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Rapture in the Spirituality of St. Thomas Aquinas

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RAPTURE IN THE SPIRITUALITY
OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

by

Diane L. Harwood

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Submitted to the
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Diane L. Harwood

ii
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I THE PROBLEM OF RAPTURE IN THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II ST. THOMAS'S TEACHING ON RAPTURE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapture Defined</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The End of Human Life</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Man Can Attain to This End</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapture Exemplified</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Thomas and St. Paul</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Paul Knew</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Paul Did Not Know</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul's Response</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III ST. THOMAS'S SPIRITUALITY: SOME OBSERVATIONS BASED ON HIS TEACHING ON RAPTURE</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture and Tradition</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Thomas's Intellectualism</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We Know God As Unknown&quot;</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eschatology, or Rapture as Rupture</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Spirituality for All Men</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV ST. THOMAS'S TEACHING ON RAPTURE AND HIS OWN SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Question 180 of the Secunda secundae of the Summa theologiae, in a classic description of the contemplative life, St. Thomas Aquinas says that there are four kinds of activities which go to make up the contemplative life.\(^1\) First, there are the moral virtues—prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice—which the contemplative needs to practice in order to curb his passions and withdraw his intention from material things. So, although the moral virtues belong more properly to the active life, they also belong, at least dispositively, to the contemplative life.\(^2\) Second, there are activities apart from contemplation itself which belong to the contemplative life because they are means by which a person arrives at contemplation. These are prayer, hearing and reading of the Word, and meditation. By prayer, and by hearing and reading the Word, man receives principles by which he may arrive at contemplation of the truth; by meditation, he applies himself to these principles by his personal study and so moves from them to contemplation of the truth as it is in itself.\(^3\)

The third kind of activity which belongs to the contemplative life is the contemplation of the divine effects, that is, the contemplation of God through the things that He has made. It is by contemplating

\(^{1}\text{Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 4.}\)
\(^{2}\text{Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 2.}\)
\(^{3}\text{Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 3.}\)
the divine effects that man is led to contemplation of God Himself. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:20, "The invisible things of Him...are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made."¹ This type of contemplation belongs to the contemplative life secondarily and dispositively, that is, for the sake of something else.²

That "something else," that activity in which the contemplative life principally consists, is the contemplation of the divine truth, or, according to the phrase which St. Thomas uses interchangeably with it, the vision of God in His essence.³ This contemplation, writes St. Thomas,

will be perfect in the life to come, when we shall see God face to face, wherefore it will make us perfectly happy: whereas now the contemplation of the divine truth is competent to us imperfectly, namely through a glass and in a dark manner (I Cor. 13:12). Hence it bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come; wherefore the Philosopher (Ethic. 10.7) places man's ultimate happiness in the contemplation of the supreme intelligible good.⁴

There are several themes in this statement to which we will return later on. Let us notice at the moment that St. Thomas goes on to say, in the next article,⁵ that this kind of contemplation, imperfect though it may be, is the "highest degree of contemplation,"

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²ibid.
³ibid.
⁴ibid.
⁵Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 5.
supremus gradus contemplationis, possible to man in this life. This is the experience, he says,

which Paul had in rapture, whereby he was in a middle state between this life and the life to come.¹

It would seem, then, that St. Thomas considers rapture to be an extremely important part of the contemplative life. It is, in his own words, as we have seen, the "highest degree of contemplation" and that activity in which the contemplative life "principally" consists. We would expect him, therefore, to include in his description of the contemplative life in Question 180 a full treatment of rapture as the crown and summit of that life.

He does not. Instead, he is mainly concerned in Question 180 with the question, Whether or not the contemplative life can attain to the vision of the divine essence in this life.² For a fuller treatment of rapture, St. Thomas refers the reader to Question 175, in the section of the Summa dealing with the gratuitous graces, the gratiae gratis datae, or, as we should say, the charismatic gifts.³ Here he has already dealt with rapture under the heading of prophecy.

Now, rapture is like prophecy in that it pertains to knowledge⁴ and is divinely given,⁵ and also because it is transitory, like a

¹libid.
²This is the substance of Article 5.
³Sum, theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 5.
⁴Sum, theol. II-II, q. 171, a. 1; cf. Sum, theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 2.
⁵Sum, theol. II-II, q. 172, a. 1; cf. Sum, theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 1.
passion, and not permanent, like a habit. It is unlike prophecy, however, in that it does not make use of images in the mind, nor does it come to man regardless of his goodness or of his desire. Strictly speaking, rapture is not prophecy at all, as St. Thomas himself readily admits. Then why does he tack his discussion of it onto the section on prophecy, instead of placing it in Question 180 on the contemplative life, where it would seem more properly to belong?

The genius of St. Thomas was, in part, a classifying genius: he possessed, in no small degree, the ability to penetrate to the essence of things and to place them in their proper and logical relationship to one another, and thus to construct a coherent system. We would not expect his placement of rapture in Question 175 to be merely arbitrary! Yet there seems to be a certain awkwardness about it. Behind St. Thomas's admission that, strictly speaking, rapture is not prophecy, can we detect a measure of uneasiness or uncertainty?

Rousselot, in The Intellectualism of St. Thomas, remarks that

1Sum. theol. II-II, q. 171, a. 2; cf. II-II, q. 175, a. 3, ad 2.
2Sum. theol. II-II, q. 174, a. 3, where St. Thomas says that that kind of prophecy which does not make use of imaginary vision "goes beyond the bounds of prophecy properly so called."
3Sum. theol. II-II, q. 172, a. 4; see below, p.
4Sum. theol. II-II, q. 172, a. 3; cf. II-II, q. 175, a. 2.
5Sum. theol. II-II, q. 173, a. 2.
it is surprising, in view of the sensitivity which St. Thomas manifests in describing the life of faith and the ordinary graces of prayer,

that he did not bring out into even greater relief the exquisite intellectuality communicated to the life of the mind by such mystical states as ecstasy and infused contemplation.

We must be cautious about projecting categories such as "acquired" and "infused" contemplation onto the writings of St. Thomas; these categories came into being at a much later period and would have been unknown to him. The fact is, however, that St. Thomas does make a distinction between what might be called "ordinary" contemplation, which makes use of images or phantasms derived from sensible things, and contemplation which goes beyond all images and all deductive reasoning to focus, however obscurely, on God as He is in Himself. This latter kind of contemplation is what St. Thomas describes under the name of "rapture." By classifying rapture under the gratuitous graces, along with miracles, prophecy, and the like, St. Thomas has in effect removed it from the ordinary development of the life of prayer and even from the ordinary development of the contemplative life to which he says it belongs. This "confusion," as one author has called it, is one reason why few Christians even today aspire to mysticism but consider it the special prerogative of a small number of exceptionally privileged souls.

Rapture, it must be admitted, presents a problem of classifica-

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tion. It is neither a kind of knowledge of God which man can have in this life, nor is it that kind of knowledge of God which he can expect to have in the life to come. It stands midway between and partakes of them both. How one classifies it will depend, ultimately, upon the total understanding one has of man and of how man comes to know God.

It may be, then, that an examination of St. Thomas's doctrine of rapture will reveal much that may be applied to his spirituality as a whole and even, perhaps, something of the nature of his own spiritual experience. What did St. Thomas teach about rapture? What can we learn from this teaching about his spirituality as a whole? What, if any, light does it shed on the nature of his own spiritual experience? These are the questions that will be addressed in this paper.

In doing so, we shall look primarily at two works which contain what may be taken to represent St. Thomas's mature thought on the subject of rapture, the Summa theologiae and the Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios. In the Summa, we shall confine ourselves mainly to Question 175 of the Secunda secundae, though some other parts of the Summa must be consulted in conjunction with it, particularly Question 12 of the Prima Pars. In the Expositio, we shall look mainly at Chapter 12, the first and second lectures, which contain St. Thomas's commentary on II Corinthians 12:1-6.

Both of these works may have been composed during the same period of St. Thomas's life, the years 1270-72, in Paris. These are certainly the years during which Question 175 of the Secunda secundae was written. It appears likely, however, that the part of the
Expositio which contains Chapter 12 is a reportatio by Reginald of Piperno from a lectura given by St. Thomas in Italy between the years 1259-65.¹ In addition to these two main sources, there is an earlier work, the De veritate, written during St. Thomas's first Parisian regency in the years 1256-59,² which contains St. Thomas's doctrine of rapture in substantially the same form as it takes in the later works, with one, as we shall see, notable exception.

²loc. cit., 362-3.
ST. THOMAS'S TEACHING ON RAPTURE

Rapture Defined

"Raptus est ab eo quod est secundum naturam, in id quod est supra naturam, vi superioris naturae, elevatio." St. Thomas makes this definition the starting point of his exposition of rapture in Question 175 of the Secunda secundae,¹ as it had been in the De veritate.² In the Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios, where it occurs as a summing-up of Paul's vision,³ St. Thomas seems satisfied that it fulfills the requirements of a good definition, for he observes that it gives the genus to which rapture belongs (elevatio), the efficient cause of rapture (vi superioris naturae), and the two poles between which it moves, the terminus a quo (ab eo quod est secundum naturam) and the terminus in quem (in id quod est supra naturam). In the De veritate, he notes that rapture is so defined by the Masters (a Magistoris);⁴ no more exact source for the definition has been identified.⁵

The end of human life

With this definition of rapture, the basic question with which

¹ Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 1.
² De ver., q. 13, a. 1.
³ In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.

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St. Thomas will be concerned in his teaching on rapture already presents itself. What is, and what is not, natural to man? In rapture, as we have seen, St. Thomas teaches that man is elevated to the vision of the divine essence. But is not man by nature ordained to the vision of the divine essence as his eternal happiness and end? Why then does he need the "power of a higher nature" to help him attain to it?

In the Prima secundae, Questions 1-5, St. Thomas has already demonstrated that the vision of the divine essence is the end of human life. In order to understand his argument, we may find it helpful to back up and look at the context in which it occurs. The plan of the Summa, as St. Thomas conceived it, is, in its barest essence, the neo-Platonic scheme of emanation and return.\(^1\) Part One concerns God and the coming forth of all things from Him, including man; Part Two concerns man's return to God; and Part Three concerns Christ, the mediator of that return.

