

Setting the Scene

Deification, a Fruit of Ressourcement

Before studying our three theologians and the way deification features in their works, a brief outline of the immediate history of deification in modern Catholic thought will be helpful. This chapter serves as a kind of summary index, rather than an in-depth history. It offers snapshots that indicate the presence of deification as a programmatic theological theme in various centers around Europe. It also illustrates how in the period just prior to and contemporary with our authors, deification was regarded as a central Christian doctrine that had somehow been neglected and needed urgent recovery. As a new historical consciousness led theologians to inquire about doctrinal development, and as research with an ever wider range of newly available texts increasingly revealed the centrality of deification in earlier periods of Christian history, a way was opened for the richer articulation of the Christian mystery beyond the confines of comparatively recent scholastic and polemical categories.

The First Vatican Council (1869–1870) is most widely remembered for promulgating the decree on papal primacy and infallibility, not for contributing in any way to the doctrine of deification. Yet in its other decree, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith of April 24, 1870 (*Dei filius*), Vatican I touched upon a theme that in the ensuing decades was to become a key focal point in attempts to revitalize the longstanding catholic teaching that human beings are gratuitously ordained to deifying union with God. To the question why, beyond the knowledge of divine things attainable by reason, special revelation and faith are necessary, the Council Fathers answered that “God has directed human beings to a supernatural end, that is, to share in the good things of God that utterly surpass the understanding of the human mind.”¹ True

enough, the Constitution tends to present revelation as a process of supernatural instruction, with a corresponding understanding of faith as docile intellectual assent to divine authority. Nowhere does it seem to appreciate the way the Scriptures depict revelation unfolding also in events, progressively, within the pedagogical drama of interpersonal action. But against the complicated historical backdrop of theology's struggle with an increasingly ubiquitous rationalism, the clear assertion of humanity's God-given transcendent end could be read as fruit of a lengthy and still-blossoming movement of renewal whose aim was to restore to the church and its mission a properly supernatural vision of the human vocation, according to which "sanctifying grace" is not simply a therapeutic salve for sin but theology's name for the human person's actual and substantial communication in the inner life of the holy Trinity.

TWO NINETEENTH-CENTURY STREAMS

Reading the modern history of the doctrine of deification in this way requires us to go back into the decades before Vatican I to uncover two main streams in the tradition whose long-term influence along the lines of such a renewal deserve attention. The first is the renewal represented by the Tübingen school of theology, pioneered by Johann Sebastian Drey (1777–1853) and Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838). Avoiding the subjectivism of Schleiermacher, their influential Protestant counterpart, the Catholic Tübingen theologians sought nonetheless to reinsert the subject back into the theological enterprise and so to reunite theology and culture, doctrine and life. In Möhler's theology especially we glimpse the revitalization of the ancient sense of the church as an organic extension of the incarnation and therefore as the living, historical community in which human beings are granted a vital share in the life of God.²

The second main stream to which Vatican I's affirmation of the human being's supernatural end bears witness is the work of Cologne patristic and dogmatic theologian Matthias Scheeben (1835–1888). Hans Urs von Balthasar hailed Scheeben as "the greatest German theologian to date. . . ."³ Aidan Nichols characterized his theology as "lyrical Scholasticism."⁴ Ultramontane populist and defender of Vatican I's Constitution on the Petrine office, Scheeben

1. *Dei filius* §5.

2. See Donald J. Dietrich and Michael J. Himes, *The Legacy of the Tübingen School: The Relevance of Nineteenth Century Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1997); Michael J. Himes, *Ongoing Incarnation: Johann Adam Möhler and the Beginnings of Modern Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

3. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 104.

nonetheless emerges as an early protagonist of what would later become known as *ressourcement*: a return to the primary wellsprings of theological reflection, combined with the affective and speculative appropriation of the fruits of that reflection in the light of contemporary thought and life. Scheeben's dogmatic expositions on traditional scholastic categories was integrated with a lively pneumatology, a profound pastoral bent, and an unshakable conviction that grace brings about not just a new situation but a "new being."⁵ As a result, the theology that emerged was at once both more Trinitarian, more pastoral, and more anthropological than what was found in many of the manuals of the day.

