THE MYSTERY OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Henri de Lubac, S.J.

Translated by Rosemary Sheed

Introduction by David L. Schindler

A Crossroad Herder Book
The Crossroad Publishing Company
New York
From excess of reverence, we should not have ventured to listen, or give utterance to any truths of Divine philosophy, were it not that we are convinced in our mind that such knowledge of Divine Truth as is possible must not be disregarded. This conviction was wrought within us, not only by the natural impulse of our minds, which yearn and strive for such vision of supernatural things as may be attained, but also by the holy ordinance of Divine Law itself, which, while it bids us not to busy ourselves in things beyond us because such things are both beyond our merits and also unattainable, yet earnestly exhorts us to learn all things within our reach, which are granted and allowed us, and also generously to impart these treasures unto others. In obedience to these behests we, ceasing not through weariness or want of courage in such search for Divine Truth as is possible.

Pseudo-Dionysius
On the Divine Names, III. 3.
(translation by C.E. Rolt
[London: S.P.C.K., 1940])

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and only beatitude, within the joy of God, that an advance used to be seen in the past, and not merely an advance, but as St. Bernard went so far as to say, following the Fathers, a desire, a seeking: "And the happy finding does not by any means strike out [extendit] holy desire, but stretches it out [extendit]. Is the consummation of joy the destruction of desire? Oil is greater than it, for it is greater than the flame; so in this case too. Gladness will be filled; but there will be no end of desire, nor, for the same reason, of seeking."83

But whatever may be the case as regards these last points, or the internal divergences we have noted, the writings of the Thomist school in which they appear lean very heavily, in putting their doctrine before us, on an interpretation of the axioms so beloved of St. Thomas: "Natur-al desire cannot be vain"—an interpretation which I have, I think, shown to be incorrect.84 Therefore, happy as I am to agree with these writings, or rather perhaps to follow them, in the working out of the first part of their thesis, I would be most hesitant to go along with them to the end, since my own plan is to begin by a full return to the thought of St. Thomas and his contemporaries on this subject. Though I would not claim to have succeeded completely. I hope that, thanks to their help, we have come somewhat closer to this thought. Without denying what I owe to the masters who taught me, I think that their historical analysis remained incomplete, and that had they had a better understanding of the theological perspectives of the past, the inner coherence of their own synthesis would have been better assured.

83 In Cant., sermo 84, n. 1 (Opera, ed. J. Leclercq, vol. 2, 1958, p. 303). The same may be said, mutatis mutandis, of the following statements of Leibniz, Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison, n. 18 (in fine): "Thus our happiness will never consist, nor ought it to consist, in a full enjoyment in which there would be nothing further to desire, and which would thus make our minds dull, but rather in a perpetual advance to new joys and new perfections."

84 Cf. Le Somnambule, pp. 467-71. My interpretation was that earlier given by Gilson, as is clear from the text I have just quoted; also, it would seem, that of G. Van Riet. Father S. Dockx, as we saw earlier, has recently taken it up again and established it on a firm footing. For other names see supra, chapter 9, pp. 181-82.

Chapter 11

The Unknown Desire

If there is one thing that the foregoing analyses have made clearer than any other, it is that while it may be quite legitimate to argue from completely abstract hypotheses, it ultimately neither explains nor justifies anything. It is not in the order of pure possibilities that our essential problems will be solved. It remains indispensable in any hypothesis to be quite clear about this question of gratuitousness within the order that actually exists. To this fact we must keep returning. By tending in a different direction, that part of modern western theology which we have had to criticize—not for what it says, but for what it does not say—(speaking metaphorically), is grasping at shadows rather than the reality. The explanations I have given have undoubtedly shown this.

But there remains one objection still to be considered. However "natural," however real it may be, the desire for the vision of God is in no case what determines God's actually giving that vision. God is not governed by our desire. The relationship between the two things must in fact be the opposite one: it is the free will of the giver which awakens the desire. This is incontestable. There can be no question of anything being due to the creature. But, one may perhaps say, it remains true, none the less that once such a desire exists in the creature it becomes the sign, not merely of a possible gift from God, but of a certain gift. It is the evidence of a promise, inscribed and recognized in the being's very self. Is one not then right to conclude from the existence of that desire to the effective reality of the gift? St. Thomas certainly seems to reason in this way. But if so, then man is surely arriving by the use of his natural reason alone at the knowledge that he is made for the vision of
God, which seems to make the effective supernatural become the object of natural knowledge.

