers’ outlooks, Garrigou-Lagrange’s desire to articulate the points of contact between different formal perspectives used by various Christian authors is admirable, especially in our age, which is all too ready to conclude that *ultimate irreducibility* implies *complete historical isolation*, as though each thinker in the history of Christian theology and spirituality were a world unto himself or herself—a museum piece for, yes, appreciation, but still historically isolated and at best providing an inspiration for our labors today, in our supposedly wholly unique contemporary situation.⁹ Great theological and spiritual authors differ more than Garrigou-Lagrange would have likely admitted, and yet they are great precisely because they were all trying to be true to the reality of nature and grace.

This is the context in which Labourdette’s thought concerning these matters matured. As is clear in his essays during the crises in the 1940s concerning theological methodology, by that time of his writing, he ardently desires to clearly delineate the various kinds of observation that take place at each level of human experience,¹⁰ not merely within the traditional Thomistic “three degrees of speculative abstraction,” but within, for

Attentive: The Noetic Structure of Sapiential Knowledge,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 18, no. 4 (2020): 1124–25.

⁸ See Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages*, 2:3–20. Indeed, against certain long-standing, though distortive (and false) critiques registered against Garrigou-Lagrange, readers would do well to consider his open appreciation of the fact that the language of mystics as loftier than that of scientific theology (without, obviously, denying the importance of the latter). It would be useful, also, to compare this to Yves Congar, “Langage des spirituels et langage des théologiens,” in *Situation et tâches présentes de la théologie* (Paris: Cerf, 1967) 135–58.

⁹ See Michel Labourdette, “Theology and Its Sources,” in *The Thomistic Response to the Nouvelle Théologie: Concerning the Truth of Dogma and the Nature of Theology*, ed. and trans. Matthew K. Miner and Jon Kirwan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 133–60 (here, 160), as well as “Criticism in Theology: A Response,” in Miner and Kirwan, *Thomistic Response*, 161–79 (here, 179).

¹⁰ In this regard, he openly sees himself developing Maritain’s discussions of different kinds of facts. See Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, 60–64; Yves Simon, “Philosophers and Facts,” in *The Great Dialogue of Nature and Space*, ed. Gerard J. Delacourt (New York: Magi Books, 1970), 139–62; Michael D. Torre, “Yves R. Simon, Disciple of Maritain:

example, the supernatural order in relation to the distinction between faith and acquired theological science.¹¹ Moreover, in a response to Jean-Marie Le Blond, he and Marie-Joseph Nicolas directly refer to the importance of what Maritain says regarding the internal differentiation of knowledge:

These matters, set forth with great depth and at length by Jacques Maritain in his *Degrees of Knowledge*, are of capital importance on the level of the philosophy of nature, and they enable us to perceive the durability not only of medieval metaphysics but also of its natural philosophy, even through the tremendous development of physics on the levels of empiriological and physico-mathematical conceptualization.¹² These same principles help us to perceive, in relation to one and the same revealed datum, the possibility of there being a profound difference in conceptualization when one considers this datum on the level of ontological reflection, in contrast to that of morality or mysticism.¹³

The Idea of Fact and the Difference Between Science and Philosophy,” in Miner, *Facts*, 19–39.

¹¹ See Michel Labourdette, “Theology: Faith Seeing Understanding,” in Miner and Kirwan, *Thomistic Response*, 89–125 (here, 93–95 and esp. 109–16).

¹² In the background here is Maritain’s account of the distinction between ontological and empiriological analysis. In addition to the texts concerning facts cited above, also see Maritain, *Degrees of Knowledge*, chs. 2 and 4; Maritain, *Science and Wisdom*, 34–69; Maritain, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Imelda C. Byrne (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951); Maritain, “The Philosophy of the Organism: Notes on the Function of Nutrition,” trans. Matthew K. Miner, *Nova et Vetera* (English) 19, no. 2 (2021): 633–51; Yves R. Simon, “Epistemological Pluralism,” in *Foresight and Knowledge*, ed. Ralph Nelson and Anthony O. Simon (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 90–99; John C. Cahalan, “Thomism’s Conceptual Structure and Modern Science,” in Miner, *Facts*, 40–68. Also see the essay by Simon at the end of the edition of Maritain’s *Philosophy of Nature* (cited above).

This position has been variously critiqued by thinkers of the “Laval” and “River Forest” school of Thomism, including Charles De Koninck, James Weisheipl, William Wallace, and Benedict Ashley. For an overview of De Koninck, Wallace, and Ashley respectively, see John G. Brungardt, “Charles De Koninck and the Sapiential Character of Natural Philosophy,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (2016): 1–24; Catherine Peters, “Dianoësis and Perinoësis in the Natural Sciences,” in Miner, *Facts*, 69–79. For Benedict Ashley, see *The Way toward Wisdom: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Introduction to Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), esp. 54 and 220.

¹³ Michel Labourdette and Marie-Joseph Nicolas, “The Analogy of Truth and the Unity of Theological Science,” in Miner and Kirwan, *Thomistic Response*, 193–240 (here, 222–23, slightly altered to make context clear).

And concerning this, they remark in a footnote: "Here too, in the *Degrees of Knowledge*, in relation to St. Augustine and St. John of the Cross, Maritain has provided principles for solving this issue, and what he says there deserves wider recognition."¹⁴

In the essay below, Labourdette applies these concerns to the specific question concerning the nature of spiritual theology, proposing a Thomistic appreciation for a mystical theology that is closer to a more ancient modality, all the while remaining within the later Scholastic understanding of mystical theology as part of theological science. By itself, the essay does not solve everything involved in the thorny issue concerning the unity of theology across its various developments, whether dogmatic, moral, or spiritual.¹⁵ This remains one of the continued contemporary tasks facing Thomists¹⁶ today, a very difficult task amid a hyper-specialized academic world. As a suggestion (or encouragement), I would turn my Thomistic readers' attention to the fact that the knowledge that we have through supernatural faith (marking all supernatural knowledge and affectivity with this same character) is not *merely* speculative, nor even "*basically*" *speculative* (even if practical too),¹⁷ nor *equally* speculative and practical, but rather is *formally and eminently* speculative and practical, loftier than the division into the speculative and the practical (though more akin to speculative knowledge insofar as its ultimate finality is akin to the triune God's self-knowledge, in which God finds loving rest in triune self-love).¹⁸

¹⁴ Labourdette and Nicolas, "Analogy of Truth," 223n36.

