

## THEOLOGY AT THE SERVICE OF MYSTICISM: METHOD IN PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS

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**T**HEOLOGY IN ALL its aspects must deal constantly with the reality of God who remains incomprehensible, nameless, and hidden. While manifesting the divine, creation and revelation in no way diminish its mystery. The affirmations of systematic theology must be corrected continually by negations. And the apophatic should permeate all dimensions of theological activity. Mystical theology should be an essential part of the theological process.

While traditional theology has employed the *via negativa* and used analogy to safeguard the incomprehensibility of God, the tendency has been to separate the mystical from the intellectual. The mystical dimension has often been relegated either to the pretheological realm of religious experience or the posttheological study of those who practice extraordinary levels of piety. On the other hand, there is the realization that the great Catholic mystical traditions should not remain marginalized. As David Tracy observes: "The future of serious Catholic theology lies with its ability to recover these classic resources of the mystical tradition without forfeiting the need to retrieve them critically."<sup>1</sup>

The Eastern writer now referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius attempts to achieve a synthesis between the mystical and the systematic. He delineates at least three stages in theology: symbolic theology, theology of affirmation and negation, and mystical theology. For him theology in all its forms must be conscious always of the unknowability of God, and the driving purpose of all theological activity should be mystical union. Mystical theology is the goal and ground of the other stages of theology.

The constant in the Dionysian world-view is that God is always the Other who is hidden and ungraspable. Nevertheless, creation and humans exist; they are in fact the image and likeness of God. Reality would not be, if God were not present within it. Creation by its very nature is theophany. God's manifestation is realized especially in Scripture and the holy mysteries (sacraments).

For Dionysius, theological knowledge is a rather limited but necessary human achievement enabled by divine grace, offering at most a pale glimpse of divine activity, and in no way a knowledge of God's

<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, "The Uneasy Alliance Reconceived: Catholic Theological Method, Modernity, and Postmodernity," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 548-70, at 564-65. Tracy also notes that both Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner exhibited a "mystical turn" in their writings.

self. Theology is directed to the fulfillment of the believer which is ultimately mystical union with God. Theology articulates the journey of humans being uplifted toward God, through a process of purification and understanding, as they rise from the world of sense to the level of intellectual knowledge of the holy, and finally by way of negation to ecstatic surrender in mystical union. In a sense, the goal of theology is not to arrive at truth, but to reach the threshold of ignorance. Theology is not intellectual analysis and rational discourse, but a hymn of praise.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this article is to show that the Dionysian synthesis represents a fruitful attempt in integrating the mystical and discursive in theology. Since the role of the divine mystery and the apophatic is of concern to both Western and Eastern theology, I shall begin by presenting the state of the question from a Western perspective, primarily through the observations of Karl Rahner. I shall then highlight the Dionysian view of the radical transcendence of God, God's presence in creation especially by light, the illuminative role of the hierarchies and of symbol as expressed in Sacred Scripture and in the holy mysteries, and the soul's progressive return and union with God.

#### THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

Reflecting the Thomistic heritage, Karl Rahner teaches that God remains incomprehensible to all created beings, angels and humans, even in the beatific vision. This is due to the disproportion between the "infinite God who is the sustaining 'ground' and the 'object' of this immediate vision and the finiteness of the contemplating subject."<sup>3</sup> God's incomprehensibility, rather than decreasing, increases in this unmediated vision, and the presence of mystery which is experienced is an aspect of God's incomprehensibility. The comprehensible and incomprehensible in God cannot be separated.

Rahner sees Aquinas as employing a metaphysics of light in dealing with the issue of God's incomprehensibility. The light which makes the object knowable and illuminated in finite knowledge is a participation in the pure light which is God absolutely present to himself in a

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that for Dionysius all theology is a celebration of the divine mysteries whose archetypes are the liturgical songs of heaven. He concludes: "The 'hymnic' is therefore for Denys a methodology of theological thinking and speaking. . . . Because God is in all things and above all things, being and knowing can only be a festival and a 'dance,' a continuous 'celebration' of the glory that communicates itself and holds sway in all things and above all things, a 'hymn,' a 'song of praise,' which has its own laws which must be followed in everything from its basic conception, the choice of point of view, right down to the least form of expression" (*The Glory of the Lord*, trans. A. Louth, F. McDonagh, and B. McNeil [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984] 2.160, 172).

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, "Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God," *Celebrating the Medieval Heritage, Journal of Religion* 58 (Supplement, 1978) S107-31, at S123-24.

unity and identity of knowledge beyond duality of subject and object.<sup>4</sup> It is in the free act of accepting one's essence and giving oneself over to incomprehensibility without condition that one arrives at faith, hope, and love.

Rahner, therefore, sees the incomprehensibility of God as firmly established in earthly human knowledge and judgment. He states: "If the affirmative synthesis in the thought of man always and inevitably relates a 'what' to a 'something' in irresolvable difference, then in the point of relation of the predicating statement, *esse* itself is always simultaneously affirmed as not comprehended, and therefore the incomprehensibility of God is operatively present."<sup>5</sup>

Turning to an existential analysis of the human subject, Rahner claims that the reflecting subject remains always a question to itself to which the sum of life's experiences does not give an answer. There is an unfulfilled and unlimited transcendental, where the subject in questions and in life experiences transcends every finite object and can nowhere come to a final rest. One experiences his or her own incomprehensibility. The human subject is not dominant or absolute but one whose being is bestowed by mystery.<sup>6</sup>

Rahner concludes that God's incomprehensibility itself is precisely the goal of the human search. God always appears as the nameless one. "The experience of nameless mystery as both origin and goal is the a priori condition of all categorical knowledge and of all historical activity; it is not merely a marginal phenomenon at the end of the road."<sup>7</sup>

Happiness is the "appearance of God's incomprehensibility and also of our own incomprehensibility to ourselves (since this is grounded on the incomprehensibility of God's freedom)."<sup>8</sup> Happiness results in letting oneself fall into the incomprehensible in an act of surrendering ourselves, in an act of worshipful love, which allows the darkness to be light.<sup>9</sup> "The real essence of knowledge is love, in which knowledge goes beyond itself and man freely surrenders himself to incomprehensibility."<sup>10</sup> Rahner states that "the blessed abandons himself unconditionally to the direct self-communication of the mystery of the *deus absconditus* from which come love and salvation. . . . the theoretical intellect is set free to love the mystery. . . ."<sup>11</sup> He reasons that it is in claiming that knowledge ultimately goes beyond itself in an ecstatic leap of love of the mystery that we are able to avoid "turning the doctrine into a sublime gnosis in which once again a man replaces God with self."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. S109-10, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. S115.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*, ed. K. Lehmann and A. Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Rahner, "Thomas Aquinas" S117-22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. S123-24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. S124.

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, *The Practice of Faith* 67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 68.

For Karl Rahner, therefore, God is incomprehensible both in himself and as manifested in creation. God is hidden mystery and infinite light. Humans reflect God's reality in their own incomprehensibility. Ultimate union with God consists in the intellect's surrendering itself to love. Hence, the implication can be drawn that the apophatic and mystagogic should be not only the goal and horizon of theology, but pervade every aspect of theological activity. This approach also characterizes the Dionysian theological synthesis.

