

GATEWAYS TO CONTEMPLATION:  
 MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE DEGREES OF KNOWLEDGE

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"For me," Flannery O'Connor wrote in one of her recently published letters, "a dogma is only a gateway to contemplation..."<sup>1</sup> For the Christian, the mystical life brings what is already known in faith to a new depth of conviction. But mystical knowledge, to use an image drawn from Gabriel Marcel's discussion of "mystery," moves, as it were, at a nearer than focal distance, an intimate realm of touch and hearing where clear sight could only impede understanding.<sup>2</sup> Since it is impossible for a creature to grasp God more and more closely, concepts become less clear and less adequate. It is precisely this paradox which leads the philosopher to investigate mystical knowledge.

Not only the second part of Maritain's The Degrees of Knowledge (with appended matter, some two-fifths of the whole), but the Preface and Chapters I and V as well contain important observations relevant to his doctrine of mystical knowledge. Thus, the Preface offers a conspectus of the whole treatment of supra-rational knowledge and shows how it relates to the kinds of knowledge treated in the rest of the book. Chapters I and V deal with some anticipated objections and with certain metaphysical conclusions fundamental to the elaboration of the properly mystical doctrine.

This mystical doctrine is contained in four chapters dealing respectively with:

1. problems concerning mystical experience
2. Augustinian wisdom
3. the "practico-practical" science of contemplation of John of the Cross
4. the "All and Nothing" in the doctrine of this Carmelite doctor

I shall consider first the preliminary questions and then the content of each of the four chapters listed above, concluding with some observations about Maritain's method of procedure.

### I. Preliminary Considerations

From the very outset, in the first pages of the Preface, where Maritain quotes the mystic Tauler as the source for his title, it is evident that the author has undertaken to vindicate for the human mind, against dialectical materialism, a realm proper to itself, and to show, against a flattened-out concept of the mind characteristic of idealist philosophies, something of the "topology" of "l'esprit," the mind.<sup>3</sup> What Maritain will do (surely a bold project) is to show that kinds of knowledge as diverse as the scientific and the mystical can and do exist in the same mind. He quickly sketches the dimensions such a mind must have: length, "the manner in which the formal light that characterizes a particular type of knowing falls upon things and defines in them a certain line of intelligibility;" breadth, the "number of objects ... known;" height, the degrees of abstraction; and depth, "those more hidden diversities which depend upon" the freedom of the individual

and on one's "own proper finalities."<sup>4</sup> An example of this last dimension would be the speculative and practical uses of the mind.

Not only this mental topology, however, but the very movement of the mind from one stage or "place" to another is Maritain's particular concern, the élan that bears the knower from a less integrated to another, higher, because more unified, sort of understanding. Thus, the study of metaphysics can be expected to awaken in the knower a kind of thirst for mystical knowledge, for direct acquaintance with God, which metaphysics itself is unable to satisfy.

Yet can it be justifiable for a philosopher to treat questions regarding mystical knowledge? Do not such questions belong to a realm of faith, taking "into account ... certitudes that depend upon lights of another order"?<sup>5</sup> Maritain defends the endeavor on the ground that "when a philosopher adopts as object of his study, something which impinges upon the existential conditions of man and his activity as a free person ... he can proceed scientifically only if he respects the integrity of his object..." In doing this, "he is still a philosopher (though not purely a philosopher)..."

Then, ... he carries through ... not as a theologian but as a philosopher - analyzing his data in order to rise to their ontological principles and integrating within his investigation of causes, points of information which he gets from the theologian, just as, on other occasions, he likewise integrates ... /what/ he gets from the biologist or the physicist.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this allusion to scientific procedure, Maritain sees his work less as a "didactic treatise" than as a "meditation on certain themes." Since, as he says, "Thomism is a common task," it is eminently appropriate that these themes be taken up here in a "spirit of collaboration and philosophical continuity."<sup>7</sup>

Central to the task of Thomism is the endeavor of the metaphysician, and it is as a metaphysician, but a believing metaphysician, that Maritain will search out his doctrine of mystical knowledge. Metaphysics, he says, awakens a "desire for supreme union" which it is unable to satisfy. At this point, one of the recurring themes of his entire treatment of mystical knowledge arises. What, in fact, is the nature of mystical knowledge? And since it is by definition a "secret" knowledge, how can one hope to attain it? Two possible ways of attaining it suggest themselves: by cultivating the highest natural knowledge - metaphysics, or by receiving in faith the knowledge God himself communicates to human beings in love. It is the second of these alone that Maritain sees as leading to authentic mystical knowledge.