It is a dynamic scheme. Man has come from somewhere and he is on the way somewhere. He is in statu viae;\(^2\) he is a viator.\(^3\) This perspective dominates St. Thomas's spirituality and it will be well to keep it in mind as we consider his doctrine of rapture.\(^4\)

All creatures came forth from God and so God is the end to which


\(^{2}\)Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 4.

\(^{3}\)Ibid.

\(^{4}\)See below, p. 51.
all creatures tend, but each tends toward Him in that way which is most in accord with its own nature.¹ Before St. Thomas can discuss man's return to God and the human acts involved in that return, therefore, he must first ask, What is man's nature? and, How, in accord with his own nature, does man tend toward God? This is the substance of the Prima secundae, Questions 1-5.

According to St. Thomas, the specific qualities distinguishing man from other creatures are his intellect and his will.² Man is man because he can know and freely choose and act on the basis of what he knows. Intellect and will are powers, or capacities, of the soul.³ They are special powers, for it is by virtue of them that man is said to be made to the image of God.⁴ In having them, man participates in—he somehow shares in the very being of—the divine nature.⁵ In tending toward God, then, man will do so with his intellect and his will, since these are the qualities which are specific to his nature. St. Thomas says that man tends toward happiness by "knowing and loving God."⁶

God is the end, considered in itself, which man desires to attain.

¹ Sum. theol. I-II, q. 1, a. 2.
² Sum. theol. I-II, q. 1, a. 1.
³ Sum. theol. I, q. 78, a. 1 (the powers of the soul); I, q. 79, a. 1 (the intellect as a power of the soul); I, q. 80, a. 2 (the intellectual appetite); I, q. 82, a. 2 (the intellectual appetite is the will).
⁴ Sum. theol. I, q. 93, a. 4.
⁵ Sum. theol. I, q. 45, a. 7.
⁶ Sum. theol. I-II, q. 1, a. 8.
The attainment of the end, so far as man is concerned (here St. Thomas uses the words "attainment," "possession," "use," "enjoyment"), must be an operation or act, since that which is actual, he postulates, is more perfect than that which is potential. It must be an act of the intellective part of the soul and not of the sensitive part, because it is impossible for man to be united to God through the senses. It must be an act of the intellect and not of the will, because desire of the end is not the same thing as attainment of the end, and the delight the will knows upon attaining that end comes not from the attainment itself but is a result that flows from it. It must, finally, be an act of the speculative intellect and not of the practical intellect, because the object of the speculative intellect is the highest object man can attain, the Divine Good. Happiness, therefore, consists principally in the contemplation of divine things (in contemplatione divinorum), by which St. Thomas seems to mean both the contemplation of God's effects and the contemplation of God Himself.

Now, the intellect desires to know not only that a thing is, but what it is; and, if it knows what an effect is, it is still not satisfied until it knows what the effect's cause is. But the Final Cause of all things is God. Man's happiness can only be complete, therefore, in knowing, not just what God is (he can know this by cont-
templating God's effects in creation) but what God is, and this experience St. Thomas calls the vision of the divine essence.¹

**How man can attain to this end**

The vision of the divine essence is, therefore, the end of human life. How can man attain to this vision? Essentially, the rest of the Second Part of the *Summa* constitutes an answer to this question. The *Prima secundae* treats of human acts, their intrinsic and extrinsic principles; the *Secunda secundae* treats of the virtues, theological and cardinal, along with their corresponding vices, and ends with a treatise on matters pertaining especially to certain men: the gratuitous graces, the active and contemplative life, and the states of life. The normal development of the Christian life is based on nature as it is perfected by the operation of grace in the soul, a work that is divine but also requires human cooperation. Ordinarily, that life will not attain to the vision of God in His essence until after death.² When St. Thomas writes of the vision of the divine essence, he usually has in mind that knowledge of God which the blessed will enjoy in heaven.

Such knowledge of God is not possible for man in this life, because it is beyond the power of the created intellect. There are, however, at least two kinds of knowledge of God which man can enjoy in

¹ *Sum. theol. I-II, q. 3, a. 8.
² *De ver.*, q. 13, a. 1 ad 1: "Est etiam ei (intelligentiae humanae) naturale quod perveniat ad cognoscendum Deum per se ipsum in sui consummatione, scilicet in patria; et si in statu viae elevetur ad hoc quod cognoscat Deum secundum statum patriae, hoc erit contra naturam, sicut esset contra naturam quod puer mox natus haberet barbar."
this life, short of the vision of the divine essence. St. Thomas considers the ways in which man can know God in Question 12 of the First Part of the Summa, in the middle of his treatise on God, when he asks the question, How can God be known by us?

He begins by asking whether any created intellect can see the essence of God. His answer is, "Yes!" Not only is God in His very nature supremely knowable, but man has a natural desire to know which remains unsatisfied with anything less than God. If man could not know God as He is, then he would not be able to attain to the end to which he is naturally oriented, and this would be contrary to the nature of things. So man must be able to attain to the vision of the divine essence.¹

But man by nature knows by means of his senses. He receives impressions from material objects in the world about him through his senses, and from these impressions—these sensory images or, as St. Thomas calls them, phantasms, in the mind—the intellect abstracts general principles. We can this act "knowing."² But God cannot be known in this way, because God is spirit. It is true that man can know something of God by seeing His image reflected in the world of creation. But knowledge of God through His effects is not knowledge of God in His essence. Through His effects man can know that God is; he cannot know what He is. So, while it is possible for man to attain to a kind of knowledge of God by natural reason based on im-

¹Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 1.
²Cognitio. Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 12. For a fuller presentation of St. Thomas's theory of natural knowledge, see Sum. theol. I, q. 85.
pressions received through the senses, this knowledge falls short of
the vision of the divine essence.

A higher kind of knowledge man can have of God is the knowledge
of Him which man receives by grace. Grace is an external principle,
freely given by God, which enables man to seek Him. By grace man re­
cieves power to believe truths which he could not arrive at by natural
reason alone. St. Thomas says that, in knowing God by grace, "the in­
tellect's natural light is strengthened by the infusion of gratuitous
light." It also happens, says St. Thomas, that God sometimes forms
images or sensations in the mind apart from sensible things, as when
one receives a prophetic vision.

The knowledge of God man has by grace remains obscure, because
grace enables the intellect to assent to truths which it does not "see." St.
Thomas, quoting Dionysius, says that by grace we are "united to Him
as to one unknown." By grace man can know God more fully than by
natural reason. He can know more about Him than simply that He is;
he still can not know what He is. The knowledge of faith, therefore,
still falls short of the vision of the divine essence.

In order for man to attain to the vision of the divine essence,
says St. Thomas, it is necessary that man's intellect be strengthened
by a still more powerful light, a light that will raise it up and en­
able it to "see" those things which are beyond its natural power of

\[1\text{Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 12.}
\[2\text{Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 13. For St. Thomas's teaching on grace, cf. Sum. theol. I-II, qq. 109-114.}
\[3\text{ibid.}
\[4\text{ibid. Dionysius, De mystica theol., i.}

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knowing. This light St. Thomas calls the lumen gloriae, the "light of glory."\(^1\)

In trying to explain what the light of glory is, St. Thomas compares the way man sees by it with the way man sees by nature.\(^2\) He says that, in the ordinary process of seeing, there are two things: the power of sight and the thing seen. When the thing seen is corporeal, it can only be present in the mind of the seer by its likeness and not by its essence, because it is obvious that a corporeal thing cannot be in two places at the same time. But, in seeing by means of the light of glory, God Himself becomes the principle of man's visual power and He is also the thing seen. Since God Himself cannot be man's visual power, it must be that this power is some kind of participated likeness of God, some similitude of God in the visual power whereby man is made capable of seeing God.\(^3\)

Here are St. Thomas's own words:

I answer that, Everything which is raised up to what exceeds its nature, must be prepared by some disposition above its nature; as, for example, if air is to receive the form of fire, it must be prepared by some disposition for such a form. But when any created intellect sees the essence of God, the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect. Hence it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height. Now since the natural power of the created intellect does not avail to enable it to see the essence of God, as was shown in the preceding article, it is necessary that the power of understanding should be

\(^1\)Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 2.
\(^2\)ibid.
\(^3\)ibid.
added by divine grace. Now the increase of the intellectual powers is called the illumination of the intellect, as we also call the intelligible object itself by the name of light of illumination. And this is the light spoken of in the Apocalypse: The glory of God hath enlightened it—viz., the society of the blessed who see God. By this light the blessed are made deiform—that is, like to God, according to the saying: When he shall appear we shall be like to him, and (Vulg. because) we shall see him as he is.  

There are, then, three kinds of knowledge that man can have of God. By natural reason man can know that God is. By grace man can know God more fully than just that He is but still cannot know what He is. By the light of glory man can know what He is, that is, he can attain to the vision of the divine essence. Ordinarily, the first two kinds of knowledge of God are possible for man in this life; the third is not. This is clear from St. Thomas's statement in Question 12, Article 11:

I answer that, God cannot be seen in His essence by a mere human being, except he be separated from this mortal life. The reason is, because, as was said above (a. 4), the mode of knowledge follows the mode of the nature of the knower. But our soul, as long as we live in this life, has its being in corporeal matter; hence naturally it knows only what has a form in matter, or what can be known by such a form. Now it is evident that the divine essence cannot be known through the nature of material things. For it was shown above (aa. 2, 9) that the knowledge of God by means of any created similitude is not the vision of His essence. Hence it is impossible for the soul of man in this life to see the essence of God.  

There is a persistent Christian tradition that St. Thomas cannot ignore, however, which says that some men have seen God in His essence

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1 Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 5.
2 Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 11.
while still in this life. It is possible to explain away some of these experiences by pointing out that they involved images or sensations in the mind, as St. Thomas does for Peter and for Jacob. It is not possible to contradict direct statements in Scripture, backed up by the authority of the Fathers, especially St. Augustine, that Moses and Paul, at least, saw God "face to face."

