

**THE SPIRITUAL LIFE**

**A TREATISE ON ASCETICAL AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY**

**by the Very Reverend Adolphe Tanquerey, S.S., D.D.**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It is the perfection of the Christian life that constitutes the proper object of ascetical and mystical Theology.

#1. A God of all goodness vouchsafed to give us not only the natural life of the soul, but also a supernatural life,-- the life of grace. This latter is a sharing of God's very life, as we have shown in our treatise *De gratia*.<sup>2</sup> Because this life was given us through the merits of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and because He is its most perfect exemplary cause, we call it rightly the Christian life.

All life must needs be perfected, and it is perfected by pursuing its end. Absolute perfection means the actual attainment of that end. This we shall attain only in Heaven. There, through the Beatific Vision and pure love, we shall possess God, and our life will have its complete development. Then we shall be like unto God, "because we shall see him as he is."<sup>3</sup>

Here on earth, however, the perfection we can reach is only relative. This we attain by ever striving after that intimate union with God that fits us for the Beatific Vision. The present treatise deals with this relative perfection. After an exposition of general principles on the nature of the Christian life, its perfection, the obligation of striving after it, and the general means of arriving thereat, we shall describe the three ways, purgative, illuminative and unitive, along which must go all generous souls thirsting for spiritual advancement.

#2. First, however, some preliminary questions must be made clear in a short introduction.

In it we shall treat five questions:

- I. The Nature of Ascetical Theology;
- II. It's Sources,
- III. It's Method;
- IV. It's Excellence and Necessity;
- V. It's Division.

## **I. THE NATURE OF ASCETICAL THEOLOGY**

In order to show exactly what Ascetical Theology is, we shall explain: (1) The chief names given to it; (2) Its relation to the other theological sciences; (3) Its relation, both with Dogma and Moral; (4) The distinction between Ascetical and Mystical Theology.

### **I. IT'S DIFFERENT NAMES**

#3. Ascetical Theology goes by different names.

a) It is called the science of the Saints, and rightly so, because it comes to us from the Saints, who have taught it more by their life than by word of mouth. Moreover, ascetical theology is calculated to make saints, for it explains to us what sanctity is, and what the means are of arriving at it.

b) Some have called it spiritual science, because it forms spiritual men, that is to say, men of interior life, animated by God's own spirit.

c) Others have called it the art of perfection, for it is really a practical science, having for its goal to lead souls to Christian perfection. Again, they have called it The Art of Arts. And indeed, the highest art is that of perfecting the soul's noblest life, its supernatural life.

d) However, the name most commonly given to it to-day is that of Ascetical and Mystical Theology.

1) The word "ascetical" comes from the Greek "askesis" (exercise, effort) and means any arduous task connected with man's education, physical or moral. Christian perfection, then, implies those efforts that St. Paul himself compares to the training undergone by athletes with the purpose of obtaining the victory.<sup>1</sup> It was, therefore, natural to designate by the name of asceticism the efforts of the Christian soul struggling to acquire perfection. This is what Clement of Alexandria and Origen did, and, after them, a great number of the Fathers. It is not surprising, then, that this name of asceticism is given to the science that deals with the efforts necessary to the acquisition of Christian perfection.

2) Yet, during many centuries the name that prevailed in designating this science was that of Mystical Theology ("mystes" mysterious, secret, and especially a religious secret) because it laid open the secrets of perfection. Later a time arrived when these two words were used in one and the same sense, but the usage that finally obtained was that of restricting the name asceticism to that part of the spiritual science that treats of the first degrees of perfection up to the threshold of contemplation, and the name of mysticism to that other part which deals with infused or passive contemplation. Be that as it may, it follows from all these notions that the science we are dealing with, is indeed the science of Christian perfection. This fact allows us to give it a place in the general scheme of Theology.

## II. IT'S PLACE IN THEOLOGY

#4. No one has made more clear the organic unity that holds all through the science of Theology than did St. Thomas. He divides his Summa into three parts. In the first, he treats of God as the First principle. He studies Him in Himself, in the Oneness of His nature, in the Trinity of His Persons, in the works of His creation preserved and governed by His Providence. In the second part, He deals with God as the Last End. Towards Him men must go by performing their actions for Him under the guidance of the law and the impulse of grace, by practicing the theological and the moral virtues, and by fulfilling the duties peculiar to their state of life. The third part shows us the Incarnate Word making Himself our way whereby we may go to God, and instituting the Sacraments to communicate to us His grace unto life everlasting.

In this plan, ascetical and mystical theology belongs to the second part of the Summa, with dependence however on the other two parts.

#5. Later theologians, without setting aside this organic unity of Theology, have divided it into three parts, Dogmatic, Moral and Ascetical.

a) Dogma teaches us what we must believe of God: His divine life, the share in it which He has willed to communicate to intelligent creatures, specially to man, the forfeiting of this divine life by original sin, its restoration by the Word-made-flesh, the action of that life on the regenerated soul, its diffusion through the Sacraments, and its completion in Heaven.

b) Moral theology shows us how we must respond to this love of God by cultivating the divine life He made us share. It shows us how we must shun sin, practice the virtues, and fulfill those duties of state to which we are strictly bound.

c) Yet, if we wish to perfect that life, desiring to go beyond what is of strict obligation, and wish to advance systematically in the practice of virtue, it is to Ascetical theology that we must turn.

## III. IT'S RELATIONS WITH MORAL AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY

#6. Ascetical theology is a part of the Christian Life. In truth, it is its most noble part, for its purpose is to make us perfect Christians. Although it has become a special, distinct part of Theology, it holds the closest relations both with Dogma and Moral.