¹⁵ The readership of *Nova et Vetera* will surely be aware of this important topic, especially regarding the unity of moral and dogmatic theology, as set forth in various works by Servais Pinckaers and as indicated at least a generation earlier than him in, for example, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

¹⁶ I write "Thomists" because the current article is written within the context of Thomistic principles, texts, and figures; however, all faithful Catholic theologians are no doubt interested in this issue concerning the unity of acquired supernatural theology, as a discipline leading from the Trinity and back to the Trinity.

¹⁷ As sometimes seems to be the case for how many read *ST* I, q. 1, a. 4, as though the *magis* in his words, "Magis tamen est speculativa quam practica," were meant to exclude the practical aspect.

¹⁸ On the formally-eminently speculative and practical nature of faith, see *ST* II-II, q. 8, a. 3; II-II, q. 9, a. 3; and II-II, q. 45, a. 3, ad 1. See Cajetan *In* II-II *ST*, q. 4, a. 2, no. 3: "Moreover, note that St. Thomas says this about faith by comparing [that which is solely] practical to [that which is solely] speculative. Indeed, speaking more loftily and truly, we must say, in accord with his own thought and also with the truth, 'that faith is a habitus that is loftier than the practical and the speculative, having both kinds of truth in an eminent manner, just as the common sense is related to the proper sensibles, and hence does the tasks [habet opus] of both. However, speaking as many do,

Thus, insofar as faith, and the acquired theological wisdom-science that is rooted therein, is formally-eminently speculative and practical, it is not surprising that this same formal *ratio* would impress its finalities on both the moral and spiritual life as well as upon the particular character of the vocabulary and notions deployed in reflective, sapiential-scientific theological thought. How to articulate such seeming differentiation within the unity of both faith and theology remains a task to be undertaken. In aid of that task, I here present Labourdette's article.¹⁹

solely speaking of the speculative and the practical when speaking about the nature of faith [comparando ad haec duo], it is said to be speculative. However, the fact that the proposed interpretation corresponds to St. Thomas's thought is clear on two heads. First of all, as was discussed in ST I, q. 1, a. 4, theological science, which is contained virtually in its principles (which are truths of faith), is something of this sort [namely, formally and eminently speculative and practical]. Secondly, it is confirmed by what he says regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit that emanate from faith [see ST II-II, q. 8, a. 3; q. 9, a. 3] namely that [understanding and knowledge] also are [formally and eminently speculative and practical].—The truth of this doctrine is clearly manifest in light of eminence of the divine cognition, of which faith is an impression belonging to the same order of knowledge [est impressio propria ordinis], as was said concerning theology in ST I, q. 1, a. 4." Also see Cajetan *In I ST*, q. 1, a. 4, nos. 7–8. Cajetan seems to hold this position rather firmly. He will refer to these two texts when he remarks on ST II-II, q. 8, a. 3, and also in his very brief comments on ST II-II, q. 45, a. 4: "In the third article, in response to the first objection, note that the practical and the speculative are united together in a superior order. To this end, see what we have written elsewhere about this in more detail." Quotations from Cajetan are my own translation from the Leonine edition of the *ST*.

¹⁹ Although a full study of the state of this question remains beyond my own competence, the reader should consult the following texts for a beginning to engagement with more recent treatments of this question, in addition to the texts cited above in note 1. See Jesús Manuel García, "La Teologia Spirituale Oggi: Verso una Descrizione del Suo Statuto Epistemologico," *Teresianum* 52 (2021): 205–38; Denis Chardonens, "Qu'est-ce que la théologie spirituelle? Contribution à un questionnement," *Teresianum* 62 (2011): 271–305; Gilles Berceville, "Une question disputée: le statut épistémologique de la 'théologie spirituelle.' Les contributions de Jacques Maritain, Antonin Lemonnyer, Thomas Deman et Pie Raymond Régamey," in *Dominicans and the Challenge of Thomism*, ed. Michał Paluch and Piotr Lichacz (Warsaw: Instytut tomistyczny, 2012) 203–21; Gilles Berceville and Catherine Fino, "Le rôle et la place de la 'théologie spirituelle' dans l'enseignement de la théologie et la recherche universitaire," *Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale*, no. 292 (2016): 115–29.

What Is Spiritual Theology?²⁰

I have chosen to use the expression “spiritual theology” on account of its very general nature, which does not prejudice positions to be taken concerning the relationship between what is generally called “asceticism” and “mysticism.” Moreover, in order to stick to this very broad meaning, I here understand the expression “spiritual theology” to indicate that part of theological science which deals with the matters belonging to the spiritual life. Let us begin by trying to provide some small clarification concerning this object.

The Spiritual Life

The General Human Notion of the Spiritual Life

When speaking of “the spiritual life,” one normally intends to designate a given part of human life considered in its full integrity. How should we understand this?

A LIFE THAT HAS AS ITS SOURCE AND CENTER A “SPIRIT”: THE SPIRITUAL SOUL.

Every form of vital activity refers to the subsisting subject, the person, and is attributable to him. It’s not a question of having the body on one side and the soul or intelligence on the other. Rather, one and the same being, one and the same self, is the principle of the various activities that make up human life. However, among these activities, there are many that, by their essence, are in no way uniquely proper to man (even though they take on a unique form in him). Human life includes activities of vegetative life which are common to all living bodies and activities of cognition and sense-appetite which are common to all animals. In order to characterize human life precisely as human, we must get at what is proper to it, namely, the activities of cognition and affection that have reason as their principle. Through the activities of vegetative life and sense life, we plunge our roots into the highest part of the bodily world. However, through those activities that have reason as their principle, we enter the world of the spirit. The only

²⁰ Translation of Michel Labourdette, “Qu’est-ce que la théologie spirituelle?,” *Revue thomiste* 92 (1992): 355–72. The unedited text presented here functioned as the introduction to a course on Spiritual Theology given by Labourdette.

possible source for such activities can be found in a being who belongs to another world, a soul which is not only the animating principle of its body, but which, moreover, is the center for a very different form of life, finding in its own activities its *raison d'être* and most profound finality, a life that there finds its own objects and nourishment, and in us [as embodied spiritual beings], its growth.

*THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THIS SPIRITUAL LIFE
AND THE OTHER ACTIVITIES OF HUMAN LIFE.*

This superior form of life will not be unrelated to the other two. If this were not true, man would be a kind of monster. On the contrary, all these activities will be related to each other by the closest bonds, though they will ultimately need to serve the most precious thing in man precisely inasmuch as he is a man. Instead of considering the activities of reason as being ordered and consecrated to the better organization and conduct of man's bodily life as regards what it needs for growth, reproduction, sense knowledge, and enjoyment—this is how most men live, a kind of life that St. Thomas, following Aristotle, calls the *vita voluptuosa*, refusing to consider it as being a form of human life—we must, in order to safeguard the normal order of values, look at things the other way around, considering the whole of our bodily life as being ordered to these higher activities. Yes, vegetative life and sense life retain their nature and immediate, proper purpose, their fundamental requirements. However, they are engaged in the development of a living being whose activity they do not “define,” whose domain they do not delimit. They are caught up in a movement which comes to its fulfillment in a place that lies beyond them.

