

## Believing and Seeing

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### Abstract

This article reconsiders the relationship between vision and faith, recuperating an understanding of the “ray of darkness” accented by Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius for a fuller understanding of the beatific vision. Vision and faith are not ultimately two opposite movements, but rather two inseparable aspects of one dynamism leading to a knowing union with God that is “ever-more.”

### Keywords

beatific vision, Dionysius, *epektasis*, faith, Gregory of Nyssa

If we compare the definition of the act of faith found in *Dei Verbum* (DV) with that of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith of the First Vatican Council, we cannot help but notice that within a substantial continuity a new emphasis emerges.<sup>1</sup> By saying that faith is “an obedience by which [the human person] commits

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1. See *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html) (hereafter cited as DV); and First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* (April 24, 1870), in *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, ed. Heinrich Joseph Denzinger, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis: Herder, 1957), DS 1789 (hereafter cited as DS): “Since man is wholly dependent on God as his Creator and Lord, and since created reason is completely subject to uncreated truth, we are bound by faith to give full obedience of intellect and will to God who reveals.”

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[one's] whole self freely to God (*homo se totum libere committit*),<sup>22</sup> *Dei Verbum* retranslates Vatican I's definition of the act of faith in such a way that the element of personal trust receives a new and more positive meaning. The act of faith is now understood not only as a due and reasonable act of submission to God, but as an act of love, a personal gift of oneself to another, which implies a profound reconfiguration of the intrinsic significance of the act of faith itself.

This simple observation grounds the main argument of this article, which is that faith and vision are not ultimately opposed, but are two intrinsic dimensions of one dynamism of knowing-union with God. The task of this article is thus to reconsider the relationship between vision and faith, in light of Christ's disclosing of the Ultimate as Love.<sup>3</sup> The language of Scripture is clear that the final end of the covenant of love between God and God's people is not simply loving knowledge in the mode of possession, but knowing love in the mode of reciprocal belonging. This is well captured in the covenantal formula "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Jer 31:33; cf. Exod 6:7, RSVC throughout), which is transposed to a more intimate key in the Song of Songs: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (2:16, RSVC throughout). In this light, the ecstatic dispossession of trusting faith must be part of the very content of the life of glory, no less than the restful and secure possession entailed in sight.

The issue at stake here, far from being just an empty curiosity about the future life, is crucial to account for the goodness and beauty of our present existential condition. As embodied beings, we know only in and through the veiling limits of space and time. These limits inevitably frame our knowledge, resulting in an interplay of seeing and not seeing. In order to be able to fully affirm the goodness of our earthly existence, then, we must ask: does the "half-light" of our veiled and progressive way of knowing stand in simple opposition to the perfect and fully joyful future? Or is it possible to

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2. "'The obedience of faith' (Rom 16:26; cf. Rom 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5–6) is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals' (First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*), and freely assenting to the truth revealed by him." *DV* 5.

3. Cf. 1 John 4:8, 16. In saying that, according to revelation, *agapē* is what is ultimate, I intend two different, though inseparable, claims, corresponding to the two sides of the well-known statement of *Gaudium et Spes* that "Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling" (22). On the one hand, love is ultimate insofar as the word *agapē* synthetically captures the deepest truth of what Christ manifests about God: that is, the mystery of God's love for us *and* the even deeper mystery of the love in which this love is rooted, namely, the mystery of the life of love that God is in himself, as Father and Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, *agapē* is ultimate also, and consequently, as the very content of the divine life that, through the grace of adoption, we come to share through Jesus Christ. See *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (hereafter cited as *GS*).

discover a more generous way of conceiving our current pilgrim condition, that is, as a prefiguration of eternal glory?

What follows is an attempt to answer this question. There are three main steps to the argument. First I will argue that faith is, fundamentally, a clearing or making space for the ever-greater freedom of God's revelation. As such, faith is *a more comprehensive way of seeing*, because it sees the divine "object" of vision most truly for what it is, namely, triune love itself. As (tri-)personal, God is eminently free in the infinite manifestations of his very same love. Faith, then, is first of all a receptive movement of the creature, a willing receiving of God's free gifts. Second, I will show that faith, when seen not just from below but also from above, is not only a receptive act, but also an act of giving glorification, magnification, and praise. In entrusting himself ever anew to God, the believer paradoxically gives God joy—the joy of being able to give ever-more-fully of his overabounding goodness. Third, and in keeping with the nuptial structure of faith (which I will unfold as we proceed), I will show that faith, as involving an exchange of giving and receiving, is intrinsically fruitful. The infinite richness of God's glory shines forth only as the fruit of the ever-new dramatic interplay of God's free gift and the believer's corresponding free movement of faith and hope. It thus remains true that the contemplation of God's glory is the one and only source of the beatitude of the blessed. Yet my claim is that the reality of this fruition is more perfectly understood when described through the more dynamic language of nuptial union (as an ever-new unity of receiving, giving, and fruitfulness) than through the language of vision simply.<sup>4</sup>

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4. To be more precise, we should speak of a synthesis of nuptial union and filial love, a point that I will develop below (see the section entitled "Happiness in Dependency: Faith as Expression of Childhood"). By nuptial union, I mean here a union that is the fruit of a mutual and asymmetrical exchange of giving and receiving, in such a way that the one who is primarily receiver simultaneously actively collaborates in giving birth to a "third," which is, in our case, the appearing of the glory itself. As will be seen, the central point in our argument is precisely that the infinite forms of God's glory shine forth, and are thus generated in the intellect, not only through the gift of God's ever-new bestowing, but also through the believer's permanent movement beyond what is already seen. The use of nuptial language, of course, presupposes an acceptance of the scriptural appropriation of the nuptial analogy, according to which Yahweh (OT) and Christ (NT) stand for the bridegroom and the creature/Israel/church stand for the bride. Such appropriation, I would argue, works only under the condition of assuming the validity of a genuine analogy between human sexual difference, on the one hand, and the (infinitely greater) ontological difference between God and the creature, on the other, with the asymmetry such difference entails. As is well known, this is one of the main reasons why, after having been given prominence especially, if not exclusively, by Hans Urs Von Balthasar and John Paul II, the fittingness of the analogy has recently been severely criticized. This is not the place for entering into this complicated debate. It is enough simply to note that this article appropriates nuptial symbolic language according to its scriptural use, for the sole purpose that it allows us to account best for a form of union which entails simultaneously (i) permanent difference, (ii) asymmetrical but truly reciprocal exchange of giving and receiving, and (iii) ever greater fruitfulness. For a positive account of the nuptial

In order to begin our reflections from within a biblical perspective, let us recall the main argument of a work that has been historically important in the development of the debate on faith in the twentieth century: Martin Buber's *Two Types of Faith*.<sup>5</sup> Although

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analogy, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 68–91 (“super-gender” in trinitarian theology); Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 365–74 (anthropology); Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 283–300 (Christology-Ecclesiology/Mariology); Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986); John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 6–8, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html); John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006); Marc Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, trans. Philip Milligan and Linda M. Cicone (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); Ouellet, *Mystery and Sacrament of Love: A Theology of Marriage and the Family for the New Evangelization*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás and Adrian J. Walker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 193–313. On the significance and limits of the nuptial analogy for theology as a whole, see Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 384–405. For a post modern feminist criticism of Balthasar's appropriation of nuptiality in general, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Women and Sexuality*, Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1992); David Moss and Lucy Gardner, “Difference—The Immaculate Concept? The Laws of Sexual Difference in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 377–402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00071>; Tina Beattie, “A Man and Three Women: Hans, Adrienne, Mary and Luce,” *New Blackfriars* 79 (1998): 97–103, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb01582.x>; Gerard Loughlin, “Sexing the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 79 (1998): 18–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb02802.x>; Lucy Gardner and David Moss, “Something like Time; Something like the Sexes—An Essay in Reception,” in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash, and Graham Ward (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 69–137; Rachel Muers, “A Question of Two Answers: Difference and Determination in Barth and von Balthasar,” *The Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999): 265–79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2265.00106>; Corinne Crammer, “One Sex or Two? Balthasar's Theology of the Sexes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. E. T. Oakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 93–112; Michelle Gonzalez, “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 566–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390406500304>; Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). For an opposite, more traditionalist criticism of the revival of “nuptial mysticism” in contemporary Catholic theology, see Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth Century Catholic Theologians* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); and, more balanced, Michele M. Schumacher, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2014).

5. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith: A Study of the Interpretation of Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951).

Buber's assessment is one-sided and inadequate, his work nonetheless serves as a helpful entry point into the question. According to the Jewish philosopher, there are two fundamental kinds of faith, which he sees as radically different, and even opposed to one another. On the one hand, there is faith as the act of unconditional trust of one person in another (essentially equivalent to what the Catholic tradition calls *fides qua*). On the other hand, there is a conception of faith in which what is most important is the content of belief, usually formulated in dogmatic propositions (similar to what the scholastic tradition calls *fides quae*). According to Buber, the biblical 'emûnâh,<sup>6</sup> the faith of Abraham and of Israel, can be identified with the former. With the writings of Paul and John, by contrast, Christians have abandoned this authentic Abrahamic and biblical faith in favor of the second, propositional kind. In the letters of Paul, the Gospel of John, and the Letter to the Hebrews, the biblical faith of Abraham has been jettisoned in favor of a *pistis* that is now understood as the confession of propositional truths concerning God's existence (Heb 11:3), Jesus's salvific death and resurrection from the dead (Rom 10:9), Jesus's divine identity (John 20:28), and so forth.

The opposition between these two types of faith, as outlined by Buber, hardly does justice to the faith of either the Hebrew or Christian covenant, although the details do not concern us here.<sup>7</sup> It is enough to recall, as *Lumen Fidei* lucidly does, that the 'emûnâh of Abraham, no less than the *pistis* of Paul, is inextricably bound to assertive statements (*fides quae*)—statements that concern both past and future, both the memory of the salvific deeds of the Lord and his promises (*LF* 9, 11). Conversely, it would not be difficult to show that the personal element of trust is no less important for Paul and John than it is for Abraham. That said, it is significant that the element that Buber emphasizes as most important in the biblical 'emûnâh is precisely that which receives new emphasis in *Dei Verbum*'s definition of faith: trust as total commitment of oneself to a personal Thou.

The most stimulating point in Buber's challenge, that is, is the fact that he implicitly asks the question that we alluded to above. In order to be faithful to the logic of mutuality proper to the biblical covenant, which should be considered ultimate in our communion with God: the possession (*stasis*) of the act of seeing or the dispossession (*ekstasis*) of the act of trust? Again, in more explicitly eschatological terms: should the veiled dimension of faith be simply opposed to unveiled vision, as something inferior?

6. The encyclical *Lumen Fidei* describes the biblical concept of 'emûnâh in the following way: "In the Bible, faith is expressed by the Hebrew word 'emûnâh, derived from the verb 'aman, whose root means 'to uphold.' The term 'emûnâh can signify both God's fidelity and man's faith. The man of faith gains strength by putting himself in the hands of the God who is faithful" (10). This twofold meaning of 'emûnâh is significant for the development of our argument. Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (June 29, 2013), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html) (hereafter cited as *LF*).

7. For a response to Buber on this point, see Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 2:277–90; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Fides Christi," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2, *Spouse of the Word*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 43–79 at 43–52.

Far from being opposed, I will argue that the light of christological revelation allows for a new illumination of the relationship between faith and vision—an illumination that, without denying the traditional emphasis on the sight of God as the ultimate object of our yearning, is able to integrate the ecstatic movement of Abrahamic faith into the realm of what belongs to “man’s highest calling” (*GS* 22), in a kind of “mutual indwelling” of faith and sight. As we will see, this conception of the interrelationship between the two is truer to the biblical understanding of interpersonal knowledge than the classical opposition between vision and faith, light and darkness, found in much of the western Christian tradition.

## Movement and Rest

The tradition of the church tends to associate the beatific vision with rest, as opposed to faith and hope, which are characterized as restless precisely because they long for the clear vision of what is still only believed in and hoped for.<sup>8</sup> Thus, any Catholic theologian who would speak of the beatific vision in terms of perfected eschatological faith needs first to respond to the most important presupposition of the traditional understanding of faith as something intrinsically imperfect, namely, the association of restlessness with imperfection. If the restlessness and yearning of faith and hope are defined *simply* as a lack, then there is no serious alternative to Aquinas’s argument against the permanence of faith and hope in heaven.<sup>9</sup> But does the trustful movement toward the “still unseen” necessarily entail imperfection? Again, is the yearning of *eros* necessarily linked to a lack?

If we consider faith from the perspective of our present experience of it, the negative aspect of not seeing or of obscurity inherent to faith does indicate a defective lack of evidence and knowledge. From *this* point of view, faith and hope can only be opposed to the unqualified vision of God, in a relationship of mutual exclusion, as St. Paul states: “We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, *for we walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor 5:6–7), and again, “For in this hope we were saved. Now *hope that is seen is not hope*. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom 8:25–26). This is clearly also the sense in which the papal bull *Benedictus Deus* (1336) has dogmatically affirmed that “the vision and enjoyment of the divine essence do away with the acts of faith and hope in the souls [of the blessed], inasmuch as faith and hope are properly theological virtues” (DS 530).

Yet if there is available a different, analogical way of conceiving the “restless desire of hope” and the correlative “obscurity of faith,” then the testimony of much of the tradition and the bull of Benedict XII would not represent an insurmountable impediment to our hypothesis. What is needed is a conception of the restless movement toward the still unseen that is not opposed to the rest of unqualified vision, but rather

8. See, e.g., Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1, 8; Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 14, a. 2; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1–2, q. 67, a. 3.

9. See, e.g., Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 18, a. 2.

is understood as the converse of the positive awareness of the infinite exuberance of God's mystery.<sup>10</sup> In this way we could arrive at an understanding of "perfect knowledge" that better secures the continuity between time and eternity, and the goodness of our inescapable finitude.<sup>11</sup>

In support of this thesis, we can find at least three important footholds in the tradition of the Church: (i) the mystical doctrine of luminous darkness common to many of the Eastern Fathers of the Church, (ii) Aquinas's understanding of faith as "restless rest," and (iii) a tradition of reflection on the spiritual senses that emphasizes the synesthetic interpenetration of sight and hearing.

First there is the mysticism of the "luminous" or "over-luminous" darkness dear to the greatest masters of Greek mysticism: Gregory of Nyssa<sup>12</sup> and Dionysius the Areopagite.<sup>13</sup> In spite of the profound differences in their metaphysics, both of these authors distinguish between two kinds of darkness: a darkness that is inferior to knowledge (Gregory's *skotos*), and a luminous or over-luminous darkness (*lampros* or *hyperlampros gnophos*) that instead characterizes the highest states of union with God, indicating the excessive

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10. The suggestion being proposed here helps to resolve the tension inherent in the idea of a genuine knowledge or vision of an infinite God, who as infinite is so far incomprehensible. Aquinas, for example, clearly states that in heaven the blessed enjoy the *visio Dei* without having the *comprehensio* of God's infinite essence; see Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 12, a. 1 ad 3; 1, q. 12, aa. 7–8; 1, q. 86, a. 2. If we conceive the beatific vision merely in terms of intellectual possession, then the permanent incomprehensibility of God's essence would become simply a negative limit, rather than being a positive source of fruition. On this important point, see D. C. Schindler, *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 85–115.
  11. At this point, one could well ask, given the substantial qualifications just made, whether it is not misleading to use the term "faith" for the spiritual act in question. In response, I would say that we do not have a better all-encompassing word to name the reality I am attempting to describe. The word "faith," in fact, recommends itself because it allows us to point to the fundamental question at stake—namely, the relationship between the dispossession of trusting faith and the possession of seeing vision, in the perfection of man's communion with God.
  12. See Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* 2, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New Jersey: Paulist, 1978), 152–69. For the expression "*lampros gnophos*" ("luminous darkness"), see in particular 2, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 163. On the meaning of the symbolism of "luminous darkness" as the unifying key of the entire mystical doctrine of Gregory, see Jean Daniélou, "Mystique de la ténèbre chez Grégoire de Nysse," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité: Ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. Marcel Viller, et al. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), vol. 2, s.v. "contemplation," col. 1872–85.
  13. See Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 997B, 1000A, 1025C; *Letters* 1, 1065A, 1073A. On Dionysius's doctrine of "*hyper-lampros gnophos*" (super-luminous darkness) and its relation of continuity and difference from Gregory's doctrine of luminous darkness, see Ysabel de Andia, *HENOSIS: L'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aréopagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 303–74. Quotations from Dionysius have been adapted, at times significantly, from Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette, 1980).