It is clear that this fresh objection is not concerned with the gratuitousness of the divine offer, but rather with the mysterious nature of the dogma from which we learn of the offer’s existence. One may perhaps recall the discussion which sprang up not long ago about the “mystery of our supernatural elevation.” 1 Pére Guy de Broglie had been accused of rationalizing the mystery because he wished to demonstrate by reason the natural desire to see God. He had no difficulty in refuting the accusation. He showed that he was quite right in thinking that natural reason can recognize in us a “radical aptitude for supernatural happiness”; in fact, in his theory this power of reason was not the ability to know either the essence of such happiness or the fact that we were actually called to enjoy it. There was, therefore, no cause “to show so much suspicion” of a thesis so limited in scope, as though it “unfolded some unheard of secret.” 2 It was quite wrong to cut short the discussion by appealing to the nineteenth-century condemnation of Frohschammer, or indeed to any other decision of the magisterium. The suspicion would, however, be well founded, and possibly even necessary, if we were to combine the thesis I have been defending with the one supported by de Broglie. For this would mean declaring that natural reason has the power to reveal to us that we are in fact called to the vision of God. But is the desire for the beatific vision really, in its full nature and force, able to be known by reason alone? 3 This I do not believe. 4

Remembering always what St. Thomas himself says, “... those things

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3 One may say with Pére de Broglie. Recherches de science religieuse 15 (1925): 19: “Who then would be so rash as to hold that the idea—like you I say the idea—of the beatific vision cannot be conceived by our natural powers?” But one may say further, and I think it important to make this clear here, that it is a far from natural idea.

4 As the result of some strange carelessness, someone has written (Gregorianum 28 [1947]: 382): “Pére de L. declares—and it is, we may say, the major thesis of his book—that the existence of this desire [to see God] enables us to be certain that we are in fact elevated to the supernatural order.”; and again (p. 384): “The author’s thought seems to be this: the desire to see God... proves strictly that we are called to the beatifying vision. In short, we have an absolute desire for the beatifying vision, which enables us to be certain that we have been created for that end.” There could be no reference to support these assertions. In my book which appeared in 1946 (p. 489, note 1), I made it clear that I avoided examining this point of doctrine which is “argued among theologians.”

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The Unknown Desire

that are expected above reason in the final end of men.” 5 I want to remain firmly within theology. I am not trying to establish a philosophical thesis, but to study a dogmatic statement and all that it implies. I do not say that the knowledge gained by reason of a natural desire, outside any context of faith, “proves strictly that we are called to the beatific vision,” and that therefore we can naturally attain “the certainty that we have been created for that end”; on the contrary, I say that the knowledge that is revealed to us of that calling, which makes us certain of that end, leads us to recognize within ourselves the existence and nature of that desire.

People frequently reason as though all the mystery were on God’s side, and there was nothing in man that eludes the grasp of common experience or natural reasoning. Our whole nature should, in theory at least, be comprehensible to us, and we have the key to understanding all its manifestations. But this is somewhat illusory. I do not think that anyone who really thought about it could maintain anything so clear-cut.

“Man himself is very deep” [valde profundus est ipse homo]. “Man is a mystery. He is so in his very essence, in his nature. Not because the infinite fullness of the mystery touches him is actually in himself, for it is strictly inexhaustible, but because he is fundamentally a pour-soi purely in reference to that fullness. When we have said everything the mind can take in, everything definable that is to be said about ourselves, we have as yet said nothing. Unless we have included in every statement the fact of our reference to the incomprehensible God; and that reference, and therefore our nature itself in the most fundamental sense, is not really understood at all unless we freely allow ourselves to be caught up by that incomprehensible God. No one must think that we can understand man otherwise than by grasping him in his movement towards the blessed obscurity of God.” This teaching, recalled recently by Karl Rahner, was once beloved of the Fathers of the Church, both Latin and Greek. In its wider interpretation, as its origins, it is not specifically Christian, but it acquires a specific character in relation to the doctrine of revelation.

