An investigation into the influence of Ruusbroec on Denys the Carthusian’s mystical writings.

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**Abstract**

This thesis seeks to establish the degree to which Denys the Carthusian has been influenced by Jan Ruusbroec. During his lifetime, Denys the Carthusian was highly regarded as an outstanding theologian and named *Doctor Ecstaticus*, which suggests that he had a profound knowledge of mystical theology not merely from a theoretical perspective but also from profound personal experience. Whilst other scholastics remain authoritative figures in the canon, Denys appears to have passed into relative obscurity.

The relationship between Denys the Carthusian and Jan Ruusbroec provides a critical perspective for discussing how Denys’ reception might be reconsidered because he emerges as a mystical theologian in his own right rather than simply a scriptural commentator. Furthermore, Denys’ mystical theology has a distinctive character comprising Victorine, Carthusian and Flemish spirituality.

By studying his life, the major events that shaped it and the way Denys makes reference to Ruusbroec, strongly defending him in his three main mystical texts, this thesis argues that Ruusbroec’s Trinitarian thought was extremely influential to Denys the Carthusian and shaped his own theological approach most strongly. This thesis argues that whilst Denys, using an extensive number of different sources, was able to synthesise these sources and thus provide an impressive insight in medieval scholastics, it was truly his mystical writing that sets him apart and is worthy of further study.

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**Introduction**

My interest in mystical theology was fuelled by Professor Peter Tyler’s lectures at St Mary’s University during the pursuit of my Masters. The discovery of *The Cloud of Unknowing* inspired me to write a dissertation researching the influence of the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite on western medieval theology. From there, I wanted to further study the Carthusian order and in particular their development in my own country, The Netherlands. Mainly because of the sheer volume of writings, the name Denys stood out to me.

Whilst many people would regard Denys the Carthusian merely a historical footnote and a compiler of materials, my research will reveal him to be a complex man, and particularly a man of contrast. He lived a life of contemplation yet engaged with some of the most important people of his time. He lived the life of a cloistered monk yet is believed to have left the monastery on occasion for travelling. He was an academic who meticulously analysed an enormous number of sources for his writings, dedicated to continuous study yet he was also a *Doctor Ecstaticus*, known for his ability to communicate with angels.

Denys is mainly known for his extensive Scriptural Commentaries, however, it seems that his mystical writings provide a much better insight into his thought. These works reveal, apart from the meticulous approach and careful analysis of each source he uses, a strong emphasis on Victorine thought as well as the Carthusians who went before him. Denys’ insight into the work of Jan Ruusbroec is of particular importance because he was able to study the work in Middle Dutch which enabled him to have a much more profound understanding of the texts without having to rely on translations. Even though the writings of Jan Ruusbroec have received considerable interest in recent years, I have been unable to find any research studying the influence of his writings on the mystical thought of Denys the Carthusian. This thesis aims to explore this influence and emphasise the importance of his mystical works.

**Literature review**

I have used the translations of Jan Ruusbroec’s work by Wiseman (1985) but of particular interest was the recent publication by Brepols publishers (2014) that offers both the full Middle Dutch version as well as a contemporary English translation. In 2005, Ide Ni Riain translated all of Denys the Carthusian’s known mystical works. This includes *On Contemplation*, *Prayer*, *Meditation*, *The Fountain of light and the Paths of Life* as well as *Monastic Profession* and *Exhortation to Novices*. For my research I have principally studied his three works in Latin, *De Contemplatione* (1912), *De Donis Spiritus Sancti* (1908) *and* *De Fonte lucis ac semitis vitae* (1912). I also relied strongly on the works by Professor Denys Turner, Professor Faesen, Professor Bernard McGinn, Professor Peter Tyler and Professor Kent Emery.

The main publications of Denys’ works were undertaken by the Carthusians of Cologne and Montreuil-sur-Mer (Teeuwen, 1929, p. 24). Even though Denys wrote so many books and also copied them at least once, very few pieces remain. The history of the autograph manuscripts is closely associated with the printed editions of Denys’ works. Even though a few of them were printed before 1500, the first major edition was achieved at the Charterhouse of St Barbara in Cologne in the sixteenth century. It was Dietrich Loher who almost singlehandedly accomplished this edition of Denys’ *opera*. Dietrich acquired the sums needed for the project through correspondence and sought the manuscripts of Denys’ works. He both transcribed and edited the texts and saw them through the hazards of printing. Between the years 1521 and 1538 he managed to produce fifty-seven volumes of Denys’ works (Emery, 1982, p. 127).

Loher was very fortunate; for his edition, with only a few exceptions, he had access to autograph manuscripts, most of which had been kept at the Charterhouse in Roermond. His task was extremely daunting, though, as the work was urgently needed by the Church, which was weakened by the Reformation, so Loher had to work rapidly. Additionally, he at times struggled greatly to read Denys’ writing, a cursive book hand, and complained that he needed to divine the sense, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, where he considered Denys’ writing to be illegible. Anselm Stoelen, who looked at some of the manuscripts, taking into consideration their condition, the handwriting and also the pressure to publish quickly, determined that Dietrich’s efforts were as good as they could be (Emery, 1982, pp. 127-128).

The second edition of Denys’ Opera Omnia (1896-1935) for the most part simply reprinted the sixteenth century edition, whilst making a few subtle changes, and presenting the work in a visually more readable format. They modern editors did consult some manuscripts and printed some treatises that had not been printed before. This edition was inspired by the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of Pope Leo XIII, and when it was first conceived, the Carthusian fathers asked the scholar A. M. P. Ingold[[1]](#footnote-1) to search the autograph manuscripts (Emery, 1982, p. 128).

Ingold was already aware of one autograph located in the library of Nicholas of Cusa in Bernkastel-Kues. He was soon alerted to several manuscripts of Denys’ work in the University Library in Louvain, numbers 127, 130, 213, 214 and 233. Number 213, which contained Denys’ commentaries *super Jeremiam*, *Baruch*, *Threnos* and *Ezechielem* bore the inscription *Ad domum Cartusiens. Ruremund.*, and indications that the manuscript had been used for the printed edition in 1533. When he compared the manuscript with the manuscript in Bernkastel-Kues, Ingold was delighted to discover that the handwriting and paper were the same. On the basis of this identification, he was able to determine that 233, containing commentaries *super epistolas canonicas* and on the *Scala paradisi* of John Climacus, was also an autograph. Unfortunately, all five manuscripts, two autographs and three copies, were destroyed in the fire of 1914. One manuscript from the Charterhouse in Roermond, D. 320, was also believed to have been destroyed. This manuscript, which contained the copy of Ulrich of Strasbourg’s *Summa de Bono*, used by Denys himself, had in fact been removed to Strasbourg before the fire. Tragically, this too was destroyed in Louvain during World War II, but a microfilm had been made before by the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto, where it still exists. Currently, only one manuscript containing a work of Denys can be found in Louvain. This manuscript was transferred from the library of the Grand Séminaire in Mechelen. In addition to several treatises by Thomas a Kempis and other writers, it also contains a copy of the *Speculum conversionis peccatorum magistri dyonisii de lewis alias rikel ordinis carthusiensis (The mirror of sinners by Master Dennis van Leeuwen alias Rijckel of the Carthusian Order)* (Emery, 1982, pp. 128-129).

The Library of Cusa at St. Nikolaus-Hospota, Bernkastel-Kues, still owns three manuscripts of Denys’ authentic writings. The first, known as 12, binds together several manuscripts and the handwriting and paper confirm it is the autograph which Ingold knew. The work is addressed ‘*Reverendissimo in cristo patre ac domino Domino Nicolao de cusa sacrosancte romane ecclesie cardinalis preclaro et nunc sancta ac apostolice sedis legato de latere per angliam atque almaniam… in sincerissime caritatis visceribus cordialissime predilecto Frater Dionysius Carthusiensis’*. (*Most reverend father in Christ, and lord Nicholas de Cusa, most holy Cardinal in the noble Roman Church and now lieutenant of the Holy and Apostolic See on the side throughout England and Germany… in the most sincere affection, most heartfelt, to our beloved brother Dionysius the Carthusian)*. This suggests the work was composed around the time of the legation in 1451-52, however, a note in the hand of Cusa, although not referring directly to this work, would date it 1454. The work seems a fitting gift for Cusa. It is a *complicatio omnium*, a folding together of all Paul’s epistles in one. It might be that this autograph still exists because it was sent away from Roermond (Emery, 1982, p. 130).

The second manuscript contains two works against Mohammed. The first comprises four books, *contra legem machometi*, *tractatus contra errores Alchoranum*, *contra doctrinam machometi* and *de evangelicis documentis*. Emery (1982, p. 131) states that neither the manuscript nor the modern cataloguer identifies the author. However, in a note in book 2, Cusa remarks that the work seems to agree with that of ‘*dionysius cartusiensis*’ except that the second book of the manuscript appears to be lacking four chapters ‘in libro meo’. The work is indeed a copy of Denys’ *Contra perfidiam Mahometi*. The text of the second book, despite Cusa’s remark, consists of forty-eight chapters, just as the printed editions. Cusa’s note suggests that he owned another manuscript of the work, perhaps an autograph.

The third work is a single manuscript in one hand containing a treatise *de potestate papae et concilii generalis*, and neither the manuscript nor the modern cataloguer identifies an author. The text is a copy of the first two books of Denys’ *De auctoritate summi pontifices et generalis concilii libri tres*. This book contains an inscription in Cusa’s hand: ‘*Hunc librum donavit mihi magister gotfridus habitans in collegio s. Jeronimi colonie 1445 in die s. florini’*. Nothing in this manuscript indicates that Cusa knew this to be Denys’ work.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For his printed edition, Dietrich Loher had gathered 141 autograph manuscripts. These manuscripts, however, did not remain in Cologne. In 1609 the Carthusian Petreius noted that they had been returned to the monastery of Roermond. No autograph manuscripts of Denys’ works exist in Cologne today, and no autographs are recorded in the catalogue of St. Barbara’s library compiled in the late seventeenth century, nor do the studies of modern scholars indicate that any remained in Cologne. One manuscript now in Cologne which may have been copied directly from an autograph, appears to confirm Petreius’ testimony. It contains a copy of Denys’ commentary on Climacus’ *Scala paradisi*, made at the convent of the Croziers in Cologne in 1482. An inscription in a seventeenth century hand states that ‘*Commentaria hec conscripta sunt et elucubrate per D. Dionysium Carthusianum, monachum Carthusiae Ruremundensis ubi et huius originalia asservantur*’. It was the autograph of this work that was destroyed by the fire at Louvain in 1914 (Emery, 1982, pp. 132-133).

