

Tripartite Biblical Anthropology Illustrated by a Few Saints

I. The Opinions of Three Doctors of the Church

What interests us most in the presentation of the tripartite anthropology is the distinction between soul and spirit. The dimension of the body is fairly obvious. The distinction between soul and spirit seems to be much finer and subtler. Are they two things separate and different or not? Is there a real distinction between the soul and the spirit or not? Let us see how three Doctors of the Church respond.

1. In the *Book of Her Life* **St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)** writes thus:

The way in which this that we call union comes, and the nature of it, I do not know how to explain. It is described in mystical theology, but I am unable to use the proper terms, and I cannot understand what is meant by “mind” or how this differs from “soul” or “spirit”. They all seem the same to me, though the soul sometimes issues from itself, like a fire that is burning and has become wholly flame, and sometimes this fire increases with great force.¹

Thus the first word from St. Teresa on this matter seems not to clarify, but rather to indicate uncertainty. She thinks there is a distinction between soul and spirit, but then they seem to be the same. But, as for some many holy souls, also for St. Teresa, the more she responded to the multiform graces that she received from the Lord, the more light she received to discover secrets of the spiritual life. Thus she writes in her *Interior Castle*:

It may be that in writing of these interior things I am contradicting what I have myself said elsewhere. This is not surprising, for almost fifteen years have passed since then, and perhaps the Lord has now given me a clearer realization of these matters than I had at first.²

¹ St. Teresa, *Life*, chap.18, #2; translation by E. Allison Peers, *Complete Works of St. Teresa*, Vol. 1 (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd., 1944; 7th impression 1972) 106. Cf. also Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., trans. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1976) Vol. 1, 117.

² St. Teresa, *Interior Castle*, Fourth Mansions, chap. 2, #7 (Peers, Vol. 3, 238). Cf. also Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Vol. 2, 325.

Later in the *Interior Castle* she writes with more precision and assurance:

It seems that the Divine Majesty, by means of this wonderful companionship, is desirous of preparing the soul for yet more. For clearly she will be greatly assisted to go onward in perfection to lose the fear which previously she sometimes had of the other favors that were granted to her, as has been said above. The person already referred to found herself better in every way; however numerous were her trials and business worries, the essential part of her soul seemed never to move from that dwelling place. So in a sense she felt that *her soul was divided* and when she was going through great trials, shortly after God had granted her this favor, she complained of her soul, just as Martha complained of Mary. Sometimes she would say that it was doing nothing but enjoy itself in that quietness, while she herself was left with all her trials and occupations so that she could not keep it company.

You will think this absurd, daughters, but it is what actually happens. Although of course the soul is not really divided, what I have said is not fancy, but a very common experience. As I was saying it is possible to make observations concerning interior matters and in this way we know that *there is some kind of difference, and a very definite one, between the soul and the spirit, although they are both one*. So subtle is the division perceptible between them that sometimes the operation of the one seems as different from that of the other as are the respective joys that the Lord is pleased to give them. It seems to me, too, that the soul is a different thing from the faculties and that they are not all one and the same. There are so many and such subtle things in the interior life that it would be presumptuous for me to begin to expound them. But we shall see everything in the life to come if the Lord, of His mercy, grants us the favor of bringing us to the place where we shall understand these secrets.³

Commenting on the Seventh Mansions, Teresa offers her more mature opinion that “the soul is divided” and “there is some kind of difference, and a very definite one, between the soul and the spirit, although they are both one”.

³ St. Teresa, *Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, chap. 1, #10-11 (Peers, Vol. 3, 238); italics my own. Cf. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Vol. 2, 431-432.

2. Now let us hear from the great contemporary of St. Teresa, **St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)**. Commenting on the importance of renouncing the joy deriving from sensible things in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* the great mystical doctor writes:

Since the exercise of the senses and the strength of sensuality are, as the Apostle says, contrary to spiritual exercise and vigor [Gal. 5:17], it follows that at the enervation of one of these forces the other, contrary one, unaugmentable because of this impediment, must grow and increase. Thus in the perfecting of *the spirit (the superior portion of the soul which refers to God and communicates with Him)*, a person merits all these attributes, since he is perfected in the spiritual and heavenly goods and gifts of God.⁴

Thus the mystical doctor refers to the spirit as “the superior portion of the soul”.