The key to resolving this dilemma lies, as St. Thomas tells us later in Question 180, in what is meant by the words "in this life." He quotes St. Augustine as saying that:

no one seeing God lives in this mortal life wherein the bodily senses have their play: and unless in some way he depart this life, whether by going altogether out of his body, or by withdrawing from his carnal senses, he is not caught up into that vision.

One can be "in this life" in two ways, says St. Thomas: first, in regard to act, and in this case the vision of the divine essence is an impossibility; second,

potentially and not in regard to act, that is to say, when the soul is united to the mortal body as its form, yet so as to make use neither of the bodily senses, nor even of the imagination, as happens in rapture, and in this way the contemplation of the present life can attain to the vision of the divine essence.

In Question 12 of the First Part, consequently, St. Thomas, look-

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1 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3 ad 1.
2 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 5 ad 1.
3 St. Thomas cites St. Augustine on Moses in Sum. theol. II-II, q. 174, a. 4, and on Paul in II-II, q. 175, a. 3.
4 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 5.
5 Ibid.
ing ahead to the subjects of rapture and of the contemplative life which remain to be discussed, leaves the door open to the possibility that some have been granted the vision of the divine essence while still in this life, when he says:

As God works miracles in corporeal things, so also He does supernatural wonders above the common order, raising the minds of some living in the flesh beyond the use of sense, even up to the vision of His own essence; as Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii. 26, 27, 28) of Moses, the teacher of the Jews; and of Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles. This will be treated more fully in the question of rapture.¹

Rapture Exemplified

St. Thomas and St. Paul

In order to understand St. Thomas's teaching on rapture, we have found it necessary to consider his teaching on the vision of the divine essence because, as it has now become apparent, rapture is a special case wherein the vision of the divine essence is vouchsafed to someone who is still in this life. The meaning of the definition St. Thomas uses has now become clear: Raptus est ab eo quod est secundum naturam, in id quod est supra naturam, vi superioris naturae, elevatio. In rapture man is lifted up by the power of a higher nature to an end which is beyond his natural powers to attain.

In explaining what this end is and why it is beyond the natural powers of man to attain, St. Thomas has employed mainly theoretical

¹Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 11 ad 2.
arguments. When it comes to examining the experience of rapture more closely, however, St. Thomas is concerned mainly with concrete historical examples. This is as true of his exposition of rapture in the theological works, the De veritate and the Summa, as it is of his exposition of it in the Scriptural commentary. The experiences of Moses and St. Paul, as they have been recorded in Scripture and interpreted by the Fathers of the Church, have made it necessary, as we have seen,¹ for St. Thomas to allow for the theoretical possibility of rapture in a system which is essentially complete without it. These experiences, especially that of St. Paul as he himself described it in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, provide the basis for St. Thomas's analysis of what happens in rapture, as well as furnishing (in St. Thomas's eyes) incontrovertible evidence that such experiences have really occurred.

St. Thomas's closeness to St. Paul has been somewhat neglected.² For him, Paul was "The Apostle," as Aristotle was "The Philosopher." Many authorities hold that he commented twice on Paul's Epistles, once in Italy between the years 1259-65 and again in Naples in 1272-73; Glorieux places the second exposition in Paris is 1270-72.³ No matter; the point is that St. Thomas knew Paul's writings well and was influenced by them. He would also have felt a closeness to Paul by the very fact of being a Dominican. St. Dominic, the founder of the Order of

¹See above, p. 16-18.
³Weisheipl, op. cit., p. 372-3.
Preachers, had a special devotion to Paul. We are told that he carried with him always the Gospel of St. Matthew and the Epistles of St. Paul and studied them so constantly that he knew them almost by heart. Paul was the prototype of the Friars Preachers, the man of action and contemplation after whom the ideal of the Order was patterned. We can assume with some certainty that St. Thomas would have identified himself to some extent with Paul and pondered the apostle’s experiences deeply. We may imagine that it is not entirely with a detached, theoretical interest that St. Thomas makes Paul’s account in Chapter 12 of his Second Epistle to the Corinthians the starting point for his teaching on rapture.

What Paul knew

In the Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios, St. Thomas notes that Paul, in describing his experience, tells us that there were certain things he knew and something he did not know. In II Cor. 12, Paul writes:

I know a man in Christ fourteen years ago (whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not; God knows) caught up (raptum) to the third heaven. I know a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not; God knows) who was caught up (raptus est) to paradise, and heard mysterious words (arcana verba) which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Let us, St. Thomas proposes, look first at those things which

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2In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.

3II Cor. 12:2-4, my translation of the Latin version St. Thomas was using in In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.
Paul knew, "ut per nota ad ignota facilius pervenire possimus."¹

Paul knew, first of all, says St. Thomas, the condition he was in at the time he was rapt: he was in Christ. Now, to be in Christ can be understood in two ways:

Uno modo per fidem et fidei sacramentum, secundum illud Apostoli Galat. 3,27: "Quotquot baptizati estis, Christum induistis," scilicet per fidem, et fidei sacramentum; et hoc modo scivit se Apostolus in Christo esse. Alio modo dicitur aliquid esse in Christo per caritatem; et hoc modo nullus scit se esse in Christo certitudiner, nisi per quaedam experimenta et signa, inquantum sentit se dispositum et conjunctum Christo, ita quod nullu modo etiam propter mortem permitteret se separari ab eo; et hoc de se expertus erat Apostolus, cum dicebat Rom. 8, 38: "Certus sum quod neque mors neque vita, neque Angeli neque Principatus, neque Virtutes, neque instantia neque futura, neque fortitudo neque altitudo neque profundum, neque creatura alia separabit nos a caritate Dei." Unde potuit habere hujusmodi signa, quod esset in caritate Christi.²

Several things in this passage are worthy of attention. We notice at the outset that St. Thomas places Paul's experience of rapture squarely within the context of the life of faith and the sacramental life of the Church: Paul first knew himself to be in Christ "per fidem et fidei sacramentum." In addition to this knowledge of faith, Paul had a higher knowledge through love, "per caritatem." This love seems not to be the apostle's love for Christ but the love of Christ Himself, for it is later referred to as "caritate Christi." Through this love, Paul knew himself to be in Christ by certain ex-

¹ibid.
²ibid.
periences and signs, per quaedam experimenta et signa. St. Thomas speaks in terms of knowledge, but it is an experiential knowledge that he is writing about: Paul felt himself, sentit se, joined to Christ; he knew by experience, expertus erat, so that he could say that he was certain: Certus sum. Finally, through love he felt himself brought into relationship with and joined to Christ, dispositum et conjunctum Christo; love brought about union, a union so strong that nothing, not even death, could sever it.

St. Thomas has often been accused of intellectualism. Here the role love plays in rapture seems preeminent. Lest it be thought that this passage is atypical, let us also look at Question 175 of the Secunda secundae, Article 2, where St. Thomas considers the question, Whether rapture pertains to the cognitive rather than the appetitive power of man. Here St. Thomas clarifies the relationship between intellect and will, knowledge and love, in rapture.

Rapture, formally speaking, is an intellectual act. This is so because, as we have seen, St. Thomas separates attainment of the vision of the divine essence from desire for the vision and from the delight that attains upon it. But love can be a cause of rapture, says St. Thomas, and thus rapture may have a cause on the part of the appetitive power; love can also flow from rapture as a result.

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1For a fuller discussion of St. Thomas's intellectualism, see below, p. 39ff.

2See above, p. 11.

3A cause, because the primary or efficient cause of rapture is the light of glory; see above, p. 15.
From the very fact that the appetite is strongly affected towards something, it may happen, owing to the violence of his affection, that man is carried away from everything else. Also, rapture has an effect on the appetitive power, when for instance a man delights in the things to which he is rapt.¹

It is interesting that in the De veritate, which St. Thomas wrote in 1256-59, and in the Summa Contra Gentiles, which he wrote between the years 1259-65,² a consideration of the affective side of rapture is wholly absent. In fact, the addition of Article 2 in Question 175 of the Summa appears to be the only major change in St. Thomas's presentation of rapture from his presentation of it in Question 12, "De raptu," of the De veritate some 11-16 years before. Did something happen between the writing of these two works, one at the beginning and the other near the end of the saint's career, to cause him to want to include a treatment of the affective side of rapture in the later work?

Unfortunately, the question is unanswerable. Weisheipl, in his recent fine biography of St. Thomas,³ suggests tantalizingly that a change in the mentality of St. Thomas may have occurred around 1269-70, leading him to moderate the rather severe intellectualism of his early career. Several scholars working on different aspects of St. Thomas's thought have noted changes in emphasis that would seem to bear this out. The difficulty with trying to prove that the addition of Article

¹Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 2.
²Weisheipl, op. cit., p. 259-60.
³loc. cit., p. 244-5.
2 in Question 175 is another instance of such a change is the fact that the date of his commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians remains uncertain. If it is a late work, the argument may hold; if, as now seems likely,¹ it is a reportatio from the earlier commentary, it would appear that St. Thomas's position on the importance of love in rapture remained relatively constant.

The second thing Paul knew when he was rapt, besides the fact that he was in Christ, was when the vision occurred: "fourteen years ago." St. Thomas calculates that the experience took place directly after Paul's conversion on the way to Damascus, during the three days he remained blind in that city, neither eating nor drinking.² This is important because it would indicate that rapture does not depend on spiritual maturity or unusual sanctity.