TWO MAJOR HISTORICAL EXPRESSIONS OF THESE RELATIONS.

(1) The doctrines fashioned along Platonic lines conceptualized these relations as being a kind of conflict. The law of human life will not be only to surpass the order of activities ordered to bodily life, but will moreover require man to fight and deny them. Thus, the separation of the soul from the body will represent a form of deliverance, the end of a violent state of affairs. And it is well known that, historically speaking, this Platonic inspiration has weighed heavily on many formulations used for expressing Christian ascetical thought.

(2) By contrast, doctrines fashioned along Aristotelian lines believe that the law of human life is a law of hierarchy and harmony, calling for contributions from all of man's parts, each in its own way and in its own order, so as to provide for the achievement of man's true finality. Vegetative

life and sensitive life are not primarily an obstacle, but instead are first and foremost indispensable elements of integral human life, indeed, the necessary means for its development. Only, rather than defining our personal life and attracting it to themselves as privileged activities, they will instead be drawn upward: first of all being structurally placed in proximity to the spirit, thereby being enabled to participate, to some degree, in reason's own manner of acting, and then opened to being progressively imbued with reason and "spirituality" by being virtuously cultivated.

THE GENERAL NOTION OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.

A first sense of the expression "the spiritual life" can refer to the whole of those activities whose purpose is to ensure that the spirit may come to have this kind of dominating existence within us. Clearly, this first notion is not yet Christian; however, it implies a fundamental insight which will be taken up by theology's own elaboration of Christian spirituality (as we find, above all, in St. Thomas's presentation of these matters), an insight which sheds light on the first and essential distinctions involved here.

THE TWO GREAT DOMAINS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.

This spiritual life is immediately divided into two great domains (which are in no way separated from each other, though they are distinct):

- the domain of the activities of the mind, of that being which is intelligent and free, all of which are oriented toward knowledge and love of the superior realities which are his true food precisely because they are his very source. This is what is traditionally called the domain of the "contemplative life" (which, obviously, is broader than what, strictly speaking, is an act of contemplation);
- the domain of the activities which the spirit, in its human condition, must carry out in order to draw the whole man, with his various powers, into the spirit's own movement, in order to unify all these inferior activities in accord with the rule of reason and also in order to lead an upright life among other men, in the human society of which one is a member, in order to "humanize" the earth. This is what is traditionally called the domain of the "active life."

With Aristotle, St. Thomas connects this distinction to the difference that exists between the two roles played by our intellect: the speculative and the practical. Depending on the kind of works (their own end)

undertaken by a given life [considered as a whole], we can say that it is contemplative or active in character. However, clearly, every contemplative life will necessarily have a portion of its life which is active, at least in the form of the virtuous cultivation of the sense powers, thereby providing the contemplative life with an indispensable preparation for its own exercise. Likewise, on the other hand, it is clear that no active life can be entirely devoid of some modicum of this disinterested speculative knowledge, which comes to its perfection only when it is stabilized in sapiential knowledge. As regards the forms of life found in human society, the contemplative life is the one whose dominant and central preoccupation is concern with contemplation or those activities which prepare for it and tend toward it. By contrast, the active life is that life whose dominant preoccupation is life shared with men, in the cultivation of all the moral and political virtues, concerned with bringing things about through action.

Note well, already here, the way that the contemplative life is the magnetic pole in such a conception of man. Indeed, it is the summit of human life, the liberation of the person for his loftiest, most fully spiritual activities. No other form of activity, not even that of the moral and political virtues, finds its end in itself. The only absolute value, that which truly represents a definitive end in man's life, is this commerce with Him who is man's end precisely because He is man's source.

We can say that, on the whole, this is the ideal that we have received from Greek thought, naturally by here leaving aside a number of its traits and retaining only its purest lines, bringing together trends that were, in fact, divided among various schools.

2. The Christian Notion of the Spiritual Life

Christian revelation came to put forward other values that require us to fashion a very different idea concerning the spiritual life.

CONSUMMATION IN THE NEXT LIFE.

From the perspective of the moral conception of human life, the most decisive element of Christianity has perhaps been the teaching that postpones our true happiness, beatitude, to the next life. Here below, in this world, a perfect contemplative life can be the human success of only a small number of privileged people, with the good fortune of having the necessary gifts, along with a uniquely favorable set of circumstances. All are called to the beatitude of heaven, and the distinction between success and failure no longer depends entirely upon natural qualities, social rank, or favorable circumstances, but rather upon love. Henceforth, the whole of human life

is no longer considered as anything more than a preparation for next life. It is a state of infancy. The Christian spiritual life reaches maturity only in the hereafter. Here upon earth, it is subject to a regime of imperfection that affects the whole of its growth, however considerable it may be. It is an apprenticeship, a trial, a time of redemption.

LIFE IN CHRIST.

And since we all find ourselves to be living “under sin,” the essential thing is to participate in the redemption brought about by Christ, something which is possible only by being joined to him, in his Mystical Body.

Henceforth, the spiritual life will no longer solely involve the personal activity of taking charge of all our inferior activities in order to ensure the rule of reason, along with the superior leisure made available for the spirit so that it may make room for the contemplation of supreme realities. (Of course, this does remain, characterizing a kind of progress in our interior development, for nature does not disappear with the advent of grace.)

The spiritual life will first and foremost be life in Christ, by participating in the mystery of His redemption, through which we find ourselves to be established in a relationship with the true God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, thereby experiencing relations of proximity, “kinship,” and direct commerce, which philosophical reflection never could have possibly suspected.

THE MORE PROFOUND SENSE OF THE WORD “SPIRIT.”

The essential faculties for this life remain our master faculties, our intellect and will, which immediately blossom forth from the spiritual soul; however, they are supplemented by higher principles which place them, as it were, directly in the midst of the divine life: the theological virtues, which blossom forth from an even deeper divinization, sanctifying grace [which deifies the very substance of the soul].