#### Aberrant Claims to Mystical Knowledge

1. Certain claimants to a natural knowledge Maritain dismisses out of hand:

...certain Occidentals suggest...in the name of the wisdom of the Orient...arrogant and facile doctrines,... substituting a so-called secret tradition inherited from unknown masters of Knowledge in the place of supernatural faith and the revelation of God by the Incarnate Word... telling man that he can...gain entrance into the

superhuman by himself. Their esoteric hyper-intellectualism /is/ apt ... to put true metaphysics on the wrong scent ... /They claim/ to attain supreme contemplation by metaphysics alone...<sup>8</sup>

2. More serious claimants to the possession of a naturally attained mystical knowledge are Plotinus and the ancient sages of India. Despite the reverence he has for the aspirations of these men, Maritain sees their quest as issuing "in a void; or ... if superior influences enter into play, ... in a mixture, in which deception will play a great part."<sup>9</sup>

In a note Maritain cites the contrary case of Al Hallaj, the tenth-century Moslem mystic who was crucified, a martyr for his faith in Christ, whom he came to know only through the Koran and through contacts with Christian merchants. When this Moslem sage was asked, at his crucifixion, "What is mysticism?" he answered, "You see here its lowest stage." Far removed, indeed, is this understanding of the mystical life from that of Plotinus' ecstasy. Maritain concludes that Al Hallaj "had grace and infused gifts (and belonged to the 'soul' of the Church) and could, as a result, have been raised to authentic mystical contemplation."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the situation of this witness for Christ is poles apart from that of the arrogants to a merely human access to mystical wisdom, and even from that of Plotinus.

#### A Reductionist View

An aberration of a different sort from that of these false seekers after a mystical knowledge is that of Jean Baruzi, who makes John of the Cross a kind of post-Christian

in a Bergsonian sense, "brashly confusing" the wisdom of the saints with metaphysics. For Maritain, on the contrary, "saints do not contemplate to know but to love." "In a genuine mystical life,...the soul does not wish to exalt itself and does not want to be destroyed: it wishes to be joined to Him who first loved it."<sup>11</sup>

### Genuine Mystical Knowledge

...the contemplation of the saints is not only for divine love; it is also through it. It...supposes the theological virtue of Faith, the theological virtue of Charity and the infused gifts of Understanding and Wisdom ... Love as such attains immediately and in Himself the very God attained in faith in an obscure manner ... at a distance.<sup>12</sup>

Maritain thus describes the mystical union:

Mystical wisdom, moved and actually regulated by the Holy Ghost, experiences the Divine things thus imbedded in us by charity, God becomes ours by charity. Through and in that Love ... it knows that Love affectively. It knows it in a night above all distinct knowledge ... This secret wisdom which secretly purifies the soul attains God as a hidden God...<sup>13</sup>

Here ... it is a question of rising lovingly beyond the created, of renouncing self and all else so as to be carried off by charity ... transformed into God by love.<sup>14</sup>

The mention of "night" introduces the question of the mode of our knowledge of God in mystical experience. Since analogical knowledge of God attains a true though never adequate grasp of the divine being, it is "irreparably defective," and thus, it is only through renouncing its ordinary way of knowing (through clear, adequate concepts) that the human intellect can come to know God as He is.

After introducing in this manner the subject of mystical knowledge in his Preface and in Chapter I, Maritain goes on in the first part of his book to treat the various sorts of natural knowledge. In the chapter on metaphysics, the last kind of knowledge to be considered, he speaks of certain themes important for his subsequent discussion of mystical knowledge: the meaning of "person," negative and affirmative statements about God, and the "Superanalogy of faith."

### The Notion of Person

God known personally, and ultimately the Trinity of Persons, is the object of mystical knowledge. Hence the notion of person becomes important for this discussion. "All mysticism is a dialogue."<sup>15</sup> Both the wisdom of India, for which the Divine Transcendence was too heavy a burden, and that of the Greco-Roman world which saw gods in everything, erred in not conceiving God as personal. "Metaphysics ... knows demonstratively that the Divine Essence subsists in itself as infinite personality."<sup>16</sup>

"A God you understood would be less than yourself."<sup>17</sup>

Against the Alexandrian philosophers, Maritain holds firmly to the fundamental place of cataphatic or positive knowledge of God. Upon such knowledge depends the knowledge of God as existing and transcendent, but it requires the corrective, on account of our limitations, of apophatic or negative theology. Even when we affirm of God perfections

having no intrinsic imperfection, we cannot claim to have a comprehension of how these perfections actually exist in God. To ascribe our mode of being to them would be to reduce God to our level. In Him these attributes remain mysterious for us.

A certain sort of negation characterizes mystical knowledge. For this reason, it is classically called "negative theology." It is not just any sort of negation in theology, however, which involves mystical knowledge. As long as the theology in question remains merely conceptual, it is not yet mystical experience.

