

Fr. Angelo Geiger

Lectio Coram Presentation of Theme

June 3, 2013

Presentation Notes

The Triple Way in Dionysius

The theme I chose for today is the Triple Way in the writings of Dionysius, also known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopogite. The phrase “triple way,” is not from Dionysius, but from his medieval interpreters. In actuality there are two triple ways associated with Dionysius by the scholastics. The first is that of St. Thomas Aquinas, who calls the ways of affirmation, negation and eminence the triple way, taking his inspiration from Dionysius. The second triple way St. Bonaventure identifies as the three modes of Dionysian knowledge called the ways of purification, illumination and perfection. I will be speaking about this second triple way, namely, purification, illumination and perfection.

I have two reasons for wanting to do this. The first is that I think the original context of this triple way is much richer than one might think. Most people who have heard of the ways of purification, illumination and perfection know them from spiritual theology and identify them with three stages in the spiritual life, those of the beginner, the proficient, and the perfect. This is perfectly valid, but I believe a very significant richness has been lost. The second reason I chose to do this is because it affords me the opportunity to articulate what I believe are the complementary, and not apposing approaches of the two great medieval doctors, St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure. I believe these two approaches are mutually enlightening.

So I propose to present this theme in three parts. First I will look to the origin of the triple way in the Alexandrian school prior to the time of Dionysius, who had his sources there. This will give us the original context. In the second part I will examine the writings of Dionysius themselves. And in the third part I will introduce different but complementary solutions offered by Thomas and Bonaventure some difficulties in the Dionysian triple way.

Part One: The Original Tradition

The origin of the triple way in the Christian Tradition is the school of Alexandria, which was particular for two things pertinent to our topic. First, they were more interested in the spiritual senses of sacred scripture than the literal. Secondly, they were very much

influenced by neoplatonic philosophy. For reasons that will hopefully become evident in the course of this discussion, the two things seemed easily to have come together in these great minds. The spiritual senses are the allegorical, tropological (or moral), and anagogical senses lying hidden beneath the literal sense, waiting to be revealed by penetrating minds. The specific aspect of neoplatonism which figures prominently in this discussion is the notion of emanation and return.

For the neoplatonists like Plotinus there is the one, or the monad, sometimes called "the Good," which is the source of all emanations. This is not creation but the idea the fullness of the Good is self-diffusive. From the one comes spheres of multiplicity radiating outward, first all the *nous*, or intelligence, which is the world of forms, then the *psyche*, or soul which is spiritual creation, and then there is the world of matter. The closer the sphere of being is to the One, the fewer in number and more perfect they are, and the further away from the One the more in number and the less perfect they are. Each sphere receives its being and is ordered by the previous sphere.

Again in its pagan form this is not creation but emanation, and a kind of falling away from being by degrees, so it is rather dualistic. Soul has fallen from the *nous* and then falls into matter, and now soul has to lead all things back to the One. Man in a particular way is imbued with soul, and through his active intelligence he is the matrix for the return of all things to the unity of the one. In other words, true philosophy allows man not to be distracted by matter, but rather through *psyche* to lead himself and all being back to the one.

This schema of emanation and return was Christianized by the Alexandrians by replacing emanation with Creation by the Trinity and thus placing the source of all things in a loving God who bestows His goodness on the things He creates. Thus, the spheres of being have not fallen away from the One but have proceeded from God with different levels of perfection. And yes, from this creation, which in among the Latins comes to be known as the *exitus*, there must be an equal and contrary reaction, which is the return of all things to God, or the *reditus*. But these Christian neoplatonists do not drop the mediated or hierarchical structure of being. The act of creation itself is not mediated, but the light of knowledge proceeding from God is mediated. It descends through hierarchy of being and then returns. And the matrix of the return is man, who has both body and soul. By receiving the light with an upright and pure soul he ascends in that light, not through philosophy, but through revelation and theology, and by so doing all things return to God through him.