Typically, Scheeben did not dedicate a separate *locus* to deification, but expressed the ancient teaching primarily under the *loci* of christology and the doctrines of grace, resurrection, and beatitude. In *The Glories of Divine Grace* (1863),⁶ the first and second parts exhibit a rich synthesis of patristic thought with scholastic categories. Grace makes us partakers in the divine nature, establishes union with God, and ushers the Holy Spirit, "the personal expression of divine love," into the soul.⁷ By grace "the soul is made deiform, godlike . . . ; it is made like God's holiness and thereby becomes partaker of God's own beauty."⁸ Indeed, it is not enough to reduce deification to the bestowal of grace, for in giving the Holy Spirit God gives not just an extrinsic gift but "the very Giver of the gifts and the very principle of supernatural power."⁹ Scheeben's way of expressing this truth is both beautiful and striking:

The Spirit who binds God the Father with the Son and the Son with the Father in the unity of inexpressible love, the same Spirit has been sent into our heart through sanctifying grace. He comes to teach us to stammer the name of the Father, to impart to us a childlike trust of Him, and to give testimony of His love, to console us in our needs and sufferings and to bind us now already with our heavenly Father in most intimate love.¹⁰

4. "Homage to Scheeben," in Aidan Nichols, *Scribe of the Kingdom: Essays on Theology and Culture* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1994): 205–13 at 213.

5. Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, trans. H. Guthrie (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 193.

6. 2 vols., trans. P. Shaugnessy (St. Meinrad, IN: Grail, 1947, orig. 1863).

7. Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, vol. 2., 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 101.

9. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

10. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

By grace then we human beings possess God not just as an object known and loved, but “immediately” and “intimately.”¹¹ Grace makes us “capable of the divine being and of the divine persons.”¹² This doctrine of divine indwelling is paramount. Our deification “presupposes union with the divine Persons and is caused by this union.”¹³ And while Scheeben affirms that the entire indivisible Trinity indwells the Christian, it is the Holy Spirit “especially” whose intimate presence in the soul effects a real ontological transformation. Not only so, but the Holy Spirit dwells also in our bodies, making them worthy of great reverence and admiration.¹⁴ Through the Spirit we are reborn and adopted as “sons of God,” not in name and right only, but in such a way that we share the same relation the Son has with the Father.¹⁵ Indeed, through grace and the sanctifying Spirit we are made not just sons but spouses of God, an analogy that indicates an even more intimate kinship inasmuch as “the spouse obtains through marriage a greater right to participate in the dignity and honor of the husband than the son to that of the father.”¹⁶

Yet even the relation between spouses, along with that between father and son, presents an inadequate analogy, because “they are not a real, permanent union of the body.” In contrast, God—being infinite—is able to unite himself to us “as the soul is united to the body which it vivifies.”¹⁷ Our bodies thereby become integral members of Christ’s own body. His body “unites to itself the bodies of those who receive it” and “fills them with divine life.”¹⁸ Clearly Scheeben is thinking here of the eucharist along the same lines as such Fathers as Ignatius of Antioch and Cyril of Alexandria. “The divine being is spiritual food to us. . . . It is a food that possesses in itself the marrow of divine life.”¹⁹ Citing Francis de Sales, he writes, “[T]he divine essence is as intimately united to our soul through grace as corporal food and the body of Christ is united with our body in the holy Sacrament of the altar.”²⁰

In *Nature and Grace* (1861),²¹ Scheeben presents a full-scale patristic theological anthropology, going beyond the categories supplied by the anti-

11. *Ibid.*, 5.

12. *Ibid.*, 6.

13. *Ibid.*, 143.

14. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

15. *Ibid.*, 48–60.

16. *Ibid.*, 128.