The third thing Paul knew was where he was caught up to: "the third heaven." One is said to be rapt, says St. Thomas, when he is carried away suddenly and by violence.³ "Rapture denotes violence of a kind," he observes in the Summa.⁴ A violent act, according to Aristotle, is one whose principle is external. St. Thomas uses the same word for physical rape that he uses for spiritual rapture.⁵ In rapture, how-

¹loc. cit., p. 372-3.
²In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.
³ibid. Subiter et per violentiam.
⁴Raptus quandam violentiam importat. Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 1.
⁵cf. Sum. theol. II-II, q. 154, a. 7.
ever, the soul is not snatched away against its will to an end it
does not desire. It is more as if the soul were picked up and
transported in the twinkling of an eye to an end towards which it is
already tending and which it vehemently desires. St. Thomas uses
the image of a stone. It is not, he says, as if a stone were inter­
rupted in mid-air and hurtled upwards, in the opposite direction to
that in which it had been going. It is as if a stone were propelled
downwards with a greater velocity than is consistent with its natural
movement.¹

One is said to be rapt, says St. Thomas, when he is made to be
outside of himself, extra se ipsum, and this is the same thing as
ecstasy.² But ecstasy can be brought about in two ways: through the
appetitive power and through the cognitive. When one is rapt by the
power of the appetite, his affections are transferred from himself to
others, so that he desires the good of others; and this is an effect
of love. This, he says, is why Dionysius says, "The divine love pro­
duces ecstasy."³ But, when one is rapt through the cognitive power,
one is made to be outside of himself when one outside
the natural manner of man is raised to see something;
and it is of this kind of rapture that the Apostle is
speaking here.⁴

De isto raptu loquitur hic Apostolus: St. Thomas again clear­
ly distinguishes Paul's experience as an intellectual vision. We

¹Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 1.
²In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.
³Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 2; cf. Dionysius, Div. Nom. iv.
⁴In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1. My translation.
have already seen how this vision is brought about:

Man, then, is made to be outside of himself through the cognitive power when he is removed from this natural order of knowing, and the intellect, abstracted from the use of the senses and of sensible things, is moved to see something by divine power; and this is properly said to be elevation: because the agent [God] is assimilating to itself the passive party [man], abstracted as he is, by divine power, and this is above man; it is something that is higher than is natural to man.

The "higher place" to which Paul was caught up was the third heaven, which denotes intellectual vision. The third heaven was thought to be an actual place in medieval cosmology, as St. Thomas points out; here, however, he uses the expression metaphorically. The first, second, and third heavens, he tells us, stand for three kinds of supernatural vision: bodily, imaginative, and intellectual.

"To the third heaven," Paul says in one sentence, and in the next he says, "to paradise." Why two different names for the same place? The gloss St. Thomas was using evidently interpreted this to mean that Paul was writing about two different visions he had had on two separate occasions. St. Thomas disagrees with this interpretation. Paul was writing about one and the same vision, he says, under two aspects. "The third heaven" refers to the clarity with which he saw God, and "paradise" refers to the sweetness with which he enjoyed Him. Claritas and suavitas: "You shall see, and you shall rejoice," said Isaiah (66:14). Here again, we see how closely for St.

1 In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1. My translation.
2 Sum. theol. I, q. 68, a. 4.
3 Ibid.
4 In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 2.
Thomas the intellectual and the affective elements in rapture are intertwined.

The three heavens may also be taken to refer to the three hierarchies of angels. According to this interpretation, Paul saw God as clearly as the angels of the first and highest hierarchy see Him, for they see God in such a way that they receive illuminations directly in God Himself, and they know divine mysteries; and this is the way Paul saw.1

Does this mean that Paul was perfect, as the angels are perfect? No, because the light of glory by which he saw God was communicated to him in a transient manner, in the way of a passion, per modum passionis, and not as a habit.2 So it could be lost again and did not have to remain.

What Paul did not know

There were three things, then, that Paul knew when he was rapt: the condition he was in, the time the vision occurred, and the place to which he was rapt. But there was one thing he did not know. "Whether in the body, or out of the body, I know not; God knows," he wrote. With the help of Aristotelian psychology, St. Thomas gives an explanation of the psychology of rapture that is fuller and more perfect than any that had been given before.3 Three out of the six articles in Ques-

1In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 2. My translation. The place of angels in St. Thomas's spirituality deserves further study.

2In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.

tion 175 of the *Secunda secundae* are devoted to this explanation.

This is the explanation St. Thomas gives.\(^1\) Man, by nature, knows by means of phantasms or mental images received through the senses. It is impossible for him to know God in this way, not only because God is a spirit, but also because if it were possible for a mental image or species of God to be present in the mind, this mental image or species would not be a true image of God, because it would leave out the essential element of His being, namely, existence. God is unlike any other being in that, for Him, essence and existence are one and the same thing. For the mind to see God, therefore, it is necessary that God Himself be substituted for the image in the mind which would be present in any other kind of seeing. The vision of God takes place, therefore, by means of an actual union between the soul and God. The soul sees God immediately, not by means of an image or species but in His essence or "as He is."

The light of glory is the medium in which the vision takes place, much as the natural light enables physical seeing to take place.

Rapture differs from the beatific vision in that it is transient, like a passion, and not an abiding state; it also differs in that the body has no part in it, as it will for the saints in heaven who will have glorified bodies. For the duration of rapture, the soul is abstracted or withdrawn from the senses and is unconscious of sensation. Thus Paul knew not whether he was in the body or out of the body.

\(^{1}\) For the explanation that follows, I am indebted to Sharpe (op. cit., p. 217-22), who has given a particularly lucid summary of St. Thomas's teaching on this matter.
Did St. Thomas believe that he had given a final and authoritative explanation for what happens in rapture? Let us look at his last words on the subject of Paul's ignorance, as they are to be found in the last article of Question 175.¹ He quotes St. Augustine:

"If the Apostle doubted the matter, who of us will dare to be certain about it?" (Gen. ad lit. xii. 3) Therefore those who have something to say on this subject speak with more conjecture than certainty.

Paul's response

After St. Thomas has commented on what Paul knew and what he did not know in rapture, in the Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios, he goes on to comment on Paul's response to the vision. Paul's response, as characterized by St. Thomas, was threefold: delight, silence, and humility.

That St. Thomas believed Paul experienced delight as a result of the vision has already been shown by his identification of the "third heaven" with the "paradise" of sweetness.² St. Thomas compares the sweetness Paul experienced with the sweetness with which the angels and saints enjoy God in heaven: summa suavitas, qua Deo fruuntur.³ He speaks of joy:

And this sweetness is the joy of divine enjoyment, about which is said (Matth. 25:13): "Enter into the joy of your Lord."⁴

Paul's second response was silence. No one who reads the lengthy

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¹Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 6 ad 1.
³In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 2.
⁴Ibid. My translation.
and detailed explanation St. Thomas gives of the state Paul was in when in rapture can fail to notice his reticence about what it was Paul actually saw. Paul himself does not mention "seeing," but says that he "heard mysterious words (arcana verba) which it is not lawful for a man to utter." "Seeing" and "hearing," as St. Thomas himself tells us, are figurative expressions for the soul's consideration (consideratio) of divine things, i.e., of the divine essence. But God in His essence cannot be known by means of any similitude from creation. The reason Paul could not speak of the things he had experienced was because, although they remained in his mind by means of certain "intelligible species," he could not relate them to any phantasm or sense-image, and, since all human thought and speech depend upon such images, he could neither form a coherent thought of them nor put them into words. He had no course but to choose silence.

It is possible for St. Thomas to argue, as he does, that Paul did indeed see the vision of God in His essence. It is possible for him to add, and he does, that Paul experienced this as a transitory passion and that it was therefore not so perfect a vision as that which the blessed enjoy in heaven. It is possible for him to demonstrate, and he does, that this vision can be more perfect in one man than in

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1 ibid.
2 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 4 ad 3.
3 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3.
4 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 6 ad 3.
another,¹ and that, in any case, it does not mean that God was
totally comprehended in it, since God cannot be perfectly compre-
hended by any created intellect.² It is possible for him to argue,
and he does, that, seeing God in His essence, one is also able to
see other truths in Him.³ But all of this speculation skirts around
the content of the actual vision, which is utterly beyond the power
of human language to describe. In St. Thomas's words, which here
sound very Dionysian,

    it is plain that that which Paul saw of the divine es-
    sence, no tongue is able to utter.⁴

Paul's third and final response was humility.

    Of such a one will I glory: yet of myself will I not
    glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would de-
sire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the
    truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of
    me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he hear-
    eth of me.⁵

Paul had a right to boast about his experience, for in so doing he
would only be speaking the truth. Yet Paul said he would not glory,
except in his weaknesses. He would not make himself seem to be some-
thing he was not. Rapture cannot be entered by effort, nor can it
be merited; it is a gift. It is supra posse meritorum.⁶ The only

¹Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 6.
²Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 7. See above, p. 12ff.
³Sum. theol. I, q. 12, a. 8.
⁴In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 2. My translation.
⁵II Corinth. 12:6,7.
⁶In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 2.
proper response to such a gift is humility. St. Thomas ends the discussion of rapture in his commentary on II Corinthians 12 by quoting Ecclesiastes 3:20: "The greater you are, the more humbly you should behave." (Quanto magnus es, humilia te in omnibus.)\(^1\)

\(^1\)In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 2.
ST. THOMAS'S SPIRITUALITY: SOME OBSERVATIONS
BASED ON HIS TEACHING ON RAPTURE

In the preceding pages, we have attempted to set forth as clearly as possible the teaching of St. Thomas on the phenomenon he called "rapture." We are now in a position to consider the question, What does St. Thomas's teaching on rapture have to tell us about his spirituality as a whole?

Despite the possibilities of his subject, we find in St. Thomas's writing on rapture none of the poetic language or pious exhortation sometimes to be found in "spiritual writing" on such a topic. St. Thomas's style is simple and direct, with no frills or flourishes—the plain, plodding, unornamented prose we should expect to have from one who, in his youth, was called by his classmates "the dumb ox."\(^1\) It is, in fact, not "spiritual writing" at all that we are concerned with here, but philosophy. This rather obvious fact needs to be stated here at the outset of our investigation into the nature of St. Thomas's spirituality, lest those who read St. Thomas for his spirituality do so with false expectations. St. Thomas did not develop his teaching on rapture to guide or inspire or edify the soul on the way to perfection. The importance of his teaching on rapture for the spiritual life lies in quite another direction.

