

CHRISTIAN FAITH AS A WAY OF LIFE

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1 Introduction

The New Testament authors emphasize unremittingly that the key to genuine human flourishing is faith in Jesus Christ as the revealed and revealing Word of God, “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). In the Gospels Jesus speaks and acts with a hitherto unknown authority that confounds his enemies but induces many others to seek him out and put him at the center of their lives. The latter he praises for their faith; the former he reproaches in the strongest terms, threatening that on the day of reckoning they will fare even worse than the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Similarly, in his Epistles St. Paul insists that it is faith in Jesus Christ, rather than observance of the moral, judicial, and ritual precepts of the Mosaic Law, that effects our liberation from the slavery of sin and the dawn of a new life as the adopted sons and daughters of our Father God. And even though Paul cautions that faith in Christ is worthless without the filial love of God and concomitant fraternal love of neighbor that Christ has made possible for us, it is clear that faith is prior to charity at least insofar as it gives us our initial cognitive and affective access to the object of our supernatural love.

Faith in Christ, then, lies at the heart of the Christian way of life. But what exactly is this faith and how exactly does it function within the Christian life? What vision of ultimate truth does it set before us? What ideal way of life does it propose for us? And how does one imbued with that vision and that ideal, along with the wisdom they promise, look upon the main alternatives proposed by philosophers who have sought wisdom outside the framework of faith in Jesus Christ? These are some of the questions I wish to broach here.

My purpose thus differs at least formally from that of the many contemporary Christian philosophers who have been trying to show that faith in Christ is reasonable by standards of rationality that have some purchase even on non-believers. This is an important project for Christian philosophers to undertake, especially in our present philosophical culture, which by and large rejects, oftentimes aggressively, Jesus Christ and faith in him.¹ What’s more, much good fruit has come of this project. Not only have currently fashionable accounts of rationality been subjected to rigorous scrutiny, but comprehensive and philosophically interesting alternatives have been proposed in their stead.²

Still, this is not the project I am engaged in here, even if some of what I say will be pertinent to it. Instead, my main purpose is to explore faith in Christ from the inside, so to speak.³ In particular, my goal is to investigate faith as a virtue that (a) flows from God’s communication of his very life to us, (b) gives shape to a distinctive vision of the truth about God, the world, and ourselves, and (c) is embedded within

¹This rejection is noted with concern by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), even though the Holy Father goes out of his way to praise the many positive contributions to human self-understanding made by philosophers who presuppose a split between faith and reason. For more on *Fides et Ratio*, see my “*Fides et Ratio*: A ‘Radical’ Vision of Intellectual Inquiry,” pp. 13-31 in Alice Ramos and Marie George, eds., *Faith, Scholarship and Culture in the 21st Century* (American Maritain Association, 2000) (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

²Here I have in mind especially Alvin Plantinga’s trilogy of *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³For a defense of the idea that believing philosophers should not limit their agenda to engaging non-believing philosophers, see my “Two Roles for Catholic Philosophers,” pp. 229-253 in John P. O’Callaghan and Thomas S. Hibbs, eds., *Recovering Nature: Essays in Natural Philosophy, Ethics, and Metaphysics in Honor of Ralph McInerny* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999)

a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral practices that promise the way to genuine human fulfillment.

In carrying out this investigation, I will be guided by St. Thomas Aquinas's "exceptionally fine example of a philosophical discussion concerning the nature of faith,"⁴ as well as his teaching on grace and virtue. With St. Thomas I will assume that the beginning of the Christian life consists not just in God's forgiving our sins, but also in his effecting within us an interior transformation that needs to be spelled out in straightforward metaphysical terms. Accordingly, I will begin in section 2 with a general characterization of divine grace and the infused habits that flow from this grace: the three 'theological' virtues of faith, hope and charity; the infused moral virtues; and the so-called 'gifts of the Holy Spirit', which, though frequently neglected in theoretical treatments of Christian ethics, lie at the heart of the Christian way of life. I will then go on in section 3 to describe faith in Christ more precisely as an intellectual act (and associated habit) that involves both cognitive and affective elements and has its own peculiar brand of certitude. Along the way, I will lay out in seminal form some of the most important elements of the ideal Christian way of life by examining the four gifts of the Holy Spirit associated with cognition. Finally, in section 4 I will briefly examine what the various classical philosophical alternatives to Christianity look like from the perspective of the devout Christian.

2. The Life: Grace and inner transformation

In the Gospels Jesus repeatedly promises "new life" to his disciples, a life he identifies with himself ("I am the Life") as well as with the indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the believer.⁵ Notice here that the believer's relationship with God is characterized as qualitatively distinct from, and inexpressibly more intimate than, the more basic relationship of a creature, even a rational creature, to the creator who makes it and sustains it in being. St. Thomas calls this new relationship a type of friendship—more specifically, filial friendship, in keeping with John 1:5: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God." And it is precisely this sort of intimacy with God—possessed inchoatively now, but perfectly hereafter—that according to Christians constitutes the only genuine fulfillment of our natural desire for happiness or, as the rich young man of the Gospel puts it, for 'eternal life'.⁶

St. Thomas is quick to point out, however, that original sin renders us unfit not only for filial friendship with God but even for rightly-ordered creaturehood.⁷ So although we desire happiness, we begin with a willful ignorance of the fact that it is only by intimate union with God that this desire can be satisfied. Worse yet, our affective condition is such that intimate union with God would not appear attractive to us even if we could envision it. To the contrary, we have a (postlapsarian) natural inclination to try to satisfy the desire for eternal life with other lesser goods which are inherently incapable of satisfying this desire and which at some level of reflection we can sense to be incapable of

⁴Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Faith," in Edward Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁵See especially John 14. In John 15 Jesus uses the striking image of the vine and the branches to convey in more concrete terms that his followers will share in his very life and, by implication, in the very life of God. St. Thomas follows St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church in taking these words to express a sober (and stunning) metaphysical reality.

⁶See Matthew 19.

⁷See especially *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter: *ST*) 1-2, 109, 3-4, on the necessity we have for God's grace to fulfill even the precepts of the natural law, including the precept to love our creator God above all things.

satisfying it.⁸ So our postlapsarian condition is this: We cannot fulfill our deepest desire, we have no very clear idea of what object could possibly fulfill it, and we would spurn the object that can in fact fulfill it even if it were presented to us. This is the hopeless starting point of a people that has turned its back on God and stubbornly set off on its own.

The well-nigh incredible Christian message—the “Good News”—is precisely that God himself has taken the initiative to liberate us from our desperate plight. We stand in need of an interior transformation that renders us both desirous of and fit for friendship with the Father as his adopted sons and daughters.⁹ And it is precisely the possibility of such a transformation that, according to Christians, has been won for us by Jesus Christ, the God-man, who through his sacrificial suffering and death has reconciled us with his Father.