17. *Ibid.*, 137.

18. *Ibid.*, 140.

19. *Ibid.*, 71.

20. *Ibid.*, 71.

21. Trans. C. Vollert (St. Louis: Herder, 1954).

Pelagian theology of the west and adopting the Greek patristic notion of grace “in its supernatural and divine excellence” and in its “relations with the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Eucharist.”²² Nowhere does Scheeben allege that the great scholastics like Albert, Bonaventure, and Thomas were not inspired by the same notion. Nor does he seek to abandon the established scholastic terms. For example, using traditional language, he distinguishes between two kinds of deification, one “accidental,” peculiar to us, and the other “substantial,” peculiar to Christ. “[W]e are born of God and become like Him through an accidental form and nature, as the only-begotten Son is born of the Father and is like Him through the substantial and essential communication of the Father’s nature to Him.”²³ This contrast, which presages later debates over formal causality and created versus uncreated actuation, was taken over into manuals of theology in terms of a distinction between the union of sanctifying grace, defined as “an accidental assimilation and union with the Godhead” and the grace of union, exclusive to Christ, defined as “substantial deification.”²⁴

Another distinction Scheeben draws, and one for which he was criticized, is between the image of the divine essence in the soul, common to all people by nature, and the image of the Trinity, granted by grace alone and exclusive to the regenerate.²⁵ For him it is akin to the patristic distinction between the image and likeness of God. The difference between the two lies in the immediacy with which the Trinitarian processions are established and represented in the graced recipient. To speak of an *imago Trinitatis* in the created soul is to presume that the divine processions are there faithfully mirrored and reproduced, something impossible without divine illumination and a holy love. He cites an old analogy from Bonaventure: by grace the soul becomes son of the Father, bride of the Son, and temple of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Only by a very imperfect and remote analogy is the unregenerate person, as Augustine taught, an image of the Trinity.²⁷

22. “Author’s Preface,” *Nature and Grace*, xviii–xix.

23. *Nature and Grace*, 107.

24. Joseph Wilhelm and Thomas B. Scannell, *A Manual of Catholic Theology*, vol. 2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Kübner & Co., 1908), 141–42.

25. *Nature and Grace*, 176–81. On the controversy over this teaching, see C. M. Aherne, “Grace, Controversies On,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (Detroit: Gale, 2003, 2nd ed.), 401–5 at 404.

26. *Nature and Grace*, 175.

27. *Ibid.*, 181.

Scheeben's masterpiece was *The Mysteries of Christianity* (1865).²⁸ Here, besides offering a similarly rich exposition of the deifying effects of grace and the divine indwelling, Scheeben treats another important theme in the elaboration of the doctrine of deification, namely, the motive for the incarnation. By it God intends far more than simply to restore the human race to the same status it occupied before sin.²⁹ Christ is "not merely a supplement, a substitute for the first Adam," with the purpose of "supplying for the deficiency" caused by him.³⁰ Rather he is "a complement to the first Adam, preordained by God,"³¹ so that we are to think of the incarnation not as a factor required by a preexisting and determinative order, whether that of creation or sin, but

as the basis of its own proper order, of a special and altogether sublime order of things, in which the orders of nature and of grace are absorbed. We must soar up to the heights of the immeasurable power, wisdom, and love of God, which in an extraordinary, extravagant manner, such as no creature can surmise and apprehend, are revealed in this work and lay open the uttermost depths of the divinity, in order to submerge creatures in it and to flood the world with its illimitable riches.³²

Once again we discern a deeply Trinitarian logic at work. The incarnation appears "as the flower springing from the root buried in the Trinitarian process."³³ Christ does not simply reveal God in general, but effectively incorporates creation into the ineffably blessed communion of the three divine Persons.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND UNCREATED LOVE

The effects of Scheeben's revitalization of the doctrine of deification were far-reaching, but formal ecclesial substantiation for developing theology in this direction would only come after his death during the pontificate of Leo XIII (d. 1903). Pope Leo was the author of the famous encyclical *Aeterni patris* (1879) whose aim was to restore Thomism as the authentic systematization of Christian

28. Trans. C. Vollert (St. Louis: Herder, 1964).

29. *Ibid.*, 354.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 356.