overabundance of the divine light, rather than its lack.<sup>14</sup> Darkness, then, as associated with nescience (*agnōsia*), has a double, diametric significance in relation to intellectual grasp, according to the different stages of the spiritual ascent of the soul toward union with God. In the first stage, when the soul is still in a condition of impurity, ignorance, and distance from God, darkness means only the absence of knowledge. At the highest level of its contemplative maturation, however, the soul goes back into the darkness as a fruit of its grasp that God is ungraspable by way of intellectual grasping.<sup>15</sup> It is this awareness of God's incomprehensibility that draws the soul into a totally "chaste silence," which is the clearing opened to God's supernatural acting in the soul.<sup>16</sup>

According to Gregory of Nyssa, this perception of the excessive overabundance of God's mystery draws the beholding soul into a paradoxical new form of progressive movement, which is not opposed to the rest of possession. This is Gregory's famous mysticism of *epektasis*, or endless progress: "This is the most paradoxical of all things: when rest and movement come to coincide."<sup>17</sup> According to Jean Daniélou,

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14. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 11, trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College, 1987), 322–23: "God's manifestation to the great Moses began with light [cf. Ex 3:2], after which he spoke through a cloud. Having risen higher and having become more perfect, Moses saw God in darkness [cf. Ex 20:21]. By this example we learn that our withdrawal from false, deceptive ideas of God is a transition from darkness (*apo tou skotou*) into light. Next, a more careful understanding of hidden things leads the soul through appearances to God's hidden nature, which is symbolized by a cloud overshadowing all appearances and which little by little accustoms the soul to behold the hidden. Finally, the soul is led on high. Forsaking what human nature can attain, the soul enters within the sanctuary of divine knowledge where she is hemmed in on all sides by the divine darkness [*theo gnōpho*]. The soul forsakes everything without, that is, appearances and ideas; the only thing left for her contemplation is the unseen (*aoraton*) and unattainable [*anephikton*] in which God dwells, as the Scripture says: 'Moses entered into the darkness [*eis ton gnophon*] where the Lord was' [Ex 20:21]."
15. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 156: "this is the man who truly comprehends (*katalambanei*) God: the one who understands that He is incomprehensible (*akatalepton*)."
16. Cf. Dionysius, *Divine Names* 1, 3, 589B. Gregory of Nyssa's distinction between *skotos* and *gnophos* is particularly interesting because it puts in evidence the analogy, in opposition, between the two kinds of darkness. *Skotos* indicates darkness as *lack* of light. The First Letter of John uses *skotos* when it affirms that God is light and in him there is no darkness (1 John 1:5). The word *gnophos* (fog, gloom) indicates, rather, the excess of light. It is the word used in the Septuagint to indicate the "smoking" top of Sinai, into which Moses disappears when he encounters the Lord (Ex 20:21).
17. *Life of Moses* 2, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 243. Starting with the studies of Daniélou, it has become customary to use the term *epektasis* to indicate the speculative affirmation most characteristic of Gregory's mystical doctrine, according to which the reaching out (*epekteinēin*) of the soul toward God is infinite, because the capacity for progress of the spirit created for participation in the life of God is infinite. The term comes from Phil 3:13, Gregory's favorite Pauline verse, which he inevitably cites in this context: "Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (*epekteinōmenos*) to what lies ahead ..."



*epektasis* means precisely the state of possession and egression that characterizes the mystical life:

In its very composition, the word lends itself to expressing a twofold element. It indicates on the one hand possession, “*epi*,” a real perception of something and the indwelling of God in the soul. On the other hand it indicates taking leave of oneself, “*ek*,” the irreducible infinity of God who snatches the soul to himself in the ecstasy of love. Here the opposition between knowledge and love, between *theoria* and *agape*, is overcome. For the intellect, God is inside the soul and dwells there; but for love, the soul is cast outside of itself toward him.<sup>18</sup>

As for Dionysius’s *hyperlampros gnophos*, it is important to note two things. First, as we will see, for Dionysius the most perfect union with God, the so-called “union beyond intellect” (*henosis hyper noun*), transcends intellectual vision *in heaven* no less than on earth. Second, the meaning of Dionysius’s “union beyond intellect” must be understood in a way that is very close to what this article is proposing with regard to faith and vision. This union is not to be understood as an *exclusion* of the ultimate character of intellectual vision, but rather as an endlessly ecstatic movement that *pre-supposes and includes* intellection. The sole (but extremely eloquent) passage in which Dionysius deals directly with the theme of eschatology is the following:

But in the time to come, when we are incorruptible and immortal, when we have come at last to the blessed inheritance of being like Christ, then, as the Scripture says, “we shall be always with the Lord” [1 Thess 4:17]. In most holy contemplation we shall be ever filled with his visible manifestation [*horatē theophaneia* = participation of the senses, *aistheta*], shining gloriously around us as once it shone for the disciples at the divine transfiguration. And there we shall be, our minds (*nous*) away from passion and from earth, and we shall have the gifts of his intelligible light [*noētē phōtodesia* = participation and enjoyment of the intellect] and, somehow, the union that is beyond intellect (*henosis hyper noun*) with him and—our understanding carried away—we shall be struck by the blazing and “unknown touches” (*agnōstoi epibolai*) of his over-luminous rays.<sup>19</sup>

We have here not only a clear affirmation of the participation of the senses in the fruition of divine life, but also the enduring distinction between the “intelligible lights” and a higher form of union, neither of which cancels out the other. The transcending movement of love does not exclude the light of intellection, but rather assumes it in its own integration.

A second foothold can be found in Thomas Aquinas. As Joseph Pieper indicates, Aquinas’s classical analysis of the paradoxical structure of the act of faith is beautifully captured in the paradox of restless rest—a point to which we will return below.<sup>20</sup>

18. Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 322, translation mine.

19. Dionysius, *Divine Names* 1, 4, 592C.

20. See Joseph Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 45–54. According to Pieper, Aquinas’s doctrine of faith is *structurally* paradoxical or “oxymoronic,” insofar as it entails an element of absolute certainty and perfection (the assent of faith is even

Because faith is seeking vision, it is inherently restless. Because it is unalterably certain, faith is also inherently restful. Pieper's insight here, in fact, points to a profound, hidden kinship between Aquinas's doctrine of faith *in statu viae* and Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of endless progress: both can be described through the oxymoron of restless rest. As we will see, this intuition of Pieper helps make sense of the transfiguration of the restlessness inherent to faith into a purely positive understanding of transcending movement.<sup>21</sup>

A third foothold in the tradition is the reflection on the spiritual senses developed by the Church Fathers, especially in their exegeses of the Song of Songs. The idea of an unceasing influx of "seeing into hearing,"<sup>22</sup> and vice versa, is not wholly strange to those who are familiar with this doctrine, which is among the most authoritative teachings of the spiritual tradition of the Church.<sup>23</sup> One of the most remarkable features of the poetic language of the Song is its "synesthetic" interweaving of the five senses, which serves to create a fluid, elusive, and dynamic continuum between closeness and distance, union and separation, clear and obscure perception, possession and desire. If the privileged images of the eschaton in Scripture are the meal and marriage,<sup>24</sup> which tend to "synesthetically" (eucharistically) merge with one another, we are invited to ask: why should the believer receive only a beatific vision of God, and not a beatific

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more certain than science in this regard) and an element of uncertainty and imperfection, as to the evidence of what is believed. In this way, "it is the linking of final assent with a residual *cogitatio*, that is, the association of rest and unrest, that distinctively characterizes the believer ... In belief ... both elements—the assent and the mental unrest—are *ex aequo* [*De veritate*, q. 14, a. 1], equally valid, coeval and equally potent" (51). This is why "the cognition of belief does not quiet the desire but rather kindles it." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, 40.