#### DIONYSIUS AND NEO-PLATONISM

In seeking to interpret the Christian tradition, Dionysius is conditioned by the culture of neo-Platonism. The world of Dionysius is a world influenced by Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus. It is a world where the highest principle and creator absolutely transcends creation, a world of procession and return, a world of mediation by triads, where the ultimate purpose of knowledge is the contemplation of spiritual forms, and whose goal is mystical union.

However, Dionysius does not present us neo-Platonism with a Christian veneer. The worldview of Dionysius is not one of philosophical abstractions. While neo-Platonism offers insights into God, a cosmic framework, and an analytical vocabulary, the God of Dionysius is the God of the Bible, the "Father of Lights." God creates out of beneficence; Jesus, the Word made flesh, comes in love. The God of Dionysius offers fellowship and divinization.

In reality, the neo-Platonic world as mediated for us through Dionysius can make a contribution to Christian theology, as a reminder that God's transcendence should never be compromised, that affirmative theology must always be corrected by negative theology, that theology itself is at the service of contemplation and mysticism, and that the offer of divine grace has divinization as its goal.

Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that Dionysius is comfortable in using non-Christian thought-forms such as

the images of the Platonic and Neo-Platonic mythic world, the religious-aesthetic idea of the cosmic eros (which Denys expressly equates with Christian agape, both God's and man's), Iamblichus' language of theurgy, the quasi-panteistic, emanationist language of Plotinus, and finally the triadic ontology of Proclus. . . . What was once historical, temporally conditioned reality becomes for Denys a means for expressing an utterly universal theological content.<sup>13</sup>

Near the end of his chapter on Dionysius, Balthasar, while granting that Dionysius was influenced by many sources Christian and non-Christian including Plotinus and Proclus, states that this does not

<sup>13</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.152.

diminish the genuinely Christian substance of his theology. Rather, he cites Dionysius' own words that "the Greeks had made an impious use of the divine in relation to the divine, trying by means of the wisdom of God to destroy the fear of God."<sup>14</sup> Balthasar concludes that Dionysius "therefore does not want to borrow, but rather to return what has been borrowed to its true owner."<sup>15</sup>

#### THE GOD BEYOND BEING

The God of Dionysius is by nature beyond being. Dionysius declares that God is "at a total remove from every condition, movement, life, imagination, conjecture, name, discourse, thought, conception, being, rest, dwelling, unity, limit, infinity, the totality of existence."<sup>16</sup>

While beings and even the idea of being itself are somewhat graspable by our intellects, God must be beyond any of our definitions or speculations about existence. The Light of God is the cause of everything, but is not a being since it transcends all beings. Dionysius reasons that just as intellectual knowledge is totally beyond the perceptions that our senses are able to grasp, so there are realities beyond the grasp of our intellect and will always be so. He concludes: "... by the same standard of truth beings are surpassed by the infinity beyond being, intelligences by that oneness which is beyond intelligence."<sup>17</sup> Later in *The Divine Names*, when discussing the concept of eternity in Scripture, Dionysius declares that God precedes eternity.<sup>18</sup> And in Letter 2 he claims that God transcends the source of divinity and goodness, by which we are made divine and good.

Dionysius cautions that "we must not dare to apply words or conceptions to this hidden transcendent God."<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, Dionysius will claim that God's "transcendent darkness remains hidden from all light and concealed from all knowledge."<sup>20</sup> The fact that God is a reality

<sup>14</sup> See Dionysius, *Letters* 7.2.

<sup>15</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.208. Charles-André Bernard defends the use of Neoplatonic language by Dionysius. He states that both Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa employed the language of Scripture and of their classical formation. However, mystical experience is beyond all language. While Dionysius was conditioned by the culture of his time, it is necessary to keep in mind the original experience that he is trying to describe. In using the means at hand to describe the experience, there is no reason to think that he was unaware of the limits of the language that he employed (Charles-André Bernard, "Les formes de la théologie chez Denys l'Aréopagite," *Gregorianum* 59 [1978] 38-69, at 49).

<sup>16</sup> *The Divine Names* 1.5 (593C-D) in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist, 1987) 54. The numbering in parenthesis follows that of the text of Dionysius in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*. In citing texts in English we will use both the Luibheid translation of the *Complete Works* and the translation by C. E. Rolt, *On the Divine Names and The Mystical Theology* (London: SPCK, 1983). In succeeding notes, each work will be identified by its translator.

<sup>17</sup> *Divine Names* 1.1 (588B) in Luibheid 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters* 10.3 (940A).

<sup>19</sup> *Divine Names* 1.2 (588C) in Luibheid 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Letters* 1 (1065A) in Luibheid 263.

absolutely distinct from creation is a hallmark of Dionysian teaching. To make any reference to being or even to a metaphysics of being is to deal with realities of our created world. If God is to be God, God is beyond any grasp of intelligence or human speculation. Presumably even the use of analogy would be subject to rigorous qualification by Dionysius, since the prime analogate is totally beyond human reach.<sup>21</sup> Humans are incapable of formulating a philosophy or theology of God.

#### THE TRINITY

The Godhead is one in three persons. On the one hand, divinity is transcendent unity, simplicity, and indivisibility, as well as the source of the unifying power that accounts for our unity. On the other hand, divinity is triune because "transcendent fecundity [is] manifested as 'three persons.'" Citing the Epistle to the Ephesians, Dionysius observes that all fatherhood in heaven and on earth exists and is named after the Fatherhood of God. All spiritual paternity and sonship is a gift from the all-transcendent archetypal Fatherhood and Sonship. Such spiritual perfection is the work of the Holy Spirit, as well as the Father and the Son. The Trinity's benevolence towards humanity was manifested in one divine person's sharing our nature that we might be lifted up toward the divine.<sup>22</sup>

The divine unities are hidden, permanent, ineffable, and unknowable. Differentiations in God describe the deity's processions and manifestations. The undivided Trinity "holds in a common unity without distinction its subsistence beyond being, its Godhead beyond deity . . . and . . . it possesses the mutual abiding and indwelling (as it were) of its indivisibly supreme Persons in an utterly undifferentiated and transcendent unity, and yet without any confusion . . ."<sup>23</sup> Reflecting the teaching of Christ in John's Gospel, Dionysius asserts that all divine attributes and divine operations belong to the Father, the Word, and the Spirit in common and in shared unity. Dionysius writes: "every name of the divine beneficent activity unto whichever of the divine persons it is applied, must be taken as belonging, without distinction, to the whole entirety of the Godhead."<sup>24</sup>

Differentiation in the Trinity is due not only to the distinctness of each person, but also to the fact that the attributes of the divine generation are not interchangeable. The Father is not a Son, nor is the Son a Father. Differentiation is also seen in the benevolent act by which the Word took on humanity and suffered for our sake.