33. *Ibid.*, 359.

philosophy. Yet numerous figures, including the influential Salamancan Dominican Juan Gonzalez Arintero (1860–1928), would invoke this Pope’s promotion of renewed devotion to the Holy Spirit and surrender to “uncreated Love” enshrined in such encyclicals as *Divinum illud munus* (1897), as authorization for an all-out recovery of deification as the lost but crucial plot of the Christian gospel and the key to human fulfillment.

Arintero joined the Dominican novitiate in 1875, and after studying at the University of Salamanca, lectured all over Europe in the natural sciences until a dramatic turn to spiritual theology in 1903.³⁴ In Arintero’s definitive *magnum opus*, *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church* (1908),³⁵ all the themes that we have encountered in Scheeben are developed with explicit and vigorous urgency. Arintero set out by highlighting the cruciality of the doctrine of deification for spiritual existence, repeatedly lamenting the loss of its central profile in Christian consciousness. “This deification, so well known to the Fathers but unfortunately forgotten today, is the primary purpose of the Christian life.”³⁶ “So common were these ideas concerning deification that not even the heretics of the first centuries dared to deny them.”³⁷ And again: “Unfortunately these sublime and consoling doctrines are utterly forgotten, as Cornelius a Lapide asserts: ‘few there are who know the privilege of such a dignity; fewer still who ponder it with the gravity it deserves.’”³⁸ Yet despite “the universal forgetfulness” and “the shameful deviations” from this traditional teaching, it can still be heard from numerous “dominant and authoritative voices.” It is here that Arintero refers especially to Pope Leo XIII and his advocacy of devotion to the paraclete. “This augurs a happy rebirth of these fundamental doctrines which are the very soul and substance of the Christian life.”³⁹

What are the features of Arintero’s exposition of the doctrine? Like Scheeben, and echoing Athanasius’ famous line, Arintero identifies deification as the very goal and purpose of the incarnation. “For this was God made man: to make men gods and to take His delight in them.”⁴⁰ His definitions likewise follow traditional lines. Quoting Dionysius the Areopagite, he defines

34. See “Biographical Note,” in John G. Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution in the Development and Vitality of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. J. Aumann (St. Louis: Herder, 1950), xi–xiii.

35. 2 vols., trans. J. Aumann (St. Louis: Herder, 1950–51).

36. *Mystical Evolution*, vol. 1, 23.

37. *Ibid.*, 29.

38. *Ibid.*, 38.

39. *Ibid.*, 38.

40. *Ibid.*, 350. Cf. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54 (PG 25, 192B).

deification as “the most perfect possible assimilation, union, and transformation in God. . . .”⁴¹ He denies any association between this teaching and any “absurd Gnostic emanation” or “repugnant pantheistic fusion.” “God remains ever the same—God is immutable—but man, without ceasing to be man, is deified.”⁴²

Two problems confront the proponent of deification, which Arintero tackles head on. To be deified, “we need the animation of a new vital principle that far transcends our own.” In other words, we need a new life from outside of us. On other hand, “[w]e need a principle that will give us a new sort of being, a second nature with its own proper faculties or potencies, so that we shall be able to live and work divinely and produce fruits of eternal life.”⁴³ In other words, this new life needs to be within us; it needs to be intrinsically our own, fitted to our creaturely and psycho-physical nature, and not merely imposed from above. Sanctifying grace, the seed and sap of divine life as communicated and adapted to the created order, fulfills both these conditions:

God respects us and does not destroy the nature formed by Him to be a subject of grace. . . . When [God’s own life] is reproduced in us to the greatest possible extent and in harmony with our own life, it does not make us cease to be men; rather it makes us perfect men at the same time that it deifies us.⁴⁴