21. Particularly interesting, in this respect, is Aquinas, *ST* 3, q. 15, a. 10 ad 1, in which the Angelic Doctor attempts to explain in which sense Jesus, who for Aquinas enjoys the beatific vision already in his earthly life, can be simultaneously *viator* and *comprehensor*: "It is impossible to move towards the end and to rest in the end, *in the same respect*; but there is nothing to prevent this under a different respect—as when a man is acquainted with what he already knows, and yet is a learner with regard to what he does not know" (emphasis mine).
22. Cf. Balthasar, *The Last Act*, 406: "It is probably true to say that the theology of vision neglected to explain that the *visio* does not obviate the *auditio*. The active, exploratory eye does not rob the passive, receptive ear of its function, particularly as the Son of God remains for all eternity the Word of the Father" (emphasis mine).
23. On the ecclesiastic interpretation of the Song, see Anne-Marie Pelletier, *Lectures du Cantique des Cantiques. De l'énigme du sens aux figures du lecteur* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Pontificio, 1989).
24. See especially, in the NT, Matt 9:15, 22:1–14, 25:1–13; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:34; John 2:1–12; Rev 3:20, 19:6–9, 21:1–22. Cf. Kevin E. Miller, "The Nuptial Eschatology of Revelation 19–22," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 60 (1998): 301–18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43723261>; Renzo Infante, *Lo Sposo e la Sposa. Percorsi di analisi simbolica tra Sacra Scrittura e cristianesimo delle origini* (Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline, 2004), 83–208; Balthasar, "Meal and Marriage" in *The Last Act*, 470–87.

hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting? This is but another way of asking why it should not be possible, and even more fitting, to say that the obscure light of faith is perfected in heaven, not only as visible light, but also as the infallible power of trusting through not seeing. The poetics of the Song of Songs suggests a possible way of holding these two things together: the light of glory, through a sort of spiritual synesthesia, would be simultaneously perceived as light that proffers the rest of evidence, as word that promises a new presence (Song 2:8), and as an inebriating scent (Song 1:3) that elicits in the beholder the ecstatic *eros* to see and taste more of the very same mystery of God. The difficulty that confronts us now is to try to elucidate what this “more” can mean, while excluding a priori any quantitative understanding of it.

## The Nuptial Analogy

Any reflection on the meaning of faith that wants to be faithful to biblical revelation needs to place faith in its proper context, namely, the covenant of love between God and his people. As we have already recalled, the nuptial analogy is the most important image through which Scripture contemplates not only the dynamism of the covenant, but also its ultimate *telos*.<sup>25</sup> The example of a marriage vow, in fact, helps us enter further into the heart of the argument. When two people get married, no matter how certain one spouse-to-be is of the love and future faithfulness of the other she/he cannot see in advance how their relationship will unfold. In this sense, a marriage vow is for both no less an act of faith and hope than it is an act of love. In this case, however, it seems clear that the “not yet” of each spouse’s ignorance regarding the future behavior of the other is not simply a lack of knowledge—in which case it could be only a source of fear—but is simultaneously the space that allows each to perform an act of trusting self-surrender. Indeed, it is precisely as such, as requiring a certain “leap in the dark,” that we spontaneously perceive this act as something admirable, even beautiful, without necessarily being able to explain why.

The paradox of a marriage vow lies in the fact that the veil of partial ignorance enveloping the spouses involves a surplus of meaning that makes it intrinsically luminous, and so not simply reducible to a negative lack of knowledge. Without ceasing to be a kind of “passive potency,” the ignorance of the spouses becomes matter informed by their act of self-abandonment, and in this way paradoxically active and radiantly expressive. It becomes, to use another oxymoron, “formed darkness.”<sup>26</sup> Put simply, in

25. Among all the images of the eschaton, the nuptial analogy must be taken as the *analogatum princeps*, recommended not only by the witness of the mystics of all times, but first of all by Scripture itself. See Joseph Atkinson, “Nuptiality as a Paradigmatic Structure of Biblical Revelation,” in *Dialoghi Sul Mistero Nuziale*, ed. Gilfredo Marengo and Bruno Ognibeni (Rome: Lateran University, 2003), 15–34; Sebastian R. Smolarz, *Covenant and the Metaphor of Divine Marriage in Biblical Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 250–71.

26. Dionysius glimpses something profound in this respect when he insists, consistent with the logic of his theology of dissimilar symbolism, that there must be a way in which non-being—understood, neo-platonically, as “pure matter” or formless darkness—itself participates in the Good and the Beautiful, if it is true that the Divine Cause is over-eminently elevated beyond any graspable form. See Dionysius, *Divine Names* 4, 3, 697A; 4, 7, 704B.

the nuptial vow, the darkness that envelops the act of trust and entrustment becomes not merely receptive space, but also a sign that powerfully shows forth the spouses' love for one another. This is why the act of vowing oneself is not only admirable, but properly beautiful—for beauty is inextricably bound to form and light.<sup>27</sup> The dazzling paradox present in the vow is that precisely the shapeless darkness of one's ignorance seems to collaborate in creating the radiant form of the act of love. The partial ignorance of each spouse receives its whole expressive power from one's knowledge of one's spouse-to-be. Without this knowledge, one's ignorance would be only a paralyzing source of anxiety, and one's "leap" a foolish act of imprudence. But when this insecurity is overcome through sure knowledge of the beloved, the mysterious veil that hides the future becomes a supremely luminous means through which the spouse is able to express his/her love. In a similar way, the self-abandonment of the believer to God, precisely in the darkness of hope, glorifies the Lord in a way that exceeds all other ways.<sup>28</sup>

### Faith in God's Almighty Faithfulness

Why does the night of faith and hope render such glory to God? In order to answer this question, we must note a simple but extremely important fact: faith, in both the Old and New Testaments, is not simply focused on God's faithful love, but on God's almighty faithful love. Without presuming fully to justify this claim, it suffices here to point to the two greatest archetypes of faith: Abraham and Mary of Nazareth. Among many similarities, these two especially have in common the fact that their faith is at once a faith in the Lord's faithfulness to his word, and a faith in the Lord's almighty power.<sup>29</sup> In the words of the angel Gabriel: "no word will be impossible to fulfill (*adynatēsei*) for God" (Luke 1:37).

The faith of Mary and Abraham does not point to a generic absolute power, but to the surpassing power of God, who is capable of confirming the truthfulness of his

27. On beauty as the unity of form and light (*species* and *lumen*), see Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 117–27. It is suggestive to note that both faith and hope, as related to word and promise, are inextricably bound to *hearing* and *time*. There is, I would submit, a secret, profound bond between music, faith, and hope. Music is beauty embedded in sound and time. Its harmony, the unity of many different notes, can manifest itself to the listener only if he remains in an attitude of silent, sightless listening (we often close our eyes to listen better), patiently trusting in the unity and "justice" of the whole. Music, in this sense, is indispensable in the education of any human being, not only because it initiates the child to the objective, pre-conscious perception of the goodness and beauty of the mystery of time, but also because it initiates him to the correspondent goodness and beauty of patient, sightless listening. Music, we could say, is a sort of natural *preambulum fidei et spei*.

28. As Charles Péguy saw in his famous hymn to the night in *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 131–32, quoted in part below.

29. Cf. Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:15–27; 22:1–19; Luke 1:38, 45.

word beyond any human hope and expectation, and in spite of any appearance to the contrary. Theirs is a faith, moreover, that centers on the gift of life—the radiance of life as if out of nothing (Gen 1:3; John 1:5). They both believe in the humanly impossible birth of a promised son, and the impossible salvation from death of the very same given son.<sup>30</sup> The surpassing greatness of God, which is the object of biblical faith, is the Lord's power of manifesting the very same *ḥesed we'emet* (steadfast love and faithfulness) in ever different and more glorious ways.

God's almightiness and his faithfulness are not simply two juxtaposed objects of faith, then, but rather two dimensions of the same reality. In calling Israel to believe in his faithfulness, his *'emet*, the Lord calls Israel to recognize his everlasting love and mercy, his *ḥesed*. In calling his people to believe in his almightiness, the Lord is inviting them to honor in wonder the inexhaustible richness of his goodness. We can see this in Abraham's enduring faith, of which Paul offers the following exegesis: "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom 4:20–21). What is properly "just" in Abraham's act of faith is precisely his recognition of the Lord's unfathomable power of being faithful to his mercy. Abraham gives glory to God, in other words, not simply by believing in the Lord's faithful love, but because, in and through this act of believing, he leaves the Lord the space in which to manifest his faithfulness, beyond any possible imagination. The calling of the Lord, both in the long years of childlessness and even more in the dramatic narrative of Genesis 22, is a calling to allow the borders of his static, possessive idea of life (symbolized and embodied in Isaac) to be broken and, in this spiritual sense, slaughtered. In this way, Abraham is able to enter into faith's movement of giving everything away in order to receive everything back, over-multiplied—a movement in which the truth of life itself consists: "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Gen 22:17–18).

