

# PART ONE

## Doctrinal Foundations

### Preface

The present volume was written in response to numerous requests for a complete and definitive work on Christian spirituality. It is not an entirely new work, however, for some sections are taken substantially from *The Theology of Christian Perfection* by Antonio Royo and Jordan Aumann, published in 1962 by Priory Press.

Spiritual theology is both speculative and practical, but it is eminently practical because it deals with Christian life in relation to the perfection of charity. Consequently, the study of the theology of Christian perfection should proceed scientifically and systematically, although its aim is not to produce scholars but to form holy Christians. Therefore the first part of this volume investigates the theological principles of Christian holiness; the second part deduces from those principles the general directives by which souls can be guided in their journey to the goal of the Christian life.

The theology contained in this volume is based on the spiritual doctrine of three Doctors of the Church: St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. Moreover, it is fully in accord with the teaching of John G. Arinterro and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

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## Chapter 1

### Nature and Scope of Spiritual Theology

Although treatises on the spiritual life can be found in the writings of the earliest theologians and Fathers of the Church, spiritual theology did not emerge as a distinct and well-defined branch of sacred doctrine until the eighteenth century. Traditionally, sacred doctrine possessed a remarkable unity that was at once the test of doctrinal orthodoxy and a sign of authentic theology -- the science that studies God and all things in relation to God.

However, by the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the attacks of heresy and the changing political, cultural, and religious conditions made it necessary for theologians to investigate the truths of faith more deeply. The result was that sacred doctrine gradually became more diversified, and was ultimately divided into areas of specialization or distinct branches of the one theology.

### Terminology

What is now called spiritual theology has been designated by various names throughout the history of theology. Some have called it simply spirituality; others have named it spiritual life; devout life; supernatural life; interior life; mystical evolution; and theology of Christian perfection. The terms first used and still commonly used to designate the systematic theology of the spiritual life are *ascetical theology* and *mystical theology*, although these words do not have the same meaning for all theologians.

The word *ascetical* comes from the Greek *askeein*, meaning to practice or exercise in order to acquire a skill, especially an athletic skill. Later the word came to mean the study of philosophy or the practice of virtue, and it was used in this sense by Greek philosophers. St. Paul uses the word only once, in Acts 24:16, but he frequently draws the comparison between the practices of the Christian life and athletic exercises (1 Cor. 9:24-27; Phil. 3:13-14; 2 Tim. 4:28; *gymnazein* in 1 Tim. 4:7-8, Heb. 5:14, and 12:11 designates spiritual striving). Among the early Christians the name *ascetics* was given to those who observed continence under the vow of chastity, from which it was ultimately applied to the practices of the monastic life. It seems that a Polish Franciscan named Dobrosielski introduced the word *ascetical* into the Latin usage of western theology in 1655, and between 1752 and 1754 the Italian Jesuit Scaramelli used the term in contradistinction to the older word *mystical*.

The term *mystical*, also from the Greek (*mystikos*), originally referred to secret or hidden rites known only to the initiated. The noun *mysterion* is used in the Book of Daniel and also in the Deuterocanonical books; in the New Testament it is used by St. Paul to signify a secret of God pertaining to man's salvation, the hidden or symbolic sense of a narration, or anything whose activity or power is hidden. The adjective *mystical* is not found in the New Testament or in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers; it was introduced only in the third century, and with the passage of time it assumed three meanings: *liturgically*, it referred to religious cult; *exegetically*, it signified an allegorical or a typical interpretation of Scripture as distinct from the literal sense;

*theologically*, it meant a more profound knowledge of the truths of faith -- knowledge not shared by all.

In the fourth century the expression *mystical theology* is found in the writings of Marcellus Ancyranus; in the fifth century, in the writings of Marcus Eremita; and the expression was introduced into western theology at the beginning of the sixth century by the PseudoDionysius, author of *De mystica theologia*. By this time the word mystical designated not only the superior and deeper knowledge formerly known as gnosis but also an experiential, intuitive knowledge of the divine. Gradually the word was identified with contemplation, and treatises on the subject tended to become more abstract and scientific.

John Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, made a further distinction in his treatise, *On Mystical Theology, Speculative and Practical*, and speculative mystical theology was extended to include the whole theology of the spiritual life, from first conversion to the full experience of the mystical life. Early in the 1750s Scaramelli introduced the distinction between ascetical and mystical theology, and the latter was again restricted to the study of contemplation and the extraordinary mystical graces. In modern times two Dominicans, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and John Arinterro, defended and restored the traditional teaching: there is but one path to Christian perfection, though it admits of ascetical and mystical stages, and the mystical life is not the result of extraordinary graces but the normal development and perfection of the grace received by every Christian at baptism. Vatican Council II made this same doctrine its own when it stated:

The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life (of which he is the author and maker) to each and every one of his disciples without distinction: "In a word, you must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). For he sent the Holy Spirit to all to move them interiorly to love God with their whole heart, with their whole soul, with their whole understanding, and with their whole strength (cf. Mark 12:30), and to love one another as Christ loved them (cf. John 13:34; 15:12) .... It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love .... The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one -- that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory.<sup>(1)</sup>

In view of the historical development of the terminology, it is not surprising that modern theologians do not agree on the meaning of the words *ascetical* and *mystical*. All the more reason, then, for students of ascetico-mystical theology to familiarize themselves with the variations in vocabulary before attempting to evaluate an author's teaching.