Nevertheless, if by "spirituality" is meant a body of more or less organized teaching regarding how man comes to know God, it is evident from what we have seen so far that there exists in St.

\(^1\) Foster, p. 32.
Thomas's writings such a body of teaching and that, presumably, it could be of some use to the soul seeking God. We have seen\(^1\) that he develops a scheme of the three kinds of knowledge man can have of God: by natural reason, by grace, and by the light of glory. At first glance, it is tempting to try to set this scheme alongside other, more traditional, tripartite schemes of the spiritual life;\(^2\) on further acquaintance, it seems to be a very different kind of scheme indeed. St. Thomas's first "way," that of natural reason, does not belong exclusively to the spiritual life, but is accessible to all men, while his third "way," that of the light of glory, is not even attainable by man in this life. Where did this scheme come from, and what are its underlying principles?

We have seen\(^3\) that rapture did not fit comfortably into this scheme and that, in fact, St. Thomas was forced to engage in a sort of philosophical tour-de-force in order to accommodate it. During the course of his explanation of rapture—what it is and how it is possible for man in this life—some of the underpinnings of St. Thomas's system are revealed. In this chapter, we should like to make some general observations about these underpinnings. We should like to inquire about what St. Thomas's teaching on rapture reveals to us about his spirituality as a whole.

\(^1\)See above, p. 12-16.

\(^2\)For example, I have before me William of St. Thierry's Golden Epistle, which divides the spiritual life into three (not necessarily temporal) stages: the animal man, the rational man, and the spiritual man.

\(^3\)See above, p. 16-18, 27-28.
Bernard Gui, one of the saint's biographers, tells the story of a certain Master Romanus, St. Thomas's successor in the chair at Paris, who died and some time later appeared to St. Thomas in a vision. St. Thomas put to him the question, "How do you see God? Do you see Him immediately, or only by means of some image?" The vision of the divine essence was, as Walz notes, "a thesis... very dear to him." It is everywhere in his writings. St. Thomas writes about the vision of the divine essence as it is enjoyed by angels, by Adam before the Fall, by Christ while on earth, by man in rapture, and by the blessed in heaven.

He was apparently not alone in this preoccupation. Beryl Smalley, in *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, says that "the problem of the beatific vision—whether man can attain to direct vision of the divine essence [was] table talk in the ninth century" and became so again in the twelfth. It seems to have been a favorite topic for debate among the scholastics of St. Thomas's day. In the

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1 Foster, p. 40-41.
3 *Sum. theol.* I, q. 56, a. 3.
4 *Sum. theol.* I, q. 94, a. 1.
5 *Sum. theol.* III, q. 9, a. 2.
6 *Sum. theol.* Suppl., q. 92.
occasional references to "quidam" and "alii" which St. Thomas makes during his discussion of rapture, we can catch echoes of the lively debate that must have swirled around this topic even as he was writing.

The starting point for the debate seems to have been Augustine's De videndo Deo.2

Even the casual reader of St. Thomas's teaching on rapture, as it is contained in both the Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios and the Summa, cannot fail to notice how much St. Thomas owes to the Scriptures and to tradition, particularly to Augustine. That the Scriptures were a primary source for the development of his doctrine of rapture goes almost without saying. The experiences of Moses3 and especially of St. Paul furnished much of the material upon which his speculation was based. Yet, in the case of others in Scripture whose experiences were somewhat similar to those of Moses and Paul—Jacob,4 David,5 Isaiah,6 Daniel,7 Peter,8 and John9—St. Thomas found cogent

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1 See, for example, Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3 and De ver., q. 13, a. 5.
2 Smalley, op. cit.
3 St. Thomas discusses the experience of Moses in Sum. theol. II-II, q. 174, on prophecy.
4 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 5 ad 1.
5 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 174, a. 4 ad 1.
6 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3 ad 4.
7 ibid.
8 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3 ad 1.
9 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3 ad 4.
reasons for denying that they had enjoyed the vision of the divine essence. He could conceivably have made the same claim, if he had wanted to, for Moses and Paul also. In fact, it would have made his task a lot easier. Why didn't he do so?

The answer is surely that St. Thomas did not wish to challenge the authority of Augustine in so high a matter. Augustine, in his Letter 147, On the Vision of God, had clearly taught that both Moses and Paul had enjoyed the vision of God in His essence while still in this life. In establishing this in his own writings, St. Thomas simply appeals to his great predecessor's authority. For Moses, St. Thomas says that he "saw God's very essence, even as Paul in his rapture did, according to Augustine."¹ For Paul, he says,

Some have said that Paul, when in rapture, saw not the very essence of God, but a certain reflection of His purity. But Augustine clearly comes to an opposite decision, not only in his book (De videndo Deo) but also in Gen. ad lit. xii. 28.²

As St. Thomas developed his teaching in Question 175 of the Secunda secundae, based on Paul's experience in II Corinthians 12, he cited Augustine a total of thirteen times, sometimes to raise an objection, more often to support or confirm his own conclusions. Three of these citations are from the De videndo Deo and eight are from the Literal Commentary on Genesis, XII,³ leading us to believe that St. Thomas must have had this latter work open on the table be-

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¹Sum. theol. II-II, q. 174, a. 4.
²Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 3.
³The other two are from the Confessions, I, 1 and the City of God, XIV, 7, 9.
fore him while he was writing.

Thomas Merton, in *The Ascent to Truth*, points out that Catholic tradition has generally held that three men saw God in His essence while still in this life: Moses, Elijah, and Paul.\(^1\) The omission of Elijah\(^2\) leaves St. Thomas with two great visionaries, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The belief that only these two have experienced rapture finds an additional argument from the correspondence between the Old and the New Testaments, a favorite theme in medieval exegesis.\(^3\)

Such [the contemplation of the divine truth in its essence] was the rapture of Paul, as also of Moses; and not without reason (*satis congruenter*); since as Moses was the first Teacher of the Jews, so was Paul the first Teacher of the gentiles.\(^4\)

This argument was probably also derived from Augustine.\(^5\)

It seems fair to say, then, that St. Thomas's belief in the possibility of rapture, as well as his belief in the relative rarity of its occurrence, came from Augustine. If it had not been for Augustine, St. Thomas might well have left rapture out of his teaching on the spiritual life altogether. Once he had accepted it as a "given," however, Augustine's insistence that only two men had ever known God in this way while still in this life went along with St.

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2 About Elijah St. Thomas has apparently nothing to say; here he probably follows Augustine.

3 Smalley, p. 6.

4 *Sum. theol.* II-II, q. 175, a. 3 ad 1.

5 For Augustine's use of this theme, see Smalley, p. 25.
Thomas's own characteristic hesitancy to ascribe too much importance in his teaching to rare and elevated states of prayer.

In the final analysis, this hesitancy seems to have stemmed, not only from the saint's own genuine humility, but also from a determination on his part not to admit into his teaching on the spiritual life too many exceptions to the principles of Aristotle.

St. Thomas's Intellectualism

There are three aspects to the problem of St. Thomas's intellectualism that a study of his teaching on rapture raises. In the first place, St. Thomas's approach to the question of rapture is an intellectual one: his primary concern is to explain how rapture is possible in Aristotelian terms. In the second place, St. Thomas believes that the experience of rapture itself is intellectual in nature. Thirdly, there is the problem posed by St. Thomas's use of an intellectual method, that of scholasticism. All of these aspects are related to one another; yet they may be considered separately.

Let us first consider St. Thomas's approach to the question of rapture.

Once he has established, by appealing to the authority of Augustine, that some men have seen God in His essence and lived to tell about it, it becomes St. Thomas's primary concern to explain how it is possible for man to know God in this way while still in this life. He bases his explanation on a theory of natural knowledge derived from Aristotle.¹ The knowledge of God which man has in the

¹See above, p. 15.
vision of the divine essence comes about in a way similar to that by which he comes to know naturally. In seeing God in His essence, man finds that the light of glory is substituted for the natural light in which ordinary seeing occurs, and the essence of God Himself becomes the visual power or principle by which man sees. In rapture, man is temporarily suspended from his natural condition, so that he is in this life potentially but not in act, and so he is enabled to see God in a way not ordinarily available to him until his soul has been separated from his body by death.

The danger, of course, with an intellectual approach such as this to rapture is that St. Thomas might have given himself or others the impression, in explaining how rapture happens, that he had succeeded in "explaining" the experience itself. In fact, as we have seen, St. Thomas himself never considered his explanation to be anything but conjectural. Then, too, he was too aware of the transcendence of God and the limitations of human knowing to have any illusions about what it was that he was attempting to do. His logic operates very much on the periphery of the question of rapture. The core of the experience itself remains a mystery.

The second aspect of St. Thomas's intellectualism that presents a problem in his teaching on rapture is his opinion that rapture is itself, formally, an intellectual operation. But St. Thomas is far from

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1 See above, p. 29.
2 See above, p. 29-31.
3 See above, p. 22.
excluding from rapture the affective elements in favor of the intellectual elements, as we have seen.\(^1\) Instead, he is engaged in trying to clarify the relationship between the two. In analyzing the role which intellect and will, knowledge and love, play in rapture, he finds it necessary to separate them. In reality they work together and are inseparable. God cannot be known without love and delight being present in the soul at the same time as knowledge. It is merely that this love and delight are not the knowledge itself, but have helped to cause it and are the consequences attendant upon it.

St. Thomas teaches that the act of knowing is, in itself, higher than the act of loving. In actual practice, he admitted, it may be better to love than to know. It depends on the object involved. Here are St. Thomas's words:

> When, therefore, the thing in which there is good is nobler than the soul itself, in which is the idea understood; by comparison with such a thing, the will is higher than the intellect. But when the thing which is good is less noble than the soul, then even in comparison with that thing the intellect is higher than the will. Wherefore the love of God is better than the knowledge of God; but, on the contrary, the knowledge of corporeal things is better than the love thereof.\(^2\)

Theoretically, the intellect is higher than the will. When it comes to God, however, it is better to love Him than to know Him. This is hardly unbridled intellectualism!