(1) Its foundation in Dogma. When describing the nature of the Christian life, it is from Dogma that we seek light. This life being actually a participation in God's life, we must soar up to the Blessed Trinity itself. There we must find its principle and source, see how it was bestowed on our first parents, lost through their fall, and given back by the Redeeming Christ.

There we must see its organism its action in our soul, the mysterious channels through which it comes and grows, and how it is finally transformed into the Beatific Vision in Heaven.

All these questions are indeed treated in Dogmatic Theology. But if these truths are not set down once more in a short and clear synthesis, Asceticism will seem to be devoid of all foundation. We shall be demanding of souls costly sacrifices without being able to justify these demands by a description of what Almighty God has done for us. In truth, Dogma is fully what Cardinal Manning called it, the fountain-head of devotion.

#7. (2) Ascetic Theology also depends on Moral Theology and completes it. The latter explains the precepts we must observe in order to possess and preserve the divine life. Ascetical Theology gives us in turn the means of perfecting it, and plainly presupposes the knowledge and the practice of those precepts. It would be indeed a vain and dangerous illusion to neglect the precepts and, under the pretext of observing the counsels, to undertake the practice of the highest virtues without having learned to resist temptation and avoid sin.

#8. (3) Withal, Ascetical Theology is truly a branch of Theology distinct from Dogma and Moral. It has its own proper object. It chooses from among the teachings of Our Lord, of the Church, and of the Saints, all that has reference to the perfection of the Christian life, and so coordinates all these elements as to constitute a real science. 1) Ascetical Theology differs from Dogma in this that, though grounded upon dogmatic truths, it actually directs these truths towards practice, making us understand. acquire a taste for, and live the life of Christian perfection; 2) It differs from Moral Theology, because, while it presents to our consideration the commandments of God and of the Church, which are the bases of all spiritual life, it insists also on the evangelical counsels, and on a higher degree of virtue than is strictly obligatory. Ascetical Theology, then, is truly the science of Christian perfection.

#9. Hence its twofold character, at once speculative and practical. Without doubt, it contains a speculative doctrine, since it goes to Dogma when it explains the nature of the Christian life. Yet, it is above all practical, because it seeks out the means that must be taken to develop that life.

In the hands of a wise spiritual counselor it becomes a real art. Here the art consists in applying the general principles with devotedness and tact to each individual soul. It is the noblest and the most difficult of all arts--"ars artium regimen animarum." The principles and rules which we shall give will help to form good spiritual advisers.

#### IV. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASCETICAL AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

#10. What we have heretofore said of Ascetical Theology holds good also of Mystical Theology.

A) In order to make a distinction between them, we may thus define Ascetical Theology: that part of spiritual doctrine whose proper object is both the theory and the practice of Christian perfection, from its very beginnings up to the threshold of infused contemplation. We place the beginning of perfection in a sincere desire of advancing in the spiritual life; Ascetic Theology guides the soul from this beginning, through the purgative and illuminative ways, as far as active contemplation or the simple unitive way.

#11. B) Mystical Theology is that part of spiritual doctrine whose proper object is both the theory and the practice of the contemplative life, which begins with what is called the first night of the senses, described by St John of the Cross, and the prayer of quiet, described by St. Theresa.

a) We thus avoid defining Ascetical Theology as the science of the ordinary ways of perfection, and Mystical Theology as the science of the extraordinary ways. Nowadays the word extraordinary is rather reserved to designate a special class of mystical phenomena such as ecstasies and revelations which are special gifts (charismata) superadded to contemplation.

b) We do not distinguish here between acquired and infused contemplation so as not to become involved in controversy. Acquired contemplation being as a rule a preparation for infused contemplation, we shall treat it when speaking of the unitive way.

We purposely unite in this one treatise both Ascetical and Mystical Theology. 1) Surely there are profound differences between them. These we shall take care to point out later. There is, all the same, certain continuity running through these two states, ascetic and mystic, which makes the one a sort of preparation for the other. When He sees fit, Almighty God makes use of the generous dispositions of the ascetic soul and raises it to the mystic states. 2) One thing is certain, the study of Mystical Theology throws no little light upon Ascetic Theology and vice versa. This, because there is harmony in God's ways; the powerful action which He exercises over mystic souls being so striking, it renders more intelligible the milder influence He exerts over beginners. Thus the passive trials, described by St. John of the Cross, make us understand better the ordinary aridity that is experienced in lower stages. Again, we understand better the mystic ways, when we see to what degree of docility and adaptability a soul can arrive that has for long years given itself up to the laborious practices of asceticism.

These two parts of one and the same science naturally throw light on one another and their union is profitable to both.

## II. THE SOURCES OF ASCETICAL AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

#12. Since this spiritual science is one of the branches of Theology, it has the same sources as the others. We must give the first place to those that contain or interpret the data of revelation, that is, Holy Scripture and Tradition. Next in turn come the secondary sources, that is, all the knowledge that we acquire through reason enlightened by faith and experience. Our task is simply to point out the use we can make of them in Ascetic Theology.

### I. HOLY SCRIPTURE

We do not find in Holy Scripture a scientific exposition of spiritual doctrine, yet, scattered here and there both in the Old and the New Testaments, we do find the richest data, in the form of teachings, precepts, counsels, prayers and examples.

#13. (1) We find there the speculative doctrines concerning God, His nature and attributes, His immensity that pervades all things, His infinite wisdom, His goodness and justice, His mercy, His Providence exercised over all creatures and above all on behalf of men, in order to effect their salvation. We find likewise the doctrine concerning God's own life, the mysterious generation of the Word, the procession of the Holy Spirit-- mutual bond of union between Father and Son. Lastly, we find God's works, in particular, those wrought for the welfare of man: man's share in the divine life, his restoration after the fall through the Incarnation and the Redemption, his sanctification through the Sacraments and the promise of everlasting joys.