Modern authors will usually fall into one of the following categories in their use of the words *ascetical* and *mystical*:

1. The terms are convertible, and either one can be used to designate the entire field of spiritual theology.

2. Ascetical theology studies the spiritual life from its beginning to the threshold of infused contemplation; mystical theology treats the stages of infused contemplation, passive purgation, and the transforming union.
3. Ascetical theology investigates the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways so far as ordinary grace is the operative principle in each; mystical theology is restricted to infused contemplation as an effect of extraordinary grace and to the epiphenomena that sometimes accompany infused contemplation.
4. Ascetical theology treats of the purgative and illuminative ways; mystical theology studies the unitive way.
5. The distinction between the ascetical and the mystical aspects of the spiritual life is determined by the predominance of the acquired and infused virtues (ascetical theology) or the predominance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (mystical theology).

Other theologians, fundamentally in agreement with this teaching, distinguish between the activity and passivity of the soul so far as it operates under grace and the virtues (ascetical) or under the movement of the Holy Spirit through his gifts (mystical).

6. In Protestant theology the word *asceticism* usually refers to the practices of mortification and self-denial; *mysticism* signifies any experiential knowledge of suprasensible things, including occultism, spiritualism, religious ecstasy, and extraordinary psychic phenomena. Many contemporary Protestant theologians reject the terms *ascetical* and *mystical* and prefer to speak of *piety*, *pietism*, or *Christian lifestyle*.

Because of the discrepancies in the use of the terms *ascetical* and *mystical*, there is no universally accepted name for the theology of Christian perfection. We prefer the succinct title, *spiritual theology*. It has the advantage of including both the ascetical and the mystical elements of the Christian life without implying an exaggerated dichotomy between the two. Moreover, it emphasizes the fundamental unity of the spiritual life, which culminates in the same perfection for all; it signifies that this perfection is a spiritual or supernatural perfection; and it classifies the theology of Christian holiness as a branch or specialization of theology.

The distinction between the ascetical and the mystical is not without foundation on the existential level, for at any given moment in the spiritual life the ascetical or the mystical aspect will predominate, and therefore it is perfectly legitimate to isolate one from the other for the purposes of investigation. However, the total view, of the spiritual life should always embrace both aspects, since mysticism cannot be understood -- much less experienced -- without a concomitant asceticism, and any authentic Christian asceticism contains within itself the seed of the mystical experience.

## Spirituality and Theology

To formulate a definition of spiritual theology it is first necessary to make some precisions concerning the concepts *spirituality* and *theology* as they apply to the study of Christian

perfection. In its widest sense, spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one's actions flow. This concept of spirituality is not restricted to any particular religion; it applies to any person who has a belief in the divine or transcendent, and fashions a lifestyle according to one's religious convictions. In this context one can speak of Zen, Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim spirituality as well as Christian spirituality.

However, the comparative study of Christian and non-Christian spiritualities belongs to the field of religious psychology rather than theology. Spirituality does not become an area of theological study and investigation until it fits the description given by Paul Evdokimov: "the life of man facing his God, participating in the life of God; the spirit of man listening for the Spirit of God."<sup>(2)</sup> The spiritual life in this more restricted sense is a supernatural life, and this seems to be in accord with biblical usage, where the word *spiritus* or *pneuma* refers to a divine power and therefore to the supernatural.

In the strict sense of the word, the only authentic spirituality is a spirituality centered in Jesus Christ and through him to the Trinity. This is true not only because created grace, the vital principle of the spiritual life, comes to us only through the mediation of Jesus Christ, but also because those who cultivate the spiritual life must consciously or unconsciously follow the teachings of Christ, regardless of their religious affiliation. Vatican Council II has promulgated this doctrine in the declaration on non-Christian religions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of the religious life.<sup>(3)</sup>

Again, speaking of the Church in the modern world, the Council affirms that there is only one spirituality for all, and it consists in a participation in the mystery of Christ:

In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear .... Christ the Lord ... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling .... The Christian is certainly bound both by need and by duty to struggle with evil through many afflictions and to suffer death; but, as one who has been made a part in the paschal mystery, and as one who has been configured to the death of Christ, he will go forward, strengthened by hope, to the resurrection. All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.<sup>(4)</sup>

Christian spirituality is therefore a participation in the mystery of Christ through the interior life of grace, actuated by faith, charity, and the other Christian virtues. The life that the individual receives through participation in Christ is the same life that animated the God-man, the life that the Incarnate Word shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit; it is, therefore, the life of God in the august mystery of the Trinity. Through Christ, the spiritual life of the Christian is eminently Trinitarian.