An important conclusion follows. Within the dynamic logic of the covenant of love between God and his people, the oxymoronic quality of faith as simultaneously luminous and obscure, restful and restless, takes on a new dimension: the aspect of light now concerns the believer's steadfast certainty in the Lord's faithfulness to his word, whereas the aspect of obscurity has a different object, namely, the unforeseeable ways in which the Lord is able to express and reveal his love, as an ever-surprising answer to the believer's self-abandonment in faith and hope. Biblical worship, in fact, entails both the yearning to see the face of the Lord *and* the celebration and reverent affirmation of God's wondrous transcendence. To see the *kābôd* of the Lord means to see the manifestation of the incomprehensible.<sup>31</sup> It means to *see* the radiant countenance of the three times Holy.

30. Cf. Heb 11:17–19.

31. See especially Exod 33:13–23; 34:4–9; Deut 9:7–10, 22; Isa 6:5–7. On the connection between glory, the cloud, and the tabernacle, see Exod 16:7–10; 24:15–17; 33:7–11; 40:34–38; Lev 16:2; 1 Kgs 8:10–12. On the manifestation of the Lord's *kābôd* in the Old Testament, see Claus Westermann, "Kbd, *to be heavy*," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old*

It is crucial to understand this distinction between the “what” of God’s faithful love and the “how” of its ever-new manifestations in order to see why the self-entrustment of faith can and must remain in the heavenly eschatological liturgy, as both an act of *knowing* and an act of *loving worship* of the highest kind. We will now look at hoping faith, or faith-filled hope, as the ultimate form of knowledge, and then at faith as the perfect form of worship, and therefore the perfect form of love.

### Faith and Beauty: Love as “Ever-More”

Let us return to the example of the marriage vow. As we have seen, the very fact that each spouse does not know in advance how the other will reciprocally unfold their love allows each spouse to show to the other the faith that the other will keep his/her word. If this were the only thing concealed behind the veil of the present, however, the “not yet” of each spouse’s faith would be related to the future fulfillment of the partner’s promise merely in terms of a movement from an imperfect possession and obscure vision to a perfect possession and clear vision. But there is more to faith than this, as any lover who is deeply sure of the reciprocation of his love knows by experience. Mixed with the inescapably negative dimension of non-knowing, there is something beautiful and good in the veil that conceals the future. This veil, we could say, opens a space in which the lover can be delighted by the surprise of the beloved’s response to his/her hope, a response that fulfills while surpassing all expectations. Indeed, the more a relationship of reciprocal love is mature and certain, the less the veil separating present from future is experienced as something negative needing to be overcome. The present, rather, becomes the “iconostasis”<sup>32</sup> that simultaneously images and conceals the mystery of the beloved, and with it the inexhaustible richness of the free ways in which the beloved can unfold his/her love. The ungraspable mystery of the other’s personal freedom, when grounded in the certainty of the other’s faithful love, is perceived as a source of joy rather than a lack.<sup>33</sup>

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*Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 2:595–602; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:29–35; Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 6, *The Old Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil and Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 31–66.

32. On the mystagogical function of the iconostasis, as simultaneously veiling and unveiling the ineffable and invisible mysteries of the “altar” through its visible beauty, see Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1996).
33. The mysterious finale of the Song of Songs (“Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices”), where the bride appears to set the beloved free and even invite him to leave, seems to suggest something along these lines. It is as if the Shulammitte, once restlessly tormented by the absences of the beloved, finally understands, through a suffered process of initiation into the mysteries of love, that the act of letting her beloved go, and her being ever-again surprised by his coming ever-again, are two inseparable dynamic dimensions of the truly joy-giving communion of love. See the important commentary on the meaning of this final verse in Gianni Barbiero, *Cantico dei Cantici. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (Milano: Paoline Editoriale Libri, 2004), 411–14.

Understood in this positive way, the obscurity of faith is nothing but the converse of the lover's grateful recognition that the beloved will always remain irreducible to all his glorious manifestations. He is more than can be grasped. This "more" does not indicate something held back so that it can be given later as a surprise; rather, it indicates the mystery of the beloved person himself, and his inexhaustible power to invent ever new ways of expressing the same love that he has already given.

We arrive in this way at the discovery of the non-quantitative meaning of the "ever-more" that, according to many mystics, belongs to the life of glory. This "ever-more," which, as we have seen, concerns the irreducibly free and personal character of love, can be understood in terms of the *tropos* of love. The term *tropos* (mode, way) was used by the most important dogmatic theologians of the Greek tradition, the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor, to distinguish what in God belongs to the Persons from what belongs to the divine essence.<sup>34</sup> According to these theologians, the "what" (*logos*) depends on the nature, whereas the "how" (*tropos*) depends on the Person. As hinted at above, this difference between "what" and "how" strikingly fits with the interweaving of the twofold object of biblical faith. What Abraham and Mary know with certainty is God's faithfulness to his word, to the *logos* of his love; what they do not see in advance is the manifestation of the ever-surpassing ways in which the Lord is able to unfold his love in time. In this way, the analogy of love expressed in a marriage vow leads us to see that the obscure aspect of faith is not necessarily opposed to the perfection of knowledge, but rather that the opposite is true. If "in love there is no fear" (1 John 4:8), then the more one knows God, the more one's faith in him coincides with a *positive recognition* of the mystery of his triune freedom. More precisely, if in faith what is never seen "once and for all" is the free "how" of God's love, we can now say that this not-seeing does not indicate a negative lack of knowledge but rather its opposite: the crystal clear and delighted awareness that the object of one's vision is not something but a living someone.

This is the first reason why the darkness of faith can be as luminous as the aspect of vision that it entails. An observation of Hans Urs von Balthasar on the heavenly life of communion among the saints helps illuminate this point:

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34. The *logos/tropos* distinction especially governs and shapes the metaphysics of Maximus the Confessor, for whom *logos* always indicates the nature or essence, and *tropos* indicates the person or hypostasis. In Maximus's trinitarian theology, for example, the same divine nature is expressed in a "singular way" (*tropos tēs hyparxeōs*) by each Divine Person. Analogously, the Divine Person of Christ confers on his human nature a wondrous (*thaumaston*) mode of existing and acting, different from the way in which any other human nature exists and acts, without in any way changing the *logos* of human nature itself. Cf. Heribert Mühlen, *La mutabilità di Dio* (Brescia: Editrice Queriniana, 1974), 49: "The Greek Fathers have indicated the distinctive properties of the divine Persons by preference through the expression *tropos tes hyparxeos* ... which literally means "turn" of existence [*trepō* = to turn]; if they were not explicitly thinking about a "personal turning to," still the expression *tropos* contains a dynamic element, the connotation of movement as opposed to rest, the idea of "turning," which gets lost in the Latin translation *modus existendi*" (translation and emphasis mine).

However we try to portray the unimaginable eternal life in the communion of saints, one element of it is constant: we shall be filled with astonished joy, constantly being given new and unexpected gifts through the freedom of others ... The fact that I cannot penetrate the other's freedom from outside or from above does not mean that I cannot know or trust him. On earth, of course, there are limits and disappointments in this area because the other person's freedom can always turn aside to the path of deceit; but in eternal life this is not possible: here we can trust limitlessly, without this beautiful trait being corrupted by a superior knowledge. For the word "trust" leaves the field open for faith and hope: in the interpersonal sphere two are most at home where two people know each other so well that they can take the risk—without fear—of depending on the other.<sup>35</sup>

This last point deserves further qualification and development. In order to do so, let us formulate a sort of biblical syllogism: if the truth of *agapē* is mainly the measureless gift of oneself (first premise); and if what we call a self or person is essentially a mystery of freedom (second premise); then it follows that such a gift, in order to be truly bestowed for what it is, must be not simply identical to what the receiver already knows and expects, but also *in some way* irreducible to any previous knowledge and expectation: that is, it fulfills the desire for love in a free, ever surprising way.<sup>36</sup> In eschatological terms, if the eternal gift of the glory enjoyed in the beatific vision were eternally identical to itself and not also ever-different, it would lose something of its proper light and glory, of its *charis*, in the double Greek sense of grace and beauty.<sup>37</sup> It would thus not fully express its essence, that is, the gracious, ever-mysterious character of love, as the expression of the irreducible freedom of the divine Persons.