Man, the Fathers tell us, is “in the image of God,” not merely

5 Summa contra Gentiles, bk. 4, c. 1. Trinita, q. 1, art. 3.

6 See supra, especially chapter 7.

because of his intellect, his free will, his immortality, not even because of the power he has received to rule over nature: beyond and above all this, he is so ultimately because there is something incomprehensible in his depths. 8 "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" asks St. Paul. 9 "For my part," adds St. Gregory of Nyssa, "I also ask: Who has known his own mind? Those who think themselves capable of grasping the nature of God would do well to consider whether they have looked into themselves... . Our mind bears the imprint of the incomprehensible nature through the mystery that it is to itself": "if the nature of the image could be grasped, then it would be an image no longer." And similarly St. Ephraim: "Who then can enter into himself and understand himself?" 11 And St. Zeno of Verona: "In no way can the substance of nature be grasped by human operations. No one knows it save him who made it... . The image of God is necessarily incomprehensible and invisible." 12 And St. Maximus the Confessor: the rational creature does not naturally know its own roots, "those deep and strong roots" which support it; furthermore, in the opening which grace operates in its being, it understands that it cannot understand itself. 13 And St. Augustine in his Confessions: "Although no man knows the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him, yet there is something of man which the inner spirit of man itself does not know." 14 So great and wonderful is man's nature! 15 So great is the "deep" that answers to the deep of God himself! 16

8 To give one reference among many, St. Augustine, De symbolo, 1, 2 (PL, 40, 528).
9 For a commentary on this and other similar texts, see Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy (London, 1936), pp. 210ff. Karl Rahner says the same thing: "We have perceived the very depths of our being when we have become as incomprehensible as God himself is." See also Bossuet, Instruction sur les data divina, second treatise, chapter 26 (ed. E. Lenormand, 1897, p. 68).
10 Rom 11:34.
11 De hominis opificio, c. 11 (PG, 34, 156 B).
13 Bk. 3, tract. 19 (PL, 11, 455-56 and 456 B).
14 Ambiguus (PG, 91, 1188 C); Quaest. ad Thalanium, 56 (PG, 90, 564 AB) etc. Cf. von Balhausen, Literaturkomische (Paris, 1847), p. 102.
15 Bk. 10, c. 5, n. 7 (PL, 32, 782). Cf. De anima et eius origine, bk. 4, n. 8: "We cannot grasp ourselves", and n. 10: "And see, it is more sought than comprehended" (PL, 44, 529, 530).
16 De Trinitate, bk. 14, c. 4, n. 6: "Nature, so great and wondrous" (Bibl. august., 16, p. 358).
17 Gerardus of Reichenberg, In Psalmum 41, v. 8: "Deep calleth on deep. Since our nature, and above all the substance of the rational soul which is profoundly incomprehensible to itself according to the physical reason [physicam rationem] and is like the deep, calls on the substance and knowledge of God in himself [in se], which likewise is an even greater depth, since the essence of the Divinity is incomprehensible to every creature; even though it is graspable [capax] by the rational creature" (PL, 153, 1516 AB).

Following the Fathers and the writers of the twelfth century, the early scholastics gave frequent explicit approval to this view. The position of Duns Scotus is an interesting one to note. He explains it in an important text, the "Controversy between philosophers and theologians as to the necessity for revealed doctrine" with which he begins his great work, the De ordinatione. According to the "philosophers," he says, there is no such thing as supernatural perfection. To every passive power of nature there corresponds in nature an active principle, and there is therefore no need to imagine any superior order in which men might need to be given revelation. But in arguing thus, by natural reason alone, the "philosophers" can only err, or remain in doubt, "about the end in particular." To all the arguments and repetitions, but one answer is needed:

They accept that our nature, or our intellective potency, is naturally knowable to us: this is false, under the very and specific rule [ratio] under which it is ordered to such an end, is completely capable of grace, and has God as the most perfect object. In fact, our soul is not known to us, nor is our nature in its present condition, except under some general rule that is beyond the reach of the senses [absorbibilis sensus]... .