The difficulty in constructing a theology of the spiritual life consists in the fact that the spiritual life is at once a *mystery* and a *problem*. It is a mystery precisely because it is life, indeed divine life, a sharing in the Christ-life. Thus, St. John says: "Whatever came to be in him, found life, life for the light of men. The light shines on in darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). St. Paul writes: "Your life is hidden now with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). Although one may experience this life in the depths of his being as a life of union with God, it is nevertheless ineffable because the supernatural and the divine transcend human comprehension. For this reason the mystics made use of such expressions as "ray of darkness," "negative theology," and "cloud of unknowing."

[Spirituality becomes a "problem" when it is made the object of study and investigation, and this involves a transition from life to doctrine, from the intuitive knowledge of experience to the scientific knowledge of systematic theology. Accordingly, the field of spiritual literature can be divided into three types of writing:

- (1) that which exhorts the reader to greater perfection and provides instruction for that purpose;
- (2) that which records and describes the religious experience of holy Christians and mystics; and
- (3) that which makes a scientific study of the nature of Christian perfection and the means to attain it.

The first type of writing is exemplified by *The Imitation of Christ*, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, and the works of Louis of Granada. The second type comprises autobiographical accounts composed by mystics themselves or special studies by experts in the field of religious experience. The third type includes systematic studies of spirituality, and this is spiritual theology in the strict sense, as evidenced in the works of John Arinterro, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Auguste Poulain, and Adolphe Tanquerey. Sometimes, however, a work may be a combination of several types of writing. Thus, the writings of St. Teresa of Avila are both instructive and autobiographical (the first and second types), whereas the treatises of St. John of the Cross are a combination of all three types, but predominantly instructive and scientific.

The present volume treats of spirituality in a scientific manner, and since its object of investigation is the spiritual life, which is of the supernatural order, the only way to study it scientifically is by the way of theology. Therefore, the method of investigation must be one that is proper to theology. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the study must be general enough to serve as norms or directives of the spiritual life, since we are dealing with an applied and a practical science. Unless these requisites are met, there can be no possibility of a spiritual theology.

Without going into the history of the origin and uses of the word *theology*, it should be noted that the nature and methods of theology have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny by numerous modern theologians. The traditional concept of theology was that of a science that studies God as revealed to mankind in the mysteries of his intimate life and all things else as related to God. For St. Thomas Aquinas, an outstanding exponent of the traditional concept, sacred doctrine is principally a speculative science because it seeks knowledge through causes and deduces conclusions from principles according to the rules of logic.

The primary function of the theologian is to investigate the truths of divine revelation, arrange them according to a logical subordination, and arrive at conclusions that are substantiated by the certitude of faith and the rational process of demonstration. Etienne Gilson applied this traditional concept of theology to the theology of the spiritual life in the following way:

Since this life is ultimately nothing other than a communication of divine life to the soul, everything that one says of it enters directly into our science of God, which is theology .... Since it is the question of a science, this teaching will treat of the nature of the divine life and the general laws according to which it is communicated to the human soul; since it is the question of a science that is principally speculative, this teaching will be concerned primarily with the theoretical knowledge of this nature and of these laws; and since, finally, it is the question of a sacred science, and very particularly of a part of theology, this teaching will have no other method than that of theology itself: it will proceed dogmatically, starting from the word of God, of which the Church is the custodian and interpreter ....Based as it is on the authority of the word of God, the theology of the spiritual life itself proceeds by the way of authority .... It states dogmatically the laws which every authentic spiritual life ought to obey, because these laws are deduced from its origin and its end.(5)

However, in spite of the clarity and certitude that proceed from the logical demonstration used in Scholastic theology, some modern authors have raised objections to the Scholastic method and have argued that spiritual theology should be described as theology in a wider and more flexible context. First, they maintain that this is the only way to avoid an *a priori* definition of spiritual theology. Second, the Scholastic emphasis on the unity of theology seems to obliterate the distinction between spiritual theology and the other branches of theology. Third, and most important, the spiritual life is a dynamic and interior mystery that accommodates itself to the personality and existential situation of the individual Christian; therefore the theology of the spiritual life ought to treat of individual cases, particular charisms, and extraordinary phenomena, which do not pertain to theology as a science.

We are thus confronted with the perennial problems of the knowledge of particulars within the scope of a given science and the application of general laws to individual cases. Some modern theologians are seeking what Yves Congar described as a reflective type of theology that "philosophizes on the whole Christian reality, illuminated, if you will, by the existential experience of man."(6) To justify their claim, they will point to the different approach and method in the works of St. John of the Cross as compared with the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The basic issue is the distinction between systematic moral theology and the practical, specialized theology of the spiritual life. Some years ago the question was disputed at length by renowned theologians such as Santiago Ramirez, Jacques Maritain, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, and Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, but rather than repeat all the arguments, it will suffice to quote the conclusions of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange:

Theology is the science of God. We distinguish between natural theology or theodicy, which knows God by the sole light of reason, and supernatural theology, which proceeds from divine revelation, examines its contents, and deduces the consequences of the truths of faith.