In the *Dark Night* he writes with even greater clarity:

Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation and spiritual solicitude, as was their custom. *The soul readily finds in its spirit*, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight. Nonetheless, *the purgation of the soul is not complete. The purgation of the principal part, that of the spirit is lacking*, and without it the sensory purgation, however strong it may have been, is incomplete because of a communication existing between *the two parts of the soul which form only one suppositum*. As a result, certain needs, aridities, darkneses, and conflicts are felt. These are sometimes far more intense than those of the past and are like omens or messengers of the coming night of the spirit.⁵

⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 3, chap. 26, #4; translation by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., trans. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, revised edition, 1991) 313-314; italics my own; Cf. also E. Allison Peers (trans.) *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross* (London: Burns Oates, 1943) 288.

⁵ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, Book 2, chap. 1, #1 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, 395) italics my own. Cf. Peers, Vol. 1, 398.

In this text the saint writes that the two parts of the soul form one single thing. Father Kieran Kavanaugh renders the Spanish word *supuesto* with the Latin word *suppositum*, which indicates one single subject, an individual substance. Thus it seems that St. John of the Cross also recognizes a real distinction between the soul and the spirit, while, like St. Teresa, acknowledging that “they are both one”.

Before moving on to our third Doctor of the Church, I would like to cite what I consider to be a very significant text by Blessed Marie-Eugène de l’Enfant-Jésus who deals specifically with the difference between soul and spirit as an exponent of the teaching of Sts. Teresa and John of the Cross in his great masterwork, *I Want to See God*:

To direct oneself toward the region of the spirit, it is necessary to understand what “sense” and “spirit” mean in the concrete and where they are actually localized.

These localizations are familiar to the mystics who all speak of an “interior cell”, of a “depth of the soul”, of a more intimate and more peaceful region, which is the seat of God’s presence and activity in the soul. For Saint John of the Cross, sense includes the sense powers as well as the intellectual faculties in their immediate relations with these senses: consequently the periphery of the soul. Spirit designates the more interior regions.⁶

These notions will later become familiar to the soul; they will shed light on its experience, defining it better. For the moment, they are merely speculative and do not refer to any precise experience. In the Teresian quiet there is an interior perception indicating that the sweetness arises from a deep source. In this way it is easy to identify the spirit with those profound regions, which produce quiet. The soul understands that it is the movement from sense to spirit that frees it from external control and leads it to the water springing up within it...

Nevertheless there is a practical criterion that remains within the reach of the soul. It is that of peace and silence. The “senses” for Saint John of the Cross are the suburbs of the soul where turmoil and agitation reign; the sensitive powers are there. The “spirit”, strictly speaking, is God’s dwelling place. It is there that He dwells and acts in peace, there that He lets himself be grasped by

⁶ Cf. P. Marie-Eugène, O.C.D., *I Am a Daughter of the Church: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality* Vol. II trans. Sister M. Verda Clare, C.S.C. (Chicago: Fides Publishers Association, 1955) on *Union of the will*, chap. III “The Nights”, 50.

faith, or at times allows Himself to be experienced as the only and transcendent Reality. The spirit is the meeting place between God who gives himself as Father and of the soul that seeks Him as a child with its filial grace. This divine dwelling is silent, for it is in silence that God engenders and all divine life is received.

This experience of silence and peace that accompanies all spiritual generation is the first and most constant experience of the soul. One can attain to it even in contemplative dryness by means of an act of faith or an anagogical act.⁷

These anagogical acts Blessed Marie-Eugène subsequently describes as “simple acts of theological virtue, which go beyond the premises or foundations, put aside inquiries and reasonings, and go directly to their divine object to rest in Him alone.”⁸

3. Now let us hear what **St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622)** writes in his masterpiece, the *Treatise on the Love of God*:

In our soul as rational we clearly see two degrees of perfection. The great St. Augustine, and after him all the doctors, have named these two portions of the soul the inferior and the superior. That which reasons and draws conclusions according to what it learns and experiences by the senses is called the inferior part. That which reasons and draws conclusions according to intellectual knowledge, not grounded on sense experience but on the discernment and judgment of the spirit, is called the superior part. The judgement of the spirit is called the superior part. The superior part is usually called spirit and the mental part of the soul, while the inferior part is commonly called sense or feeling, and human reason.