But how is this transformation to be characterized in metaphysical terms? According to St. Thomas, it consists in God’s affecting the very core of our being, the ‘essence of the soul’,¹⁰ by imparting to it—or, in technical terms, ‘infusing’ into it—a quality that constitutes spiritual health and at the same time initiates us into the intimate “family life” of the triune God.¹¹ This quality, which elevates us to the status of sons and daughters of the Father, is called ‘habitual’ or ‘sanctifying’ grace. In insisting that the immediate ontological subject of this grace is the very essence of the soul, and not just the cognitive and appetitive powers that flow from the soul and serve as the immediate subjects of the various virtues, St. Thomas is underscoring the radical nature of the transformation. It is, literally, an alteration—more specifically, an enhancement—of our very nature as human beings. In speaking of the infused virtues that emanate or flow from habitual grace, St. Thomas puts it this way:

“In *Physics* 7 the Philosopher says, ‘A virtue is a disposition of what is perfect, where by ‘perfect’ I mean that which is disposed in accord with its nature.’ From this it is clear that a thing is said to have a virtue with reference to a preexisting nature, so that it has a virtue when it is disposed in a way that befits its nature. Now it is obvious that the virtues acquired through human acts are dispositions by which a man is fittingly disposed with reference to the nature by which he is a man. In contrast, the infused virtues dispose a man in a higher way and with respect to a higher end; hence, it must also be the case that they dispose him with reference to a higher nature. But this means with reference to a participated divine nature, in keeping with 2 Peter 1:4: ‘He has given us the greatest and most precious promises, in order that through these promises you might be made participants in the divine nature.’ And it is because of the reception of this nature that we are said to be re-generated as children of God.”¹²

⁸It is true, of course, that many people seem, at least at certain times of their lives and at least on the surface, to be oblivious to what Christians claim is their desperate plight. This sort of indifference is a feature of our culture that some have taken note of. See, e.g., Walker Percy, “A ‘Cranky Novelist’ Reflects on the Church,” pp. 316-325 in Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. by Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991).

⁹See *ST* 3, 23.

¹⁰Throughout this paper I am assuming the truth of a philosophical anthropology which is a form of neither dualism nor materialism, but instead holds that the human organism includes both a material and immaterial component. For more on this, see my “Good News, Your Soul Hasn’t Died Quite Yet,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 75 (2001): 99-120.

¹¹For a popular and yet profound treatment of the “family life” of the Trinity and our share in it, see Scott Hahn, *First Comes Love: Finding Your Family in the Church and the Trinity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

¹²*ST* 1-2, 110, 3, resp.

Echoing Sacred Scripture and the Fathers of the Church, St. Thomas here employs the startling language of divinization. By the infused quality of habitual grace, we are literally given a participation or share in the very nature and life of God, so that grace establishes within the believer a sort of replication (or, as St. Thomas puts it, a similitude) of the union within Jesus Christ himself of a human nature and a divine nature.¹³ What the Son of God is by his own proper being, believers can become by ‘adoption’. But, as should be clear by now, this divine ‘adoption’ has an interior depth that goes far beyond anything found in its human analogue:

“God is said to adopt men insofar as, out of his goodness, he admits them into the inheritance of [divine] happiness. But this divine adoption involves more than human adoption does. For through the gift of grace God renders the one whom he adopts fit to receive a heavenly inheritance, whereas a man does not render the one whom he adopts fit [to receive an inheritance], but chooses one who is already fit by adopting him.”¹⁴

“A creature is assimilated to the eternal Word in the third [and final] way according to the unity which the Word has with the Father—a unity that is effected in the creature through grace and charity. Hence, in John 17 the Lord prays that “they may be one in us, even as we are one.” It is this sort of assimilation that satisfies the concept of adoption, since an eternal inheritance is due to those who are assimilated in this way. Thus, it is obvious that to be adopted belongs only to the rational creature—and not to every rational creature, but only to one who has charity. This charity is diffused in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5). And that is why, in Romans 8, the Holy Spirit is called the spirit of the adoption of children.”¹⁵

The believer’s interior participation in the very life and unity of the three divine persons outstrips our common notion of participation in the lives of others to such an extent that it boggles the imagination: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Perhaps the closest analogue we have is the combination of physical, spiritual, emotional, and social unity exemplified by the friendship between husband and wife in the ideal of Christian marriage—and even this unity pales in comparison to the intimacy with God that St. Thomas is pointing to in the passages just quoted.

This, then, is the context within which any discussion of faith or the other infused virtues must be set. For these virtues ‘flow from’ habitual grace into the powers or faculties of the soul and constitute, as it were, the specifications that define more precisely what active participation in God’s life and happiness amounts to. The powers (or faculties) in question are those that serve as the immediate subjects of the moral and intellectual virtues—namely, the power of intellection (the ‘intellect’), the power of intellectual appetite or desire (the ‘will’), and the power of sentient appetite or desire, which is the seat of

¹³The language of divinization is also reflected in liturgical practice. In the Mass of the Roman Rite, for example, the following prayer is said as a small quantity of water is added to the wine that is soon to be consecrated: “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

¹⁴*ST* 3, 23, 1, resp.

¹⁵*ST* 3, 23, 3, resp. The first two modes of assimilation to the Word of God are (a) the assimilation of each actualized creature to the Word insofar as the Word is the locus of the divine idea corresponding to that creature and (b) the assimilation of all intelligent creatures to the intellectual nature of the Word by virtue of the higher intellectual powers they possess by their natures.

the concupiscible and irascible passions.¹⁶ By grace these very powers are themselves enhanced and thus become capable of acts that would otherwise be impossible for a human being. In one of his arguments for the claim that habitual grace affects the very essence of the soul, St. Thomas gives us in passing a succinct portrait of how the infused virtues elevate the powers of the soul to a participation in the cognitive and affective aspects of the life of the triune God:

“Since grace is prior to virtue, it has a subject prior to the powers of the soul. Thus, it exists in the essence of the soul. For just as by means of his intellectual power a man participates in the divine knowledge through the virtue of faith, and just as by means of the power of the will he participates in the divine love through the virtue of charity, so too by means of the nature of the soul he participates, according to a certain similitude, in the divine nature through a kind of re-generation or re-creation.”¹⁷

So the infused virtues are the instruments by which the main powers of the soul take part in the divine life. To describe the effects of the believer’s participation in the very life of God, St. Thomas draws upon an analogy between the natural “light of reason,” to which the virtues acquired through repeated action are ordered, and the “light of grace,” from which all the infused virtues flow and to which they are ordered:

“Just as the acquired virtues perfect man for living in a way consonant with the natural light of reason, so the infused virtues perfect man for living in a way consonant with the light of grace.”¹⁸

The acquired virtues, each of which falls under one or another of the four cardinal virtues—namely, (a) prudence, which perfects our intellect insofar as it engages in practical reasoning, (b) justice, which perfects our will with respect to other-regarding actions, (c) fortitude, which harmonizes our irascible passions with well-ordered practical reason, and (d) temperance or self-control, which harmonizes our concupiscible passions with well-ordered practical reason—make us fit for friendship with others and

¹⁶The division of the basic passions into the *concupiscible* and the *irascible* is based on the objects toward which the passions are directed. The concupiscible passions have as their object a good or evil taken simply in itself. St. Thomas identifies six basic concupiscible passions arranged in two ordered triplets: (a) *love* (inclination toward a good), *desire* (motion toward an object of love), and *pleasure* or *enjoyment* (possession of what is loved); and (b) *hate* (inclination away from an evil), *aversion* (motion away from an object of hate) and *pain* or *sadness* (possession of what is hated). The irascible passions kick in when the good loved is difficult to attain or when the evil hated is difficult to avoid or overcome. The five basic irascible passions are *fear* (movement away from an evil that is difficult to overcome), *daring* (movement toward an evil that is difficult to overcome), *hope* (movement toward a good that is difficult to attain), *despair* (movement away from a good that is difficult to attain), and *anger* (reaction to an evil as something to be avenged). See *ST* 1-2, 22-23 for St. Thomas’ general treatment of the passions; the subsequent questions are devoted to the particular passions. According to St. Thomas, the cardinal virtues of fortitude and temperance, along with the virtues related to them, have the sentient appetite itself as their immediate subject.