The idea we formed concerning the spiritual life thus takes on a new depth and, as it were, a new dimension. In the order of nature, it refers to what the spiritual soul brings to us, a life which is one of reason. However, henceforth, without ceasing to refer to this, the spiritual life will be something much more profound, referring to the order of realities and activities that flow into us from the communication of the Holy Spirit. Deeper than the *psychè* in its own rational life, we reach a *pneuma*, the principle of the divine life. Here too, we are not speaking of a separate life. This life “in the spirit” must permeate and polarize the whole of our inferior faculties and activities, ordering them to itself, in accord to its own requirements. This

is why, in addition to its essential organs (namely, the theological virtues), there are added [infused] moral virtues, themselves supernatural, whose proper role is no longer precisely to “rationalize” our appetite and sensibility [as is the case for the acquired moral virtues], but rather to proportion them to a truly divine life whose rule is loftier than reason itself.

THE PLACE OF NATURE.

One of the central ideas of St. Thomas’s spirituality is that this surpassing of reason, this surpassing of what is merely human, of nature, in no way represents a kind a suppression, negation, or opposition to nature. The Christian life surpasses the rectified human life because, all the while adding on to the latter, the former realizes and fulfills it. In order to surpass the rational level of things, one must at least have attained it. The natural moral virtues, which should impregnate our appetite (and therefore all our social relations), as well as our sensuality, with rationality (and already, in this sense, with “spirituality”), are by no means rendered useless. They have an indispensable role to play, but they will not have the last word concerning the perfection we must attain. The cultivation of our faculties and of our social behavior will be subject to other, more rigorous demands which will not allow us to remain below, but rather, will outstrip mere human perfection. Faith surpasses the natural scope of the intellect, but it does so by way of knowledge and in the intellect’s own line of ordering turned toward the truth. Therefore, faith not only does not destroy the intellect, but rather nourishes it, giving it something on which to exercise its activity and to surpass its own limitations. The intellect will not need to renounce its cultivation, but rather will need to impregnate it with a loftier and more decisive light. Finally, charity surpasses our natural love of God, but it does so by rediscovering and fulfilling its already natural ordination to love God more than oneself.

CONSIDERATION OF THE CONCRETE STATE OF NATURE.

Let us make one final remark so as to clarify our Christian idea of the spiritual life. In our first, very provisional consideration of human spirituality, we looked at things in terms of what nature as such requires, envisaging a flowering of the human person in a way that would certainly be progressive and found at the end of a process of growth, but one whose maturity, if not its full achievement, should normally be realized in the present life. From the perspective of Christian spirituality there is another very important notion which must always be brought into play, namely, that of nature’s concrete state of existence, itself to be considered at a variety of levels:

First, given that the entrance of the supernatural order into our life is not an essential necessity, but instead, is a[n existential] fact, it necessarily opens up a "history": a state of nature which was first elevated, then fallen, and then restored. We must take into account what has been arranged within a *de facto* economy, whose organization is based not on metaphysical necessities but, instead, on God's freely willed dispositions.

Second, more generally: a state of preparation (of "way," *in via*) and a terminal state (*in patria*). The present life is a period of preparation. It is a state of childhood. Our divine life will reach its full maturity only in heaven. Here below, it knows an inferior conditioning which comes from the fact that the activity of knowledge which, of itself, is our loftiest activity, is still only possible in the form of faith. *Per fidem ambulamus, non per speciem* (2 Cor 5:7). Therefore, our supreme activity here below is not knowledge, but instead, love. The division of human life into the contemplative and the active life will find a deeper meaning here. It still remains true to understand it in connection with the distinction between the intellect's two functions (as speculative and practical), but it is profoundly connected to the distinction between the two great types of works of charity: (1) the love of God in Himself, a love which finds its privileged exercise in the pursuits and holy leisure of the contemplative life; (2) the love of our neighbors in God, a love which finds its privileged exercise in the labors of the active life in the service of our neighbors. Thus, the spiritual life's center of gravity passes from the intellect to love.

This is what we mean by "the spiritual life." Here we have, in broad-brush, our material object of inquiry when we say that we intend to study spiritual theology.

Spiritual Theology

Should we not speak of "theology," *tout court*, or at least of moral theology, that part of theology which is concerned quite precisely with the rational creature's return to God? What would be the reason for us to fashion a unique course, distinct from the course of explanation found in the *Summa theologiae*?

In What Sense Spiritual Theology Is Not Distinct from Moral Theology

A good number of Thomists absolutely refuse to admit the legitimacy of such a distinction. And we must admit that it is often nowadays presented in a form that fully justifies their rejection.

If many modern thinkers meticulously distinguish spiritual (or ascetical)

theology from moral theology, this is because they have a very constricted and diminished idea of the latter. Centered on the idea of obligation, such a moral theology would have the essential role of distinguishing that which is forbidden from that which is permitted. Such moral theology is dominated by the idea of “precepts” and limits itself to knowing what is a transgression and what is not. It necessarily becomes a morality of what is minimally required. The call to progress will be seen as representing a different object, by which we enter into the realm of things which are no longer prescribed for all, but rather, are only counsels. This, it will be said, represents a different topic, of use for generous souls: ascetical theology. And given that, in some cases, certain accidental occurrences take place in the development of the spiritual life of rather unusual people, it is said that they walk along extraordinary ways, leading to an even more special and reserved consideration for their cases: mystical theology.

The perspective guiding St. Thomas’ moral theology is, from the beginning, completely different from this schema. Its central idea is the notion of the end, and therefore the notion of perfection, of the forward march toward perfection. For him, moral theology is nothing if it does not propose to study and regulate (for it is a practical science) the full extent of this march toward perfection, from its humblest point of departure up to its loftiest end: beatitude.

This is not the place to expatiate on this idea, which is very dear to us. However, you know quite well that I fully embrace this conception of morality. I hold to it no less than does Deman and, with him, all those who indignantly reject the very idea of a spiritual theology which would be a kind of add-on to the scientific exposition of moral theology. Only, I believe that this is only one aspect of the problem and that it can be taken up from another perspective, where it is posed in a very different fashion.

How Spiritual Theology Is Distinct from Moral Theology

I think that we can conceive of a spiritual theology which obviously would not be independent of moral theology or really distinct from it but which, on the contrary, would be constituted, as regards the same realities, on a level which is closer to action, which is not reached by a science functioning in accord with a speculative modality.

THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF A SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE.

It is very instructive—let us say it once more with Aristotle—to know what things are and how they come into being. In this sense, the history of theological thought and its progressive differentiation constitutes a

capital *datum* for those who would like to fashion a just idea of its nature and the extent of its domain.

