

CATHOLIC Spiritual Advancement

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Also by the author:

“Jesus, a novel”

“A Catholic Understanding of the
Near Death Experience”

The Gospel of Thomas, A Catholic Perspective”

”A Maximum Understanding of the Body of Christ”

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Stages of Spiritual Advancement

Purgative Stage

(sin is purged from our moral and theological virtues)



Illuminative Stage

(moral and theological virtue is legitimate and sustained)



Unitive Stage

(moral and theological virtue is perfected)

Active Night of the Senses

Passive Night of the Sense:



Moral Virtues
(directed to Man)

Active Night of the Spirit

Passive Night of the Spirit



Theological
Virtues
(directed to God)



Transforming Union

(also called Divinization or Spiritual Marriage, it is complete incorporation into Christ, and intended to be made in this life)

Outline of Spiritual Advancement

God conducts a seemingly strange exercise in which he detaches attributes from his very person, but withholding his own attributes of eternity and divinity. These detached attributes are then formed into wonderful entities such as humanity.¹ God then asks that these entities reunite with his very person. Furthermore, these entities called to union are damaged in this very ability for reunion, and must first overcome their damage.

We call this strange exercise creation and redemption. Those that rejoin Christ are humans, angels, and ultimately all of creation. To make this reunion more meaningful, we construct the discipline of spiritual advancement, which produces in us, a better quality of soul for this reunion. Spiritual advancement is as old as humanity. This book deals with spiritual advancement within Catholicism.

Spiritual advancement as practiced in the Old Testament was simply a stricter adherence to the Law of Moses. Jesus was truly revolutionary in his teaching on spirituality; he demanded love without exception, and even spoke of his own person as somehow being a goal in our life.

Jesus and the apostles largely spoke of the beginning purgative stages, with some instruction beyond the basics. Such instruction is sound however, because much of spiritual advancement is a matter of perfecting the human virtues we have always had.

¹ God uses the medium of nothing, forming it into creation. God creates by giving form to nothing, (the only thing that was not himself at the time of creation). His own selected attributes are used to make this formation, either directly or indirectly. When God incarnates directly, Jesus Christ results, when God incarnates selected attributes, giving substance to nothing, humanity and all creation results.

With the coming of Jesus however, our spiritual potential became nothing less than participation in the divine nature of Christ, the Son of God, (2Pet 1:4). Our divine inclusion into Christ was always the plan (CCC 280, 398), and it was for this reason that the Son of God was incarnate as Jesus Christ. Jesus did not come because of sin; he came for the purpose of divine communion with his children. Sin was an obstacle which he first had to remediate, prior to making his intended communion with humanity.

For the first 1500 years of Christianity, very few members could even read the literature on spiritual advancement; but this was not really a problem. God provides for our material well being, and how much more for our spiritual well being and advancement. Spiritual direction from a priest was the most common method, but the quality of instruction varied greatly, and instruction only goes so far, only the student may do the required work on his soul.

Lay religious communities existed from the start, and the Book of Acts mentions the Jerusalem community. The desert fathers (and mothers), were religious communities of lay people. These and the later dedicated religious orders provided a conducive environment and moral support for those seeking spiritual growth beyond the basics. Even before the time of Jesus, there existed the Jewish Essene religious communities in Israel. These were mostly lay communities, but the famous Essene monastery at Qumran were professional religious who made spiritual advancement their exclusive task.

About the year 500 Saint Benedict founded the first monastery of professional religious monks, and instruction in spiritual advancement was part of this life. At this same time in Greece, Pseudo-Dionysius wrote of the three stages of spiritual advancement: Purgative, Illuminative and Unitive stages, and even spoke briefly of the 'Divine darkness', in which faith must advance even in the absence of any emotional compass.

The sixteenth century brought two spiritual giants, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa of Avila. John experienced and studied what he termed “the dark night”, which is our advancement beyond our very soul, into union with the person of God.

We know what to do to attain virtue, but there is no internal road map union with God, besides this we must detach from all that previously brought us satisfaction. Self satisfaction, even legitimate satisfaction must go, we cannot become Christ if we remain self.

St. Teresa experienced and wrote of the several grades of prayer from beginning stages to the divine union...after Jesus showed her the place in Hell she would have if she remained in her lax life as a nun. She went on to lead and reform the Carmelite order. By the end of her life, her sisters had to pull her back to her seat as she levitated in prayer.