To tell the truth, there is a certain equivocality in this word, /negative theology/ which explains its varying fortune. It leaves us suspended on the border between the rational and the mystical, and takes on a different meaning according to the side from which it is viewed. Insofar as the via negationis announces that God is like nothing created, it is one of the ways of metaphysical knowledge, or ordinary theology, and, indeed, its most exalted moment. But insofar as theologia negativa constitutes a species of knowledge, a wisdom of a higher order (and that is what is meant once it is distinguished from ordinary theology as a theology of another kind), it is nothing, if not mystical experience.

It is negative, not because it simply denies what the other affirms, but because it attains it better than by affirmation and negation, that is to say, better than by communicable propositions because it experiences by way of not-knowing, the reality that the other affirms and will never be able to affirm sufficiently.<sup>18</sup>

### The Superanalogy of Faith

Before going on to consider mystical knowledge in itself, Maritain notes that a "third degree of analogy ... must be noted here," different from the metaphysical analogy that



has its basis in being.

On the contrary, in the knowledge of faith it is from the very heart of the divine transintelligible, from the very heart of the deity that the whole process of knowledge starts out, in order to return thither. [Of] objects and concepts in the intelligible universe ... which God alone knows to be analogical signs of what is hidden in Him ... He makes use in order to speak of Himself to us in our own language. [This is an] uncircumscriptive analogy [and also] a revealed analogy ... Let us say it is a superanalogy.<sup>19</sup>

Thus our knowledge of God's Fatherhood is not the result of our induction from creaturely instances of paternity, but, rather, the gift of God given us in terms already known to us from our experience.

## II. Properly Mystical Knowledge: The Three Wisdoms

A number of fundamental distinctions confront the reader at the beginning of the Second Part of The Degrees of Knowledge. Here Maritain begins his treatment of mystical knowledge proper, distinguishing between nature and supernature, between the soul and its powers and acts, and among the three kinds of wisdom. Of these notions, the most pervasive is probably that of wisdom, which involves the others. Maritain takes wisdom to mean "a supreme science, having a universal object and judging things by first principles."<sup>20</sup> Aristotle's ideal of a deductive science which would derive conclusions from principles in the manner of geometry is implied here, as is Aristotle's understanding of wisdom as the science which not only draws conclusions, but also defends the principles themselves, and, thus, is capable of judging

other things in the light of these well-understood and mediated principles.

There are three distinct "wisdoms" here: first, there is that of metaphysics, in which an analogical knowledge of God is attained through reason alone, using principles arrived at through human research. Then there is the wisdom of theology proper, which knows God on the basis of principles given by faith, but through the effort of human reason exercised upon these principles. Both metaphysician and theologian are scientists to the extent that they derive conclusions in a reasonable way from principles; to the extent that each is wise, each considers the principles of the respective sciences for their own sake. There is a third "wisdom" however, which is supernatural not only in its principles, but in its mode of operation as well. This is the so-called "mystical theology," an infused wisdom, a gift of the Holy Ghost, in which knowledge of God is "according to a mode that is superhuman and supernatural." This is the wisdom that makes mystical knowledge possible; its very mode is supernatural and direct, its content is given. In mystical knowledge God is experienced in faith rather than reasoned about on the basis of faith. If the emphasis in faith is upon not seeing, the stress here is upon the certitude and immediacy of the experience of God for the believer.

Since we are, according to 2 Peter 1:4, "sharers in the divine nature," we possess, as Christians, a whole panoply

of powers and habits, a "second nature," through which we are related to God. Faith, hope, and charity, through which we are able to know and love God in a truly divine way, are supplemented by certain "gifts of the Holy Spirit." It is these which enable us to be sensitive and responsive to the divine initiative. Three of these latter, in particular, come into discussion in Maritain's treatment: wisdom, understanding and knowledge. As a result of the gift of sanctifying grace, it is possible to experience the divine reality, and a desire for this is implanted in the soul. But the gifts of understanding and wisdom "make this experience of God A REALITY."<sup>21</sup>

Underlying the entire discussion of "wisdoms" is the conception of a human nature operating through powers not identical with the soul, powers capable of being perfected through the cultivation of intellectual as well as moral virtue, a conception that goes back to Aristotle.

Less pervasive than the foregoing three distinctions, but still important is the distinction between efficient and final cause. When he wishes to show how the baptized person can be aware of God's presence in a way beyond that of merely natural presence, Maritain says:

...it is a real and physical (ontological) presence of God in the very depths of our being.

How? In what respect? As object!

