

Philosophical Formation and Spiritual Life in Seminaries

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***Abstract:** This essay considers the relation between philosophical formation and spiritual life in seminaries, in light of the apparent tension between the two. Proceeding in five steps it first discusses the “spiritual life” as a configuration to Christ that is not only experienced personally but interpreted and understood in light of the rationality of the faith. Second, this need for understanding our experience and the faith is explored through consideration of the philosophical demands of the spiritual life. Third, the essay explicates how a philosophical search for truth is not foreign, but integral, to an authentic spiritual life. Fourth, it elucidates the significant spiritual demands of philosophical research in search of truth and wisdom. Fifth and finally, it discusses the importance of the distinction between ratio (discursive reasoning as a prelude to reaching truth in a judgment) and intellectus (the act of understanding in which truth is attained), along with the incompleteness and circularity of both the spiritual life and philosophical investigation.*

At first glance, everything in a seminary would seem to set philosophical formation and spiritual life in opposition with one another. The aridity of philosophy can often dampen the ardor of these young men, desirous to consecrate themselves to Christ and to the proclamation of the Good News. On the other hand, it can unfortunately happen that a passion for philosophy diminishes a seminarian’s first fervor. Spiritual life and philosophical abstraction don’t seem to be made for one another! It is legitimate, moreover, to inquire into the rationale for beginning seminary formation with two years in which philosophical studies predominate.¹

1. Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Decree on the Reform of Ecclesiastical Studies of Philosophy*, January 28, 2011, 15b: “In order to avert the increased risk of fideism, and to avoid either a manipulation or fragmentation of philosophy, it is highly preferable that the philosophical courses be concentrated in the first two years of philosophical-theological formation. Within this two-year period, these philosophical studies, which are undertaken in view of theological studies, will be integrated with the introductory theology courses.”

1. The Spiritual Life

For a correct approach to these questions, it would be useful to first define what is meant by “spiritual life” in a seminary. Is it merely a set of exercises and teachings suitable for the formation of future priests? Or, are such practical and pedagogical methods various means at the service of a pathway of growth, in a free response to the appeal of Christ the Good Shepherd and of the Holy Spirit, for service to the Church and its mission in the world?

More than merely an institution regulated by norms, a seminary is “a spiritual place, a way of life, an atmosphere that fosters and ensures a process of formation, so that the person who is called to the priesthood by God may become, with the sacrament of orders, a living image of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church.”² Priestly formation “is ultimately a self formation” in responsible freedom and in awareness that the Holy Spirit is “the Protagonist *par excellence*” of this educational activity within the Church.³

The expression “spiritual life” thus refers to a drawing near to the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the baptized: “if the *Spirit* is our life, let us also *walk* in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). Commenting on St. Paul’s words, John Paul II adds: “the Christian life is a *spiritual life*, i.e., a life enlivened and led by the Spirit towards holiness and the perfection of charity.”⁴

The pope is referring here to spiritual life “*in seminary*”: in one called to the ordained ministry, charity is a gift of the Holy Spirit received in baptism, but destined to become more and more a *pastoral* charity. Partaking of the love of the Good Shepherd, and of a faith that is a “free *gift* of the Holy Spirit” and a “call to a free response,”⁵ such a one unites himself to Christ through a complete *gift of self* to the Church.⁶ Though not yet configured to Christ, Head and Shepherd, by the sacrament of orders, the seminarian is already called, in virtue of his baptism and his particular vocation within the Church, to grow in this pastoral charity.

It is with this vision of the spiritual life that we must begin as we reflect on its relation to philosophical formation. To what extent, and why, does spiritual formation in a seminary have need of philosophical reasoning? And, conversely, can the spiritual life stimulate philosophical research? On what basis can the two converge?

Before responding to these questions, a basic distinction must be made. Are we treating here of the spiritual life as an experience, lived in the intimacy of conscience and in the mystery of faith? Or as an experience reflected upon, interpreted and expressed by believing reason? The relationship to philosophy will differ according to which of these levels one addresses. A brief reflection on Christian experience, then, outlining the characteristics of these two dimensions of the spiritual

2. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 42. Cf. Vatican Council II, Decree on the Formation of Priests, *Optatam totius*, 8.

3. *Ibid.*, 69.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

5. *Ibid.*, 23.