It is worth noting here that Gregory of Nyssa shows a marked preference for the name of Beauty (*to kalon*) whenever he speaks about God in the context of his doctrine of *epektasis*. According to Gregory, in the mystical life, and even in the eschaton, the soul sees God as "*aoristos kallos*," as infinite, unending and unbounded beauty.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, there is a mutual co-implication between beauty (*kallos*), wonder (*thaumazein*), and endless transcendence, or the desire to see ever more:

35. Balthasar, *The Last Act*, 404.

36. Cf. Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 1, *Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 45: "Nothing can surpass the joy of exchange and reciprocal sharing. Accordingly, it would not be a sign of perfection if a subject were already so well equipped, so stuffed with truths, that it no longer needed another to share anything with it and would not know what to do with such a communication anyway ... An all-knowingness that precluded any communication or sharing would be the height of boredom, and the idea of having to deal with someone or thing that displayed this kind of knowing would be the least attractive prospect imaginable ... In order to experience and to taste the full richness of being, you need a kind of poverty, a receptivity to what is other than yourself and to the big wide world that lies beyond you."

37. Cf. John 1:14, Luke 1:28. The title given Mary by the angel, "*kecharitōmenē*," means both "filled with grace" and "made beautiful."

38. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 219ff.



The person looking at the divine, infinite beauty (*aoriston kallos*) will always discover it anew since he will see it as something newer (*kainoteron*) and more wondrous (*paradoxoteron*) in comparison to what he had already comprehended. He continues to wonder (*thaumazei*) at God's continuous revelation (*to aei prophainomenon*); he never exhausts his desire to see more because what he awaits is always more magnificent and more divine than anything he has seen.<sup>39</sup>

If the syllogism formulated above is correct, as Gregory of Nyssa seems to confirm, then we can conclude as follows: the two elements of possession or vision, on the one hand, and dispossession or faith, on the other, have to be considered as not only compatible, but even as *mutually necessary* in the perfect contemplation of the divine glory. As the tradition of the church teaches, the blessed see the essence of God. And yet, because the "what" of this vision is absolute tri-personal Love, there must simultaneously be space for being drawn ever-anew by the glorious beauty of the Lord, toward and into the infinite depths of his ways.<sup>40</sup>

## The Ray of Darkness

Paraphrasing Dionysius's mystical language, we could say that the "luminous ray" of divine light, in order to be seen in its proper splendor—that is, as gracious—must be seen simultaneously in its arriving from, and in its drawing the believer to, the bottomless depth of God's freedom: "through a purely absolute ecstasis—abandoning all things and being drawn away from all things, being lifted up to the super-essential ray of darkness (*aktis theious skotous*)."<sup>41</sup>

Dionysius's dense symbolic expression "ray of darkness," which he uses in his mystical theology to indicate the mysterious "object" of the mystical union with God, deserves further consideration. What lies behind the genitive "of darkness" (*skotous*)? In my opinion, this "of" indicates something more than the fact that the ray illuminates the darkness of the believer's nescience (*agnōsia*). The ray can shine only in the "darkness" of the emptied intellect *precisely because it comes from the ungraspable "darkness" of God's own freedom*. In other words, what is divine in the union is not only the light of the ray (as for Plotinus), but also the incomprehensible, sudden *gratuity of its appearing*.

The super-essential ray is a "ray of darkness," then, for two reasons: first (on the side of the object) because it comes from the darkness of divine freedom, that is, as an

39. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 11, trans. McCambly, 320.

40. Cf. Rom 11:33–36; Eph 3:14–21. The triple, pleonastic repetition of the preposition "hyper" in the climax of the latter, and especially the formula "*τῆν υπερballousαν τῆς γνώσεως τῆν ἀγαπῆν*" (Eph 3:20), cannot but remind one of Dionysius's language regarding God's excessive super-eminence. Paul, however, qualifies the "excessive" character of the divine over-abundance as the "*hyperbolē*" of an *agapē* that always surpasses our powers of comprehension.

41. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1, 1000A.

inscrutable, unanticipatable gift; and second (on the side of the subject) because it comes through the darkness of the intellect's renunciation of its own ability to comprehend. This renunciation, in fact, is the only proportionate way of receiving the divine light for what it is: a free gift. It is precisely its gratuity, then, that makes the ray of darkness super-luminous (*hyper-lampros*, *hyper-phōtos*), that is, in some way beyond and above the opposition of light and darkness, as the super-eminent unity of both.

It is significant, in this regard, that chaste moderation (*sōphrosyne*), pious respect (*eulabeia*), and awe and reverence (*timē*) are the unmistakable features that radically distinguish Dionysius's attitude toward the mystery of God from the Neoplatonic mysticism of Plotinus.<sup>42</sup> The chaste regard or distance that characterizes Dionysius's attitude in front of the mystery of the living God, which goes hand in hand with an erotic striving toward union, becomes the way of positively affirming the mystery of God's personal inviolable freedom as good, and so as no less joy-giving than the unifying presence of God's light in the intellect. This adoring acknowledgment of God's irreducible otherness is the "dark backdrop" needed to see the light of being in its truth, that is, *as ray*, as "light in motion," as gift that is being-given. In this way, the mystery of distance, freely affirmed by the intellect through chaste silence,<sup>43</sup> becomes the mark of the receptive attitude of faith, through which one is made capable of enjoying the inexhaustible light of the divine giving *as given*.

A striking passage from Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy* helps clarify how this attitude of chaste awe governs the contemplative universe of his thought. Upholding a venerable tradition of the Eastern liturgy, Dionysius asserts that even the seraphim, the highest of the angels who are closest to the divine, do not dare ask anything directly of God when shown the shocking spectacle of Jesus's bloody vestments:

Now I am astonished (*agamai*) that even the first of the beings in heaven, and so far above all, strive after the thearchic illuminations with reverent respect (*eulabōs*) as intermediate angels do [i.e., as angels lower in rank, who need the mediation of those who are higher]. For they do not ask directly "Wherefore are Thy garments red?" (Isa 63:2), but they first raise the question among themselves, showing that they desire to learn, and crave [*ephientai*] the divine knowledge, but do not anticipate (*mē propedosai*) the illumination's bestowal from the divine Procession.<sup>44</sup>

It is significant that Dionysius stresses the reverent respect of the angels only here, when presenting the highest and wisest rank of the seraphim. Supreme wisdom, for Dionysius, does not simply consist in a vision that quenches erotic striving. Rather, the divine light is enjoyable only through a simultaneous attitude of unifying *eros* and distancing reverence and adoration. *Sōphrosyne* and *eros*; moderation, which honors the otherness of God, and the ecstatic movement toward union, unified and unconfused: this, for Dionysius, is the essence of wisdom.

42. Cf. Dionysius, *Divine Names* 1, 1 586A–587A; 1, 3, 589B.

43. Dionysius, *Divine Names* 1, 3, 589B.

44. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 7, 3, 208C.

## Happiness in Dependency: Faith as an Expression of Childhood

The first answer to the question of why the obscurity entailed in the act of faith is in a certain respect luminous, then, is because it is an inherent dimension of the believer's wonder in front of the inexhaustible truth of God's love.

But the darkness of faith is also luminous for another reason. If we look at the reality of faith not only from below but also from above—from the point of view of God—the ecstatic, trusting movement of being drawn beyond what one already sees takes on a new meaning. From this “katalogical” point of view, faith is seen as the believer's response to God's calling word, that is, to God's desire to bestow his gifts more and more. Seen from God's perspective, then, faith and hope “remain” (1 Cor 13:13), not only as receptive dispositions, but also as “actively” generous and joy-giving—to God. Indeed, it is precisely in this dynamic “stepping beyond” what he already sees that the believer shows his beloved Lord that he adores him, as the one who is so rich in mercy that he is even more willing to give than the creature is thirsty to receive.