Man needs revelation, then, in order to know distinctly what is his last end:

If it is objected against this that man in the state of established nature can know his own nature, and therefore also the end of his nature... . I answer... . It would require to say that the knowledge of established man is such that it is different from other [knowledge]. But at least in respect to the wayfaring man in his present condition, it is called supernatural knowledge, because it exceeds its natural faculty; I say that it is natural according to the state of fallen nature. 17

Duns Scotus speaks here only of man in his present condition, "pro statu isto"—an expression he often uses. It is only of such a man that...
the "philosophers" speak; it is only in connection with him that the need for revelation is queried. Elsewhere he concedes, though without subjecting the matter to any critical argument, that in a less imperfect state, natural reason might have been able to know more. Here, in writing to refute those who rejected the faith, he wisely limits the field of discussion: "at least in his present condition" [sullem pro statuto]. And this is all I wish to quote from him here. Without entering into the windings of the long, subtle, and complicated dissertation which takes up the whole first part of this Prologue, I would merely indicate that in his view the reasons brought against "the opinion of the philosophers" about our final end could only have been discovered after the event; they presuppose that we have first been enlightened by supernatural revelation, and therefore, in reality, "these are but theological persuasions, from beliefs to belief [ex creditis ad credendum]."\(^\text{18}\)

263 The tradition was to be carried on in the sixteenth century by such major theologians as Soto and Toletus. In his treatise De natura et gratia, Soto speaks of "that light to which we have no access, where both our end and the goal of our actions are hidden."\(^\text{19}\) In his commentary on the Summa theologica, Toletus declares—as usual in opposition to Cajetan: "If man knew his nature perfectly, he would know that his end is the vision of God"; he does not, any more than St. Thomas, restrict this statement, or this supposition, to the hypothesis of a so-called "elevated" nature; but he also says, correspondingly, that it is not surprising that the nature of our soul cannot be wholly known to us, since it is spiritual and very close to that of the angels.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) Bk. 1, c. 4: "The knowledge of that inaccessible light, where our end, and the goal of our actions, are hidden..." (p. 10). What a contrast with Cajetan’s assurance: "The response of Scotus, who says that the soul according to this reason is unknown, does not fully settle the issue. The essential knowledge [cognitio quidditatis] of something leaves nothing of its nature unknown: for it contains formally or virtually the whole knowledge [nozioni] of it" (De potissimo naturae, q. 2, ad quin. 2). Soto did not let these trenchant phrases intimidate him.

\(^{20}\) In Primum Secundae, q. 3, a. 8: "If man knew his own nature perfectly, he would know that his final end is the divine vision." Cf. J. M. H. Ledezma, S.J., Doctrina Tolan de apponita naturali visuini beateficius... (1849), p. 22. In Primum Parvum, q. 1, a. 1, q. 2

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This, as we know, is also the constant position of the Augustinian school connected with Giles of Rome. Some of its members express the matter with particular clarity. Thus Gerard of Sienna (d. 1336):

The rational creature is so good that there is nothing by which it may be happy but God alone. ... This nature that is capable of God cannot be ordered to be quieted by enjoyment [satisfaction] in anything below God; the rational creature is of this kind; therefore, etc. The major [premise] is evident because potency, which is capable of a greater good, is never quieted in a lesser good. ... This reasoning in respect to the minor proposition proceeds from beliefs.\(^\text{21}\)

It is really this same teaching, though in less strictly metaphysical language, that St. Francis of Sales is trying to give to Theotimus in his Treatise on the love of God:

We have a natural inclination towards the sovereign Good, in consequence of which our heart has a certain inward hastening and a constant restlessness, without being able to be appeased in any way, nor to stop showing that its full satisfaction and lasting content are lacking. But when our sacred faith has represented to our mind the beautiful object of its natural inclination, then, Theotimus, what comfort, what joy, what a thrill there is throughout our soul which then, as though completely overwhelmed at the spectacle of such glorious beauty, cries lovingly: "O how beautiful thou art, O my Beloved, O how beautiful thou art!"\(^\text{22}\)

The human heart tends to God by its natural inclination without properly knowing who he is; but when it finds him at the fount of faith, and sees him so good, so beautiful, so gentle and so kind to all, and so disposed to give himself as sovereign good to all who want him, then, what joys and holy movements there are in the mind, to be united for ever to that supremely lovable goodness! I have at last found, says the soul thus moved, I have found what I longed for...\(^\text{23}\)

We sometimes feel certain joys which seem to come quite unexpectedly, with no apparent cause, and which are often the forerunners of some greater joy... Then, when that joy arrives, our hearts receive it with open arms, and recalling the delight they had felt without realizing

(Rome, 1869, vol. 1, p. 20): "The nature of our soul cannot be known in this way by natural knowledge, and this is no wonder, since it is spiritual, having great closeness with the angels. "But Cajetan believes that the nature of man can fairly be known aside from his knowledge, for such a capacity is not natural but obediential" (p. 18). Cf. Augustiniani et theologia modernae, op. 177-78.

