

NASHOTAH HOUSE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CATHOLIC AND ANGLICAN:  
THE MOTIF, MODEL, AND OPERATIONS  
OF MARTIN THORNTON'S THEOLOGY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
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## Abstract

The purpose of this Thesis is to explicate the principles at play in Martin Thornton's theology. Martin Thornton wrote thirteen books and numerous chapters and articles that explored the theological nature of corporate prayer, its relationship to doctrine, tradition and scripture, and the overall scope of discipleship and obedience to Christ that begins in this life and continues into the next. The first section of the Thesis describes the underlying theological motif and the resulting theological model. That is, the motif of "Every truth flowing from the Incarnation must impinge upon our corporate prayer life" discloses the dynamic model of total, corporate spirituality Thornton calls "Ascetic." The next section outlines the Thornton's varied articulations of Ascetic seen as operations with respect to scripture, doctrine, and tradition; and such operations are properly called Thornton's "Ascetical Theology," all of which demonstrates Thornton's mode *ressourcement* within a 20th-century Anglican context. Overall this thesis hopes to demonstrate that Thornton's motif and model affirm a Catholic conviction, and his operations an Anglican context—the "English School of Catholic spirituality" being the underground yet regnant dynamic within Anglican tradition including present day—and that his theology as a whole remains relevant, useful, and pastorally attuned for use today, in parish life particularly as well as in wider ecumenical discussions.

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

Nearly four years ago, on the 37th anniversary of my birth, my family and I drove to Niles, Illinois, a nearby suburb of Chicago, to the used bookstore Half-Price Books. Hannah, my wife, invited me to pick out something for the occasion. Perusing the theology shelves, I found *English Spirituality* by Martin Thornton. Completely unfamiliar with the author and title, I remember an immediate resonance. As it turned out, this book articulated, in content yet far more in feel, the sense for me of what it was to worship God at Saint Paul's, Riverside, my parish church. I had been zealous for books that articulated what had been attracting me to the Anglican tradition of Christianity, as I was raised Lutheran till college and was functionally atheist until my mid-thirties. How describe the feeling of the environment at Saint Paul's, Riverside was hence a challenge for me. *English Spirituality* gave me a vocabulary and view of its relationship to wider history.

Less than a year later, I had acquired and read all thirteen of Thornton's books, and began to incorporate his theology into my academic work, the adult catechesis courses I began to facilitate at my parish, and my preaching. Anglicanism is "caught, not taught," they say. The same applies with Thornton; for in the words of my rector, Father Thomas Fraser, I was soon a "hopeless Thornton junkie," but even more so, I would have to be "in it for the long haul, for this work is the work of a lifetime." In my estimation, he remains correct on both counts.

As I subsequently asked other people about Martin Thornton and his place in Anglicanism, the picture that developed was complicated. Among those who knew him, Thornton was loved and spoken of in reverent tones; most had read some combination of *The Heart of the Parish* (originally published as *Pastoral Theology*), *Christian*

*Proficiency, and English Spirituality*. Some had a lesser degree of familiarity with his other works, such as *Spiritual Direction*, but most did not. Yet, truth be told, many more of those I asked had heard nothing of Thornton, and were unfamiliar with ascetical theology as an area of significant and historical Anglican contribution. This is perhaps to be expected among my Roman Catholic friends and professors. Yet to my dismay, I discovered a lack of attention within the wider contemporary Anglican world to what I was appreciating to be Thornton's deeper themes, contributions, and innovative proposals for renewal. Where were the published articles about his theology? Where were the studies of the pastoral implications of his theology of the Divine Office, of threefold Regula in general, of his approach to spiritual direction, of Remnant doctrine, and so on? Surely several people had written dissertations looking at his theology. Finding little to nothing, what I came to conclude was that Thornton's theology had not been absorbed, digested, and brought forward. Rather, it had been *effectively ignored*, or not pastorally applied, which amounts to the same thing. I decided to change that.

As I began investigations, I was able to contact Magdalen Smith, Thornton's daughter. She graciously invited me to the UK to look at her father's papers. On the advice of Father Peay, I decided to try and organize a research trip. By the grace of God, I raised almost \$6,000 through Kickstarter to fund my research/pilgrimage. In Cambridge, I met with Dr Rowan Williams (who confirmed that Thornton was being "largely overlooked" and "for no good reason"). In Oxford, I met with Sister Benedicta Ward and Dr George Westhaver, and was a Reader at the Bodleian Libraries. In Nottingham, I met with Dr Alison Milbank. In Hawarden, Wales, I met with Martin's wife, Monica, and later with Magdalen Smith, who lives in Wilmslow, England. My

intentions were simple: To explain why I felt Thornton was important for the Church today; to try to understand what was known of him and what was unknown; to begin to discern the areas or edges at which Thornton's theology might gain traction in today's Church. Both Monica Thornton and Magdalen Smith encouraged me to pursue my work with Martin Thornton always keeping in mind the concerns and realities of ordinary, committed Christians in the pews. What's more, Monica Thornton graciously granted me full permission to reissue her husband's books through my publishing outfit, Akenside Press. I have begun to do that, beginning with *The Purple Headed Mountain*, which is the single best introduction to everything Thornton intended by his writing.

Through all these conversations and my own reflection, I came to realize this thesis was both necessary and needed. It was *necessary* because my long-term goals with Thornton's theology require me to have a thorough-going handle on the mechanics of his method. And it was *needed* because, as I have said, Thornton's theology can still teach the Church today. His perspective was prophetic in a number of ways, including with respect to post-Constantinian parochial realities, the nature of corporate prayer life, and the necessities of a renewed yet orthodox approach to spiritual guidance of communities and individuals. His theology, then, needed an advocate and interpreter who was both a practicing Anglican yet in possession of "fresh eyes" unburdened by the battles within the Anglican world during the 20th and 21st centuries. God appears to have chosen me for this work, and despite my occasional temptations to abandon it, He keeps calling me back to this task. It certainly helps that every time I read even a page of Thornton, something new or deeper occurs to me.

In that light, I must express my profound gratitude to my Advisor, Father Steven

Peay, and 2nd Reader, Father Andrew Grosso, who patiently guided me through the difficult process of writing this thesis. I was almost ready to give up and they would have none of it. Thanks as well go to Father Matthew Olver, Father Jack Gabig, Father Thomas Holtzen, Dr David Sherwood, Dr Garwood Anderson, Father Arnold Klukas, Bishop Edward Salmon, Father Tony Bleything, and the faculty and students of Nashotah House who have provided encouragement and suggestions. I am particularly thankful for the recognition given to me by Bishop Daniel Martins, who charged me with the mission to “keep Thornton in front of Anglican eyes,” and who from the beginning has been very supportive.

Thanks are due as well to Dr Richard McCarron, Father Stephen Bevans, Father Gilbert Osdiek, Father Richard Fragomeni, Dr Herman Stark, and Nunzio D'Alessio, all of Catholic Theological Union, for their constructive and loving feedback with respect to a theologian, Thornton, of whom they had never before heard yet sensed obvious resonance, owing to Thornton's rather obvious catholicity.

I am grateful also to Dr Rowan Williams, Sister Benedicta Ward, Dr George Westhaver, and Dr Alison Milbank for giving their time to an unknown Chicago student.

I am honored and humbled by the graciousness of Monica Thornton and the Rev. Magdalen Smith for entrusting with me Martin's publishing legacy as well as personal knowledge of this gentle, brilliant man.

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Special thanks to Father Thomas Fraser, my rector, friend, and authoritative soundboard. Also, to Carlmac and Mary Falk, James Baum, Deborah Yetter, and Thomas Holliday for participating in our catechetical laboratory. The support of Father James Biegler, his wife Lin, Father Richard Daly, Heather Becker, Joyce Garcia, and all the parishioners at St Paul's, Riverside have been invaluable and inspiring.

Finally, to my father, Robert Dallman, and my mother, Katherine Dallman, to my brother, Christopher Dallman—what words can I say but thank you. Profound thanks to Grandma Gertrude, Larry Pendzich, Kris Hein, Joshua Pohja, Maggie and Andy Hardy, Robert and Sandy Rockhill, Carter and Taylor Rockhill, Rick Wuerl, and Patt Krejci. To my daughters, Twyla, Isadora, Oona, and Marla: Papa is waiting to teach you about Martin Thornton someday—just ask. And to my lovely wife, Hannah: Who knew that question six years ago in our kitchen would lead to this!

All praise to the Blessed Trinity—the maker, keeper, and lover of all.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

“*Ascetical* theology,” wrote Martin Thornton, “makes the bold and exciting assumption that every truth flowing from the Incarnation, from the entrance of God into the human world, must have its practical lesson. If theology is incarnational, then it must be pastoral.”<sup>1</sup> With this statement, Thornton announced not only a provocative definition of ascetical theology, but what is the basis his conception of all theology. It was the endeavor of theology in its total that Thornton was after in his work. Whereas theology today, both popularly as well as in the theological classroom, is often thought of in terms of various divisions or branches—systematic theology, historical theology, moral theology, liturgical theology, mariology, christology, soteriology, missiology, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, and so on—by *ascetical theology*, Thornton intended “a practical and synthetic approach to all other branches of theology . . . an approach or process of theological thinking.”<sup>2</sup> He thereby signaled a desire to recast theology away from compartmentalized and toward integration, synthesis, and pastoral application to reinvigorate Anglican spirituality through creative attention to its theological roots.

Although there is much to say about what Thornton means by ascetical theology, immediately what can be noted is the difference between Thornton’s definition and the conventional definition. The entry “ascetical theology” in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* reads “See ‘spirituality’ and ‘purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways’.”<sup>3</sup> Under the entry “spirituality,” we see *ascetical theology* defined as “the science of the spiritual life” and “the science of human spiritual endeavor to attain to

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1. Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986), 21.

2. *English Spirituality*, 20.

3. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 144.

perfection.”<sup>4</sup> In either case, *ascetical theology* is treated as a dimension of *spiritual theology* or *spirituality*. Under the entry of ‘purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways,’ *ascetical theology* is not in fact mentioned explicitly. We can note as well that “asceticism” is defined as “(1) practices employed to combat vices and develop virtues and (2) the renunciation of various facets of customary social life and comfort or the adoption of painful conditions for religious reasons.”<sup>5</sup> Putting both sets of conventional definitions together, we have both science and practice, *theoria* and *praxis*.

As we will see, Thornton does not reject these definitions nor refuse them in his own work (or even in the chapter from *English Spirituality* already referenced). Yet we can already discern the beginning of a difference between his approach and the conventional understanding: what Thornton is after is an approach to *all* of theology. He is looking to articulate a means for “doing theology.” He is not after merely a novel approach to one aspect or dimension of theology. His is an approach of integration and synthesis.

In so articulating his *ascetical theology*, he even went so far as to consider the possibility of removing the word “ascetical.” Three years before publishing *English Spirituality*, Thornton wrote “If ascetics is such an approach to all theology, it seems that the logical conclusion would be to eradicate it as a ‘subject’ altogether.”<sup>6</sup> That is, might there be no need to modify the term *theology* with the adjective “ascetical,” for the very doing of it would by definition and nature be ascetical. Yet he continued, “That could be the case, but the time is surely not yet.” Here we simply note the depth at which Thornton

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4. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1543.

5. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 114.

6. Martin Thornton. “Anglican Ascetical Theology, 1939–60.” *Theology* 63 (August 1960): 313-319.

conceived his *ascetical theology*: he sought a complete rethinking and redefinition, so much so as to transform “ascetical theology” out of use.

Related to such bold intention, we will see also that it is necessary to regard Thornton as a figure of *ressourcement* within the Anglican tradition. Because it is important to keep this in mind throughout all consideration of Thornton’s theology, in this Introduction a bit of elaboration is necessary.

*Ressourcement* is the name of the movement of 20th-century theologians, typically thought to be exclusively French Roman Catholic, at least with regard to the major figures. These figures include Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar, Dominique Dubarle, Henri-Marie Feret, Jean Danilou, Henri de Lubac, Henri Bouillard, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.<sup>7</sup> Congar, in particular, may be said to have defined the movement’s emphasis when he wrote it sought to move from “a less profound to a more profound tradition; a discovery of the most profound resources,” and that it was concerned “rather with the unity of the ever-living tradition” of the Church.<sup>8</sup> And according to Gabriel Flynn, “the achievement of the *ressourcement* theologians lay not so much in their rejection of a long since arid neo-scholasticism as in their dual concern to engage with the contemporary world and to ensure the essential unity of theology.”<sup>9</sup>

Is such a description in any way apt for Martin Thornton? The argument here is, yes. His 1965 book *The Rock and The River: An Encounter between Traditional Spirituality and Modern Thought* has the following comment in its first chapter:

The first systematic ascetical treatises—the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of

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7. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1–2.

8. *Ressourcement*, 4–5.

9. *Ressourcement*, 9.

Cassian—grew out of the need to adapt Eastern monastic practice to the different seeds, temperament and outlook of the West. Like all ascetical theology it was an attempt to adapt dogmatic principles to particular circumstances, but I do not think Cassian got into a panic and doubted the survival of Christianity without a mission to Marseilles, nor did he think in terms of the minimum imposition possible of acceptance by the weak-kneed Gauls. He spoke from orthodoxy and asked what qualities Gallic temperament and society had to offer God, and how such offering could best be made. So without arrogance but with faith, hope and love, the Church seeks to speak ascetically to the modern world, but it speaks from what the politicians call a position of strength. It is not “how can the Church survive in the modern world?” but “how can the Church harness the particular needs, qualities, thought-forms and aspirations of the modern mind to prayer and the purposes of God?”

It is obvious that such an approach must begin by concentrating attention on modern ascetical theology itself and on the ascetical practice of the existing Christian community. Development can arise only out of the growth of a living tradition; the Church itself must lead, and it is only from a revived spirituality within the Church that a larger Christian influence upon the modern world can spring. Any attempt to create a radical spirituality which will be immediately embraced by the modern masses, the attempt to scrap everything and start from scratch, is impossibly naïve and unrealistic. Yet the Church itself must be self-critical: the modern rock, like the ancient rock in Horeb, needs a healthy clout now and again before the river gushes forth.<sup>10</sup>

This affirms the primary characteristics of *ressourcement* as described above by Congar.