Merton has pointed out\(^3\) the significance of this qualification

\(^1\)See above, p. 21, 26.
\(^2\)Sum. theol. I, q. 82, a. 3 (italics mine).
\(^3\)Merton, p. 274-87.
for the contemplative life. Contemplation is, formally, an intellectual act; nevertheless, in practice, "the most important element in the contemplative life is not knowledge but love." This is so because contemplation "flows from love and terminates in love"; it is so because love "is the end and consummation" of the contemplative life; and it is so because love "is the source of our merit."

We saw earlier¹ that love could be a cause of rapture because, as St. Thomas says,

from the very fact that the appetite is strongly affected towards something, it may happen, owing to the violence of his affection, that a man is carried away from everything else.²

God is the efficient cause of rapture; it can neither be brought about nor merited by man himself. But it is possible for man to dispose himself in such a way that "it may happen" that he is "carried away." How is this possible? By love. Ultimately, St. Thomas's teaching on rapture links up with his doctrine of love³ and how love is produced in the soul.

One more point needs to be made about St. Thomas's teaching on the intellectual nature of rapture, and it is perhaps the most important point of all. St. Thomas's notion of intellect is a vastly different one from ours.⁴ His intellectualism is not rationalism. For St. Thomas, knowledge is not primarily rational or discursive but

¹See above, p. 22.
²Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 2.
³See especially Sum. theol. II-II, qq. 23-27.
⁴Rousselot, op. cit., gives the best assessment of St. Thomas's intellectualism.
involves an intimate contact—a union—between the knower and the thing known.

This is clear in Question 180 of the Secunda secundae, in Article 6, where St. Thomas comments on Dionysius' division of the act of contemplation into a threefold movement, circular, straight, and oblique. "Straight" movement would seem to be what we today understand by discursive reasoning. In straight movement the soul moves from "exterior sensibles to the knowledge of intelligible objects" "according to the order of natural reason." "Oblique" movement is somewhat the same but, instead of using natural reason, depends upon "the light received from God," by which St. Thomas seems here to mean revelation. "Circular" movement, however, most nearly approximates the knowledge of God enjoyed by the angels, \(^1\) whose intuition of God is uniform and unceasing, having neither beginning nor end: even as a circular movement having neither beginning nor end is uniformly around the one same center. \(^2\)

In order for the soul to arrive at this angelic uniformity of vision, its twofold lack of uniformity needs to be removed.

First, that which arises from the variety of external things: this is removed by the soul withdrawing from externals....Secondly, another lack of uniformity requires to be removed from the soul, and this is owing to the discoursing of reason. This is done by directing all the soul's operations to the simple contemplation of the intelligible truth....Afterwards, these two things being done, he [Dionysius] mentions thirdly the uniformity which is like that of the angels, for then all

\(^1\)Leclercq, Jean, "La vie contemplative dans S. Thomas et dans la tradition," Recherches de theologie ancienne et medievale, XXVIII (1961), 260, on angels as models of contemplatives in medieval spirituality.

\(^2\)Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 6 ad 2.
things being laid aside, the soul continues in the contemplation of God alone.

Circular movement would seem to be the same kind of knowledge of God which man enjoys by means of the light of glory, that is, the vision of God in His essence. This is, as we have seen, the kind of knowledge that is had in rapture.

Continuing on the subject of St. Thomas's idea of knowledge, Housselot says that, for St. Thomas, "to know" means "to seize within the self a non-self which in its turn is capable of seizing and embracing the self: it is to live with the life of another." The intellect is, above all, "the faculty of being; the faculty which most truly grasps, attains, and holds being." Far from being only an epiphenomenon on the surface of life, the intellectual process is, for St. Thomas, "the life-process par excellence...the deepest and most intense activity of intellectual beings." It is the very opposite of something egocentric, "the faculty which emancipates men from subjectivity"; it might be called the "faculty of otherness."

Because creatures are finite, they possess being only to a finite degree. "To know" is, in effect, to make contact with and to assimil-

1 ibid.
2 See above, p. 2-3.
3 op. cit., p. 8.
4 loc. cit., p. 20.
5 ibid.
6 ibid.
ate within oneself the being of another. It is to expand one's own being and, by so doing, to become more oneself. One author, in writing of this activity, has used the term "ontological expansion."¹

Is this fanciful? A short lesson in Aristotelian optics would stand us in good stead here. St. Thomas's favorite metaphor for the knowing process is the metaphor of sight. That this is a conscious metaphor, he tells us himself.² The sense of sight is the noblest of the senses, and it corresponds to the intellect, the noblest of man's mental powers. If we were to understand the act of seeing in Aristotelian terms, as St. Thomas did, this would be a very powerful image. In Aristotelian terms, the physical act of seeing involved a very real contact between the seer and the thing seen—a kind of union.³ Sight has therefore an immediacy to it, a directness, which makes it a very apt metaphor for the highest kind of knowledge man can have of God.

The third aspect of St. Thomas's intellectualism which presents a problem for us in his teaching on rapture is the problem of his method, scholasticism. Not only is St. Thomas's approach intellectual, not only does he claim that rapture itself is intellectual in nature, but the method he has chosen to use is also intellectual. We are speaking here primarily of the Summa, but St. Thomas's doctrine of rapture

²Sum. theol. I, q. 67, a. 1.
³Sum. theol. I, q. 85, a. 2.
in the *Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios* also contains many scholastic digressions and could justifiably be termed "scholastic." What is the effect of applying a dialectical method to the realities of the spiritual life? Or, to state it more simply, Can there be such a thing as "scholastic spirituality"? After all, as Chenu rightly reminds us,\(^1\)

A commentary on Aristotle, a commentary on the Bible, a quodlibet, a *summa*, these are not shapeless vessels which pure reason can use indifferently. Rather, they have their own laws and their own spiritual bearing.

St. Thomas might not have meant to give the effect of subordinating religious truth to logic, but isn't this the effect that he achieved after all? Isn't St. Thomas's use of the scholastic method a classic example of the operation of McLuhan's law, "the medium is the message"?

In order to answer this question, which vexed the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at least as much as it does us, it will be well to look a little more closely at the scholastic method as it is actually used by St. Thomas.

The basic building block of the scholastic text, as it is used by St. Thomas, is the *quaestio*, or question. As we note when we read St. Thomas, a question can be divided into articles, each of which has to do with one aspect of the topic under discussion. In an article, a position is stated—usually the contrary of the position the author will be taking—and then a number of authorities are cited who would seem to support this position. The authorities may be the authors of

\(^1\) op. cit., p. 3.
Scripture, or the Fathers of the Church, or (often in St. Thomas) secular philosophers, or even writers who are contemporary or nearly contemporary to the author. Then another quotation is given, or an argument made, which seems to contradict the authorities who have already been quoted. The master then proceeds to give his solution to the problem and, finally, to show how the opinions of the authorities he has cited may be brought into harmony with one another by means of the solution he has proposed.

What is the value for spirituality of such a stylized and abstract form of writing? What does it allow an author to do? In the first place, it obviously allows him to adhere very closely to the tradition of the Church and to treat the writings of the Fathers with due respect. (St. Thomas's formula is "exponere reverentur": to "expound reverently." Statements in the Fathers which apparently contradict the truth can often be explained by the literary context in which they occur, or by the period of history in which they were written; it is seldom necessary to reject them outright.) At the same time, the scholastic method allows the author to go beyond tradition and to open up new frontiers by asking new kinds of questions and imposing new kinds of order on the traditional material. It allows him to introduce new, more scientific terminology alongside the traditional terminology of religious thought and to bring the old into harmony (more or less) with the new. In the process, the realities of faith would come to be more sharply defined and, insofar as cause and effect could be established, more objectively known.

Obviously, the use of this kind of dialectical method has its
advantages and its disadvantages, so far as spirituality is concerned. Insofar as it appeals primarily to the reason and not to the affections, it certainly has less Christian efficaciousness than more poetic and symbolic methods of religious expression.\(^1\) It is not likely that too many men have felt drawn to the heights of contemplative prayer by reading St. Thomas's treatise on rapture in the *Summa*. However, the weakness of the dialectical method from one point of view may be seen as strength from another. The intellectual understanding of spiritual truth has always been a legitimate, though secondary, part of the Christian spiritual tradition in the West, and this includes the understanding of mystical experience.

St. Thomas's application of Aristotelian principles to an understanding of mystical experience is, in fact, a major innovation and constitutes perhaps his chief contribution to spirituality.\(^2\) It seems providential that, at a time when the West was entering upon a period of scientific rationalism, St. Thomas felt moved to provide an explanation of mystical experience on rational grounds. In so doing, he strengthened the mystical tradition in Western spirituality and gave it a measure of respectability, where otherwise it might have been left to flounder in subjectivity and might well have been discarded altogether.\(^3\) As it was, science and spirituality, after St.


\(^2\)Sharpe, op. cit., p. 217.

Thomas, still went their separate ways. But his teaching was always a thread holding them together. Today, when psychology is acquiring the tools for a scientific understanding of mystical experience that St. Thomas lacked, his daring venture points the way.

"We Know God As Unknown"

As significant as St. Thomas's contribution to spirituality was in the intellectual realm, however, it must not be allowed to deceive us as to the essential nature of his spirituality. The "apophatic strain" in his spirituality has often been remarked with some surprise, as if it contradicted the dominant rationality which his thought owed to Aristotle.¹ St. Thomas has been quoted saying such things as,

> The final attainment of man's knowledge of God consists in knowing that we do not know Him, in so far as we realize that He transcends everything that we understand concerning Him.²

and,

> Having arrived at the term of our knowledge we know God as unknown.³

Remarks such as these in St. Thomas's writings have been laid to the influence of Dionysius, whose Divine Names and Mystical Theology St. Thomas commented upon. Dionysius's influence in St.