It is obvious that such sublime teaching is a powerful incentive to an increased love for God and to a greater desire for perfection.

#14. (2) As to the moral teaching, made up of precepts and counsels, we find: The "Decalogue," which is summed up in the love of God and the neighbor. Next, comes the high moral teaching of the Prophets, who ever proclaiming the goodness, the justice, and the love of God for His people, turn Israel away from sin, and especially from idolatrous practices, whilst at the same time they inculcate into the nation respect and love for God, justice, equity and goodness towards all, chiefly towards the weak and the oppressed. We have further the Sapiential Books, whose counsels, so full of wisdom, contain an anticipated exposition of the Christian virtues.

Towering above all else, however, stands the wonderful teaching of Jesus. His "Sermon on the Mount" is a condensed synthesis of asceticism. We find still higher doctrines in His discourses as recorded by St. John and commented upon by the same apostle in his Epistles. Finally, there is the spiritual theology of St. Paul, so rich in doctrinal ideas and in practical application. even the bare summary which we shall give in an "Appendix" to this volume will show that the New Testament is already a code of perfection.



#15. (3) We find also in Holy Writ prayers to nourish our love and our interior life. Are there any prayers more beautiful than those of the psalter? The Church has deemed them so fit to proclaim God's praises and so apt to sanctify us, that She has incorporated them into her Liturgy, the Missal and the Breviary. Other prayers we also find here and there in the historical and sapiential books. But the prayer of prayers is the Lord's Prayer, the most beautiful, the most simple, and in spite of its brevity, the most complete that can be found. Added to this we have Our Lord's Sacerdotal Prayer, not to mention the doxologies contained in the Epistles of St. Paul and in the Apocalypse.

#16. (4) Finally there are in Scripture examples that incite us to the practice of virtue: a) The Old Testament musters before us a whole series of patriarchs, prophets and other remarkable personages who were not indeed free from weaknesses, yet, whose virtues merited the praise of St. Paul, and are recounted at length by the Fathers, who propose them to us for imitation. Who would not admire the piety of Abel and Henoch, the steadfastness of Noe, who wrought good in the midst of a corrupt generation? Who would not pay homage to the faith and trust of Abraham, the chastity and prudence of Joseph, the courage, the wisdom and constancy of Moses, the fearless zeal, devotion and wisdom of David? Who would not admire the austerity of life in the Prophets, the heroic conduct of the Maccabees and countless other examples?

b) In the New Testament, it is of course Jesus Christ who appears as the ideal type of sanctity. Next, Mary and Joseph, His faithful imitators. Then, the Apostles, who imperfect as they were at first, gave themselves up so completely in body and soul to the preaching of the Gospel and to the practice of the Christian and Apostolic virtues, that their lives cry out to us, even louder than their words, "Be ye followers of me as I also am of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

If some of these holy ones had their faults, the manner in which they redeemed them adds greater worth to their example, for it shows us how we can, by penance, atone for our faults.<sup>2</sup>

## II. TRADITION

#17. Tradition completes Holy Writ. It hands down to us truths which are not contained in the latter. More, it interprets Scripture with authority. It is known to us by the solemn and ordinary teaching of the Church.

(1) The Solemn Teaching consists chiefly in the definitions of Councils and Sovereign Pontiffs. It has but rarely concerned itself, it is true, with questions ascetical or mystical properly so-called; yet, it has often had to come to the fore in order to clear up and define those truths that form the bases of the science of perfection, to wit: God's life considered at its source; the elevation of man to a supernatural state; original sin and its consequences; the Redemption; grace communicated to regenerated man; merit, which increases in our souls the divine life; the sacraments, that impart grace; the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in which

the fruits of Redemption are applied. In the course of our study we shall have to make use of all these definitions.

#18. (2) The ordinary teaching is exercised in two ways, theoretically and practically.

A) The theoretical teaching is given us first in a negative way, by the condemnation of the propositions of false mystics; secondly, in a positive manner, in the common doctrine of the Fathers and theologians or in the conclusions that follow from the lives of the Saints.

a) False mystics have at different times altered the true notion of Christian perfection. Such were the Encratists and the Montanists in the first centuries, the Fraticelli and the Beguines or Beghards<sup>1</sup> of the Middle-Ages, Molinos and the Quietists<sup>2</sup> in modern times. By condemning them, the Church has pointed out to us the rocks we must avoid and marked the course to which we must hold.

#19. b) On the other hand, a common doctrine has gradually evolved from all those major questions that make up the living commentary of biblical teaching. This doctrine is found in the Fathers, the theologians and spiritual writers. In reading them we are impressed with their agreement on all vital points that have reference to the nature of perfection, the necessary means of arriving thereat, and the principal stages to be followed. Doubtless, there remain a few controverted points, but these concern secondary questions. Their very discussion simply brings into relief the moral unanimity that exists with regard to the rest. The tacit approval which the Church gives to this common teaching is for us a safe guarantee of truth.

#20. B) The practical teaching is to be found chiefly in the processes of the canonization of Saints, who have taught and practiced the whole of these spiritual doctrines. We are all acquainted with the meticulous care exercised both in the revision of their writings and in the scrutiny of their virtues. It is easy to find out from the study of these documents just what principles of spirituality are the expression of the Church's mind with regard to the nature and the means of perfection. This can be clearly seen by perusing the learned work of Benedict XIV entitled: "De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Canonizatione," or some of the processes of Canonization, or even by reading biographies of the Saints, written according to the rules of sound criticism.

### III. REASON ENLIGHTENED BY FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

#21. Human reason is a gift of God absolutely indispensable to man for the attainment of truth, whether natural or supernatural. It plays a very important role in the study of spirituality, just as it does in the study of the other ecclesiastical sciences. When it is question, however, of revealed truth, it needs to be guided and complemented by the light of faith; and in the application of general principles to souls, it must look for help to psychological experience.

