

## The Three Spiritual Ways

The classical purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways in Christian spirituality. This article defines the meaning of this phrase in its historical development and present-day usage.

According to St. Bonaventure and the Franciscan school the three ways are “hierarchical actions,” i.e., different orientations given spiritual exercises in order to achieve the elements that make up Christian perfection. Each way fulfills a particular role; and the three ways, followed more or less simultaneously, lead to interior order and loving union with God. Thus the three ways are not successive stages of spiritual development, but parallel methods of action at every stage. In *The Triple Way*, for example, St. Bonaventure shows how meditation can be organized to achieve purification, illumination, and union; he then shows how the same ends can be achieved by the exercise of prayer and by contemplation.

The earliest occurrence in Christian writing of the terms purgation, illumination, and union is found in Pseudo-Dionysius (fl. c. 550), who applied them to the mystical experience. According to Dionysius the three acts are thearchic (i.e., divine) and hierarchic (i.e., ordered) ways to mystical union. They describe, moreover, not only complementary functions, but also successive activities; being successive they correspond to the three stages of mystical growth set down by Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399). More will be said below of Evagrius’s categories. Hugh of Balma, a Carthusian of the 13th century, correlated the Dionysian ways and the three ages—beginners, proficient, and the perfect—designating the degrees by the corresponding Dionysian terms. Each degree was denominated by its predominant emphasis. Thus beginners are those who endeavor to purify themselves of sin and its effects;

proficients seek illumination, i.e., growth in virtue; and the perfect ‘exercise union with God. Spiritual writers have come to accept this identification of ways and degrees, a usage followed in the present article.

The fact of growth is evident in Scripture (Prv 9.6; Eph 4.12-16; Phil 3.14). Christians are to grow to maturity in Christ. But although the Scriptures assert the necessity of growth, they do not mark out the traditional three stages. St. Paul speaks of two stages, infancy and adulthood, leaving aside the middle phase of adolescence (I Cor 3.1-3; Heb 5.12-14). At the same time he indicates the practical usefulness of such divisions when he defines children as those who can assimilate only the milk of basic teachings but not the strong meat suitable for adults. Divisions of growth are thus a framework for spiritual direction according to the needs and possibilities of different people.

**The Fathers.** The divisions found in the works of the earliest Fathers are likewise twofold rather than threefold. St. Clement of Alexandria (d. 220) and Origen after him (d. 255) took over the Platonic categories of active and contemplative life from Philo (d. c. 40) and applied them to Christian life. The active life (*bios praktikos*) consisted in the exercise of the moral virtues for the purification and ordering of the soul. The contemplative life (*bios qvphtikos*) was the highest human activity, the contemplation of God, and hence the exercise of the theological virtues. The contemplative life presupposed and crowned the active life. This original concept of the two lives in Christian literature continued in the works of SS. Augustine (d. 430) and Gregory the Great (d. 604).

But a second meaning of the two lives found its way into the thought of Augustine: the lives were identified with external modes or styles of living. This new sense became

confused with the original signification by Gregory; ever since, ambiguity has plagued this terminology (E. Mason, *Active and Contemplative Life*, Milwaukee 1961). But in Augustine the active life corresponded to what later became the purgative and illuminative ways, and the contemplative life was the unitive way. Augustine also used the triple division for spiritual progress of beginning, developing, and perfect charity. Other authors, such as Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) and Cassian (d. 435), singled out the predominant virtues of fear, hope, and love as the distinguishing characteristics of the degrees.

The teaching of Evagrius, however, is the key to understanding the history of the three ways. While he used the twofold division of active and contemplative life, attributing to the first stage the active way of the *praktikē* aimed at moral perfection, or *apatheia*. He subdivided the contemplative way of *q̄nosis* into a lower form of contemplation called *praktikē theoria* and a higher form called *theologia*. These two degrees of contemplation came to specify and distinguish the illuminative and unitive ways in tradition.