But now as efficient principle whose primary causality gives being to everything in the soul, but as term towards which the soul is inwardly turned, turned back, converted and ordered as to an object of loving knowledge

... a fruitful, experimental knowledge and love which puts us in possession of God and unites us to Him ... really.<sup>22</sup>

Being partakers of the divine nature, we are also able to know God "by connaturality," that is, "making use, in order to know Him, of ... our co-birth with Him." Following John of St. Thomas and Joseph of the Holy Ghost, Maritain postulates that the infused virtue of charity can, under the influence of the gift of wisdom and by virtue of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "pass ... to the status of an objective medium of knowledge (objectum quo...). Then we not only experience our love for God, but it is God Himself whom we experience by our love." Thus, "... in virtue of this union in which love clings to God immediately, the intellect is, through a certain affective experience, so elevated as to judge of divine things in a way higher than the darkness of faith would permit." In this experience, the human person is, in a sense, passive under the divine action. As yet, however, though the experience is direct, it is not a vision of the Divine Essence. Concepts in this relatively passive experience are not present as means of knowledge; they can be said to "sleep." It is love and wisdom that are here effective as sources of knowledge, but not of a new knowledge. They merely bring what is already known in faith to a new depth of conviction, for the mystical life deepens the ordinary life of faith without extending beyond it. "It is a disastrous illusion," says Maritain, "to seek mystical experience outside of faith, to imagine a mystical experience freed from theological faith ..."<sup>23</sup>

There are, however, analogues in the natural order to mystical experience in the supernatural, and these are to be found, in particular, in the inspiration of metaphysics or poetry. But this natural contemplation terminates in creatures. While it has not the "inert passivity proper to subnormal states, due to temperament, sickness or imagination," it lacks, as well, the "supernatural passivity proper to the 'contemplation of the saints' ..."<sup>24</sup> Maritain denies that there can be in the natural order an "authentic and properly so-called mystical experience, ... [that is], 1. a mystical experience which is not a counterfeit ... 2. one which bears on God Himself and makes us experience the Divine reality ..."<sup>25</sup> "The whole distinction between nature and grace is here at stake," he maintains.<sup>26</sup>

Maritain proposes a number of objections to this position and answers them in the following manner. Although it is true that we, like God, are spiritual beings, it does not follow that even though God is everywhere, we should be able to see Him as He is. A merely natural love of God, furthermore, could not possibly produce an experience of His presence. When examples of mystical experience are found among those who do not enjoy membership in the Church, we must, Maritain thinks, suppose that

such cases arise from divine grace and from infused contemplation more or less modified in their typical forms by special visible rays of truth ...<sup>27</sup>

St. John of the Cross enables us to do justice to Ramakrishna.<sup>28</sup>

Difficult though it may be, it is possible to distinguish genuine from pseudo-mystical experience, and though there can be a metaphysical experience pointing to God, this is not at all identical with genuine mystical knowledge. Intuitions of the divine might, in fact, be sought as much in poets as in metaphysicians. In any case, these intuitions do not make part of the science of metaphysics.

Maritain finds analogues of mystical experience in instances of knowledge by connaturality, in practical judgments, whether moral or artistic. "The poet is ... much better prepared than anyone else to understand things that are from on high...." But the "most obvious and natural analogies of mystical contemplation, the ones that mystical language currently uses" are those of human love.<sup>29</sup>

Although metaphysics cannot of itself rise to the level of mystical knowledge the human person who is a metaphysician will be strengthened in this metaphysical science, if such a person also enjoys the benefits of the higher wisdoms.

Acquired contemplation, which is supernatural in its object and in its dependence on faith, but natural in its mode, is thus distinct both from metaphysical speculation and from infused contemplation.

Thus, Maritain concludes his introductory chapter on mystical experience and philosophy. In the two following chapters, he studies mystical doctrine as it is found first in Augustine and then in John of the Cross, in each contrasting the teaching of these saints with that of Thomas Aquinas.

### III. The Wisdom of St. Augustine

Maritain is at pains to distinguish Augustine's sense of wisdom from that of Thomas. Using the distinctions among the various wisdoms already introduced, he takes the supernatural gift of wisdom to be the controlling force in the Augustinian syntheses.

"St. Augustine had the order of charity ..St. Thomas ... the order of intellect." These two saints differ in point of view. Whereas, for Augustine, the proper source of his teaching is the wisdom of the Holy Ghost, Thomas practiced theology in the sense of a human science. This is not to deny that Thomas also enjoyed infused wisdom; it is simply to say that, for Augustine, neo-Platonic philosophy is "an instrument of the gift of wisdom, ... the gift of wisdom using reason and discourse." True philosophy, according to Augustine, is a "path to beatitude ...: it is the wisdom of the Holy Ghost."<sup>30</sup>

Science, for Augustine, is the product of inferior reason; wisdom of the superior. "With St. Thomas we track down essences; with St. Augustine we are drawn to experience Him whom we love. ... Augustine's wisdom is the gift of wisdom using discourse." "... faith in every case universally precedes and prepares the understanding. ...the understanding in question is the knowledge of infused wisdom extended by discourse to the whole humanly explorable field." "... the soul only succeeds in finding God through a return and penetration ad intus ..." "When the soul experiences God in a mystical manner, it simultaneously experiences its own

nature as a spirit...."31

... once the substance of his [Augustine's] psychology is grasped, it is easily integrated in its entirety ... in to the system of Aristotelian ideas Augustinized by the Angel of the Schools. ... Where he (Augustine) examines the notion "prime matter" is in an act of thanksgiving. ... such a wisdom contains philosophy in a virtually eminent manner and theology in a formally eminent manner .... 32

Augustine's wisdom, unlike that of Thomas, is not reduced to a technically exact state.