However, Dionysius begins his *Mystical Theology* by reaffirming

<sup>21</sup> Balthasar observes: "But not for a moment is the singularity of this analogy, its irreversibility, forgotten: things are both like God and unlike him, but God is not like things" (*The Glory of the Lord* 2.168).

<sup>22</sup> *Divine Names* 1.4 (589D–592A) and 2.8 (645C) in Luibheid 51–52, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 2.4 (641A) in Rolt 69–70.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 2.11 (652A) in Rolt 81.

the apophatic view that the Trinity exceeds all being, deity, and goodness. The cause of all things cannot be grasped. It is not "spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood. . . ." <sup>25</sup> Dionysius argues that the ideas of oneness and trinity regarding the Godhead are beyond our use of these concepts.

To express the truth of its utter self-union and its divine fecundity we apply the titles of "Trinity" and "Unity" to that which is beyond all titles, expressing under the form of being that which is beyond being. But no unity or trinity or number or oneness or fecundity or any other thing that either is a creature or can be known to any creature, is able to utter the mystery, beyond all mind and reason, of that transcendent Godhead which super-essentially surpasses all things. <sup>26</sup>

#### GOD'S PRESENCE IN CREATION

Yet the God who transcends all things is found in all things. Through God's presence the world has come to be and exists. All creation praises God's providence, which is at the center of everything and is the destiny of all things. "All things long for it. The intelligent and rational long for it by way of knowledge, the lower strata by way of perception, the remainder by way of the stirrings of being alive and in whatever fashion befits their condition." <sup>27</sup>

Through an excess of goodness God creates the world. Dionysius states that there is a yearning toward the good that God has created, resulting in an ecstasy where the lover belongs not to self but to the object of affection. Therefore, God through a superabundance of yearning "is carried outside of himself in his providential activities toward all things. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things . . ." Thus, superior beings have a yearning toward their subordinates and in ecstasy exercise providential care towards them. On the other hand, all things must desire and yearn for the good and strive in ecstasy to return to it. <sup>28</sup>

Scripture declares that God is in our souls and bodies, in heaven and on earth, and while remaining ever in himself, he is in all, and yet in no thing. "Providence and goodness, shared by beings, come forth from the unshared God in a great flood rushing and overflowing from him." <sup>29</sup> Balthasar states that for Dionysius "the doctrine of providence is discerned partly in the immanent, ontological rightness of things, and partly from the equally 'worldly' Holy Scriptures." He further observes that creation is not so much a matter of causality as of participation. <sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Mystical Theology* 5 (1048A) in Luibheid 141.

<sup>26</sup> *Divine Names* 13.3 (981A) in Rolt 188.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 1.5 (593D) in Luibheid 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 4.10-13 in Luibheid 78-82 and Rolt 101-106.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 11.6 (956B) in Luibheid 125.

<sup>30</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.163, 70.

Through providence and for salvation, God is available to all and becomes all things in all, and yet "at the same time he remains within himself and in his one unceasing activity he never abandons his own true identity. . . . He gives himself outward for the sake of the divinization of those who are returned to him."<sup>31</sup> Dionysius speaks of the act of creation as a procession arising from the excess of God's goodness and unity resulting in the multiplicity of creation. The divine unity works through differentiated actions in bestowing being, life, and wisdom.<sup>32</sup> In the work of creation God manifests distinctions, processions, powers, and attributes.<sup>33</sup>

While the procession of creation from God results in a multitude of beings, God remains one. "He remains one amid the plurality, unified throughout the procession, and full amid the emptying act of differentiation."<sup>34</sup> The "one God who dwells indivisibly in every individual . . . is in himself undifferentiated unity with no commixture and no multiplication arising out of his presence among the many."<sup>35</sup> God is the cause of all things without ever departing from his oneness. On the other hand, nothing in the world lacks its share of the One.<sup>36</sup>

Dionysius also speaks of "exemplars" of all created things pre-existing in God's transcendent unity. These exemplars are laws or principles, which "theology" calls "preordinations" or divine volitions according to which God brings into being the whole universe.<sup>37</sup> Dionysius explains the dialectic of God's presence in, and transcendence from creation in the following way: "In reality there is no exact likeness between caused and cause, for the caused carry within themselves only such images of their originating sources as are possible for them, whereas the causes themselves are located in a realm transcending the caused. . . ."<sup>38</sup>

The terms "being itself," "life itself," and "divinity itself," are used in a derivative fashion. They are applied to "provident acts of Power which come forth from that God in whom nothing at all participates."<sup>39</sup> In *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius notes that while Scripture applies such ideas as "Word," "Mind," and "Being" to God, these attempts are no more successful than earthly descriptions.<sup>40</sup>

Vladimir Lossky observes that the relation of cause to effect is its

<sup>31</sup> *Divine Names* 9.5 (912D) in Luibheid 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 2.5 (641D-644A).

<sup>33</sup> *Letters* 9.1 (1105A).

<sup>34</sup> *Divine Names* 2.11 (649B) in Luibheid 66.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 2.11 (649C) in Luibheid 67.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 13.2 (977C). Dionysius sees this reality reflected in the mystery of the Eucharist which remains unique, simple, and indivisible, while being multiplied in a variety of sacred symbols.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 5.8 (824C) in Luibheid 102 and Rolt 140-41.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 2.8 (645C) in Luibheid 64. Dionysius observes that, as the cause of all and transcending all, God is rightly nameless, and yet has the names of all that is; see *Divine Names* 1.6 (596A-597A).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 11.6 (953D, 956A) in Luibheid 125.

<sup>40</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 2.3 (140C).



manifestation. Invisible and secret causes appear visible and knowable in their effects. God is manifested in creatures. The relation of effect to cause is called participation or imitation in virtue of which the effect becomes an image or icon of the cause. The imitation of God, the participation in God is proper to every creature, since each created being has received the image and likeness of God. Deification represents the absolute participation of a creature in its Creator.<sup>41</sup>

As already noted, Dionysius views creation as a procession or movement outward from God. This movement is a unifying power which originates in God, reaches down to the lowliest creation, and returns in due order and stages back to God. It "turns from itself and through itself and upon itself and toward itself in an everlasting circle."<sup>42</sup>

René Roques claims that Dionysius takes a dialectical structure from neo-Platonism. A descending procession manifests the Supreme One to the intelligible and sensible orders that it constitutes. Essentially, it is an enveloping or veiling of the One in our categories and images. This obscurity itself manifests the inconceivable and invisible One. The conditions of the descending dialectic determine those of the ascending. To the dullness, veiling, and disguise ought to correspond purification, unveiling, and naked truth through an ascent by negation. The degree of manifestation is rigorously proportioned to that of conversion.<sup>43</sup>

The sacred symbols of the liturgy provide an analogy. The holy realities under symbolic forms represent the divine procession toward secondary things. In contemplating the symbols the hierarch experiences a return to the holy.<sup>44</sup>

The dynamic in creation that brings about a return to God is experienced by humans as an uplifting or anagogy. This concept expresses both God's benevolence and love seeking to draw creatures to him, and the utter reliance of lowly creatures on divine power to raise them beyond their own capacities. As already noted, God's power is ever present and every drawing. The divine light which is at the heart of all things provides the power for uplifting. All creatures are called to turn to God. In proportion to their love, light, and level of knowledge they are able to be uplifted toward the source of their being. For humans, this anagogical process begins with purification and continues through the various stages of knowledge and contemplation. Sacred

<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Lossky, "La Théologie négative de Denys l'Aréopagite," *Revue de sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 28 (1939) 204–21, at 217.