#22. (1) Its first task is that of gathering, interpreting and setting in order the teachings of Scripture and Tradition. These are scattered through many books and need be put together if they are to form one consistent whole. Besides, the sacred utterances were pronounced under diverse circumstances, elicited by particular questions, spoken to different hearers. In the same way, circumstances of time and place are often responsible for the texts of Tradition.

a) Therefore in order to grasp their meaning, we must needs place them in their proper setting, harmonize them with analogous teachings, and lastly, arrange them and interpret them in the light of the sum-total of Christian truths.

b) Once this first work is done, we may draw conclusions from these principles, show their legitimacy and their manifold applications to the thousand and one details of human life in its most varied situations.

c) Lastly, these principles and conclusions will be coordinated into one vast synthesis and thus will constitute a real science.

d) It is likewise the work of reason to defend ascetical doctrine against its detractors. Many attack it in the name of reason and science, seeing nothing but illusion in what embodies sublime reality. It is in the province of reason to make answer to such criticisms with the aid of philosophy and science.

#23. (2) Spirituality is a science that is lived. It is important therefore to show historically how it has been carried out in practice. This requires the reading of the biographies of the Saints both ancient and modern, who lived in diverse countries and under different conditions. Thus we make sure of the way in which ascetical rules were interpreted when adapted to different epochs and peoples and to peculiar duties of state. More, since the members of the Church are not all holy, we must be thoroughly acquainted with the obstacles encountered in the practice of perfection and with the means employed to surmount them.

Psychological studies then are paramount, and to reading must be joined observation.

#24. (3) It is further the task of reason enlightened by faith to apply principles and general rules to each person in particular. In this, account must be taken of the individual's temperament, character, sex and age, social standing, duties of state, as well as of the supernatural attractions of grace. One must also be mindful of the rules governing the discernment of spirits.

In order to fulfill this threefold role, it is not only necessary to possess a keen mind, but also a sound judgment and great tact and discernment. One must add to this the study of practical psychology, the study of temperaments, of nervous ailments and morbid conditions, which exert such a great influence over mind

and will. Then, since it is question of a supernatural science, one must not forget that the light of faith plays a predominant part, and that it is the gifts of the Holy Ghost that bring this science to its supreme perfection. This is true in particular of the gift of knowledge which makes us rise even up to God; of the gift of understanding which gives us a deeper insight into the truths of faith; of the gift of wisdom which enables us to discern and relish these truths; of the gift of counsel that gives us skill to apply them to each individual case. Thus it is that the saints, who allowed themselves to be led by the Spirit of God, are the best fitted to understand and the best to apply the principles of the spiritual life. They have a sort of instinct for divine things, a kind of second nature, that enables them to grasp them more readily and to relish them more. "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them to little ones."<sup>1</sup>

### III. THE METHOD TO BE FOLLOWED

What method must be followed in order to make the best possible use of the sources we have just described? Ought we to employ the experimental, also called the descriptive method? The deductive one? Or the combination of both? What attitude should we adopt in the employment of these methods? What aim should control their use?

#25. (1) The experimental method, also called descriptive and psychological, consists in the observation of ascetical or mystical phenomena in oneself or in others, and in classifying these, in order to glean from them the characteristic marks peculiar to each state, as well as the virtues and dispositions proper to them. This, without taking into account the nature or cause of these facts, without any further inquiry as to whether they have their origin in virtues, or proceed from the gifts of the Holy Ghost or from miraculous graces. This method, on its positive side, has many advantages, since facts must be well ascertained before we proceed to explain their nature and their cause.

#26. a) But if this method were employed to the exclusion of the others, Ascetical Theology could not be made into a real science. This method does furnish the bases for a science, that is, facts and conclusions from these facts, it can even establish which are the practical means that ordinarily succeed the best. Yet, as long as one does not go on to the intimate nature and to the cause itself of these facts one is dealing with psychology rather than with theology. Again, if one simply describes in detail the means of practicing such or such a virtue, one does not sufficiently disclose the principle that motivates that virtue.

b) One would thus be exposed to form ill-founded opinions. For instance, if in studying contemplation, one does not make a distinction between what is miraculous, like ecstasy or levitation, and that which constitutes the essential element of contemplation, to wit, a prolonged and loving regard of God under the influence of a special grace, then one can easily reach the conclusion that all contemplation is miraculous. This, however, is opposed to the common doctrine.

c) Many a controversy over the mystic states would amount to little, if to the descriptions of these states were joined the distinctions and accuracy which the study of theology supplies. Thus a distinction between acquired and infused contemplation enables us to understand better some very real states of soul and to harmonize some opinions which at first sight appear to contradict one another. Again, there are numerous degrees in passive contemplation: some may be accounted for by the habitual use of the gifts of the Holy Ghost; in other cases, God intervenes in order to provoke ideas and to aid us in drawing to the most striking conclusions. Finally there are some that can be hardly explained by anything save infused knowledge. All these distinctions are the result of long and patient research in the fields of speculation and practice. In abiding by them we shall reduce to a minimum the differences that divide the various schools.

#27. (2) The doctrinal or deductive method consists in studying the teaching of Holy Scripture, Tradition, and theology (especially the Summa of St. Thomas) concerning the spiritual life, and in drawing conclusions about its nature and perfection, about the obligation we have of making it the aim of our efforts, and about the means to be employed. In this method not enough stress is placed on psychological phenomena, on the temperament and character of individuals, on their special attractions, on the effects produced on individuals by certain particular means; nor is there a detailed study made of the mystic phenomena experienced and described by such persons as St. Theresa, St John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, etc. As we are liable to err in drawing conclusions, especially if we multiply them, it is simply wisdom to control our conclusions by facts. If, for instance, we discover that infused contemplation is rather rare, we shall then lay a few restrictions round the thesis sustained by some schools, namely, that all souls are called to the highest degrees of contemplation.<sup>1</sup>

#28. (3) Combination of both methods.