¹⁷*ST* 1-2, 110, 4, resp.

¹⁸*ST* 1-2, 110, 3, resp. Why is grace said to give off light? It is not just intellectual light that is in question here. Rather, St. Thomas is taking his cue from John 1:4 (“In him was life, and the life was the light of men”) and Ephesians 5:8 (“For you were heretofore darkness, but now light in the Lord; walk then as children of the light.”). This in turn accords with the idea, articulated in *ST* 1-2, 86, that one of the main effects of sin is the *macula peccati*, the stain or pollution or defilement caused by sin, a sort of darkness of the soul that permeates all its powers, resulting in effects such as ignorance in the intellect, malice in the will, and weakness and disordered desire (or concupiscence) in the sentient appetite. By contrast, a soul in God’s good graces is radiant and unblemished—immaculate, if you will.

hence for a life of interdependence within one or another human community.¹⁹ In like manner, the theological virtues that flow from habitual grace make us intrinsically fit for eternal life in the divine community. In particular, faith gives us cognitive access to God's inner life and to his designs for our salvation, hope leads us to put our complete trust in God's ability and resolve to help us overcome the obstacles to attaining the perfection of everlasting life, and charity is just the special friendship with God which constitutes even now the beginning of eternal life and toward which both faith and hope are ordered. In the same way, the infused moral virtues enable us to exercise self-control, fortitude, and justice in a way that is motivated and ordered by the theological virtues.

Here, though, we must note a difference between those virtues that are directly infused by God and those that are acquired naturally. The latter are generated by repeated action and in this way become 'firmly rooted' in the human agent. Since every virtuous action is voluntary, it involves a free act of the will. But the disposition or inclination toward eliciting this act of will can vary in intensity, so that when contrary desires or fears are themselves intense, they can carry the will along with them, as it were, and in this way impede the operation of the virtue. Virtues acquired through repeated actions are better able to withstand and overcome these contrary desires and fears because the very manner in which they are acquired is intrinsically connected with their intensity. In short, the voluntary self-control and performance of good works necessary for acquiring such virtues make it easier for us to exercise them consistently.

However, things are not the same with the virtues that flow from habitual grace, since they are not acquired habits, but are instead given directly by God through a gratuitous infusion or 'in-pouring'. So, at least at the beginning, these habits are relatively weak dispositions not firmly rooted in the agent. As a result, one who has them still needs to be encouraged and cajoled from the outside, as it were, in order to exercise them in the face of various obstacles, including a general tendency toward forgetfulness of our divine calling—in much the same way that children need to be reminded and encouraged by their parents to exercise, say, the self-control or courage they are struggling to attain. This is why the gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessary for the consistent exercise of the theological virtues and infused moral virtues. These gifts are supplementary dispositions directly aimed not at the exercise of the infused virtues, but rather at rendering believers attentive to the cognitive and affective promptings of the Holy Spirit and at making them ready to be moved by those promptings to exercise the relevant virtues. Just as in the case of children, this sort of attentiveness must be cultivated, and in the Christian life it is the practice of prayer that fosters it, leading to an intensification of the gifts themselves.²⁰ Thus, prayer—both communal liturgical prayer and private meditative prayer—is, in addition to self-denial and good works, crucial for living a devout Christian life. For it is prayer that cultivates a lively sense of God's presence and heightens the believer's sensitivity to the thoughts and affections that constitute the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

The central role played by the gifts of the Holy Spirit helps account for the pronounced element of passivity—more specifically, trusting abandonment to God's will—that characterizes a devout Christian life. The practice of being open to advice, persuasion, prompting, and coaxing from outside sources is important in every morally upright life, even though some moral theories underplay this fact because of

¹⁹For an excellent treatment of St. Thomas's view of the acquired virtues, see Brian Shanley, OP, "Aquinas on Pagan Virtue," *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 553-577. St. Thomas, unlike some other scholastics—most notably, Duns Scotus, holds that there must be infused moral virtues in addition to the acquired virtues. See *ST* 1-2, 63, 3-4. I will not pursue this issue here.

²⁰Strictly speaking, the intensification of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is God's doing alone. But he has promised to give an increase of his grace—and, *a fortiori*, of the gifts—to anyone who follows him faithfully. This phenomenon falls under the notion of *merit*, whereby God establishes a framework within which he promises to bestow an abundance of grace on those who persevere in their love of him. See *ST* 1-2, 114.

their commitment to a strong (I would say excessively strong) notion of autonomy or self-rule as a moral ideal for human beings. From a Christian perspective believers are always in need of guidance and firm direction, since they are the “little ones” to whom God has revealed what “he has hidden from the wise and the learned” (Matthew 11:25) and who want to be led by the Father to a peace and joy that would otherwise be impossible in the travails of the present life. In fact, since it is God who is the “source of all holiness” (*fons omnis sanctitatis*),²¹ the believer’s conception of the ideal moral life is primarily one in which no obstacles obstruct the action of the Holy Spirit. That is, to the extent that believers simply allow themselves to be led by the action of the Holy Spirit and resist putting up obstacles to that action, their lives will participate more fully in the ‘divine adventure’.

Some will find this notion of ‘spiritual childhood’ repugnant because of the humility and docility it requires.²² Yet from a Christian perspective it is precisely filial subservience to the Holy Spirit that reflects the plain truth about the human condition and that frees believers from a slavish subservience to the power of their own passions and, just as significantly, from a similarly slavish subservience to worldly powers such as political, social, economic, and intellectual elites.

In the next section I will examine in more detail the four gifts of the Holy Spirit that affect cognition: understanding, knowledge, counsel, and wisdom.

3. The Truth: Faith and its role in the life of believers

By faith, then, believers participate in God’s cognitive life—coming more and more to understand him intimately in himself, to see themselves and the world as he does, and to recognize his providence at work in their own lives.

St. Thomas identifies the principal object of the act (or habit) of faith as that which has been revealed as true by God precisely insofar as it has been revealed by him and made public through Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church.²³ While this general object of faith can be divided into the particular statements contained in the creed, the essential point is that anything one assents to through the theological virtue of faith is assented to under the rubric or ‘formality’ of its having been revealed as true by God and made public through Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church.

In several places St. Thomas draws a distinction among the particular objects of faith. Some of the truths God has revealed—the so-called ‘preambles’ of the faith—are such that in principle human reason can come to an evident or clear cognition of them through philosophical inquiry without the aid of special divine revelation, while others—the so-called ‘articles’ or ‘mysteries’ of the faith—are such that without recourse to divine revelation human reason cannot even in principle come to any well-grounded cognition of them at all. St. Thomas himself counts among the preambles a large number of propositions concerning God’s existence, nature, and activity that can be gleaned, he believes, from treating various features of the world as effects and reasoning back to God as their cause.²⁴ In this regard he is more optimistic about the prospects for philosophical inquiry than are other medieval and modern thinkers, who are decidedly less sanguine about the power and range of ‘natural reason’, that is, of reason unaided

²¹Eucharist Prayer II in the Roman Missal.

²²A cautionary note is in order here. In the early history of the Church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, it is clear that believers were encouraged to take counsel from the wise among them who were assumed to have a special “grace of state” for this role. This practice was meant to prevent believers from adopting idiosyncratic and even spiritually and morally dangerous interpretations of the promptings of the Holy Spirit. This practice survives today under the rubric of “spiritual direction.” I will say a bit more about this below.

²³*ST* 2-2,1,1.