Now, it is a fact that, alongside the reflection upon dogmas which gave birth to theology, there came to be amassed, among those souls who devoted themselves in particular to the perfect life, a collection of observations, experiences, descriptions, and practical rules, coming to form what is called the knowledge of “spiritual ways,” the knowledge of the ways of God. For example, consider the *Conferences* of John Cassian (and, indeed, all the abundant monastic literature of the first centuries of Christianity). In them, we see, regarding the things of the spiritual life, a primordial desire to instruct and to learn. Now, this obviously presupposes the transmission of a certain body of communicable knowledge. Clearly, the “master” involved in such a form of teaching is conceived of as having different qualities than merely “having learned” from another person, even though this is very necessary. He must be “enlightened,” which includes the idea of a personal spiritual experience, a kind of permanent contact with the realities into which he initiates his disciple. However, he has very specific things to teach him: not only personal counsels in order to aid his prudence—such counsels need to be invented every day in the face of the unforeseen circumstances of a personal history which, though similar to others, is nonetheless unique—but rather, a set of observations and general rules that are extremely useful to know.

Now, it is also a very certain fact that, in any order of knowledge, when a given number of certainties have been acquired, they do not remain in a scattered state. The mind registers too great a demand for unity in order for those who acquire and transmit these certainties not to be concerned with grouping them together in a given order. This is why, from antiquity onward, indeed even after theology became aware of itself as a science, a host of spiritual treatises were written, claiming to be more-or-less complete, presenting a more-or-less perfect synthesis of the “science” of spiritual things. For its own part, theology under the sway of its scientific aspect reached the same realities and problems, and it was not rare that, far from agreeing with each other, theologians and spiritual writers opposed each other, something which often takes place between “empirical” and “theoretical” thinkers in every field. Heeding all the obvious differences between the two cases, this is somewhat like how medicine has developed, with some thinkers proceeding in a more deductive way from the better-known sciences of nature and the human body, while others press on in a more empirical fashion, on the basis of their experience.

In the Fathers, the various functions of theological knowledge are found

in a still all-too-undifferentiated state. In them, the speculative purpose of knowledge precisely as knowledge receives so little emphasis and awareness for it not to seem that a perfect continuity exists among all these various kinds of consideration—and this is undoubtedly what enchants so many of our own contemporaries, who are weary and disgusted with all the distinctions and separations introduced by the modern age. Hence, in the Fathers' writings, this outlook gave birth to syntheses which were at once admirable and premature (thanks, for example, to Platonic philosophy), in which some of the essential (and often the deepest) postulates of Christianity were wonderfully highlighted, though not without somewhat compromising the complete balance between the human and the divine. I am thinking, for example, of the theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa, who seems to have been at once an admirable mystic and a very great theologian. He left behind an utterly profound doctrine concerning the whole of the spiritual life, in which we can undoubtedly find all the truths we must live by, and many of them, because they had been somewhat forgotten over the course of history, take on a particularly striking and novel emphasis in his presentation of them. However, for want of an adequate philosophical instrument—that is, of a set of notions which have undergone sufficient elaboration—this doctrine was not able to attain the universality that is needed for science. It was not able to distinguish the various planes on which our consideration moves about, either among divine things or among the realities of the spiritual life. And it must be admitted that his synthesis, on many points, remains somewhat cut off, offering little room for developments which the later development of theological thought has shown to be not only legitimate but, indeed, indispensable.

Similar observations could be registered concerning St. Augustine, who was so admirably intuitive and enlightened concerning the things of God and of the soul that he seems to have pronounced decisive words concerning just about everything, words which would come to be commented on from generation to generation, while nonetheless abounding—on nearly everything as well—in ambiguous formulas, full of potential for a host of deviations, both theoretical and practical (a fact which can readily be shown by merely considering the history of theology, as well as that of spirituality).

However, to the degree that theology, properly so-called, became aware of its scientific status, along with the requirements proper to a rigorously intellectual method, it required categories for use in this task of rational elaboration, drawing them from a philosophy concerned with precision and speculative rigor. For this reason, it necessarily distanced itself from

a given conceptual language which was closer to affection. I do not mean that it distanced itself from reality (for precisely what we are enabled to reach through abstract knowledge, in the sense in which St. Thomas uses the term "abstract," is the most real, permanent, and necessary reality in things), but rather that it distanced itself from the concrete formulation that presents realities such as they surround us, offering themselves to our actions, enveloped by a host of accidents and circumstances. Since it has no other end than the knowledge of the truth, to the eyes of men who hurry forward toward action, this theology seemed a little like an exercise for powerful insider-bureaucrats.

All the meanwhile, "spiritual theology," which is much more solicitous concerning action and how to direct it, much closer to the human experience of divine things, continued to use increasingly different categories, ones that were less removed from observation, more charged with relations to man's affection and concrete situation. It is a fact that the atmosphere changes almost violently when we pass from a treatise of scientific theology concerning the things of the soul to a book written by a spiritual author, even when the latter knows his theology very well, as is the case for someone like, for example, St. Francis de Sales. Now, this knowledge concerning of the things of the spiritual life always tended toward systematization, in its own line and in a form that was wholly different from the scientific theology, though with an obvious concern to fashion a coherent whole. In the fourteenth century, [Jan van] Ruysbroeck's work presents an overall consideration of the spiritual life, which is, moreover, very much nourished by speculation, while nonetheless having a very different form from what we would find in theological treatise. From the sixteenth century onward, at least in our Latin West, the Carmelite school perhaps did the greatest work on this systematization, and it is possible that it has exercised too exclusive an influence upon it. However, at the very least, through the course of these efforts at systematization, the unique perspective of spiritual theology increasingly was brought to light, holding that the spiritual life offers itself to a consideration which is different from that of scientific morality along the lines of St. Thomas's *secunda pars*. How can this perspective be characterized? To answer this, let us study the various elements of what, for the time being, we will call "spiritual doctrine," though we will still need to ask whether it can withstand being called scientific in its own way, thus being articulated as one of the legitimate functions belonging to the whole of theological knowledge.

PRESENTATION OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY:

(1) *Spiritual doctrine and moral theology.* Spiritual doctrine is always presented with much less universality than is moral theology properly so called. Yes, it is presented as being open to all, though as being, in fact, of interest only to souls who present certain conditions, souls devoting themselves to the "perfect life." This first observation, expressed and utilized in quite broad terms, lays at the foundation of the conception of ascetical and mystical theology which I have cast aside, one which would lay beyond morality, a calling whose requirements would be only for generous souls, surpassing the requirements of mere morality. This seems to me to be an unquestionable observation (indeed, one which is in no way contradicted by the more modern attempts to extend the formulation of "spirituality" no longer solely to "specialists in the perfect life," but to all conditions, from the laity to the priesthood, from marriage to virginity, from "work" to action to contemplation, etc.). However, I believe that this observation has another meaning and a completely different scope.