Supernatural theology is usually divided into two parts, dogmatic and moral. **Dogmatic theology** has to do with revealed mysteries, principally the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, the Holy Eucharist and the other sacraments, and the future life. **Moral theology** treats of human acts, of revealed precepts and counsels, of grace, of the Christian virtues, both theological and moral, and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are principles of action ordained to the supernatural end made known by revelation ....

Moral theology thus understood evidently contains the principles necessary for leading souls to the highest sanctity. **Ascetical and mystical theology** is nothing but the application of this broad moral theology to the direction of souls toward ever closer union with God. It presupposes what sacred doctrine teaches about the nature and properties of the Christian virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it studies the laws and conditions of their progress from the point of view of perfection.

To teach the practice of the highest virtues and perfect docility to the Holy Spirit and to lead to the life of union with God, ascetical and mystical theology assembles all the lights of dogmatic and moral theology, of which it is the most elevated application and the crown.<sup>(7)</sup>

The foregoing statement demonstrates clearly that the study of the spiritual life is truly a branch of theology, but a question remains: how can spiritual theology as a science treat of the spiritual life as lived on the existential level of the individual person? It would seem that personal experience lies outside the domain of spiritual theology as a science; it belongs to the area of prudence and is therefore the concern of spiritual directors rather than theologians. However, the answer to the question depends on the place we give to subjective experience in spiritual theology, and since experience pertains to the psychological order, it is ultimately a question of the role of psychological data in ascetical and mystical theology.

It is true that there can be no science of singulars, and therefore subjective experience does not fall under the scope of theology as a science. Nevertheless, the psychological data of the spiritual life do have a scientific value if they manifest a certain universality in the spiritual life and if this is demonstrable by means of a methodical process of induction. Then, when these psychological data are synthesized with theological principles, the experience as thus interpreted has theological value. For example, St. John of the Cross relates the psychological effects of the dark nights to the movement of the Holy Spirit, who more and more directs the soul but does not impede psychological reactions. Thus, spiritual theology deals directly with the psychological data of the spiritual life, and in so doing it adds to the principles of moral theology the experiential or existential element that constitutes spiritual theology as a combination of speculative and practical theology. **To summarize, spiritual theology comprises three elements:**

**(1) the psychological data of spiritual experience;**

**(2) the application of theological principles; and**

**(3) practical directives concerning progress in the spiritual life with a view to Christian perfection.**



## Definition of Spiritual Theology

In view of the foregoing distinctions, spiritual theology can be described in general terms as the application of moral theology to the spiritual lives of individual Christians with a view to leading them to the-perfection of the Christian life. More precisely, ***spiritual theology is that part of theology that, proceeding from the truths of divine revelation and the religious experience of individual persons, defines the nature of the supernatural life, formulates directives for its growth and development, and explains the process by which souls advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to its full perfection.*** A brief comment on each phrase of the definition will suffice to explain the subject matter and purpose of this branch of theology and to show its relationship to other parts of theology.

In saying that spiritual theology is a part of theology, we admit some degree of distinction between spiritual theology and the other branches of sacred doctrine, not as a specifically distinct science, but as a field of specialization. Theology itself is one because it has a unique object, namely, ***the revealed mystery of God as known by human reason through the divine revelation accepted in faith.*** But theology is also sacred wisdom and in that respect it comprises a complexity of elements that allow for a plurality of disciplines within the one sacred science, subordinating them to the purpose of the one theology and at the same time respecting their autonomy. Thus, as a part of the one theology, spiritual theology has its own identity as a specialty both by reason of its method (practical or applied theology as distinct from purely speculative theology) and by reason of its subject matter -- Christian perfection and the means to attain it. In like manner we admit the emergence of other areas of specialization in dogmatic theology and moral theology; for example, Christology, Mariology, sacramental theology, pastoral theology, and Christian anthropology, to name a few.

To say, secondly, that spiritual theology proceeds from the principles of divine revelation is to say that it is a science of the truths of faith, an unfolding of the faith. If this were not so, it would not be theology at all. Unlike natural theology, which provides a knowledge of God through the study of creation, sacred theology is a knowledge of God received initially through the gift of supernatural faith. Through faith, we possess God in his mystery; through sacred theology, we penetrate the truths of faith by means of the human reasoning process. Hence, ***God is both the object of theology and, through faith, the principle of theology. Faith is therefore the very foundation of the knowledge acquired through theological study.***

As sacred wisdom, theology is the supreme science; it utilizes the conclusions of other sciences but only after judging them in the light of faith. This does not mean that theology may intervene intrinsically and destroy the autonomy of the other sciences, but it does mean that so far as the profane sciences touch the area of revealed truths, it is the role of theology to determine their conformity or repugnance to the truths of faith. And since the theologian of the spiritual life must deal directly with many of the data of the natural sciences, especially psychology, it is particularly important to stress the magisterial function of theology in the study of the nature and phenomena of religious experience.