While Thomas, then, integrated into his doctrine the exalted wisdom of Augustine, Augustine's lesser followers - Descartes, Jansenius and others - failed to see it for what it truly was and thus reduced it to the level of a philosophy or theology lacking its proper inspiration. Thomistic wisdom, on the other hand,

recognizing itself inferior to the knowledge of infused wisdom but superior to every other knowledge, and distinguished only to unite, ... establishes within the human soul an enduring coherence and living solidarity between those spiritual activities that reach up to heaven and those that reach down to touch the earth. 33

The principal difference between the two saints is that Thomas substitutes "efficient causality ... for participation ..."

...Augustine reminds us of what Thomists are tempted to forget ... Christian philosophy needs to live and spiritualize itself by contact with the living faith and the experience of a Christian soul ... to be fortified from on high by contemplation. 34



#### IV. John of the Cross, Practitioner of Contemplation

On this earth,

intellectual knowledge ... is communicable by its very nature. ... But besides this communicable knowledge ... through ideas, there is another knowledge whose object is the concrete as such and which arises from experience: this is incommunicable knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

Having considered philosophy and mystical experience in a first chapter, and Augustinian wisdom in a second, in the third chapter of his Second Part, Maritain compares Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross as theoreticians of contemplation. John of the Cross is here seen as the great doctor of the incommunicable, as Thomas is of communicable knowledge of the divine. Maritain undertakes, at this point, to show that while the Doctor of Night and the Doctor of Light, whom he likens to El Greco and Fra Angelico, respectively, differ in what they set out to do, in fact, their doctrines harmonize completely.

Since the notion of practical science governs this whole question, Maritain treats it at some length, distinguishing what he calls Thomas' "speculatively practical" from John's "practically practical" science. Between the virtue of prudence, which deals with the individual act to be performed, and the science of ethics which deals with the universal principles on which prudential judgment must be based, Maritain discerns a place for a science which, indeed, considers the universal, but in relation to the particular, and which, "instead of analyzing, composes,"<sup>36</sup> whereas ethics, as a science, analyzes. Like art and

prudence, "these practical sciences too ... presupposes ... the right dispositions of the will ..."<sup>37</sup> This question touches upon a central concern of Maritain: "... there are in the world of the mind structural differentiations and a diversity of dimensions whose recognition is of the greatest importance."<sup>38</sup> The great moralists deserve a place of their own, equal in dignity with that of the psychologists.

In reference to contemplation, there exists, in addition to theology, a "practically practical science" of contemplation, interested in leading us to perfection. John of the Cross is its master. "In the writings of John ... this science exists with all its dimensions."<sup>39</sup>

At this point, Maritain introduces his reason for distinguishing speculative theology from this practical science. A theologian who loses charity may remain a theologian, but "how could one ... have practical concrete knowledge of the paths that lead souls to infused contemplation if one has no experience of it oneself - experience which supposes charity?" He concludes that,

just as the practical intellect is an extension of the speculative intellect .. wherein new principles ... enter in, so the practical science of the interior paths of the spirit is a practical extension of theology wherein mystical experiences and gifts necessarily enter in.<sup>40</sup>

For all Christians, the "end of human life is transformation in God ... by the beatific vision and beatific love"<sup>41</sup> in heaven, and by love, in faith, on earth. While we remain on earth, we cannot see God directly; but we can be

united to God directly by love. Thus, "contemplation is not its own end but ... a means ... for the union of love with God ... We are here at the antipodes of neo-Platonic intellectualism."<sup>42</sup> Faith is the means of the union of the soul with God in love "since only supernatural faith attains to divine reality in its proper life; and it is knowledge in a suprahuman mode, wherein faith surpasses its natural mode of knowing ..."<sup>43</sup>

Maritain contrasts the differing language, the distinct vocabularies, used by Thomas and John. For John, contemplation is non-agere, for Thomas, the highest activity. From the ontological point of view, contemplation is, indeed, the highest activity possible; but from the point of view of mystical experience itself, "the suspension of every activity in the human mode appears to the soul as non-activity."<sup>44</sup> When John speaks of the "substance," he is not considering the soul's substance as opposed to its powers; it means "what is deepest, most fundamental, most hidden."<sup>45</sup> Faith, for John, means living faith, animated by charity.