Ingold was hoping to find more autographs, and on Petreius’ word he believed the manuscripts were returned to Roermond from Cologne. Apparently, none of the manuscripts were destroyed in a fire of 1554 as over a century later, in 1665, the Bollandists noted that 150 volumes of Denys’ works, ‘*ab illo composita ac propria mana exarata*’ were to be found at the Roermond Charterhouse. In the same year, shortly after this testimony, the Charterhouse in Roermond again suffered a fire. However, since at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Carthusians indicated their intent to make a new edition of Denys’ works from the Roermond manuscripts and never alluded to any destruction of them, Ingold presumed that most of the manuscripts were still in existence in Roermond at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

According to Emery (1982, p. 133) Ingold lost sight of Denys’ manuscripts until 1783. From 1783 on he was able to draw an outline of the subsequent history of the Roermond manuscripts. In that year, Emperor Joseph II supressed many religious houses in the low countries and apprehended the libraries of most of these houses, including that of the Charterhouse of Roermond. The library was first entrusted to the Bollandists, who created a list of its content. The list shows twenty-five manuscripts containing work by Denys. In 1785 some works were sold to the Chambre Héraldique in Brussels, which was trying to rebuild its library, recently destroyed by a fire. It appears that the Roermond manuscripts stayed there until 1794, when the French invaded the Low Countries. At that time, Baron M. Beydaels de Zittaert was commissioned to transport the manuscripts out of Brussels, to safety. Beydaels proceeded to carry the manuscripts to Vienna, via Düsseldorf, Würzburg, Ratisbon and Linz. After several years of negotiation, Beydaels turned over the manuscripts to the Emperor’s agents. Beydaels had made a vague list, and Ingold assumed that he had transported fifteen manuscripts of Denys’ works, and that all of these entered the private library of the emperor. Although he did not investigate manuscripts in Vienna, Ingold judged that two manuscripts listed in Becker’s catalogue of the emperor’s private library were in fact manuscripts of Denys’ works from Roermond.[[3]](#footnote-3) At this stage the research Ingold did into Denys’ manuscripts ended (Emery, 1982, pp. 133-134).

Lucidius Verschueren resumed and refined Ingold’s research, and in 1941 a study of the library of the Carthusians in Roermond was published. Just like Ingold before him, he did not find documented evidence that the fires of 1554 and 1665 destroyed the Roermond manuscripts. He also determined that although the Charterhouse in Roermond was plundered by the Protestants in 1572, and books in the library were scattered and damaged, the monks were able to repair and regather the manuscripts of Denys’ works. Verschueren then published the list made by the Bollandists in 1783 and found modern locations of some of the manuscripts. He identified two of the manuscripts on the list, containing works by Denys, as those discovered by Ingold at Louvain and destroyed in 1914. He also believed that another manuscript, an autograph, *Sermones de tempore cum expositione Evangeliorum et Epistolarum Dominicalium* was destroyed at Louvain in 1914. By means of catalogues, Verschueren was able to locate four other manuscripts of Denys’ works, recorded on the list of 1783, in Vienna, and three of these he judged to be autographs.

In 1967 E. Persoons made a survey of manuscripts from the supressed religious houses in the Low Countries now located in Vienna. He added a fourth to the supposed three. However, only two of the manuscripts cited contain autographs. The first is a manuscript which contains one work, *D. Dionysii Carthusiani in translationem suam opusculorem Ioannis Cassiani presbyteri; D. Dionysii Carthusiani in translationum…Collationum patrum*. The script of the text, rubrication and paper show this to be an autograph. Further, an inscription, partially erased, on a parchment leaf pasted to the inside of the front cover reads: ‘*liber Carthusiensis in Ruremunda q(ui) continent in eo Translacio Liborum Cassiani ad stilum facilimum (?) deuoti p(atris) dyonisii Carthusiensis in Ruremunda manu sua propria…’[[4]](#footnote-4)* The second is a book that binds together several separate manuscripts written by at least five different hands. Several works of Denys are included, but only one manuscript, containing the *de vita et regimine presulum*, is written by Denys himself. [[5]](#footnote-5)(Emery, 1982, pp. 135-136).

Based on the finding of Ingold, Verschueren and Persoons, one would expect to find four of Denys’ autograph manuscripts in Vienna, however, only two of the works contains autographs. Although there are other known manuscripts of Denys’ works in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, none of them is an autograph. It is difficult to comprehend how the numbers of autographs and manuscripts can vary so extremely. Emery suggests they must have been dispersed in ways undetected by Ingold and Verschueren.

A small autograph manuscript has come to light in Belgium, the Bibliothèque Royale Albert. It contains only a single work but may have been bound together at one time with two others from the list by Verschueren. It bears the familiar stamp and initials of Sir Thomas Phillips and was acquired by the Bibliothèque Royale from the Phillips collection in 1888. (Emery, 1982, p. 138)

A number of titles that were on the lists of Dietrich Loher and Petreius are said to be lost. The modern editors made some efforts to recover lost works, and when they came across a few which Loher had not found, printed them either in a volume of opera inedita, or inserted them in other volumes according to their overall arrangement of Denys’ works. Two examples are the following sermons, entitled *Sermo ad religiosos* *(de nominee monachi)* and *Sermo alter ad religiosos*. These were both discovered in a manuscript in Bruxelles.

In 1914 D. D. Waffelaert discovered a small work in Bruges that he attributed to Denys. Emery states that he has seen the work, it binds together many different manuscripts, and appears to be of Carthusian provenance. However, unlike almost all manuscripts of Denys’ works, the divisions of the text are not clearly rubricated, it does not indicate an author and there does not seem to be sufficient other indications that the work is Denys’.

Unfortunately, most of the works cited as lost by Dietrich Loher and Petreius have never been found. Perhaps in future, more of these will reappear, and perhaps also authentic works never mentioned by Denys or never before attributed to him by scholars may be discovered. In Gent a beautiful parchment manuscript exists that contains a treatise entitled *De arte musicali* and is attributed to Denys. It is puzzling, since neither Denys nor his later editors referred to it. However, the first part is characterised by Pythagorean and Boethian lore that he was very familiar with. Furthermore, he wrote commentaries on liturgical hymns and a treatise *De modo psallendi*.

Emery (1982, pp. 145-146) also discusses the manuscript copies of Denys’ works and concludes that the two largest single collections are found in the Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht and in Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale. In Utrecht, twenty-three manuscripts containing works by Denys have been catalogued. Fourteen of these were made in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries at the Charterhouse in Bloemendael, whilst most of the others in the collection were made in religious houses in or nearby Utrecht. With regard to the works made in the Charterhouse in Utrecht, eight of them contain biblical commentaries, one sequences of sermons for religious and three others devotional and practical monastic treatises. Emery emphasises the importance of the remaining two. One of them contains the only copy he has found of *De contemplatione libri tres*. The other is significant because it contains properly speculative, or philosophic work by Denys.

**The founding of the Order - life of Saint Bruno**

It is important in giving context the work of Denys the Carthusian to have an understanding of the life and times of the founder of the Order, St Bruno of Cologne, and the charism of the Carthusian Order that he founded as Denys was fundamentally rooted in that charism and it was his main influence. There are limited sources on the life of St Bruno, my summary draws most heavily on the work *St Bruno the Carthusian* by André Ravier SJ, although other sources have been accessed, such as Roger of Cologne.

In the year 1084 Bruno of Cologne together with six companions found themselves in the Alpine wilderness near Grenoble, with Bishop Hugh of Grenoble who helped them establish a monastery that became known as *La Chartreuse*, later *La Grande Chartreuse*. Their aim was to live a monastic life, similar to that of the Desert Fathers, whilst retaining elements of the common life as it had developed in western monasticism. Initially they drew on the statutes of the canons regular of Saint Ruf near Avignon as well as the rule of Saint Benedict. With the help of Bishop Hugh they were able to acquire a large tract of wilderness land as their ‘desert’, *eremus*, with clearly established boundaries to ensure their strict regimen would not be compromised.

Saint Bruno’s companions were Master Landuino, a renowned theologian from Lucca in Tuscany; Stephen of Bourg and Stephen of Dié, both canons of Saint Ruf; Hugh, whom they called the chaplain as he was the only one of them who functioned as a priest; and two laymen, Andrew and Guérin, who were lay brothers. These seven men had decided to lead an eremitical life and had been looking for a suitable place to carry out their project. Bruno knew how well suited the forests in the Dauphiné were for solitude and prompted by the Spirit, came to Hugh, Bishop of Grenoble to ask for both shelter and advice. It was Hugh who, inspired by a wonderful dream, chose the wilderness of Chartreuse for Bruno and his companions (Ravier, 1995, pp. 12-13).

The conditions were extremely harsh; a severe climate with heavy snowfall, poor soil that required significant labour to provide even a meagre nourishment for the inhabitants, the ruggedness of the terrain that made cultivation difficult in the forest, and the fact that the place was inaccessible for a considerable part of the year, which meant that in an emergency such as a fire or illness there was no hope of obtaining help quickly. After an enormous avalanche fell upon all of the cells except one and six hermits and one novice were killed on Saturday, January 30, 1132, they were forced to go back a mile and a half towards the south from the end of the Wilderness, where the Grande Chartreuse is located now. Bruno was over 50 years old, several of his companions were no longer young (Ravier, 1995, p. 13). In order to understand why these men undertook this journey and to get a better understanding of the Carthusian Order and their unique mysticism I propose to examine the life of its founder, St. Bruno of Cologne more closely.

**Early life**

Born in Cologne, the exact birth date of St Bruno is unknown, although it was most likely 1030. During his childhood, Bruno experienced the intense spiritual life that Archbishop Bruno I had given Cologne. The Archbishop promoted the eremitical and monastic life, built churches and founded cathedral chapters so that the city was called ‘holy Cologne’ or ‘the Rome of Germany’. At that time, the only schools that introduced children to classical studies were in monasteries and churches. It is unknown which school Bruno attended, but as he became a canon of the cathedral church of St Cunibert it is likely that he had a special relationship with that church and might have attended their school as his family could have belonged to that parish (Ravier, 1995, pp. 16-17).

The fact that, whilst he was still young, Bruno was sent to the famous cathedral school of Rheims, shows that he was intellectually particularly gifted. Even though he lived in Paris, Tours and Chartres, Rheims had a special significance for him. Although he was of German origin, he was often called *Gallicus*, the Frenchman.

Bruno excelled in theology and philosophy but was also an excellent writer who excelled in rhetoric as can be seen from the following elegy:

The Lord created all mortals in the light, offering the supreme joys of heaven according to their merits.

Blessed is the one who without straying directs his soul toward those heights and is vigilant to preserve himself from all evil.

Blessed again is the one who repents after sinning and often weeps because of his fault.

Alas! People live as though death did not follow life, as if hell were only an unfounded fable, though burning embrace.