So Dionysius is from this school of thought, but I want to mention several of his Alexandrian predecessors who introduce the concept of the Triple way. They are Clement of Alexandria (150-214), Origen (185-254) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395).

Clement

In Clement, the goal of the spiritual life is the vision of God (*theoria*), and the means of obtaining it are knowledge (*gnosis*) and the practice of love (*agape*) in ethical activity (*ethike*). In other words, one arrives at the contemplation of God through correct speculative and ethical knowledge. So in Clement the goal of the spiritual life is contemplation achieved through correct speculative knowledge and ethical activity. It is the return of the soul to God in response to His creative act. So the light coming from God takes the form of speculative and ethical knowledge, and this leads us to the vision of God.

Origen

In Origen who seems to inherit this idea of St. Clement, this notion of return is linked to a kind of spiritual exegesis of sacred scripture. He believes that the general division of the knowledge of the universe by Greek philosophers was derived from the wisdom of Solomon, who wrote the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. For the Greeks knowledge of the universe is comprised of three disciplines: ethics, physics and enoptics (meaning roughly, metaphysics), or what Origen refers to as moral, natural and contemplative discipline. In the Prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Origen writes:

First, let us examine why it is, since the churches of God acknowledge three books written by Solomon, that of them the book of Proverbs is the first, the one called Ecclesiastes second, and the book Song of Songs has third place. The following ideas have been able to come our way about this subject. There are three general disciplines by which one attains knowledge of the universe. The Greeks call them ethics, physics and enoptics; and we can give them the terms moral, natural and contemplative (Origen, *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*).

Moral discipline prepares for a life of virtue; natural discipline concerns the consideration of all created things according to the nature they have received; and contemplative discipline has to do with the transcending of corporal experience to the direct apprehension of divine things. Again Origen believed that the Greeks learned this from Solomon who enshrined moral discipline in the Book of Proverbs, natural discipline in Ecclesiastes and contemplative discipline in the Song of Songs.

This is a way of describing the return of man to God through successive steps according to specific disciplines of knowledge, moral, natural and contemplative. It is not merely philosophical knowledge, but linked to the sacred text which is the *scientia Christi*. He calls it the “triple form of the divine philosophy.” In fact, in his during his General Audience on the teaching of Origen Benedict XVI says that Origen played a primordial role in the development of *lectio divina*, because he “constantly interweaves his exegetical and theological writings with experiences and suggestions connected with prayer” (May 2, 2007).

Gregory of Nyssa

The tradition also passes to Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395) continuing with an emphasis on spiritual exegesis and progressive knowledge. However, Gregory’s vocabulary is significantly different, instead of technical philosophical language he speaks symbolically of light, cloud and darkness (*phos*, *nephele*, and *gnophos*). The context is his allegorical reading of Exodus 20:21: *And the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.* God first speaks to Moses through the light, then through the cloud and finally, Moses sees God in the darkness. Gregory writes:

Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect he saw God in the darkness. Now the doctrine we are taught here is as follows. Our initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God is a transition from darkness to light. Next comes a closer awareness of hidden things, and by this the soul is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. And this awareness is a kind of cloud, which over-shadows all appearances, and slowly guides and accustoms the soul to look towards what is hidden. Next the soul makes progress through all these stages and goes on higher, and as she leaves below all that human nature can attain, she enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she is cut off on all sides by the divine darkness. Now she leaves outside all that can be grasped by sense or by reason, and the only thing left for her contemplation is the invisible and the incomprehensible. And here God is, as the Scriptures tell us in connection with Moses: *'But Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was.'* (Exod. 20:21) (*Comm. on the Song XI: 1000-1*).

The text is important for several reasons. First, the triplex form of knowledge is clearly present. From the darkness of sin, the soul passes into the *light* through ethical knowledge, and then from sensible reality into the *cloud* of the invisible through speculative knowledge, and finally into the brilliant darkness of divinity through a

knowledge that comes directly from God. Secondly, here for the first time we see that this spiritual exegesis has two poles, one cataphatic and the other apophatic. The soul passes from the ethical and speculative affirmations of sacred scripture to a divine darkness which appears to be wordless. The third reason why this is important is because it seems to be a source for a text of Dionysius in *The Mystical Theology*, which is crucial for history of theology. We will come back to this in the last section.