6. Cf. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

life and how they are distinguished, might be helpful.⁷ First, as the basic form of the Christian life, the spiritual life is above all an experience which “puts the subject in direct contact with the object.”⁸ It is an immediate relation between the person and God, by faith acting through love. It is thus a personal experience, eminently subjective yet profoundly objective, putting as it does the subject in relation with a divine Reality that is other than himself and that in every way transcends him. Finally, it is a relation between two freedoms, which manifests itself as a journey, at times obscure and never completed (hence the metaphors of path, mountain and night often used by spiritual writers).

Secondly, this original spiritual experience is personal and communitarian. It consequently involves reflexive awareness⁹ and thus a hermeneutic: “Experience is always interpreted.”¹⁰ Indeed its very immediateness is made possible only through the mediation of Christ and the Church. It therefore has an intrinsic relation with the rationality of faith.¹¹ There is a close link between the spiritual life and the understanding we can have of it in the light of Scripture and Tradition. Lived experience and interpreted experience are inseparable, but they are not the same. Since, thirdly, the spiritual life born of experience ultimately leads to more experience – after having been enriched and guided by reflection—experience is not merely the source and condition of knowledge. Rather, knowledge ultimately gives way to divine union and to action for others (according to the twofold orientation of charity, towards God and neighbor).

We can see, therefore, that the study of philosophy can aid the spiritual life precisely as reflected experience (which could be called “spirituality”). Likewise philosophy, as a personal search for truth, can contribute to the spiritual life as lived experience, and the spiritual life can in turn contribute to philosophical research.

2. Philosophical Demands of the Spiritual Life

It would seem that, by definition, the spiritual life is excluded from the domain of reason. Isn't life in Christ “foolishness” in the eyes of the “clever” and of “Greeks in search of wisdom” (cf. I Cor. 1:18-25)? Does the spiritual life know any laws other than the sovereign freedom of “God who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16), and

7. Cf. Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954); Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987); Gerald O'Collins, “Expérience,” in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Fondamentale*, (Montréal-Paris: Bellarmin-Cerf, 1992); Edmond Barbotin, “Expérience,” in *Dictionnaire Critique de la Théologie* (Paris: P.U.F., 1998).

8. Gerald O'Collins, art. cit., p. 456.

9. “The condition of all knowledge and of all action,” experience is, by definition, “consciousness of a relation with the world, others and God”; “recognition of an alterity,” it consists in “anticipation, encounter, reflection” [“pressentir, sentir, ressentir”]; of itself implies “reciprocal awareness” (Edmond Barbotin, art. cit., p. 450).

10. Gerald O'Collins, art. cit., p. 456.

11. “The fact of having a content belonging to the same structure of the Christian faith,” since Christ is the Logos “in whom is contained the meaning of the world and its truth” *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 338.

the free response of God's children, reborn through the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:14-21)?

And isn't the spiritual life essentially spontaneity, a matter of sudden and unexpected emotions? Is the subjectivity of the spiritual life exempt from all rationality? Isn't it simply a "logic of the moral life" (Maurice Blondel) which gives direction to human life, tied wholly to mutable, contingent realities in reliance upon the omnipotence of divine Mercy? Or, without confining the spiritual life in too systematic a framework, can we recognize in all the great masters of Christian spirituality that the spiritual life does in fact obey a wisdom having its own laws, which in fact comprise its philosophical foundation? Let us consider here some of the principle elements.

First, a profound understanding of the human person would seem to be necessary. How, after all, can we arrive at a conception of the spiritual life without as clear a vision as possible of the person, its subject? Man, comprised of body and soul, conscious and free, with sensible and intellectual faculties, capable of knowing the truth of things and of desiring the good. Man, situated in space and in time, lives in society and with a unique destiny. Man with his nature and his singularity, his essence and his history. And finally, man, limited but open to the infinite, mortal and yet, in his highest intellectual faculties, already eternal.

Moreover, the spiritual life unfolds in the context of the moral commitment of the human person in the realization of his vocation. Any understanding we arrive at must therefore be founded upon a precise knowledge of the philosophical bases of morality. Can the spiritual life be grasped without situating it in the context of morality, with its principles, its sources and the criteria which qualify human acts? Or, for example, how can one understand prayer without the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and therefore without a reflection on what is a "virtue" and its place in human action? Likewise, a correct appreciation of a person's spiritual journey implies the ability to understand him in the context of his personal history, including his sometimes wandering path. St. Augustine's *Confessions* are always fruitful on this question, lending as they do to a dialogue with modern Western philosophies of consciousness and freedom, and indeed with philosophical texts of other cultures.