The most striking difference in vocabulary, however, is that between the Thomistic ontological division of the soul's powers into intellect and will and the Augustinian tripartite division adopted by John, which includes memory. As Maritain explains it, memory, in this sense, deals with "things insofar as he the subject has experienced and will experience them, insofar as they concern him and touch his personal experience, have practical value for him...."<sup>46</sup> By adopting, with the tradition of mystical writers, the

three-fold division, John was able to expound "the profoundest of views upon the relations of hope to memory..."<sup>47</sup>

Again, John's doctrine of nothing, far from denying the value of nature, supposes it. With reference, however, to "our ownership of ourselves...he asks for everything. There we must give all."<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the greatest perfection of nature was that worked by grace on the Cross.

It is necessary here again to distinguish carefully the linguistic usage of the speculative from that of the mystical theologian. One must not attempt to transfer, without any change, the expressions of one discipline into the other. To do so would result in disastrous confusion.

St. Thomas and John agree completely, Maritain finds, in their doctrine of the nature of mystical contemplation, the "very experience of this union to which all else is pre-ordained. It is not only for love, it is by love."<sup>49</sup> It is a union in darkness because no concept is adequate to it.

"From beginning to end, St. John.../T's/ whole teaching claims and insists that what belongs essentially to the domain of the grace of virtues and gifts must be shielded from the usurpations of the charisms;...he leads souls to the supreme degree of love and mystical union ...not by the shorter, but less sure, path of extraordinary favours...but rather by the normal way of the virtues and gifts...because, as St. Thomas...teaches...they are necessary for salvation."<sup>50</sup>

"If to know is what you want...study metaphysics, study theology. If divine union is what you want...you will know a great deal more...precisely in the measure that you go beyond knowledge...."<sup>51</sup>

## V. Todo y Nada

Maritain begins his final chapter with a brief

consideration of the influence of the contemplative in the world, with particular reference to the world of the mid-thirties and especially to Russia. He notes that in recent centuries the "spiritual density" of truth in the world has tended to become less than that of falsity. The contemplative stance is needed to restore the lost balance, to set priorities without turning away from the temporal concerns that are necessarily ours.

Following principally John of the Cross in this chapter, Maritain considers the stages of progress in the spiritual life, from its beginning to the highest manifestation of mystical life in the spiritual marriage. Starting with the famous sketch of the ascent of Mount Carmel, in which one is to see the diagram and notes made by an experienced climber for the assistance of those who will attempt to reach the summit in the future (for, after Switzerland, Spain is the most mountainous country of Europe), Maritain identifies the two wrong roads, that to death and that to servitude, and one narrow path to liberty. This last is the path of self-denial which leads to the "place where the Son is. (He is in the bosom of the Father and He is on the Cross.) It is a matter of becoming one single spirit with God."<sup>52</sup>

The value of contemplation is not...so much that it is a life of knowledge, but above all that it is a live of love...knowledge proceeds from love, which, through a God-given instinct, experiences God. The property of spirit is to be within itself; how should not the unity of the spirit effected by the adhesion of love between God and the soul re-echo in knowledge? Contemplation is the very experience of union ...it is a matter of transforming the human being into love, bringing him to have the manners of God....

The creature, made from nothing - and this is what Plotinus never knew - must be resorbed into nothingness, know and live it.<sup>53</sup>

Maritain does not intend to say here that the creatures must become nothing ontologically, that he must cease to be, but that he must cease to desire apart from God.

"Such conduct would be insane were it not instigated by God."<sup>54</sup> Maritain here makes the interesting observation that "love of creatures [is] far more rarely attained in its full perfection...than is divine love...."<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he defends John of the Cross in a striking passage against a possible accusation of hatred of creatures. "Later, on the mountain, all will be transfigured. Meanwhile, we must begin by losing all."<sup>56</sup>

Because the soul's sense life is partly opposed to spirit and partly opposed, as well, to the contemplative union, the person who is called to this union must, under the inspiration of divine grace, undertake actively to purify the life of the senses. God Himself intervenes to achieve, in a Night not of the ascetic's own choosing, a freedom for the soul from what would interfere with divine union. The soul thus "enters into the prayer of quiet...the tiny beginning of infused contemplation."<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the night of the senses is that of the spirit, and this is also active and passive. The person in the active night must exert effort to reject, in faith, "everything that is unlike the divine."<sup>58</sup> But in the passive

night of the spirit, "God for his part works all by Himself ...'the horrible night of contemplation' which is infused contemplation itself."<sup>59</sup> "In this agony of its very substance is consummated the meeting of extreme..." And "the fruits of the Holy Spirit...such are the final and delectable products superabounding on those heights."<sup>60</sup>