Let me summarize the similarities and differences between these pre-Dionysian sources on the triple way:

Origin of Triple Way			
Clement of Alexandria	Ethics <i>Ethike</i>	Knowledge <i>Gnosis</i>	Vision of God <i>Theoria</i>
Origen	Ethics <i>Ethike</i>	Physics <i>Physike</i>	Metaphysics <i>Enoptike</i>
Gregory of Nyssa	Light <i>Phos</i> (Affirmative)	Cloud <i>Nephele</i>	Darkness <i>Gnophos</i> (Negative)
Dionysius	Purification <i>Katharsis</i>	Illumination <i>Photismos</i>	Perfection <i>Teleiosis</i>

1. While prior to Dionysius the terminology varies regarding the three ways, all of them indicate an active form of ethical and speculative knowledge derived from scripture, leading to a state of knowing God more directly. The ways appear also to be linked to the spiritual exegesis of sacred scripture. They also are the manner in which the *reditus* takes place.
2. The ways are also linked to philosophical categories borrowed from Greek philosophy but understood as derived from the scriptures themselves that operate in the soul not in a natural but a divine manner.
3. Generally, these ways appear to be successive stages: from ethical knowledge which corrects vice, to the speculative knowledge of created things according to the purpose God has given them, to contemplative knowledge that transcends corporal experience. Only in Gregory of Nyssa is it not clear whether the ways are stages or modes of activity.
4. It becomes progressively clear there are both cataphatic and apophatic poles to the threefold knowledge.

Part II: The Triple Way in Dionysius

We will now look directly at Dionysius' triple way. I will present this in two steps. First, we need to look at his appropriation of the neoplatonic *exitus-reditus*. Then we will examine directly at the triple way as the mode of ascent to God.

A. Exitus-Reditus

I want to begin discussing Dionysius by examining the way in which he appropriates the neoplatonic *exitus-reditus* or creation and return. Here I summarize for brevity's sake. But I will have direct recourse to textual evidence when I discuss the triple way.

So in the *exitus* the light spreads down to us from its origin in God, and enlightens every man. The center of the man's enlightenment is found in the scriptures by which God takes the things He has created and re-signifies them in a supernatural way. Thus, through the light of the sacred Oracles, or scripture, we are able to name God in the things He has created. When those names are intrinsically linked to material reality as when the psalmist says: *The LORD is my rock, and my fortress*, (Ps 18:2), then they are only metaphorical, but when the names are not so linked to matter, as when our Lord says: *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*, then these may be attributed to God literally.

Thus, the Divine Light terminates through its descent in creation and in the concepts used by sacred scripture taken from created realities in order to signify the divine. In effect, Dionysius has an implicit doctrine of analogy of being, and in fact, St. Thomas' formulation of the analogy of being in Question 13 of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa* is largely inspired by Dionysius' divine naming.

So the *exitus* of the Divine Light terminates in creation and in divine revelation, i.e., in the Apostolic Tradition received by the Apostles. Dionysius says that this happens to the Apostles from God's mind to theirs, and then they hand on what they have learned through created symbols: "But the inspired hierarchs have transmitted these things not in the common part of the sacred act in undisguised conceptions, but in the sacred symbols" (*EC*, c. 1; *PG* 376C). So Dionysius has a rather apophatic notion of the Inspiration of sacred scripture, and seems to reserve a higher form of knowledge to a few, especially to the Apostles. He immediately adds: "For not everyone is holy and, as scripture affirms, knowledge is not for everyone" (*ibid.*).