Sanctifying grace truly gives us a participation in the divine life so far as it deifies us. It transforms us to our very depths and makes us like unto God as His sons in truth, and not in name only or merely in appearance. It is the true divine life . . .⁴⁵

Constantly we find Arintero emphasizing this intrinsic character of our deifying transformation, the fact that it consists not simply in an extrinsic relation with God or his grace, or only in a moral or affective inclination, but in an organic and ontological transformation of the human person. Sanctifying grace is not received, like the virtues, only into the faculties. “It is received into the very substance of the soul and makes us a new creature and so transforms and divinizes us. It gives a manner of life which is truly divine; whence flow certain powers and energies likewise divine. . . .”⁴⁶ In order to be truly deified, “the

41. *Mystical Evolution*, vol. 1, 355 and 65. Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* I, 3.

42. *Mystical Evolution*, vol. 1, 57.

43. *Ibid.*, 71.

44. *Ibid.*, 60.

45. *Ibid.*, 67.

46. *Ibid.*, 24.

conformity of wills is not enough; there must be a conformity of nature. . . .⁴⁷ God must become the very life of our souls, as the soul is the life of our bodies. “To dwell in the soul, to vivify and refashion it, God must penetrate it substantially, and this is proper and exclusive to God.”⁴⁸ This explains why, like Scheeben, Arintero finds human adoption a poor analogy for divine adoption. “Earthly adoption is nothing more than a moral union. It confers new rights, but it does not change the nature of the adopted. . . . Divine adoption, on the other hand, not only implies the name, but also the reality of filiation. . . .”⁴⁹ In fact in finding all earthly analogies falling far short, Arintero anticipates the rejection of the two-tiered theology of nature and grace that we will find by theologians of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*:

The supernatural order is not . . . anything that our reason can trace out by analogy with the natural order. Nor is it a superior order which has been “naturalized” so as to fit our mode of being. It is not simply “an order which exceeds all the natural exigencies of creatures, whether existing or purely possible,” as others have defined it. Such an order is still in some way a projection of the natural; it could easily be a superadded perfection or gratuitous complement to the natural order, without transubstantiating it or deifying it.⁵⁰

The intrinsic transformation of the human person by grace brings about a range of new and divine acts. Human beings become capable of knowing and loving God as God knows and loves himself. But it is Arintero’s description of the Trinitarian “shape” of this knowing and loving that is most interesting.

The functions and essential or characteristic operations of this [deified] life are a divine love and knowledge caused in us by the Spirit. . . . As directed to the Father, this love should be a filial love; as directed to the Son, it should be fraternal, marital, and even organic, vital, for He is the first-born, the Spouse of our souls, and the Head of the mystical body of the Church. Finally, as directed to the Holy Ghost, that love must be a love of affectionate friendship and, so to speak, an experimental and vital love, full of sentiment and life and intimate affections. . . .⁵¹

47. *Ibid.*, 33.

48. *Ibid.*, 30.

49. *Ibid.*, 348.

50. *Ibid.*, 349–50.

51. *Ibid.*, 353–54.

Two comments are pertinent here. First, Arintero, like Scheeben, believes that the deified soul properly bears the marks of the Trinitarian processions. He argues that current opinion on the “appropriation” of sanctification to the Holy Spirit is erroneous. He invokes not only the ancient Fathers but also such authors as Petau, Scheeben, Thomassin, and Ramière⁵² in support of his affirmation that the indwelling by grace is an action “proper” to the Holy Spirit, and not simply an *ad extra* work of God in general and only nominally “appropriated” to the Spirit. Of course, all the Persons together, and each in his own way, “contribute to the work of our deification.”⁵³ But it is the Spirit in particular “who directly unites Himself with souls in order to vivify and sanctify them”⁵⁴ and who inserts them into the relations constitutive of the Trinitarian processions. That is why, at one point, Arintero can call deification a “trinitification” inasmuch as it is “a resemblance of and participation in the inner life of God, one and three.”⁵⁵