By about 1900 the term ‘victim soul’ had come into use. This is a profound dark night in which the moral remediation of the victim makes spiritual advancement (usually salvation) for others. The principle has always been in place with Jesus Christ as the first ‘victim soul’ to make such remediation. St. Gemma Galgani, St. Faustina and St. Pio are recent spiritual remeditators or victim souls.

The idea of divinization of the individual is first recorded in 2Pet 1:4; it has been written of by many saints, and it exists as Catholic doctrine in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In paragraph 398 we read,

“Constituted in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully divinized by God in glory.”

From CCC 460, *“The Word became flesh to make us partakers of the divine nature...For the Son of God became man so that we might become God”.*

Many saints and doctors of the church have written of our intended divinization.² Most speak of it occurring in the final Unitive stage, as the spiritual marriage. In the sixteenth century divinization was the clear outcome of the dark night of the soul, as written of by St. John of the Cross. It occurs after full purgation in this life or the next.

Christian spiritual advancement is simply a deeper sharing in Christ — in his very person — ultimately ending in divine union.³ This is the highest and most fulfilling existence possible, and it was intended to occur in this life, and it still may. Those we call saints have often attained this divine union in this life. This typically requires many years, but Saint Francis made the journey from playboy to divinization in five years. Christ himself calls every person to such perfection and union, *“Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*, Mt 5:48.

Spiritual advancement occurs as we eliminate self will, allowing a deeper indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is both

² The book, “Mystical Evolution”, by Fr. John Arintero is a study of the process of divinization in this life and is still in print.

³ Spiritual advancement may be made for others to some degree. In Colossians 1:24 the apostle Paul says, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” Here, Paul is a member of the ‘ongoing Christ’, which is the body of Christ on earth, with the same, continuing mission of Jesus Christ. This mission was and is remediation of sin, allowing the former sinner to be incorporated into Christ, who is now all who constitute the body of Christ.

This is possible because, “...we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”, Rm (12:5). It is for profound reason that Jesus Christ tells us, “bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”, Lk 6:28.

Jesus Christ remains the head of the body, but the body is the ongoing Christ on earth. Jesus, and all those in Heaven have no contact with sin; remediation of sin is a task of the ongoing Christ on earth.

giver and gift of our union with Jesus Christ. We become Christ, who is now all who constitute the body of Christ.

It sounds daunting and mystical, but it's no more mystical than living a just life as a first century carpenter. To deny one's self does not require abandoning family, food, sleep, or even the enjoyments of life, rather these are had according to God's will, not our own.

The science of elimination of self is well developed; religious orders have for centuries molded their member's wills away from self, and toward God. These religious orders exist as practical aids to spiritual advancement, and their techniques may be used by anyone according to their circumstances. The seemingly pointless discipline they require has real results in mastering self will: uniforms, schedules, endless rules...there is little room for individual will. This selflessness becomes a habit, and over time a character of the soul. The sacraments they have received act with fuller effect, drawing them closer to God as self is mortified.

Conversely, our world is geared toward satisfaction, growth and indulgence of self...all to the detriment of our souls. We are told to eat richly, drink well, purchase, pleasure ourselves, get honor, find fault and demand our rights. Jesus had a different mindset. How would Jesus live if he were a reformed sinner, rich, bed ridden, a mother? Read the lives of the saints.

Personal spiritual advancement promotes social justice and even salvation for others. We observe how original and subsequent sin introduced mistrust, greed, hatred, war, poverty, injustice. These may be reformed by the mediation of spiritual advancement. When we suffer anger into patience, and greed into trust, individuals and nations are bettered, and the corruption is no longer suffered as social disorder.

National and worldwide prosperity, security and justice depend upon personal integrity. Political programs may "arrange the deck chairs", within the limits of order and disorder existing

within our world, such order and disorder is caused by human moral behavior. Political action attempts to repair the existing effects of sin. Political repair has limited success, while sound morality and good spiritual advancement would prevent the damage in the first place. All of creation benefits as distorted forms of spirit, (love, patience, justice, reverence, moderation), are remediated (by moral effort) into their original perfect forms.⁴

We are called to make union with Christ, who is now the entire body of Christ.⁵ The entire body of Christ in some way benefits

⁴ Spirit forms the unseen framework of creation. Spirit is intangible but as real as matter; and it has real effect. Spirit is immaterial being. Being is anything that exists: a rock, an idea, energy, emotion, logic, a person. Patience, respect, hate, reverence, morality, memory, free will, are all spirit, and all have real effect in our world. Spirit is the underlying framework of all creation, and corruption of the willed moral virtues degrades the operation of all creation. Spirit forms matter, spirit forms spirit, spirit forms events. Consider that anything that can be described in terms of logic, will, virtue, act, emotion, mathematics or physical law has these same immaterial spirits or qualities as its foundation. Anything you can think of is first of all spirit, to which a material nature may be added.

⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic Church states explicitly that we become Christ in at least two paragraphs: (1) CCC 1213, "Through baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ."; (2) CCC 795, "...Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself...he and we together are the whole man." The idea and term "Whole Christ", occurs at least six times: CCC 795, 796, 797, 1136, 1187, 1188. Christ is now all who constitute the body of Christ: Jesus, Eucharist, humans, angels. CCC 398, "...man was destined to be fully divinized by God in glory...". Even without sin, we were destined to rejoin Christ. Redemption of sin was not the original reason for Christ (since sin was never intended), communion was the reason. Sin was an unintended obstacle that Jesus Christ overcame, before he could make his originally intended communion with humanity.

2Pet 1:4, "...he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature...".

Mt 25:34, "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'". During his mission, Jesus Christ referred to himself as being the kingdom of God.

Related verses for divinization: 2Pet 1:4, 1Jn 3:2, Lk 6:40, 16:26; CCC

from this reunion, to which we bring new dimensions of love. To this communion, we bring our hard earned spiritual advancement made in our fallen world, and the entire body of Christ benefits. *God who cannot advance in virtue has found a way to do just that.*⁶

Let us recall the purpose of our lives, and make a plan accordingly. The purpose of our lives is to make spiritual advancement and bring our improved souls to union with God. Sin and death were never a part of the plan. Adam and Eve were to have perfected their human virtues, then with the coming of Jesus Christ; they would have made divine union.⁷

260, 398, 460, 795, 1988. Related verses for the faithful as the literal body of Christ: CCC 790, 795, 789; 963; 1Cor 12:27, Rm 12:5, 1Cor 1:2, 1Cor 6:15.

⁶ Psalm 139:16 has our creation being for the sake of what we will do, (spiritual advancement); *“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”*

“Ephesians 1:4, “Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him, in love.” This is another bible verse that reveals our purpose as spiritual advancement. St. John of the Cross writes, *“we were created to set our hearts on God.”* From this we see that God did not create Adam and Eve so that they might live out their lives in human sinlessness, but that they should attain divine perfection and inclusion.

⁷ Adam and Eve were made sinless, even so any of their good acts may have been conducted even more perfectly. Jesus was not only sinless but perfect, yet his flawless acts were made even better by his many acts of forgiveness rather than justice. A static perfection was not given or expected from Adam and Eve, God expected spiritual growth.

What they certainly lacked was a means for divine union, Jesus Christ was sent for just this purpose. He left behind the sacraments of sanctification and a priesthood to administer them. Upon his second coming he was to have found humanity eager and prepared for divine inclusion. Those already having made divine communion would have been our guides, these are the saints who have attained to the spiritual marriage or divine union, and it was intended to be made in this life.

Christ's plan for our spiritual advancement has a beginning, a progression and a definite end point.⁸ The original plan remains, even though its progress is damaged by the effects of sin. Remember the goal of all this is the ultimate inclusion of humans, angels and all of creation into the divinity and person of Christ.

The beginning, as everyone knows is the creation of moral creatures, first angels then human persons.

The purgation was not a part of God's original plan. With the onset of sin, we must now reform our souls to their original starting point of virtue.⁹

The progression has us first perfecting our human virtues. Then with the coming of Jesus Christ, we are to make inclusion into his divine nature, (in this life). Jesus was not originally intended to lift us out of sin (sin was never planned); he came to make divine union with each person. Sin was an (unplanned) obstacle he first had to overcome before humanity could make divine inclusion.

Jesus not only came as planned, he left as planned. It is for this reason that Jesus Christ left us the sacraments of sanctification and a priesthood to administer them, and the knowledge that he is to return. The interim period is our time of preparation for his

⁸ It is a Catholic teaching that our spiritual advancement ends upon our death (particular judgment), or upon the general judgment, whichever we experience first. The general judgment marks the end of creation, and the beginning of eternity. Our world and our lives will not cease, but Jesus Christ will attempt divine communion with all of creation, so that "God may be all in all", (1Cor 15:28). This general judgment (evaluation and action) is Christ's second coming, which is detailed in the Book of Revelation chapter 21. This general judgment or communion will result in a "new Heaven" and a "new earth" (Rev 21). Heaven and earth will exist in a "new order" of divine union with Christ, and they will be populated by divinized angels and humans.