But action is not separate from being, and thus moral philosophy rests on metaphysics. To continue with the example of the virtues (theological but also moral), how can these be understood without a metaphysics of action, of *habitus*, and finally of being and of the good, of the object of the moral act and of man's final end? Or, how can one speak of "union with God" as the goal of the mystical life, without a reflection on the "One," and on the ontological distinction between created being and infinite being? A systematic knowledge of the first principles in the order of being is thus a tremendous help for arriving at a right understanding of the spiritual life. The thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, who marvelously clarified human action by means of a metaphysics of being, remains here an irreplaceable point of reference.¹²

Finally, all spiritual experience takes place in a specific historical and cultural context. Here philosophy's critical task is indispensable, making possible a discern-

12. Note that St. Thomas studied what we call the "spiritual life" within the context of human action as a whole (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, IIa Pars).

ment of the concrete conditions in which the person is called to live in the Spirit. One's manner of conceiving and of living a Christian life is strongly influenced by assumptions, influences, general mindsets, even ideologies. In the digital age, with the great amount and variety of information available to us, philosophical reflection is essential. In dialogue with the natural sciences, the human sciences and the arts, philosophy allows one to discern the trends, sympathies, and stakes which condition human freedom. The study of the history of philosophy and of contemporary thought allows one to grasp the background in which freedom can commit itself, and based on which it is possible to elaborate a concrete understanding of the spiritual life.

Solid philosophical knowledge, accompanied by personal reflection, provides a basis for understanding the spiritual life. Called not only to walk towards holiness, but also to guide others along the paths of the spiritual life, the future pastor should not be without it.

3. Truth, Freedom, Faith

Philosophy's contribution to the spiritual life is realized not only at the level of reflection and the understanding of texts, but also involves lived Christian experience. We should recall that this contribution takes place in the context of faith, which has two dimensions: first, the act of theological virtue *by which* the person accepts the gift of God (*fides qua*), and second, the divine truth *that* the person confesses in faith (*fides quae*). Regarding the *fides qua*, the act of submission to God who reveals himself involves both a preliminary and an ongoing activity of reason. To be truly free, faith must be based on a knowledge of the truth that is as critical and as ample as possible. The believing conscience has the obligation to investigate, to the greatest extent possible, the truth regarding the world, man, and ultimate questions (death and afterlife, God, evil). In our day this search must be capable of confronting the new questions posed by scientific developments and technologies, with their anthropological and ethical repercussions. Like every believer, but especially because of his vocation, the seminarian must acquire the philosophical means that will allow him to reflect on these new problems, so as to be able to think about and speak of his faith in the world in which he lives.

The study of the great philosophers, from both before and after the birth of Christianity, helps the believer to pursue this investigation with rigor and perseverance. This may be the reading of Plato's dialogues, the study of the debates among the different currents of Ancient Greek and Latin philosophy, but also the study of Indian and Chinese philosophy. A profound study of Aristotle and the great Latin scholastics, with their formal expression of how, in each order of reality, the intellect can raise itself to the highest principles, provides an unparalleled school of rigor in the search for ultimate truth. In a different way, the effort to understand the thought of Western modernity, even in its opposition to faith and to Christian wisdom, can extend to the limit a radical questioning on the meaning of human existence and the truth of the world.

Such a philosophical formation, if it goes beyond merely the history of ideas or eclectic juxtaposition, facilitates the search for truth. With it reason acquires an au-

thentic *habitus* of truth,¹³ making it possible for one to give himself fully, i.e. with his whole intellect and freedom, in submission of faith to God.¹⁴ This effort is particularly important in today's society, which prizes the acquisition of specialized techniques.¹⁵

The *fides qua* is inseparable from the *fides quae*: the intellect must therefore verify its ability to attain being and truth beyond changes in language, culture or historical epoch. This is a fundamental philosophical requirement of the spiritual life today: with one "click," the person has access to a virtually limitless number of cultural expressions, spread over time and space, and is thus more aware than previous generations of the relativity of language and knowledge. The spiritual life, however, puts one in relation with the Absolute, "He who is" (Ex. 3:14). Only thought based in metaphysical realism can assure the intellect of its capacity to reach truth (even if always imperfectly), and thus, by the illumination of faith, to engage the Word of God, revealed and transmitted in its historical expressions. An authentically realistic philosophy, in its various forms, makes it manifest that "right reason" can arrive at a truthful knowledge of being and express it adequately, though always in a way that is conditioned and perfectible.¹⁶