This superior portion can reason according to two kinds of light. That is, either according to natural light, as did the philosophers and all those who have reasoned by science, or according to supernatural light, as do theologians and Christians, since they base their reasoning upon faith and the revealed word of God.

⁷ *I Am a Daughter of the Church* 103-105 alt. [Marie-Eugène de l'Enfant-Jésus, O.C.D., *Je veux voir Dieu*, Nouvelle édition revue et complétée sous la direction du P. Marie-Laurent Huet, O.C.D. et du P. Louis Menvielle (Toulouse: Éditions du Carmel, 2014) 727-728].

⁸ *I Am a Daughter of the Church* 105.

This holds still more for those whose spirit is led on by particular illuminations, inspirations, and heavenly premonitions. As St. Augustine has said, it is by the superior portion of the soul that we adhere and apply ourselves to the observance of the eternal law.⁹

Many times the holy Bishop of Geneva distinguishes between the soul and the spirit in this way:

For my own part, I speak in this *Treatise* of the supernatural love which God in his goodness pours into our hearts, and which resides in the highest point of the spirit, a point above all the rest of the soul and independent of every natural disposition.¹⁰

Summarizing the citations for our three doctors, I offer the conclusion that our immaterial dimension, commonly called the soul, is a subject that comprises two parts: the inferior part is called the soul; the superior part is called the spirit. This conclusion is also in perfect harmony with this declaration found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

Sometimes the soul is distinguished from the spirit: St. Paul for instance prays that God may sanctify his people “wholly”, with “spirit and soul and body” kept sound and blameless at the Lord’s coming (I Thess. 5:23). The Church teaches that this distinction does not introduce a duality into the soul (*DS* #657). “Spirit” signifies that from creation man is ordered to a supernatural end and that his soul can gratuitously be raised beyond all it deserves to communion with God (*DS* #3005; *GS* #22 § 5; *DS* #3891).¹¹

II. Why the Distinction?

If we have established that the soul is one single subject, one individual substance, is it worth the effort to distinguish between the inferior and superior parts, between the soul and the spirit? I believe so because the doctors of the

⁹ St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book 1, chap. 11, translation by John K. Ryan (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1975) Vol. 1, 82. Cf. also Henry Benedict Mackey, O.S.B. (trans.), *Library of St. Francis de Sales*, Vol. II: *Treatise on the Love of God* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 4th edition, n. d.) 45-46. All of chapters 11 and 12 are devoted to this topic.

¹⁰ *Treatise on the Love of God*, Book 12, chap. 1 (Ryan, Vol. 2, 261). Cf. also Mackey 533.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #367.

Church already cited would not have pointed out the distinction if they had not found it useful in their spiritual journey, particularly with regard to the grace of discernment. I would now like to present the testimony of other holy persons who upheld this distinction in their own way. We will see that they do not necessarily use the biblical terminology, but they maintain the distinction between soul and spirit with consistency according to their own vocabulary.

1. The Venerable Louise Marguerite Claret de la Touche (1868-1915)

Let us begin with some texts from the Diary of the Venerable Louise Marguerite Claret de la Touche, a Visitandine nun who had a special mission for priests. The first thing to note is that this nun had her own particular vocabulary to speak of the three dimensions of man that she always used in very consistent way. Let us listen to this prayer penned in a moment of anguish on 17 July 1904:

It is you, my Jesus, Who permit all, You direct all. Thus without dwelling on the secondary causes, on the instrument with which you rend my heart, I come to you and kiss the hand, which strikes me. ...

Take all then, O my Master, my soul, my heart, my body; pardon me for my weakness and for the impulse, which would wish to reject Your Cross. I belong to thee; do then in me, without regard for the tears, which I sometimes shed, Thy divine and loving will.¹²

We see that instead of speaking of spirit, soul and body, she speaks of soul [*âme*], heart [*cœur*] and body [*corps*], but always in a way that is entirely consistent. Thus for her the word “soul” [*âme*] always refers to what St. Paul calls the “spirit” while “heart” [*cœur*] always refers to what St. Paul calls the “soul”.¹³

¹² *The Love and Service of God, Infinite Love* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1987) 117-118 (trans. slightly modified). [Original text in *Journal Intime d'une mystique française Visitandine: Louise Marguerite Claret de la Touche (1868-1915)* (Turin, 1984) 126.]