⁹ Even today, every person is made by God in human virtue, free of sin. As we enter into the realm of creation each person must take on a burden of original sin.

second coming, in which Jesus Christ will attempt divine communion with all of creation, (also called the general judgment), so that “God may be all in all”, (1Cor 15:28). No one need wait for the second coming of Christ to make this divine communion, it is offered at an individual level now.

The end of creation, and the beginning of eternity and the fulfillment of God’s great project, is the second coming of Christ, which is described in Revelation chapter 21. Chapter 21 speaks of a new divine order in which there is no more death or corruption, and a new Heaven and a new earth. This is the end point of creation, and the start point of eternity. From Revelation 21:1-4;

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

This new order of creation is the result of Jesus Christ making communion with all of creation, so as to bring about the highest fulfillment of what he has created. Jesus Christ is *“the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”*, (Rev 22:13). Christ is the source of all creation, and the communion of all creation. Heaven and the resurrection are the very person of Christ.¹⁰

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly made statements that Heaven is the person of Christ. From his Mass homily at Monte Cassino, May 24, 2009, “...this word

Jesus Christ will attempt communion with all creation, all goodness will make the communion; the evil left behind is Hell.

This end of creation and the beginning of eternal existence will be done within the very person and divinity of Jesus Christ. Every person and thing (except Hell) will exist as a dimension of Christ, the Son of God. As the apostle Peter says, "...we will participate in the divine nature [of Christ].", (2Pet 1:4).¹¹

The preceding is an outline of the history of spiritual advancement and God's plan for humanity, from creation through human virtue, to divine inclusion. What follows is a summary of the techniques of spiritual advancement.

Heaven does not indicate a place above the stars but something far more daring and sublime: it indicates Christ himself..."

From his book "Dogma and Preaching", under the article of "The Meaning of Christ's Ascension", "...we go to heaven to the extent that we go to Jesus Christ and enter into him. Heaven is a person: Jesus himself is what we call heaven." Jesus himself taught, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." (Jn 11:25).

Observe here also that the first level of participation in Christ is simply to believe in him. We will see that salvation and spiritual advancement are a participation in Christ.

¹¹ Our divinization has been spoken of by the Church, apostles and saints for 2000 years. The divinization of the human individual is Catholic doctrine appearing in the catechism and scripture: (CCC 259, 398, 460, 1988; 2Pet 1:4, 1Jn 3:2, Lk 6:40, 16:26); St. John of the Cross also spoke of this idea. The book "Mystical Evolution" by Fr. John Arintero, is an extensive study of spiritual advancement from humanity to divinity and is still in print.

Let's make a rule for spiritual advancement right away. We will study it for the remainder of the book.

Any activity, be it action, thought or will, must be stripped of illegitimate selfish content. Those wishing perfection must strip it even of legitimate self interest. What remains of the action must have its origin and end in Christ.

Illegitimate selfishness makes for a sinful act, and it's fairly easy to identify. Legitimate self interest is not as easy to identify, because it is legitimate (but not perfect); but for those seeking spiritual perfection, even legitimate self interest must go.¹² Any idea that may be prefaced with the word "self" — self satisfaction, self accomplishment, self interest — must go. God has no enmity toward prosperity, but if we want to move beyond this limited life, we must detach from all that is not Christ.

What remains of the action must come from, and go to Christ, for the end purpose of participation in Christ. Perfection is arrived at when the student is no longer his own person, but an instrument of Christ, because he is a member of Christ; but the student may not become Christ if he remains self.

We might observe spiritual advancement as being a three stage process. It is just a rewording of God's plan for humanity, discussed a few paragraphs ago, but now on an individual level.

The **purgative stage** has the student mastering the heavy, sensual failings. The **illuminative stage** has the student practicing a life of moral and religious virtue; the student is adept in living a

¹² We may end up doing the same action, (eating, sleeping, working) in much the same way, but our reasons and the intended end of our actions are now the very person of Christ, and this will fine tune our legitimate actions into selfless actions. Our goal is complete participation in Christ, who is now the entire body of Christ, but we cannot become Christ if we remain self, even legitimate self.

life of virtue. The unitive stage has the student reforming his unknown selfishness which is hidden in legitimate action and even in virtue and religion. This is the means of the unitive stage; the end is to enter into full divine union with Jesus Christ.¹³

Spiritual writers term this unitive stage, “the dark night of the soul”, and it happened to the biblical Job. Job had perfected his human virtue; he did not know it, but he had done so according to his own terms. Job’s legitimate self interests had to go, these interests were not evil, but nor was Job yet perfect. Job emerged from the trials into a final perfection.