¹See, for example, Merton, op. cit., p. 100-101.
²De potentia, vii, 5 ad 14.
³In Boethium de Trinitate, i, 2 ad 2.
Thomas's thinking has generally been underplayed.\(^1\) Ironically, it seems from a study of St. Thomas's doctrine of rapture, that the Aristotelian psychology he uses has the effect of reinforcing, rather than contradicting, the apophatic strain in his spirituality. This is not primarily because those things which are explained by it throw into even greater relief those things which remain unexplained. No, it is more basic than that.

In studying St. Thomas's doctrine of rapture, we saw that, with the help of Aristotelian psychology, he proves that the only knowledge of God which man can have in this life is by means of phantasms or images abstracted from the senses.\(^2\) In St. Thomas's system, any knowledge of God which is other than this, though it may possess perfect clarity in and of itself, is not able to be translated into the language of the senses and so remains essentially incommunicable. Here the via positiva and the via negativa meet. Though God is, in Himself, supremely knowable, because of our limitations as natural beings in this life "we know Him as unknown."

If this much is true, then a corollary may be added. It may be that later German mysticism—the mysticism of Tauler, Suso, Eckhart, John of Sterngassen and others—which attached itself intimately to St. Thomas,\(^3\) came not, as has been charged, from a failure to grasp his main

\(^1\)Durantel, J., *Saint Thomas et le Pseudo-Denys*. Paris: 1919. This is the only full-scale treatment of St. Thomas and Dionysius; it is badly out of date and needs, as Chenu suggests, to be done over.

\(^2\)See above, p. 15.


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principles but can better be seen as a logical consequence of those same principles.

**Eschatology, or Rapture as Rupture**

The radical discontinuity that exists, for St. Thomas, between the ways that man can know God in this life and the way he knows God in the vision of the divine essence—whether in rapture or in the life to come—suggests still another observation that might be made about his spirituality as a whole. Do we not find, in this discontinuity, a theme dear to monastic spirituality, that of the eschatological character, hence the incompleteness, of all contemplation here on earth?¹ At the beginning of this paper,² we saw that the highest form of contemplation, that in which the contemplative life principally consists, is the vision of the divine essence. We quoted St. Thomas as saying that this contemplation will be perfect in the life to come, when we shall see God face to face, wherefore it will make us perfectly happy: whereas now the contemplation of the divine truth is competent to us imperfectly, namely through a glass and in a dark manner (I Cor. 13:12). Hence it bestows on us a certain inchoate beatitude, which begins now and will be continued in the life to come; wherefore the Philosopher (Ethic. 10.7) places man's ultimate happiness in the contemplation of the supreme intelligible good.³

In this passage the authority is Paul; the confirming text is taken from Aristotle. St. Thomas is always aware, when he writes of

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¹Leclercq, op. cit., p. 255.
²See above, p. 2-3.
³Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 4.
the contemplative life, that he is writing of contemplation as it pertains to man "in the present state of life," secundum statum huius vitae.\(^1\) The dichotomy in hac vita...in futura vita is a golden thread running through his writings on man's knowledge of divine things. In his commentary on the Divine Names of Dionysius, there is an extended passage\(^2\) where St. Thomas develops the theme nunc and tunc with the poetic suppleness of a St. Bernard.

The eschatological theme dominates his teaching on rapture. Rapture is never anything but a wholly exceptional mode of knowing granted, in the inscrutable purposes of God, to some few chosen souls in this life as a kind of anticipation of that knowledge of him they will enjoy in the life to come. Even when it exists, it retains its earthly character inasmuch as it is transitory and not perfect, as will be the beatific vision.

Rapture, in fact, constitutes a total break with man's ordinary way of knowing God in this life. In St. Thomas's words, it is "sudden" and "violent,"\(^3\)—a rupture. St. Thomas sometimes couples rapture with death, as when he tells us that nothing hinders death brought about by God from being called rapture.\(^4\)

Another fact could be mentioned in regard to the eschatological theme as it is to be found in St. Thomas's spirituality. He lived in an age of eschatological awareness. In his Contra impugnantes Dei cultum

\(^1\) Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 5.
\(^2\) In lib. De div. nom., lect. 2.
\(^3\) In II ad Corinth., c. 12, lect. 1.
\(^4\) Sum. theol. II-II, q. 175, a. 6 ad 1.
et religionem, he defended the new mendicant orders against William of Saint-Amour, whose denunciation of them brought forward the theme that the end of all things was at hand. In St. Thomas's day, a wave of eschatological speculation was sweeping across Europe. The end of the world or the coming of the Antichrist was expected to happen in the year 1260. St. Thomas could hardly have remained unaware of all this eschatological fervor. Yet his eschatology seems to be wholly traditional in the line of Augustine and not the apocalyptic type. Perfect happiness, for St. Thomas, is not to be sought for in the world of history but only beyond time, in eternity. In rapture, man is lifted up, if only for a brief moment, out of time into eternity.

A Spirituality for All Men

Finally, the more one reflects on what St. Thomas's teaching on rapture has to say about his spirituality as a whole, the more it seems that this teaching is characterized by what might almost be called a kind of metaphysical modesty—a reluctance to place too much emphasis in the spiritual life on rare and unusual states of knowledge at the expense of that knowledge of God which can be enjoyed by all

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3*Summa contra gentiles* III, pt. 1, ch. 61.
men. This tendency, as it has been shown, must be attributed to St. Thomas's Aristotelian psychology, which makes him keenly aware of the limitations of human knowing. Its effect is to make of his spirituality, to a greater extent than had been true of previous spiritualities, a spirituality for all men.

In this, St. Thomas is very much a man of his age. The thirteenth century was a period when the spiritual ideals of Western Christendom were undergoing change. Life was no longer what it had been for many centuries. An increase in population, based on agricultural reform, had led to the rapid growth of towns and the emergence of a bourgeois class of merchants and craftsmen. Better roads, more trading, and the Crusades had brought about an increased circulation of books and ideas. Though most could not yet read, people as a whole were better informed, wealthier, and more worldly. They were less inclined to let the Church do their thinking for them. Heresies were springing up, notably the Albigensian heresy in southern France. The monasteries, which hitherto had been the intellectual centers of society, were not equipped to meet the needs of the emerging classes, nor to deal with the new kinds of questions men were asking.

Nor should they have been. A monk is not a scholar (except secondarily), nor is the monastic life the apostolic life in the sense of being a life of pastoral activity and preaching. Monasticism has made, and continues to make, a lasting and valid contribution to Christian spirituality. In the twelfth century, however, the terms

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1 See above, p. 39.
schola and vita apostolica, which the monks had appropriated to their way of life, began to undergo a shift in meaning.\(^1\) Orders began to be formed for the specific purpose of preaching and the care of souls, the cura animarum, and they based themselves not in remote places as the monasteries had done, but in the towns, around the cathedral schools. From the beginning, the importance of study for the preaching apostolate seems to have been recognized. When St. Dominic founded the Order of Preachers in 1216, one of the first things he did was to establish a community of friars at Paris, which had become, in theology, the intellectual center of Europe.

St. Thomas's decision to run away and join the Order of Preachers, against the wishes of his family, who had destined him for the Benedictine abbacy of Monte Cassino, reflects this change in the order of things. It symbolizes a shift in the center of gravity from the monasteries to the schools. In the thirteenth century, the magistri (masters) of the schools would be called upon to settle questions which a St. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, would have been called upon to settle a century before.

The scholars introduced changes in theology which aroused bitter opposition and distrust from the monks. It would be misleading to draw too great a contrast between monastic theology and scholastic theology; at all times they had more in common than they were divided on. Yet, monastic theology had remained very close to the Scrip-

tures; its characteristic forms were the gloss and the commentary. Scholastic theology, under the influence of Aristotelian logic, began to move away from the sacred text and to be arranged in more logical and coherent systems; it is in the twelfth century that we have the beginnings of what could really be called "systematic theology."

Monastic theology had been expressed mainly in the poetic and imprecise language of the Bible and of everyday experience. Scholastic theology began to import categories from secular science, especially from Aristotle—categories such as essence and existence, principle and form, potency and act—and to apply them to the content of faith.

Although these changes were taking place primarily in theology, they could not fail to have an effect upon spirituality as well. It is hard to escape the conviction that St. Thomas's spirituality represents, at least to some extent, a "democratizing" or "secularizing" of the spiritual life. As a theologian, St. Thomas had a specialized function to perform in his Order. He seems never to have forgotten, however, that one of the primary purposes of his work was to prepare men for the preaching apostolate. Those of his own sermons which have been left to us are a case in point. They are models of pastoral practicality and Christian simplicity. His sermons on the Ten Commandments, the Our Father, the Hail, Mary, and the Apostles' Creed, which were delivered in Lent of 1273 to the townspeople of Naples,¹ present the Christian message clearly and with unaffected piety. In them, the focus is on the ordinary life of faith and not

on exalted states of mystical prayer.

It is true that St. Thomas places rapture at the pinnacle of the contemplative life, as the highest degree of contemplation attainable by man while still in this life. But such a high degree of contemplation will ordinarily not be attained by those living the contemplative life. The contemplative life is a life oriented to such contemplation. It is comprised of all the activities necessary to such a life. As Leclercq has pointed out,\(^1\) it is a question of intention, of a certain predominance, not of an exclusivism. Some men are especially (prae-cipue) intent on the contemplation of the truth, while others are principally (principaliter) intent on external actions.\(^2\) But the end toward which both the active and the contemplative lives are directed is the same: the vision of God in His essence, the beatific vision. And the means for achieving the end is the same: God's action of grace in the soul by which man, freely cooperating, grows in faith, hope, and love.

In summary, the extreme reticence which we find in St. Thomas's spirituality regarding the highest kind of mysticism, that which later came to be called "infused" as opposed to "acquired" contemplation, appears, from a study of his teaching on rapture, to be the product of a number of forces, old and new, which operated together to produce the same result. St. Thomas owed his initial caution about rapture to Augustine, who had taught that only Moses and Paul had seen God in His

\(^1\) op. cit., p. 253.