Charles Péguy has beautifully expressed the giving power of unconditional faith and hope in the image of the child, who is “master of the house,” not in spite but precisely because of his radical poverty and absolute dependence:

Thus it is the children who do nothing. / Those mischievous kids, they pretend they're doing nothing, / Those sly little children. / They understand what they're doing, / The innocent ones. *The innocent, their hands shall be filled.* / That's how it is. / They know well that they do everything; and more than everything; / With their innocent manner; / Seeming not to be aware of anything; / Not to know; / Because it's for them that we work ... / Children, it is for this that you are the masters and that you command the households. / We understand why. / One glance, one word from you bends the hardest of heads. / You are the masters and this we know well.<sup>45</sup>

The child is the one who paradoxically gives the most, who illuminates the house, because through his radical, inexhaustible receptivity, he gives his parents the joy of bestowing on him the full abundance of their love. Now if it is true, as a *logion* of Jesus recorded in the Acts of the Apostles says, that “there is more joy in giving than in receiving” (Acts 20:35), then the child becomes the one who knows best how to give joy. The child is pure space opened to welcome the gifts of another—pure happiness in receiving everything from another. He is happy to depend on the generosity of his parents. He lives this condition of dependency not simply as an unavoidable necessity but as beautiful and good.

This allows us to see another reason why the act of faith, in its aspect of unconditional trust, is a supreme gift. As an act of trust—between friends, for example—faith is the way in which one person manifests her readiness to depend on another's gift *as the way in which she desires to know*. More precisely, the freer the act of faith, the

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45. Péguy, *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, 23–25.

more perfectly it expresses the receptive dimension of love, because it expresses a more radical willingness to depend on the free disclosure of the other as the very means of arriving to see the truth that one believes.

In order to better grasp this subtle but crucial qualification, let us recall a basic teaching of Thomas Aquinas. According to the *Doctor Angelicus*, faith is an act that takes place in the intellect.<sup>46</sup> Now, for Aquinas, the intellect is the noblest power that the human being possesses. What the lover gives to the beloved in the act of faith, then, is to be the one through whom his own greatest capacity is given actuality. To believe, in other words, means to accept to see *through a gift of another* rather than simply through oneself alone. What is more, while it is possible simply to *accept* the need to depend on the witness of another to arrive at vision, one could also *prefer* it, and so pass through faith willingly and happily, precisely because in this way the lover can give joy to the one he loves, allowing him to be the giver of what is highest in the human being, namely, knowledge. In this free refusal to see by oneself alone, in this free act of emptying one's cognitive ability to grasp, one affirms that the object of one's desire is not only vision but the given-ness or being-given of the vision. I do not simply want the possession of sight, but also the joy of letting the beloved be the one to open my eyes and fill them with light.

From this point of view, the certainty of faith not only frees the believer from doubt and makes possible and reasonable the act of self-abandonment, but also transforms this very self-abandonment into an act of generosity toward the other. In the end, as long as this self-entrustment is moved not simply by the desire to see and therefore *to receive* from the other, but also by the desire to receive *precisely from the other*, then the act of faith can be understood as at once a receptive *and* a giving act. In this way, the darkness of faith is transfigured into a luminous expression of love.

To return, for a moment, to Buber and *Dei Verbum*, we could formulate the same point using the more traditional language of *fides qua* and *fides quae*. That which in faith I know with certainty, that which I rest upon, is the fact that my friend, here God himself, is absolutely trustworthy (*fides qua*). What I still do not evidently see is the entirety of the truth of the word that I believe (*fides quae*)—the truth which still remains the object of my restless hope. Evidence and obscurity therefore have two different objects. What is certain is the truthfulness of the Lord's word, his *ἔμετ*. What is still unseen is the full unfolding of the believed truth before the eyes of the mind. This is why, as Aquinas clearly states, supernatural faith can be simultaneously inferior to science, with regard to the clear grasp of its object, and superior to science, with regard to the degree of certainty.<sup>47</sup> What Aquinas does not explicitly say is that this is also the reason why the darkness that envelops the act of faith can become in turn a means of expression, and thereby a source of light.

This is corroborated by our experience of loving friendship, in which there seems to be a direct proportion between the certainty one has in one's friend, on the one hand, and the transformation of nescience into a luminous gift, on the other. Why else do we

46. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 4, a. 2.

47. Aquinas, *ST* 2–2, q. 4, a. 8; 1–2, q. 67, a. 3.

desire to show the trust we have in our friend, and to be trusted by him in turn, even when it is possible to avoid this exchange of trusts?<sup>48</sup> The more solid a friendship, in fact, the fewer explanatory words and proofs are needed in order to elicit trust in one another. The deeper the bond of love, the more friends tend, almost unconsciously, to desire and ask for trust through that curious and beautiful phenomenon that we can call, for lack of a better word, “eloquent silence.”

A simple example can help clarify what I mean. I need to go to the hospital in order to undergo some tests, and I am feeling very nervous. I do not want to go alone. I ask my friend if he is free that day to go on an errand with me. He asks, naturally, where I need to go, why, and for how long. For some reason it is hard for me to talk about the situation, and I do not really know how long the tests will take. I look at him in silence for a few moments and then simply repeat, “Please, just come with me if you can,” without further explanation. Whatever the deep reason for my silence, it is evident that this silence is not simply reducible to a negative absence of words. Through this silence I am actually saying something: I am asking my friend to show me his trust and his love. We cannot say, then, that the ignorance of my friend, insofar as it is generated by my silence, is simply reducible to a negative lack of knowledge. Rather, this ignorance paradoxically coincides with the *grasp* of something that my friend could not know if he knew everything in advance: namely, my desire for an act of loving trust on his part.

Why does this happen? Why is it that, in a relationship of profound friendship, we desire to give and receive trust, even when it is avoidable? Ultimately, the answer must be related to the fact that the ideal of knowledge is not an autonomous, all-encompassing science, but rather the knowledge proper to the divine *Logos*, the Son, who knows and sees all *as a gift of another*.

## Faith and Fruitfulness

To take the final step in our argument, we need to reflect on a biblical narrative that is of crucial importance from an epistemological point of view: the creation of Eve, following Adam’s naming of the animals (Gen 2:22).<sup>49</sup> God is said to create Eve because

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48. Cf. Balthasar, *Truth of the World*, 48: “The passivity presupposed here is of a piece with the inmost freedom of the spirit, which resolves in the freedom of love to let itself be freely determined in love. We have to proceed with extreme care in applying the concepts of act and potency to this reality. The reality of love, precisely when love is perfect, runs counter to any high-handed anticipation of the truth of one’s Thou. Rather, it is part of love’s very constitution to wish, genuinely and unfeignedly, to receive every gift of this Thou as a new, truly enriching wonder. Love would gladly give up a great deal of what it knows if it could thereby receive it anew from the beloved; indeed, it would happily perform the miracle of unknowing things that it knows in order to be able to receive them anew as a gift of the beloved.”

49. What follows is a “phenomenological” reflection inspired by the Genesis narrative, rather than a strict exegesis of the text aimed at grasping its original meaning.

Adam did not find among the animals any “helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18–20). What distinguishes Eve from the animals and makes her a more fitting companion? And how does this correspond to a growth in knowledge on Adam’s part, beyond the knowing entailed in naming the non-human world?

Among many other things, the newness of Eve is manifest in the fact that only she is able to speak and respond. As a person like Adam, Eve has the power of self-revelation and self-concealment, which the animals do not. To paraphrase Max Scheler, only persons have secrets. Starting from this simple observation, we can glimpse one of the most important dimensions of the “help” Eve is for Adam. Only through her can Adam discover the goodness and beauty of his inescapably limited, and therefore progressive, way of knowing. As embodied spirit, Adam knows only in passing through the “veil” of time and space. He cannot simultaneously embrace the whole, as God does. This “powerlessness” or limitation of his intellect could appear to Adam to be a negative absence of power (and therefore something that negatively opposes him to God), *if* he did not experience through Eve a different dimension of this way of knowing, manifest in the free and reciprocal opening of freedoms.

Three inseparable elements constitute the content of this discovery. First, the fact that Eve is a person means that it is radically impossible for Adam to have access to the essence or heart of Eve without her free self-expression. The reason for Eve’s incomparable inaccessibility, then, is exactly the same reason for her capacity to be incomparably near. Second, Adam’s discovery of his own limited power of knowing coincides, as we have said, with the discovery of a new and different mode of knowing, which occurs through the free, reciprocal self-opening of persons—through an exchange of words, through asking and answer. Third, then, Eve helps Adam discover the goodness of not seeing as the sign, not of an insurmountable ignorance, but of the formidable inviolability of the other’s freedom.<sup>50</sup> Not seeing becomes the space that opens up to the exercise of a new and higher way of knowing, namely, the patient, “asking” openness of faith and hope.