¹³ Bishop Kallistos Ware carefully notes that heart may refer to the physical organ (of the body), to man's psychic composition (soul) or to the innermost being (spirit). Cf. Kallistos Ware (ed.), *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966) 19.

Now let us see how Louise Marguerite simultaneously experiences joy in the superior part of the soul (spirit) while she suffers in the inferior part of the soul. In genuine mystics these two simultaneous experiences do not indicate schizophrenia, but rather how they can enjoy peace even when they experience mental anguish.

This evening at prayer, Our Lord made me taste the bitterness of the sacrifice, which He is preparing for me. No matter how things turn out, the cross awaits me at the end of the year.

The superior part of my soul adheres to God and finds peace in constantly renewed abandonment, but the inferior part is in agony. I see nothing, I walk in the dark; everything seems to me to be full of dangers.¹⁴

These simultaneous experiences are very common among the mystics, even if their vocabulary is not always uniform. In the passage that follows we will see how the venerable Louise Marguerite effectively uses the word “soul” to indicate the spirit, the superior part of the soul where Infinite Love resides while she speaks of the heart as the inferior part that suffers:

My interior disposition has been constantly the same: dilation of the soul in Infinite Love; sufferings, in the sensitive faculties, but sufferings in some way absorbed by Love. ...

In the midst of this inward maternal sorrow, which tortures my heart, Infinite Love, living in my soul, diffuses a peace, a sweetness, a most celestial repose.¹⁵

We find the same usage in this brief passage: “After passing through the most painful inward sorrow, I commenced my retreat. My heart became more and more broken and sorrowful, but my soul was in a state of abandonment and peace.”¹⁶

2. Blessed Concepción Cabrera de Armida (Conchita) (1862-1837)

The Venerable Conchita was a devoted wife, the mother of nine children, widow and foundress of five Works of the Cross. At the order of her spiritual directors she left sixty-six volumes of her spiritual diary or “account of

¹⁴ *Love and Service* 109 (trans. slightly modified) [*Journal Intime* 68].

¹⁵ *Love and Service* 144, 145 (trans. slightly modified) [*Au Service de Dieu-Amour* (Alexandria, Egypt: *Œuvre de l’Amour Infini*, 1950), 233, 234].

¹⁶ *Love and Service* 130 [*Journal Intime* 203].

conscience” as she called it. She also wrote books and essays. She was a relatively uneducated laywoman who scaled the heights of the mystical life. She was perhaps less consistent in her use of vocabulary, but nonetheless one cannot not grasp what she wrote here:

My soul is suffering great sadness and desolation. But I do not want to fall or faint in the fight even if it lasts until I die. Furthermore, in spite of the desolation, which overcomes me, in the depths of my spirit I feel a constant force that draws me to cling to God, tending always, or almost always, to the Holy Eucharist; everywhere, at night, during the day, I feel this divine attraction in the very depths of my soul.

I am frozen in the superior part of my spirit, and yet inside an everlasting fire is burning, fire that never goes out. I have suffered a sadness whose weight has made me shed abundant tears; I have not been able to control myself especially in front of my adorable Eucharist.¹⁷

Clearly the first part of the above quotation is a perfect illustration of the fact that even while the emotions of the soul can be sadness and desolation, the spirit can be drawn to God. The second part of the quotation seems to contradict the more standard terminology, using the term “superior” where “inferior” would have been preferable. Nonetheless speaking of the “fire that burns inside” the concept of the spirit deep within is conveyed.

On the 15th of August 1897 she wrote down these words from the Lord;

You are to live cloistered *in the very inner sanctuary of your soul*, for there is where dwells the Holy Spirit. It is in this sanctuary you must live and die. There are your delights, your consolations, your repose. Do not look elsewhere for it, you will never find it. It is for this purpose I have created you specifically. From today on enter into *the innermost regions of your soul*, into those areas so unknown to so many others but where is found that happiness which *I am*. Enter into it never to leave it.¹⁸

¹⁷ Juan Gutiérrez González, M.Sp.S., *Irresistibly Drawn to the Eucharist: Conchita Cabrera de Armida's Most Beautiful Writings on the Eucharist* trans. Mark Guscini (Staten Island: Alba House, 2002) 7 (translation slightly modified) italics my own.

¹⁸ M. M. Philippon, O.P., (ed.), *Conchita: A Mother's Spiritual Diary* trans. Aloysius J. Owen, S.J. (Staten Island: Alba House, 1978) 39-40 italics my own.