\(^2\) Sum. theol. II-II, q. 179, a. 1.
essence in this life. St. Thomas's monastic background had imbued him with a sense of the eschatological character of all contemplation in this life, and with other traditional themes of Christian spirituality, including the primacy of love. The trend of his age toward a more popular or "lay" emphasis in spirituality, his own purposes as a Dominican scholar, and, without doubt, his own spiritual life, were also factors which helped to form his teaching on the knowledge of God which man could and could not ordinarily expect to enjoy while still a "wayfarer" in this life.
This brings us to the question of St. Thomas's own spiritual experience. Is there any evidence that he had the experience of rapture he describes?

There are only two ways we could possibly find an answer to this question. One is by reading what St. Thomas himself wrote, and the other is by reading what his contemporaries wrote about him. The first way presents many difficulties. Those who have had an experience of this sort are notoriously reluctant to discuss it, and, even if they are willing, they find it impossible, for the reasons St. Thomas gave. Add to this the fact that St. Thomas's writings are, without exception, studiously impersonal, that he almost never mentions himself or his personal concerns or feelings, and we have left only what can be discovered by a careful examination of the texts, reading between the lines and inferring things on the basis of what is said.

Foster has noted the "burning intensity that glows through the... severe pages of the Summa." Men who have studied and loved St. Thomas over a lifetime have testified to the glowing ardor of soul which they have come to recognize from the pages of his works. Is there nothing more concrete than this?

It must be admitted that there seems to be nothing in St. Thomas's teaching on rapture as it is found in the Summa and in the Expositio in epistolam II ad Corinthios that would indicate that St. Thomas had

\[1\text{Foster, p. 22.}\]
the experience he describes as rapture. Indeed, all the evidence seems to point to the fact that he did not. In the *Summa contra gentiles*, St. Thomas mentions ecstasy only once and rapture not at all and goes to great lengths to show that no man in this life can enjoy the vision of the divine essence and that, once this vision is attained, it is perpetual and can never be lost again. St. Thomas wrote the *Summa contra gentiles* between the years 1259–64. In the *Summa theologiae*, which Thomas was writing from 1266 to 1273, he uses "they" (meaning the blessed in heaven) when he refers to those who see God in His essence and "we" when he refers to those who know God by natural reason and by faith. This is in Question 12 of Part One. From St. Thomas's language here, one would conclude that the blessed in heaven are the only ones who enjoy the vision of God in His essence.

In Question 180 of the *Secunda secundae*, St. Thomas's reluctance to admit rapture as an ordinary part of the contemplative experience seems to indicate that, at that time in his life, he had had no personal experience of it. The *Secunda secundae* was written from the beginning of the year 1272 to the spring of 1273.¹

When we turn to the biographies, the difficulty, of course, is that of trying to reconstruct someone's spiritual experience from what others heard him say or saw him do or from what they themselves thought about him. We are fortunate, however, in that St. Thomas was canonized less than fifty years after his death. The minutes of the canonization process held at Naples in 1319 include testimony from people who actually remembered him, or had heard stories about him.

¹Weisheipl, *op. cit.*, p. 361.
from those who did. In addition, we have lives of St. Thomas by three members of the Order of Preachers—William Tocco, Bernard Gui, and Peter Calo—written for the canonization proceedings, and fifteen chapters from an ecclesiastical history by an octogenarian, Tolomeo of Lucca, who had known him. These sources are remarkably restrained (for saints' lives!) and agree in the main points. It seems safe to say that they present a fairly accurate picture of St. Thomas as his contemporaries knew him.

In these sources we are presented with the picture of a brilliant scholar whose ardent desire for God expressed itself in almost incessant work punctuated by fervent prayer. St. Thomas's prayers were often accompanied by tears. In these accounts, it is often hard to tell where his life of study leaves off and his life of prayer begins. St. Thomas's famous "habit of abstraction" may have been no more than the preoccupation of an intellectual absorbed in his thoughts, but the testimonies about visions and other supernatural occurrences are numerous enough to leave little doubt that St. Thomas was a contemplative in what he considered to be the normal way: that he knew God by means of "divinely-produced images or sensations" in the mind. These experiences seem to have increased in frequency towards the end of his life.\(^2\)

On December 6, 1273, while he was saying Mass in the chapel of St. Nicholas in the Dominican priory at Naples, an event occurred

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\(^2\) Weisheipl, op. cit., p. 300.
which was different from these others in the effect it produced on him. He was suddenly struck by something that profoundly affected and changed him ("mira mutatione\(^1\)). "After this Mass he never wrote or dictated anything."\(^2\) When his dear friend and companion, Reginald of Piperno, urged him to resume the work which was so important for the world, St. Thomas answered, "I cannot." When Reginald pressed him for an explanation, he repeated, "Reginald, I cannot. All that I have written seems to me like so much straw."\(^3\)

It was decided that a visit to his sister, the Countess of San Severino, might minister to his condition, but when he got there, he "was rapt in ecstasy almost continually for three days."\(^4\) When he came to himself, Reginald again pleaded with him to go on working or to explain why he was in such a constant state of stupefaction ("stupe-factus"). He said,

Reginald, my son, I will tell you a secret which you must not repeat to anyone while I remain alive. All my writing is now at an end; for such things have been revealed to me that all I have taught and written seems quite trivial to me now. The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, he may quickly end my life also.\(^5\)

Three months later he was dead. He had never fully recovered, but he set out to the Council of Lyons in obedience to the summons of

\(^1\) Weisheipl, op. cit., p. 321.
\(^2\) ibid.
\(^3\) ibid.
\(^4\) Foster, op. cit., p. 46.
\(^5\) ibid.
a pope. On the way he met with an accident: he struck his head on the branch of a tree that was jutting out or lying across the road (the circumstances are not quite clear). His condition rapidly worsened, and he was brought at first to his niece's castle at Maenza, which was nearby, and, a few days later, to the Cistercian abbey of Fossanova, a few miles away, where he was in bed about a week and then died.

The question people have been asking ever since is, What did he die of? Even his contemporaries were puzzled. Some of them concocted a theory that he had been poisoned. Weisheipl thinks he might have died from a blood clot on the brain (subdural hematoma) resulting from the accident on the road.¹ Some have argued rather eloquently that, in fact, he died of the aftereffects of the experience of December 6, when he saw God in rapture. Can anything be said in favor of this possibility?

There are at least three things that might be said. First, St. Thomas connected what had happened to him on December 6 with his own death, when he said, "The only thing I want now is that as God has put an end to my writing, he may quickly put an end to my life also." If he had truly experienced rapture, and if it was his conviction—as we have seen that it was—that this experience was, almost without exception, reserved for those who had departed this life, might not the experience have meant to him that his own death was imminent, and even perhaps have helped to bring it about?²

¹Weisheipl, op. cit., p. 324.

²See above, p. 52, on the connection in St. Thomas's thinking between rapture and death.
Second, Bernard Gui, in his biography, calls St. Thomas "another Moses,"¹ and, directly after he relates the words of St. Thomas to Reginald concerning the experience which put an end to his work, he adds:

Thus it was with him as with Moses and Paul, to whom God revealed things that surpass human understanding, to the one as the mediator of the Law to the Jews, to the other as the preacher of Grace to the Gentiles. For it was fitting that to this holy teacher Thomas, who from the Throne on high received the book of both Laws and expounded it in the presence of the whole Church, should be shown things beyond the reach of natural reason, as pledges of a still greater vision to come. O happy teacher, enlightened in the present and seeing far into the future! Who from those things you were found worthy to write of rose to a vision of yet greater things?²

We have seen that it is likely that the belief that Moses and Paul were the only two men to have experienced rapture was rather common in the Middle Ages. In placing him in the company of these two men, is Gui actually saying that he believes St. Thomas to have been the third?

Finally, there is a statement St. Thomas made upon entering the cloister at Fossanova where, as he knew, he was going to die. Witnesses disagree as to exactly where he was when he said it, but several give his words. He said, quoting Psalm 131:14: "This is my rest for ever and ever; here will I dwell, for I have chosen it."³

Most modern biographers interpret these words of St. Thomas to

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¹Foster, op. cit., p. 35.
²loc. cit., p. 46.
³loc. cit., p. 54.
mean that he wanted Fossanova to be his final resting place, and they say that the Cistercians remembered his words—or invented them—because they supported the Cistercians' claim to the saint's body after his death, over against the Dominicans. If the words are truly St. Thomas's, could they not have had another meaning?

In the traditional biblical and patristic vocabulary of contem­plation, the word "rest," quies, is commonly used to refer to the re­pose which the soul enjoys in contemplation. In Question 180 of the Secunda secundae, St. Thomas says that the three movements of the soul in contemplation which Dionysius describes belong to the rest of contemplation: ad quietem contemplationis pertinent. But, as we have seen, the most perfect of these movements, circular movement, refers to the vision of God in His essence. And this is the know­ledge of God enjoyed in rapture.

Did the words of Psalm 131:14 have a contemplative significance for St. Thomas? One instance where they are used in his writings seems to suggest that they did.

In one of a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments given to the townspeople of Naples the year before his death, St. Thomas com­ments on the commandment, Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

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1 Leclercq, p. 258.
2 Sum. theol. II-II, q. 180, a. 6.
3 See above, p. 43.
4 This is the only instance of St. Thomas's use of Psalm 131:14 that I have been able to find.
He says that there are four rests reserved for the people of God:

The first is the rest from the turmoil of sin. "But the wicked are like the raging sea which cannot rest."
The second rest is from the passions of the flesh, because "the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh." The third is rest from the occupations of the world: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things."

St. Thomas ends with the words from Psalm 131:14:

And then after all these things the soul rests peacefully in God: "If thou call the Sabbath delightful... then shalt thou be delighted in the Lord." The saints gave up everything to possess this rest, "for it is a pearl of great price which a man having found, hid it, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field." This rest in truth is eternal life and heavenly joy: "This is my rest for ever and ever; here will I dwell, for I have chosen it." And to this rest may the Lord bring us all!\(^1\)

\(^1\)Collins, op. cit., p. 85-86.
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