Nevertheless, spiritual theology must make use of experimental data and for that reason the definition calls for an investigation of the religious experience of individual persons. Spiritual

theology, as we have seen, is not a purely speculative science but also a practical and applied theology; it must therefore investigate the experimental data lest it attempt to formulate the laws of the spiritual life by an *a priori* method. However, the experience to which the definition refers is not restricted to the external phenomena of religious experience, as can readily be investigated by the psychologist. Rather, it is a supernatural experience, an awareness of the workings of grace and the Holy Spirit within the soul. This is the primary concern of the theologian of the spiritual life; the external manifestations and extraordinary phenomena are of secondary importance.

We further state in the definition that spiritual theology defines the nature of the supernatural life. Here the theologian must rely almost exclusively on the truths of revelation, the teaching of the Church, and the conclusions of systematic theology. In seeking to identify the essential elements of the spiritual life, he transcends the variety of religious experiences of individual persons and the particular characteristics that distinguish one school of spirituality from another. The investigation focuses rather on such questions as the nature of Christian perfection, the life of grace, and the operation of the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual theology also formulates the laws or directives that govern the growth and development of the spiritual life. Still closely related to revealed truths and theological conclusions rather than experiential data, the approach is scientific and somewhat speculative rather than experimental and descriptive. The reason is that laws for spiritual growth must rise above particular differences in order to be applicable to Christians of every class and condition. Only when the universal laws have been stated and explained should the theologian proceed to discuss and evaluate the particular forms of spirituality such as lay spirituality, sacerdotal spirituality, spirituality of the religious life, or liturgical spirituality. Therefore this section of spiritual theology treats of such matters as sin and temptation, active and passive purification, the sacraments, good works, and the grades of prayer.

Lastly, spiritual theology describes the process by which people normally advance from the beginning of the spiritual life to full perfection. While it is true that God acts in various ways and the Spirit breathes where he will, so that each person follows a path proper to himself, it is nevertheless possible for the theologian to chart the various stages through which the individual usually passes. For this part of spiritual theology the descriptive and experiential data are absolutely indispensable, since it is here that the general theological principles are tested, so to speak, by the facts of experience. It is also here that the prudence of theologians is tested as they formulate directives for those who are striving to make progress toward the perfection of the Christian life. "Between the knowledge of the principles of action and action itself," says Yves Congar, "there is room for a practical knowledge which is directly regulatory. This knowledge is one no longer of a science, but of a virtue at once intellectual and moral: the virtue of prudence."<sup>(8)</sup>

### **Theological Method**

Theology as wisdom is at once eminently speculative and eminently practical because the God who is the object of the study of theology is the God who intervenes in human history and calls us to perfection and salvation. Spiritual theology reflects precisely on the mystery of our

participation in divine life. It is concerned not only with the construction of a science or theory of the supernatural life, but also with the existential condition of that life in the individual Christian. Consequently **spiritual theology must express itself in both ontological and psychological terms.**

Because spiritual theology is part of the one theology, it is closely related to dogmatic and moral theology, from which it derives its principles. And because it is an applied theology, it necessarily contains much that is practical and experiential. Consequently, the method of theologizing must take both of these factors into account; it must, in fact, combine the deductive method and the inductive method and strive to keep a proper balance between the two.

The descriptive or inductive method abstracts for the most part are from theological principles in order to investigate and describe the physical and psychological phenomena of religious experience. ` Studies of this type make a valuable contribution to the theology of the spiritual life, but to use the empirical method exclusively would cause serious problems.

First, the descriptive method tends to convert spiritual theology into experimental psychology or religious psychology, as GarrigouLagrange observes: "Whoever neglects to have recourse to the light of theological principles will have to be content with the principles furnished by psychology, as do so many psychologists who treat of mystical phenomena in the different religions."[\(9\)](#)

Second, although a psychological study may be scientific, the psychologist frequently fails to seek the causes of the phenomena investigated but is satisfied with a collection of descriptions and statistics.

Third, this method tends to give too much importance to extraordinary phenomena, with the result that it fails to distinguish between the normal, concomitant phenomena of mystical experience and the extraordinary, charismatic phenomena. Consequently, it at least implies that **the mystical state is extraordinary, that Christians are not even remotely called to it, and hence that there are two distinct perfections in the Christian life, one ascetical and the other mystical.**

Fourth, any general rules proceeding exclusively from the empirical data of the descriptive method are unscientific and untrustworthy, since they ignore the nature of the supernatural life of grace and the theological laws of its progress.

Fifth, the purely descriptive method is unable to distinguish between the supernatural, the natural, and the preternatural. It may therefore be tempted to categorize as pathological or diabolical any phenomenon that cannot be explained by the rules and theories of normal psychology.

The exclusive use of the deductive method also presents problems. First, it tends to overlook the fact that spiritual theology is a practical, applied theology and must therefore be correlated with the data of experience. Second, there is a temptation to explain phenomena or formulate laws by an a priori method that is not substantiated by the facts. Third, spiritual direction based on the deductive method may be totally inadequate for the needs of the individual or may impede the soul from following where the Spirit leads.