So that is the *exitus*. In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* Dionysius describes the *reditus* in this way:

Let us then, call upon Jesus, the light of the Father, the *true light enlightening every man coming into the world* (Jn 1:9), *through whom we have access* (Rom 5:2) to the Father, the light which is the source of all light. To the best of our abilities we should raise our eyes to the paternally transmitted enlightenment coming from sacred scripture and, as far as we can, we should behold the intelligent hierarchies of heaven and we should do in accordance with what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic uplifting fashion” (EC, c. 1; PG 121AB).

So Dionysius says that we should raise our eyes to the light coming from the scriptures and be uplifted through their symbols. He also connects this with beholding the “intelligent hierarchies of heaven.” This is because Dionysius believes that the hierarchical ordering of divine revelation that and of the Church are modeled on the hierarchies of heaven. The light of revelation has descended through the hierarchies to the Apostles, and now we ascend through the mediation of the Church, rooted in the revelation that has been transmitted to us. We pass from the sensible images of sacred scripture to their hidden meaning into the very presence of the living God.

To summarize the dynamic of *exitus-reditus* in Dionysius, we can say that there is a mediated descent and ascent of illumination. The descent terminates in creation, in the inspiration the sacred writers, and in the illumination of the Church. The ascent is also mediated through the sacred symbols found in creation, in the words of sacred scripture that signify those things, and in the hidden meanings beneath the veils of the sacred symbols and words.

B. Deification and the Triple Way

According to Dionysius, this process of ascending to God is deification or *theosis*: As we read before: “Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in” (CH, c. 1; PG 3, 120B). This process of deification is a function of hierarchy, which Dionysius defines as “a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine” (CH, c. 3; PG 164D).

So hierarchy in the first place is a spiritual function of illumination, descending from God through intermediate levels and then returning to Him in the same fashion. In the first place it is not a series of states or stages but a series of mediations. This can be clearly seen in the mediatorial role of the Apostles whom he calls Hierarchs, whose role is to receive, transmit and inculcate the truths of divine revelation in the faithful. The Apostles receive illumination and communicate it through “Jesus who is transcendent

mind, utterly divine mind, who is the source and the being underlying all hierarchy, all sanctification, and the workings of God, who is the ultimate in divine power” (EH 372AB).

But the scripture’s themselves function also in this hierarchical fashion, by proceeding from the one Divine Light and working downward toward multiplicity. This one divine ray “can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings” (CH 121C). In Dionysius the hierarchical function of created images is related to the spiritual understanding of sacred scripture.

It is in the context of the hierarchical function of revelation and the Church that we must situate Dionysius use of the triple way. We read:

In summary, we can reasonably say that purification, illumination, and perfection are all three the reception of an understanding of the Godhead, namely, being completely purified of ignorance by the proportionately granted knowledge of the more perfect initiations, being illuminated by this same divine knowledge (through which it also purifies whatever was not previously beheld but is now revealed through the more lofty enlightenment), and being also perfected by this light in the understanding of the most lustrous initiations (*EC*, c. 7; *PG* 3, 209CD).

Under the title of purification, illumination and perfection we see the hierarchical function of the Divine Light that communicates wisdom according to an ethical, speculative and contemplative mode. This ascending illumination passes from the sensible images of sacred scripture, to intelligible truth and then is perfected in contemplative knowledge. This is a function neither of scripture alone nor the Church alone, but of Scripture, Apostolic Tradition and the Church together. It is scriptural, sacramental and liturgical. For Dionysius, it is a monastic discipline, arguably only for a few in his context, but in the hands of those who inherit this tradition, it is the process of sanctification signified and effected at every level within the Church.

For Dionysius, this hierarchical illumination pertains not only to the hidden meaning of sacred scripture or to one’s personal ascent to God, but to the whole Church and its structure. The ecclesiastical hierarchies match the hierarchies of the angels in heaven on earth.