\(^{21}\) In 1 Sent., dist. 1, q. 2 (in J. Alfaro, op. cit., p. 390).

\(^{22}\) In Primum Secundae, q. 3, a. 8 (in J. Alfaro, op. cit., p. 390).
its cause, they then know that it was a kind of forerunner of the happiness that has now arrived. Thus, my dear Théotime, our heart has for so long inclined to its sovereign good, it did not know to what that inclination tended; but as soon as faith has shown it, then it sees that this was what its soul sought, what its mind looked for and its inclination gazed at. 22

"And I myself do not fully grasp all that I am." We do not know all that we are, nor are we exactly what we know. Light and life, word and experience, are not united. 23 This consideration of a sensitive philosopher applies primarily to the very depths of the soul. "There is," says another philosopher, "in man's pre-comprehension of himself, a wealth of meaning which thought can never equal." 24 Certain depths of our nature can be opened only by the shock of revelation. 25 Then, with a new clarity, deep calls upon deep. By revealing himself to us, Bérulle used to say, God "has revealed us to ourselves." 26 Every light cast on God is at the same time reflected back on to man. Thus, just as the Buddhist believes he can understand in a single intuition both pain and its remedy; the origin of evil and the way to deliverance from it; so by perceiving something of the holiness and love of God we become aware of our own sinfulness. 27 Commenting on Isaiah, Origin says that the prophet began to see his wretchedness at the moment of beginning to glimpse the glory of God. 28 William of St. Thierry says the same thing in a more general way: "Never is the mode of human imperfection better grasped than by the light of the countenance of God in the mirror of divine vision," 29 and Marie de l'Incarnation says: "The purity of his spirit shows us the impiety of ours." 30 Similarly, it is by the promise given us of seeing God face to face that we really learn to recognize our "desire.

Of course the two cases are not completely parallel. In the first case we are dealing with a wholly religious reality; and furthermore, the correspondence is direct and is established totally by way of contrast. In the second, a reflection of a metaphysical kind arrives at what the revealed object implies: beginning with a fact, the promise that we shall see God face to face as a free gift, a promise that is part of the Christian revelation, one examines how this can be possible, and by its light one interprets observations or inductions whose precise bearing could not previously be recognized. It remains that the desire of the mind, which does not fall within the scope of empirical psychology, is not deduced from purely rational premises either. The "natural inclination to the sovereign good" of which Francis of Sales spoke was only translated into consciousness first under the aspect of a desire for happiness in general; a desire which might not merely mistake its object, but even pursue quite worthless objects: it was this same distinction that fascinated Bonaventure, the distinction between the "knowledge of beatitude in general" and the "knowledge of beatitude in particular," the former being "inborn," the latter given to us by faith. 31 It was a distinction gen-