²⁴One can consult table of contents of the first three books of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* to see which truths about God St. Thomas counts as preambles.

by special divine revelation.²⁵ Still, everyone agrees that the central Christian doctrines, those having to do with the nature and history of human salvation, are all mysteries that must in this life be accepted on faith if they are accepted at all. These include doctrines about the inner life of the Triune God; about the creation of the world in time; about original sin along with its transmission and its consequences; about the establishment of the people of Israel as the carrier of the promise of salvation; about the incarnation of the Word; about his life, death, and resurrection; and about the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the extension in time of Christ's salvific mission. Moreover, even though the distinction between the preambles and the mysteries is an important one for certain apologetic reasons, it does not play a central role in the lives of the overwhelming majority of Christian believers.²⁶ Rather, it is by the infused virtue of faith that they assent to *all* revealed doctrines—whether preambles or mysteries—as non-evident truths revealed by God.²⁷

But what exactly is it to have faith in these objects? In general, accepting something on faith is just voluntarily assenting to it as true on the word of someone we consider trustworthy—even though we cannot clearly “see” it to be true—and to do this with some good in mind. Reflection on the relationship between teachers and their students is helpful here, and St. Thomas often invokes it. Trust lies at the center of this relationship, especially when the students are just beginning their study of a particular discipline.²⁸ As a means to attaining some good—perhaps a high-minded good such as the acquisition of truth or expertise in the discipline, or perhaps only some less noble good such as passing a course needed for graduation—students voluntarily assent to many propositions basic to the discipline in question, even though they are barely able to understand those propositions, let alone see their truth clearly. They simply put their trust in their teachers or the authors of the books they are reading, with the expectation that if they put the propositions in question to good use and come to see their connections with other important propositions, then their understanding of the basic propositions themselves will gradually increase. Indeed, if they are among the few who pursue the study of the discipline long enough and intensely enough, they may ultimately become experts themselves and be in a position to see those basic propositions as evident in themselves.

This analogy takes us part way. In the case of revealed truths, St. Thomas designates God and the blessed in heaven as the relevant ‘experts’ who see clearly what the faithful now see only darkly. And like students, devout believers have a goal in mind in freely putting their trust in the word of God—namely, the attainment of eternal life, that is, genuine human flourishing.

However, the analogy falls short once we notice that in the case of Christian faith, the believer's love for the one who reveals the truth is itself a factor that contributes to an increase in understanding.²⁹ This suggests another analogy that is closer to the mark—that of filial friendship, especially when the

²⁵For a discussion of the relevant differences among some medieval Christian thinkers, see my “Ockham on Faith and Reason,” pp. 326-349 in Paul V. Spade, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.)

²⁶For a discussion of the significance of the distinction between the preambles and the mysteries, see my “Two Roles for Catholic Philosophers.”

²⁷For confirmation of this point in St. Thomas, see *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, chaps. 1-9, esp. chap. 4. I will elaborate later on in this section.

²⁸This analogy works best for the scientific and mathematical disciplines, in which at any given time there are fundamental propositions and first principles that all practitioners of the discipline take for granted. One must grasp and accept them for the time being even in order to be in a position to criticize them at some later time.

²⁹This does not in general seem to be a feature of the teacher-student relationship, though perhaps ideally it should be. But I will not pause to pursue this issue here.

children in question are young. Their love for their parents, along with an implicit acknowledgment of their own dependence and lack of experience, prompts a desire—defeasible, to be sure, in the face of conflicting desires and fears—to see the world as their parents see it out of love for them. This love helps them not just to understand better what their parents have taught them and demanded of them, but also, as they participate more fully in the way of life that accompanies the teaching and the demands, to develop insights that they would not otherwise have had. In like manner, when faith is motivated (or, to use St. Thomas’s term, ‘formed’) by charity, and when the way of life proposed by the object of faith is lived with intensity, believers come to insights that might otherwise have failed to materialize. In short, believers with the right affections who strive to live in accord with the theoretical object proposed by divine revelation will undergo a profound cognitive transformation as they become more and more adept at seeing their lives and the world in general from the perspective of their heavenly Father.

The manner and extent of this transformation become clear from an examination of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that pertain to cognition. Each of these gifts plays a role in the acquisition and transmission of divine cognition, in the meditative study of revealed truths, and in the believer’s perseverance in the faith.

The first is the gift of understanding (*intellectus*), which is a fixed disposition to receive from the Holy Spirit intellectual illumination with respect to the central truths of the faith, that is, the first principles of divine revelation.³⁰ In its most obvious function, which has to do with the initial grasp of these truths, the gift of understanding is analogous to (and, in Latin, eponymous with) our natural intellectual power to grasp substances initially with enough insight to categorize them and distinguish them from one another, thus setting the stage for further inquiry into their natures. Of course, this natural power does not of itself provide deep comprehension of the relevant substances—and so, too, it is with the believer’s understanding of central revealed principles. Still, even though believers cannot have perfect comprehension of the mysteries of the faith, they can at least grasp them well enough to identify them, distinguish them intuitively from their contraries, and persevere in their assent to them. Furthermore, in its second function the gift of understanding provides further illumination when, moved by love for and gratitude to their heavenly Father, believers make the effort to deepen their comprehension of the mysteries and of their interrelations with one another. In the normal course of events, this deeper understanding comes through participation in the liturgy of the Church and through the sort of study and prayerful reflection on revealed truths that almost all believers are capable of, especially when they have a good teacher—for instance, a writer who can present the relevant material in a way consonant with their level of intellectual maturation.

Even though the gift of understanding, which is available to all the faithful, does not of itself guarantee the ability to engage in sophisticated intellectual inquiry into the truths of the faith, it does carry with it a defeasible intuitive ability to sense what is and what is not consonant with divine revelation. And it is precisely this sort of ability that is presupposed in the more sophisticated assessment of theories and arguments that marks formal theological inquiry of the sort that is undertaken by only a few of the faithful. The very fact that the gift of understanding is open to all the faithful helps keep in check the gnostic tendency—a characteristic temptation for intellectuals—to split the faith into two faiths, one for the vulgar and one for the learned, to use Berkeley’s terms. For the community served by the more sophisticated intellectual inquirers is just as securely guided by the Holy Spirit as the intellectuals themselves. To be sure, members of either group can succumb to what St. Thomas dubs “blindness of mind” and “dullness of sense,” which lead to sins directly opposed to the virtue of faith.³¹

³⁰St. Thomas treats this gift in *ST* 2-2, 8.

³¹See *ST* 2-2, 15, 1-2. St. Thomas defines blindness of the mind (*caecitas mentis*) as the complete privation of the light of grace (or light of faith) and dullness of sense (*hebetudo sensus*) as “a certain weakness of mind in the consideration of spiritual goods,” a lack of insight. Insofar as they pertain to matters of faith, both these defects are

But God's intention in bestowing the gift of understanding is to bring about unity of belief and a consequent unity among believers.

Given that believers have a grasp of the basic principles of the faith, the next cognitive step is to make judgments in light of those principles.³² This brings us to the other three gifts of the Holy Spirit pertaining to cognition.