A) Evidently, one must know how to harmonize both methods. This is, in fact, what most authors do, with this difference, that some lay more stress on facts, others on principles.<sup>1</sup>

We shall try to keep the golden mean without, however, making bold of success.

a) The principles of mystical theology, drawn by the great masters from revealed truths, will help us to a better observation of the facts, to analyze the facts more thoroughly, to arrange them more systematically, and to interpret them more wisely. We must not forget the fact that, at least very often, the mystics describe their impressions without meaning to explain their nature. The principles spoken of will aid us also in seeking the cause of the facts, by taking into account truths already known, and to coordinate them into a real science.

b) The study of the facts, ascetical and mystical, will in turn correct whatever is too rigid and too absolute in purely dialectic conclusions. The truth is that there can be no absolute opposition between the principles and the facts. Hence, if experience shows us that the number of mystics is quite limited, we cannot hasten to the conclusion that this is due solely to resistance to grace.<sup>2</sup> It is also well to keep in mind that in the process of canonization the Church ascertains genuine sanctity rather from the practice of heroic virtue than from the kind of contemplation. This goes to show that the degree of sanctity is not always and necessarily in proportion to the kind and degree of mental prayer.

#29. B) How can these two methods be combined? a) It is necessary first of all to study the deposit of revelation as presented to us by Scripture and Tradition, including, of course, in the latter the ordinary teaching of the Church. From this deposit of truth we must determine by the deductive method what is Christian perfection and Christian life, what are its different degrees, what are the stages usually followed in order to reach contemplation, passing through mortification

and the practice of the moral and theological virtues. Finally, from it we must also determine in what this contemplation consists, considering it either in its essential elements or in the extraordinary phenomena that at times accompany it.

#30. b) This doctrinal study must be accompanied by methodical observation: 1) Souls must be examined with care; their qualities and their faults, their peculiar traits their likes and dislikes, the movements of nature and of grace that take place within them. This psychological data will allow us to know better the means of perfection that are best suited to them; the virtues they stand in greatest need of and towards which they are drawn by grace; their correspondence with grace; the obstacles they encounter and the means most apt to insure success. 2) To widen the field of experience we must read attentively the lives of the Saints, especially those that, without hiding their defects, describe their tactics in combating them, the means they availed themselves of to practice virtue, and lastly, how they rose from the ascetical to the mystical life, and under what influences. 3) It is also in the life of the contemplatives that we must study the different phenomena of contemplation from its first faint glimmers to its full splendor. In them we must study the effects of sanctity these graces work, the trials they had to undergo, the virtues they practiced. All this will complete and, at times, correct the theoretical knowledge we may already possess.

#31. c) With clear theological principles, with well-studied and well-classified mystic phenomena we can rise more easily to the nature of contemplation, its causes, its species, and distinguish what is normal from what is extraordinary in it. 1) We shall investigate how far the gifts of the Holy Ghost are formal principles of contemplation, and in what manner they must be cultivated so as to enter into the interior dispositions favorable to mystic life. 2) We shall examine whether the duly verified phenomena can all be accounted for by the gifts of the Holy Ghost, whether some of them postulate infused species, and how these work in the soul. Again we may have to inquire further and see whether love alone produces these states of soul without any added knowledge. 3) Then we shall be able to see better the nature of the passive state, in what it consists, to what extent the soul remains active, and what part is of God and what of the soul in infused contemplation. We shall be able to determine what is ordinary in this state and what is extraordinary and preternatural. Thus we shall be in a better position to study the problem of vocation to the mystical state and of the number of real contemplatives.

Proceeding in this manner, we shall have a better hope of arriving at the truth, and at real practical conclusions for the direction of souls. Such a study will prove as attractive as it is sanctifying.

#32. (4) What must be our attitude in following this method? Whatever the method employed, it is essential that we study these difficult problems with calmness, aiming at knowing the truth, not at making capital at all costs in behalf of a pet system.

a) Hence it is fundamental to seek out and place to the fore whatever is certain or commonly admitted, and to relegate to a second place whatever is disputed. The direction souls must be given does not depend on controverted questions, but on commonly accepted doctrine. All schools are unanimous in recognizing that charity and renouncement love and sacrifice are indispensable to all souls and in all the ways of perfection, and that the harmonious combination of this twofold element depends largely upon the character of the person directed. It is admitted on all hands that no one can afford at any time to put out of his life the spirit of penance, even though it may take different forms according to the different degrees of perfection. In the same manner, it is agreed that, in order to arrive at the unitive way, one must exercise oneself more and more perfectly in the practice of both the moral and the theological virtues; that the gifts of the Holy Ghost, cultivated with care, endow the soul with a certain docility that renders it more submissive to the inspirations of grace, and, should God call it thither prepares it for contemplation. No one questions the important fact that infused contemplation is essentially a free gift of God; that God bestows it upon whom He wills, and when He wills; that consequently it is not in anyone's power to place himself within the passive state, and that the indications of a proximate call to such a state are the ones described by St. John of the Cross. Likewise, all agree that once souls have reached contemplation, they must advance in perfect conformity with God's will, in a holy abandon and above all in humility.

#33. b) It is our opinion that if we approach these problems in a conciliatory manner, looking for what tends to harmonize rather than for what would emphasize differences, we shall eventually not indeed eliminate these controversies, but shall certainly mitigate them and come to recognize the soul of truth contained in every system. This is the most we can do here and now. For the solution of certain difficult problems we must patiently await the light of the Beatific Vision.