Here the terminology is quite exact. The Holy Spirit wants to reside in the human spirit and the repetition of the words “inner sanctuary of your soul” and “innermost regions of your soul” leave no room for doubt. The Venerable Conchita illustrates this concept in a text written much later, on the 17th of April 1913.

Once transformation into Jesus is brought about in a soul, the Holy Spirit also becomes the spirit of the creature raised to a more or less higher degree according to the intensity and amplitude of transformation, which strictly depends on the growth of the soul in virtue. The Holy Spirit absorbs the creature’s spirit in the course of transformation and fills it with this so pure love, which is Himself. Then, it is with the same Love that the creature loves the divine Word, that is, with the same Love with which the Father loves Him, with absolute Love.¹⁹

There is no doubt that Conchita is speaking of the human spirit in these final texts. In the first we hear this fascinating testimony of the 1st of April 1894:

I greatly wanted to remember everything concerning the spiritual, for instance, mystical readings and sermons. If I cannot remember them, on account of my poor memory, still these truths penetrate the very depths of my soul. ... This mystical meaning exists deeply hidden in my spirit and vibrates like a violin string at the slightest touch of these of God. ... I have always liked to read and, in mystical books, I have found repose, light and relaxation.

Then there is this beautiful passage of the 31st of May 1890:

In the abyss of my misery and counter to my will, my spirit breaks the ties, which fix it to the soil of my nothingness, and flees. It rushes toward the divine throne of the most Holy Trinity as if there was its center and its life, there, within Life itself. If my spirit cannot find its satisfaction in the little pools of water I present it, I seek the boundless Ocean without shores, its God and Lord. I enclose my spirit in the well of self-knowledge, but it takes flight out of it and rushes off into this immensity of its God, the only place where it can find satiety and breathe.²⁰

¹⁹ *Diary* 230.

²⁰ *Diary* 220.

This final text is very poetic, but also very theological. Against the will (which is a function of the soul) the spirit cannot find satisfaction “in the well of self-knowledge” (which pertains to the soul), but wants to fly to God where the human spirit finds its true center.

3. Blessed Dina Bélanger (Mère Marie Sainte-Cécile de Rome) (1897-1929)

The final testimony that I have chosen for this presentation comes from the autobiography of Blessed Dina Bélanger. This document was also written in obedience to the superiors of her community, the Religious of Jesus and Mary. We discover immediately that, like the Venerable Louise Marguerite, Dina uses the world soul [*âme*] as the equivalent of spirit. She writes:

Then Jesus invited me to approach the altar myself. There were five steps to be climbed in honor of the five sacred wounds. I cannot explain what I experienced interiorly. I felt a kind of revulsion, as if my nature were in rebellion; *in my soul, I was at peace, content.*²¹

When Blessed Dina is speaking of her nature, she is speaking, in fact, of her ego, her humanity, i.e. her soul. When she writes that in her soul she was at peace and content, she is indicating her true center or spirit where only God reigns.

Usually one finds that even when there is tribulation in the souls of mystics, there is great peace in the spirit, as in the passage just cited. In Dina’s *Autobiography*, however, one finds the opposite situation.

23 July 1928. The recreations in which I took part did not distract me in any way from the action of my divine Master. *Exteriorly, I appeared relaxed and lively; interiorly, I was sharing in the sufferings of my Jesus. In the evening, while exteriorly I was engrossed, chatting and laughing, I was closely united with the agonizing Heart of my God, keeping him company, trying to console him; neither of these simultaneous thoughts was difficult.*

²¹ *The Autobiography of Dina Bélanger (Marie Sainte-Cécile de Rome) Religious of Jesus and Mary* (Canada: Religious of Jesus and Mary, 3rd Edition revised and up-dated, 1997) 158 italics my own [*Autobiographie de Dina Bélanger (Marie Sainte-Cécile de Rome) religieuse de Jésus-Marie* (Canada: Religieuse de Jésus-Marie 5^e Édition revue, corrigée et augmentée, 1995) 171].

No. I had only to follow the divine impulse. On the one hand, I was at recreation through obedience: Jesus wanted me to cheerful and full of joy. On the other hand, his Heart wanted me to taste the bitterness of his agony: he himself gave me the grace and kept me mindful of his intimate action.