23 Jacques Palarrd. For the idea that man is the being with a mystery in his heart that is larger than himself, see Ebeling, Prayer (London, 1961).
25 Cf. my own Catholicon, 1 (1947), pp. 294-97. R. Bultmann has said that in every way revelation gives to the believer, through the gospel, a decisive light on the pre-existence, which is not visible to philosophy.
26 St. Augustine said something similar in the Confessions, bk. 10, c. 2 and 3: "And from you, O Lord, for whose eyes the depths of man's conscience are naked . . . For what is it for man to hear from you of himself, but to know himself? . . ." (Bibl. August., 12, pp. 147, 149).
27 Yves de Montchenel, Leçons sur le Christ, p. 123. Cf. Gabriel Marcel, Journal métaphysique, 3: "One might say that we are immediately aware of it, is not yet sin . . . It seems to me that the realization of my sin only enters my awareness in so far as I become awake to the infinite love with which I am loved!" (Fontaine, April 1946, pp. 594, 600). Paul Claudel says how do we know of God's will, when the only way we can know of it is by going against it?
28 In Isaiam, hom. 4, n. 2 (Isa. 6:4): "Before you see the vision, do you not confess yourself to be wretched, O Isaiah? No, says he: as long as he sees Isaiah, and it does not come into my sense that I am wretched; for I begin to know that I am wretched when I see the vision, my king Ozaiah the leper dying, and I say: woe is me! Now even I begin to confess to the Lord and to say of myself: woe is me! just as Isaiah says: woe is me! . . ."
29 (p. 260). Cf. Severus of Antioch, Homily 115 on the appearance of God: "Oh, how immense is the height of God's goodness to us! It is through that, indeed, I also realize the magnitude of our sin . . . ."
30 Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei, c. 3 (ed. M. M. Dary, p. 148). Cf. In Cantica: "More swiftly is he sent back into the house of his poverty . . . knowing to some extent what he lacks" (PL. 180, 526 AC).
31 Eritis (ed. Dom Jemset), vol. 4, p. 246. Cf. Edmond Ortizes, Les tems de la Parole (1954), p. 35: "The true knowledge of sin cannot be had by simply turning one back in upon oneself, but is discovered only by returning from oneself to the mind of God." Cf. Bossuet, Histoire des Variations, bk. 1, n. 17, on the subject of our sins which we do not always know: "Man will always be a great enigma to himself, and his own mind will always be the subject of an eternal and inexplicable question to him" (ed. Lachet, vol. 14, p. 31). This is not true only in a moral sense.
32 In 2 Sent., div. 38, dubium 1: "The knowledge of beatitude is twofold: in general and in particular. Knowledge of beatitude in general is innate to everyone; but knowledge in particular, that is, of where beatitude should be placed, we have by the habit of faith in
eraly held in scholasticism. Similarly, the movement of the intellect, never satisfied with the knowledge it has, constantly rises from cause to cause, can be interpreted as a sign of the spirit’s desire—and as we know, this was a consideration particularly dear to the mind of St. Thomas. But in order to interpret that sign so well, to discern so clearly in it the desire to see the first cause in his very essence, it was surely necessary for St. Thomas to be at least “oriented” by his faith. It must at least, as Père Roland Gosselin points out, be that faith which gives him “complete certainty” in his interpretation. For the actual desire, though it certainly exists in every man, being inherent in his nature, is not in him personified, as the early writers say: it is only in him simpliciter or naturaliter. Or, if one admits that it is not entirely unknown, because of its spiritual character, it may be said that, like the soul, it is the object of a knowledge that is called “habitual,” “built into the soul itself” as Bonaventure puts it, or as he also says, the object of a knowledge “arising from a sense of need,” but not of any “actual” and positive knowledge.

Some manner, and in some way it is expected to be had through conformity to God [délégation] by grace… Cf. dist. 22, ob. 3.

22 Thus Matthew of Aquasparta, Quaestiones de gratia, q. 2: “Man… can be beatified in no created good, nor can his appetite be ended by any created good, but he is ordered to beatitude and to a certain end, which wholly exceeds both reason and the virtue of nature and its faculty” (Doucet ed., p. 47). And earlier, William of Auvergne, De Universo, bk. 2, c. 9, on what he calls that “state of glory” [stato gloriosi]. “This state is not known in our world as yet, save through faith and revelation” (Opera omnia [Paris, 1574], vol. 1, p. 817 A); cf. St. Thomas, In Sent., dist. 49, a. 1, ad 1 sum; De Veritate, q. 22, a. 7, Prima Secundae, q. 5, a. 8.


24 “Beatitude et désir naturel,” in Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques (1929): 200: “The prime conviction which gives direction to his analysis and gives him complete certainty is his faith in the word of God… Faith in the beatific vision must be considered as exercising a positive and decisive influence on the argument itself.