Had Job lived after the coming of Christ, he would have made complete divine inclusion into Christ, (after his final purgation). Christ would have encountered no hidden resistance in making union with Job.¹⁴

The saints who have made the journey no longer ate, slept or worked as they pleased, but as Christ pleased, and the further their advancement, the more important the fine details became. In the end they had truly become instruments of Christ. Their participation was such that they were hands, hearts and minds of the person of Christ.

¹³ The last two stages, the illuminative and the unitive stages were part of the original plan. We were to first perfect our human virtues, then, with the coming of Jesus Christ, perfect our theological virtues allowing our full divine inclusion into Christ. The Purgative stage deals largely with avoiding sin, but sin was never part of the plan.

¹⁴ After his death, Job would have lived in the place of Limbo, awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ, at which time he would have been able to enter into a high level of divine participation in Christ. Prior to Christ, divine union was not available. The prophet Elijah may have been a prophetic incarnation of the Holy Spirit and at the end of his mission (not his death), he rejoined the Holy Spirit.

Later chapters will examine each of the three stages of spiritual advancement; the purgative, illuminative and unitive stages, and the dear night of the soul.

In the next chapter we will study the means by which we share in the very person of Jesus Christ by sanctifying grace, which is given to us at baptism. *The purpose of spiritual advancement is to fully cultivate this sanctifying grace to its full divine indwelling.*

Grace, Sanctifying and Actual

Definitions:

Sanctifying grace is the means by which a person is included into the life and person of Jesus Christ. Sanctifying grace is infused into one's soul, normally at baptism. Because of original sin, which makes selfish damage to our soul, we must first purge and perfect our soul before sanctifying grace may make its full divine indwelling. The Holy Spirit is the giver of sanctifying grace, and its major component. **Cultivating the full divine infusion of sanctifying grace is the purpose of spiritual advancement.**¹⁵

¹⁵ At its core, sanctifying grace is the divinity of God. Sacraments are not a decree of God, but a sharing in God, which is offered by God. Each sacrament offers a specific sharing in the very person of Christ. The sacrament of marriage is not less than the sacrament of holy orders, but it is different, and both are not just decrees, but an actual sharing in Christ.

We observe that a police officer (for instance), is empowered by decree to enforce the laws of the legislature, the written law is the entity from which he draws his authority. A Christian is empowered by the very person of Christ, not just the decree of Christ. In baptism we become the person of Christ, who is now all who participate in Christ as the body of Christ. We share in the human nature of Christ, then finally in the divine nature of Christ.

From this we see that a priest is "in the person of Christ", not just authorized by Christ. We see that spouses too are "in the person of Christ", and not merely authorized to marry. Every sacrament has its origin in the actual person of Christ, and not only in the decree of the Church.

Justification is defined in CCC 2019, “*Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man.*” Anyone who may be identified as being a just person in Heaven or on earth has been justified by the efforts of himself and of the Trinity of God.

Sanctification, also called divinization in CCC 1999, is our full “participation in the divine nature” (2Pet 1:4), of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason a person is given created life, (CCC 398). Sanctification occurs by the full indwelling or infusion of sanctifying grace.

Actual graces are all other graces that support the sanctification or divinization of the student. Actual graces (think grace of action) may be given in any form, to assist us in our vocation or tasks in life.

Catholic terminology uses the word “sanctification” where Protestants would use the term “salvation”.¹⁶ Our divine inclusion (sanctification) was the original plan; there was no plan to save us from sin, death or Hell, because none of these were ever planned. No salvation from anything was required in the original plan. Our sanctification, divinization or divine union in this life, was the original plan, hence the term ‘sanctifying grace’.¹⁷

¹⁶ In a nutshell, Protestant/Evangelical theology has Jesus Christ saving us from impending Hell (by atonement of our sins), and taken to Heaven where we live alongside Jesus. Catholic theology has us making union with the person of Jesus Christ, and living as members of him (as the body of Christ), in Heaven and the resurrection, both of which are Jesus Christ himself. Pope Benedict XVI made repeated statements that Heaven is the actual person of Jesus, (Jn 11:25).

¹⁷ Why does Christ create us as free human persons, only to desire reunion with

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