With St. Thomas, I hold as a certain fact that theologically defined perfection, considered as the perfection of charity, is required of all as an end that must be attained. It is not only "a counsel," and for those who will it, it falls under a precept: at once under the positively formulated precept of total love ("with all one's heart" etc.) and under this intrinsic law of charity, which is its very nature, namely to tend toward progress without any other assignable limit than the infinite divine amiability (with our own capacity to love itself increasing with our progress). In this sense, it is absolutely necessary that this spiritual doctrine be presented to all.

However, it is a fact that, since there are "many mansions" in our homeland, an infinite diversity is found in the march of souls, in the intensity of their progress. In order to avoid transgressing the precept of charity, it suffices that we remain in a state of grace. Certainly, this cannot hold true without some form of progress, but it is compatible with a life that is unfortunately quite busied with other things: for some, consummated perfection in heaven will be (relatively speaking) quite small because their very capacity to love will indeed have increased very little. Like every Christian, they will have holiness in substance (namely, grace and the infused virtues). Like every Christian, they are on the march toward loftier holiness and are truly called to perfection. The requirements which moral theology formulates in this regard apply no less to them than to all, including the most fervent. And yet no spiritual author, writing in his own language, will ever agree to say that these people are devoted to "the perfect life." This is so not only because, historically, the expression "the perfect life" came to

mean “the evangelical life,” in the sense that it implies a particular kind of life characterized by observation of the “evangelical counsels” or at least of some of them, but also because, as a point of fact, these “lukewarm” people will seem to him to be attentive above all to something other than their spiritual life. If a spiritual author speaks to them, it will always be a little like speaking to people on the outside, who will only have to use his teachings when they have decided to take a given step [along the way].

Hence, we have a first important characteristic: in relation to the object of moral theology in general, the very object considered in spiritual doctrine experiences a kind of limitation or restriction, with a reasoning which, moreover, is legitimate only from a much more concrete perspective than that of moral theology. The scientific moral analysis of the essence of charity and its own, proper requirements is absolutely valid for everyone. From this perspective, the “step” or “decision” that we are speaking of (the “first conversion” according to the language of Lallemant) is perfectly accidental. For spiritual doctrine, it takes on a capital value.

In the considerations undertaken in spiritual doctrine, a second characteristic limitation can be noted in relation to moral theology’s own considerations. For moral theology, the central reference point for everything, in a sense, revealing and illuminating everything, is the ultimate terminus of our existence: beatitude in the next life. Everything is defined in relation to this, and since we are considering moral matters, everything is decided in relation thereto. Forever anxious to keep present in all his reasoning that which is the ultimate resolute term for all of the middle terms which he utilizes, a moral theologian should forever think upon the Beatific Vision, God finalizing the action of the rational creature.

Of course, spiritual doctrine also has its eyes fixed on this consummation of our supernatural life. However, another notion is perhaps more central for it, or at least more active: that of the perfection to be attained in this life. The Beatific Vision is not part of progress in time. It can arise at any given moment of that progress and crown it, with time therewith coming to a halt. For its part, spiritual doctrine will fix its gaze on this “penultimate” end: the perfection which can be achieved here-below.

The limitations I have just spoken of directly affect only the material object involved. However, they are indicative of a deeper difference, namely, a difference in the very mode of consideration exercised in these two domains.

The *secunda pars* of St. Thomas’s *Summa theologiae* [ST] (already differentiated into I-II and II-II) is constructed, as a whole, according to a rigorous analytical method which elaborates, within the movement

characteristic of practical knowledge, a science that is speculative in character. Even in his particular moral theology (*ST* II-II), St. Thomas applies himself essentially to distinguishing, in accord with the methods of speculative analysis, the various ontological principles involved (formal objects, *habitus*, and acts), doing so in accord with the most precise categories of his metaphysics of being. This is what gives his treatise its originality. It is what bestows on it its particular value and extraordinary illuminative power, namely, its universality.

However, a spiritual author is concerned with something different from providing a definition for each virtue, all in accord with the rules of the *Organon*. Of course, this does not mean that he renounces the rule of action in the light of the truth. However, in order to provoke, support, and direct action, he more immediately has need of another kind of light, another form of knowledge, one that is more modest and, perhaps, less precise, but in any case more concrete, less stripped of its relations to emotion and affection, a knowledge which is more characterized by the particularities falling to its temporal evolution. "What do genera and species matter to me?" Such are the words of the author of the *Imitation of Christ*, and no doubt, a certain current of Christian culture, one which is historically very different from those associated with St. Thomas, are reflected in this cry. However, more profoundly still, it is indicative of an attitude belonging to spiritual authors as such.

After you have studied in the *secunda Secundae* the question concerning the increase of charity and of the infused virtues and have considered it as a particularly difficult case of the general problem of the growth of *habitus*, a spiritual author will tell you that something still awaits further explanation concerning the same question: no longer the theoretical explanation regarding the increase of the infused virtues, but rather the laws and practical means for increasing them in souls, the characteristic stages of their development along with the particular rules that each of them will require. Similarly, when you have determined, with St. Thomas, the nature of the formal object of faith or charity, a spiritual author will tell you: This is very good and infinitely illuminating for me. However, whether faith has this formal object and charity another, this is just as true at the beginning of the spiritual life as at the end or in the middle. Nonetheless, each of these virtues grows, and every director of souls knows quite well that any given direction does not suit just any given Christian at any given time. Likewise, he knows that faith and charity are not exercised (and therefore are not cultivated) in the same way in all states. This all depends upon whether they are incipient, already strong, or are in

a consummated state of perfection. Likewise, he is well aware that, for example, doubts against faith have utterly different meanings, requiring wholly different treatments, in a new convert still in the midst of the world in contrast to in an old Carthusian after thirty years of contemplative life, or in someone like Thérèse of the Child Jesus. And if there is a relatively general explanation for this, connected to the laws of the concrete progress of the spiritual life, this is something essential which a director of souls must indeed come to know.

(2) *Spiritual doctrine and prudence.* In truth, we here find ourselves on a different plane from that of moral theology such as it is laid out along the lines presented by St. Thomas. However, this does not mean that we are on the level of prudence.