26 In 4 Sent., dist. 49, p. 1, q. 2, ad 1-3.

27 The desire itself growing, according to St. Bonaventure, from the “habitual” knowledge of God which is in the depths of the rational soul made in his image: Quaestiones de Timotheo, q. 3 (Quezalcis, vol. 5, p. 49); q. 1, fund. 7: “If such an appetite cannot exist without some knowledge [notitia], it is necessary the knowledge, by which it is known that the highest good or God exists, he planted in the soul itself” (p. 46). But St. Thomas, as we know, is even more sober on the point. Cf. some comments in L. B. Gillon, O.P., Beatitude et désir devoir Dieu au moyen âge, 2, Angelicum 26 (1949): 127-33.

Such a desire then takes nothing from the character of the marvelous and “incredible” newness of the revelation in Christ of our final end; it makes that end no less utterly “ineffable.” Here we can agree with Cajetan: “This end is hidden from us, because it is the supernatural end of our soul.” This is what I have tried to show in an earlier chapter. But for us, unlike Cajetan, it is not the absence of any desire that is the reason for that ignorance; rather it is the depth of our desire. I would rather say, with Père Rousselet: “That which, were there no divine offer, would merely be a seeking for something in impenetrable darkness, can, thanks to the light of faith, be expressed in a clear series of syllogisms.” “What do you know,” asked Meister Eckhart, “of the possibilities God has given human nature? Those who have written of the soul’s capacity have not gone beyond the point to which their natural reason takes them; they have never got to the bottom; and many things must be hidden from them, must remain unknown.” The bride only knows herself when she answers the bridegroom’s invitation. Bérulle was right in saying that the movement “imprinted by the power of the Creator deep within his creature,” that movement that is “natural to the soul, is hidden from it in this life, just as the soul is hidden from itself… It sees neither its being, nor what is at the depths of its being;” it is “Jesus Christ who reveals within us someone whom we do not know;” it is Christ “who speaks our soul to us.” “Thus the mysterious nature of the dogma remains unimpaired. It remains ‘the King’s secret’:

Although God is the final end in consequence, and the first in the intention of the natural appetite, nevertheless it is not fitting that it be first in the knowledge of the human mind, which is ordered to the end; rather it is fitting that it be first in the knowledge of the orderer: just as is the case with other things that tend to their own end by natural appetite.

28 St. Augustine, In psalm. 109, n. 2 (CCL, 40, 1602). And nothing short of faith in the incarnation can enable us to believe in that “ineffable immortality” promised to us (1603). See supra, chapter 7.

29 In Primum, q. 1, a. 1, n. 7 (tol. 1 v). Cf. J. Javelle, Expositio in Primum testamentum Prima Pars, q. 1, a. 1 (tol. 1 v).

30 Op. cit., p. 188.

31 See above, supra. See also the text of Bérulle quoted supra, pp. 74-75.

32 Cf. Paul Claudel, "L'écriture sainte" in J'aimai la Bible (1955), p. 56: “He will instruct her and teach her who she is, for she does not know…”


Nevertheless it is known from the beginning and is directed in some generality, according to the soul strives to well-being and well living, which exist only when God has [the soul].

It is hardly surprising then that beatitude—the only beatitude—"transcends all rational investigation." St. Thomas himself, starting from his principle that a desire of nature can never be in vain, knows that he can only arrive at a sure conclusion because he is reasoning within faith. Like St. Bonaventure whom we have quoted, he knows that the "desire bestowed" [desiderium indiunit] or "innate" is not of itself explicit and conscious, since he sets out to make it explicit by showing that its end can only be the vision of God; and he also knows that in the conscious desire for happiness, God is at first desired only implicitly." There is much truth in what Cajetan and Bâtes say, though each in his own way draws conclusions that go too far: "The divine Thomas proceeds as a theologian, although he uses natural reasons as aids [quasi ancillae]."

This appears particularly true in the Summa contra Gentiles which is, in the eyes of one of its recent commentators, Anton C. Pegis, "a theological work profoundly mingled with a theological enterprise and no less visibly governed by a precise theological plan." In fact one entire chapter of the second book is devoted to distinguishing the "philosopher's" point of view from that of the "theologian." It is, then, as a theologian (like Duns Scotus) that St. Thomas sets out to develop a complete and lofty philosophical apologetic (if I may be forgiven the term). In his own special way, he imitates the "saints"—of whom he says elsewhere in a different context: "The reasons employed by holy men to prove things that are of faith are not demonstrations; they are persuasive arguments showing that what is proposed to our faith is not impossible."