Thornton mined selectively yet intentionally Christian tradition for more profound resources; he was concerned with the living Church that engages the pastoral and ascetical realities of today’s Christian world; and we have already spoken of Thornton’s desire to see theology as an integrated, ascetical whole. Another paragraph cements the appropriateness of seeing Thornton as a figure of *ressourcement*—as he wrote in the first

Preface to *English Spirituality*:

At the heart of Anglicanism is the insistence on historical continuity; if our claims are true then our spirituality, that is our total expression of Christian life, as well as our theology, liturgy, and polity, must be

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10. Martin Thornton, *The Rock and the River: An Encounter between Traditional Spirituality and Modern Thought*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 16–17.

retraceable through the medieval and patristic ages to the Bible. I have tried, therefore, to portray the English School as a living tradition, drawing its inspiration and character from all ages, while set within the glorious diversity of Catholic Christendom. Rather than preoccupation with the past, I believe that it is this comprehensive view which can inspire creative insights into the spiritual needs of the twentieth century: a good tree, especially an ancient one, bears new fruit only when attention is paid to its roots.<sup>11</sup>

At least broadly speaking, the theology of Martin Thornton was in keeping with these central principles of French Roman Catholic *ressourcement*. This is certainly an area that invites further research, particularly in terms of the context to which Thornton himself responded, and what in Anglican ascetical and pastoral practice that needed reinvigoration given its post-WWII context with a rapidly changing technological and social environment.<sup>12</sup> Another question might be: does Thornton's ascetical theological approach render the term *ressourcement* redundant at least in an Anglican context?

The groundwork properly laid we can now inquire into how Thornton's theology works and the nature of the principles he deployed. We can now explore the writers from which Thornton drew. We can analyze how he interpreted and applied doctrine, reason, tradition, and scripture. What seems quite apparent is that Thornton is a more far-reaching, even prophetic, theological voice than a first glance at his books might reveal.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose herein is to explore those very questions and arrive at a comprehensive understanding of how Martin Thornton's theology works and how it functions. If his entire corpus is thought of as an automobile, then what we will do here is

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11. Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology According to the English Pastoral Tradition* (London: S.P.C.K., 1963), xiv.

12. It may be that part of what he sought to improve upon was a perceived imbalance that grew out of the later Tractarian pastors, who applied in various ways the thought of the original Divines of Keble, Williams, Newman, Pusey, and the rest, along with the subsequent ritualists.

open the hood and analyze the engine. For such an analysis of the foundational principles behind his theology aims to articulate the heart of Thornton's overall thought. If successful, we will be able to see in a glance what makes it drive.

Martin Thornton did not write for his own fanciful pleasure. He in most cases wrote for Anglican theological/spirituality students, in order that they would become better, more competent, spiritual guides. This means both clergy and parish catechists, as well as on occasion for the faithful laity. He desired that his work be of great benefit to the spirituality of clergy and catechists, as well as to their preaching and their teaching in parishes. It is toward that end that this analysis is constructed, and it is toward that benefit that this analysis hopefully applies.

It follows from that purpose to include, as part of the Conclusion, a pastoral reflection that derives from my experience in parish life. For three years I have ministered catechetically and pastorally in two parishes in the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. The primary ministry has been at Saint Paul's, Riverside, ten miles southwest of Chicago. I also spent six months in pastoral internship at Grace, Chicago. In both parishes, I have preached and taught in a method that consciously employs the ascetical theology of Martin Thornton. Both environments allowed me substantial liberty to experiment and test out approaches suggested in Thornton's work, which flow from his principles of theology. Hence I will reflect on my own efforts to apply Thornton's theology in Anglican parish ministry today.

This analysis has been informed by a close study of his body of work that includes 13 books, half a dozen journal articles, and 17 book reviews.<sup>13</sup> It has also been

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7. As known to date; there may be other articles and reviews unknown at this time to the author.

informed, as already mentioned, by the conscious deployment of Thornton's approach in my own pastoral ministry. An additional, atmospheric dimension to this analysis is the month I spent in both England and Wales in the summer of 2014; this was a research trip that included interviews with Dr Rowan Williams, Dr Benedicta Ward, Dr Alison Milbank, and Dr George Westhaver. I also interviewed Monica Thornton and the Rev. Magdalen Smith, Martin's wife and daughter, respectively. I examined Thornton's working papers kept for many years by his wife, and examined resources kept in Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, Wales, and the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

### **Explanation of Method**

To understand the roots of a theologian's perspective is to examine the hermeneutic principles both behind the theology as well as at work in the theology. What principles lie behind Thornton's interpretation of the Christian faith? Three principles will be looked at in detail: *theological motif*, *model*, and *operations*. These were chosen because Thornton's writing is persistently synthetic, pastoral rather than academic, at times sprawling, and as a result defies easy analysis. Hence a simpler, threefold analytical framework proved the best to deal with the complexity inherent in his writing.

The first is the *theological motif*.<sup>14</sup> What is the foundational premise that underlies Thornton's theology? What is his basic assumption? What is the interpretive given? By

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14. H. Paul Santmire provides a clear definition derived from the work of Stephen Pepper, Alfred North Whitehead, Langdon Gilkey, and Sallie McFague. "When certain root metaphors cluster together and shape a tradition of theological reflection, or when a single root metaphor exercises a formative influence on a tradition over a period of many years, that cluster of metaphors or that single metaphor can be called a 'theological motif.' As a mode of thinking that persists in a given tradition or reflection, a theological motif is the name we can give to a habitual employment of one or more root metaphors. A theological motif, in other words, is not yet a 'theological model' in the contemporary sense of the latter expression because it is not self-consciously chosen, as a model is, as a formative principle for theological reflection. Theological motifs, rather, are presupposed, taken for granted, and employed as a matter of course. . . . Theological motifs function in a self-conscious theological reflection as 'ways of thinking that seem so natural and inevitable that they are not scrutinized with the eye of logical self-consciousness.'" See *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 15.

analysis of his theological motif we seek the presupposition behind everything Thornton meant and intended by *ascetical theology*. Above, we have already pointed toward what may be Thornton's motif, yet more can be said to fully articulate it. And although he baldly stated his motif in *English Spirituality*, he also stated it in slightly different ways in different points in his writing career. So something of a "composite" sense of his theological premise will be developed herein that confers a coherent picture of his overall theology.

The field of possibilities raised and the territory bounded by the theological motif is the theological *model*. A model in Christian theology refers to an overall framework of thought within the realm of Christian intellectual thinking.<sup>15</sup> It is the interpretive environment made possible by the motif. It will be argued here that the appropriate name for Thornton's model is *Ascetic*. Yet this is to suggest a meaning of "ascetic" that is different than the conventional definition of the term. This will be seen as similar to the definition of ascetical theology in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, namely a science. As his model, Thornton envisioned Ascetic as an overall conception of spirituality and corporate development—the Christian journey as a corporate whole by the People of God, "whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way,"<sup>16</sup> in fact a fundamental ecclesiology itself—bounded by the doctrines of the Incarnation and Theosis, as will be

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15. Ian G. Barbour defines *model* as "a symbolic representation of selected aspects of the behavior of a complex system for particular purposes," see *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 6. Avery Dulles defined *model* as "a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated," see *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1978), 28ff. Ian Ramsey called disclosure models complex theological realities, see *Models and Mystery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); and Paul Ricoeur insisted such models "give rise to thought," see *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 347-357.

16. Ps 84:4 from *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (The Episcopal Church, 1979).



discussed below.

Thirdly, the final principle we will examine is Thornton's ascetical *operations*. By operations, we refer to the patterns that arise through the application of the motif—that is, discernible paradigms.<sup>17</sup> With the motif to guide, and the model, as map, to coordinate, the operations are the walking of the terrain. Operations are Thornton's particular explanations and explorations of spirituality and ascetical possibility. It will be seen that it is here, in Thornton's operations, that we can properly and accurately use the term *Ascetical Theology*. Saint Anselm saw theology as “faith seeking understanding”; Thornton's approach to ascetical theology is analogous: Ascetic (model flowing from and disclosed by the motif) seeking articulation (operations). In other words, within the overall model of corporate spiritual development/pilgrimage, which is Ascetic in the Thorntonian sense, the operations that articulate and make intelligible the many dimensions, aspects, conditions, and patterns of spiritual development as a whole can be called *Ascetical Theology*. Ascetical theology is the articulating of Ascetic.

The value of restricting analysis of Thornton to the threefold framework of motif, model, and operations will become apparent as we proceed. What also becomes apparent is the importance of Thornton's motif, applied or kneaded time and time again in his writing. Thornton's motif is the very anchor of his theological thinking. As will be briefly mentioned in the biography in the Appendix, Thornton was a gardener and farmer before he was a theologian, so the image of “root” is particularly poignant and appropriate. It is to the hermeneutic roots that our attention is now directed. These roots will be expounded

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17. Thomas Kuhn defined paradigms as “standard examples of scientific work that embody a set of conceptual, methodological and metaphysical assumptions” in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

in two parts. Part I will look at Thornton's *motif* and *model*; these will be argued to be "Catholic." Then in Part II, we will look at Thornton's *operations*, outlined in three ways: his use of Scripture, Doctrine, and Theological Tradition; these will be seen to be "Anglican." Taken as a whole, then, Martin Thornton's theology is both Catholic and Anglican.

## Chapter 2: Hermeneutic Principles, Part I

### Theological Motif

We begin with the theological motif that lies behind Thornton's ascetical thinking. What is the foundational premise that underlies Thornton's theology? What is the interpretive "given"? The primary characteristic of a motif is that the motif governs interpretation. The motif becomes the basis for how data and information are interpreted, used, and manipulated in an overall analysis. Theological motif therefore determines the environment of theological analysis. In seeking to arrive at the simplest, most accurate expression of Thornton's theological motif, we are looking to unearth the presupposition behind everything Thornton wrote.

In Chapter 1, we began to consider Thornton's motif, yet that articulation bears repeating again because we are looking more closely at this fundamental aspect of Thornton's hermeneutic framework. He wrote:

*Ascetical* theology makes the bold and exciting assumption that every truth flowing from the Incarnation, from the entrance of God into the human world, must have its practical lesson. If theology is incarnational, then it must be pastoral.<sup>18</sup>

In this statement, we do see what looks to be "motif language." That is, Thornton uses the word "assumption." This is a clear sign that he is thinking in hermeneutic terms and is aware of the necessity to expose the presuppositions that lay behind his thinking.

Let us look closely at this statement. The word "*ascetical*" is italicized. This was Thornton's own emphasis. Why did he put that word in italics? The reason is that he sought make a distinction between thinking and application. The distinction is between "*ascetical* theology" on one hand, and "ascetical-theology" on the other. The former

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18. *English Spirituality*, 21.

refers for Thornton to a general mode of thinking about all of theology. The latter refers to ascetical practices and asceticism such as is found in ascetical manuals and textbooks such as *The Elements of the Spiritual Life* by F.P. Harton, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life* by Joseph de Guibert, SJ, and others. We will look closer at “ascetical-theology” when we examine Thornton’s hermeneutic *operations*, below.

The next words are “makes the bold and exciting assumption.” These clearly demarcate this statement as either part or all of Thornton’s *motif*. He is trying to state what he understands, at the writing of this book at least, the basis for his interpretation and thinking to be. Why is this assumption both “bold” and “exciting”? We might be reminded of the words “we are bold to say” that precede the recitation of the Our Father in eucharistic liturgy. Thornton does not expressly explain his use of the word “bold.” Yet he does immediately expand on what he means by “exciting,” or at least one meaning. In the subsequent paragraph, he writes

It is a common dilemma of theological students, absorbed or otherwise, in a lecture on Old Testament sources, the synoptic problem, or some intricate piece of Scholastic philosophy, to sit back and ask themselves ‘if I am training to be a parish priest what has all this to do with it?’ Ascetical theology asks the same question in a way which excludes the answer ‘nothing at all.’ The question becomes honest and exciting instead of frustrating; one of the lesser values of ascetical study is to colour and bring alive some aspects of theology which, to the average student, would otherwise be academic and dull.<sup>19</sup>

At least in the immediate sense, “exciting” refers to theological students who are bored by a particular aspect, idea, or area of their study. This continues to affirm that Thornton intended to offer here a motif, because he thinks application of the motif in real-life theology brings some kind of change to the interpretation or interpretive mood of the

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19. *English Spirituality*, 21.

person who adopts it. Furthermore, application of this motif does exclude at least one kind of interpretation. The response to any theological insight cannot be “it has no bearing on my priestly ministry,” or more bluntly, “it does not matter.” Expressed in the converse, the consequence of Thornton’s theological motif is “everything matters.” Somehow, the most intricate piece of Scholastic philosophy, the most arcane aspect of an Old Testament lecture or lecture on the synoptic problem of the gospels must have some kind of relationship to the ministry of the theological student after graduation.

Thornton continues with the words “that every truth flowing from the Incarnation, from the entrance of God into the human world, must have its practical lesson.” This is the expression, in clear terms, of the motif that governs Thornton’s ascetical thinking, at least as of 1963 and *English Spirituality*. Notice the clear and strong language: “every truth,” not just some and not others; “flowing from the Incarnation,” an image that brings to mind the image of “living water” from the Gospel of Saint John;<sup>20</sup> “entrance of God into the human world,” brings to mind another Johannine image, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father”;<sup>21</sup> and then “must have its practical lesson,” is a clear affirmation of the relationship between theological interpretation and Christian practice: a *practical* lesson and not an *intellectual* lesson.

Yet the motif cannot be seen as one that is in some sense anti-intellectual. This would be at direct cross-purposes to the subject matter under examination at any given moment in theological studies; study of the problems of holy scripture or philosophy are by nature intellectual problems. Thornton does not refuse the intellectual aspect of

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20. Jn 4:10-14; Jn 7 37-39. RSV.

21. Jn 1:14. RSV.

theological interpretation, then. Rather, he is stating that the relationship between intellect and practice must be a first principle. “If theology is incarnational,” he concludes, “then it must be pastoral.” That is to say, it is the part of the very nature of theology to be used in pastoral settings such as the parish, the confessional, teaching environments, spiritual direction relationships, and so on. There is a close relationship between thinking and doing. The pastoral aspect of theology for Thornton is not an optional component, but rather it is at the heart of theology itself. We will return to this point below.