Prudence judges and decides concerning the moral quality of a singular action, considered in all its circumstances. It renders its decisions not only on the basis of universal and speculative knowledge, but also, because it is a question of personally and voluntarily committing oneself to action, on the basis of the connaturality to the moral good in its various forms introduced into us through the (acquired and infused) moral virtues. Its decisions are never pre-made in advance. They always must be invented. When the moral life falls into “recipes,” repetition, the ready-made, “conformity,” and so on, prudence withers, and life becomes mechanical and infra-human. Prudence does not consist in not deviating from what has been done in the past or from what is usually done; it consists quite precisely in doing, in every action, that which has never been done before, that is, an action which comes from this and that person, at this or that moment in his life, surrounded by all his singular circumstances. It is essentially knowledge, practical knowledge, dependent as such on both our emotional dispositions and speculative forms of knowledge, at least basic and elementary ones. However, even at the level of knowledge, it is not in direct continuity with the science of human acts. It necessarily presupposes the use of other forms of knowledge: experience, opinion, and individual discernment, not to mention all that comes from advice drawn from others and so on.

Now, I think (along with Jacques Maritain) that, due to the progressive differentiation of knowledge, of intellectual knowledge, that this produces—between, on the one hand, the science of human acts considered in a speculative manner and, on the other, prudence—at the summit of this whole body of knowledge used by prudence, as it were, a [unique] intelligibility appeal: the postulation of a certain type of knowledge, one which because of its universality absolutely surpasses prudence and its

particular minor terms, though equipping itself with a conceptualization and systematization which are themselves practical in character.

This knowledge, which is complex but tending to be systematized in its own coherent line, is what we can call the science of the practitioner. In the case of works to be fashioned, it would perhaps be called, rather, an art, in order to thereby emphasize its continuity with artistic realizations. However, in the field of human acts, there is no art, strictly speaking, and we have seen that this "science" is very different from prudence, not suffering being reduced thereto.

(3) *The nature of spiritual theology as a science.* Nonetheless, can it be called a science, and, if so, what will its characteristics be? I believe that it can be called a science, on the condition that we do not have a narrow and univocal idea of what science is. The evolution of knowledge and the progressive differentiation of the sciences have already forced us to take up this kind of analogical understanding of the nature of science. In the very order of speculative knowledge, because the idea of laying out "explanations through causes" is quite different in various domains, the notion of science does not apply with the same perfection, nor with quite the same meaning, to metaphysics and the physico-mathematical sciences, and even more so to the obscure, so-called experimental sciences. Within practical knowledge, which in itself is already less fully and purely scientific than a speculative knowledge, a similar downgrading of the idea of science takes place.

In speculative knowledge, such differentiation comes from the greater or lesser immateriality involved in the objective light in question, that is, in its *modus definiendi*. We can, and indeed must, speak of different modes of conceptualization, which are more or less profound, concerning the same realities, the same material objects. And, moreover, depending on whether this conceptualization reaches and presents things on the plane of ontological knowledge or on that of sensible and measurable observation, there will be different types of explanation, precisely because the very idea of cause will be different.

In practical knowledge, the sciences will be distinguished in accord with the various ends involved (i.e., the various objects, considered formally as realizable). However, within the consideration of one and the same line of finality, there will be room for the differentiation of other principles, one which will reach, if we can so speak, the fundamental equipment of science somewhat like how, in the consideration of the sensible world, the philosophy of nature is distinguished from the experimental sciences. Here the most determinative formal characteristic of the scientific light is not its greater or lesser immateriality (this will remain accidental), but

rather its “practicality,” its proximity to realization and, consequently, the more-or-less notable influence exercised upon this very light by practical purposes and by regulation by appetite. In this order of practical knowledge, the most properly scientific consideration will be the one which, while being concerned with an object to be done, considered precisely as operable and already by this very fact necessarily including an order to action and to the appetite as the source of the action, equips itself, in these means of knowledge, with instruments which are typically those of speculative science, borrowing its essential procedures therefrom. Through a strict analytical method, realities are thus studied and reduced to their essential requirements, and it is in these essential necessities that explanations are sought out (necessities which here include the relation to the end, the measurement and regulation by the end considered as something to be attained and to be realized, by which a completely unique object of knowledge is constituted). This is the level upon which the moral theology of St. Thomas operates.

However, we can indeed think that at a different level, and in relation to the same realities (although with a much more restricted scope), a consideration of human acts gradually emerged, one that is much more engaged in concrete reality, though reaching a sufficient generality to support an analogical, though still proper and formal, extension of the notion of science: the science of man’s concrete development, of his slow development through time, in relation to his true finalities. Here the typical procedure will no longer be analysis, but rather *composition*, which brings together the elements of action, putting forward as its explanatory heads (for the explanations which are proper to it) complexes, attitudes of soul or of natural and supernatural realities which are ultimate explanatory categories from an immediately practical perspective. Take, for example, the idea of “conformation to Christ.” This is a composite notion, which a speculative analytical method must pull apart, drawing distinctions between nature and the supernatural, that which is supernatural in its essential structure and in one of its states, the “Christian” state, studying the proper laws of the present economy of salvation, and so on. By contrast, for a spiritual doctrine, “conformation to Christ” is one of the highest principles, the most “primary,” if we dare say, which governs nearly all of our interior behavior.

We must go even further still: the objective intellectual content of the expression “conformation to Christ” is not exactly the same in the two different considerations, or at least in the second one, it has a whole host of harmonics and resonances that the first ignores, given that, precisely

through one of its fundamental requirements, it must let go of them. For spiritual doctrine, "conformation to Christ" is a notion laden with affection, already engaged in attitudes of soul and heart, already a notion with a particular savor. It has a power of emotion and attraction that one is careful not to leave out of sight. For speculative theology, this affective and motivating harmonic would, rather, be an embarrassment in the pure analytical light which wishes only to bring forth all the essential elements considered only objectively, from the perspective of the truth. The fact that this theology would be that of St. Thomas and would represent one of the essential requirements postulated by the intellect working the datum of faith and its practical requirements in no way impedes the legitimacy of the other consideration, nor its necessity. It is just as futile to try to oppose them as though they were incompatible as it would be to confuse them as though one and the same consideration, more-or-less blended, could adequately respond to each of these needs, to each of these objective intelligibility appeals.

Therefore, we will say that, within the practical science concerning the rational creature's return to God (moral theology in general), there is room for two types of consideration which in no way hinder each other, but rather, on the contrary, call for each other as soon as each one becomes aware of its true nature, scope, and limits: a practical consideration which is speculative in mode, namely, moral theology along the typical lines of the *secunda pars*; and a practical consideration which is practical in mode, spiritual doctrine, which is not developed in the work of St. Thomas (although it finds many beginnings there).