It is necessary, therefore, to make use of both methods in order to correlate the theological principles with the empirical data of the spiritual life with a view to charting the steps to Christian perfection. In this way theologians will be able to discern the unity and variety of the spiritual life; they will distinguish the essential from the accidental and the ordinary from the extraordinary; they will then postulate what is absolutely essential for the attainment of Christian perfection and what is contingent upon individual personalities or states of life.

### Sources of Spiritual Theology

The question of method leads logically to a discussion of the sources of the theology of the spiritual life. Some of these sources are common to theology in general; others are proper to spiritual theology. ***The primary source of spiritual theology, and of theology in general, is Sacred Scripture and Tradition.*** Thus, Vatican Council II has stated: "Sacred theology relies on the written Word of God, taken together with sacred Tradition, as on a permanent foundation .... Therefore, ***the study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology.***"(10)

The Scriptures unquestionably present God as transcendent and immanent, as the beginning and the ultimate end of a person's life, but the primary witness of Scripture is that God has intervened in human history to fulfill in humankind the designs of his providence. Therefore, ***we study the divine mysteries revealed by God to know not only what they are in themselves but also what they are for us.*** Revealing to us our high destiny, the Scriptures answer our innate desire to rise from a fallen condition in order to experience the divine. ***The Bible is therefore the rule and standard of all authentic spirituality.*** The fundamental message that comes to us in the gradual revelation of the Old Testament is that God loves us and asks our response through faith and obedience. Then, in the New Testament, God's covenant with Abraham culminates in Christ, who is the "last revelation" and the source and model of our life in God.

Vatican Council II has stated that Scripture, which is "the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit," and Tradition, which "transmits in its entirety the Word of God that has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit," are closely bound together and "make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God."(11) However, ***Tradition is not the purely mechanical transmission of static truth; it is a seed that must develop; it is a living tradition that has continuity in history.*** Thus, Vatican II has asserted:

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts. It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities that they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing toward the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.(12)

***Tradition is therefore a source of spiritual theology at the same level as Scripture because it includes Scripture in the sense that the oral transmission of revealed truths preceded the written record.*** Moreover, St. John states at the end of his Gospel: "But there are also many other things

which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

We also speak of Tradition as the transmission of the deposit of faith from one generation to another under the magisterial guidance of the Church, which proclaims, explains, and applies the revealed truths throughout the centuries. Unlike purely human tradition, which is subject to error, the living tradition of the Church is infallible as regards the essential content of the deposit of faith, as has been affirmed by Vatican Council II:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication, and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.

It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.[\(13\)](#)

It is evident, therefore, that the *Magisterium of the Church* is likewise a primary theological source for the study of the spiritual life and Christian perfection.

**The relation of the liturgy to spiritual theology stems from the fact that "it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church."**[\(14\)](#) It is a vital manifestation of what life in Christ should be, for in the liturgy we have not only an expression of belief but also an experience of life in God. Consequently, the Fathers of Vatican Council II stated that the liturgy is "the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit."[\(15\)](#)

As a source of spiritual theology, the liturgy is closely related to Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church. Vatican Council II stressed the importance of Scripture in the liturgy:

Sacred Scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from it that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung. It is from the Scriptures that the prayers, collects, and hymns draw their inspiration and their force, and that actions and signs derive their meaning.... Although the sacred liturgy is principally the worship of the divine majesty, it likewise contains much instruction for the faithful. For in the liturgy God speaks to his people, and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel.[\(16\)](#)

The link between Tradition and the liturgy is manifested in such statements as: *Lex orandi est lex credendi* -- The law of prayer is the law of belief. The liturgy is thus an expression of the vital

continuity and perennial unity of the Church's proclamation of the revealed truths to all, nations throughout the centuries. Finally, as regards the Magisterium, Pope Pius XI referred to the liturgy as "the principal organ of the ordinary Magisterium of the Church."

Spiritual theology also makes use of the principles and conclusions of *dogmatic theology* and *moral theology*, but before explaining this relationship it would be helpful to comment briefly on the function of theology and its relation to the Magisterium. St. Augustine contrasts theology and Magisterium when he says: **"What we understand we owe to reason; what we believe we owe to authority."** Yet theology and Magisterium are also interdependent, for the function of theology, says Pope Paul VI, is "to bring to the knowledge of the Christian community, and particularly of the Magisterium, the fruits of its research so that, through the doctrine taught by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, they become a light for all the Christian people." **The Church could undoubtedly proclaim and preserve the deposit of faith without the aid of the theologians, but without theology it could not discover the implications of the revealed truths or make applications to the everchanging needs of the faithful.** It is the function of the theologians to place at the disposition of the Magisterium the theological information that is necessary for the exercise of the Church's teaching authority. Hence, St. Augustine describes theologians as the agents by which Christ guards his Church from error and makes it grow in truth.