Is the sufficient expression of Thornton’s motif, then, stated as “Every truth that flows from the Incarnation must have its practical lesson”? It may be, and that is certainly the expression of his motif as articulated in *English Spirituality*. Yet if we consider specifically the phrase “its practical lesson,” and measure that against the rest of his work whether in *English Spirituality* or elsewhere in his corpus, “practical lesson” tends to imply too narrow an application. Or, put another way, what does Thornton mean by “practical lesson”? What is included in that phrase, even restricting our question to a Thorntonian outlook only?

“Practical lesson,” as we saw, includes a pastoral dimension. “Pastoral” for Thornton has to do with coaching and guidance in prayer. As he wrote in the first chapter of *English Spirituality*, “In any pastoral context, [the] nurture of the manifold gifts and grace which God so profusely pours upon his disciples must be central, for it is by this means that God performs his miracles of redemption.”<sup>22</sup> Thornton views the primary task of priests, following William Temple, to be teachers of prayer. “Prayer” in the

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22. *English Spirituality*, 3.

Thorntonian sense, means “a *continuous relationship* between man and God,”<sup>23</sup> or more definitionally stated, prayer is

. . . a generic term for any process or activity qualified by a living relation between human souls and God. It not only embraces all the usual divisions of prayer—adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication; meditative, contemplative, and vocal; liturgical and private, etc., but all such works, arts, and moral acts that spring from our communion with God. Prayer, quite simply, is the total experience of a ‘religious man.’<sup>24</sup>

Hence for Thornton, “pastoral” centrally involves the teaching of prayer seen as the cure of souls. Pastoral work has two broad dimensions: corporate and individual. *The Heart of the Parish* was Thornton’s second book, and it is useful to note here that its original title was *Pastoral Theology: A Reorientation*. Thornton argues in that text that the work of the parish priest involves a corporate perspective and an individual perspective. The corporate perspective sees the parish as a whole or “organism”; the parish priest is a steward of the congregation, charged with responsibility to the spiritual development of the parish as a whole as well as all members of the parish particularly, much akin to the dual role of an abbot or abbess in a monastery. Hence a more complete understanding of “practical lesson” must include what Thornton intends as the central task of the parish priest, which is pastoral guidance in prayer both corporate and individual. And because “individual” is impossible without “corporate,” for the latter begets the former, we can use the single word “corporate” to refer to both.

Therefore, Thornton’s motif is expressed in the most complete form in the following way: “Every truth flowing from the Incarnation must impinge upon the

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23. Martin Thornton, *Prayer: A New Encounter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1988), 27.

24. Martin Thornton, *The Heart of the Parish: A Theology of the Remnant* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1989), 4. The phrase “the total experience of a religious man” summarizes William Temple’s theology of religious experience found in Chapter 3 of his work, *Christus Veritas*.

corporate prayer life.” This formulation honors Thornton’s own words and what “practical lesson” refers to in his corpus. This formulation adds the word “impinge.” By it we mean “have an effect on,” and “be in relationship with.” All Christian truths, in other words, must be interpreted in a way that finds real correspondence to the prayer life, or religious experience both corporate and individual.

A thorough analysis of Thornton’s corpus sees that is exactly what he did in book after book. He sought to work out the means by which we understand the teachings, doctrines, and practices of the Church over its history to be not relics of the past that the Church keeps around out of curiosity and tradition. Rather he sought to demonstrate how the teachings and doctrines have a direct bearing on the lives of ordinary Christians today. He tried to bring fresh thinking to a broad number of areas so that the Christian revelation would be charged with new life and vigor— this again reminds us of *ressourcement* described above.

Let us note, as well, that this motif has a close relationship with doctrine. That is, it is every truth flowing from the *doctrine of the Incarnation* that must impinge upon the prayer life. The doctrine of the Incarnation is a central doctrine, if not *the* central doctrine, of the Christian faith. This doctrine “affirms that the eternal Son of God took flesh from His human mother and that the historical Christ is at one both fully God and fully man.”<sup>25</sup> This doctrine is the fruits of the patristic Church and its ecumenical councils. It reached its fullest expression in the Council of Chalcedon, which that definition refers to in the phrase “fully God and fully man.”

We must then affirm that Thornton’s theological motif, the root of his thinking, is

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25. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 830.



patristic, orthodox, and of the universal Church, that is to say, Catholic. This means that those same adjectives apply to all of Thornton's theology in so far as it can be seen to be governed by this theological motif. But this is not to say Thornton is alone in that distinction. Rather, any theologian with a hermeneutical premise akin to Thornton's can reasonably claim to be patristic, orthodox, and Catholic. This motif is hardly the exclusive property of Martin Thornton. But he did choose to make it central to his theology.

Perhaps that fact explains his own description of the motif as both "bold" and "exciting." Maybe he realized how far-reaching and inclusive this motif was, and its implications for the prayer life both explicit and hidden. After all, when all truths that flow from the Incarnation must have a practical, pastoral bearing on ordinary Christian lives, possibilities for pastoral direction and guidance are inexhaustible. A great many truths flow from the Incarnation! That Jesus is both fully God and fully man means that all doctrines, in one way or another, flow from the Incarnation. These include doctrines of Trinity, Creation, Sin, Atonement, Church, Sacraments, and Theosis. Thornton's motif makes christology itself the basis of his thinking. That this motif brings all of this to bear in a single, rather straightforward formulation is, in fact, both bold and exciting. Because of this motif, both the theological as well as pastoral separation between God and the lives of ordinary Christians is erased.

### **Theological Model**

From the motif comes the *model*. Hermeneutically, a model is specifically the interpretive possibilities, both known and unknown, that the motif brings forth. By model, we mean a relatively stable framework that is analogous to what it describes

symbolically and intellectually. A model is systematic, multi-faceted, and metaphorical.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the examination of Thornton's motif, our look at his model is not self-evident in Thornton's writing. That is to say, Thornton seemed to not expressly define his model as he quite clearly did his motif. Although we saw the need to expand upon Thornton's specific definition of motif offered in *English Spirituality*, nonetheless our final formulation of it is faithful to his original expression. But to formulate his hermeneutic model requires some investigation and deeper analysis.

An immediate answer to the question of the nature of his model might be to suggest simply that it is called "ascetical theology." After all, ascetical theology as a term is used throughout his corpus.<sup>27</sup> Theologians who are aware of Thornton would normally associate his work with "ascetical theology." One of his most well-known works uses "ascetical theology" in its subhead. As we mentioned, he wrote that ascetical theology is an "approach or process of theological thinking." In a little known journal article from 1960, three years before *English Spirituality* was published, he argued similarly:

Ascetical theology is both a subject and a method of theological thinking. By traditional definition, it is that branch of spiritual theology which deals with the elementary stages of the Christian life, formed and nurtured by prayer and the practical disciplines which attend it; it is the study of the soul's early progress towards perfection, of the purgative way, of discursive and acquired prayer. But it is also concerned with the application of doctrine to pastoral method, which is likely to overlap, first into moral and liturgical studies, and ultimately into all other branches of divine learning.<sup>28</sup>

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26. See Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 28–31.

27. Of his more academic/scholarly books, the term as such does not show up explicitly in *Rural Synthesis* (1948); *The Function of Theology* (1968); or *Prayer* (1972).

28. "Anglican Ascetical Theology, 1939–60," 313. This article is also the earliest example of the distinction Thornton makes between "ascetical theology" "ascetical-theology." The latter is a specific subject (i.e., asceticism), and the former is a method or approach. This is essentially the same description he offers in *English Spirituality*.

What is notable about this passage is what it assumes. It assumes that there are “stages of the Christian life,” that there is “progress towards perfection” (“early” implies later or subsequent progress, as well), and it that there is a “purgative way” which brings to mind the classic Three Ways of Perfection widely described through Christian ascetical writing: the Purgative Way, the Illuminative Way, and the Unitive Way.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, what is behind Thornton’s thinking is something of a *model*. That is, stages, progress, and the Three Ways are terms that articulate the Christian life as an integrated, systematic, metaphorical, corporate *whole*. “Ascetical theology” is not the model or whole itself. Rather, “ascetical theology” is what describes the model. “Ascetical theology” describes the stages of progress in souls as part of a pastoral method, but it is not the stages of progress themselves. Following Anselm, theology of whatever kind is a process of making-intelligible. Theology itself, including ascetical theology, cannot be what is made intelligible. Certainly theology seeks to make God intelligible, yet what is demanded by such a task? We will return to this subject in the next chapter.

We are still looking for an intellectual framework that is analogous to a systematic whole. To find one, we can look at the term “ascetical theology” itself for a clue toward what we seek. What, after all, is “ascetical theology” a theology *of*? Does adjective “ascetical” correlate to some noun, that is, some dimension of Christian thought? Similar conventional terms, after all, do just that. *Dogmatic* theology is the theology of Christian *dogma*. *Moral* theology is the theology of Christian *morality* or *moral choice*. *Mariology* is the theology of *Blessed Mary*. *Liturgical* theology the

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29. See entry “purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 1358.

theology of *liturgy*. *Sacramental* theology the theology of *sacraments*, and so on. Does the same follow for “ascetical theology”? That is, does it amount to theology of “ascetic”? What would “ascetic” have to mean if it did? Did it find any place in Thornton’s work?

It turns out that Thornton did use the term “ascetic” in his writing. In fact he used it quite a bit, beginning in his second book, *The Heart of the Parish*. In chapter 1 of that book, he wrote, “Christianity is so essentially social that its applied dogmatic must issue in a *corporate* ascetic as well as a science of individual prayer-process.”<sup>30</sup> The word “corporate” is crucial to seeing that Thornton is pointing toward a systematic framework to describe, or at least grapple with, Christianity in total; not “individual prayer-process” or personal piety, but what is shared by all Christians as a whole. This is developed further in the next chapter where he wrote

Rule, in the singular, is an integral ascetical system like the Prayer Book scheme of Office, Eucharist, and private prayer, or the *Regula* of St Benedict: a comprehensive system aiming at wholeness, or better holiness, of life in Christ. Moral rules, in the plural, imply a list of ethical tenets, which may have nothing to do with religion at all. Of course, this does not make ascetic antinomian: self-examination, confession, and the strengthening of moral volition by Prayer and Grace, all play their part in one integrated ascetical Rule.<sup>31</sup>

Here, “ascetic,” already said to be corporate, becomes associated with “Rule” such as that of St Benedict; that is, “ascetic” is said to take on the character of a “comprehensive system.”

This seems to satisfy Thornton’s own concerns to define the term ascetic, because the first words of chapter 3 are “If modern ascetic is concerned overmuch with the

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30. *The Heart of the Parish*, 6-7.

31. *The Heart of the Parish*, 10.

individual member to the neglect of the unity of the Body. . . .”<sup>32</sup> Thornton did not modify or further elaborate on the term in this chapter, although he does begin to speak of a “parochial system.”<sup>33</sup> We can note here that the thesis of the entire book has to do with developing a sound and modern parochial system; this is the work where the term “parochial theology” was coined. The parish is the “Catholic Church in microcosm” where the whole of Christ is present through the eucharistic Body and Blood, and the whole of the communion of saints is present at the altar as well.<sup>34</sup> He describes the parish as an “organism,” which becomes elaborated as the Remnant Concept, an approach to the parish that “arranges its three strata as concentric circles in which power from the centre pervades the whole.”<sup>35</sup> This all strongly supports our contention that by “ascetic,” Thornton intends a systematic framework. The term “ascetic” is used throughout *The Heart of the Parish*; there is an intentionality behind the use of this term.

Yet there is still more evidence. In chapter 9, Thornton wrote, “If St Bernard, as champion of living religion, objected to the Abelardian *Theologia* and would doubtless have objected to the Thomist *Summa* as proud rationalizing, then what would he have made of a close reasoned system of *ascetic* such as the Ignatian Exercises?”<sup>36</sup> Again, we see a clear description of *ascetic* that supports a conclusion that it refers to a systematic framework. Chapter 10 begins with the words, “The modern Remnant evolves out of monasticism because the ascetic upon which it is based grows out of the systematization of the prayer-experience of monastic Order.”<sup>37</sup> Later in the same chapter he writes, “Up

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32. *The Heart of the Parish*, 13.

33. *The Heart of the Parish*, 15.

34. *The Heart of the Parish*, 20.

35. *The Heart of the Parish*, 21.

36. *The Heart of the Parish*, 83.

37. *The Heart of the Parish*, 93.

to the twelfth century, ascetic, as a practical guide to progressive religion, meant monastic Rule.”<sup>38</sup> Monastic Rule, simply put, is a corporate framework for a complete Christian life. Is that, ultimately, what Thornton means by *ascetic*?

It appears so. Here it is necessary to quote a more extended excerpt of that chapter that provides conclusive evidence.

It is sometimes suggested that St François de Sales simply lifted Prayer out of the monasteries and planted it in the market place; in fact he only completed a long drawn out process, and if any single man gave greater impetus to that process than another, the honour must go to St Thomas Aquinas. Once the whole of reality is seen as an ordered hierarchy of existence beginning with God as spirit and descending to matter, then the ascetical and pastoral implications are revolutionary. In all things we are to “Live like men, that is like embodied souls; and remember that souls embodied cannot behave as though they were disembodied.”<sup>39</sup> This is the overall sacramentalism which Dr [Kenneth] Kirk calls as “other worldly naturalism,” and if the Victorine’s tentative interest in nature and order inspired Prayer to venture a little way from the cloister, now it positively overflows into the world. Not only is prayer an orderly, progressive part of reality, but it lies between the same two poles: it extends from natural phenomena to God. It begins very much in the world with sense-experience, we are to “seek God in his creatures”—a process called the “first form of contemplation”—and this is the very infancy of religion. St Thomas’s ascetical common sense saw a gradual climb from here to the Vision of God, but moral theology returns as the one guide, and a moral theology which cannot dispense with the corporate; he ‘brought back the heroics of ascetic religion—always aspiring, often unregulated, sometimes tragically wasteful—to the test of reason, and subordinated them to the supreme rule of the beatific vision as commensurate to human nature.’<sup>40</sup> And this is the real meaning of ascetic.<sup>41</sup>

The final sentence invites us to understand ascetic as correlate to Aquinas’s hierarchy of existence that operates between the two poles of sense experience and the vision of God. Prayer “extends from natural phenomena to God.” Ascetic has to do with a gradual climb

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38. *The Heart of the Parish*, 95.