Second, by the word “experimental” Arintero is tapping back into an old tradition according to which deification is as much experienced or “suffered” as it is actively achieved. “Experimental” knowledge is not the fruit of discursive reason, but a “knowing” that arises from the intimate experience of another through love. As Arintero puts it, “The knowledge which accompanies this love must not be an abstract knowledge but one that is concrete and ever more experimental, because it treats of an admirable and incomprehensible fact that can be realized only by living and experiencing it.”⁵⁶ We shall see how these two characteristics come to feature significantly, though in different ways, in the works of our three theologians.

GERMAN THEOLOGY AND FRENCH NEOPLATONISM

While Arintero was championing deification among Neothomists in Rome and Spain, who included, as I shall soon reveal in more detail, the philosophically inclined Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Karl Adam (1876–1966) was doing so in

52. Denis Petau S.J. (1583–1652) was a renowned patristics scholar; Louis Thomassin (1619–1695) was an Oratorian from the age of thirteen; Henri Ramière S.J. (1821–1884) was a theological consultant at Vatican I but is better known for editing the writings of J.-P. de Caussade and publishing them in the form of the spiritual classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence*. Other favorite authors Arintero drew on heavily included Guy de Broglie S.J. and Jean Vincent Bainvel S.J.

53. *Mystical Evolution*, vol. 1, 350.

54. *Ibid.*, 36.

55. *Ibid.*, 44.

56. *Ibid.*, 354.

Germany in the spirit and eventually also the surrounds of the great Tübingen school. Trained in Regensburg and Munich with doctoral theses on Tertullian and Augustine, Adam became one of the most widely read theologians in the twentieth century.⁵⁷ Given that his life and work “spanned the period from the First Vatican Council to the Second Vatican Council,” to recollect them is virtually “to review one hundred years of drastic changes in governments, culture, church polity, and theology.”⁵⁸ In his justly famous book *The Spirit of Catholicism* (1924), which manifests deep affinity with the mystical ecclesiology that eventually flowered at Vatican II,⁵⁹ we discover a strongly ecclesiocentric and sacramental exposition of deification that Adam expounds in terms of participation in the church which, as the body of Christ, has been established by Christ as the living and dynamic *locus deificandi* in history. Like Arinterro and Scheeben, Adam argued that the church’s message of salvation does not simply concern the redemption of humanity from a state of sin and its restitution to a pristine natural condition. “The Church’s doctrine of justification is based upon the presupposition that man is not only called to a natural end, . . . but also beyond that, to a supernatural elevation of his being which entirely surpasses all created aptitudes and powers, to sonship with God, to participation in the divine life itself.”⁶⁰ This glorious end constitutes “the central fact” of the gospel. The likeness to which we are being conformed “consists, according to the Second Epistle of St. Peter, in an enrichment by grace, in a fulfilling and permeation of our being by divine and holy forces. . . . Therefore man’s end lies, not in mere humanity, but in a new sort of superhumanity, in an elevation and enhancement of his being, which essentially surpasses all created powers and raises him into an absolutely new sphere of existence and life, into the fullness of the life of God.”⁶¹

For Adam, deification and incarnation are almost reversible terms. He speaks of “this incarnation, this raising of man to the fullness of the divine life. . . .”⁶² Grace is “a vital force” that “does not come from outside like some alien charm,” but rather presupposes our humanity and calls for accompanying human activities and psychological points of contact.⁶³ Yet it is thoroughly

57. See Robert Anthony Krieg, *Karl Adam: Catholicism in German Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

58. *Ibid.*, 177–78.

59. Trans. J. McCann (London: Sheed & Ward, 1929, from the 4th German ed.). Cf. Krieg, *Karl Adam*, 51–56.

60. *Spirit of Catholicism*, 177.

61. *Ibid.*, 177–78.