<sup>42</sup> *Divine Names* 4.17 (713D) in Luibheid 84. This movement of going outward and returning is symbolized in the divine liturgy when the hierarch moves from the altar outward to the edges of the sacred place and back during the rite of incensing; see *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3, III:3 (428D–429A).

<sup>43</sup> René Roques, "De l'implication de méthodes théologiques chez le Pseudo-Denys," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique* 30 (1954) 268–74, at 272.

<sup>44</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3, III.3 (429B) in Luibheid 213.

Scripture and the holy mysteries enable and further the process of uplifting.

"THE FATHER OF LIGHTS"

Prominent in Dionysius' understanding of reality is the idea of light. Light is the substance of reality, and illumination plays a primary role in the work of salvation. What the Trinity gives the celestial hierarchy and what the angels in turn transmit to the ecclesiastical hierarchy is illumination, the heavenly rays of light that ultimately uplift us toward God. A key biblical image for Dionysius is the description of God as "the Father of lights" in the Epistle of James. Dionysius declares: "Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in."<sup>45</sup> The Good "reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenments proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it."<sup>46</sup>

The basic theme of light is also applied to the Incarnation. Jesus is the Light of the Father through whom we have access to the Father, the light that is the source of all light.<sup>47</sup> In Letter 8, Dionysius advises the monk Demophilus to receive the "beneficent rays" of Christ and to be led by their light to the good deeds he performed so as to gain fellowship with him.<sup>48</sup>

Dionysius stresses that God's guiding light is given in proportion to the disposition of each one to the sacred. In interpreting the washing of the hands by the hierarch and priests during the eucharistic liturgy, he teaches, "They must themselves virtually match the purity of the rites they perform and in this way they will be illuminated by ever more divine visions, for those transcendent rays prefer to give off the fullness of their splendor more purely and more luminously in mirrors made in their image."<sup>49</sup> Sinners turn away from the light that is ceaselessly offered, and which, "far from abandoning them, shines on their unseeing eyes."<sup>50</sup>

In this brief description of the Dionysian view of creation, we see that the hiddenness of God is preserved at all costs. Dionysius affirms the reality of creation, its multiplicity, the divine presence through providence, and the gift of divinization, while at the same time declaring divine transcendence, oneness, and identity.

Dionysius describes the Incarnation as an act of divine benevolence.

<sup>45</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.1 (120B) in Luibheid 145.

<sup>46</sup> *Divine Names* 1.2 (588C–D) in Luibheid 50.

<sup>47</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.2 (121A). <sup>48</sup> *Letters* 8.1 (1085C–D).

<sup>49</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3, III.10 (440B) in Luibheid 219.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 2, III.3 (400A) in Luibheid 205.

In his goodness Christ fashions all things and seeks that all things have fellowship with him. Dionysius declares, "The universal cause which fills all things is the divinity of Jesus."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Jesus, the transcendent cause of all things, without changing his own nature, takes on our human condition so that we may be lifted up from our low estate. Divine Simplicity has assumed a compound state, and the Eternal has taken on a temporal existence. Jesus allows us to enter into communion with his divine nature and acquire a share of its beauty. He has brought about a change in our nature and enlightened our darkened minds.<sup>52</sup> However, the Word of God remains hidden even in his revelation among us. No word or mind can grasp the mystery of Jesus. It remains unsayable and unknowable. Whatever we affirm about Jesus' love for humanity, has to be purified by negation.<sup>53</sup>

### THE HIERARCHIES

The divine light which is the power of illumination and divinization descends through creation in varying degrees. In his wisdom and goodness, God has established hierarchies to carry out the work of enlightenment and perfection. Dionysius spells out the purpose for hierarchy by observing that

the Deity . . . has resolved, for reasons unclear to us but obvious to itself, to ensure the salvation of rational beings, both ourselves and those beings who are our superiors. This can only happen with the divinization of the saved. And divinization consists of being as much as possible like and in union with God. . . . Therefore, out of generosity God has bestowed hierarchy as a gift to ensure the salvation and divinization of every being endowed with reason and intelligence.<sup>54</sup>

Dionysius defines hierarchy as "a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine."<sup>55</sup> "Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself."<sup>56</sup> Jesus is the *thearchic* intelligence who surpasses every essence and the *thearchic* source, perfection, and being

<sup>51</sup> *Divine Names* 2.10 (648C).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 1.4 (592A–B) in Rolt 57; *Celestial Hierarchy* 4.4 (181C); *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3.11 (441A–C); *Letters* 8.1 (185C–188A) in Luibheid 158, 220–221, 271.

<sup>53</sup> *Letters* 3 and 4 in Luibheid 264–65.

<sup>54</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3–4 (373D, 376A–B) in Luibheid 198. Dionysius also states: "I have said in solemn fashion that our greatest likeness to and union with God is the goal of our hierarchy" (*ibid.* 2.1 [392A] in Luibheid 200.) Balthasar compares the term hierarchy with thearchy: "If thearchy means the principle of all divine being, or of all divinization, then hierarchy can only mean the principle, foundation, effective form of holiness and sanctification" (*The Glory of the Lord* 2.202).

<sup>55</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 3.1 (164D) in 153.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 3.1–2 (164D–165A) in Luibheid 153–54.

underlying all hierarchy and all sanctification. He illuminates all the angelic beings and assimilates each hierarchy according to its ability to his own light. And every hierarchy ends in Jesus.<sup>57</sup>

For Dionysius, just as there are three types of understanding, namely, mystical union, intellectual knowledge, and sense perception, so too there are three hierarchies: the celestial, the ecclesiastical, and the legal (the hierarchy of the Old Testament). The heavenly hierarchy communes with God, while the hierarchy of the Law dealt with symbols and foreshadowings of the realities to come. The ecclesiastical hierarchy is in a mediate position between the former hierarchy and the celestial. With the hierarchy of the Law it strives to contemplate the meaning of symbols; with the heavenly array, it seeks the higher levels of contemplative union.<sup>58</sup>

The highest level of the celestial hierarchy enters into communion with Jesus through a "participation in the knowledge of the divine lights working out of him." They share in the divine activities and virtues. The seraphim filled with spiritual gifts chant the divine praises.<sup>59</sup> Jesus also instructs the angels about his work of salvation for humankind. Once the celestial hierarchy possesses the divine light in its fullness, God's will is that it pass on this light to beings further down the scale. In the Dionysian scheme we are uplifted toward God in proportion to the light given to us.