39. This is an unattributed quotation of Aquinas.

40. A. E. Taylor, *St Thomas Aquinas as a Philosopher*, 27-28.

41. *The Heart of the Parish*, 97-98.

between those two poles. All of the features we described of *model* have come together in Thornton's term Ascetic.

Furthermore, we can see how Ascetic as a hermeneutic model grows out of Thornton's motif—"Every truth flowing from the Incarnation must impinge upon the corporate prayer life"—for the two poles comprise the outer limits of the possible truths that issue forth from the Incarnation of Christ. One on hand, the inception of a Christian life begins with the initial recognition that our regular sense-experience issues somehow, and finds some kind of fulfillment in, the incarnate Christ. On the other hand, and at the other pole, lies the beatific vision, the *telos* of the Christian life. Ascetic, as the hermeneutic environment that emerges from Thornton's motif, lies between these two doctrinal poles.

In developing his understanding of Ascetic, Thornton makes a startling claim. In discussing the transition from monasticism of the patristic and early medieval periods into the late medieval and modern periods, he wrote,

The medieval Order was undergoing a metamorphosis and its *imago*—or, less ambitiously, its *pupa*—we believe to be the parochial Remnant. It seems therefore established that modern ascetic is not part of monastic Order but its substitute. The Remnant is neither opposed to monastic Order, not just a mild form of it—but its true and rightful successor.<sup>42</sup>

That is, Ascetic is the heir of monastic Order, and its name is "parochial Remnant," the three-strata pastoral model understood as concentric circles of diverse commitment and vocation. He underscores this understanding a couple paragraphs later: "Ascetical Rule and discipline thus *replaces* monastic Order and discipline."<sup>43</sup> And he affirms this for the Anglican context (see Chapter 3) in a summary of the Prayer Book era which provided a

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42. *The Heart of the Parish*, 99.

43. *The Heart of the Parish*, 101.

vernacular Bible for the devotional life, the Eucharist ordered for at least 75 days of the year, and the monastic sevenfold Office concentrated into two longer Offices—all so that the “secular world should share in the full stream of Christian devotion.”<sup>44</sup> And what did this Prayer Book amount to but a “specifically English ascetic: through Lancelot Andrewes, William Law, Jeremy Taylor, George Herbert, thence to the Oxford reform, we can trace a direct line back to Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and St Gilbert of Sempringham.”<sup>45</sup> This again brings to bear Thornton’s *ressourcement*: both before *and after* the Reformation era.

Therefore, Thornton’s hermeneutic model is Ascetic. It is an interpretive model of the environment bounded (if we can use such a term about the spiritual life) by the poles of incipient prayer and fulfilled, completed prayer (in heaven), both of which flow from the doctrine of Incarnation. Ascetic is a correlate to Aquinas’s hierarchy of existence and hence is a hierarchical framework of overall spiritual development, one classic example of which is the Three Ways. Ascetic is the successor to monastic Order; it is the “science of Prayer.”<sup>46</sup> And employed in the local pastoral context, it is understood as the Remnant Concept of the parish, a *whole* in microcosm of the Catholic Church of Christ. At the level of the parish, Ascetic becomes “a system of training adapted to temperament and circumstances. . . . [It] is mainly concerned with the actual practice—arts and skills—of Christian prayer. . . . The ultimate Christian goal is not purity of heart but the Vision of God.”<sup>47</sup> The ordinary Christian life in the local parish nonetheless invites, and makes possible, the fullness of the Christian reality.

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44. *The Heart of the Parish*, 104.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *The Heart of the Parish*, 255.

47. Martin Thornton, *Feed My Lambs: Essays in Pastoral Reconstruction* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Seabury Press, 1961), 21.



One cannot help but notice the elegance of the relationship between Thornton's motif and model. A whole interpretive realm opens up and flowers out of the hermeneutic root that is his theological motif. And like we saw with his motif, Thornton intends his model is also Catholic, the local as microcosm of the whole, undivided Catholic Church of Christ. Etymologically, "catholic" derives from *κατά* "concerning, in respect of, according to," and *ὅλος* "whole." Catholic is "according to the whole," which matches the relationship in Thornton's theology between the microcosm and macrocosm.

What remains of Thornton's hermeneutic approach is to describe his *operations*. Through an analysis of his operations, we look closer at what Thornton means by a "specifically English ascetic," as a lineage from St Gilbert of Sempringham to the Oxford Divines. To a closer look at these *operations* we now turn.

## Chapter 3: Hermeneutic Principles, Part II

### Theological Operations

If Thornton's overall model is understood to be a system of Ascetic, then the operations within that model that flow from his motif are the observable paradigms developed to explicate and draw out the content of his thought in an orderly and intellectually coherent way. In other words, from the motif, and as the content of (somewhat abstract) framework of Ascetic, *theology itself flows*. The operations fill out the system and provide its intellectual life. And this theology can properly be called, we argue here, *Ascetical Theology*. If we define "theology" in the tradition of Saint Anselm, where theology is "faith seeking understanding or articulation," then *Ascetical Theology* is the articulating of *Ascetic*: the journey of the People of God into unity with God.

Thornton late in his life provided a succinct statement about ascetical theology, that is, his *operations*, that is consonant with Anselm's famous dictum. Thornton wrote,

Spirituality has always involved interaction between ascetical theology, seen as the articulation of the church's corporate experience, and the social sciences. Saint Augustine was a profound psychologist, while Jung was ever conscious of the human spiritual dimension. The perennial problem is to maintain the balance.<sup>48</sup>

Although this excerpt is intriguing in a number of ways, what is important for our analysis is the definition of ascetical theology as "the articulation of the church's corporate experience." This perfectly matches the characteristics of hermeneutic operations that we seek. Theology is the activity of making faith intelligible. "Faith" here becomes the "church's corporate experience." The process of such articulation is never complete, always born of changing social contexts, yet ever keeping with the sense of one

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48. Martin Thornton, "Spirituality for Ministry," *Pastoral Psychology* 32, no. 4 (1984), 287.

Church despite historical and contextual diversities over 2,000 years. By “experience,” Thornton means the corporate experience of Jesus Christ. He clarified this point when he wrote,

From the practical point of view, Christianity begins with the confrontation between Jesus Christ and the chosen twelve. To the apostles, and then to all who met Jesus, this was a religious experience of awe, excitement, questioning and bewilderment. It was also Christian prayer—of which the confrontation of men by Christ is a working definition—and we should not be surprised when our own prayer and thought are characterized by awe, excitement, questioning and bewilderment. This experience of confrontation becomes more complex, and more bewildering, as the great events of the gospel unfold. More and more questioning arose as the disciples witnessed the Passion, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, and as they lived through the tremendous experience of Pentecost.

Through all the vicissitudes of speculation and argument which characterized the life of the Church in the first centuries, there finally evolved a series of formulae: questioning experience was crystallized into dogma and creed. The purpose of this body of theology was, at first, to guide each new generation of Christians into a proper interpretation of its own experience of confrontation with the risen Christ. Theology and prayer—according to our initial definition—both become more complicated: the former widens the scope of the latter. Confrontation with Christ may still be a simple awareness of his presence according to some image or symbol. This issues in personal dialogue or colloquy which is what is normally if ambiguously meant by ‘mental prayer,’ that is an interchange between minds: the mind of man with the mind of Christ. This is how the ‘voice of God’ is verily ‘heard’ by the spiritual ears of the dedicated mind. If this is the heart of Christian life it is neither its peak nor its totality: confrontation with the risen Christ means infinitely more than the individualistic idea of ‘Christ as personal Savior.’ Theology leads on to a richer confrontation of a corporate nature; to the relation involved in baptismal incorporation—of being ontologically ‘in Christ’—and to a deepening awareness of the eucharistic presence. Confrontation with Christ thus expands unto his indwelling of humanity and of nature, and to further colloquy with the word revealed in Scripture. Finally, the central doctrines of the Holy Trinity, of Christology, of the Church and the Atonement further rebound to the elaboration of prayer into a total continuum of life in all its aspects.<sup>49</sup>

Besides a glimpse here into how Thornton treats Scripture, we see the centrality of

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49. *The Function of Theology*, 24.

experience to his ascetical theology, his operations. This is not experience without boundary, of course. He intends experience in all its forms yet within the *confrontation* with Christ. We see here how his *motif* comes again to the fore—“Every truth flowing from the Incarnation must impinge upon the corporate prayer life.” The Christian corporate prayer life, in Thorntonian hermeneutics, began in a practical sense with the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. This holds for us today, as disciples who see in Jesus our salvation; we also are confronted by him through our liturgical and devotional life. “Corporate prayer life,” for the twelve, the seventy, the rest of Jesus’s day, and for us today, *is* our experience. Bound intimately into our experience, and guiding our experience, are the truths of God with which we seek to reconcile our lives. Our corporate prayer life, our experience, is bound up with the Creeds, with the Bible, with the Sacraments. One cannot meaningfully separate the corporate terms “faith” and “prayer life/experience.” At most, these are two sides of the same coin. For Thornton, both are kept firmly in mind at all times, as we will see in our analysis of his treatment of doctrine.

In other words, within the overall model of corporate spiritual development, or Ascetic in the Thorntonian sense, the operations that articulate and make intelligible the many dimensions, aspects, conditions, and patterns of spiritual development amid confrontation with Jesus, as a whole, can be called *ascetical theology*. Again, we state the argument simply: the *operations* of Ascetical Theology articulate the *model* of Ascetic, disclosed by his *motif*.

How do we understand Thornton’s operations? That is, what are the primary methods of his ascetical theology? The fullest dramatization of his ascetical theology

comes of course in his writing. His 13 books, additional chapters and journal articles express his methods; these are his *operations* in action. Within the more narrow boundaries of this analysis, we will confine ourselves to three questions: How does Thornton read Holy Scripture? How does Thornton treat the doctrines of the Church? And finally, how does Thornton treat tradition? Exploring these three inquiries will provide us with a substantive sense of the kinds of methodological moves Thornton makes in his theology. Each question could bear extended examination far beyond our limit here. Instead, we will focus on the basic dynamics evident in Thornton's work; that is, we will attempt, with respect to these three questions, to distill his writing into clearly stated *operations*. What follows, in other words, are summaries of his paradigms.

### ***Operations: Scripture***

Thornton wrote of his hermeneutic approach to Scripture in several places. The primary descriptions come in *The Heart of the Parish*, *English Spirituality*, and *The Function of Theology*. Additionally, he described his approach to Scripture in a late career journal article called "Spirituality in the modern world, 2: Meditation and Modern Biblical Studies."<sup>50</sup> We will examine these in order.

In *The Heart of the Parish*, chapter 6 is called "The Example of Our Lord Jesus Christ." It begins

Ascetic suggests that meditative prayer is the most creative approach to the Gospel story, for such prayer confronts us not so much with isolated sayings, miracles, and parables to be taught and studied, but with the living Christ to be known and adored. A man does not know and love his wife because she says certain things, does certain things, and behaves in a particular way; he loves her because of his continuous living relationship with her as a *person*, a life-pattern which embraces and synthesizes all

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50. Martin Thornton, "Spirituality in the modern world, 2: meditation and modern biblical studies," *Expository Times* 89, no. 6 (1978): 164–167.

these things and millions more. Christianity *is* Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ: Church and sacraments are the extensions of the Incarnation and Atonement. So the life and function of the Church must follow the same pattern, the same overall principles, that are to be found in the earthly life of Jesus.<sup>51</sup>

That earthly life of Jesus, of course, is found exclusively in the New Testament Gospels.

There we are confronted by the accounts of Jesus in his ministry. Note Thornton's strong association of Bible reading with both meditation and marriage. Can we say that

Thornton's use of the Bible in his hermeneutic *operations* have this same character?

That appears to be the case. He wrote

The Gospel, however inadequate as a theological system, biography, or ethical treatise, is nevertheless perfect and complete since it serves to introduce us to this Person, this living and glorified Son of God. And the most enlightening of all methods of following him in pastoral practice—as is the case with any expert in any sphere—is not only to read about him or study his theories, but to watch him at work.<sup>52</sup>

This is “marriage” in the sense of non-carnal yet profoundly deep attachment and attention to Jesus as he is described in the New Testament. And this is “meditation” in the same sense: yes, we are to study him, yes we are to think deeply about him, but first and foremost we are to *watch* him, and we watch through meditation.

Chapter 3 of *English Spirituality*<sup>53</sup> clearly states his use of the Bible, which is clearly in keeping with his motif and model. He writes

More generally, we can look at the Bible *ascetically*: confronted with a saying or passage, we can ask the ascetical rather than the propositional or moral question. No “What does this mean?” or “How does this teach me to behave?” but “How does it impinge upon my total Christian life which is grounded on my prayer?” As a divine proposition, “take no thought for the morrow” suggests a reasonable possibility that this world is not going to

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51. *The Heart of the Parish*, 29.

52. *The Heart of the Parish*, 43.

53. Thornton calls chapters 1–4 “Preliminary surveys”; in our language, there he spells out much of his hermeneutic approach.

last much longer. As a moral exhortation, we must be obliged to burn all our insurance policies. As ascetic, it leads to common-sense teaching on “surrender,” “abandonment to divine Providence,” habitual recollection, the sinfulness of anxiety, temporal-eternal relations in the sacraments of the threefold Church, and so on.<sup>54</sup>

This passage outlines the steps involved in Thornton’s use of the Bible. First, read a certain passage. Second, separate out the various kinds of possible questions that may arise, whether propositional, ethical, and ascetical (that is, related to ascetic which means prayer). Thirdly, focus on the ascetical possibilities of a particular passage and allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit according to that approach.