Through the gift of knowledge (*scientia*), believers are disposed to make sound judgments, in light of the principles of the faith, about the created world in general and human affairs in particular. To put it more simply, by means of this gift they come to see various aspects of the created world as God sees them. Many philosophers, beginning with the ancients, have held that it is only by reference to unseen realities that we make our most reliable judgments about the world we see. (In fact, this is almost a truism in contemporary natural science.) Likewise, according to Christians, the most penetrating view of creatures is hidden from us in the absence of divine revelation, and it is only to the extent that the judgments we make about created things participate in God's knowledge that we see the world aright—even when, perhaps *especially* when, our judgments run counter to what St. Paul calls the “wisdom of this world” (1 Corinthians 3:19). The gift of knowledge is especially important for the moral progress of believers toward holiness and genuine human fulfillment. For, once again, the most accurate and reliable perspective we have on our own character, intentions, and actions is God's perspective, and this is precisely the perspective that the gift of knowledge is meant to provide us with. Needless to say, the attainment of accurate self-knowledge is often a painful experience, but it is absolutely crucial if we are to see ourselves truthfully. And the truth, according to Christian revelation, is that we are deeply flawed and yet deeply loved by the Lord of the world. Human fulfillment demands that both poles of this opposition be vigorously asserted, internally appropriated, and held in creative tension in all of our theoretical and practical reasoning.³³

The gift of knowledge is also crucial for one of the key aspects of the Christian way of life, namely, the believer's identification with the crucified Christ. From a Christian perspective, suffering is neither a surd nor an evil merely to be endured for the sake of strengthening one's character.³⁴ Rather, Christian doctrine views suffering of all kinds as redemptive when the believer joins it to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. More specifically, when suffering is embraced out of love for God and neighbor, it takes on a positive value and can be supernaturally efficacious not only for oneself but also for all the others to whom one is joined (or, in the case of non-believers, potentially joined) in the ‘communion of saints’. This helps explain the distinctive character of the practice of self-denial or ‘mortification’ in the Christian way of life—where such mortification is not limited only to great sufferings or to those that are actively self-inflicted, but extends as well to all the little joyful sacrifices (so-called ‘passive mortifications’) that one is called upon to make by the unpredictable circumstances of ordinary everyday life in community with others. Such mortification is not so much a test of one's will-power as it is an act

consequences of sin—especially, says St. Thomas, of carnal sins.

³²While it is true that understanding precedes judgment, it is also the case that correct judgments can deepen understanding. However, I will not pursue this point directly here.

³³For a brilliant description of the way in which Christianity holds opposites in tension with one another, see G.K. Chesterton, “The Paradoxes of Christianity,” which constitutes chapter 6 of *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1908, 1995).

³⁴For a profound meditation on the Christian understanding of suffering, see Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris* (1984).

of supernatural charity.³⁵

To be sure, the Christian account of suffering and the practice of mortification will strike some people, especially those in comfortable circumstances, as strange and even perverse. Yet, according to Christians, it is part of the ‘paradox of the cross’ that our greatest joy lies in sacrificing ourselves out of love for God and neighbor, and that we find our lives only by losing them for the sake of Christ (Matthew 10:39).³⁶ And we have the age-old and ever new witness of the saints to confirm that this is the way to genuine peace and joy.

Whereas the gift of knowledge helps believers to make sound theoretical judgments about themselves and their circumstances, the gift of counsel (*consilium*) disposes them to make sound practical judgments in concrete situations and to follow through on those judgments. In other words, the gift of counsel helps believers to bring their theoretical judgments to bear on day-to-day situations of all sorts. More specifically, it makes them amenable to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as they carry out the various cognitive operations associated with the virtue of prudence.³⁷ Thus with the gift of counsel they receive direction from God in a way analogous to that in which someone receives the advice of other people in reaching the determinations of practical reason.

There are two things to note here. First, in a given case the upshot of the gift of counsel might be to single out a piece of advice the believer has been getting from another person as the embodiment of God's will in that particular situation. So in this sense the Holy Spirit's promptings may sometimes be indirect. In fact, the Christian life has traditionally incorporated built-in safeguards against idiosyncratic interpretations of these promptings. This is in part what lies behind the practice of spiritual direction in the various forms it takes in the life of the Church. Second, while believers will try to be particularly attentive to the Holy Spirit when they find themselves faced with important vocational decisions or morally ambiguous situations, the promptings associated with the gift of counsel are meant to guide them in *all* their actions and decisions. So, for instance, one finds devout Christians praying for counsel about how to spend their money, or about how to divide their time among the different demands made on them, or about how to best handle a tense situation with their spouses or children at home or their colleagues at work, or about how to arrange their daily schedule so as to make time for various acts of piety or evangelization, etc. This reinforces the claim made above that Christianity proposes a comprehensive way of life, one that includes not only an expansive theoretical framework, but also practical guidance in day-to-day situations.

Finally, there is the gift of wisdom (*sapientia*), an intellectual disposition that St. Thomas directly associates with the theological virtue of charity, even though it has an obvious connection with the virtue of faith as well. For while this gift pertains directly to the believer's knowledge of divine realities in themselves, the knowledge in question springs primarily from filial love and bespeaks an intimacy of the sort that Christian doctrine encourages believers to cultivate with the persons of the Blessed Trinity through prayer and through the prayerful ‘pondering’ of revealed truth, taking as their model Mary the

³⁵This point is consonant with what I will say in section 4 about the devout Christian's motivation for leading a morally upright life.

³⁶See *Fides et Ratio*, no. 23.

³⁷See *ST* 2-2, qq. 47-52. The cognitive operations associated with the virtue of prudence are (a) deliberating well about means and ends, (b) making sound judgments about means and ends, and, especially, (c) formulating and following through on appropriate precepts (or maxims) for action. According to St. Thomas, each exercise of prudence involves the following elements: grasping basic moral principles; reasoning validly from those principles; remembering the past accurately and without self-deception; being receptive to the advice of others; having moral insight into concrete situations; accurately assessing the prospects for successfully realizing our intended ends; taking into account all the relevant circumstances of the action; and exercising caution with respect to possible harmful consequences of the action.

mother of Christ, who “pondered all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19) The lives of the saints, those particularly close friends of God, are replete with evidence of such knowledge born of intimacy. Especially striking is the familiarity with which they address God, even to the point of seeming irreverence—as when, after a particularly trying experience, St. Teresa of Avila is said to have exclaimed, only partly in jest, “Dear Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it’s no wonder you have so few!”

By the gift of wisdom, then, believers are disposed to seek and delight in intimacy with God in such a way that they order all their other loves by reference to their desire for union with God. This is why the theological virtues are said to give believers even in this life a foretaste of heavenly peace and joy. In short, it is through the gift of wisdom that all created things are accurately judged to be infinitely less desirable than intellectual and affective union with the persons of the Blessed Trinity. And it is through this judgment that believers become wise in the classical sense of having a firm certitude about the “highest causes” that allows them to “order things rightly and govern them well .”³⁸

According to Christians, this is genuine wisdom—a wisdom that fulfills the promise of the classical philosophical schools. In the next section of the paper I will examine how Christians view the sapiential claims of those schools. But first I want to dwell briefly on the certitude of the wisdom of the faithful. Upon reading the lives of the saints, one is struck by their utter confidence in the deliverances of Christian revelation and in the God who stands behind those deliverances. How can this be, given that they all acknowledge the central articles of the faith to be mysteries that cannot even in principle become intellectually evident to us in this life? Isn’t it the height of foolishness, not to mention a blatant sin against reason, for them to put their full trust in what they themselves cannot clearly see to be true?