Three Special Characteristics of Spiritual Theology

To draw these reflections to a close, I would like to highlight three important characteristics of "spiritual doctrine":

THE ROLE OF AFFECTION.

Rectitude of appetite takes on a preponderant role in spiritual doctrine. This is not yet the decisive role that it has in prudence, giving its judgment and the *imperium* their practical truth. In that case, we would be completely outside of the domain of anything that could still be called science in a way which is proper, even with much imperfection. Rather, this rectitude will play a role that is more-or-less necessary as a condition for a complete and constant correctness of appreciation [of the data] (which remains supported by intellectual motives) in all the domains of the virtuous and contemplative life. By thereby drawing close to action,

this represents an increase in the importance given to extra-scientific knowledge through connaturality and to the role played by personal experience. (It can be said that, analogically, the experimental sciences present, in relation to the philosophy of nature, a considerable increase in the role of infra-scientific knowledge involving the cogitative power and the [other internal and external] senses.) If, absolutely speaking, it is true that someone could be a theologian with faith alone, without possessing charity, I do not believe that the practical extension of the theological *habitus* is compatible with the absence of charity: the theological *habitus* surely already suffers from such a deficiency when it occurs in relation to moral theology, which is speculative in mode; however, it is impossible for it to fully develop into a spiritual doctrine that is completely just and sure without the support of an affective connaturality brought about through the various virtues and charity.

THE PROPER CONCEPTUAL LEXICON AND VOCABULARY.

A second, extremely important characteristic is that spiritual doctrine uses a conceptual lexicon which is different from that utilized in moral theology, which is speculative in mode. I do not mean that it does not use the same words as this theology (which is, in fact, partly true), but I mean more profoundly that, where the words are the same, they do not have the same scope in these two registers. Nothing is more dangerous than to interpret the expressions of a spiritual author as though they were expressing rigorously speculative and metaphysical notions. It is a commonplace to note this fact as regards the idea of "nature." A Thomistic theologian would say that grace does not destroy nature, but rather perfects it. It would be a monstrosity in his eyes if grace found something in nature to be destroyed. He thus thinks, as he should, of nature from a metaphysical perspective, as man's essence as ordered to human activities. By contrast, a spiritual author will say that nature must be tamed, corrected, and subdued. For as long as his zeal prevails, and in line with the logic proper to his particular perspective, he will say that it must be "destroyed." This will not go without the danger of misinterpretation, and that is why control exercised by theology that is speculative in mode will always be infinitely beneficial. However, the language of spiritual authors must be understood in its own right: nature is the "old man," it is fallen nature precisely as fallen, with all that this implies concerning disordered inclinations, and so on.

"Spiritual" language presents, among others, two characteristics:

(1) The expression of such language is charged with preoccupations other than concern with defining an objective truth. Far from seeking a

stripped and simple “assertion,” it is connatural to it to have recourse to a kind of rhetoric (in a very good sense of the term). If he needs to translate ineffable realities, because they are supernatural or too personal, he will readily resort to all sorts of methods of suggestion and preferably to hyperbole. It must be understood that this is a normal means of expression for him. He does not “exaggerate” (much to the contrary, even when stretched as far as possible, these expressions remain terribly poor); rather, his words are a means of suggestion. If spiritual language wishes to express duties and rules of conduct, it does so with a concern (one which is essential to it) to motivate and to lead. It will be charged with images, affective “savor,” and so on. This is, moreover, its danger, and is why (as in poetry or music) mediocrity is quickly unbearable therein. Operating at a level much closer to Scripture, which he does not need to elaborate in accord with the categories befitting a purely intellectual analysis, he willingly retains its expressions.

(2) Precisely in virtue of the preceding characteristics, spiritual language is inevitably much more personal than that of speculative theology and, as a result, varies much more from one author to another. One must be wary of catch-all terms, above all in “mysticism,” for they quickly come to be emptied of their true meaning. In order to express experiences of lesser magnitude, these words become, as it were, oversized clothes. Any given nun, drawing connections with her state of soul, will borrow the expressions of St. Theresa. Quite obviously, all of this constitutes so many difficulties for a “science” properly so called.

SYSTEMATIZATIONS.

A third characteristic (itself also depending on the previous ones): systematizations in spiritual doctrine are also much more personal and varied than in theology proper so called. They are much more fundamentally individualized. St. John of the Cross has a way of saying things which expresses his temperament, his ethnicity [*race*], and his time, all to the highest degree. He is abrupt. He brings each assertion to its maximum vigor, to its absolute point of expression. This makes for a somewhat jarring ensemble, where the harmony of the parts is grasped only by the perception of the whole. For his part, Saint Francis de Sales loves nuances. He does not swell his voice. He is gentle. Bérulle is solemn and grandiose. Marie of the Incarnation is clear and precise, as French as St. John of the Cross is Spanish. That form of theological science which is speculative in mode much more quickly emerged from particular theologies. It arrives at a state of “impersonality” much earlier. Spiritual science tends toward

this, though much more slowly, and I believe that, on the whole, it has yet to do so. Perhaps, it is not yet ripe enough to reach the level of generality it stands in need of. Maritain is doubtlessly correct in seeing the clearest typical form of it in the work of St. John of the Cross. Nonetheless, his work still remains a very personal synthesis. Not only has spiritual theology not become, in him, reflexively conscious of its nature and methodology (so that his own mode of thinking is often masked by frequent recourse to the Scholastic mode of thinking), but moreover, a good number of his assertions perhaps do not reach the generality he gives them, his use of Scripture is too personal, and his “spiritual temperament” is too powerful. Even here, a scientific character requires some minimal degree of impersonality, and it is questionable whether St. John of the Cross achieved this. What is true is that his systematization cannot be fully understood, nor take on its full value, unless this original level of knowledge has been recognized, and only then can it find its full proportions. I do not believe that it alone fulfils this requirement. I do not believe that it is so directly interconnected with the theology of St. Thomas that it represents in its own order a success comparable to that of St. Thomas in his own. A spiritual theology [*spiritualité*] as scientific, as detached from its author, and as universally valid as St. Thomas’s theology is on the level of speculative analysis, with the attenuations that will forever hold true for a spiritual theology [*spiritualité*], seems to me like something that still needs to be constructed. It will not necessarily be the work of a great mystic or a great spiritual writer, but rather, that of someone who will be well acquainted with the great mystics and the great spiritual authors, while also possessing theology properly so called, someone who will patiently orient Christian spirituality, not toward syncretism (which, in fact, is nothing more than an immediate and, above all, very material form of concordism), but rather, toward the extraction of what is truly common and universal, though expressed in a variety of ways because it is seen from various perspectives.