Following the great Carmelite doctors, Maritain distinguishes two stages of union, the spiritual betrothal, an intermittent experience, and the spiritual marriage. In the first state, the contemplative person,

without seeing God in his essence...experiences that He is all.... But peace is not yet complete because God's visitations remain intermittent and the soul is still exposed to the terrors of the devil."<sup>61</sup>

Yet, the soul is somehow already equal to God at the time of the spiritual betrothal - not, of course, in the entitative order, but in "the order of love as love."<sup>62</sup> In the spiritual marriage, however, in which the lover loses himself in the beloved, in ecstasy, "the soul not only possesses God through grace but through union with all the strength and sweetness of His own will..."<sup>63</sup>

In the perfect peace of the consummated union, in which there are "two natures in one spirit and love," the "soul possesses the unlimited rights of a bride...."<sup>64</sup> In this state, suffering can coexist with the greatest peace. And, "The blessed repose of the soul transformed is not a repose of immobility...this repose is the stability of triumphant movement and desire."<sup>65</sup>

Maritain points out that John of St. Thomas has indicated

"fruitful principles for a ... development concerning the intentional being of love...But this development itself is yet to be made."<sup>66</sup>

What is the nature of this highest contemplative life?

...The espoused soul is associated in a certain manner with the operations of the Trinity...Clearly...there is absolutely no question...of an entitative participation of the creature...in producing a Person in God...The participation of which he speaks relates to the union of love, to the unity and transformation of love.<sup>67</sup>

To arrive at this state is to have attained the highest life possible on this earth, the beginning of eternal life in which we love God as God loves us and as God loves Himself. This highest contemplation is trinitarian because "from the very outset...contemplation...has proceeded from a living faith and from supernatural gifts..." If "spiritual marriage is of itself a state explicitly related to the intimate life of the Trinity,"<sup>68</sup> (though not necessarily an intellectual vision of the Trinity...The latter belongs to the order of charismata...) how will this be possible for such persons to enjoy this highest stage of union?

How ought the soul in this state of being on the threshold of heaven to live? John of the Cross agrees with St. Thomas that the "mixed life" of action flowing from contemplation, the life lived by Jesus Himself, is the best in itself. But for a soul in the state of spiritual marriage, except for the imperative duties of life (like those of a mother toward her child), all her time ought to be spent in contemplation.



### Concluding Remarks: Method

What this very brief sketch of Maritain's doctrine of mystical knowledge cannot have made evident is the dense style in which it is written. Much of the text defies outline; to outline it would be to put every word of the text into it.

Another characteristic of this portion of Maritain's text is his dependence upon his sources, often quoted at length in the text itself, something which is not typical of the rest of this work. The necessity for this procedure grows out of the fact that he proceeds as a philosopher, but discusses matter that properly belongs in theology.

Finally, the method he uses exemplifies very well the title, "Distinguish to Unite." The list of distinctions is long, running to a page or so. Distinctions are indicated between words, vocabularies, sciences, individuals and their characteristic approaches. Maritain constantly travels back and forth between the realms of nature and grace, of human and divine ways of proceeding, comparing, contrasting, showing precisely wherein lie differences and identities.

For someone who wished to know something of his doctrine of contemplation without the necessity of finding it through all these distinctions, his book Liturgy and Contemplation might be more accessible.

## NOTES

1. Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, Letters edited and with an introduction by Sally Fitzgerald, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 92. Flannery O'Connor had read and underlined Maritain's Art and Scholasticism, and she often recommended it and offered to lend it to correspondents. Creative Intuition was also in her library at the time of her death. See Kathleen Feeley, Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 190. When she learned that Maritain was "taken" with the French translation of her novel, Wise Blood, she asked her publisher to send him The Violent Bear It Away also.
2. Therese of Lisieux alludes to the need to "lower one's eyes" in the presence of God. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, Therese of Lisieux, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), pp. 254-55.
3. The English-speaking reader will think here of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall, frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed." See his "No worst, there is none."
4. Jacques Maritain, The Degrees of Knowledge, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), Preface, p. x. Hereafter referred to as Degrees. Possibly this is where the study of the personal "encounter," as the realm of the human being's response to God and to other human beings, might most properly be made, since once's willingness for and openness to such encounter are essential to its taking place. But Maritain does not devote time here to a phenomenological description of the personal encounter. One who would desire some insight into the question of individual mystical experience as it relates to the Maritains might consult Raissa's Journal, (Albany, New York: Magi Books, Inc., 1974). Maritain's purpose here is a different one, and the fact that his undertaking has not needed to be repeated is perhaps an indication of his success in it.
5. Degrees, Preface, p. xi. Noel D. O'Donogue discusses the differing approaches of the philosopher and the theologian to the mystic in "Vision and System," Heaven in Ordinarie, (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate, 1979), pp. 148-64. William A. Wallace, in his presidential Address to the American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1971,

pointed out that in "the existential situation in American philosophy and theology ... in philosophy Catholic thinkers have made it a point never to discuss theological issues, whereas in theology Catholics seem to have made it a point to avoid philosophy...." Proceeding of the ACPA, 1971, p. 4.