Several points are in order here. First of all, under normal circumstances devout believers do not worry themselves about such epistemic questions. To be sure, they typically study and reflect on their faith and engage in acts of piety meant to keep that faith at the forefront of their minds. Still, they do so not primarily in order to build a reasoned case for the epistemic credentials of their belief, but rather in order to better understand their own central convictions and to better conform their lives to those convictions. Beyond that, they are mainly concerned with performing the works of charity and justice demanded by the various social roles they play in their homes, at work, and in the wider community. If they were to spend time reflecting on sophisticated epistemic questions instead, they would not be able to fulfill their responsibilities. In this, of course, they do not differ from the vast majority of non-believers. What’s more, most believers lack either the ability or the training or the inclination to engage in serious intellectual inquiry. Typically, they study the deliverances of the faith formally in their youth and may take a few philosophy or theology courses as undergraduates. But their level of philosophical sophistication falls far short of what is required for independent formal inquiry into Christian doctrine. In fact, if they were to attempt serious intellectual inquiry on their own, it might well prove harmful to them, since inexperience and lack of sophistication could cause the sort of needless confusion that would paralyze them and keep them from living the Christian life to the full—a deplorable condition for “soldiers of Christ,” who must keep their minds firmly focused on immediate battles with their own faults and weaknesses and with the “principalities and powers” (Romans 8:38) that threaten to obstruct the spread of the Good News.

From the perspective of certain accounts of epistemic rationality, devout believers will thus appear irrational and foolish. For example, John Locke and John Stuart Mill hold in effect that, at least within liberal democracies, each normal adult has an obligation to become his or her own philosophical expert.³⁹

³⁸This is the characterization of wisdom that St. Thomas gives in *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, chap. 1.

³⁹In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, esp. chaps. 16-20, Locke insists that all normal adults have the ability and the obligation to apply an epistemic methodology that will ensure that their assent to any proposition is proportioned strictly to the evidentness of that proposition’s claim to truth. And in *On Liberty*, chap. 2, Mill

However, as adumbrated above, such accounts of epistemic rationality, with their excessive demands for intellectual effort on the part of everyone, seem hopelessly out of touch with the reality of ordinary people's abilities, inclinations, and expertise—not to mention their busy lives and their many familial and social responsibilities. (Neither Locke nor Mill had children.) A much more sane view, it seems to me, is expressed by St. Thomas in chap. 4 of *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, where he explains why it was fitting for God to reveal to us, for acceptance on faith, even those truths about himself that human reason could in principle have come to know in the absence of divine revelation:

“There are three reasons that keep most people from enjoying intense inquiry, that is, the discovery of truth. First of all, because of a lack of natural ability, and this is the reason why many people are ill-suited for pursuing knowledge Second, the necessities imposed by ordinary affairs prevent some people from pursuing knowledge. For they are charged with taking care of temporal affairs, and so they cannot spend enough time in the leisure of contemplative inquiry to reach the pinnacle of human inquiry, which is the cognition of God. Third, there are some who are impeded by indolence For one cannot arrive at the investigation of [divine] truth without expending a great deal of effort in study. But there are few who wish to submit themselves to such an effort out of a love for knowledge—even though God has instilled a natural desire for such knowledge in the human mind.”

Still, to make this point is not to claim that the Church *as a community* should not be concerned with epistemic questions. That is an entirely different matter, and I will return to it in a moment.

Second, the type of certitude believers have with respect to the articles of faith is arguably superior—even on ostensibly epistemic grounds—to the type of certitude that would ideally emerge from intellectual inquiry. St. Thomas himself draws a distinction between two types of certitude, one associated with the virtue of faith and the gifts of the Holy Spirit treated above, and the other associated with the eponymous natural intellectual virtues of *intellectus* (evident grasp of first principles), *scientia* (evident knowledge of conclusions derived from those principles), and *sapientia* (wisdom that combines *intellectus* and *scientia* so defined). The first type of certitude involves putting one's complete trust in God as a trustworthy revealer of truth, whereas the second is based on the evidentness to the knowing subject of the objects of assent:

“Certitude can be thought of in two ways. First, in terms of the *cause* of certitude and, accordingly, that which has a surer cause is said to be more certain. And in this sense faith is more certain than the three intellectual virtues mentioned above, since faith is founded on divine truth, whereas those three virtues are founded on human reason. In the second way, certitude is thought of in terms of the *subject* and, accordingly, that which the human intellect perceives more fully is said to be more certain; and because the things that belong to faith, but not the things that belong to the three virtues in question, lie beyond human understanding, faith is less certain in this sense. Yet since each thing is judged absolutely according to its cause it follows that faith is more certain absolutely speaking.”⁴⁰

Thus, even though the natural intellectual virtues in their perfected states exceed faith in the degree of evidentness with which one who has them grasps their objects, Christian faith in its perfected state exceeds the natural intellectual virtues in the degree of firmness and confidence with which the believer can responsibly adhere to divinely revealed truth—even to the point of voluntarily undergoing

brings this enlightenment ideal into the public forum by arguing that the best way for the citizen of a democracy to attain truth on important metaphysical, moral, and political questions is to participate in the on-going free discussion of these questions among intellectually autonomous citizen-philosophers.

⁴⁰ST 2-2, 4, 8.

martyrdom in order to give witness to that truth.⁴¹ This makes perfectly good sense once we come to see ourselves in our present condition as neophyte students of Christ the teacher. Just as beginning students reasonably put their faith in their teachers and the authors of their textbooks and wisely trust the judgment of those authorities more than their own untutored judgments, so too believers trust that God, who is perfectly truthful, is epistemically better situated than they are when he reveals mysteries about himself that they could not ascertain on their own. Needless to say, this docility to Christ the teacher, as well as other aspects of the Christian ideal of ‘spiritual childhood’, flies in the face of the ideal of democratic enlightenment promoted by the likes of Locke and Mill.⁴² But from a Christian perspective, docility to Christ is an altogether appropriate response to our true epistemic condition with regard to ultimate metaphysical and moral truth.

To be sure, certain contemporary philosophers have claimed that no comprehensive metaphysical and moral worldview of the sort that Christian faith proposes can be shown to have more rational warrant than any other.⁴³ The mere proliferation of such worldviews and their proponents’ inability to convince their opponents are themselves taken as reasons for this type of skepticism. The philosophers in question concede that we are free as private individuals to adopt one or another such worldview (as long as it is politically tolerable), but the affective commitment and level of confidence involved in such a choice is, if not irrational, then at least arational.

In reply, we should note, first of all, that St. Thomas—like all mainstream Catholic thinkers and many reformed thinkers as well—takes the role of intellectual inquirer to be an important one within the ecclesiastical community, and that he considers both gullibility and intellectual arrogance to be serious faults. For even though he agrees with the skeptical philosophers that reason on its own is incapable of attaining true wisdom in this life, he is nonetheless much more optimistic about the power of reason than they are.

Second, and more to the point, St. Thomas holds that Christian faith can be shown to be reasonable by any plausible standard of epistemic warrant—and, indeed, more reasonable than any alternative. I cannot develop his line of thought fully here, but in outline it goes like this:⁴⁴ Given that our goal is to attain true wisdom and that, as even the great classical philosophers admitted, we are incapable of doing this on our own, the key question becomes not *whether* we should entrust our lives to some putatively authoritative teacher, but rather *which* such teacher we should trust. To this question St. Thomas answers unabashedly: Jesus Christ and the Church he founded. And against the charge that it is foolish for us to assent to the mysteries of the faith, he replies not by trying to prove the mysteries or even by trying to give plausible arguments for them, but rather by pointing to the marks of trustworthiness that characterize the Christian claim to revelation: the character, teaching, and miracles of Jesus Christ; the rapid spread of the early Church despite its being led by a band of generally uneducated and deeply flawed Apostles; the witness of thousands of saints down through the centuries and especially of the martyrs; the nature of the way of life it proposes, which appeals to our most noble aspirations and does not pander to our weaknesses, etc. His claim in the end is that the credentials of Christian revelation are superior to those

⁴¹We should note here the difference between being willing to die for something—a trait exemplified by the Christian martyrs—and being willing to kill for something.