Mortals, have a care that you live, all of you, in such a way that you do not have to fear the lake of hell. (St. Bruno, no date, quoted in Ravier, 1995, p. 20)

When Bruno was about 20 years old. Pope Leo IX came to Rheims to hold a Council. He arrived on September 30, 1049. On October 1, he arranged for the transfer or the relics of Saint Remi to be returned to the famous abbey. The next day, Leo IX consecrated the new church of the abbey of Saint Remi. This was an event that made a profound spiritual impression on Bruno, as he had a particular devotion to him (Ravier, 1995, p. 20). In a letter written to his friend Raoul le Verd at the end of his life, Bruno asks him to send a copy of The Life of Saint Remi.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another important point to make is that this was the first time Bruno was confronted with some of the problems in the Church. The Council was attended by numerous archbishops, bishops and abbots and the main concern was simony, which was at that time threatening the Church and urgently needed to be eliminated. Several bishops who were accused of having bought their bishoprics were deposed and excommunicated, and disciplinary decisions were made to put an end to this. As Bruno was participating in the ceremonies, he was aware of the measures and decisions that the Council took (Ravier, 1995, p. 21).

After his studies Bruno was promoted to be a canon at the church of St Cunibert of Cologne, and after that canon of the church of Rheims. He also became director of studies (Ravier, 1995, pp. 25-27). Of Bruno’s writings, two commentaries, one on the Psalms and one on the Epistles of Saint Paul and the letter to Raoul le Verd remain. Ravier describes Bruno not only as a renowned scholar but also a master, in the fully human sense that Saint Augustine gives the word, he was truly an excellent teacher. He was a man of undisputed moral honour and distinction (Ravier, 1995, pp. 40-41).

**Exile**

When Archbishop Gervais died in 1067, he was succeeded by Manassès I. This was a start of a very troubling period for Bruno that left a considerable impression on him. In the end, it would result in a serious conflict with Pope Gregory VII, his legate in France Hugh of Dié and several canons of the cathedral on one side and Manassès I on the other.

Initially, Manessès I appeared to administer his diocese in a manner that showed hope for a proper and peaceful administration, but this soon changed. He had obtained the See of Rheims through simony and with the complicity of Philip I, the king of France. The chronicler Guibert of Nogent wrote twenty five years later that he was a noble man, but had none of the moderation that should be characteristic of an honourable man, and after his elevation he adopted the ostentations of kings and the brutality of barbarian princes. He loved weapons and neglected his clergy (Ravier, 1995, pp. 36-37).

The first serious problem occurred in 1071 when Manessès I prevented the monks of the Abbey of St Remi from choosing their new abbot. He had been pestering them for years, starting quarrels and taking away their possessions. The monks had sent their complaints to the Holy See and a warning letter was sent to Manessès I. Through scheming and plotting he managed to stay in power and eventually managed to regain the trust of the Pope, Gregory VII. Around 1076 Bruno was named chancellor of his diocese. It is likely that Manessès I selected him to flatter the opinion of the public and of the university as Bruno was held in high esteem. However, documents show he resigned of his post in 1077 (Ravier, 1995, p. 39).

In 1075 the spiritual power of the Pope and the temporal power of the princes began the long struggle known in history as the struggle of the investitures (Ravier, 1995, p. 43).

Pope Gregory VII had continued the Church reforms started by his predecessor and Hugh of Dié was the legate in France commissioned to enforce the papal decree. At the Pope’s command Hugh called a series of regional councils that those bishops suspected of simony were required to attend. Those who were found guilty were dismissed from their office and replaced with trustworthy bishops. In 1075 at Anse, near Lyons, the first of a series of councils was held and in 1076 the Council of Clermont took place. During this council, the Provost of Rheims, also called Manassès, came of his own accord and admitted to buying his office, asking forgiveness. It is believed that during this meeting the Provost acquainted Hugh of Dié with the situation created by Archbishop Manassès I. The Archbishop had involved the diocese in corruption and violence, deprecation of possessions of the Church, traffic in offices and benefices, arbitrary extractions from clergy and monks and the threat of excommunication against anyone who dared to oppose him. An intervention from the higher authority was required (Ravier, 1995, pp. 43-44).

During the last months of 1076 several important people went into voluntary exile from Rheims, risking the loss of their positions and possessions. They were offered a place of refuge by Ebal, count of Roucy-sur-l’Aisne. Some of these complainants were the Provost Mannassès, Raoul le Verd, Fulco le Borgne and Bruno, but they were not the only ones (Ravier, 1995, p. 44). They testified against Manassès I at the Council on September 10, 1077, where he failed to appear, accusing him of having obtained the See of Rheims through simony, amongst other matters. At that point, Manassès was suspended from his position by the Fathers of the Council (Ravier, 1995, pp. 44-45). The Archbishop responded immediately with severe reprisals against the clerics of Rheims who had gone to Autun and testified against him. Hugh of Flavigny wrote in his Chronicle that the Archbishop ambushed them, sacked their houses, sold what they had to live on and confiscated their possessions (Ravier, 1995, p. 45).

Manassès continued to plot and scheme and once he realised Gregory VII could not be deceived, he attempted to bribe Hugh of Cluny. This was unsuccessful. When the Council assembled, Manassès did not attend but sent an Apology instead. In the Apology, he refers to Bruno:

…But I say to you that I have come to an agreement with Manassès with regard to all his followers except two, one of whom is Bruno. But this Bruno does not belong to my church. He was not born there, nor was he baptised there. He is a canon of St Cunibert in Cologne, in the land of the Teutons. Having absolutely no knowledge of his life and background, I do not value his presence here very much. Besides, I have bestowed many benefits upon him since he came to live here, and in return I have received from him only malicious and undeserved treatment. …

(L’Apologie de Manassès, no date, quoted in Ravier, 1995, p. 54)

This document shows that Bruno did not yield to the pressure and the offers of the Archbishop, and stayed true to his principles. The Pope made Manassès a generous offer in a letter dated April 17, 1080; he could save his reputation by asking six bishops in whom the Pope had confidence to testify on his behalf. The Archbishop was to allow Bruno and all the others to return, allowing them to serve God in Rheims with security and return their possessions to them. The following year he was to vacate the Church of Rheims and withdraw to Cluny or Chaise-Dieu to live in seclusion (Ravier, 1995, p. 56).

Manassès decided not to take advantage of this generous offer and tried to remain at the head of the church in Rheims. On December 27, 1080 Gregory VII deposed Manassès once and for all. He instructed the clergy and the people of Rheims to resist the Archbishop and expel him, and, with the legate’s consent, to proceed with new elections. He asked Count Ebal to stand by those who resisted Manassès and to support the new Archbishop who would be elected. He finally wrote a letter to Philip I, King of France, urging him to break with Manassès and fully accept the election of a new Archbishop. Even though the King did not take any action, Manassès was eventually driven out of Rheims (Ravier, 1995, pp. 57-58).

**New beginnings**

The departure of Manassès marked a new beginning. The exiles could return to Rheims. They were welcomed enthusiastically by both clergy and people. Bruno in particular received public honour. He had shown true character and wisdom. He had remained true to his principles. Although he did not take back his chair or his title of director of studies or the office of chancellor, he was favoured by the whole Church of Rheims when the election of the new Archbishop came up (Ravier, 1995, p. 58).

At this point, Bruno was fifty years old. A wonderful future was ahead of him. The See of Rheims, the diocese that was called ‘the crown of the kingdom’ was offered to him. Gregory VII and his legate, Hugh of Dié, had both publicly expressed the esteem in which they held him, they had appreciated his integrity during this period of simony. Bruno was the perfect candidate for high office; his perfect integrity, his learning, his clarity of vision in delicate situations, his courage in trials, his faithfulness to the Holy See, his deep spirituality, his cultured sense of friendship, his detachment from riches and his charity (Ravier, 1995, pp. 58-59).

Even though Bruno had every opportunity to enjoy a life of wealth and security, he chose not to take it. He had a calling to a life of solitude, inspired by the ancient desert fathers. About twenty years later he wrote in the letter to his friend, Raoul le Verd about a meeting in Adam’s Garden:

…We had been discussing for some while, as I recall, the false attractions and ephemeral riches of this present life and comparing them with the joys of eternal glory. As a result, we were inflamed with divine love and we promised, determined and vowed to abandon the fleeting shadows of this world at the earliest opportunity, and lay hold of the eternal by taking the monastic habit. (Letter of St Bruno to Raoul le Verd, no date, Chartreux)

This letter is of great significance because it offers a clear testimony to the vocation of Bruno. ‘Inflamed with divine love’ a threefold vow is made; they promised, determined and vowed to abandon the world. The date of this letter in unclear but Ravier (1995, p. 64) argues that it would be surprising if this meeting in Adam’s Garden took place before the exile at Count Ebal’s, but that even so the date could not reasonably be placed after 1076.

When Bruno was offered the See of Rheims, he had to reject as in his heart he had already made his vow and wanted to fulfil it.

**The Chartreuse**

Bruno did not know where his hermitage would be. Around 1084 he asked advice from Bishop Hugh of Grenoble, who was considered a virtuous man who led a saintly life. Hugh offered his personal advice, assistance and guidance and ensured they would be able to fulfil their vow and enter the solitude of the Chartreuse. Around the same time, Hugh had a dream. In this dream he saw God building a dwelling place for his glory in this solitude and there were seven stars showing him the way. Bruno and his companions numbered exactly seven. He offered the hermits the benefits of his council and generosity until his death (Ravier, 1995, pp. 77-78).

The location of the Chartreuse was perfect for Bruno. It was in the heart of the mountains, difficult to access even from the nearest villages, the winters were long with deep snow, and the soil was poor. This created an almost complete separation from the world (Ravier, 1995, pp. 80-81). The area was rocky with the occasional meadow to feed some cattle. It would have been impossible to plant grain, vines or fruit trees. By working the soil diligently some vegetables could be grown. Their livelihood depended on a little agriculture and some flocks (Ravier, 1995, pp. 82- 83).

Only the church, consecrated by Bishop Hugh of Grenoble on September 2, 1085, was made of stone. The original cells must have been similar to small huts or chalets (Ravier, 1995, p.85).

The concept was to take elements from cenobitic life to reduce dangers and inconveniences. To use those elements of community life was not a concession to human weakness but rather a way of combining the spiritual and the human. The members were bound together by a holy friendship, a friendship of strong personalities who were great, learned and holy with Bruno being the outstanding example. The three traits that characterised the vision Bruno had for the Carthusian were contemplation nourished by Holy Scripture and the Fathers, knowledge of Scripture and the Fathers stimulated by contemplation and knowledge full of love, love that desires knowledge. The Carthusian lives the mystery of God in his spirit and his heart (Ravier, 1995, p. 90).

Bruno did not have the opportunity to enjoy his solitude for long. In 1085 Pope Gregory VII died. In spite of all his hard work, the Church was in a distressing state. Urban II was elected in 1088 after his predecessor Victor III died shortly after his election. Urban had studied in Rheims, had been one of Bruno’s students (Ravier, 1995, pp.101-102).

Urban II was determined to surround himself with trustworthy men who he knew would have perfect fidelity to the Church and the works undertaken by Gregory II, and to involve them in the government of the Church. One of the people he selected was Bruno, and around the year 1089 Bruno left Chartreux for Rome (Ravier, 1995, pp. 102-104).