Lest this be considered only an approach to scripture for personal devotion whether by lay persons or clergy, Thornton recapitulates this same approach three years later in *The Function of Theology*, which is not a book intended for general readers but more specifically theologically trained clergy and students. The book attempts to develop a coherent relationship between revelation, professional scholarship, pastoral practice, and the prayer lives of ordinary Christians in the pews; the argument of this book is explored in more detail below. Here, we look at chapter five, which is called “The Centrality of Prayer,” and in it he writes,

[M]odern biblical scholarship takes on much of the character of what used to be called “intellectual meditation” in its highest sense; the disciplined synthesis of speculative thought with affective insight, faith in search of understanding the mind of God. So “biblical scholarship” and the “spirituality of the Bible” come to much the same thing; modern words may look more difficult and obscure to the ordinary man, yet they are more potentially pastoral than ever before.<sup>55</sup>

An evaluation of the accuracy of this summary of modern biblical scholarship lies beyond the scope of our analysis here. But what is important is what it indicated about

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54. *English Spirituality*, 33.

55. *The Function of Theology*, 74.

Thornton's approach to Scripture. Thornton repeatedly emphasizes the close relationship between reading the Bible and prayer. Again he describes an ascetical approach to the Bible. This is not an approach that dismisses biblical scholarship, but rather one that affirms the need for a meaningful bridge between biblical scholarship and pastoral practice.<sup>56</sup> Thornton sought a coherent relationship between scholarship, pastoral theology, and applied theology.<sup>57</sup>

Thornton's description of his use of the Bible reached its fullest expression in a late career journal article called "Spirituality in the modern world, 2: Meditation and Modern Biblical Studies." In the article, he discusses and rejects four approaches to Bible reading. He rejects (1) blunt fundamentalism, which dismisses biblical scholars, (2) a more sophisticated fundamentalism that incorporates biblical scholarship but dismisses the need for prayerful appropriation and presentation of it, (3) reading with a professional commentary yet confusing scholarship with prayer, and (4) study prayerfully the Bible, yet do so dissociated from contemporary scholarship which seems too complicated.<sup>58</sup> These four rejected approaches amount to four different grades of imbalance between scholarship and prayer.

Thornton himself proposes a fifth approach. In this proposal, there is a clear outlining of steps. They are:

1. Bible reading, meditation, can only be attempted from within the fellowship of the living Church, which includes its theological tradition, its liturgical worship and its pastoral guidance.
2. Thus, all prayer begins with Baptismal incorporation into the Sacred Humanity of the Risen and Glorified Lord. The Bible can feed, inspire,

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56. See *Feed My Lambs*, chapters 1 and 2.

57. *The Function of Theology*, 59.

58. "Spirituality in the modern world, 2", 164.



and articulate this experience: look for its life rather than its message.

3. Do not try to construct intellectual theories, or Ignatian “resolutions,” or strict moral rules: leave all that to the biblical scholars. Rather allow the heart and mind of Christ to seep into the shared life within the Sacred Humanity: penetrate its mystery.

4. Nevertheless, go to the Bible armed with the theological essentials, as guidelines. Prayer for the guidance of the Spirit is a good start, but so, I suggest, is a prayerful recitation of the *Quicumque Vult*. But such theological basis need not be one’s own learning, it can be sought in personal guidance from within the fellowship of the Church.

5. Accept the challenge and adventure of the Bible’s subtlety, difficulty and mystery. Do not try to make it prove anything, rather let it inspire, poetically and contemplatively. In other words, see the essential connection between scholarship and prayer, but do not confuse the two.

This summarizes Thornton’s hermeneutic *operations* with respect to scripture. Three points warrant particular note. The first is that he emphasizes the corporate underpinning of any ascetical reading of the Bible; this corporate reality is rooted in the Sacrament of Baptism and belongs to the People of God as a whole. The second is that the Bible should be allowed to be mysterious, rather than self-evident. The Bible is not only an introduction to Jesus, through the New Testament, but throughout both the Old and New Testaments, it is an introduction to, and confrontation with, God. The truths of the Incarnation flowed into the Bible (again, his motif), and we are to seek those truths from the Bible. To wit: “We have learned that the Bible itself is no objective record of events and sayings, no set of revealed propositions, no manual of morals and no biography of Jesus. It is an intensely personal interpretation of the experience of the biblical writers from within the community of faith.”<sup>59</sup> And the third is that we need not be biblical scholars, but the more we carry theological and doctrinal awareness into our study of the

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59. Martin Thornton, *Prayer: A New Encounter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 12.

Bible, the more we are reading the Bible as part of the wider fellowship of the Church.

Hence Thornton's operations with respect to the Bible are an ascetical approach to scripture. This ascetical approach seeks confrontation with Jesus. This confrontation is precisely prayer which brings to bear both our own experiences (corporate and individual) as well as the theological and doctrinal inheritance of the Church throughout its ages. All of this strongly hints at our next section, where will look at Thornton's treatment of doctrine specifically.

### ***Operations: Doctrine***

What are Thornton's *operations* with respect to doctrine? Let us be specific immediately what is meant here by "doctrine." We use it in a non-technical sense to refer to authoritative teachings of the Church through formulas derived directly or indirectly from scripture and dogmas decreed in various ecumenical councils. All of this is here called "doctrine." So, how does Thornton use doctrine, the Church's authoritative teachings?

Firstly, and perhaps most demonstratively, we again note Thornton's hermeneutic motif: "Every truth flowing from the Incarnation must impinge upon the corporate prayer life." That is not only his motif but it also summarizes his approach to doctrine, as we mentioned above. That is, Thornton's use of doctrine is to closely ally it with prayer in all forms. Just as his motif is that the doctrine of the Incarnation is to be used for prayer, *all doctrines* are to be used for prayer. Even more succinctly, the use of doctrine as a means to know Jesus better *is* prayer.

Furthermore, doctrine, for Thornton, is the Church's interpretation and distillation

of the Bible. This was succinctly stated in his last lengthy work, *Spiritual Direction*.<sup>60</sup> In that book, which is written as a guide for the training of spiritual directors, Thornton cites the doctrines of Creation, Holy Trinity, Incarnation (or christology generally), Atonement, Last Things, Church, Sacraments, and the Communion of Saints as the primary doctrines to be used in the practice of spiritual direction.<sup>61</sup>

For students who desire to become adept at spiritual direction (and we recall that, in some way or another, Thornton insists this is a central task of *all priests*; and we can add lay catechists, as well), one is to study closely these and other doctrines, then see them as crystallizations of the biblical revelation, and then teach prayer as the application of doctrine. “Ascetical theology is applied doctrine” is a constant theme throughout Thornton’s hermeneutical explanations. For example, he wrote in *English Spirituality* that “one of the functions of ascetical theology is to adapt doctrine . . . to particular circumstances.”<sup>62</sup> That expresses Thornton’s operations with respect to doctrine clearly; for again, doctrine is to be used in the teaching of prayer.

The term that expresses Thornton’s use of doctrine most succinctly is “speculative-affective synthesis.” He introduced this term in *English Spirituality*, chapter 4. He used it as the first characteristic of what he called the “English School of Catholic spirituality.” He wrote that a feature of this school is

[a]n extraordinary consistency in maintaining *the speculative-affective synthesis*; the theological and emotional, doctrine and devotion, fact and feeling. This, I suggest, is the deepest meaning of the Anglican *via media*; it is the insistence that prayer, worship, and life itself, are grounded upon dogmatic fact, that in everyday religious experience head and heart are

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60. Martin Thornton, *Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1984), 49.

61. *Spiritual Direction*, 64-79.

62. *English Spirituality*, 61.

wedded.<sup>63</sup>

We note the particular emphasis Thornton gives to the word “fact.” It is the same treatment to doctrine in general that he gives specifically to the doctrine of the Incarnation in his theological motif. Doctrine is treated as a *fact*; doctrines amount to givens, these are the premises upon and in response to which the Christian life arises.

Thornton does not appear to spell out particular steps, as such, in his use of doctrine. We might suggest the steps above in the use of doctrine for purposes of spiritual direction: (1) learn the doctrines, (2) search the scriptures for their source, and (3) teach them through prayer and as means for prayer. We would add, prior to the first step, another move, which is to treat the doctrines of the Church as *facts*. Doctrines, for Thornton, are statements ultimately about the nature of reality. In *The Purple Headed Mountain*, which is a book written for the laity for Lenten reflection, Thornton approvingly quotes Anglican Divine William Beveridge’s dictum, “Anglicans . . . do not ‘stand on fine points with God Almighty’: for to do so is to forget that God *is* Almighty.”<sup>64</sup> This demonstrates that Thornton’s ascetical theology is rooted in the sheer reality of doctrine; it is not “if” God exists, but without question, he does, so what are the consequences for prayer?

Another example from *The Purple Headed Mountain* is Thornton’s treatment of the Doctrine of Theosis. Thornton ties this directly with penitence and vocation. “Penitence,” he wrote, “becomes the search for the truth of one’s own vocation.”<sup>65</sup> Our ultimate vocation is to sainthood in heaven. How that manifests in this earthly life is prior

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63. *English Spirituality*, 49.

64. Martin Thornton, *The Purple Headed Mountain* (Riverside, IL: Akenside Press, 2014), 54.

65. *The Purple Headed Mountain*. 66.

to that ultimate end, of course, but part of the same continuum of prayer seen as relationship with God. Penitence, for Thornton, is the doctrine of Theosis rendered into prayer. For this to be hermeneutically meaningful in one's prayer life, one must accept as not a neat idea or curious possibility, but rather a sheer *fact*, the doctrine of Theosis. From that acceptance, or surrender, prayer lives and moves. Thornton's use of Theosis also expresses his model of Ascetic: the doctrine of Theosis is another way of expressing the Beatific Vision of God discussed above, which Thornton approvingly cited from Thomas Aquinas.

Penitence, then, is not just an activity to try to practice in Lent. For Thornton, it characterizes the entirety of the Christian journey. He sees the seven Capital Sins each as sins against Creation.<sup>66</sup> Each of the seven Sins deny some aspect of that doctrine. They can be said to be the seven primary patterns of going awry with Creation. "Pride, the root-sin, is . . . the ultimate denial of the fact of creation, it is a refusal to accept the indisputable truth that *we are* creatures."<sup>67</sup> Again, he strongly affirms that doctrine is fact. The doctrine of Creation, in particular, is a fact about who human beings are. *We are* creatures. To deny this is a sin: the sin of Pride.<sup>68</sup>

Finally with respect to Thornton's use of doctrine, we can look to his use of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This use is alluded to very clearly in the 1972 book, *Prayer: A New Encounter*. He wrote this book as a commentary upon John Macquarrie's *The*

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66. *The Purple Headed Mountain*, chapter 5.

67. *The Purple Headed Mountain*. 63.

68. All of the seven Capital Sins seem to be expressed by Thornton as a *denial*. Envy is the denial of divine providence at work in the vocations of persons; Anger is the denial of the need for harmony with creatures; Covetousness is the denial of ultimate purpose, or *telos*, in creatures; Gluttony is the denial of the proper use and respect of creatures; Lust is the denial of respect to the creative process at work in creatures; Sloth is the denial of beauty in creatures and/or all of creation. See *The Purple Headed Mountain*, chapter 5, of which this is a brief summary.

*Principles of Christian Theology*, specifically upon the ascetical implications of Macquarrie's work.<sup>69</sup> Chapter five is called "Triune Being" and it begins

The doctrine of the Trinity is just about the most practical idea that the Church has ever come up with. It is the creed in embryo, the foundation of prayer, and the guide to decision. Like all true theology, the doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in experience, and it safeguards the dynamics as against the static idea of God.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps this is a startling statement to many, yet it also affirms Thornton's approach to doctrine. There is no more central doctrine than that of Holy Trinity, and this most central doctrine is not merely practical in one way or another, or depending upon its theological expression. Rather, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the *most practical* of all doctrines. And it is practical precisely because it is the foundation of prayer. It is also, for Thornton, the germ of Nicene Creed. It is practical because it is a guide for decision-making, suggests Thornton.

This use of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not late to the scene in Thornton's writing. It shows up in chapter 17 of *The Heart of the Parish*, his second book. That chapter is entitled "Spiritual Health: The Holy Trinity." It begins in the same vein as did *Prayer*: "The health of the soul depends upon the health of its Prayer, which it turn depends upon the adequacy of its conception of God."<sup>71</sup> Again we see an intimate relationship between prayer and doctrine. But what more can be said about the relationship in Thornton's theology between prayer and trinitarian doctrine?

At the heart of the Thorntonian relationship between prayer and the doctrine of the Trinity is what he calls "the threefold *Regula*." *Regula* means the ascetical framework

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69. It is worth noting that of all theologians in the Christian tradition that Thornton considered in his writing, the most pages by far were devoted to John Macquarrie's theology. *Prayer: A New Encounter* is the longest such treatment, as the entire book is devoted to analysis of Macquarrie's *Principles*.

70. *Prayer: A New Encounter*, 67.

71. *The Heart of the Parish*, 102.

of Divine Office, eucharistic Mass, and personal/private Devotion. This is the ascetical recognition of the threeness of realities of God in human apprehension of him: in His nearness, named the Holy Spirit; in His incarnation, named God the Son, Jesus Christ; and in His otherness, named God the Father. For Thornton, *Regula* is the ascetical framework for response to God oriented in these three dimensions. Devotion (or baptismal ministry) centers on the nearness of the Holy Spirit; Mass on the Son who communicates to us; and Divine Office on the Father Almighty.

It is reasonable to inquire whether this is modalism? Thornton is well aware that some may interpret this use of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as modalism, but he also rejects that interpretation. In chapter 17 of *The Heart of the Parish*, Thornton cites the Anglican theologian Lionel Thornton (no relation) who wrote a chapter called “The Christian Conception of God” that was published as part of the compilation *Essays Catholic and Critical*. There Lionel Thornton wrote,

We can never attain to a completely synthetic view of what God has revealed Himself to be. For that would involve a level of unified knowledge which can belong to none but God himself. Such a simple and simultaneous knowledge of what God is must exist in God Himself. But we on our part must be content to approach the sanctuary from the outside and from a number of different points of view.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, our lived journey toward glorified being in Christ, codified as the doctrine of *Theosis*, begins by approaching the three Persons of God imperfectly: more or less one at a time. This occurs simultaneous to our confessing at all times the doctrine of the Trinity, in liturgy and our devotion. And, over time and into our next life, the idea is that we grow into the synthetic, unified, full trinitarian truth. That is, what we experience

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72. Lionel S. Thornton, “The Christian Conception of God” in *Essays Catholic and Critical*, ed. Edward Gordon Selwyn (London: S.P.C.K., 1931), 126.

consciously and appropriate meaningfully eventually matches what the Church teaches about God.