6. Degrees, Preface, p. xii.
7. Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.
8. Degrees, Chapter I, p. 8, (6). The number in parentheses refers to the section in each chapter, for ease in referring to the French original.
9. Degrees, Chapter V, p. 241, (24). Plotinus is discussed here and there throughout the work: see pp. 5 and 6, (5), p. 13, (6), etc.
10. Degrees, Chapter I, p. 7, (6), note 2.
11. Ibid., pp. 10-11, (6), with note.
12. Degrees, Preface, p. 11, (6).
13. Ibid., p. 12, (6).
14. Ibid., p. 13, (6).
15. Degrees, Chapter V, p. 234, (22). Cf. Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being, p. 354; also p. 136: "I guess meditation and contemplation and all the ways of prayer boil down to keeping it firmly in mind that there are two." See also p. 458: "I never completely forget myself except when I am writing.... The great difference between Christianity and the Eastern religions is the Christian insistence on the fulfillment of the individual person...."
16. Degrees, Chapter V, p. 234, (22). Remarkable as Maritain's assertion appears in an Aristotelian context, and important for dialogue as is realization that God is personal, metaphysics is still not able to "introduce" the human being to God as He is in Himself. Without a properly supernatural knowledge of God He would remain known only through His effect, His footprints, as it were.
17. O'Connor, op. cit., p. 354.
18. Degrees, Chapter V, pp. 237-8, (23).
19. Ibid., pp. 241-4, (25-27).
20. Degrees, Chapter VI, p. 247, (2).
21. Ibid., p. 269, (19).

22. Ibid., pp. 257-8, (10).
23. Ibid., pp. 261-5, (13-15).
24. Ibid., p. 268, (17).
25. Ibid., p. 269, (18).
26. Ibid., p. 269, (19).
27. Ibid., pp. 272-3, (26). In a communication addressed to the Fourth Congress of Religious Psychology, September, 1938, Maritain modified his position on this point to some extent. He refers to this work in a postscript to the third edition of the Degrees (193). It was published as Chapter III, "L'Expérience mystique naturelle et le vide," in Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle, (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et Cie, 1939), pp. 76-106, translated into English by Harry Lorin Binsse as Chapter X, "The Natural Mystical Experience and the Void," in Ransoming the Time, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), pp. 255-89. Here Maritain remarks again that although the intellectual method of the metaphysician can issue in a natural contemplation, this is not a natural mystical experience. In this later work, however, he does recognize that an authentic natural mystical experience is possible for one who, like the sages of India, pursues emptiness, the void, rather than being. See note 19 in that work (French, pp. 154-7; English, note 18 in the edition referred to, pp. 279-80). I am grateful to Mr. Thomas O'Brochta for sending me a copy of this essay.
28. Ibid., pp. 274-5, (26).
29. Ibid., p. 282, (34-35).
30. Degrees, Chapter VII, pp. 292-7, (27).
31. Ibid., pp. 296-8, (7).
32. Ibid., pp. 297-8, (7-8).
33. Ibid., pp. 302-5, (10-12).
34. Ibid., p. 308, (14).
35. Degrees, Chapter VIII, p. 310, (1).
36. Ibid., pp. 314-15, (4-5).
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., pp. 315-316, (6).

39. Ibid., pp. 316-17, (7).
40. Ibid., p. 318, (8).
41. Ibid., pp. 320-21, (10).
42. Ibid., p. 324, (11).
43. Ibid., p 325, (12).
44. Ibid., p. 327, (14).
45. Ibid., p. 328, note 2.
46. Ibid., p. 330, (17).
47. Ibid., p. 331 (17). Note misprint: "faith" where "hope" should be in line 11. Cf. p. 657 in the third French edition and p. 406 in Wall.
48. Ibid., p. 332, (18).
49. Ibid., p. 338, (20).
50. Ibid., p. 345, (22).
51. Ibid., p. 349, (24).
52. Degrees, Chapter IX, p. 356, (4).
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., p. 358, (5).
55. Ibid., p. 358, (6).
56. Ibid., p. 359, (6).
57. Ibid., p. 361, (7).
58. Ibid., p. 361, (8).
59. Ibid., p. 362, (8).
60. Ibid., p. 364, (9).
61. Ibid., p. 364, (10).
62. Ibid., p. 368, (12).
63. Ibid., p. 371, (12).
64. Ibid., p. 364-365, (10).
65. Ibid., p. 367, (11).

66. Ibid., p. 369, note 6.
67. Ibid., p. 376, note 2.
68. Ibid., p. 378, (15).
69. Ibid., pp. 379-81, (16).