I find nothing new in this synchronization of very different thoughts, but if I mention this, it is out of obedience and for the glory of my good Master, because the suffering of his Heart so preoccupied me on Thursday last that he had to give me at the same time a very powerful grace to cope with my exterior actions.²²

This represents a rather striking situation, but certainly shared by other genuine mystics who share with Dina the call to reparation and consoling the Heart of Jesus. In this case Dina's soul appeared and was joyous, but in her spirit she was sharing in the sufferings of the agonizing Heart of her God. This text not only gives us a glimpse into what Dina calls "synchronization" i.e., the fact that the soul and the spirit can be occupied simultaneously in diverse operations, but also supplies us with an indication about how reparation can be carried out.

III. Applications

All that I have presented here is a brief excursus that follows on my presentation of tripartite biblical anthropology. I believe that this kind of research could and should be continued. There is much more to examine, discover and verify in the lives of the saints. If at the base of what I have managed to present here there is something true, it is not only a theoretical truth, a key to better understand the saints and genuine mystics, but it is also a key to help us in our discernment of spirits. There are many corollaries that follow from the tripartite anthropology that I have just exposed, but I leave those for another time. I would now like to leave a final word to St. Teresa of Jesus, the saint with whom I began and who, in my humble opinion, illustrates very well a very important aspect of the argument i.e., that the divine life, the life of grace, begins in the spirit and then expands into the soul and often finally in the body. This comes from Book Four of the *Interior Castle*:

With this other fount, the water comes from its own source, which is God. And since His Majesty desires to do so – when He is pleased to grant some supernatural favor – He produces this

²² *Autobiography* 344-345 italics my own [*Autobiographie* 371].

delight with the greatest peace and quiet and sweetness in the very interior part of ourselves. I don't know from where or how, nor is that happiness and delight experienced, as are earthly consolations, in the heart. I mean there is no similarity at the beginning, for afterward the delight fills everything; this water overflows through all the dwelling places and faculties until reaching the body. That is why I said that it begins in God and ends in ourselves. ...

I don't think the experience is something, as I say, that rises from the heart, but from another part still more interior, as from something deep. I think this must be the center of the soul, as I later come to understand and will mention at the end. ...

It seems that since that heavenly water begins to rise from this spring I'm mentioning that is deep within us, it swells and expands our whole interior being, producing ineffable blessings; nor does the soul even understand what is given to it there. It perceives a fragrance, let us say for now, as though there were in that interior depth a brazier giving off sweet-smelling perfumes. No light is seen, nor is the place seen where the brazier is; but the warmth and the fragrant fumes spread through the entire soul and even often enough, as I have said, the body shares in them.²³

IV. A Final Word from Pope Saint John Paul II

Finally I would like to cite this lengthy, but dense and very important passage from Pope St. John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* of 6 January 2001, #25 to 27:

In contemplating Christ's face, we confront *the most paradoxical aspect of his mystery*, as it emerges in his last hour, on the Cross. *The mystery within the mystery, before which we cannot but prostrate ourselves in adoration.*

The intensity of the episode of the agony in the Garden of Olives passes before our eyes. Oppressed by foreknowledge of the trials that await him, and alone before the Father, Jesus cries out to him in his habitual and affectionate expression of trust: "Abba, Father". He asks him to take away, if possible, the cup of suffering (cf. Mk. 14:36). But the Father seems not to want to heed the Son's cry. In

²³ St. Teresa, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 2: *The Interior Castle* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez (Washington, D.C: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980) 324-325. Cf. Peers, Vol. 2: 237-238.

order to bring man back to the Father's face, Jesus not only had to take on the face of man, but he had to burden himself with the "face" of sin. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

We shall never exhaust the depths of this mystery. All the harshness of the paradox can be heard in Jesus' seemingly desperate cry of pain on the Cross: "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*" which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mk. 15:34). Is it possible to imagine a greater agony, a more impenetrable darkness? In reality, the anguished "why" addressed to the Father in the opening words of the Twenty-second Psalm expresses all the realism of unspeakable pain; but it is also illumined by the meaning of that entire prayer, in which the Psalmist brings together suffering and trust, in a moving blend of emotions. In fact the Psalm continues: "In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you set them free ... Do not leave me alone in my distress, come close, there is none else to help" (Ps. 22:5, 12).