An important suggestion follows. Eve is Adam’s fitting helper because in his relationship with her, Adam experiences, in the most natural way, the gratifying fruitfulness of expectance. Asking, or even begging, becomes a mode of participating in the disclosure of (interpersonal) truth. Through Eve, in other words, Adam experiences the joy of attaining knowledge, not only as a fruit of the gratuitous gift of another, but also and simultaneously as *the fruit of his own gift to her*: in the gift of his begging her to reveal herself. Between Adam’s joyous wonder in his first awakening after the birth of Eve (Gen 2:22), and his wonder before Eve’s first answer to his first word to her (about which Scripture remains silent), there is not only continuity but also discontinuity. Her response is not only the fruit of her free, mysterious gift to him, but also the fruit of his own free “putting to sleep” (Gen 2:21) of his capacity to grasp, in order to allow Eve the space and time to reveal herself in the way she freely chooses.

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50. On the importance of the metaphors pointing to the “formidable inaccessibility” and “awesome reserve” of the bride in the Song of Songs, see Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 203 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 35–145.

This is a crucial point: the first wonder, the wonder experienced by Adam in front of the first appearing of the world, including the appearing of woman, is caused by *being surprised* by the gift of reality. To use the language of darkness and light: before the existence of Eve, Adam could only equate darkness with the passive absence of knowledge. With Eve, however, Adam is given access to a new kind of darkness, which gives rise to a wonder that is no longer inferior to grasping, as potency to act, but that is instead superior to it—as the mature fruit of Adam’s grasping the ungraspable nature of Eve’s freedom.<sup>51</sup> Adam now freely and joyfully wills to “fall asleep” in order to let himself be constantly awakened by the ever-new morning of the self-manifestation of his beloved.<sup>52</sup> This is the second reason for the goodness of not seeing: namely, the co-creative role of the free act of faith and hope in the very unfolding of revealed truth. Faith increases the joy of knowledge because it contributes to the self-disclosure of being, as a co-cause of this disclosure. The truth, in fact, in a relation of interpersonal dialogue, is the result of a reciprocal opening of freedoms. In this way, knowing through faith brings about an increase in joy, because the knower not only receives but “actively” collaborates in giving birth to the appearing of the truth, through his “patient,” active-receptive attitude of begging prayer.

## Darkness Can Be Said in Many Ways

If all we have said is correct, a paradoxical conclusion follows: it is precisely the inextinguishable *poverty* entailed in the transcending movement of faith and hope that transforms them—in their eschatological form as *hyper-faith* and *hyper-hope*—into a pure expression of love, which is simultaneously receptive and generous. Faith becomes the positively willed and enjoyed recognition of the enduring difference between oneself and the mystery of God.

Let us now synthesize the threefold sense in which faith and hope can be considered inherent to the perfection of knowledge and love. On the one hand, faith and hope “remain” (1 Cor 13:13) as the everlasting receptive movement of the creature, who thirsts to drink always “more” from the same infinite source. In this first sense, faith is the only adequate way to receive the glory of divine love for what it is: an always new and surprising event—an eternally arriving “ray of darkness.”

On the other hand, this transcending movement of “hoping faith,” as reaffirming and celebrating the “ever-more” of the beloved’s ever-surpassing greatness, also appears as the very way in which the creature quenches, not only its own ever-greater

51. To borrow an expression dear to Gregory of Nyssa: see *Life of Moses* 2, trans. Malherbe and Ferguson, 156, cited above.

52. Cf. Balthasar, *Truth of the World*, 48: “Thus, we can express the knowing subject’s *readiness* to welcome possible objects of knowledge in itself only by simultaneously employing the categories of act and potency. This readiness is not pure act, because it does not anticipate the actual reception of truth, yet neither is it pure potency, because the medium of cognition is equipped with all the active capacities that are needed for the cognition that is about to occur.”

thirst to receive, but also God's ever-greater thirst to give. In this second sense, faith entails perfection precisely because there is "more joy in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35), so that the creature never gives as much to God as it gives through its desirous begging for his ever-greater gifts.

Third, the eternal newness of the eschatological gift depends not only on God but also on the transcending movement of hoping faith itself. The gift of the beatific vision is the fruit of the believer's own receptive movement, no less than of God's inexhaustible giving. Hoping faith, as a nuptial act that is inseparably receptive and generous, is also fruitful. Indeed, this third conclusion is simply a further clarification of the second—for what the free openness of faith actually gives to God is the ever-new space for his glory to shine.

This ever-greater receptive expansion of the soul has nothing of the insatiable, nostalgic character of Romanticism's *streben*. There is nothing eternally unfulfilled in this idea, not only because the ever-new spur of desire is the effect of the presence of the divine light, of the Spirit that reveals the Father through the Son, but also because this perpetual "moving beyond" is moved not only by the desire to receive, but also by an act of giving. The act of faith and hope realizes this act of giving to God precisely in witnessing to the believer's joy in God's ever-greater difference. In the symbolic language dear to the mystics of the Greek tradition, the obscure "darkness" of faith is not only the mark of a lack of knowledge. Rather, it becomes, in the highest stages of the spiritual union of the soul with God, the mark of the believer's crystal-clear recognition of the inexhaustible character of the mystery of God, and of the believer's reverent and chaste affirmation of this ever-greater mysteriousness of God *as good*.<sup>53</sup>

"God is light and in him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5). By now it should be clear why this statement from the First Letter of John in no way contradicts the idea proposed here. The obscurity of faith becomes, in the glory of God, nothing but a wondrous dimension of his glorious light, which is beyond the opposition of light and darkness, act and potency, desire and perfection, movement and rest—as the supereminent unity of both.<sup>54</sup> Rereading Dionysius's profound insight that in God all denial

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53. Péguy, in his *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, has perhaps captured better than anyone else the luminous character of the night of "hoping faith." On the one hand, the darkness of the night glorifies God because it utterly expresses the entrustment of abandonment, or what we have called the joy of depending on the act of another. On the other hand, it glorifies God on account of its reverence: "O Night, o my daughter Night, the most religious of all my daughters. / The most reverent. / Of all my daughters, of all my creatures, the most abandoned into my hands. / You glorify me in Sleep even more than your brother, Day, glorifies me in Work. / Because in work, man only glorifies me in his work. / Whereas in sleep it is I who glorify myself by man's surrender." (132).

54. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 5, 1048A–1048B: "He is not firm and He is not in movement, nor at peace (*oute estēken oute kineitai oute heyschian agei*) ... He is not power, He is not potency (*dynamis*) and not Light (*phōs*) ... He is not Light (*phōs*) nor Darkness (*skotos*)."



must be understood according to super-eminence (*kat' hyperochēn*) and not according to privation (*kata steresin*),<sup>55</sup> and that God is thus beyond the opposition of affirmation and negation, we could say that if there is potency in God, it must be a dimension of his pure actuality; if there is darkness, it must be an inner dimension of his light.<sup>56</sup> As the psalmist says: “Even darkness is not dark for you; and the night is as clear as the day” (Ps 139:12).

### Author biography

Paolo Prosperi, a priest of the Fraternity of the Missionaries of Saint Charles Borromeo (FSCB), earned his doctorate in 2008 from the Eastern Pontifical Institute (PIO) in Rome. His dissertation, “Al di là della parola: apofatismo e personalismo nel pensiero di Vladimir Losskij (Beyond the Word: Apophaticism and Personalism in the Thought of Vladimir Lossky),” explores the relation between negative theology and personalism in Lossky and the tradition of the Greek Fathers. He currently teaches at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC. He has published in *Communio*, and his dissertation was recently published by Città Nuova (2014).

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55. Dionysius, *Divine Names* 7, 2–3, 869A, 872A; Dionysius, *Letters* 1, 1065B.

56. Cf. Balthasar, *The Last Act*, 265: “God’s darkness is ‘the aspect of his light we do not understand.’ ... We, however, ‘cannot bear being deprived of anything’; we fail to see that eternal love needs its infinite places and its ‘darkness’ in order to ‘flow on eternally’; we fail to realize that all love is ‘vulnerable and defenseless.’”