#### **IV. EXCELLENCE AND NECESSITY OF ASCETIC THEOLOGY**

The little we have said on the nature, sources, and method of Ascetical Theology will enable us now to survey briefly its excellence and its necessity.

##### **1. EXCELLENCE OF ASCETICAL THEOLOGY**

#34. Its excellence comes from its object, which is one of the most exalted man can possibly study. It is in fact the divine life present and constantly fostered in the soul of man. If we analyze this notion we shall readily note how worthy of our attention this branch of theology is.<sup>1</sup>

(1) First of all, we make a study of God in His most intimate relations with the soul. That is, we consider the Most Blessed Trinity dwelling and living in us, giving us a share in the divine life, collaborating in our good works and thus ever aiding us to develop that life; we see the same Triune God helping us to purify and beautify our soul by the practice of virtue, transforming it till it be ripe for the beatific vision. Can we imagine a like grandeur? We cannot think of anything more sublime than this transformation God works in souls in order to unite them to Himself and assimilate them perfectly.

(2) We next study the soul itself cooperating with God. We see it weaning itself little by little from its faults and imperfections, nursing Christian virtues, making efforts to imitate the virtues of its Divine Model in spite of the obstacles it finds both within and without, fostering the gifts of the Holy Ghost, developing a marvelous responsiveness to the least touch of grace, and becoming each day more and more like its Father in Heaven. To-day, when life and the questions related thereto are considered the ones most worthy of our attention, we cannot overestimate the import of a science that treats of a supernatural life, of a participation in God's own life, that tells us its origin, its growth and its full development in eternity. Is it not the most noble object of study?

##### **II. NECESSITY OF ASCETICAL THEOLOGY**

To be the more precise in such a delicate matter, we shall explain: (1) Its necessity for the priest; (2) its usefulness for the faithful; (3) the practical way of studying it.

(1) Its necessity for the Priest.

#35. The priest is bound to sanctify himself and his brethren, and from this twofold point of view, he is obliged to study the science of the Saints.

A) We shall demonstrate with St. Thomas, later on, that the priest is not only obliged to strive after perfection, but that he must possess perfection in a higher degree even than the simple religious. Now, a knowledge of what the Christian life is and of the means of perfecting it is normally necessary to reach perfection, for "nil volitum quin praecognitum."

a) Knowledge fires and stimulates desire. To know what sanctity is, its sublimity, its moral obligation, its wonderful effects on the soul, its fruitfulness, to know all this, we say, is to desire sanctity.

One cannot for any length of time behold a luscious fruit without conceiving the thought of tasting it. Desire, especially when vivid and sustained already constitutes an incipient act. It sets the will into motion and urges it on to the possession of the good the mind has apprehended. It gives it impulse and energy to obtain it; it sustains the effort required to seize upon it. This is all the more necessary when one considers how many are the obstacles that work counter to our spiritual advance.

b) To know in detail the various steps in the way to perfection, and to see the sustained efforts made by the Saints to triumph over difficulties and to advance steadily towards the desired goal, will stir up our courage, sustain our enthusiasm in the midst of the struggle and prevent us from becoming lax or tepid, especially if we recall the helps and consolations which God has prepared for souls of goodwill.

c) This study is of capital importance and all the more in our day: We actually live in an atmosphere of dissipation of rationalism, of naturalism and sensualism. It envelopes even unawares a multitude of Christian souls, and finds its way into the sanctuary itself. It is idle to repeat, that the very best way to react against these fatal tendencies of our time is to live in close contact with Our Lord by a systematic study of the principles of the spiritual life-- principles that are in direct opposition to the threefold concupiscence.

#36. B) For the sanctification of the souls entrusted to their care. a) Even in the case of sinners, the priest must know Ascetical Theology to teach them how to avoid the occasions of sin, how to struggle against their passions, resist temptations and practice the virtues opposed to the vices they must avoid. No doubt Moral Theology suggests these things, but Ascetical Theology coordinates and develops them.

b) Besides, in almost every parish one finds chosen souls whom God calls to perfection. If they are well directed, they will by their prayers, their example, and the thousand means at their disposal, be a real help to the priest in his ministry. At all events a priest can train up such by choosing carefully from among the children attending Sunday school or sodalities. In order to succeed in this important task, the priest must of necessity be a good guide of souls. He must know thoroughly the rules given by the saints, which are contained in spiritual books. Without this, he will have neither the taste nor the ability required for this difficult art of guiding souls.

#37. c) One more reason for the study of the ways of perfection lies in the guidance to be given fervent souls. These one meets with, at times, even in the

most secluded country districts. In order to lead these souls to the prayer of simplicity and to ordinary contemplation one must, not to blunder and actually place obstacles in their way, know not only Ascetical but also Mystical Theology. On this point St. Theresa remarks: " For this, a spiritual director is very much needed - but he must be experienced... My opinion is, and will always be, that as long as it is possible, every Christian must consult learned men - more learned the better. Those that walk in the ways of prayer have more need of such than the rest; and the more so, the more spiritual they are... I am thoroughly persuaded of this, that the devil will not seduce with his wiles the man of prayer who takes counsel with theologians, unless he wishes to deceive himself.