62. *Ibid.*, 178.

divine, “a sort of overflow of the eternal and infinite life within the soul.” “It is not of me, yet it is wholly mine.” The expression “infusion of charity” means “that the new love flows into me out of a primal source which is not my own self. But this primal source is not far from me, but within me, for it is the basis of my being. . . .” It is on this transcendent, intrinsically communicated divine power that the entire Christian life depends. “If man denies it theological substance, then his theology is an unsatisfactory subjectivism.”⁶⁴ Adam’s modes of expression were not as precise as those of Arintero or Scheeben, but he has certainly become the better-known theologian outside his own circle, and remains even today one of the key inspirations behind many Protestant conversions to the Catholic Church.

This chapter would not be complete without a brief final word about the philosopher Maurice Blondel, who through his lasting friendships with Etienne Gilson and Henri de Lubac provided a formidable philosophical backbone for the *ressourcement* movement in theology. The revolutionary character of de Lubac’s project in particular is better appreciated when it is read in the light of its formative background in the wider intellectual movement of French Augustinian Neoplatonism, of which Blondel was an early representative. In this movement, philosophy—and indeed, any truly human pursuit—was regarded as an intrinsically religious and mystical enterprise. In his 1893 *L’Action*, Blondel described the way God stands behind all human knowing as a kind of presupposition. “God is the immediate certitude without which there is no other, the first clarity, the language known without having learned it.” No one can act “without co-operating with Him and without having Him collaborate with us by a sort of necessary *theergy*.” If human action is to be authentic, if it is not to be short-circuited by blind self-containment, then it must eventually lead toward “a synthesis of man with God.”⁶⁵ Yet it is important to note that for Blondel this synthesis did not imply any kind of effacement of the ontological heterogeneity between God and human beings. Writing to de Lubac in 1932 on the subject of the latter’s nascent work in progress, he wrote:

One of the errors in perspective that must be avoided, it seems to me, has to do with the bad habit of considering that the state in which the supernatural vocation places us eliminates the “state of nature.” No, the latter remains immanent to the divine adoption itself. And it

63. *Ibid.*, 179–81.

64. *Ibid.*, 181.

65. Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 325.

is in this sense that one can, as a philosopher and a theologian, speak of the essential and indestructible incommensurability of created beings and God, in order better to understand the creations of the divine Charity, the paradoxical ways of transforming union, the metaphysical and properly hyperphysical wonder of our *consortium divinae naturae*. . . . Like you, I believe that God created only with a view to a deifying elevation; but that does not prevent the radical heterogeneity of the first gift of rational life and the second (and *antecedent* in the order of finality) gift of supernatural life, which, in order to be both received and acquired demands of us a *denuo nasci*. . . .⁶⁶

This pregnant paragraph encapsulates some of the most fundamental themes of what would become de Lubac's panoramic theological vision. It also demonstrates, as Wayne Hankey has argued, that the kind of Platonism adopted by Blondel and de Lubac was "intellectualist and ontological, as opposed to henological, and Augustinian as opposed to Iamblichan."⁶⁷ This observation may be illustrated by the way Blondel responded to the claim that there is fundamentally no difference between creation and incarnation, between "the gifts of the creator" and "the gifts of the incarnation and redemption," in short, to the claim that the natural order *is* supernatural. In reply, Blondel asserted: "Well, for my part I believe that there is an abyss to cross, and in order not to see it one must not *realize in concreto what God is*."⁶⁸ In other words, Blondel's account of the human person's deifying *itinerarium* toward mystical union with God remained firmly embedded in the metaphysical realism supplied by the patristic, and indeed soundly catholic doctrines of God, creation, and incarnation.

66. Quoted by Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings*, trans. A. E. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 186–87.

67. Wayne J. Hankey, "One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History," in J.-M. Narbonne and W. J. Hankey, *Levinas and the Greek Heritage Followed by One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 99–162 at 112.

68. Quoted by Alexander Dru in the introduction to Maurice Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. A. Dru and I. Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 75–76.