Bruno’s obedience to Urban II was complete and unconditional from the moment the order came, but it must have been a devastating event for him. The other hermits at Chartreuse panicked. They could not bear to continue without the man who was the soul of the operation and decided to end their experience and disband. Bruno tried in vain to convince them to persevere, but they had made their decision and separated. Bruno was then forced to make arrangements about the property he left behind. After having consulted Bishop Hugh of Grenoble, in whose jurisdiction the lands of Chartreuse lay, it was decided to return it to the abbey of Chaise-Dieux, in the person of its abbot, Seguin. During this time, Renaud du Bellay, the man who was offered the See of Rheims after Bruno refused it, requested a few monks be sent to the abbey of St Nicaise at Rheims as it was in need of reform. At this moment, Bruno had lost everything he had worked so hard for. He had endured hardships and given up everything to finally find peace in the solitude of Chartreuse, where he had found the deepest inspiration for his soul, the pure love of God and now, upon a command of the Pope, it was all gone (Ravier, 1995, pp. 105-107).

The hermits who had separated reflected on the words of Bruno and then suddenly started to doubt their decision. They got back in touch with each other and met with Bruno, who offered advice and urged them to stay at Charteuse and continue their spiritual journey together. He would be loyal to them from Rome and offer his advice and friendship. They then reversed their decision, and Bruno named Landuino their new prior. The problem was now that they no longer had possession of the Chartreuse. Asking for the land to be returned to them was rather embarrassing. The stability of Bruno was never in question but for outsiders it may have seemed that there was instability among the hermits and that there was an uncertainty about the future of the foundation (Ravier, 1995, pp. 108-113).

Bruno reached Rome in March of 1090. He had already decided to ask the Pope to be allowed to return to the Chartreuse or at least to solitude. The land had not yet been returned to them, and between March and April of 1090 Pope Urban II wrote a letter to Seguin urging him to allow the hermitage to be established again and to return the land to the hermits. Seguin obeyed immediately and in September 1090 the hermitage of Chartreuse was restored to its original condition. Even though he was far away, Bruno was not absent. Within ten years, the Chartreuse would be a testimony to the fervour and unity of his sons, the faithfulness of Landuino and the power of Bruno’s own invisible presence (Ravier, 1995, pp 110-113).

Bruno remained at the court of Urban II for about one year. The Pope decided to have Bruno appointed to the See of Reggio. Bruno refused firmly. As bishop, he would have had to involve himself permanently with worldly matters and soon, as a cardinal, he would be expected to accompany the Pope in his travels, take part in all the business and legal matters of the Church whilst being closely involved in papal diplomacy. This strongly conflicted with Bruno’s true vocation, his craving for solitude and interior tranquillity (Ravier, 1995, pp. 116-117). The Pope could have insisted and imposed the appointment on Bruno under pain of ecclesiastical censures, but he realised his old master’s special vocation. Bruno was allowed to follow the way of pure contemplation but was not allowed to return to Chartreuse. He had to remain in Italy (Ravier, 1995, pp. 116-121).

Bruno ended up in Calabria. Where would he find a wilderness, similar to the Chartreuse, that would be appropriate for the eremitical life? Urban II met Count Roger I, ruler of Sicily and Calabria in the small town of Mileto at the beginning of June 1091. He undoubtedly told Roger about Bruno’s plan and asked for his help. The wilderness of la Torre is only a few kilometres from Mileto.

The place where Bruno established his new hermitage was called Saint Mary of La Torre. It was a wilderness, located between the towns of Stylum and Arena, at an altitude of almost 800 meters. The property consisted of forest, meadows, pasture land, water and mills. Even though secluded, it was not as remote as Chartreuse.

Just as when he went up to Chartreuse, Bruno had companions. In the letter to Raoul le Verd, probably written around 1096, he describes his life:

I am living in the wilderness of Calabria far removed from habitation. There are some brethren with me, some of whom are very well educated and they are keeping assiduous watch for their Lord, so as to open to him at once when he knocks. I could never even begin to tell you how charming and pleasant it is. The temperatures are mild, the air is healthful; a broad plain, delightful to behold, stretches between the mountains along their entire length, bursting with fragrant meadows and flowery fields. One could hardly describe the impression made by the gently rolling hills on all sides, with their cool and shady glens tucked away, and such an abundance of refreshing springs, brooks and streams. Besides all this, there are verdant gardens and all sorts of fruit-bearing trees. (Letter of St Bruno to Raoul le Verd, Chartreux, no date)

Around this time, it is estimated that the small community must have numbered fifteen to twenty members, and when Bruno died, around 30. Even though Bruno sounds optimistic about his life in the letter, there were several frustrating factors for him regarding life in Calabria. When he founded Chartreuse, Bruno had obtained clear title to the property. No nobleman or abbey had any interest in them, as the lands were so poor and isolated. This gave him complete freedom to do whatever he wanted. Hugh of Grenoble stood by the hermits and if he ever intervened in their affairs, it was to help them keep their spirit. He fully understood Bruno’s ideal and made it his own. Full independence was considered so vital that in 1090, as soon as the community had come together again, both Bruno and Landuino worked tirelessly to ensure they regained complete control over the property where the hermitage was established (|Ravier, 1995, pp. 164-165).

Matters were very different in Calabria. Not only was the location of the hermitage quite different, it was not as secluded, it was more easily accessible and less rugged, Bruno and his sons were willingly or unwillingly committed to them by Count Roger. Even though Bruno and the Count showed mutual respect for each other, and some biographers used the word ‘friendship’ Bruno at times felt uncomfortable accepting donations and refused them where possible. Around 1114 Saint Mary of La Torre became a Cistercian monastery (Ravier, 1995, pp. 165-173).

At the end of his life, Bruno lost three people he was particularly close to. On July 29, 1099 Urban II died. On August 14, 1099 he was succeeded by Rainier, an elderly monk from Cluny and cardinal priest of the church of Saint Clement and a personal friend who had great respect for his foundation. Finally, in September of 1100, news reached Bruno that his faithful friend Landuino had died. Landuino, who had been there right from the start, to whom Bruno confided his trials and joys, the disciple who could be relied upon to entrust the foundation at Chartreuse at the heartbreaking moment he had to leave for Rome (Ravier, 1995, pp175-176). This was undoubtedly a devastating blow.

Nothing is known about the illness that caused Bruno’s death. His sons at Calabria wrote a letter saying his death was peaceful and during the preceding week, Bruno was eager to make his profession of faith. When he felt the hour of death was near, he called his brothers together and recalled all the stages of his life since infancy and the special events of his lifetime. After that, in a profound and detailed discourse, he expressed his faith in the Trinity and the holiness of transubstantiation. He passed away on the evening of the eight of October 1101 (Ravier, 1995, pp. 176-177).

**Carthusian order**

In the 1120s, the fifth head of the Chartreuse, Prior Guigo I (1083 -1136) created a written summary of its patterns of life which became known as the Customs, *Consuetudines Guigonis*, of the Chartreuse. From that moment we can truly speak of a Carthusian Order (Martin, 1997, pp. 3-4).

It was Bishop Hugh of Grenoble who had urged Guigo to write down a sort of rule to give a sound structure to Bruno’s work and legacy. Guigo at first was sceptical as he was unsure if he would be able to undertake this task. He was elected prior after eleven years, at the age of twenty-six. He was to write a rule that would be imposed on monks who were older than him and more experienced in the eremitical life. He also worried about interpreting Bruno’s vison accurately. However, the timing was excellent. Hugh of Grenoble was still present to verify Bruno’s intentions and authenticate the interpretations. Several of the first hermits who had known Bruno and seen how he lived were also still alive. Guigo hesitated for a long time, but then started his work. He did not want to make laws, but decided to codify the life as it was lived at Chartreuse under the title ‘*The Customs of Our House’*.

To describe the eremitical mystery, the vocation to live the contemplative life in the solitude and silence of a cell, Bruno used the word ‘Quies’, usually translated with ‘rest’. Ravier (1995, p.189) argues that does not clearly convey the divine dimension and richness of ‘Quies’. The ‘quiet’ of the Carthusian and faithfulness in exterior practices go together. ‘Quiet’ actually includes everything contained in our word ‘rest’; calm, peace, silence, orderly thinking, mastery of heart’s passions etc., but it contains infinitely more as it is the hidden movement of the Holy Spirit in the soul, it is a condition of the spirit together with a gift of grace. The soul strives, prepares and merits it, but it is conferred by God alone (Ravier, 1995, pp. 188-189).

In his letter to Raoul le Verd, Bruno writes:

Here they can observe a busy leisure and rest in quiet activity.[[7]](#footnote-7) (Chartreux, no date)

This shows and interesting paradox and indicates why it is so difficult to define and explain the eremitical mystery.

In *Customs*, Guigo also refers to Martha and Mary, a traditional theme among the Fathers of the Church (Ravier, 1995, p. 191). The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* also used the story of Martha and Mary to explain the sharp contrast between the actives and the contemplatives and why there will always be a distance between the two (Walsh, 1981, pp. 156- 165). Guigo explains how it is right for the Carthusians to take the role of Mary, at Jesus, feet, but sometimes, even though this is from a distance, it is right for them too, to perform some of the legitimate and holy actions of Martha, such as hospitality, almsgiving and service.

Guigo used his own learning, his creative literary talent, his fidelity to and admiration for Bruno as well as his love of solitude and contemplation. It took about six years to complete *Customs* (Ravier, 1995, pp. 185-187).

The Carthusian Order grew steadily throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By 1300 there were around 70 houses, and by 1500 there were about 200 monasteries. The eremitical lifestyle was also considered unusual at the time, and exercised an attraction and fascination. Saint Thomas More spent several years in the London Charterhouse before his marriage in 1505, and even as chancellor of England he would often return there for prayer and inspiration (Tanner, 2008, p. 49).

The Carthusians have survived many horrors, from wars and plagues to the Reformation and Vatican II. However, throughout the centuries, the wisdom of St Bruno and the power of his words have never changed. **Stat crux dum volvitur orbis**.

**1.1 Denys the Carthusian**

*Qui Dionysius legit, nihil non legit* was a saying in the sixteenth century; he who reads Dionysius, reads everything. Schnürer (1929, book III, p. 202) called Denys the last great spiritual writer of the Middle Ages. This chapter will explore the life and work of Denys the Carthusian, why he could be seen as controversial and why his legacy endures to this day.

**Early life and education.**

Denys the Carthusian, also known as Dionysius Cartusiani, Dennis van Rijckel, and Dionysius de Rijckele, the name under which he was registered at the University of Cologne, was born in the small village of Rijckel in 1402 (Teeuwen, 1938, pp. 13-14).[[8]](#footnote-8) His parents were called Van Leeuwen, descendants of a Flemish aristocratic family (Schnürer, 1929, book III, p. 201)[[9]](#footnote-9). The family was small, Denys had one brother named John and two sisters, whose names are unknown (Mougel, 1896, p. 7)[[10]](#footnote-10).