This implies an epistemology respectful of the "degrees of knowledge" (Jacques Maritain) and capable of reinforcing reason in its ability to grasp truth. A respect for the degrees or kinds of knowledge pertaining to different realms of study or experience is important for the spiritual life: it facilitates progress in the truth while avoiding either a separation or a mixing of what Pascal called the "order of bodies" (physical and psychical life), the "order of spirits" (the life of the soul, freedom) and the "order of charity" (the life of grace). The critique of knowledge and

13. The *Decree on the Reform of Ecclesiastical Studies of Philosophy* insists on the fact that philosophical formation "involve[s] both intellectual 'habitus' (plural) and contents": the acquisition of intellectual *habitus* and a solid philosophical *forma mentis* is presented as decisive for the formation of seminarians, in relation with the questions of truth and of freedom (cf. *Decree*, 11-12).

14. Cf. Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 5: "The obedience of faith' is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,' and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving 'joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.' To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts."

15. Cf. the distinction between the *arts* (technical competence) and speculative knowledge (in the ancient sense of the term, which derives from *speculum*, mirror, and designates contemplation). See *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 3.

16. Cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, n. 4: "There exists a body of knowledge which may be judged a kind of spiritual heritage of humanity. [...] Once reason successfully intuits and formulates the first universal principles of being and correctly draws from them conclusions which are coherent both logically and ethically, then it may be called right reason or, as the ancients called it, *orthós logos*, *recta ratio*." Philosophy must not be afraid to draw from the "philosophical patrimony which is perennially valid" of the Church (*Optatam totius*, n. 15), a patrimony within which St. Thomas (and the tradition that follows from him) constitutes an enduring paradigm (cf. *Fides et ratio*, n. 43-44; n. 57-58).

the study of logic make it possible to think about spiritual experience and to express its laws with respect to each of these “orders.”

This effort of reason makes possible a missionary dialogue with all people in the search for truth, even with those who consider this search to be impossible. Here the goal of philosophical study is not merely to provide a basis for apologetic, or to impart knowledge of different systems of thought in order to dialogue with them. By its very activity, rather, its aim is to contribute to the long journey to ultimate truth, departing from partial truths and apparently opposing points of view, so as to understand hearts and minds more deeply, in all their complex progress and contradictions.¹⁷

We have seen that the study of philosophy provides a solid basis for the believing person’s relationship with God through faith. It provides the basis for a Catholic theological understanding of the spiritual life. It allows the believer to express himself in dialogue with every culture, time and place. Now to our other question: can the spiritual life stimulate philosophical research?

4. Spiritual Demands of Philosophical Research

When prayer has matured into contemplative silence, the “simple gaze at the truth that is God, under the influence of love,”¹⁸ it sharpens the capacity for understanding truth, *intellectus veri*, and opens one to metaphysical knowledge, for an *intus-legere*, a “seeing into” things. An atmosphere of silence favors inquiry into being, which is hindered by an alienating dissipation subject to the dictatorship of image and opinion. This contemplative silence aids in the fight against the chatter of a “rationalistic reason” that reduces philosophy to dialectic, indeed to sophism.

In the words of Gabriel Marcel, in philosophical research worthy of the name “one is not talking a lot of hot air.” Silent prayer facilitates an inquiry which attains “to the things themselves,” and which avoids the tendency to ruminate only on the ideas of others, or to think in abstractions increasingly remote from concrete reality. St. Thomas emphasized that “the aim of philosophical study is not a knowledge of what people think, but objective truth.”¹⁹ In our own day Joseph Rassam, in critical dialogue with the philosophies of language and communication, has shown the value of “silence as an introduction to metaphysics.”²⁰

17. Philosophers can help in this journey: we think of Plato in his Socratic dialogues, of St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa contra gentiles*, of Pascal in his *Pensées*, of Maurice Blondel in *Action*. Cf., nearer to us, Marc Leclerc, *La destinée humaine* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1997); Henri Hude, *Prologomènes* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009).