*Later Spiritual Writers.* Classic authors such as Bl. Jan van Ruysbroeck (d. 1381) and St. John of the Cross (d. 1591) and many modern writers such as R. Garrigou-Lagrangé, OP (d. 1964), and Louis Bouyer lay down the same basic characteristics of the three ways as Evagrius. For them as for Evagrius, both the illuminative and unitive ways represent states of mystical contemplation. Other modern writers, however, adapt this mystically oriented pattern to a more ascetical emphasis. They expand the Evagrian purgative way, which now becomes the purgative and illuminative stages, and they telescope the Evagrian illuminative and unitive degrees into a single stage, the unitive way, which alone has contemplation as its prayer form. Generally

speaking, ascetical writers of this group consider the higher form of Evagrius's contemplation, called, "mystical theology" or the mystical experience as an extraordinary gift and not necessary for high sanctity. A. Tanqueray, SS, and J. de Guibert, SJ, are examples of writers of this school. Their works reflect descriptions of the three degrees of charity such as that found in the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas (I a2ae. 24.9), even though they utilize the terminology of the ways. Present-day usage follows either one of these two general interpretations and can be exemplified in Garrigou-Lagrangé and De Guibert.

*Garrigou-Lagrangé.* For Garrigou-Lagrangé the purgative way is ascetical; i.e., it is characterized by the action of the virtues, which always manifest the "human mode" of reason and deliberation. The beginner strives to know God and know himself; his prayer life is that of meditation. If he is generous to the inspirations of grace, he quickly brings order into his moral life and his prayer becomes more affective and more simple. Through faithfulness to active purification he enters the dark night of the senses and passive Purification. This dark night is the door to the illuminative way and the beginning of manifest mystical life. The gifts of the Holy Spirit, which always act in a "superhuman way" according to the divine manner and measure, now predominate in the prayer and life of the proficient. Contemplation, especially the exercise of the gift of understanding, which penetrates divine mysteries, specifies the prayer life. But the proficient is not yet perfect. A still more radical purification must occur, the dark night of the spirit. This is the transition into the way of the perfect, which in turn is characterized by the highest infused contemplation, that of the gift of wisdom, which gives a quasi-experimental knowledge of God. The classifications are those of John of the Cross,

the theological explanations those of Thomas Aquinas as interpreted by John of St. Thomas.

*De Guibert.* The more ascetical conception of the three ways, illustrated by De Guibert, identifies the beginner as the converted Christian who by meditation and mortification is endeavoring to eradicate the effects of sin and consolidate himself in God's grace. He enters the illuminative way when he has overcome habitual deliberate venial sin, and ordinarily his prayer life in the second stage will be affective prayer. Whereas the beginner is concerned primarily with fulfilling the demands of the law, the proficient emphasizes interiority and inner renovation. Hence recollection, humility, purity of heart, and self-abnegation are the virtues to be stressed. The crucial point in this second degree is the call to total abnegation. It is the fork in the road that separates the pedestrian

Christian from the incipient saint. Those who hear this call are in the category of pious souls but become "mediocre" Christians if they make no further progress. Such persons, however, are not to be equated with the tepid or the retarded, both of which groups belong to the purgative way. But neither are they the fervent souls, who have the will to surrender completely to God. Only those in this last group negotiate the crisis of total abnegation and thus enter the unitive way. This last stage is the way of perfect charity, either heroic or ordinary; the fulfillment of charity rather than any special contemplative prayer is the specific mark of the perfect.

Each of these formulations of the three ways has its own advantages for spiritual direction in different settings and vocations to Christian life.

Bibliography: Bonaventure, "The Triple Way, or Love Enkindled," in v.1 of his *Works*, tr. J. De Vinck (Paterson, N.J. 1960) 59-94. L. Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, tr. M.P. Ryan (New York 1961) 243-285. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, tr. M. T. Doyle, 2 v. (St. Louis 1947-48). F. Jurgensmeier, *The Mystical Body of Christ*, tr. H. G. Strauss (New York 1954). J. De Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, tr. P. Barrett (New York 1953) 255-301.