An interesting detail from his early years can be found in chapter 29 of his *Commentary of Genesis*. He writes:

I also in my childhood, before I began attending schools, kept and fed the sheep of my parents, and I was a very bad boy, fighting frequently in the field against other shepherds.[[11]](#footnote-11)

His first education was received at the small Benedictine School in St. Trond (St Truiden). Mougel (1896, p. 11)[[12]](#footnote-12) believes this was followed by further studies in Deventer, where he met Nicholas Creds, the future Cardinal de Cusa.[[13]](#footnote-13) Schnürer (1929, p. 202) believes this meeting took place at the Charterhouse in Roermond.

When he was eighteen, Denys sought admission to the Order of the Carthusians and approached two Charterhouses, in Zeelem and in Roermond. Both rejected him because of his young age, and the Charterhouse in Roermond recommended him to first study in Cologne for a few years (Teeuwen, 1938, p. 15).

Teeuwen (1938, pp. 15-16) states that according to Mougel, Denys went to Cologne in 1420, however, this is not consistent with the date of his registration at the University of Cologne, which was not before 20 December 1421. According to the statutes of the university, each student was to present himself *infra primam quindenam*, within the first fortnight, to the rector to take the oath and be registered. Nevertheless, it often occurred that students were registered much later and this was due to carelessness either from the part of the rector or the student himself.

Denys graduated in 1422 in ‘liberal arts.’ According to Emery (2010, pp. 145-146) Denys did not, properly speaking, study theology. It was a particular feature of the secular masters who taught in the *viae antiquae* at Cologne that they professedly taught philosophy via the theological *Summae* and commentaries of Thomas, Albert and other thirteenth century theologians. However, his considerable and extensive theological and exegetical works indicate strongly that in addition to philosophy, he also studied theology. This would have been against university regulations, as the statutes indicated that one could only progress to theological studies with the title *magister atrium* after the third year. However, the statutes were at times not very strictly applied which would enable a student to graduate from both faculties within that time frame (Teeuwen, 1938, pp. 17-18).

His first book is most likely a philosophical work, *De ente et essentia* which was written during the time of his studies in Cologne (Teeuwen, 1938, p. 17).[[14]](#footnote-14)

According to Mougel (1896, p. 16) Denys left Cologne in 1423 and joined the Carthusians in Roermond. He chose the name Dionysius, and, according to historians, no longer used his name Hendrik (Henri). He also rejected his aristocratic name Van Leeuwen and chose ‘Van Rijckel’ instead. Denys was appointed Bursar in the 1430s. By that time, he had already started an ambitious plan to comment on all the books of Scripture, beginning with a commentary on the Psalms, completed in 1434 (Turner, no date, pp. 1-2).

**Religious life and writings**

Mougel (1896, p. 16) states that the life of Denys can be summarised in three words: prayer, study and writing. He lived according to the Carthusian rule of solitude, silence, and seclusion, joining his brethren for the night office and the conventual Mass and occasionally for recreation, but otherwise staying in his cell where he said the remaining hours of the divine office privately. Denys believed the most perfect life to be a blend of contemplation and action, and divided his day into two, devoting the first part to prayer and the second to study and writing. This remained his pattern for almost fifty years, with only occasional interruptions. Pansters (2009, pp. 26-28) states that all aspects of Carthusian life are reflected in the theology of Denys the Carthusian. In his writings, he discusses every facet: Carthusian liturgy, the effects of vices and virtues, the handling of food and drinks, the spiritual orientation of the pious soul, the inner reformation, profession and obedience to superiors. However, he is keen to point out that all activities should be aimed primarily at solitude, quiet and silence, the meeting place of God. The Carthusian monk is a *solitarius*, and silence is his secret. In this silence God gradually makes him an equal to Himself. In silence, demons are driven away and angels come to his aid. God fights for the silent, in silence. True peace and true quiet are found in silence. In silence lies the secluded concentration of the inner self, where outer disturbances come to an end and where one can speak quietly with God.

Knowledge of his writings soon spread, and he was approached for advice and guidance by people of all conditions, religious, clerical and lay, and he was eager to comply with their requests. In spite of his reclusion, he was conscious of the troubles afflicting society of his time (Ni Riain, 2005, p. 9).

Emery (1996, pp. 101-102) states that in 1446, twenty-three years after Denys had entered the Charterhouse at Roermond, accusations were laid against him and another monk at the General Chapter. It is unknown what these were specifically, but the nature of the accusations can be inferred as in the same year, or shortly before, Denys was constrained to write a *Protestatio ad superiorem suum*. In this document, which has the form of an apology, Denys petitions to be allowed to continue his study and writing.[[15]](#footnote-15) Denys starts his apology by stating that it is the duty of a monk to mourn and be illumined rather than to teach or to illumine. This is directly inspired by the words of Hugh of St Victor, the twelfth century Parisian Victorine monk:

You will say, ‘but I wish to teach others.’ It is not your business to teach, but to weep. But if you desire to be a teacher, listen to what you must do. It is with your workaday dress, with the simplicity of your face, with the innocence of your life and with the holiness of your dealings with people that you must teach them. (Hugh of St. Victor, quoted in Turner, unpublished, pp. 4-5[[16]](#footnote-16))

However, in the twelfth century, the fifth prior of La Grande Chartreuse, Guigo I, codified the order’s *Customs* and included what may be seen as an appeal for monks to engage in the writing of books, for ‘we preach the word of God with our hands, since we may not do it by word of mouth’[[17]](#footnote-17) In spite of this approval, Denys’ writing was unparalleled and most likely Guigo I did not have this in mind.

Emery (1996, pp. 101-102) explains how Denys defends himself in the *Protestatio*. It is true that he has expounded sacred Scripture and is prepared to continue. His conscience tells him that he has not done this for a vain or vile purpose such as fame or worldly gain. On the contrary, through his heavy labour he learned humility, meekness and patience.[[18]](#footnote-18) He also answers the objection that the great Doctors and Holy Fathers have already expounded Scripture sufficiently by citing Jerome, Augustine and Jean Gerson; just as exterior taste differs among different persons in different times, so does interior taste. As a consequence, it is always apt to bring new dishes to the table of wisdom. Denys further emphasises that he has written for his personal sanctification and the edification of others.

Denys then lists the authors whose works he has studied:

I have been most studious and have read many authors, namely, [the commentaries] on the Sentence of Thomas, Albert, Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, Peter of Tarantaise, Giles [of Rome], Richard of Middleton, Durand [of St. Pourçain], and others. Also, the books of the saints: Jerome over all the prophets and many other volumes of his, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, Dionysius the Areopagite – my most elect teacher, Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Cyril, Basil, Chrysostom, the Damascene, Boethius, Anselm, Bernard, Bede, Hugh [of St. Victor], Gerson, William of Paris. Besides, I have read all of the popular *Summas* and Chronicles, the whole of the law-canon and civil- as much as was worthwhile for me, many commentators on both Testaments, and whatever natural philosophers I have been able to obtain, Plato, Proclus, Aristotle, Avicenna, Algazel, Anaxagoras, Averroes, Alexander, Alfarabi, Abubacer, Avempace, Theophrastus, Themistius and others. (Denys the Carthusian, quoted in Kent, 1996, p. 103)[[19]](#footnote-19)

Emery (1996, pp. 102-103) takes this statement to be a confession of crimes. Denys starts by mentioning the Doctors of the Church and also emphasises his admiration for Dionysius the Areopagite, ending with the pagan and heathen philosophers and writers. Denys states that he read all these and more to the mortification of sensuality and carnal desires. Denys was allowed to continue his work and he did so after 1452, resuming his scriptural commentary.

The fact that Emery views Denys’ statement as a confession of crimes is of particular interest when looking carefully at the names mentioned. Origen in particular is an extremely controversial choice as his books were still banned by the Church at this stage. Tyler, (2016, p. 78) states that the first disquiet with Origen’s teachings was expressed by Gregory of Nissa in 393 in an anti-Origenistic tract. This was taken up six years later at an Eastern synod held at Nitria in 399. The official condemnation of Origen’s work is not believed to have taken place at the Second Council of Constantinople as the anathemas of 533, discovered in 1672, do not explicitly mention Origen but the sixth century Origenist monks of Palestine. However, the Byzantine emperor Justinian was greatly disturbed by various elements of doctrinal excess he perceived in the contemporary Church, which he attributed in part to Origen’s teachings. Origen is explicitly condemned at the Council of Constantinople of 680, and the condemnation is upheld by all following Councils, right through to the Councils of Basel-Ferrara-Florence-Rome from 1431 to 1445. This means that Denys, in his *Protestatio*, openly confessed to studying a forbidden author.

Denys was quite unique in that he, on occasion, left the hermitage. In addition to having extensive knowledge and understanding of mysticism, hence his title *Doctor Ecstaticus* (Ecstatic Doctor), he wrote extensively about Scripture, early and medieval Christian authors, moral theology, and Islam. He was a visionary who warned against the dangers of Islam, and in 1451-1452 left his monastery to accompany his friend, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa to Germany in the cause of Church reform and to preach a crusade against the Turks (Tanner, 2008, pp. 49-50).[[20]](#footnote-20) This was a journey of seven months, which led through the Low Countries and the Rhineland, during which they visited parishes and religious communities to encourage renewal and reform. According to Emery (1996, pp. 103-104) the trip afforded visits to monastic centres of learning at Egmont, Liège, Mainz, and Trier, nearby the Cardinal’s own Hospital, as well as the university city of Cologne. In these places Denys would have been able to see the kinds of books not owned by his monastery. Furthermore, there is strong reason to believe that Denys was able to take advantage of Cusa’s splendid library.

Schnürer (1929, book III, p. 202) argues that Denys was the last great spiritual writer of the Middle Ages, who, without compromise, summarised his thinking, feeling, praying, and striving in his works. The comprehensiveness of his writings shows that he did not limit himself to contemplative or monastic knowledge, but that he had an interest in all world events, and did not neglect, as far as he could, to work for the renewal of the Church in accordance with the teachings of ancient times. He did not just sit back in his cell pondering the iniquity of the world, he wanted improvements, and he preached and wrote treatises with remarkable steadfastness, not just about theological and philosophical questions. From a religious perspective, he was also interested in worldly governments, lay people and the overall wellbeing of Christianity, particularly as it was under threat due to the Fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Denys was particularly distraught over the loss of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and, as an act of repentance, he led the formation of a Charterhouse dedicated to St Sophia in ˈs-Hertogenbosch, where he became the first prior. Fuelled by the explicit visons and warnings he experienced, he continued to strive towards reforms in the Church, writing letters to Bishops and even to Rome. He was deeply distressed about the depravity of many of the clergy and with the terrible consequences of their actions and felt compelled to warn of the wrath of God and urge all people, from all sections of society, both clergy and laypeople, to repent and redeem themselves (Schnürer, 1929, book III, p. 202).