18. Expression used by Venerable Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus to designate prayer, following St. John of the Cross and some Dominican theologians. Cf. *I want to see God: I am a Daughter of the Church* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1986), 459-465.

19. *In librum Aristotelis de caelo et mundo*, I, 1. 22. In an Aristotelian vein, Marie-Dominique Philippe has shown the metaphysical fecundity of a philosophical research that departs from concrete experience, within which it discovers the principles of induction, thanks to the investigation of and a judgment upon existence. Cf. *L'être I, Recherche d'une philosophie première* (Paris: Téqui, 1972); *Une philosophie de l'être est-elle encore possible?*, Vol. II (Paris: Téqui, 1975); *Lettre à un ami* (Paris: Éd. Universitaires, 1990).

20. *Le silence comme introduction à la métaphysique* (Toulouse: Publications de l'université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1980).

The purification inherent in every authentic spiritual life leads to a detachment which unifies the person in his orientation towards God. Along these lines, the active and passive “nights” purify the intelligence in its relation to beings. By a radical critique of the illusions of the imagination and the lies of self-will, they make possible an exacting work of research into the essential, which unifies the spirit in its quest for being, the true and the good.

This presupposes an ascesis that is “the concrete method of metaphysics,” in the words of Jacques Paliard, following Maurice Blondel (as well as, among many others, Plato and St. Anselm).²¹ “Purity of intellectual gaze” is thus acquired, and a generosity which is the condition of thought being capable of following its demands to the limit.²² These are joined to a disposition of sincerity and rectitude; a humility which makes space for the acceptance of truth; a purity which banishes the solipsism which is an obstacle to light.²³ “Let us pursue the truth, and pursue it to its measure, rather than shaping it to our measure.”²⁴ Finally, all these virtues are ordered to goodness and charity, which, surpassing analytical curiosity, give access to the intimacy of beings. Indeed, this would seem to be the “metaphysical virtue of virtues.”

The spiritual life, at its highest, leads to “wisdom”: the saint sees man and the world in light of the plan of God, its Creator and Savior. “Wisdom” *par excellence* is that contemplative knowledge which considers all things in the light of their origin and end or goal. Is this not the object of philosophy?²⁵ One should of course carefully distinguish philosophical wisdom, theological wisdom and mystical wisdom.²⁶ But it is even better to unite them. The spiritual life is a way of wisdom. Its progress, though not linear, is nonetheless real, and leads to a “knowledge by causes,” a seeing according to ends. It gives to philosophy its fundamental orientation, keeping it from becoming pedantic, doubtful, proud and tired, or reduced to a history of ideas. Wisdom sustains philosophy’s orientation to ultimate ends and to the Good.

Finally, an authentically Christian spiritual life is of its nature missionary. It leads to union with Christ, Head of the Church and Savior of the world, and thus can engage the men and women of our time. It creates the desire for dialogue with every form of philosophy, to seek the truth with everyone. It moves one to desire to know the “thoughts of humanity,”²⁷ and to always seek to “salvage another’s proposal”²⁸ so as to help him walk towards the truth.

21. Cf. *Maurice Blondel. Une Philosophie du dépassement* (1950), (La Roche sur Yon: Presses de l’ICES, 2009), ch. V.

22. “The ascesis is total; the spirit is too tied to the world for its release to be accomplished by its own power alone; the eyes are too riveted to sensible goods for their seeing to be purified without a metamorphosis, an entire remaking of their being. This must all be a gift.” Jacques Paliard, *Maurice Blondel. Une Philosophie du dépassement*, new ed. Marie-Jeanne Sepey, (La Roche-sur-Yon: Presses de l’ICES) p. 93.

23. Cf. *Une Philosophie du dépassement*, p. 71-72.

24. *Une Philosophie du dépassement*, p. 94.

25. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 982 a; John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 3; 6; 81-83.

26. *Fides et ratio*, 44.

27. Cf. André Léonard, *Pensée des hommes et foi en Jésus Christ* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1980).

28. “Every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another’s statement than to condemn it. But if he cannot do so, let him ask how the other understands it. And if the latter understands it badly, let the former correct him with love.