On the other hand, the ultimate criterion of orthodox Christian teaching is the Magisterium, as Congar has stated:

Theology has for its rule a datum proposed by the ecclesiastical Magisterium, just as philosophy has for its rule the datum of natural knowledge. And it is well established that the first step of the theologian is an act of submission to this datum and the Magisterium. But the datum is so rich that it authorizes different manners of approach and, according to the intellectual orientation of each one, different manners of posing problems themselves.<sup>(17)</sup>

In using dogmatic and moral theology as sources, theologians of the spiritual life are not seeking primarily to formulate Church teaching as such, nor do they study dogma and morality as purely speculative sciences that prescind from religious experience and the spiritual life. Rather, their task is to investigate doctrine as lived by individual Christians, in accordance with the supreme norm of morality: life in Christ with a view to the perfection of charity. In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, Thomas Hopko writes as follows concerning the relationship between spiritual theology and speculative theology:

**The first step toward the rediscovery of authentic spiritual life in the Church ... must be the integration, or reintegration, of theology and religious experience.** Theology must become again what it was for the Fathers: the way to union with God open to every Christian soul .... And it must deal not only with the possibility of religious experience, but also with the manner and the means of achieving it within the life of the Church ....

**What must theology thus understood be like? What must be the dogmatic foundation of the experience of God? ... The three stages to this approach ... would be the absolutely transcendent and Trinitarian character of divine reality, revealed and experienced within the**

***liturgical-sacramental life of the Church, and personally and corporately appropriated by men through guided ascetic-contemplative activity, also within the total life of the Church.*** (18)

Another important source of information for the theology of the spiritual life is the *history of spirituality*. Although the Christian life is essentially the same for all individuals in all ages, it admits of secondary differences and modifications. The reason for this is that grace does not change nature but perfects it by working through it, and therefore individual personalities, national temperaments, and the needs or charisms of a given age are dominant factors in the variety of religious experiences and the classification of schools of spirituality. A knowledge of the history of spirituality enables the theologian to recognize the laws or constants that prevail throughout the centuries and at the same time to discern a progressive development and evolution in Christian holiness as manifested in the Church. Finally, the history of spirituality provides the experiential data so necessary for the practical science of spiritual theology, without which the theologian would have to depend exclusively on the *a priori* method of deduction from the principles of speculative theology and the teaching of the Magisterium.

Closely related to the history of spirituality are the *writings of saints and mystics, their autobiographies, and their biographies*. Apart from having descriptive value, such works also provide models worthy of imitation. However, the writings should be authentic and critically sound, and preference should be given to those works that have received the positive approbation of the Church. As a rule it is also safer to read the instructive and expository writings rather than personal letters or ardent exhortations, where exaggeration or misinterpretation may readily occur. The value of these works for spiritual theology is that they provide factual testimony of the wonderful and mysterious ways in which God is glorified in his saints.

Finally, spiritual theology makes use of purely experimental sources such as *personal experience and the various branches of psychology*. These sources are of particular importance for cultivating the art of spiritual direction and the discernment of spirits. Rational or normal psychology provides information concerning the nature of the human soul, the distinction and functions of the various faculties and powers, the laws of the emotional life, and the interrelation between soul and body. Experimental psychology complements rational psychology by providing the data of experience and an analysis of the phenomena of normal and abnormal or pathological states. A knowledge of the latter is indispensable for distinguishing between the natural, the diabolical, and the supernatural and for evaluating the phenomena of the mystical state.

***It is necessary, however, to avoid two extremes in the use of psychological material: first, a "psychologism" that would reduce all religious phenomena to a state of consciousness and thus deny the possible intervention of the supernatural; second, a "syncretism" that would classify all religious experience as identical, thereby obliterating the distinction between Christian spirituality and the religious experiences of non-Christians.*** Psychology provides much important data for the study of the spiritual life, but it cannot make the ultimate judgment; that is the function of theology, which proceeds from the truths of faith and acknowledges authentic religious experience as a supernatural reality.

[Question: "How does the word "mystery" relate to our understanding of the "supernatural""]

In listing personal experience as a source for spiritual theology, we refer first of all to one's own religious experience, but we also include one's experience in the direction of others and the vicarious experience that comes from a study of the testimony of saints and mystics. **Nothing can replace personal experience in providing an understanding of the mysterious workings of the spiritual life.** Thus, Congar asserts: "Charity, taste, and a certain personal experience of the things of God are necessary in order that the theologian may treat the mysteries and speak of them in a befitting manner." (19) And St. Teresa of Avila stated: **"Many are mistaken if they think they can learn to discern spirits without being spiritual themselves."** (20)

### Schools of Spirituality

Because the Holy Spirit moves in a variety of ways to lead individuals to perfection, with the result that saint differs from saint in glory, **there are styles of Christian spirituality sufficiently diverse to be classified as schools of spirituality.** Some theologians reject the concept of schools of spirituality, preferring to emphasize the essential elements that safeguard the unity of the Christian life, but the multiple forms of spirituality in the Christian tradition follow logically from the definition of the spiritual life as participation in the mystery of Christ.