Denys addressed two of his works to Cusa, the *Monopanton* and an *Epilogatio in librum Job: Tractatulus de causa diversitatis eventuum humanorum*. The latter, written ‘ad instantiam Reverendissimi D. Cardinalis de Cusa’, treats questions concerning the influence of divine justice, fortune and the stars in human affairs. Scholars relate several other works of Denys to his friendship with Cusa. [[21]](#footnote-21)

In addition to his friendship with Nicholas of Cusa, another important person in his life should be mentioned, namely Jan Brugman.

Brugman was born in Kempen and died at Nijmegen in 1473. He entered the Franciscan Order at an early age and became a lecturer of theology at the convent of St Omer. From then on, for twenty years, he travelled throughout The Netherlands to announce the Word of God. He was such a powerful speaker that even now, after more than five centuries, a well-known Dutch proverb *‘Praten als Brugman’* (To speak like Brugman) means to speak with great eloquence and persuasion (Mougel, 1896, p. 54).

Brugman greatly admired Denys for his knowledge and holiness and asked him to write him a book. He was quite specific in his request; the first part was to be based on Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Fathers, exposing the duties of all Christians, as Christians. The second part was to discuss the special obligations of each, in accordance with the requirements of his position. Because this book was to provide Brugman with material for his sermons, he urged his friend to make haste and concentrate on the needs of the simple clergy and the people, rather than the ecclesiastical dignitaries. Denys obliged, and wrote *De doctrina et regulis vitae christianae,* which he dedicated to Brugman (Mougel, 1896, p. 55).

In the book, Denys calls Brugman his beloved brother, and uses his name to praise him. The Dutch word ‘brug’ means bridge. He writes how Brugman is a man of the bridge, who tirelessly and wisely, with clear words and examples, is able to open and show a bridge, by which passing the bitterness and turbulence of the most tempestuous sea can lead to the most pleasant and most quiet port of eternal salvation (Dionysii Carthusiani, 1910, Vol. 39, Tomus VII, pp. 500-501).

**Death**

In 1458 Denys played an important part in the reconciliation of the Duke of Guelders with his son. Stoelen (1964, p. 221) argues that there is no documentation that supports the assumption that Denys went to see the Duke and made him agree to an interview with his son. Rather, the role of Denys was purely spiritual. He prayed and received through an angel a message from God, which he transmitted to both parties. From then on, he was known as ‘the man who speaks with the angels.’

In 1465 Denys left Roermond again to help found a new Charterhouse in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, (Bois le Duc) which he governed from 1466 to 1469 when failing health forced him to resign. He returned to Roermond after four years, a sick man. It was here he died at the age of sixty-nine in 1471 (Ni Riain, 2005, pp. 9-10).

Mougel (1896, p. 24) states that two words characterised Denys’ approach to life, science, and piety. He left a legacy of one hundred and eighty-seven volumes. Denys remained very popular, long after his death. When after 1530 his books were published in Cologne they were seen as a sort of encyclopaedia for the pioneers of the Counter Reformation. Ni Riain (2013, p. 8) states that some scholars believe he may have influenced Ignatius of Loyola, which is not improbable given the fact that Ignatius studied and obtained a degree at the University of Paris (1534-1537).

The tomb of the *Doctor Ecstatic*us was opened long after his death, and it was found that the finger and thumb which had for so long and remorselessly guided his quill pen were incorrupt. Death had respected them (Ni Riain, 2013, p. 9).

The relics of Denys the Carthusian and the martyrs of 1572 were sent for safekeeping to the family Clocquet, local pharmacists. The eldest son of this family, Antonius Jacobus Josephus Clocquet, was first a chaplain at the Cathedral Church of Roermond. When he became priest of Swalmen in 1806, he brought the relics along and they were kept under the altar of St. Georgius. At some point, most likely after the death of Father Clocquet in 1825, they were handed over to the Cathedral of Roermond. From there, in 1858, they were returned to the church of the former Charterhouse, that was now being used as a seminary [[22]](#footnote-22)(Nissen, 2009, p. 76).

**Writings**

For Carthusians, books have always been extremely important, and each Charterhouse had a considerable library. Books were considered essential as they nurture and sustain the monk throughout his life. Also, as Carthusians for the most part never leave the hermitage, this is their way to preach the Gospel. The writing of manuscripts was an important part of Carthusian life. The printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1436, and by 1477 the Carthusians were printing; at least fifteen monasteries possessed printing equipment. They did not just print books, they wrote them. In 1881 a Carthusian author stated that there were at least 800 Carthusian authors. Of all these authors, Denys was perhaps the most prolific writer of the Middle Ages (Klein Maguire, 2006, p. 29).

As Denys was aware that certain books were attributed to him that he did not write, he himself created a list of his works. His fellow brethren also encouraged him to do this. There are several lists written by him, one of which is part of the collection of the Bodleian Library in Oxford.[[23]](#footnote-23) This list was written in 1466 and contains a total number of 118 works. Another list is kept in the library of Trier, which mentions 141 books.[[24]](#footnote-24) It is suggested that Denys wrote a third list, which included 143 works. The list included by Loër van Stratum in the publication of Cologne of 1535 mentions 187 works attributed to Denys (Teeuwen, 1929, pp. 22-23).

How could a Carthusian monk write so many books? Denys himself attributed his production to the goodness of the Holy Spirit, and his strong health must have also helped. However, a Carthusian monk lived according to a strict schedule, obliged to recite the office for many hours a day and also attend to other appointed duties. According to Anselm Stoelen, fifteenth century Carthusian observance was different from the modern. Denys would have had an hour between lauds and prime and a few more before matins unavailable to the modern monk.[[25]](#footnote-25) Still, it is an incredible achievement when considering Denys not only worked alone, without any secretaries, but also authored, wrote, and copied each work himself. His superiors often wanted to retain copies of his works in the library and to have others for circulation, which is why Denys often made two copies of many of his texts (Emery, 1982, p. 124)[[26]](#footnote-26).

**Conclusion**

St. Hugh’s Charterhouse in Horsham, West Sussex, has the entire range of works by Denys for sale, a total of 42 volumes. Their website states that the writings of Denys were so orthodox that they went through 20 editions during the Reformation period.[[27]](#footnote-27) During the Counter Reformation, Denys’ works were republished and held in high regard as being true to the teachings of the Church. However, the works that were of a practical nature were republished most often. The Commentaries on the New Testament were reprinted 17 to 21 times, the sermons 4 times, several short writings on sin and reform of the Church had some success, the treatise on the last things had 3 editions in the 15th century, 24 in the 16th and 8 in the 17th. On the other hand, *De Contemplatione*, Denys’ masterpiece on mystical theology, was not reprinted until 1894. *The Fountain of Light and the Paths of Life*, which is a relatively short text, was printed with other pamphlets and as a result of that, had 11 editions (Stoelen, 1961, Tome 3, Colonne 430).

Denys the Carthusian was a truly unique man. Even though it was not unusual for Carthusians to write, their work was typically about contemplative life and nobody wrote so prolifically. Denys wrote about everything and was not afraid to use a wide variety of sources to inspire him, from Christian sources to works of heathen authors. He had a keen awareness of the outside world and the problems faced by the Church at the time. His friendships with men like Brugman and Cusa, who travelled extensively and also had access to a wide range of books, would have given him the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas.

Schnürer (1929, book III, pp. 201-202) states that Denys led everything back to the Heart of Jesus. In his commentary on Genesis 19, ‘*Foderuntque in torrente, et repererunt aquam vivam*.’[[28]](#footnote-28) He wrote that the torrent is the heart of Christ, in which all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God are hidden. This is where the Evangelists and Apostles dug, because they drew from the source, that is in the chest of the Lord, whatever they understood correctly and wrote. They found living water in the stream, that is the teaching of the Evangelical laws, heavenly grace, and the exceeding riches of the Holy Spirit. Denys was able to combine a life of true contemplation with the pursuit of intellectual wisdom. Perhaps that is his greatest achievement of all.

**Contemporary views on Denys.**

In his chapter on Carthusian theology, Pansters (2009, pp. 23-28) argues that given the fact that Denys based his writings on a seemingly never ending supply of intellectual predecessors, his work can be considered a reflection of medieval theology, particularly because of its widespread distribution and considerable reprint.

Zuidema (2009, pp. 52-53) states that the Carthusians left a strong impression on many aspects of medieval theology and she describes two of them. Firstly, the way in which they paid attention .to the earthly life of Christ. They spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on the life of Jesus which allowed them to see His divine glory. This devotion was further developed by the Devotio Moderna. A second development within medieval spirituality strongly influenced by the Carthusians is the speculative mysticism. The emphasis in medieval mysticism was mostly on affectivity and experience on one hand and speculation and the intellect on the other. Hugh of Balma mainly emphasised affectivity and experience. With Denys, the emphasis shifted, in the late Middle Ages, to speculation and use of the intellect. In his writings theological teaching is the centre of meditation in general and intellective meditation in particular. In line with his Carthusian predecessors, he considers meditation to be the stage in the spiritual life of the monk that precedes the final stage of divine unity in contemplation. Denys’ theory of meditation is strongly influenced by the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, and he believes that the intellectual part of the soul is able to see the secrets of faith without a veil.

Nissen (2009, p. 163) argues that Denys can be seen as a compiler of work who created a sort of Readers Digest of classic and Christian philosophy and theological tradition. Schnürer (1929, pp. 203-204) calls Denys the last scholastic of the Middle Ages, who still seeks and finds the unity of all knowledge in the scholastic system without taking up new suggestions. In his extensive collection of work, he shows himself to be very well informed about the great traditions of Christian teaching, which he wants to remain completely untouched by the new directions that appeared at the time, by the move to the classic form of the Latin language and to a greater emphasis on historically critical or scientific research. He considers it his task to present the greatest speculative legacy of the medieval scholars in the harmonious combination of theory and practice, doctrine and asceticism whereby he wants all the great authors of the past to have their say and be considered valid.

This chapter explored the life of Denys and his writings. The next chapters will discuss his mystical work *De Contemplatione, Gifts of the Holy Spirit* and his defence of Jan Ruusbroec. I will demonstrate why Denys the Carthusian was rightly called *Doctor Ecstaticus*, and how the fact that he allowed himself to explore a wide variety of sources enabled him to create work that remains as relevant today as when it was first written. His main influences will be further explored with an emphasis on the work of Jan Ruusbroec, who became a second Dionysius the Areopagite for him.

**1.2 Jan Ruusbroec**

**Birth, early life, education**

Jan Ruusbroec was born in the year 1293 in the village of Ruusbroec. A true biography of him is not available. The main source available is *De origine monasterii Viridisvallis* (The origin of the monastery of Groenendael) written by Henrik Utenbogaerde (circa 1382 - 1469), mainly known under his Latin name Henricus Pomerius. He entered Groenendael around 1412 and was a prior of the monastery from 1431 to 1432. This text was written between 1414 and 1420, more than thirty years after the death of Jan Ruusbroec. As it is a strongly hagiographical description of the mystic’s life rather than purely historical, it is to be used with some caution (De Baere, Mertens in Ruusbroec[[29]](#footnote-29), 2014, p. 11).