5. Incompleteness and Circularity

The distinction between *ratio* and *intellectus*²⁹ is of great importance for philosophy in its relation to the spiritual life. In the human soul, *ratio* and *intellectus* are not two different powers, but indicate – respectively – an imperfect and a perfect mode of the act of knowledge.³⁰ Necessary for man in his bodily condition here below, the goal of the exercise of *ratio* is the immediate apprehension of truth by *intellectus*, as the “movement” from the imperfect is ordained to “rest” in the perfect. *Intellectus*, for its part, designates both the *habitus* of first principles and the seat of the *visio Dei*, as well as of that mystical knowledge which is ultimately “the touch of the substance of God with the substance of the soul” (John of the Cross). This is why *intellectus* is linked with the moral and spiritual life: purification allows *intellectus* to intend its divine Object more purely. Reason (philosophical and theological) is no less necessary, allowing one to make his way more securely towards God, even if his own resources are insufficient: ultimately, philosophy must become “prayer.”³¹ Between the limited knowledge of *ratio* and the infinite *élan* of *intellectus* there is an irreducible gap, of which we can be aware.³² This interior distance is at once the space of the search for truth (reason always straining to extend its discoveries) and the place of the engagement of freedom (the will unceasingly provoked to surpass particular objects). Reason in search of wisdom, and the spiritual life in search of God, are thus both distinguished and united in an unending search.

The systematic search for truth, which is the goal of any philosophical work worthy of the name, of itself lends to a sense of incompleteness. This conclusion should not be confused with skepticism or “weak thought” (Gianni Vattimo). Rather, a rigorous thought taken to the limit of its capacities leads to “sapiential” knowledge: the “sage” knows that there is always still a *goal*, a “beyond” what he knows,

If that does not suffice, let the Christian try all suitable ways to bring the other to a correct interpretation so that he may be saved” (St. Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 22, cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2478).

29. In Western thought, the roots of this distinction are found among the Greeks in the terms *dianoia* and *noûs* (Cf. Plato, the allegory of the line, *Republic*, VI, 509e-511e; Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, 1012a). The term *noûs* (intellect) comes from the root *snu*, “to sniff,” “to sense.” In Homer, *noûs* designates the capacity to intuit a true nature, beyond appearances. *Dianoia* is the ability to move from one known thing to another (*ratio* comes from *reor*, to calculate). This distinction entered Latin thought under the influence of St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite; it is explicitly formulated by John Scotus Erigena. Parallels exist in Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese philosophy.
30. St. Thomas notes that “to understand is simply to apprehend intelligible truth” in an *intuitus simplex*, such that “to reason is to advance from one thing understood to another, so as to know an intelligible truth” (*Summa theologiae*, Ia, q. 79, a. 8, c.).
31. “It is not just the person who in everything lives as a philosopher, but philosophy itself which naturally, normally, is and will always be prayer. [...] Because everyone has to discover that they are not themselves their own light, their own sufficient power; everyone must think in such a way as to never sin against this recognition, to stir up a sense of their misery, and in Pascal’s words, to extend their arms to their liberator, their unknown source.” Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée*, vol. II (Paris: P.U.F., 1954²) p. 270-271.
32. As one can see, for example, in Pascal (“spirit of geometry” and “spirit of finesse”), in Newman (“notional assent” and “real assent”), in Bergson (“reflection” and “intuition”), or in Blondel (“abstract knowledge” and “concrete knowledge”).

and infinitely so. This openness of reason is precisely the point where grace impacts nature.³³ The incompleteness and radical insufficiency of knowledge prepares the person to accept Revelation.

At its foundation, as at its summit, the spiritual life awakens in the person an awareness of his radical insufficiency. The recognition of the primacy, both ontological and historical, of grace, is the fundamental and permanent experience of every Christian spiritual life: “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:9). Indeed, the spiritual life renders the intellect more humble before being, the true, the good, and the beautiful, just as before the most humble or most sublime concrete realities. It allows reason to grasp the human person in his singularity, and to recognize the first being as the principle and foundation of all things. True spiritual humility always moves the intellect to wonder before what exists, so as to incessantly seek the cause.

Indeed here we have a fundamental dimension of the “open circularity” between reason and faith.³⁴ Far from undermining one another, philosophical formation and spiritual life come together in the discovery of truth. Because, ultimately, the aim of each is to journey toward the truth with all of one’s soul. ■

33. This is also the point of distinction between Christian theology and philosophy. Cf. Josef Pieper, “The Philosophical Act,” ch. IV, in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).

34. Cf. *Fides et ratio*, 73. Translation by Joseph T. Papa.