In this process of divine education, it was necessary that we first have the hierarchy of the Law because of our lowly condition. In the Old Testament, God veiled the truth with obscure imagery, employed the palest copies of the originals, and resorted to symbolism whose meaning is discerned with maximum difficulty. God granted us only as much light as we could handle. In contemplating the images handed down to Moses, the initiated were able to be uplifted to worship in spirit.<sup>60</sup>

The ecclesiastical hierarchy consists of understanding, activity, and perfection. Its goal as that of the other hierarchies consists in a continuous love of God and of things divine. To reach this level of love, one must go through several stages. Through purification one strives to avoid all that would militate against love. One must then seek a knowledge of beings as they really are. One must see and understand sacred

<sup>57</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.1-2 (372A-373B); 5.5 (505B).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 5.2 (501C-D). There is a parallel between Proclus' use of hierarchy and that of Dionysius. Proclus spoke of three levels of reality—the henads (or gods), intelligences, and souls—while Dionysius speaks of the Thearchy (or the Trinity), the celestial hierarchy, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Proclus claimed that mediation among various levels of being takes place through various triads; Dionysius incorporates triads at each level of hierarchy (Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1981] 163-64).

<sup>59</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 7.2 (208C-D); *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 4.5 (480B-C) in Leubheid 163-64, 229.

<sup>60</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 5.2 (501B-C) in Luibheid 234.

truth. Finally, one arrives at a participation in perfection and in union with God himself—"that sacred vision which nourishes the intellect and divinizes everything rising up to it."<sup>61</sup>

The triad making up the ecclesiastical hierarchy are the holy mysteries; the sacred ministers, namely, hierarchs, priests, and other ordained ministers; and the laity, namely, monks, the baptized or the "contemplative order" (*theōrētikē taxis*), and those excluded from the mysteries, namely, catechumens, penitents, and the possessed. The offer of salvation extends to all creation.

The sacred ministers within the ecclesiastical hierarchy carry out a threefold work: the purifying of the uninitiated by way of the mysteries (sacraments); the illumination of those who have been purified; and the perfection of the illuminated through striving for perfect understanding by contemplating and communing in God's light. Those whom the deacons have purified and the priests have illuminated, the bishop leads on to an understanding of the sacred things they have beheld. Correspondingly, the initiates go through three stages: purification, illumination by contemplating sacred things, and enlightenment "in the perfect understanding of the sacred illuminations."<sup>62</sup> This process involves both affirmation and negation.

#### THE NEED FOR SYMBOLS

The farther that hierarchies and creatures are from God on the ladder of creation, the more primitive is their ability to participate in divine knowledge and love. Therefore, as the gifts of divine knowledge and love descend to us, they can only reflect symbolically the activity going on in heaven. Unlike the celestial hierarchy which is incorporeal and whose level of understanding is beyond us, the human hierarchy due to its limited nature must deal with a plurality of perceptible symbols, which nevertheless can lift us up hierarchically until we are brought as far as we can be into the unity of divinization.<sup>63</sup>

Humans are called to respond to God's offer of love, light, and divinization. However, humans are extremely finite, with limited abilities for understanding. The response of knowledge and love is a slow and lengthy process. Dionysius claims that we must ascend to higher and higher stages, and as we do, we leave the former stages behind. On the level of sense perception, we use words, phrases, and symbols. Once we operate on the level of intellect, our senses and all that go with them are no longer needed. Finally, when our soul becomes divinized and our minds enter an unknowing union with the rays of unapproachable light, our intellectual knowledge is left behind.<sup>64</sup> In Letter 9, when speaking on the need for symbols, Dionysius claims that humans are

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 1.3 (376A) in Leubheid 198.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 5.3 (504B); 5.8 (516B) in Leubheid 235, 243.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 1.2 (373A-B).

<sup>64</sup> *Divine Names* 4.11 (708D).

both undivided and divided. Our souls are possessed of two elements. The impassive element is attuned to interior visions of the divine. However, the passionate element of the soul can only rise toward divine realities by means of representations. It is through symbolic veils that it arrives at holy things.<sup>65</sup>

Commenting on Dionysius, Balthasar says: "Things are not simply the occasion for his seeing God; rather, he sees God in things. Colours, shapes, essences, and properties are for him immediate theophanies, and if he gives up the veil for the sake of what is veiled, then he gives up something that he has embraced and loved."<sup>66</sup>

Dionysius asserts that since God is beyond being, we cannot rely on human wisdom. Our spiritual goal is an unknowing that is beyond speech, mind, or being itself. We must not dare to resort to human words or conceptions concerning the hidden divinity. The only way we can speak about God is through Sacred Scripture and through symbols that have been fashioned for us through God's inspiration. Through the Spirit, the scriptural writers have been granted a power of expression by which we are able to "reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our own abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or intellect."<sup>67</sup>

The necessity of liturgical mysteries and symbols is developed in *The Celestial Hierarchy* where Dionysius argues that divine and heavenly things can be represented through similar and dissimilar earthly symbols. Matter after all was created by God who is Beauty and still possesses some echo of intelligible beauty. On the other hand, the very dissimilarity in shape of the material image protects the holy from defilement and renders divine things inaccessible to the profane. The types are seen to be not an end in themselves.<sup>68</sup> Balthasar points out that liturgy is really celebration of the "beauty which appears in every manifestation of the unmanifest, and which is therefore the sacredness of everything profane."<sup>69</sup>

Dionysius further observes in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* that the earthly hierarchs present heavenly things in sacred symbols, since such knowledge is not for everyone, but only the initiated. He explains that the first leaders of the earthly hierarchy "using images derived

<sup>65</sup> *Letters* 9.1 (1108 A–B).

<sup>66</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.179.

<sup>67</sup> *Divine Names* 1.1 (585B–588A) in Luibheid 49.

<sup>68</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 2.4 (144B–145A) in Luibheid 151–52. René Roques considers Dionysius' symbolic theology to be a dialectic involving similar and dissimilar symbols. Objects reflecting similarity to the divine represent a descending movement from the more noble to the more humble. Dissimilar symbols represent a negative and ascending movement where symbols are cast aside in order to unite with the divine. Roques points out that symbols have their value, but also limitations. In the Dionysian phrase they are "unlike likeness." They must always be subject to critical examination and purification (Roques, "Méthodes théologiques" 269–70). Balthasar adds that the inappropriateness of symbols helps to highlight the inadequacy of our affirmations (*The Glory of the Lord* 2.180).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid* 2.166.

from the senses . . . spoke of the transcendent. . . . Of necessity they made human what was divine. They put material on what was immaterial. In their written and unwritten initiations, they brought the transcendent down to our level."<sup>70</sup> The sacred symbols are perceptible tokens of contemplative realities. They "bear the mark of the divine stamps. They are the manifest images of unspeakable and marvelous sights."<sup>71</sup>

Sacred symbols are directed to those who love holiness and are prepared to put aside their childish imagination. "They alone have the simplicity of mind and the receptive, contemplative power to cross over to the simple, marvelous, transcendent truth of the symbols." Dionysius continues:

Theological tradition has a dual aspect, the ineffable and mysterious on the one hand, the open and more evident on the other. The one resorts to symbolism and involves initiation. The other is philosophic and employs the method of demonstration. . . . The one uses persuasion and imposes the truthfulness of what is asserted. The other acts and, by means of a mystery which cannot be taught, it puts souls firmly in the presence of God. This is why the sacred initiators of our tradition, together with those of the tradition of the Law, resorted freely to symbolism appropriate to God, regarding the sacraments of the most holy mysteries.<sup>72</sup>

#### SCRIPTURE AND THE DIVINE NAMES

Since we dare not apply our human words and conceptions to God, we use what God has disclosed to us in Sacred Scripture. Through Scripture we are able to be lifted from the "perceptible to the conceptual, from sacred shapes and symbols to the simple peaks of the hierarchies of heaven."<sup>73</sup> The gift of salvation and divinization has been passed on to us from the heavenly beings through Scripture in a way suited to us, that is, by means of the variety and abundance of composite symbols.<sup>74</sup>

While Scripture interprets the world in a variety of ways, its ultimate concern is not with history but with life-giving perfection.<sup>75</sup> Dionysius describes Scripture as providing heavenly food and drink. As solid food, it provides our intellect with a participation in the knowledge of divine things. As liquid nourishment, it represents a divine overflowing reaching out to us and guiding us through all that is varied, multiple, and divided to a simple, stable knowledge of God.<sup>76</sup>

The Dionysian themes of light and anagogy are reiterated in his

<sup>70</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.4-5 (376C-377A) in Luibheid 199.

<sup>71</sup> *Letters* 9.2 (1108C) in Luibheid 284.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 9.1 (1105C-1108A) in Luibheid 283.

<sup>73</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.3 (124A) in Luibheid 147.

<sup>74</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.4 (376B) in Luibheid 198.

<sup>75</sup> *Letters* 9.2 (1108B-C) in Luibheid 284.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 9.3-4 (1109B-1112A).

consideration of Scripture. He speaks of the "enlightening beams" of Scripture which raise us up, illuminate us, and enable us to behold the divine light. In Scripture the Source of all holy enlightenment has told us about itself.<sup>77</sup> He invites us to raise our eyes to the enlightenment coming from Scripture, and to behold the angelic hierarchy in accord with what Scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion.<sup>78</sup> In Letter 9, Dionysius describes the multitude of images used in Scripture and concludes: "All this is to enable the one capable of seeing the beauty hidden within these images to find that they are truly mysterious, appropriate to God, and filled with a great theological light."<sup>79</sup>

Although Scripture is limited to the use of veiled images and symbols, it does furnish us with some intimation of God by providing us with divine names. These names are not the result of human speculation but have been fashioned through the inspiration of the Spirit. The divine names refer to the divine processions, and the fact that creatures possess certain images and semblances of the divine exemplars. For example, in using the name "Being," we do not claim to know the divine Being, but we give praise to the creative procession from the Absolute into the universe of beings.<sup>80</sup>

Dionysius presents a multitude of names and images. Goodness is the first of the affirmations about God in *The Divine Names*. Goodness shows forth all the processions of God. "This essential Good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things."<sup>81</sup> Other biblical names for God include being, life, light, God, beautiful, and eternal.<sup>82</sup> The testimony of Scripture provides material for lifelong contemplation.

Ultimately Dionysius admits that even Scripture is very limited in revealing God. First of all, we have only a limited capacity to receive revelation. Secondly, all things divine in their actual nature are beyond every intellect, being, and knowledge. "When, for instance, we give the name of 'God' to that transcendent hiddenness, when we call it 'life' or 'being' or 'light' or 'Word,' what our minds lay hold of is in fact nothing other than certain activities apparent to us, activities which deify, cause being, bear life, and give wisdom."<sup>83</sup>

René Roques observes that affirmative theology has dangers analogous to symbolic theology. Rather than "hylomorphisms" or "zoomorphisms," "noomorphisms" are able to compromise the true knowledge of God. This is why affirmative theology needs negative theology to

<sup>77</sup> *Divine Names* 1.3 (589B) in Luibheid 50–51.

<sup>78</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.2 (121A) in Luibheid 145.

<sup>79</sup> *Letters* 9.1 (1105C) in Luibheid 283.

<sup>80</sup> *Divine Names* 1.4 (589D); 5.1 (816B); 7.3 (869C–872A) in Luibheid 51, 96, 108 and Rolt 56, 131, 151–52.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 4.1 (693B) in Luibheid 71.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 1.6 (596A–C).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 2.7 (645A) in Luibheid 63–64.



delimit it and make it precise. He cites Lossky as saying that negation must penetrate to the very heart of affirmative theology so as to render it valid.<sup>84</sup>

A more appropriate way of naming God is by way of negation to which Dionysius gives preference, saying that the way of negation lifts the soul above its own nature and guides it above the farthest limits of the world, where it is brought into union with God.<sup>85</sup> Dionysius points out that such descriptions of God as invisible, infinite, and ungraspable do not describe what he is but what he is not. He reaffirms that "God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility." Dionysius declares that the way of negation is more suitable, and positive affirmations are ultimately unfitting. He therefore reasons that when Scripture uses vastly dissimilar shapes to describe divine things it is admitting their indescribability.<sup>86</sup>

However, negations are not simply the opposites of the affirmations, since the Cause of all things is preeminent and surpasses every denial and every assertion. Therefore, we must use superlative terms to express the excess beyond negation such as "Super-Excellent," "Super-Divine," "Super-Essential," "Super-Vital," and "Super-Wise."<sup>87</sup>

We approach God who is beyond all things by way of negation and transcendence. "God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. Yet, on the other hand, he cannot be grasped by intuition, language, or name, and he is not anything in the world nor is he known in anything."<sup>88</sup>

The Incarnate Word represents the fullness of the divine manifestation and the summit of all theophanies in creatures. He is the foundation of affirmative theology, while remaining inaccessible.<sup>89</sup> "Every affirmation of Jesus' love for humanity has the force of a negation pointing to transcendence."<sup>90</sup>

#### THE SACRED MYSTERIES AND CONTEMPLATION

The mysteries and the liturgy of the Church serve a dual purpose. They represent acts of divine power (theurgy) accomplishing the work of salvation history and divinization.<sup>91</sup> They are also divine gifts provid-

<sup>84</sup> Roques, "Méthodes théologiques" 270.

<sup>85</sup> *Divine Names* 13.3 (981A-B).

<sup>86</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 2.3 (140D-141C) in Luibheid 149-50.

<sup>87</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1.2 (1000B); 5 (1048A-B); *Divine Names* 1.3 (640B-C).

<sup>88</sup> *Divine Names* 7.3 (872A) in Luibheid 108-09 and Rolt 152.

<sup>89</sup> Lossky, "Théologie négative" 220.

<sup>90</sup> *Letters* 4 (1072B) in Luibheid 264-65.