According to my opinion, the devil is in mortal fear of a science that is both humble and virtuous; he knows full well that it will tear his mask and rout him. "1 St. John of the Cross speaks in the same way: " Such masters of the spiritual life (who know not the mystic ways) fail to understand the souls engaged in this quiet and solitary contemplation... they make them take up again the ordinary ways of meditation, to exercise the memory, to perform interior acts in which such souls meet with nothing but dryness and distraction... Let this be well understood: Whoever errs through ignorance, when his ministry imposes on him the duty of acquiring knowledge that is indispensable, shall not escape punishment in proportion to the resultant evil. "2 Let no one say to himself: If I encounter such souls, I will abandon them to the guidance of the Holy Ghost.-- The Holy Ghost will make answer that He has entrusted them to your care, and that you must cooperate with Him in guiding them. Without doubt, He can Himself guide them, but to preclude any fear of illusion, He wills that such inspirations be submitted to the approbation of a human counselor.

(2) Its usefulness for the Laity.

#38. We say usefulness and not necessity, since lay folk can well entrust themselves to the guidance of a learned and experienced director and are not therefore absolutely bound to the study of Ascetical Theology.

Nevertheless the study of Ascetical Theology will be most useful to them for three good reasons:--a) In order to stimulate and sustain the desire of perfection as well as to give a definitive knowledge of the Christian life and of the means which enable us to perfect it. No one desires what one does not know, "ignoti nulla cupido," whereas reading spiritual books creates or increases the sincere desire to put into practice what has been read. Many souls, as is well known, are ardently carried on to perfection by reading "The Following of Christ," the "Spiritual Combat," "The Introduction to a Devout Life" or the "Treatise on the Love of God."

b) Even when one has a spiritual guide, the reading of a good Ascetical Theology facilitates and completes spiritual direction. One knows better what must be told in confession, what in direction. It makes one understand and retain better the

advice of one's spiritual adviser because it may be found again in a work to which one can return and reread. It, in turn, relieves the spiritual director from entering into endless details. After giving some solid advice he can have the penitent himself read some treatise where he will find supplementary information. Thus he can shorten his direction without causing any loss to his penitent.

c) Finally, if a spiritual guide cannot be had or if spiritual advice can be had but at rare intervals, a treatise on the spiritual life will, in a way, take the place of spiritual direction. There is no doubt, as we shall repeat later on, that spiritual direction constitutes the normal means in the training to perfection. But if for some reason or other one is unable to find a good adviser, God provides for the lack; and one of the means He uses is precisely some such book as points out in a definite and systematic manner the way to perfection.

(3) The Way to study this Science.

#39. Three things are needed to acquire the knowledge necessary for the direction of souls: a Manual, reading the greatmasters, and practice.

(A) The Study of a Manual. The seminarian is indeed helped in acquainting himself with this difficult art by the spiritual conferences he listens to, the practice of spiritual direction, and above all by the gradual acquisition of virtue. To this, however, the study of a good Manual must be added.

1) The spiritual conferences are chiefly an exercise of piety, a series of instructions, of advice and exhortation concerning the spiritual life. Rarely, however, do they treat a~ the questions concerning the spiritual life in a methodical and complete fashion. 2) At all events, seminarians will soon forget what they heard and will lack competent knowledge, unless they have a Manual to which they can relate the varied advice given them and which they can reread from time to time. Rightly did Pius X say that one of the sciences young clerics should acquire at the Seminary is: " The science of Christian piety and practice, called ascetical theology."1

In the meeting of the Seminary Department of the Educational Association at Cincinnati in 1908 the late Bishop Maes of Covington complained that our young men do not seem to be acquainted with the spiritual life and added: "If I were to put my finger on the great defect in the training of many Seminaries, I would point to the absence of a course of Ascetic Theology."

In the meeting of the same Seminary Department at Milwaukee In 1924, the following resolution was passed: "That ascetical theology should be systematically studied With a suitable text, and that the curriculum should be so ordered as to provide for such courses."

#40. (B) A deep study of the Spiritual Masters, particularly those who have been

canonized or those, who although not canonized, have lived saintly lives.

a) As a matter of fact, it is by coming into contact with these that the heart glows, that the mind, enlightened by faith, sees more clearly and relishes better the great principles of the spiritual life. It is at their touch that the will, sustained by grace, is drawn to the practice of the virtues so vividly described by those who have lived them to the highest degree. By the perusal of the lives of the Saints one will understand even better why and how one must imitate them. The irresistible influence of their examples will add new strength to their teaching: "Verba movent, exempla trahunt."

(b) This study, begun at the Seminary, ought to be continued and perfected in the ministry. The direction of souls will render it more practical. Just as a good physician is never through advancing in knowledge by practice and study, just so a good spiritual adviser will complement theory by actual contact with souls and by further studies, according to the needs of the souls entrusted to his care.

#41. c) The practice of Christian and Priestly virtues under the care of a wise director: To understand well the various stages of perfection, the best means is to go through them oneself, just as the best mountain-guide is the one that is familiar on first-hand information with the trails. Once one has been wisely guided, one is more competent to direct others for the simple reason that it is experience itself that shows us how to apply the rules to particular cases.

If these three elements are combined the study of Ascetical Theology will prove most fruitful both to self and to others.

#42. Solution of some difficulties. A) A reproach often directed against Asceticism is that it produces a false conscience, by going so far beyond Moral Theology in its exactions and by demanding of souls a perfection that is well-nigh beyond realization. This reproach would be indeed well grounded if Asceticism would not make a distinction between commandment and counsel, between souls called to high perfection and those not so called. This is not so, for while it does urge chosen souls toward heights that are out of the reach of ordinary Christians, it does not lose sight of the difference between commandment and counsel, between the conditions that are essential for salvation and those that are necessary to perfection. It keeps in view on the other hand, that the observance of certain counsels is indispensable to the keeping of the commandments.

#43. B) Asceticism is also attacked on the ground that it fosters egotism since it puts personal sanctification above all else. But Our Lord Himself teaches us that our chief concern must be the salvation of our souls: "For what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?"<sup>1</sup> In this there is not the least egotism, for one of the essentials for salvation is love of the neighbor. This love is manifested by works both corporal and spiritual, and perfection precisely demands that we love our neighbor to the point of sacrifice

as Christ loved us. Should this be egotism, we must acknowledge that we have little to fear from it. We have only to read the lives of the Saints to see that they were the most unselfish and the most charitable of men.