Jesus' cry on the Cross, dear Brothers and Sisters, is not the cry of anguish of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all. At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, "abandoned" by the Father, he "abandons" himself into the hands of the Father. *His eyes remain fixed on the Father. Precisely because of the knowledge and experience of the Father, which he alone has, even at this moment of darkness he sees clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it. He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father's love by sin.* More than an experience of physical pain, his Passion is an agonizing suffering of the soul. *Theological tradition has not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union.*

Faced with this mystery, we are greatly helped not only by theological investigation but also by that great heritage which is the "lived theology" of the saints. The saints offer us precious insights which enable us to understand more easily the intuition of faith, thanks to the special enlightenment which some of them have

received from the Holy Spirit, or even through their personal experience of those terrible states of trial which the mystical tradition describes as the “dark night”. Not infrequently the saints have undergone *something akin to Jesus’ experience on the Cross* in the paradoxical blending of bliss and pain. In the *Dialogue of Divine Providence*, God the Father shows *Catherine of Siena* how joy and suffering can be present together in holy souls: “Thus the soul is blissful and afflicted: afflicted on account of the sins of its neighbor, blissful on account of the union and the affection of charity which it has inwardly received. These souls imitate the spotless Lamb, my Only-begotten Son, who on the Cross was both blissful and afflicted”. In the same way, *Thérèse of Lisieux* lived her agony in communion with the agony of Jesus, “experiencing” in herself the very paradox of Jesus’s own bliss and anguish: “*In the Garden of Olives our Lord was blessed with all the joys of the Trinity, yet his dying was no less harsh. It is a mystery, but I assure you that, on the basis of what I myself am feeling, I can understand something of it*”. What an illuminating testimony! Moreover, the accounts given by the Evangelists themselves provide a basis for *this intuition on the part of the Church of Christ’s consciousness* when they record that, even in the depths of his pain, he died imploring forgiveness for his executioners (cf. Lk. 23:34) and expressing to the Father his ultimate filial abandonment: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk. 23:46).²⁴

I would now simply like to point out certain aspects of this text of St. John Paul II, which, I believe, may be understood in terms of the distinction between soul and spirit. First, the Pope speaks of “the mystery within the mystery” and points out that

Theological tradition has not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union.

He then goes on to state that “Not infrequently the saints have undergone *something akin to Jesus’ experience on the Cross* in the paradoxical blending of

²⁴AAS 93 (2001) 282-284 [ORE 1675:V]. Emphasis my own.

bliss and pain” and illustrates it by citing two women Doctors of the Church. In the first instance he cites St. Catherine of Siena on how joy and suffering can be present together in holy souls:

Thus the soul is blissful and afflicted: afflicted on account of the sins of its neighbor, blissful on account of the union and the affection of charity which it has inwardly received. These souls imitate the spotless Lamb, my Only-begotten Son, who on the Cross was both blissful and afflicted.²⁵

I believe that this can be readily understood in terms of the distinction between soul and spirit. The spirit, the deepest dimension of our being, is our inbuilt orientation to God, the “locus” in which God communicates himself to the person, in which the Trinity dwells, the “locus” of the Beatific Vision in Jesus.²⁶ While the soul of Jesus, the “locus” of his mental sufferings, is afflicted, his spirit still rejoices in the Beatific Vision.

In the second instance John Paul II cites St. Thérèse of Lisieux who says

In the Garden of Olives our Lord was blessed with all the joys of the Trinity, yet his dying was no less harsh. It is a mystery, but I assure you that, on the basis of what I myself am feeling, I can understand something of it.²⁷

True, neither Catherine nor Thérèse distinguishes between soul and spirit as such nor do they speak of the Beatific Vision in Christ as such, still they support the great theological tradition of the Beatific Vision in Christ the Wayfarer on the basis of their own personal experience, what the pope refers to as “the ‘lived theology’ of the saints”. Unfortunately, many modern theologians have denied the Beatific Vision in Christ the Wayfarer simply because modern psychology cannot understand it.²⁸ That is precisely why John Paul II speaks of

²⁵ St. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* trans. Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (NY: Paulist Press, 1980) #78, p. 146 [Santa Caterina da Siena, *Il Dialogo* a cura di Giuliana Cavallini (Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 1995) 207-208].

²⁶ Cf. Arthur Burton Calkins, “The Beatific Vision in Christ: An Enquiry,” *Atti del IX Congresso Tomistico Internazionale V: Problemi teologici alla luce dell’Aquinata* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana “Studi Tomistici” #44, 1991) 326-33.