In sum, the threefold *Regula*—associating Mass with the Son, Devotion with the Holy Spirit, and Office with the Father—is an “ascetical application of trinitarian dogmatic.”<sup>73</sup> Over time and through *use*, these “different points of view” become by the grace of God a single woven tapestry of praise to one God. Again we recall that crucial to Thornton’s Ascetic is the ultimate *telos* of the Vision of God. Perhaps it is not until we achieve such a vision, by God’s grace, that we attain a completely synthetic view of God.

One cannot overstate the importance of *Regula* to Thornton’s ascetical theology. Thornton explicitly explores the concept of *Regula* in every book save his first (and with that book, *Regula* enlightens its insights). It demonstrates his Ascetical Theology—that is, the operations involved with his use of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; it also demonstrates the theological model in the simplest form. We saw above that for Thornton, parochial Ascetic is the successor to monastic Order. What’s more, for Thornton the preeminent example of parochial Ascetic available in the Church today is the Book of Common Prayer seen as an ascetical system. It is “one of the most brilliant pieces of ascetical construction there has even been . . . it is the consummation of centuries of spiritual development, and . . . regarded as ascetical theology, it is almost as Benedictine as the *Regula* itself.”<sup>74</sup> Ascetic discloses the reason for Thornton’s very high view of the Book of Common Prayer. *Regula*, which emerges when Ascetic is coordinated with the doctrine of the Trinity, is for Thornton the fundamental

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73. *The Heart of the Parish*, 193.

74. *English Spirituality*, 47.



ecclesiology, as seen in Acts 2.42.<sup>75</sup>

As a final aspect to Thornton's hermeneutic use of doctrine, we can note in more detail the broader discussion of theology, which would be inclusive of doctrine, that he explores in *The Function of Theology*. This book articulates Thornton's understanding of the theological endeavor, in broad terms. It is a book about "doing theology." He understand the doing of theology to be of "chain-reaction" whereby the work of scholars, the work of priest and lay ministers, and the work of the laity are interdependent in the theological endeavor. Thornton seeks to articulate a "functional pattern in theology as a whole. Prayer remains the unifying force since prayer is indissociable from the Holy Spirit of unity, harmony, and wholeness. But there must still be a pattern if we are to avoid the prevailing confusion caused by the current disintegrated jumble of minutely specialized studies."<sup>76</sup>

His book develops a synthetic framework for doing Ascetical Theology along five modes or functions. (1) *revelational*: the disclosure or proclamation of revealed knowledge; (2) *practical* or *straight*: theology which necessitates an immediate or spontaneous reaction; (3) *pastoral*: that which is employed by pastors to draw out implications for the laity; (4) *applied*: which guides individual Christians via spiritual direction; and (5) *negative* or *testing*: which guards communities from errors in prayer. Together, these five modes comprise the nature of ascetical theology—or according to the book title, "Theology" without adjective. That is, these summarize the intellectual maneuvers that constitute Thornton's operations. He seeks an articulation of the relationships between these narrower forms of theology to prevent dissociation and

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75. See *English Spirituality*, 36.

76. *The Function of Theology*, 25-26.

divorce between them. The work of scholars should be able to be relevant to the prayer lives of ordinary Christians. Again, this is entirely in keeping with Thornton's motif and model.

***Operations: Tradition***

We turn toward an analysis of Thornton's hermeneutic use of the Christian theological tradition in his ascetical theology. Certain superficial, yet still important, features can be mentioned first. It is no stretch to conclude, upon examining voluminous references throughout all of his published theology, that he was a significantly erudite theologian. Even the bibliography of just one of his books, *English Spirituality*, is impressive, as well as its Table of Contents: examinations of Augustine, Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St Thierry, Hugh of St Victor, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Anselm, the *Ancrene Riwle*, Walter Wilton, Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, Margery Kempe, the various Caroline Divines including Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, and finally the Anglican Evangelical and Oxford Divines. Other works incorporate the insights of John Cassian, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Rudolf Otto, Arthur Koestler, Karl Rahner, Charles Gore, William Temple, Lionel Thornton, G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, Michael Ramsey, John Macquarrie, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Martin Heidegger, C.J. Stranks, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Among his final writings was a glowing review of one of Rowan Williams' early works, *Resurrection*. He studied dozens of lesser works, including biblical and theological commentaries. He mastered the ascetical manuals and text-books, including classics by Scaramelli and the more contemporary Guibert, Goodier, Pourrat, and Harton. Tracing his thought through its roots and branches is a exciting journey, yet also

bewildering in its complexity. It is clear that Thornton read a great many of the major theologians in all eras of Christian history. He drew from a variety of ascetical thinkers, whether Patristic, Medieval, Modern, or Contemporary, and whether Anglican, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox (even occasionally Protestant). He closely considered natural theology (philosophy) and philosophical theologians of his day.

These are the raw materials used by Thornton in his analysis of tradition; that is, in his *ressourcement*. Thornton organized many of the raw materials with a strong emphasis on affirming both an overall scheme of schools of spirituality across the Christian centuries as well as an English School, as we mentioned above. This requires still more explanation.

Such an analysis is an ascetical manner of interpreting Christian theological tradition. For Thornton there are 14 major schools of spirituality.<sup>77</sup> The notion of “schools” he picked up from Pierre Pourrat, who over a four-volume work published in 1922<sup>78</sup> traced a variety of developmental threads of corporate spirituality. For Thornton, each school, these and any others not included, exhibit a particular *attrait*. This is a term he said originates in thought of Baron von Hügel, a Roman Catholic spiritual writer, although Thornton does not cite where. It means “natural spiritual propensity, inclination toward or attraction to particular forms of prayer; hence the sort of prayer, spiritual outlook, or theological direction that comes most naturally.”<sup>79</sup> Each school has different emphases, but each provide an overall fullness of Christian reality. Characteristic of *attrait* emerges according to two broad polarities: (1) speculative and affective, and (2)

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77. Desert Fathers, Eastern Orthodoxy, Pseudo-Dionysius, Benedictine, Cistercian, Russian School, Franciscan, German Dominican, Victorine, English School, Carmelite, Ignatian, Caroline Divines, Salesian.

78. Pierre Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality*, vols. 1–4 (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1922).

79. *Spiritual Direction*, 32.

world affirmation (kataphatic) and world renunciation (apophatic).<sup>80</sup> These are ascetical categories for tendencies and characteristics seen corporately yet manifesting individually.

What more can be said about “schools”? Thornton wrote,

A school of spirituality is the local and corporate expression of the great Pauline doctrine of diverse gifts within the unity of the Mystical Body; and it is the logical consequence of the Incarnation itself. In one sense, Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, recapitulates the whole of humanity within himself, and the doctrine issuing from this fact is dogmatic, changeless, and Catholic. On the other hand, Jesus is *a* man, with a particular personality and temperament. His own spiritual life, and his death, redeemed the whole world, yet he lived within the pattern of a particular strain of first century Judaism. The prayer of Christ is the prayer of humanity, because all true prayer is prayer in Christ. But Christ’s prayer was also very specialized; it was a synthesis of the Priest-Prophet Jewish tradition: Christ belonged to a “school.”

From this balance between the total body and the unique characteristics of every human soul, there arise the great Catholic schools of spirituality, all differing according to temperamental and racial traits yet all in harmony with the dogmatic facts of the one faith. As seven musical notes are arranged and woven into an infinity of harmonies, so the clauses of the Creeds, by emphasis and arrangement but without omission, are woven into the rich diversity of Christian spirituality. One of the most impressive arguments for the true universality of the Catholic Faith is that it is so readily qualified by any number of adjectives: Eastern and Western, French, Italian and American, Franciscan, Cistercian and Carmelite. It is impossible to speak in the same way about Western Buddhism or African Confucianism.<sup>81</sup>

The analogy to music is notable. For Thornton, the Catholic Church is the totality of musical possibilities (think a piano, if you like, and all the possible tonal combinations). Each school plays the piano and weaves and realizes its harmony differently because that is the nature of Incarnation (again, we are reminded of his *motif*). No one plays the piano exactly like anyone else. But as the deep harmony of music is ever-present and ever-

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80. *Spiritual Direction*, 32-34.

81. *Margery Kempe*, 9.

animate in and through all piano players, the underlying Catholic unit—love, beyond abundance—is ever-present and ever-animate in and through all Catholic schools. The capacity for balance and harmony in the English School is connected to its tradition of ascetical theology.

A longer description of his approach to spiritual direction exceeds the purposes of our analysis. But what we can observe here is that Thornton sees in Christian theological tradition a broad ascetical pattern of varieties of wholeness—that there is diversity and pluralism to spirituality and prayer life, rather than any kind of static uniformity within the Church. There are wholes (schools of spirituality) within the larger whole of the Catholic Church of Christ.

The fourteen schools of spirituality form the background for a work he wrote twenty-one years earlier (yes, *earlier*), *English Spirituality*.<sup>82</sup> For within the broad spectrum of various schools, he in this work describes one in particular, the “English School.” Here we must note his use of terminology. “English Christianity” he understands almost sociologically: that is, whatever is the Christian phenomena that has existed in the English/British lands, and exists today. He himself is an unapologetic Anglican, but he cannot agree to the term “Anglican” to describe Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, or any of the pre-16th century figures in England. And yet he finds deep spiritual affinity and, in that sense, continuity, between all eras of Christianity in England. “English spirituality” he traces to the New Testament Church, then the Celtic Church, the Benedictine influence. His broad historical eras for English spirituality are Celtic (1st<sup>t</sup> through 6th century), Benedictine (6th through 11th), Medieval (11th through

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82. In the Preface to the revised edition of *English Spirituality*, he referred to *Spiritual Direction* as the prequel to *English Spirituality*, despite the former being written twenty years after the latter.

16th), and Prayer Book (16th through today). All-in-all, the “English School” is one of the great Catholic schools, owing to his understanding of its overall lineage, rooted in his *ressourcement*. The English School gathers the most profound resources within the Anglican spiritual tradition.

We emphasize that Thornton’s understanding of the “English School” is an interpretation of theological tradition relating to England and its ecclesial heirs. This English School is seen to have two great flowerings. The first was the 14th/15th century as represented by works by Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, and Margery Kempe. The second was the 16th/17th century as represented by the Book of Common Prayer and works by Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes, George Herbert, and Jeremy Taylor. The “forefather” of the English School is St Anselm, and important ground for the school was tilled by the works of St Augustine, St Benedict, St Bernard, William of St Thierry, the Victorines, St Bonaventure, St Thomas, and the culture of English anchoritism.

The primary characteristics of the English School—its corporate *attrait*—are (1) speculative-affective synthesis, (2) unity of the Church Militant: “priest and layman, monk and secular”,<sup>83</sup> (3) a unique humanism and a unique optimism, (4) a foundation in liturgy (both Mass and Office), (5) emphasis on habitual recollection, and (6) centrality of spiritual direction.<sup>84</sup> Much more could be said, but again what we can observe is that Thornton finds unity to an “English School” through an attention to corporate qualities that are decidedly related to the prayer life, rather than magisterial doctrine or patriarchate jurisdiction.

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83. *English Spirituality*, 49.

84. *English Spirituality*, 48-51.

What is the relationship between the English School and Anglicanism? For Thornton, the English School is the underground yet regnant dynamic within Anglicanism. He wrote

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries offer a certain parallel to the fifteenth and early sixteenth: the true tradition remains alive, but it is an underground current, buried beneath more spectacular modes and events. Our task is to recognize and rediscover this true tradition, and to work and pray that, by God's grace, it may lead us into our third golden age.<sup>85</sup>

Here we see the adjective "underground" to describe the relationship between the English School and contemporary Anglicanism. The term "true tradition" used twice underscores his belief that the English School, according to its characteristics described above and mediated and developed through the numerous figures he considered within English Christianity, amounts to one of the faithful Remnant traditions of the full and comprehensive Catholic faith once delivered to the saints, and this Remnant reality lives within Anglicanism today. It is seeing English spirituality as a tradition traceable to the New Testament and the Fathers, but also alive before and after the 16th century, which is the earliest we can properly begin to call English Christianity "Anglican," that constitutes a primary aim of the book, *English Spirituality*. And being a book of *ressourcement* and Remnant theology, drawing such a continuity must have its pastoral application. For example:

The plain message is that to teach the habit of recollection in the twentieth century, that is to develop responsible, everyday Christian living, we need to combine fourteenth- and seventeenth-century elements, and boldly experiment with them. A truly revitalized Anglican spirituality for to-day will not just arrive from nowhere: it will not be the ascetical system of Margery Kempe, nor that of Jeremy Taylor, but I think it might well be the new-born child of their marriage.<sup>86</sup>

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85. *English Spirituality*, 289.

86. *English Spirituality*, 229.

“Revitalized spirituality” points to Thornton’s belief that the English School, despite being underground, is nonetheless the dominant, or *regnant*, dynamic of, and our source for revitalization within, Anglicanism. He put the matter still more bluntly when he wrote

One of my Oratorian brothers of the American College once told me that if there was going to be a revived culture and spirituality in the Episcopal Church he saw it coming now from the tight traditions of New England but from the social flux of Chicago. That seems a wise prophecy, and I think it has an analogy here. The inspiration for a new golden age in Anglican spirituality, which is about due, may not come from Victorian Tractarianism but from the uninhibited zeal of new converts in new townships—perhaps from Chicago. But these cannot be divorced from our preceding golden ages: the Caroline period and the fourteenth century. Our new inspiration will come, perhaps, not from cultured ladies of Victorian piety, but from Mistress Kempe of Lynn: right dearworthy and full boisterous!<sup>87</sup>

There is a clear announcement that Anglican spirituality, while not identical the English School, nonetheless is its heir, and according to Thornton, needs to look to the English School for “revivified culture and spirituality.” This accords, we note again, with *ressourcement* and Congar’s “discovery of the most profound resources.”