⁴²A Christian need not deny that the ideal of inquiry proposed by Locke or Mill might have some legitimate role with respect to conflicting political opinions that fall within the limits of Christian orthodoxy—though to the extent that such ideals entail that every citizen of a democracy must become a “political junkie,” they are implausible on other grounds.

⁴³For an astute exposition, emendation, and defense of a position built on this sort of skepticism, see Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁴See especially *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, chaps. 5-6.

of any alternative.

There is obviously much more to be said here—for instance, concerning the reliability of Sacred Scripture.⁴⁵ But devout Christians will find themselves identifying with St. Peter’s sentiments at John 6:68-69. After many of Jesus’ followers have walked away from him in the wake of his Eucharistic teaching, he turns to the Apostles and asks whether they, too, wish to leave. Peter replies poignantly: “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.” In the end, the question is: Just what are the alternatives? To these I now turn.

4. The Way: Christian life and its competitors

To this point I have been describing in broad outline what the ideal life of Christian faith looks like from the inside. I now want to consider the way in which devout Christians have tended to view the alternatives to Christianity. I will limit my discussion to the classical alternatives, given that their contemporary counterparts are arguably just variations on themes that were already present in the ancient world.

A bit of history is in order here. As is evident from the Acts of the Apostles, at the very beginning of Church history, the Gospel was preached mainly as the fulfillment of the aspirations of the people of Israel. But as Pope John Paul II points out in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the search for the way, the truth, and the life has been common to all times and cultures.⁴⁶ So once the Apostles and early Fathers of the Church began to come into contact with intellectually sophisticated Gentiles, it was not long before the Gospel was being presented to the pagan world as the fulfillment of the aspirations of the many philosophical movements which had sprung up around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. Jesus Christ himself was now being portrayed as the true Philosopher, the one who teaches and guides us to genuine wisdom.

Within the world of the Roman Empire, for earnest seekers after wisdom to embrace a philosophy or philosophical school was for them to adopt not only an expansive theoretical account of the world’s origins and destiny and of the human condition, but also a set of practices meant to bring them to human fulfillment as understood by that theoretical account.⁴⁷ These practices were in intent both positive, including especially the cultivation of good habits, and negative, aimed at rooting out bad habits and preparing the aspirant to avoid typical pitfalls and to withstand typical temptations. The ideal was that there should be a perfect complementarity between theory and practice. The theoretical framework was meant to validate and sustain the practices, and the cultivation of the practices was meant in part to deepen the aspirant’s intellectual grasp of the theoretical framework. In short, the philosophy of a serious-minded lover of wisdom constituted a comprehensive way of life and required extensive doctrinal

⁴⁵On this matter, I have little to add to the contributions of Michael Dummett (“The Impact on Scriptural Studies on the Content of Belief,” pp. 3-21) and Peter van Inwagen (“Critical Studies of the New Testament and the User of the New Testament,” pp. 159-190) to Thomas Flint and Eleonore Stump, eds., *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

⁴⁶See the Introduction to *Fides et Ratio*.

⁴⁷For a thorough defense of this claim, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995). Hadot acknowledges that the tradition of conceiving of philosophy as a way of life was continued in the monastic movements of the early Church, but claims that it was lost when philosophy and theology became the object of study in the universities in the high middle ages. However, this claim hardly does justice to St. Bonaventure or St. Thomas, to name just two stellar figures. In fact, the simple truth is that St. Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* cannot be deeply understood except as both expressing and directing the practice of the Christian life. As I see it, this flaw in Hadot’s otherwise compelling work is in part caused by the inordinate opposition he posits between theory and practice and by his excessive disdain for theory.

and moral training.

So, for instance, when St. Augustine became inflamed with the love for wisdom by his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, he did not react by simply taking a few philosophy courses at his local college. Instead, after a hasty rejection of Christianity, he joined the Manicheans as a catechumen, submitting himself to the discipline of the Manichean way of life, replete with its demanding doctrinal and moral formation.⁴⁸ Afterwards, when he grew closer to Christianity, he did not go off on his own, but joined together with other like-minded men in a communal life of study and prayer.

In the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes that Christianity is "Platonism for the masses." Without giving a blanket endorsement to Nietzsche's sometimes insightful and sometimes outlandish ruminations about Christianity, and keeping in mind that Stoicism claims a similarly universal appeal, we can at least acknowledge that the Christian faith makes available to people of all stripes what, according to many of the classical philosophical schools, would otherwise have been available only to those with a very rare combination of intellectual prowess, moral excellence, and good fortune—namely, the pinnacle of human fulfillment. More specifically, the Christian ideal of the life of the saint, which supplants the classical ideal of the philosophical life, is a possibility for the simple as well as for the intellectually gifted, for the poor as well as for the leisured elite, for the unfortunate (in the world's eyes) as well as for the fortunate.⁴⁹ In fact, according to Christian revelation, even the best of the pagan ideals of excellence were never really possible for human beings left to their own resources. It was only through the inner transformation of grace, elevating us from the status of mere creatures to that of sons and daughters of our Father God, that the pagan dream could be both rectified and realized. For only this transformation—made available through the merits of Jesus Christ, effected by the Sacraments of the Church, and nurtured through prayer, mortification, and good works—could heal and elevate their minds and hearts in such a way as to make genuine human fulfillment possible.

So in the primitive Church the Christian way was already being presented as a full-fledged alternative to, and the fulfillment of the most noble aspects of, the culturally indigenous sapiential ways of the philosophers—be they Platonists, neo-Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans, Pyrrhonian Skeptics, Cynics, Manicheans, etc.

What I have said so far is, of course, an oversimplification, because the Church is a big place, so to speak, and its early history witnessed the development of a wide variety of so-called 'spiritualities', all of them centered around sound doctrine, the sacraments, and prayer, but each with its own distinctive emphases and customs tailored to the particular style of life characteristic of its adherents. In essence, these 'spiritualities' were providing their adherents with a precise analogue of the detailed ways of life proposed by the pagan schools of wisdom, but now within the framework of revealed Christian faith and morals.

Given this background, we can now ask how Christians have tended to view the main alternative ways of life proposed by classical non-Christian philosophers. I will not pretend that my treatment here is thorough; rather, I wish simply to indicate in broad strokes the general types of reasons Christians have for judging these alternatives to be defective and unsatisfactory.⁵⁰

⁴⁸See St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 3, chaps. 4-6.

⁴⁹It must be confessed that at times in the history of the Church the fact that the vocation to holiness or sanctity is universal—that is, meant for all baptized Christians—has been muted, so that striving for perfection was thought, in practice, if not in theory, to be limited to the clergy or those who professed the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

⁵⁰To my mind, the best modern defense of Christianity against contemporary alternatives is still G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1908, 1995). Anything I say here is little more than a footnote to Chesterton's argument.

Christianity shares in common with most of these alternatives the imperative to live a life that has the single-minded desire for, and pursuit of, wisdom at its center. So Christians concur with Socrates that normal adult human beings should be constantly reflecting on the nature of the best sort of life and on how their own lives compare with that ideal.⁵¹ A life lived unreflectively in accord with prevailing cultural customs (or fads) is deemed unworthy of a human being.

Christians likewise agree with most of the classical schools in holding that our souls are initially disordered in such a way that some form of ascetic practice aimed at self-control is essential to a genuinely happy life. Hence, they are especially wary of the insidious temptation to make goods such as wealth, honor, fame, sexual pleasure, and power—whether political or social or economic—the dominant ends of their lives.