First Hierarchy	Chrism	Perfective	Perfective
	Eucharist	Illuminative	
	Baptism	Purgative	
Second Hierarchy	Bishop	Perfective	Illuminative
	Priest	Illuminative	
	Deacon	Purgative	
Third Hierarchy	Monk	Perfective	Purgative
	Lay faithful	Illuminative	
	Catechumen	Purgative	

Cf., chapters 2-6 of *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*.

So this threefold hierarchy of divine action within the soul of man is written into the fabric of scripture, the structure of the Church, the sacramental economy and the liturgical *ordo*. The triple way integrally links the spiritual senses of sacred scripture, the monastic discipline of *lectio divina*, the celebration of the liturgy and the administration of the sacraments, the conduct of theology itself, as well as the mediatorial role of the Church.

II. The Dark Cloud

I now want to address briefly the apophatic side of Dionysius, or the way of negation, and offer an insight about what I think are significant complementary differences between the way St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure assimilated the Dionysian tradition.

Very much like St. Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius sees Moses as a type of the man at the heights of mystical ascent. According to Paul Rorem both of these great writers see Moses as the prototype of the liturgical hierarch, who passes from the outer court into the Holy of Holies. The language is both liturgical and apophatic:

It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And He does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells (*MT*, c. 1; PG 3, 1000CD).

This final ascent in the perfective mode culminates in “the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (ibid., 1001A) Dionysius goes even further and says in this way “one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing” (ibid.).

The question as to what exactly is happening here continues to be argued today by scholars. What does it mean to know beyond the mind by knowing nothing? Dionysius is right in as much as we cannot know God in his essence in this life, because all our knowledge is received through the mediation of the senses. I want to mention two traditional approaches, which I think are complementary. The first is that of St. Thomas, and the other is that of St. Bonaventure.

St. Thomas

Deriving it from Dionysius himself, St. Thomas has his own triple way that has nothing to do with the allegorical interpretations of sacred scripture. It is affirmation, remotion (negation) and eminence. In the ascent to God, Dionysius demands that what we have affirmed about God must also be negated. So when we affirm, for example that God is a rock, we know that this is a metaphor that stands for the immutability and steadfastness of God. So God is also not a rock. But beyond that He is not even immutable or steadfast in any way that we have experienced, because He so completely transcends all that He has created. Created images, whether they are sensible or intelligible point to God but do not reveal his essence. According to Dionysius even the negations need to be negated. In *The Mystical Theology* he writes:

Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion (*MT*, c. 1; *PG* 3, 1000B)

What St. Thomas does by appropriating and reinterpreting the triple way of affirmation, remotion and eminence is to overcome Dionysius’ reluctance to affirm clearly that analogy leads us to real knowledge of God himself and not just His effects. He speaks about this in *Lectio 1* of his *Commentary on the Divine Names*. Indeed, while Thomas agrees with Dionysius that the Divine Essence cannot be the object of the human intellect—not only is it incomprehensible, but also beyond apprehension (26-27)—he does assert that the names are created *likenesses* of God. However, they signify Him not in a mode corresponding to His excellence, but to the mode of their existence as creatures (29). Thus, the Divine naming involves, not only the affirmation of the likenesses, but also their remotion and an eminent naming as well, because while

naming is inadequate due to its creaturely mode, it does signify—truly though inadequately—what wholly transcends it, namely, God Himself (30, 32).

Beyond this, Thomas sees the entrance is to the dark cloud and the knowing beyond mind, not as a purely apophatic, non-conceptual kind of knowledge, which would ultimately destroy any anthropology that grounds God's revelation in the real and objective. Rather, through this higher form of knowledge which comes through the gift of understanding the mind

is purged of phantasms and errors, so as to receive the truths which are proposed to it about God, no longer by way of corporeal phantasms, nor infected with heretical misrepresentations (cf., II^a-II^{ae}, 8.7 *corpus*).