Another valuable source was written by Brother Geraert van Saintes (died 1377), a monk at the Charterhouse in Herne, Belgium. He wrote a relatively short prologue to a selection of texts by Ruusbroec that he had copied for the library of his monastery. Ruusbroec had visited the monastery circa 1362 to discuss controversies regarding his work, and Brother Geraert wrote solely to ensure the texts were understood correctly and the author was no longer under suspicion of any heresy. It was not to create a biography. An important difference between Pomerius and brother Geraert is that Pomerius never personally knew Ruusbroec, but brother Geraert did. Another person who knew him and corresponded with him was Geert Groote, who will be discussed later in this chapter (Faesen, 2007, pp. 11-12).

According to his biographers, Jan Ruusbroec left his parental home at an early age to move in with his uncle Jan Hinckaert, who was a chaplain at the collegiate of St Gudula in Brussels. He went to school and followed the *trivium:* *grammatica*, *retorica* and *dialectica*. It is not known which university he attended. Pomerius appears to imply that he did not do this but, just as Saint Benedict, preferred divine wisdom to human science that would lead to high prestige jobs. However, it is impossible, given the nature and quality of his writings, and the fact that he was ordained, that he stopped his education after the trivium. He might have studied at the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris, but the page which shows the entries of that time is missing. Ruusbroec has undoubtedly received an excellent intellectual education but unfortunately it is uncertain where (Faesen, 2007, pp. 13-14). Ruusbroec was ordained in 1317 when he was around twenty-four and became chaplain at the same church as his uncle, a post he held for 25 years. Pomerius describes him as a calm and quiet man, shabbily dressed but with impeccable manners, who preferred the peace of reflection over outward activities (Faesen, 2007, p. 15).

Jan Ruusbroec and his uncle would be joined by a young chaplain, Frank van Coudenberg, who moved in with them and gave up the income the Church provided him in favour of a simpler lifestyle. All three desired to leave the city and were provided with land by Duke Jan III of Brabant. Initially, their goal was to live there and build a chapel and a house for five religious men. The bishop had appointed Frank van Coudenberg priest of the chapel. They lived like this for seven years.[[30]](#footnote-30) Had they wanted to, they would have been able to join several religious orders in the area, but Jan Ruusbroec was very critical of many of them, accusing them of having abandoned their original religious zeal. The notable exception for him were the Carthusians. Eventually, however, an Augustinian monastery was formed at Groenendael in 1350 (Faesen, 2007, pp. 20-24). It was important to accept a religious rule as the site had previously been inhabited by different hermits since 1304, who were secular priests who lived in common without this, attracting kindred spirits. This led to criticism and suspicion. Ruusbroec became the first prior and Frank van Coudenberg the first provost (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 13).

**Career, Writings, how were they received, chronology of translations**

The exact chronological order in which Ruusbroec wrote his works is not exactly known, but it is clear that he started writing in Brussels and he wrote solely on contemplation (Faesen, 2007, p. 16)

Jan Ruusbroec lived in a particularly tumultuous era. The Great Famine, the Hundred Years’ War, and the Black Death killed many millions of people throughout Europe. Also, there was a crisis in the Church with the Babylonian Captivity of the Popes in Avignon, followed by the Western Schism, whereby several men claimed to be the lawful Pope. Many bishops were criticised for being occupied with accumulating wealth rather than following Christ’s example. Also, illiteracy amongst the lower clergy resulted in poor preaching. These conditions provided a breeding ground for heretical sects. One of these sects was that of the Free Spirits. John of Schoonhoven, who entered Ruusbroec’s religious community in 1378, four years before the mystic’s death, wrote a letter responding to Jean Gerson’s criticism of certain aspects of Ruusbroec’s teachings. This letter, composed in the first decade of the fifteenth century, states that God, at one point, had endowed Ruusbroec with special gifts, ‘in order that he might eradicate and expose the errors of the sect of those Free Spirits who during his lifetime had been greatly multiplying in Brabant and neighbouring regions.’ (Wiseman, 1985, pp. 3-4). This correspondence will be further discussed in the next chapter. Similarly, Brother Geraert wrote that in these days ‘there was a great need for holy and complete teaching written in the Dutch language, particularly because hypocrites and groups with unorthodox and false teachings attracted attention’ (Faesen, 2007, p. 16).

**Free Spirit**

Writing about the Free Spirit is difficult because it never constituted a well-defined sect. According to Gordon Leff, a British historian who specialises in the study of medieval heresy, the heresy of the Free Spirit was really as state of mind as much as a settled body of doctrine. Some leading twentieth century historians of spirituality suggest that the term is best used to refer simply to a number of independent, though similar, phenomena. However, between 1262 and 1280, Albert the Great wrote *Compilatio de novo spiritu*, which contains ninety-seven propositions claimed to be characteristic of the heresy. It is not known how he obtained these propositions and the text contains many repetitions and contradictions (Wiseman[[31]](#footnote-31), 1985, p.5)

Written in Old French around the beginning of the fourteenth century, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is considered one of the most important testimonies of Free Spirit thought[[32]](#footnote-32). Although the work has been known to students of mysticism for many centuries, it was only correctly identified by Romana Guarnieri as the work of Margaret Porete in 1946 (Wiseman, 1985, p. 5).

Margaret Porete was a French beguine who died at the stake after having been condemned of heresy in 1310. The work is written in the form of a dialogue between Love and Reason and concerns the conduct of a soul. A major theme is that of extreme passivity in religious conduct. At one point, the liberated soul exclaims: ‘Virtues, I take leave of you forever’, and this statement is repeated a number of times throughout the work. At another point, Love says of the soul that ‘this daughter of Zion has no desire for Masses or sermons, for fasting and prayers’ and then proceeds to explain the reason for this lack of desire: ‘Why should this soul desire the things named above, since God is just as present everywhere without these things as with them?’ (Wiseman, 1985, pp. 5-6).

Three major points appear typical of the ideas of the Free Spirit. Firstly, the disparaging of the sacramental mediation of the Church. Secondly, autotheism, the belief in the possibility of a person’s total identification with God on earth and thirdly, the idea that this identification can be lasting rather than temporary (Wiseman, 1985, p. 6).

The second and third point are very strongly present in another Free Spirit work, known as *Sister Catherine*. This work, most likely written in Strasbourg in the first half of the fourteenth century, was originally composed in Alemannic but it was soon translated into other Germanic dialects as well as Latin. It claims to describe the relationship between a beguine named Catherine and her confessor, the famous German mystic Meister Eckhart. In the treatise, Catherine proclaims, ‘Sir, rejoice with me, I have become God’. She later tells her confessor that this is a permanent identification:

‘I am confirmed in the bare Godhead, in which there is neither form nor image.’ ‘Are you there for good?’ he asked. She answered, ‘Yes… I am as I was before I was created: just God and God… In God there is nothing but God. No soul gets to God until it is God, as it was before it was made.’ (Wiseman, 1985, p. 6)

According to McGinn (2012, p. 30) Ruusbroec, like many mystics of his time, was deeply concerned about the dangers presented by the Free Spirit heretics. However, unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not believe that the contact with God claimed by the Free Spirits was fictitious, feigned or always the product of demonic spirits, although demons could make use of it to deceive humans. He believed a human person without charity was sufficiently demonic to misuse the essential presence of God within the soul for evil purposes. The fact that he uses the difference between the true and false forms of attaining inner contact with God in almost all his works shows that he considered this to be a serious danger.

**The Meister Eckhart controversy**

An important event that occurred in 1329, when Ruusbroec was 36 years old, was the Meister Eckhart controversy that saw several of the German mystic’s statements condemned by the papal court in Avignon (Faesen, 2007, p. 52).

Even though Meister Eckhart is an important figure, neither his date of birth or death are known, nor even his first name. He may have been born before 1260 in Tambach, near Gotha, and joined the Dominicans in Erfurt, where he received is first education. He later studied with the Dominicans in Cologne and also in Paris. He was entrusted with several important roles: he was a prior in Erfurt, provincial superior of the newly created province of Saxonia and professor in Paris. He stayed in Paris for different periods and in the years 1311-1313 he lived in the same community as William of Paris, one of the people who condemned Margarete Porete. It was in this period that the Council of Vienne condemned the heretic ideas of the beguines. After his final stay in Paris, Meister Eckhart was sent to Strasbourg. Pope Clemens IV had decided that it was important for female religious to be guided by *fratres doctres*, ‘educated brothers’, who did not only possess good intentions and religious zeal but also had adequate theological competence. As Meister Eckhart was known to be an educated man, he was entrusted with the spiritual care of a large number of female religious in Strasbourg (Faesen, 2007, pp. 52-53).

Faesen (2006, p.53) argues that even though the instructions and sermons as well as his academic writings are very valuable and offer a clear insight into his spiritual profile, the most valuable of all are the *cura monialium*. This is because they were written for communities of religious women who were well versed with the contemplative literary tradition. This enabled Eckhart to speak freely. His texts are rather suggestive and provocative. It appears that through his sometimes enigmatic, provocative writing, he wants to ‘break open’ the thinking, in order for the ‘breakthrough’ (*Durchbruch*)[[33]](#footnote-33) on account of God to be taken seriously. This is what contemplative theology aimed to achieve for centuries, and a good example of Eckhart’s meaning can be found and the start of his sermon *Intravit Jesus in templum.*

We read in the Holy Gospel that our Lord went into the temple and was throwing out those who were buying and selling, and he said to others who had doves and the likes for sale: ‘Get rid of this, put it away!’ (Jn. 2:16) Why was Jesus throwing out those who were buying and selling and why did he tell those who had doves to get rid of them? His intention was none other than to have the temple empty, just as though He were to say: ‘I have a right to this temple and want to be in it and to rule in it alone.’ What does this mean? This temple in which God wants to rule mightily according to His will is the human soul which he formed and created exactly like Himself, as we read that our Lord said: ‘Let us make man according to our image and likeness’ (Gn. 1:26). And He did this, too. So like Himself did He make the human soul that neither in heaven nor on earth, of all the wonderful creatures that God made so attractive, are there any as like Him as the human soul. This is why God wants to have this temple empty-so that no one is in it but Him alone. And this is why this temple pleases Him so much: because it is so exactly like Him and He is so very comfortable in this temple when He is in it alone.

(McGinn, 1986, p. 239)

Faesen (2007, p. 55) argues that it could be claimed that Eckhart in his sermons wanted to achieve that all intellectual barriers would be cleared from the temple of the soul in order for Christ to have this temple entirely to Himself. In fact, Eckhart is only wanting to continue the tradition of contemplative theology. However, during Eckhart’s lifetime, these thoughts became problematic.

In the year 1326 a list, compiled of statements made by Eckhart that were considered dubious, was presented to the bishop of Cologne, and Eckhart was invited to defend himself against the allegations. Certain groups, in particular that of the Free Spirit, had used some of Eckhart’s ideas to justify their heretic beliefs. The ideas had been taken out of context and, particularly, removed from the tradition of the contemplative theology, which Eckhart assumed would be present (Faesen, 2007, p. 55).