<sup>91</sup> Dionysius refers to the Eucharist as *ta theourgia mysteria*, the mysteries by which one is made a god; see Henri-Dominique Saffrey, "New Objective Links between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed. by Dominic O'Meara (Albany: State University of New York, 1982) 72.

ing us through the veils of symbol an opportunity for spiritual knowledge and contemplation. Dionysius tells us that we must uncover the symbols and see them in their naked purity. The realm of the senses is converted to service of the divine. By contemplating them in this manner we can revere the source of life and knowledge.<sup>92</sup> In a sense, for Dionysius liturgical theology is really contemplative theology. And Balthasar adds that a theologian "can be such only if he is involved in the business of the saints. . . . It is pointless for a theologian to speak from any other perspective than that of purifying, illuminating and unifying grace." He says of Dionysius that ". . . his penetrating contemplation of the symbols makes it possible for him to receive an utterly different—and quite concrete—picture of God from that found in predominantly abstract and conceptual theologians."<sup>93</sup>

In commenting on the mysteries of initiation, the divine liturgy, the ceremonies of ordination, consecration of altars, and funerals, Dionysius not only describes the rites and their meaning, but devotes equal time to their importance as vehicles for contemplation. Scripture teaches us that the divine birth of baptism represents purification and enlightenment, the mysteries of myron (chrismation) and synaxis provide a perfecting knowledge and understanding of the divine workings. Through these actions there results "uplifting" toward divinity and communion with it.<sup>94</sup> On this Balthasar observes:

Therefore the pictorial character of the liturgical ordinance belongs unconditionally to the sacramental effectiveness: the ever-present fragrance of the holy oil, the sweet smell and the rising movement of the incense, the movement of the celebrant from the altar to the people and back again, the sign of the cross in baptism, confirmation and hierarchical consecration, the dipping of the baptizand in imitation of Christ's descent into death, the tonsure of the monk, the breaking of the host, the assimilation of the bread and wine in communion, and whatever else the purifying, illuminating and perfecting mystery-rites contain. Their holy forms are finally the content of all true formation: only through them does the material, embryonic man attain his divinely ordained form.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>92</sup> *Letters* 9.1 (1104B–C).

<sup>93</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.167, 174–75, 181. There are some who believe that Dionysius' approach to the liturgy may have been somewhat influenced by the views of the Neoplatonists, Iamblichus, and Proclus regarding theurgy. Louth speculates that whereas for Plotinus the only activity by which man draws nearer to the One is contemplation (*theoria*), for Iamblichus and Proclus "theurgy," magical operations with plants and animals, is more likely to be effective. Proclus says of theurgical power that it is "better than any human wisdom or knowledge." And Iamblichus' longest work, *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, is about little else (Louth, *Origins* 162). On the other hand, Balthasar observes that Dionysius deviates from the Plotinian worldview by not speaking of a world-soul, and simply setting "nature as a whole" over against the individual soul (*The Glory of the Lord* 2.161).

<sup>94</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 5.5–6 (504B–D) in Luibheid 235–36.

<sup>95</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.183.

Dionysius teaches that we can only attain to likeness and union with God through observance of Christ's commandments and the doing of sacred acts. To observe the commandments means to hear the sacred words as receptively as possible, to be open to divine workings, to clear an uplifting path towards heaven, and to accept "our most divine and sacred regeneration." Love of God impels us to divinization by divine birth. We cannot put into practice the truths received from God unless we have a divine beginning.<sup>96</sup> Baptism first introduces the light and is the source of all divine illumination. The light of baptism leads us toward the vision of other sacred things.<sup>97</sup> "Order descends upon disorder within [the baptized]. Form takes over from formlessness. Light shines through all his life."<sup>98</sup>

The baptized are received into the company of those who have earned divinization and who form a sacred assembly. Whoever enters into communion with the One cannot then proceed to live a divided life. Anointed with baptismal oil and with Christ as the trainer, the baptized will do battle with everything that stands in the way of divinization. By dying to sin, the baptized shares in the death of Christ. The anointing itself symbolizes that the divine birth joins the baptized with the Spirit. Chrism also symbolizes that Jesus bestows on "those minds that have achieved the closest conformity to God . . . an outpouring of divine fragrances to delight the intelligence, to cause a longing for God's gifts, and to feed on conceptual food."<sup>99</sup>

The Eucharist is referred to as "communion" and "gathering" (synaxis). The purpose of initiation is to forge our fragmented lives and the divisions among us into a divine unity. All the mysteries are directed to the Eucharist, and are perfected through the eucharistic action of gathering us to the One.<sup>100</sup>

After describing the various stages in the celebration of the divine liturgy, Dionysius goes on to consider the Eucharist as source of contemplation. He says that through the light of Christ we will be able to go from effects to causes, we will be able to glimpse the contemplation of spiritual things clearly reflected in a blessed original beauty. "And you, O most divine and sacred mystery: Lift up the symbolic garments of enigmas which surround you. Show yourself clearly to our gaze. Fill the eyes of our mind with a unifying and unveiled light."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>96</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 2,I (392A-C) in Luibheid 200-201.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* 3,I (425A-B).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 2.8 in Luibheid, p. 208. Dionysius in teaching the value of baptizing infants concludes that the hierarch admits the child to share in the sacred symbols so that he/she may spend his/her entire life in unceasing contemplation of the divine things (*ibid.* 568C).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 2.4-6, 8 (400C-404A, 404C-D); 4,III.4 (477C-480A) in Luibheid 206-08, 228-29.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 3,I (424C-D) in Luibheid 209.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 3,III.2 (428C) in Luibheid 212. Dionysius notes that while in the liturgy the people look at the symbols, the hierarch is continuously uplifted by the Spirit to the source of the sacramental rite through spiritual contemplations (*ibid.* 3,II [428A]).

The Eucharist symbolizes the mystery of the Incarnation. Just as, in the liturgy, the covered bread and wine are uncovered and distributed among the many while the body and blood remain the one Christ, so the hidden Word of God has become flesh without undergoing change and becomes a composite and visible reality. By uniting our humility with his divinity, he has made us members of his one body. Christ calls us to share in his goodness, by uniting ourselves with his divine life and imitating it as far as we can.<sup>102</sup>

Since the "initiated" have been purified and solidly formed in holiness, they are called to engage regularly in contemplation. In fact, as noted above, the order of baptized laity is seen as a contemplative order. They commune with the divine symbols and through the powers of uplifting rise up to divine love, as far as they are able.<sup>103</sup> The monks who have reached a higher level of purification and holiness are called to contemplation and communion. Their singleness of purpose and life and their duty "to be at one only with the One" open them to the perfection of God's love.<sup>104</sup>

#### THE ASCENT TO THE DIVINE RAYS

The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is achieved through being uplifted by the rays of divine light. Dionysius observes that those striving for perfection cannot know God directly since that is beyond them. "Instead they are raised firmly and unswervingly upward in the direction of the ray which enlightens them. With a love matching the illuminations granted them, they take flight, reverently, wisely, in all holiness."<sup>105</sup>

Having moved away from our passions, we will receive a spiritual gift of light, by which we will be united with God, and our minds will be struck by his "blazing light."<sup>106</sup> In *The Celestial Hierarchy* Dionysius says we must lift up the spiritual eyes of our minds to that primal light which comes from the Father. Through symbols this light informs us of the angelic hierarchies. "But we need to rise from this outpouring of illumination so as to come to the simple ray of Light itself."<sup>107</sup> We possess the "godlike and celestial" lights in proportion to our participation in the "unity which transcends all things," and in proportion to our dispositions.<sup>108</sup> Dionysius gives a rather graphic description of the divine rays:

So let us stretch ourselves prayerfully upward to the more lofty elevation of the kindly Rays of God. Imagine a great shining chain hanging downward

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 3.12-13 (444A-D) in Luibheid 222-23.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 6.I.2 (532B-C).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 6.I.2-3 (532B-D); 6.III.2 (533D-536A) in Luibheid 244-45, 247.