For St. Thomas, this is an infused remotion that strips the mind of intellectual idols and purifies our concepts, but our knowledge of God in this life is never separated from the objective and real in some kind of meta-conceptual experience. And this teaching on the gift of understanding is complemented by Thomas' doctrine on the Gift of Wisdom. Wisdom together with charity as co-causes (cf., II^a-II^{ae}, 45.2 *corpus*) enables the mind to judge according to the divine rules in a manner completely beyond what it would be capable of through rational discourse enlightened by faith. St. Thomas supports all this with a robust doctrine of grace based on an equally robust Christology.

What Thomas does in typical fashion is to take his laser precision and apply it to the data of revelation and derive a detailed account of the contemplative knowledge of God. In this he does not sacrifice the human way of knowing to a subjective form of revelation.

St. Bonaventure

St. Bonaventure's project is somewhat different. He too has a robust doctrine of grace, and a well-developed Christology. The gifts of Understanding and Wisdom are also involved here, though in different ways. But Bonaventure is focused on the implications of the triple way that he has appropriated from Dionysius and describes the entrance into the dark cloud anagogically according to the perfective mode: In the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, like Dionysius he turns to the figure of Moses but with a twist:

So, using that rod of the Cross, this person can pass over the Red Sea, moving from Egypt into the desert where the *hidden manna* will be tasted. This person may then rest with Christ in the tomb as one dead to the outer world, yet experiencing, in as far as possible in this pilgrim state, what was said on the cross

to the thief who was hanging there with Christ: *This day you will be with me in Paradise* (c. 7.1).

In Bonaventure the affirmative way and the way of negation are two poles within the triple way. Ethical knowledge and speculative knowledge or the tropological and allegorical senses are firmly rooted in the sacred page, but contemplative knowledge leaps off the page in the perfective and anagogical mode. In this way the mind ascends into the divinity of Christ and then descends back to the humanity. In my opinion in Bonaventure if the dark cloud is wordless that is only because knowledge there is non-discursive, not because it is non-conceptual.

I think this is one of the more enlightening differences between the two scholastics, which is more complementary than opposed. Thomas' triple way represents the analytic precision of his attention to the literal sense, and that of Bonaventure the symbolic return of the spiritual senses. Both of them are indebted to Dionysius.

Summary

In the first part, we showed that the origin of the triple way in the school of Alexandria is rooted in Christianized neoplatonism and the spiritual interpretation of sacred scripture. Supernatural revelation teaches on three levels: ethical, speculative and contemplative. In Gregory of Nyssa we find also both cataphatic and apophatic poles.

In the second part, we saw how Dionysius describes the *exitus-reditus* as a hierarchical illumination. Descending it terminates in creation and revelation. It ascends through the scriptures and the hierarchical functions in the Church, including the sacraments and the liturgy the ecclesiastical hierarchies. This ascent is rightly called purification, illumination and perfection.

In the third part, we saw how Thomas and Bonaventure deal with the problem of the apophatic knowledge of God in the heights of contemplation. Thomas does so by clearly and consistently developing the consequences of the human mode of knowing through the senses and thereby conserves the objectivity of divine revelation. Bonaventure, on the other hand, describes something very similar but does so symbolical through the anagogical sense of sacred scripture, identifying cyclic movement between the sacred page and wordless communion with God.

Conclusion

I have three conclusions:

First, that the true nature of contemplative knowledge is a difficult question, but we cannot afford to sacrifice the real and objective to a metaconceptual breakdown of revelation.

My second conclusion is that the connections drawn by the ancients between the allegorical interpretation of sacred scripture, the monastic disciplines of *lectio divina* and sacred theology, the liturgy and sacramental life is a wonderful patrimony to be affirmed and cultivated. It is the original patrimony of the triple way of purification, illumination and perfection.

Which leads me to my final conclusion, namely, that one way to cultivate this patrimony is to see the liturgy once again as a symbolic way of ascending to God. Perhaps some of the medieval allegorical interpretations of the Mass parts were excessive, but the underlying truth should never be lost: the preparatory or penitential rite is purgative. The hymns, chants, antiphons, collects and readings are illuminative and the sacred mystery that makes the sacrificial victim present on the altar is perfective.