C) The further objection is made that Asceticism, by impelling souls towards contemplation, turns them from a life of action. To state that contemplation is detrimental to an active life is to pass over historical facts. "Real, mystics," says M. de Montmorand,<sup>2</sup> an unbeliever, "are practical men of action not given to mere thought and theory. They possess the gift and the knack of organization as well as talent for administration showing themselves well equipped for the handling of affairs. The works instituted by them are both feasible and lasting. In the conception and conduct of their undertakings they have given proof of prudence and enterprise and full evidence of that exact appreciation of possibilities which characterizes common sense. In fact, good sense seemed to be their outstanding quality,--good sense undisturbed either by an unwholesome exaltation, or a disordered imagination, but rather, possessed of an uncommon and powerful keenness of judgment."

Have we not seen in Church History that most of those Saints who have written on the spiritual life were at the same time men both of learning and action? Consider Clement of Alexandria, St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, St. Gregory, St. Anselm, St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure, Gerson, St. Theresa, St. Francis de Sales, St. Vincent de Paul, Cardinal de Berulle, M. Acarie, and numberless others. Contemplation far from hampering action, enlightens and directs it.

There is therefore nothing worthier, or more important, or more useful than Ascetical Theology rightly understood.

## V. DIVISION OF MYSTICAL AND ASCETICAL THEOLOGY

### 1. THE VARIOUS PLANS FOLLOWED BY AUTHORS

We shall first enumerate the various plans generally followed and then present the one which seems best suited to our purpose. Different points of view may be taken when making a logical division of the science of spirituality.

#44. (1) Some look at it chiefly as a practical science. They leave aside all the speculative truths that form its basis and limit themselves to coordinate as methodically as possible the rules of Christian perfection. So did Cassian, in his Conferences, and St. John Climacus, in the Mystic Ladder. Rodriguez in modern times did the same in his Practice of Christian Perfection. The advantage this plan offers is it takes up at once the study of the practical means that lead to perfection. Its drawback is to leave out the incentives given by the consideration of what God and Jesus Christ have done and still do for us, and not to base the practice of virtue upon those deep and all-embracing convictions that are formed by reflecting on the truths of dogma.

#45. (2) Likewise the most illustrious among the Fathers both Greek and Latin, to wit, St. Athanasius and St. Cyril St. Augustine and St. Hilary have taken care to base their teachings regarding the spiritual life upon the truths of faith and to build on them the virtues, the nature and degrees of which they explained. The same is true of the great theologians of the Middle Ages, Richard of St. Victor, Blessed Albert the Great, St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure. This is exactly what was done by the French School of the XVI I century, through such men as Berulle Condren, Olier, St. J. Eudes.<sup>1</sup> Its great merit lies in the fact that it makes for the enlightenment of the mind and the strengthening of convictions so as to render more easy to men the practice of those austere virtues it proposes. It is accused at times of being given too much to speculation while touching little on practice. To unite these two plans would be the ideal. Several have attempted it and with success. <sup>2</sup>

46. (3) Of those who strive to combine these two essential elements, some adopt the ontological order treating successively of the various virtues; others follow the psychological order of development of the said virtues throughout the course of the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways.

A) Among the former we find St. Thomas. In the Summa he treats successively of the theological and moral virtues, and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which correspond to each virtue. He has been followed by the principal authors belonging to French School of the XVII century and by other writers.<sup>1</sup>

B) Among the latter are all those whose principal aim was to form directors of souls. They describe the progress of the soul through the three ways; at the head of their treatises they simply give a short introduction on the nature of the spiritual life. Such are Thomas of Vallgomera, O. P., "Mystica Theologia Divi Thomae,"

Philip of the Blessed Trinity, O. C. D., "Summa theologiae mysticae," Schram, O. S. B., "Institutiones theologiae mysticae," Scaramelli, S. J., Directorio Ascetico," and today, A. Saudreau, "The Degrees of the Spiritual Life," Fr. Aurelianus a SS. Sacramento, O. C. D., "Cursus Asceticus."

47. (4) Others, like Alvarez de Paz, S. J. and P. Le Gaudier, S. J., have combined both methods: they treat at length, from the point of view of dogma, whatever appertains to the nature of the spiritual life and the chief means of perfection; then they make application of these general principles to the three ways. It seems to us that to attain the end we have in view, that is, to form spiritual directors, the last is the best plan to follow. No doubt, with such a scheme, one is bound to repeat and to parcel out, yet any division of the subject would necessarily offer like inconveniences. For these one can make up by proper references to subjects already dealt with or to be unfolded later on.

## II. OUR PLAN

#48. We divide our Treatise of Ascetic Theology into two parts. The first is above all doctrinal. We entitle it "Principles." In it we explain the origin and nature of the Christian life and its perfection, the obligation of striving after it and the general means of attaining it.

We designate the second part as the Application of principles to the different categories of souls. In it we follow the gradual rise of the soul that, desirous of perfection, goes successively through three ways, purgative, illuminative, and unitive. Although resting on dogma this latter part is chiefly psychological.

The first part is designed to throw light on our path by showing us the divine plan of sanctification. It should inspire us with courage in our efforts, for it reminds us of God's generosity toward us. It traces for us as in a foreground the great lines we are to follow in order to correspond to this bounty of God Almighty by the complete giving of self. The second part is meant to guide us in the detailed exposition of these successive stages, which, God helping, must be traversed to reach the goal. This plan we hope, will unite the advantages of the various other divisions.