Beyond this, Christians agree with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics—against the Epicureans—that the best sort of human life must not be ordered toward the pleasant and the comfortable. From a Christian perspective, this is an alluring road to perdition that caters to our weakness and is borne of a deep despair about the human condition—a point confirmed by Epicurean metaphysics, which posits a materialistic universe wholly indifferent to human aspirations and invites us, in the manner of Simonides the ancient poet, to keep our gaze fixed on things here below and thus to avoid irrevocable self-transcending life-commitments.⁵² (In this respect Epicureanism is strikingly similar to what is sometimes called ‘pragmatism’ in contemporary parlance, as well as to a certain type of scientific-minded naturalism that is nowadays popular in some intellectual circles.⁵³) From a Christian perspective, to live in this way is not unlike extending to the whole of one’s own life the otherwise praiseworthy practice of making terminal patients comfortable in their last hours.

The alternative is to live a life unified by a dominant noble end, passionately desired, that makes possible permanent life-commitments consonant with that end. To be sure, such a life presupposes certitude—if not that of Christian faith, then at least that of a Socratic faith in the superiority of the philosophical life to all competitors. This is one reason why permanent self-transcending commitments are terrifying (I can think of no better word for it) to those—especially within pluralistic liberal democracies—who are skeptical of sapiential claims. However, I noted that the dominant end in question should be noble, and one mark of a noble end is (or should be) that the pursuit of it makes one more fit for and desirous of genuine friendship with others. This is certainly the case with the goal of knowing and loving the triune God that lies at the core of the Christian way of life, but it was equally true of the ideals set forth by Aristotle in his *Ethics* and *Politics*, by Plato in his *Republic*, and, it seems, by

⁵¹I specify normal adults (or, better, those who have the use of reason) because, unlike Socrates, Christians deem those who for pathological reasons are incapable of rational reflection—for example, the mentally handicapped, the insane, the terminally comatose, etc.—as fully human nonetheless and capable of ultimate human flourishing. This is because Christians understand such happiness to be in the first place a divine gift rather than an achievement. To be sure, this gift demands a response, but one that is appropriate to one’s circumstances.

⁵²Aristotle quotes this line from Simonides in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10, chap. 7 (1177b31), and St. Thomas cites Aristotle’s allusion to Simonides in *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1, chap. 5.

⁵³The *locus classicus* for the modern version of scientific-minded naturalism is Bertrand Russell’s essay *A Free Man’s Worship*, in which Russell famously claims that given what modern science tells us about the purposelessness of the universe, it is “only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair [that] the soul’s habitation [can] henceforth be safely built.” See *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 12, *Contemplation and Action, 1902-14* (London: Routledge, 1985). For an exposition of pragmatism, see Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*.

the Stoics as well.⁵⁴ So the skeptics have less to worry about than they seem to think.

So Christians are similar to the Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics in a number of important respects.⁵⁵ But there are significant differences as well. I will end by briefly mentioning two of them, one having to do with the primary motivation for living a morally upright life and the other having to do with the nature of the end sought. On both these counts Christians take themselves to have a great advantage over their classical counterparts.

Even though these classical philosophies are meant in some way or other to make human beings fit for friendship, the primary motivation for an aspirant's living in accord with one of classical ways seems to be impersonal at its base. By this I mean that what motivates individuals to lead a morally upright life is the desire to make themselves measure up to a certain impersonal standard of human flourishing—in something like the way that, say, my daughter Katie might want to make herself into the sort of basketball player who makes 90% of her free throws. The desire for happiness is thus accompanied by what, from a Christian perspective, is a prideful desire for self-sufficiency. Because of this, failures in the moral life are regretted not primarily because they are offenses against another whom we love, but rather because they make manifest our own weakness. So, from this perspective, just insofar as we have acted badly, we feel embarrassment rather than guilt or contrition, and our failure is a failure in our resolve to make ourselves better rather than a failure of love.

St. Augustine noticed this very point when he lamented in his *Confessions* about what he had found lacking in the works of the Platonists:

“..... the writings of the Platonists contain nothing of all this. Their pages show nothing of the face of that love, the tears of confession, Your sacrifice, an afflicted spirit, a contrite and humbled heart”⁵⁶

For devout Christians, by contrast, the deepest motivation for living well is love for another, and, more specifically, loving gratitude for God's gift of salvation and grace. Failures to respond to God's gracious initiative are thus failures of love—that is, failures in conforming one's will to the will of God. For from a Christian perspective, the desire to be lovingly obedient to God's will is extensionally equivalent to the desire for happiness.⁵⁷ This is because God has made us in such a way that to conform ourselves to his will satisfies our desire for genuine human flourishing as defined by our very natures.

The second difference concerns the nature of the end we hope to attain by living in a morally upright way. From a Christian perspective, the main problem with the classical philosophical schools is that, in the absence of divine revelation, they set their sights too low. In the *Phaedo* Socrates hopes for an afterlife in which he will possess philosophical wisdom and enjoy the company of other philosophers. Interestingly, this is exactly what Dante gives him, placing him in the first circle of the *Inferno* along with other noble philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Cicero, Seneca, Avicenna, and Averroes. In commenting on this scene from the *Inferno* Dorothy Sayers expresses the Christian perspective perhaps as well as anyone could:

⁵⁴I say this even while acknowledging the limitations Aristotle and Plato put on just who counts as someone worthy of the philosopher's friendship.

⁵⁵This similarity extends as well to other monotheists such as Jews and Muslims and to Buddhists and many Hindus as well. However, my purpose here is to concentrate on the worldviews of prominent Western philosophers.

⁵⁶St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 7, chap. 21.

⁵⁷Not all Christian authors agree with this sentiment. For a compelling argument that they *should* agree, see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

“[These souls] enjoy that kind of after-life which they themselves imagined for the virtuous dead; their failure lay in not imagining better. They are lost (as Virgil says later) because “they had not faith”—primarily the Christian Faith, but also, more generally, faith in the nature of things. The allegory is clear: it is the weakness of Humanism to fall short in the imagination of ecstasy; at its best it is noble, reasonable, and cold, and however optimistic about a balanced happiness in this world, pessimistic about a rapturous eternity. Sometimes wistfully aware that others claim the experience of this positive bliss, the Humanist can neither accept it by faith, embrace it by hope, nor abandon himself to it in charity.”⁵⁸

The upshot is that the Aristotelians, Platonists, and Stoics suffered from a despair which, even if not as pronounced as the despair of the Epicureans, was nonetheless in the end debilitating. Indeed, when one reads the Gospel account of the rich and virtuous young man who walks away in sadness when Jesus asks him to leave everything in order to gain eternal life (Matthew 19), it is hard not to think of, say, Aristotle’s good man or the ideal Stoic or even perhaps Socrates himself. The rich young man suspects that there is something more he must do to gain eternal life—that is, something more than the Mosaic Law (or the philosophers) demand. He also suspects, it seems, that there is something more to eternal life itself than he has understood up to this point. But he lacks the will to commit himself passionately and without reserve to Jesus Christ. He mistrusts Jesus’s suggestion that there is a happiness for which it is worth sacrificing everything he has—an everlasting life of ecstasy to be gained if only he will “lose” the way of life he has now.

And so there is, according to the Christian faith: we can live forever as sons and daughters in intimacy with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is the promise of Christian faith as a way of life.

⁵⁸*The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine, Cantica 1: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1949), pp. 95-96.