**First,** the cause of the diversity, as St. Thomas Aquinas states, is that God "dispenses his gifts of grace variously so that the beauty and perfection of the Church may result from these various degrees." (21) St. Paul teaches the same doctrine: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the favor bestowed on each of us" (Rom.12:4-6).

**Second,** St. Paul repeatedly admonishes the Christian to strive to become transformed into Christ as completely as possible. But **the mystery of Christ is so complex and perfect that it can never be duplicated by an individual Christian or by a school of spirituality. It is a treasure that we share but never exhaust.** The greatest of the saints exemplified in their lives one or another aspect of Christ, but never "the whole Christ." The total Christ is best manifested, as St. Paul teaches, in the Church as the holy people of God and the Mystical Body of Christ.

**Third,** schools of spirituality emerge as a response to the needs of the Church at a given time. The history of spirituality demonstrates that from the earliest days of the Church to the present, the Christian lifestyles and practices that later became stabilized as schools of spirituality were always introduced to help live the mystery of Christ more intimately and thus grow in holiness. Moreover, **if we see the Church, not as an institution or static structure, but as a vital organism constantly evolving toward "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), the various schools of spirituality can be appreciated as contributing to the progressive building-up of the Mystical Body of Christ.**

**Finally,** schools of spirituality are justified by reason of the fact that **grace does not destroy but works through and perfects nature.** The supernatural life of grace respects the human personality



and condition, and therefore the differences in Christian lifestyles are rooted ,in the individuality of the human person and the particular characteristics of groups and nations. Thus, the temperament of individuals, the moral predispositions to virtue or vice, the type of character cultivated -- all these factors exert a great influence on one's response to grace and the use one makes of it. These factors will also determine to a great extent one's aptitude or need for particular ascetical practices, devotions, and styles of prayer. They will likewise affect the choice of one's vocation or state in life, and that, in turn, introduces another set of factors that define one's spirituality in view of vocational commitments and duties of state.

When, therefore, saintly Christians follow Christ in a way that appeals to other persons, or when they formulate a spiritual doctrine that can lead souls to greater perfection, they frequently attract followers who adopt the same pattern of Christian living. In time the lifestyle or the doctrine is expressed in a corporate manner by the followers, and this social manifestation emerges as a distinct school of spirituality, e.g., Benedictine spirituality, Franciscan spirituality, Teresian spirituality, or Salesian spirituality. Yet schools of spirituality are not restricted exclusively to individual persons as founders or leaders; they may also be classified according to national temperaments and cultures (French spirituality as distinct from Spanish spirituality), a particular period in history (post-Reformation spirituality and Vatican II spirituality), or the doctrinal basis and content (Eucharistic spirituality and Marian spirituality).

The schools of spirituality are thus an indication of the diversity of the ways of the Spirit, a proof of the Church's respect for personal freedom in following the impulses of the Spirit, and a corporate witness to the variety of ways in which the mystery of Christ is imaged in the Mystical Body of the Church. Therefore one's attitude toward schools of spirituality should be one of openness and tolerance, respecting the diversity of needs and charisms and approving whatever the Church approves.

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## CHAPTER NOTES

1. Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, nn. 40-41. All quotations from the documents of Vatican II are taken from the English version edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., under the title *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y., Costello Publishing Co., 1975).
2. Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle with God* (Glen Rock, New York: Paulist Press, 1966), p. 41.
3. Vatican Council II, *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, n. 2.
4. Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 22.
5. Etienne Gilson, *Théologie et histoire de la Spiritualité* (Paris: Vrin, 1948), pp. 12, 17). This teaching coincides with that of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange: "Spiritual theology, like every science, ought to consider the interior life as such, and not in a given individual .... Spiritual theology, while noting the exceptions that may arise from the absence of a given condition, ought especially to establish the higher laws of the full development of the life of grace as such." *The Three Ages*

- of the Interior Life*, trans. Timothea Doyle, Vol. I (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947), p. x.
6. Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, trans. and ed. H. Guthrie (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 17.
  7. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, trans. T. Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1945), pp. 12-14.
  8. Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-65.
  9. Garrigou-Lagrange, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
  10. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n. 24.
  11. *Ibid.*, n. 9-10.
  12. *Ibid.*, n. 8.
  13. *Ibid.*, n. 10.
  14. Vatican Council II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 2.
  15. *Ibid.*, n.,14.
  16. *Ibid.*, nn. 24, 33.
  17. Congar, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
  18. Jordan Aumann, Thomas Hopko, and Donald Bloesch, *Christian Spirituality: East and West* (Chicago: Priory Press, 1968), pp. 105-06.
  19. Congar, *op. cit.*, p. 269.
  20. St. Teresa, *The Life*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946) p. 237.
  21. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (Taurini: Marietti, 1948), I-II, q. 112, a. 4.

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### **Recommended Supplementary Reading**