To see in more depth how Thornton recognized a deep relationship between the English School and Anglicanism is a task beyond the aims of this writing. Although even a cursory look at *English Spirituality* shows that Thornton intends a bountiful, perhaps inexhaustible source of reflection and analysis, his treatment of two theological figures from English tradition particularly illustrate his approach to theological tradition in light of the aims of *ressourcement*. Those figures are Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, to which we now turn.

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87. Martin Thornton, *Margery Kempe: An Example in the English Pastoral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1960), 89. That the writer of this thesis lives in Chicagoland, is a new convert, is more than a little zealous for Catholic Anglicanism and finds deep resonance with all the theological figures in Thornton’s analysis—particularly William of St Thierry and Margery Kempe—has not been overlooked in light of this passage.



Why Julian, and why Kempe? The reason is that for Thornton, both are central figures in the English School, and are seen as rich sources to retrieve for ascetical theology today. Although for Thornton, St Anselm is “the supreme exponent” of the “spiritual harmony” at the heart of the English school, Julian’s *Revelations* is the “single greatest work” that is illustrative of this spiritual harmony,<sup>88</sup> this “theology-devotion synthesis.”<sup>89</sup> Julian “perfectly expresses the English spiritual tradition.”<sup>90</sup> Likewise with Kempe, we see a Christian life “whole and integrated,” a “supreme exponent of habitual recollection.” Or more broadly, “the solid core of English spirituality vividly alive.”<sup>91</sup>

In light of these characteristics, Thornton sees in Julian and Kempe the embodied demonstration of the English School in its first golden era. Thornton affirms that “our greatest single work . . . is probably the *Revelations of Divine Love*.”<sup>92</sup> Julian “is not in the least bit insular; rather she combines all the strands of our patristic lineage into a synthesis altogether new. . . . She prays in the [English] tradition itself.”<sup>93</sup> Although it was Anselm who was the “father-founder who first brought all the essential elements together, who gave the school its clear character and stamp,”<sup>94</sup> it was Julian who was at the heart of its first full flowering. Thornton even regards Anselm as the “spiritual father” of Julian.<sup>95</sup> Her work is “pervaded with a plain Benedictine spirit. . . . Not only her optimism, but her prudence and ‘domestic’ doctrine of the Church, all imply that

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88. *English Spirituality*, 49.

89. “The Anglican Spiritual Tradition,” 84.

90. *English Spirituality*, 203.

91. *English Spirituality*, 222.

92. *English Spirituality*, 49.

93. *English Spirituality*, 203.

94. *English Spirituality*, 156.

95. *English Spirituality*, 202.

Benedictinism inherent in all English spirituality.”<sup>96</sup>

And what of Kempe? She makes a “unique contribution to English pastoral theology, and especially to the tradition of English spiritual direction,” because “she went through all the normal ascetical experiences, struggling from day to day and from year to year for the development of her prayer.”<sup>97</sup> She is a “true spiritual daughter of Bernard”<sup>98</sup> and her whole life, according to Thornton, accords with the ascetical theology of Hugh of St Victor.<sup>99</sup> Her value to us is not that she is a mystic. Thornton writes that Kempe “may not be much of a mystic but she was a first-class parishioner, with all the faults and failings that first-class parishioners usually have.”<sup>100</sup> He is aware that his interpretation of Kempe is not of the mainstream: “in modern terms, it is primarily an ascetical rather than a mystical treatise, and that, to my mind, is the crux of the prevalent misunderstanding of her.”<sup>101</sup> Or as elaborated later:

If we look for “mysticism” of every page, we shall either deceive ourselves or be disappointed. If we see it as an ascetical treatise we shall discover an exhilarating example of the type of “Perfection” we may all reasonable hope to achieve.

Both Julian and Kempe demonstrate “agonizing penitence, but . . . the tremendous virtue of unquenchable hope.”<sup>102</sup> Both are incarnational: “devoted as they are to the Passion, the emphasis is still on the life of Jesus as a whole, with strong theological undercurrents.”<sup>103</sup>

There are several areas in both Julian and Kempe ripe for reinterpretation once the Thornton’s theological motif, model and operations are grasped. That is, equipped with

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96. *English Spirituality*, 205.

97. *Margery Kempe*, 14.

98. *English Spirituality*, 86.

99. *Margery Kempe*, 28-49.

100. *Margery Kempe*, 3.

101. *Margery Kempe*, 3.

102. *English Spirituality*, 50.

103. *English Spirituality*, 91.

Thornton's underlying theological principles, we can revisit English religion before the Reformation, and perhaps rethink the received conclusions about this era, and any era. We can move from a less profound understanding of Julian and Kempe to a more profound understanding of their contribution to our own corporate experience.

One area (dozens are possible) would be the relationship between grace and the Church. For Julian "the beginning of Christian life is still prevenient grace, the basis of all prayer, however affective in nature, is still the Creeds."<sup>104</sup> For Julian, "the world and life and Christ are all grace," which is to say, to reflect on the world and life and Christ is to reflect upon God.<sup>105</sup> How can these insights impinge upon our corporate and individual prayer lives?

Another area would be the role of theological reflection and mystagogy, because for Julian "we do not have to choose between seeking understanding and seeking God. Both are contemplation."<sup>106</sup> What's more, both Julian and Kempe demonstrate a method of biblical reflection that Thornton calls "imaginative meditation, controlled by doctrine."<sup>107</sup> He sees this as an alternative to the common parish practice of Bible study, which we discussed above.

Another would be being and existence. Julian writes "everything has its being by the love of God."<sup>108</sup> Existence itself might be seen to be theological. Her use of *being* means we can bring to bear subsequent systematic theology rooted in the examination of the relationship between *being* and God. For Anglicans this means incorporating theology

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104. *English Spirituality*, 203.

105. Hugh Feiss, O.S.B., "Dilation: God and the World in the Visions of Benedict and Julian of Norwich," *American Benedictine Review* 55, no. 1 (2004): 67.

106. "Dilation: God and the World in the Visions of Benedict and Julian of Norwich," 72.

107. *English Spirituality*, 32.

108. Julian of Norwich, *The Complete Julian of Norwich*, Fr John-Julian, trans. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), 71.

such as John Macquarrie's, for whom God is "holy Being." Julian can describe easily the attributes of the hazel-nut (its littleness, round as a ball). Yet when she (through God's grace) grasps its Being, its fundamental "is-ness," so to speak, and still more when she grasps that its attributes presuppose and require its Being, and still more that she can only grasp its Being by going *through* the attributes of the hazelnut, she is demonstrating what Macquarrie and Thornton explored in detail 600 hundred years later. Thornton understood this, for he wrote that Julian's theology "might be called a Middle English translation of the doctrines of potentiality and actuality, being and becoming, nature and grace."<sup>109</sup>

Still another area is the relationship between personal experience and corporate experience. How can Christ be with both Julian and Kempe so intimate and homely, and yet with *all Christians*, "for this sight was shown universally,"<sup>110</sup> a corporate impulse shared also by Kempe. Another is the theology of baptismal incorporation: Julian's first revelation began with her nearly dying, and her life is restored through the Christ's gift of meditation upon his bleeding body. In Christ, she becomes a new creation. Kempe herself as "touched by the hand of Our Lord with great bodily sickness, wherethrough she lost reason and her wits a long time, till Our Lord by grace restored her again."<sup>111</sup>

Finally, there is the doctrine of prayer itself. For Julian, "prayer is the way to learn theology,"<sup>112</sup> and for Kempe, theology is "acquired in prayer, it is used for prayer, and it overflows into a recollected life."<sup>113</sup> Following Julian, "we can never leave off wishing

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109. *English Spirituality*, 205.

110. *Revelations*, 91.

111. Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe: A Modern Version* by W. Butler-Bowdon (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 2.

112. *English Spirituality*, 160

113. *Margery Kempe*, 67.

nor longing until we have Him in fullness of joy, and then we can wish for nothing more, for He wills that we be occupied in knowing and loving until the time that we shall be fulfilled in heaven.”<sup>114</sup> In simple terms, “the goodness of God is the highest prayer.”<sup>115</sup> It is because of the cultivation of habitual recollection—for Julian, “spiritual contemplation with everlasting wonder at this high, surpassing, inestimable love which Almighty God has for us of His goodness;”<sup>116</sup> for Kempe, recollection means she “increased by grace, and in devotion of holy meditation, of high contemplation, and of wonderful speeches and dalliance which Our Lord spake and conveyed to [my] soul.”<sup>117</sup>

There is much more to explore and investigate in Martin Thornton’s operations within Christian theological tradition. Yet in broad terms, we can rightly speak of Thornton as (1) an emphatic figure of Anglican *ressourcement*,<sup>118</sup> (2) that he affirmed the organization of Christian theological tradition into a variety of schools of spirituality, with particular emphasis and creative explication of the English School that reached its ascetical pinnacle with the Book of Common Prayer, which “is fundamental to our understanding of all ages of English spirituality. . . . the development and consummation of our patristic and biblical tradition,”<sup>119</sup> and (3) that he invites a rethinking of received opinions about Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, whom Thornton regards as central to Anglicanism seen as the proper environment for the English School, which is its true tradition.

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114. *Revelations*, 85.

115. *Revelations*, 83.

116. *Revelations*, 83.

117. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 2.

118. Or, that *ressourcement* can also be understood as Thorntonian ascetical theology within the French context!

119. *English Spirituality*, 257.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion, Pastoral Reflection and Next Directions in Research

Well in the background remains the English School of Spirituality: sane, wise, ancient, modern, sound, and simple; with roots in the New Testament and Fathers, and of noble pedigree; with its golden periods and its full quota of saints and doctors; never obtrusive, seldom in serious error, ever holding its essential place within the glorious diversity of Catholic Christianity. Our most pressing task is to rediscover it.<sup>120</sup>

With these words, Martin Thornton confirmed that he understood his theology to be both Catholic and Anglican. The Anglican emphasis emerges the operations of his Theology (tradition, scripture, and doctrine). His operations with respect to *tradition* fundamentally are that of *ressourcement*, for the English School of Catholic spirituality is precisely the product of Martin Thornton's *ressourcement*—that is, his rethinking of Anglican spirituality in accordance with the spirit of Yves Congar, from “a less profound to a more profound tradition; a discovery of the most profound resources.” Thornton’s operations with respect to *scripture* likewise outline an approach for more profound, meditative encounter with God’s Word based upon baptismal incorporation and safeguarded by the Church’s doctrine. His operations with respect to *doctrine* seek to invite us to a more intimate relationship with the Church’s authoritative teachings; indeed that doctrine becomes the basis of our corporate prayer life. From our natural sense life to the ultimate Vision of God, using tradition, scripture, and doctrine, the *operations* of Thornton’s theology articulates a *theological model* of our corporate experience, called Ascetic. And this model and operations in all moments enact his underlying *theological motif*: Every truth flowing from the Incarnation must impinge upon the corporate prayer life. This theological method is summarized just that elegantly.

These principles, then, are what constitute the mechanics of Thornton’s theology.

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120. *English Spirituality*, 14.

Yet despite the relative simplicity of our reduction of his corpus to basic principles, Martin Thornton's theology is obviously multi-faceted and wide-ranging. His writing is by turns both speculative and affective: in one moment it might be an analysis of some intellectual, even arcane, fine point of doctrine, and in another it might immediately invite profound prayer and reflection. It sometimes rings of an ideal Anglican life that lives only on the pages of his books, yet readers are regularly struck by the sense of how contemporary his insights can be, even timeless. His thirteen books range from the christological and sacramental meditation on "numinous experience" in his first book<sup>121</sup> to spiritual guides for ordinary Christians trying to live faithful to the full Christian revelation,<sup>122</sup> to a bold rethinking of both English Christian tradition and the theological endeavor itself, to a strict syllabus to train spiritual directors, followed by a collection of homilies arranged for publication that serve as an elegant epilogue to his corpus.<sup>123</sup>

Yet through it all, his writing remains surprisingly faithful to the three hermeneutic principles here outlined. Hence it is by keeping these principles in mind that we can fully grapple with the insights in Thornton's writing, as well as continue in the path he walked that sought to quietly but powerfully accurately reflect his understanding of the Christian revelation in the Anglican tradition, and to live it out prayerfully. May those that study Thornton's theology ever-bear in mind his intention to be both Catholic and Anglican.

### **Pastoral Reflection**

The Appendix of *English Spirituality* is subtitled "A Course of Study in

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121. Martin Thornton, *Rural Synthesis: The Religious Basis of Rural Culture* (London: Skeffington and Son, 1948).

122. Martin Thornton, *Christian Proficiency* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961); *The Purple Headed Mountain*.

123. Martin Thornton, *A Joyful Heart* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1987).

Ascetical Theology for Parish Priests and Theological Students in the Anglican Communion.” In this Course of Study are included a number of primary sources, as well as commentary on many of those sources. My own pastoral advice to those who desire to explore Thornton’s theology and apply it in parish life is to follow this Course of Study and pray with these writers. Make these sources the first-choices within your Devotional life. I have done this for several years, and I can report that the prayer invested in these sources is time very well spent. These sources vivify the Book of Common Prayer as *Regula*, for there are inexhaustible consonances between these sources and the Prayer Book liturgy. And at every step, Thornton’s *English Spirituality* is a wonderful commentary and companion to be regularly consulted and considered. There is no need, I have found, to follow any rigid reading order through the resources listed in his Course of Study. Rather, the student is encouraged to begin wherever he or she feels comfortable, and then proceed dutifully through the other resources, knowing that each of the sources will be visited and revisited many times over.

With these sources becoming the furniture and landscape of a devotional environment, the next step is to begin one or more ongoing conversations with fellow parishioners. That is to say, start an adult catechesis group. I have found the ideal size to be from 4 or 5 to a maximum of 9 people. The approach to the catechesis is simple: reading and discussion. The more open-ended and non-goal-driven, the better, I believe. This kind of approach allows the students to explore, to stretch out, to consider the faith in a mature, often sophisticated way. An excellent text to start with is Thornton’s *The Purple Headed Mountain*. I have



used this with great effect in my parish. It is short, accessible, and deceptively simple. Its strength is that it covers the basics of discipleship: ascetical framework, penitence amid God’s creation, the Capital Sins as the pattern of our going awry with Creation, and biblical meditation focusing on Our Lord. The catechist can decide what tangents to pursue and encourage in the group, and *The Purple Headed Mountain* suggests many: Creed, Sacraments, Grace, Confession, Christology, Regula, and so on.

The Coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) is the biblical setting I have used as the ground of all my catechetical teaching. I advise several, if not a longer series, of classes dedicated to contemplation and reflection on what it may have been like to be among those first Christians—what it would have been like to hear Saint Peter preach, to experience that atmosphere, to participate in the baptisms, and to “continue in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers,”<sup>124</sup> for this is the inception of the threefold *Regula* as we have seen. We also see in this chapter the questions from the people, “What does this mean?” and “What shall we do?”<sup>125</sup> These questions I view as the foundational questions behind all spiritual direction, and I encourage the parishioners to feel at liberty, even the obligation, to ask these questions whenever they have them. They are indications that genuine discipleship is being sought.

Such rich catechesis—I have a class that has been running continuously for three years, and there is no end in sight—helps to foster an active environment

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124. Acts 2:42 (RSV)

125. Acts 2:12 and 2:37.

for preaching on Sundays. I have been surprised how many times I have preached on essentially the same material we have discussed in catechesis, yet through the preaching medium, connections are made that were not in the catechesis room. Perhaps it is the result of the more dynamic activity of the Mass and the larger corporate gathering. Perhaps it is the incense. Whatever the reason, I have found no reason not to keep a close relationship in content between catechesis and pulpit. They feed each other and act as seal.

Throughout all my catechetical experiments, I have never shied away from the Thorntonian injunction to be confronted by Jesus through the doctrines of the Church. As we have seen, the “speculative-affective synthesis” means we pray with doctrine. That is, we seek to know what a particular doctrine entails. Then we grapple with its implications intrinsic, as well as in relationship with other doctrines, and in relationship with our corporate and personal prayer life. Obviously one must be savvy in one’s attention to what a particular group of people need at a given moment. Yet I have found that it is rarely inappropriate to bring to the foreground a particular doctrine and insist the group grapple with it. An effective means to do so, I have found, is an analysis of the Collect of the Day for its doctrinal and theological content. These Collects are concentrated with deep reflection, learning, and experience. The catechist should try to invite connections made between the content of the Collect, the liturgical life of the community, as well as the personal lives of the people in the class.

Obviously my reflections emerge from my worship life at Saint Paul’s, Riverside and its parish culture, and I have been blessed with an enviable

opportunity to experiment and explore at Saint Paul's in a way that may not be available at other parishes. The primary thing is to reflect on the commonly held experience within the group and allow for personal, idiosyncratic tangents to develop in the discussion, within reason. Because to reflect on commonly held experience—when that experience is in a liturgical, sacramental environment such as emerges through corporate commitment to the Book of Common Prayer as Regula—is to do *mystagogy*. There are so many Mysteries to our faith grounded in the central Mystery of Easter. Thornton would insist we be confronted with this Mysteries—in a reasonable, sane, humane way, to be sure—yet never anything but in the most direct way possible. It is confrontation with Our Lord amid His Creation that changes people; and in fact it is the only thing that ever has.

### **Next Directions in Research**

Here I would like to indicate briefly where my research and reflection upon Thornton's theology may lead me going forward. Most certainly, I do not intend this thesis to be my final word about Thornton. Quite the opposite is the case. I consider this thesis the opening salvo in my writing about Thornton's theology, necessary to organize my thoughts and distill his principles to a simple and potent concentrate. Where, then, might I go next?

A number of possibilities present themselves. The first is to explore the interaction between Thornton's theology and that of John Macquarrie and Marshall McLuhan. Students of Thornton's later writing, particularly *Prayer: A New Encounter*, would not be surprised by a Thornton-Macquarrie exploration. *Prayer* is an extensive ascetical commentary on key aspects of Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*. Writing in

the Foreword to *Prayer*, John Macquarrie admitted that Thornton's "profound knowledge of ascetical theology has enabled him to draw implications from my work of which I was not myself aware."<sup>126</sup> I suspect that the well of such implications has not dried up. Being a great admirer of Macquarrie's theology, I think bringing Thornton's theologies of *Regula* and Remnant into conversation with Macquarrie's existential-ontological theology of Being may yield much fruit.

Similarly, resonances between Thornton's theology and Marshall McLuhan's "media ecology" have begun to bubble in my own reflections. Being a great admirer also of McLuhan's work on the relationship between medium and consciousness, of the impact of technology on the invisible environment, of the printing press on cognitive awareness, of visual versus acoustical awareness, and the relationship (in his later work posthumously published) between figure and ground—that is, formal cause and effects—often ring sympathetically with my studies of Thornton's theology. And for that matter, the same occurs with my studies of Macquarrie.

The most fruitful interaction, then, may be that between Thornton, Macquarrie and McLuhan. What does the threefold *Regula* look like when it has taken into account the ascetical and dogmatic insights of these theologians? There also may be implications upon liturgical and sacramental theology, as well as the theology of sin (hamartiology).

Another potential interaction may also be noted. David Fagerberg is a contemporary ascetical writer who is influenced by the considerable voices of Aidan Kavanagh and Alexander Schmemmann. All three figures in dialogue with Thornton's theology may produce significant light upon liturgical theology and ascetic.

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126. *Prayer*, 9.

## Appendix A

### Concise Biography of Martin Thornton

A focused account of Thornton's biography that obeys the relatively narrow boundaries of this analysis may further situate his theological perspective. Although description and analysis of the finer points of his biography lie beyond the scope of our theological aims, nonetheless a basic sense of the shape of his background and experience may highlight the significance of his hermeneutic principles. What follows is a personal biographical summary derived from two sources: one is the previous research of Michael Proctor, and the other is Monica Thornton, Martin's wife.<sup>127</sup>

Martin Stuart Farrin Thornton lived from 1915 to 1986. He was the youngest of three boys born to Alfred Augustus Thornton and Ida Beatrice (Farrin) Thornton on 11 November 1915. He was born in Hockley, England, and his name was chosen because his day of birth was that of the feast of Saint Martin. His father established and owned a patent law firm, and the family's home was a Georgian style house on grounds of two acres, with a 7-acre field part of the property as well.

Thornton's initial exposure to Christianity through his family life appears to be of

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127. In consultation with Monica Thornton, Martin's wife, Proctor researched Thornton's biography and wrote a "published" book called *God and the Englishman: A Biography of the Reverend Martin Thornton 1915–1986*. It is termed "published" because it was never actually distributed. Although Proctor appears to have aimed for a comprehensive biography, what appears on the pages of this very difficult to find book is problematic at best. The editing is inconsistent and often shoddy, and the narrative is oddly paced and often discontinuous. The book's publisher, Bridge Books in Wrexham, Wales, reported in private correspondence that they were never paid for the printing cost, and discarded most of the printed books' they were less a publisher than a mere hired printer. Furthermore, Monica Thornton regards the biographical details to be at turns misleading and in places outright incorrect. Because this book was the only such gathering of biographical details of Thornton's life, she purchased and privately distributed one hundred copies of the book from Bridge Books (who discarded the rest) while hastening to caution its readers of its problems. The biography described herein focuses on factors that would contribute to Thornton's theology, and leaves aside any thing else. I will also add that in the coming years I plan to work with Monica Thornton to publish the first "authorized biography" of Thornton that corrects Proctor's erroneous account. In a sense, the biography herein is the first "authorized" account, or at least the summary of one.

largely unspectacular and commonplace. All of the children were baptized in the local Church of England parish church (Hockley Parish Church of St Peter), and Thornton's elementary education is described as "following broadly the Church of England ethos."<sup>128</sup> His older brothers went off to college when he was eight years old, so he was something of an "only child" until age 15 when he went off to boarding school. Hence he described himself as "imaginative, because solitary."<sup>129</sup>

Thornton's first formal education was in the field of agriculture, and he began adult life as a farmer. His father had acquired property (in Finchingfield in Essex) which Thornton then managed and farmed pigs, sheep, and sugar beet. He conceived of a style of ploughing that is not straight lines but round and round in decreasing circles, and was an early adopter of what are now called "sustainable/organic" farming practices.<sup>130</sup>

Relevant to Christianity, Thornton also describes a spiritual, or numinous, experience that he had as a farmer in Finchingfield. It appears that part of this land was previously a Cistercian grange (or satellite farm of the monastery). Here is an excerpt of his longer description of what happened as he walked in the field, working out a sense of personal anxiety about his direction in life:

It was mid-November, dark, dank, negative, and I walked through a swamp and across two meadows.... Then the fog descended, and so did the Spirit, all-shrouding is better than all-enveloping, because the former words hints at death while the latter has the false (in this case) connotation of comforting protection. If you want to make shallow jests about omnipresence and holy fog, then go ahead; I shall not be amused, nor shall I be abashed. The presence of God was disclosed through the total foggy environment; and the disclosure pointed to the Father transcendent, to a Providence who brooked no opposition and no argument. It was very

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128. Michael Proctor, *God and the Englishman: A Biography of the Reverend Martin Thornton 1915-1986* (Wrexham, Wales: Bridge Books, 2003), 19.

129. Martin Thornton, *My God: A Reappraisal of Normal Religious Experience* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1974), 87.

130. *God and the Englishman*, 25.

frightening, very uncomfortable, and very real.

It was also very confusing: no dialogue, no prophetic pointer, no answer. Then the fog cleared off, almost at once, in a most spectacular fashion, and a series of integrations, contemplative syntheses, took place. Creation through which God spoke, in which he dwelt, concentrated itself into a single beech tree. As befitted the occasion it was straggly, in a sinister way ugly, not especially significant compared with many of its fellows. But herein God took his stance, herein he disclosed. I, too, experienced a personal integration, a contemplative awareness. The beech tree spoke....

A few weeks later a near-hurricane swept through the valley, but doing surprisingly little damage. I took the same walk, not to recapture the presence because that does not do; that would be Schubert Ogden's semi-idolatry. There was nothing sacred about the beech tree: once it had been a pin-point of a total creation in which God dwells, a medium for his disclosure, that is all. I crested the hill and the tree was not there, only a gap making visible transcendent uplands beyond. The tree had succumbed to the gale, uprooted and straddled across the lane; a farmer friend was clearing a way through a cutting it up to burn. He could not understand it, for it was a healthy tree, and it was surrounded by decrepit elms which are especially susceptible to high winds, shallow rooted and brittle. Beeches do not readily fall. There were no more casualties within sight....

Am I seriously contending that God intervened, intruded, destroying a beech tree for my personal benefit? No, I don't think I am. It is more like Noah's rainbow, just an ordinary rainbow, but nevertheless a specific disclosure at that point. Or who moved the stone? The holy women worried, but they need not have done. I worried, deep-down I think I was frightened of that tree: I need not have worried!

Everything came to pass as I knew it would. Now I am glad: *Benedicite, omnia opera*. O ye Winds of God, bless ye the Lord: praise him and magnify him for ever.

Whether this experience of the "numinous," as well as his farming background, sheds light on Thornton's subsequent theological method appears to be an intriguing question. Everywhere he lived, he gardened, built dry stone walls, and laid hedgerows.

To complete this brief sketch, it should be added that Thornton graduated from King's College London with a degree in Theology in 1946, and was ordained a priest in 1947 by the Bishop of Norwich. He published his first book a year later. In 1955, he professed full vows to the Oratory of the Good Shepherd. This non-residential

community of men employed a rule that called for daily Eucharist, private recitation of the Office, celibacy, intellectual study, fellowship, stewardship, and full accounting of all finances. He received an M.A. from Christ's College, Cambridge in 1955. In 1962, he accepted a teaching post (warden) at St Deiniol's Library in Harwarden, Wales. A residential library, it trained ordinands and laity, and he additionally wrote seven books while stationed there. Subsequently, Thornton was adjunct faculty at The General Theological Seminary in New York (receiving an honorary doctorate in 1966), and later at Philadelphia Divinity School. He left the Oratory of the Good Shepherd in 1968 when he married Monica. She gave birth to their daughter, Magdalen Mary, in 1969. All told, he ministered in six English parishes as a priest. His last position was Canon Chancellor at Truro Cathedral in Truro, England, where he was responsible for the cathedral library and school, various administrative duties, and regularly presiding at Cathedral liturgies; additionally he developed a four-year course to train spiritual directors.

What can we distill from this very brief biography for purposes of theological analysis? The first is that he had a vivid intellectual and imaginative life. The second is that his first formal training was in farming; that is, working with the land, and a consciousness or perspective that corresponds to farming realities. The third is that he understood God's presence in an immediate, personal, even mystical way. The fourth is that as a mature adult, he was, from the beginning, a writer and thinker. The fifth is that he learned a disciplined prayer life that followed a rule that was monastic but non-residential. These situate Thornton as a person who is hands-on, intellectual, disciplined, and perhaps most comfortable in the natural world. Thornton was a serious theologian who thought like a gardener.



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## VITA

Matthew Dallman was born in Washington, DC, baptized in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, in Shawano, Wisconsin, and grew up in northern suburbs of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, attending with his family an ELCA church in Fox Point. Always engaged in athletics as an adolescent, he came to focus on football, where he was a quarterback on high school and college teams. He received a B.A. in English Literature with a Minor in Creative Writing from Washington University in St Louis. After studying music composition for over fifteen years, and founding and publishing an online journal for working artists called *POLYSEMY*, at age thirty-five he returned to the Church at St Paul's, Riverside, Illinois and felt called to the tasks of Christian theology. In 2014 he completed a M.A. in Liturgy from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He is the founder of Akenside Press, which publishes resources to renew Catholic reality in Anglican parishes; Matthew is coordinating the reissuing by Akenside Press of all 13 books by Martin Thornton. He has contributed to *The Living Church* magazine, as well as various Nashotah House publications, including its Lent 2015 book of daily meditations. Matthew has taught adult catechesis in two parishes in the Diocese of Chicago, and he aspires to the priesthood. He and his wife, Hannah, have four daughters.