²⁷ St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations* trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C., 1977) 75 [Sainte Thérèse de l’Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, *Œuvres Complètes* (Éditions du Cerf; Desclée de Brouwer, 1992) 1025].

²⁸ Cf. the excellent treatment of this topic in the special number of *Doctor Communis* (Anno XXXVI, N. 2-3; Maggio-Dicembre 1983) devoted to “La Visione Beatifica di

Jesus' agony in the garden as "The mystery within the mystery, before which we cannot but prostrate ourselves in adoration". Once the soul has made the act of will to enter into adoration the adoration proceeds in the spirit. Indeed all genuine theological reasoning needs to take place in the spirit.

Perhaps the comments on Jesus' agony and Passion by another Doctor of the Church, St. Francis de Sales, is the best that I have thus found illustrating the point made by St. Catherine and St. Thérèse:

Thus our divine Savior was afflicted with incomparable woes in civil life: he was condemned as guilty of treason against God and man; he was beaten, scourged, reviled and tortured with most extreme ignominy. In his natural life, he died in the most cruel and piercing torments we can imagine. In His spiritual life, He suffered sadness, fear, terror, anguish, abandonment, and inner depression such as never had and never shall have an equal. *For although the highest portion of His soul supremely rejoiced in eternal glory, love hindered this glory from extending its delights into His feelings, imagination, or lower reason, and thus left His entire heart exposed to sorrow and anguish.* Ezechiel saw "the likeness of a hand" which "seized him by a single lock of the hair of his head" and lifted him up between heaven and earth. *Our Lord likewise was lifted up on the cross between heaven and earth, and seemed to be held by His Father's hand only by the highest point of His spirit, as it were by a single hair of His head, which was touched by the gentle hand of the eternal Father and received a supreme affluence of felicity. All the rest was swallowed in grief and sorrow.* For this reason He cries out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

It is said that in the midst of the tempest the fish called the sea lantern thrusts its tongue above the waves and is so luminous, brilliant, and clear that it serves as a light or beacon for sailors. *So too in the sea of sufferings that overwhelmed our Lord, all the faculties of His soul were swallowed up and buried as it were in a maelstrom of fearful pain. The point of His spirit was alone excepted. Left exempt from all suffering, it was bright and*

Cristo Viatore" and also the English translation of the original French article by Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *The Human Knowledge of Christ* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1980).

resplendent with glory and joy.²⁹

I believe that this text best illustrates St. Francis' reference to the Heart of Jesus as the "superior portion of the soul" which comprises "His feelings, imagination, or lower reason," and at the same time it further illuminates the first two. The final text also distinguishes between the suffering of "all the faculties of His soul," and the supreme rejoicing in the summit or "highest portion of His soul." This distinction made by St. Francis reflects, in effect, the weight of tradition in the Church on the threefold knowledge³⁰ and threefold love of Christ, indicated by the Venerable Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Haurietis Aquas*.³¹ It is precisely in "the point of His spirit," the highest dimension of his Heart, that Christ maintains communion with His Father and love for us by means of his Beatific Vision. In his earlier encyclical *Mystici Corporis* Pius XII taught about this latter point that "in that vision all the members of His Mystical Body were continually and unceasingly present and He embraced them with His redeeming love."³²

I humbly submit that recognizing the distinction between soul and spirit is a very important key to understanding dogmatic statements and theology in general as well as to the pastoral discernment of spirits. I believe that this is well illustrated by "the 'lived theology' of the saints". This is an area that could be explored at much greater length.

²⁹ *Treatise on the Love of God* Book Nine, chap. 5 [Ryan, Vol. 2, 108-109 italics my own. Cf. Mackey 376-377]

³⁰ Cf. ST III, q. 10-12; cf. also Reginald Garrigou-Lagrangé, O.P., *Christ the Savior: A Commentary on the Third Part of St. Thomas' Theological Summa*, trans. Bede Rose, O.S.B. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1950) 370-389. The "inferior portion of the soul", which St. Francis does not deal with here, would correspond to Christ's acquired knowledge; the "superior portion of the soul" to His infused knowledge; the "highest portion of His soul" or "point of His spirit" to his Beatific Vision.

³¹ Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds., *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) [= D-H] #3924.

³² D-H #3812.