<sup>105</sup> *Divine Names* 1.2 (589A) in Luibheid 50.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 1.4 (592C).

<sup>107</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.2 (121A-B) in Luibheid 145-46.

<sup>108</sup> *Divine Names* 2.4, (641C); *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 2.III.2 (400B) in Luibheid 62, 205.

from the heights of heaven to the world below. We grab hold of it with one hand and then another, and we seem to be pulling it down toward us. Actually it is already there on the heights and down below and instead of pulling it to us we are being lifted upward to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams.<sup>109</sup>

Speaking of the heavenly existence after death, Dionysius declares that the blessed will be fulfilled in a visible theophany contemplating light similar to that of Christ's transfiguration. Immersed in the dazzling rays of Christ, they will become like the angels, as "sons of the Resurrection."<sup>110</sup>

In approaching the ray which transcends being we leave behind all our notions of the divine and call a halt to the activities of our minds.<sup>111</sup> We leave behind everything perceived and understood, all that is, and our understanding itself. Dionysius declares: "By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is." Since God is beyond word and understanding, we must "pass beyond every holy ascent," and "leave behind every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven," and "plunge into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One who is beyond all things."<sup>112</sup>

The way to God is ultimately by negation since the soul must move beyond its own nature.<sup>113</sup> The more we ascend from below, the more language falters until we are reduced to silence when we reach union with the one who is indescribable.<sup>114</sup>

Using the angelic union with God as a model, Dionysius claims that the union of divinized minds with "the Light beyond all deity occurs in the cessation of all intelligent activity." The most appropriate praise to offer is through the denial of all beings. Although the cause of everything, God is not a thing since he transcends all things in a manner beyond being.<sup>115</sup> By denying all things we arrive at that unknowing which is hidden from those possessed of knowing, and we are able to see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.<sup>116</sup>

The most divine knowledge of God comes from unknowing. It is in that union where the mind has turned away from all things including itself, and has become one with the "dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depth of Wisdom."<sup>117</sup> Balthasar expresses this insight by noting: "Each dogmatic decree, even the sharp-

<sup>109</sup> *Divine Names* 3.1 (680C) in Luibheid 68.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* 1.4 (592C).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* 1.4 (592D-593A).

<sup>112</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1.1-3 (997B-1000C) in Luibheid 135-36.

<sup>113</sup> *Divine Names* 13.3 (981B).

<sup>114</sup> *Mystical Theology* 3 (1033C).

<sup>115</sup> *Divine Names* 1.5 (593B-C); *Mystical Theology* 2 (1025A) in Luibheid 54, 138.

<sup>116</sup> *Mystical Theology* 2 (1025B) in Luibheid 138.

<sup>117</sup> *Divine Names* 7.3 (827A-B) in Luibheid 109.

est conciliar definition, must be seen in the light of the ever-greater unlikeness of God, of his ever-deeper mystery."<sup>118</sup>

The union with God who is light beyond light, and above all expression, is best described as a plunge into darkness and silence, a state of ecstasy. In the prayer that opens *The Mystical Theology*, Dionysius declares: "Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence."<sup>119</sup>

According to Andrew Louth, Dionysius sees ecstasy primarily as an ecstasy of love, as union and divinization. Dionysius not only speaks about the soul's ecstasy, but also of God's own ecstasy. The soul in ecstasy meets God's ecstatic love for herself. Louth concludes: "Here is no union with Plotinus' One, immutable and unconscious either of Itself or of the soul."<sup>120</sup> Balthasar describes it in this way: "... this ecstasy of creaturely *eros* is itself an imitation of the ecstatic divine *eros* which out of love goes out of itself into the multiplicity of the world . . ." He also observes that Dionysius' assertion of the immediate relationship of all creatures, especially human beings, to a personal God undermines the system of mediation found in Gnosticism and neo-Platonism.<sup>121</sup>

Using the model of Moses on Mt. Sinai, Dionysius observes that Moses does not meet God himself, but contemplates the region where God dwells. Therefore, our highest understanding is of "the rationale of all that lies below the Transcendent One."<sup>122</sup> However, Moses then leaves all behind and plunges into the "truly mysterious darkness of unknowing." Renouncing all things, one comes to belong completely to God. "Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing."<sup>123</sup>

For Dionysius, the divine darkness is not an absence of light but "unapproachable light." It is light beyond light. It is invisible because of its superabundant clarity and transcendence.<sup>124</sup> However, even the terms unknowing and darkness are inadequate. Dionysius declares:

Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.<sup>125</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.204.

<sup>119</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1.1 (997A–B) in Luibheid 135.

<sup>120</sup> Louth, *Origins* 175–6.

<sup>121</sup> Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* 2.205, 192.

<sup>122</sup> *Mystical Theology* 1.3 (1000D) in Luibheid 137.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* 1.3 (1001A) in Luibheid 137. <sup>124</sup> *Letters* 5 (1073A) in Luibheid 265.

<sup>125</sup> *Mystical Theology* 5 (1048A–B) in Luibheid 141.

## CONCLUSION

In Dionysius, theology, doxology, and mystical unknowing are merged into one process. The task of theology, namely the study of God, is affirmed but ultimately transcended. The goal of knowledge is the impossible one of escaping its own boundaries.

Creation itself is a series of paradoxes. Creation is not God but embodies the presence of God. We speak of existence, but God is beyond existence. Humans are finite and lowly in their distance from God, yet are mirrors of the divine image and called to true divinization. Sacred Scripture reveals the names of God in words and images familiar to us, yet God in reality is nameless, inexpressible, and ungraspable. The sacred mysteries take the shape of water, oil, bread, and wine, yet contain the untouchable holy.

Therefore, in the study of creation and of salvation history inquiry is directed to contemplation. Theology can only meditate on the work of creation and divine providence and contemplate the divine light to be found in Scripture and the holy mysteries (sacraments). The task of theology is not to satisfy the intellect's inquiry but to enable intelligent beings to join in the praise that creation constantly gives to God. Ultimately, theology abandons its activity in ecstatic surrender, plunging into the darkness of unknowing. There, earthly theology discovers its original paradigm, the primordial "theology" that consists in the union of creature and creator, not possessing but being possessed by the Source of all love.

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