50 St. Thomas, In Brevirum de Trinitate, q. 1, a. 3, ad 4um.
51 Cf. In 3 Sent., dist. 27, q. 2, a. 2: "But because a certain happiness is promised us..." In 4 Sent., dist. 49, q. 2, a. 1: "Just as, by reason of faith, we posit that the final end of human life is the vision of God..."; v. cf. In 1 Sent., prol., q. 1, a. 1, ad 1um.
52 Cf. In 2 Cor., c. 14, sect. 2: "Therefore the rational creature is not moved by nature to desire this (to be happy, to be good, and to see God in his essence), but by God himself, who makes us for this..." (ed. Vivès, vol. 21, p. 94).
55 "Cf. 4: "Because the philosopher looks at creatures in one way, the theologian in another.""
56 Summa contra Gentiles, bk. 3, c. 1, in fine: "The things which, being above reason, are looked for in the final end of man..." Cf. Tert. 1, q. 1, a. 3: "For what springs from the will of God alone, beyond any debt to creatures, can only come to our knowledge insofar as it is given in Holy Scripture, through which the divine will comes to our knowledge." Cf. Peter Trigonus, loc. cit., p. 9: "Therefore there remained hidden in us from the beginning a natural inclination..." 
57 De Veritate, q. 14, a. 2: "The good of man exceeding the proportion of human nature is another thing, because natural powers are not sufficient to obtain, think about or desire it."
The Mystery of the Supernatural

Now eternal life is a good exceeding the proportion of created nature, since it exceeds its knowledge and desire. 57

That is the first reason why we need divine revelation and divine grace. But furthermore, even when the natural desire for the vision of God—which we must remember is not the same as an elicited desire—has been recognized, defined and analyzed, its end is still only known "aliquo modo." 58 No more than we can ever desire it truly "sufficiently," can we conceive it in any adequate way. Even in the light it gets from God, and at whatever phase one looks at of its intellectual or spiritual life, the believing and hoping soul is ultimately left "facing an intrinsically impenetrable mystery." 59 "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor has the heart of man conceived." 60 We may recall comments of St. Bernard, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Robert Bellarmine on these words of St. Paul's:

Ineffable words to be sure; even though he does not give me something to hear, still he gives me something to desire, and let it be pleasing to get a whiff (odorare) of what it is not granted to hear. 61

No one can see glory but he who is in glory; there remains both the desire and the intellect of those who are not in it; this indeed is the manna left us and the new name written on the stone, which no one who receives it knows. 62

57 Prima Secundae, q. 114, a. 2, c. William of St. Thierry, Speculum fidei: "And although nature has an appetite for these [eternal goods] by virtue of grace creating, still it only distinguishes [distinguere] them perfectly by virtue of grace illuminating, and only takes hold of them if God grants it" (PL 190, 386 C).

58 St. Bonaventure, quoted above.


60 1 Cor 2:6–9, St. Thomas, Prima Secundae, q. 62, a. 3. Cf. the commentary by Georges Didier, S.J., Déintérêtissement du cérémonie (1956), pp. 46–47. St. Augustine, In Ioannis, tract. 1, n. 4.

61 In Cant., s. 67, n. 7 (Opera, ed. J. Leclercq, vol. 2, p. 193). William of St. Thierry, Epiq. ad Fratres de Montre-Dieu, bk. 3, c. 1, on the heavenly beatitude (beatus coelestis): "It is so great, so unknowable, that no eye has seen it, no ear has heard it, nor has it come into the heart of man!" (PL 184, 354). See also John Tinctur (d. 1469), Lectura in Primam S. Thomae (in J. Altho, ep. cit., p. 216).

62 Quodl. 8, q. 7, a. 16. Cf. Sommata contra Gentiles, bk. 4, c. 54: "Man could be led to this because, in his ignorance of the dignity of his nature, he adhered to things existing beneath God as to an end" (hence the fittingness of the incarnation). While rejecting the thesis of Duns Scotus (which was in fact that of all the early writers), Cajetan was aware that he agreed with him about man's natural ignorance of his true end. In Prima, q. 1, a. 7: "Concerning this part, note that Scotus . . . disagrees neither in the conclusion nor in the reasoning: but in the reason for which this end is hidden from us naturally . . . ."