In March 1329, twenty-eight propositions taken from the work of Meister Eckhart were condemned in the Bull *In agro dominico*. Davies (1990, p. 433) argues that *In agro dominico* stands out from other such condemnatory Bulls because firstly, it was the first and only occasion when the full machinery of the Inquisition was used against a member of the Dominican Order and secondly, it was the first and only time in which a theologian of the first rank[[34]](#footnote-34) was charged with the *inquisitio haereticae pravitatis*: the most serious accusation which the Inquisition had at its disposal and the one which carried the heaviest penalties.

In 1313 Eckhart moved from Paris to Strasburg where he did not hold a teaching post at the Dominican Convent, rather he seemed to have been serving as Vicar-General of the Province with oversight of the many women’s convents in the South German area. In the period 1313-1323 there were three nunneries in the immediate vicinity of the friars in the centre of the city, Turm, Offenburg and Innenheim. All three had originally been Beguine houses which had been accepted by the Dominican order before the year 1276. In 1304 Mollesheim joined and in 1323 Spiegel. By the end of the fourteenth century there were around eighty-five Beguine houses attached to the Dominican Order (Davies, 1990, pp. 438-439). When Eckhart arrived in Cologne, he became a person of interest to the Archbishop, who was a close ally of the Bishop of Strasburg and well-known for his zealous pursuit of groups he suspected of heresy. In addition to his role in Strasburg, it was during his Strasburg years that Eckhart began presenting some of his radical ideas in German, which had long been part of his Latin writings. Some of these articles could be read by uneducated or the unsympathetic as being dangerously close to some of the precepts of the Free Spirit which the Archbishop believed to be a significant threat among the Beguines (Davies, 1990, p. 440).

Faesen (2007) states that in particular the Free Spirit used several statements from Eckhart to justify their dubious teachings. Eckhart’s statements were taken out of context especially from the tradition of contemplative theology that he assumed to be present. In *The Spiritual Espousals* Ruusbroec describes how all creatures desire peace. It becomes obvious from the descriptions of contemplation that its features are profound joy and happiness. In *lectio*, *meditatio* and *ornatio* man is active but in contemplation it is God who takes the initiative; man receives. The Free Spirit movement believed this inner peace to be the end goal specifically. They thought all active, true love for God and neighbour good for beginners but not for those who were proficient, which is not at all what Ruusbroec meant. However, they used several statements from Eckhart to justify their vision:

A good man is the only begotten son of God

The Father begot me as his son, and as the Son himself. Everything God creates is one: therefore he begot me, his Son, without distinction.

(Eckhart, in J. Quint, Deutsche Werke I, p.p. 109-110, quoted in Faesen, 2007, p. 58)

What Eckhart meant was that Christ becomes present in man, and allows man to share in His life, namely the life that consists of being ‘beloved Son of the Father’. However, if it is explained to mean that every good man is God’s son on his own, a good man would no longer need Christ, which is definitely not what Eckhart meant (Faesen, 2007, p. 58).

The process against Meister Eckhart initially took place in Cologne. He defended himself, explained that some of his declarations were misunderstood and he indicated how they should be understood correctly. After having made a public declaration, he appealed to the Pope and pleaded his case. Most likely, he would have travelled to Avignon. During his lifetime, there was no sentencing. After his death, on March 27th 1329, *In agro Dominico* was decreed in which some of Eckhart’s ideas were condemned and of others it was said they could be misunderstood. Eventually, Eckhart himself was not condemned, and neither was his overall work. The theological committee did indicate that the ideas could damage the hearts of simple people when preached to them. They were referring to people who were uneducated and particularly those who were unfamiliar with the tradition of contemplative theology. It is clear, however, that Eckhart always intended his work to be heard and read by those with a solid spiritual knowledge and understanding. When Jan Ruusbroec started writing, *In agro Domenico* was already decreed and this would have influenced his style of writing which was not as confrontational and controversial but more descriptive and careful. In order to understand Ruusbroec’s theology properly, it is important to bear this in mind (Faesen, 2007, 59).

**Bloemaerdinne**

According to Pomerius, Ruusbroec expressed strong disapproval of a mysterious female teacher, possibly a beguine, named Heilwig Bloemarts (or Bloemaerdinne) (McGinn, 2012, p. 6). Pomerius describes her as a heretic woman who wrote extensively on the Free Spirit and founded a new doctrine. She was highly revered by her many followers, and Ruusbroec was deeply concerned about this development. Despite considerable resistance, he revealed her heresies protected by the shield of truth. This description has contributed strongly to the fact that Ruusbroec is seen as a fighter of heretics (Faesen, 2007, pp. 16-17).

Faesen argues that there are two reasons why this requires correction. Firstly, Pomerius has made a very strange error. Even though there was a lady called Bloemaerdinne who lived in Brussels, in the same street as Ruusbroec, she was not a heretic. She was a woman who had founded a home for the elderly, which was taken over, after her death, by the Church. Her death was commemorated every year with a special Mass and there is no indication whatsoever that she had any connection to the Free Spirit or any other questionable organisation. There are several theories on the true identity of the woman in question, and it might very well be Margaret Porete. In his writings, Ruusbroec uses parts of her book to indicate they have been misinterpreted, something he also did with certain sentences from Eckhart’s work (Faesen, 2007, pp. 17-18).

Secondly, the idea of Ruusbroec as a notorious fighter of heretics is unjustified. Although he corrects misinterpretation of particular mystical writings, he often thinks and writes in a very similar way. It is very well possible that this idea has been emphasised to protect Ruusbroec from attacks and accusations of being a heretic himself (Faesen, 2007, p. 19).

**Description of works**

*The Kingdom of Lovers (Dat rijcke der ghelieven)* is believed to be Ruusbroec’s first book, written in the early 1330s whilst he was still a chaplain. The longest section of this work concerns the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are compared to the seven streams by which the Spirit leads a truly righteous person to eternal life (Wiseman, 1985, p. 7).

Faesen (2007, p. 65) states that the ‘lovers’ are God and man, and this work, as well as al his others, could basically be seen as the exploration of this one theme: the love meeting of God as God and man as man. The work is built up around one sentence, taken from a book of hours: *Iustum deduxit dominus per vias rectas et ostendit illi regum.* Ruusbroec adjusted this slightly to: *Die here heeft weder leidet den gherechten die gherechte weeghe, ende hevet hem ghetoent dat rike Gods*. (Faesen, 2007, p. 66. The Lord led the just back along the right ways and showed him the realm of God (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 79).

Ruusbroec never intended this book to be published and, according to Brother Geraert, was not entirely satisfied with it. He was therefore surprised to learn that the Carthusian monks at Brother Geraerts’ monastery possessed a copy of it when he visited them in 1362. It had been given to them by a priest who had formerly been his secretary. Rather than request them to return the copy, he indicated that he would write another work to clarify and elucidate any points that caused concern (Wiseman, 1985, p. 7). The title of this book is *Dat boecsken der verclaringhe*, *The little book of clarification*. This will be discussed in further detail later on in this chapter.

His second work is believed to be *The Spiritual Espousals*, *Die gheestelike brulocht*. Ruusbroec may not have been satisfied with his first work, but his attitude towards his second book was completely different. Brother Geraert wrote that he considered it altogether reliable and good, and that this work had already become widely known and read during the mystic’s lifetime (Wiseman, 1985, p. 7). Rulman Merswin, a tradesman and banker from Strasbourg, who devoted his life to God in 1347, wrote that he received a copy of *The Spiritual Espousals* in 1350. Shortly after this, Willem Jordeans, a member of the monastery in Groenendael, translated the book into Latin and it spread quickly (Faesen, 2007, p. 71).

As in his first work, the book starts around one sentence, this time taken from Scripture, Matthew 25:6. *Siet, de brudegom comt; gaet ute hem te ontmoete*. (Faesen, 2007, p. 71) ‘Behold the bridegroom cometh, go ye forth to meet him’ (Douay Rheims). Ruusbroec distinguishes four elements that he considers to be essential for Christian life. *Siet* refers to spiritual perception. This immediately emphasises the contemplative nature of his theology, but it is fundamentally linked to the fact that there is also effectively something to see, namely the arrival of Christ, the bridegroom (*de brudegom comt*). The third element, *gaet ute*, is for Ruusbroec the ‘stepping out of one’s self’ of man as an answer to the initiative of God, who approaches man. The fourth element, ‘to meet Him’ (*hem te ontmoete*) is the foundation of Ruusbroec’s theology; the love meeting between God and man (Faesen, 2007, p. 72).

These four elements are described at three different levels. The soul is divided in three levels. The first concerns the five senses the second relates to intellect, will and memory. The third is the most profound dimension, it is the fact that man exists as a creature and because of this is continuously connected with God and cannot exist without the continuous and direct contact with the Creator. Ruusbroec calls this third dimension *wesen*, which could be translated as the ‘being’, the ‘existing’ or ‘existence’. God, being the Creator of this *wesen*, is higher, which is why Ruusbroec refers to Him as *overwesen* (Faesen, 2007, pp. 72-73).

The sentence *Siet, de brudegom comt; gaet ute hem te ontmoete* is analysed at three levels. The first concerns human activities, called ‘the working life’. The second concerns the inner attraction to God, who is actively present in the *wesen*. This is called the life that longs for God. The third level is when the contemplative man experiences God as source of his existence (Faesen, 2007, p. 73)

The third level was to become the source of considerable criticism and led to accusations of pantheism. Jean Gerson expressed his theological objections for the first time around 1398. This will be discussed in an upcoming chapter (Faesen, 2007, p. 74)

The third book is believed to be *Vanden blinckenden steen*, *The sparkling stone*. (Faesen, 2007, p. 76). The title refers to the book of Apocalypse:

He, that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches: To him that overcometh, I will give the hidden manna, and will give him a white counter, and in the counter, a new name written, which no man knoweth, but he that receiveth it.  (Douay Rheims, Apocalypse 2:17)

Ruusbroec uses the word ‘sparkling’ for the white counter (stone) which he sees as Christ being given to man (Faesen, 2007, p. 77).

According to Brother Geraert, this book was written by Ruusbroec in response to a request from a hermit with whom he had discussed spiritual matters and who had asked him to write these matters down so he and others could benefit from them (Wiseman, 1985, p. 22).

Whereas in his previous work Ruusbroec spoke of a threefold division in the Christian life, (the active, interior, and contemplative lives), he speaks here of four characteristics that make the most perfect kind of Christian (Wiseman, 1985, p. 23):

A man who wants to live in the most perfect state offered by the Holy Church must be a zealous and good man, and an inward and spiritual man, and an uplifted man contemplating God, and an outflowing, common man. If a man combines these four things his state is perfect and it will grow and increase always in grace and all virtues and knowledge of truth before God and all men of reason. (Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, p.237)

He also distinguishes between hired servants, faithful servants, secret friends, and hidden sons. (Ruusbroec, 2014, pp. 243-246) The emphasis of this book seems more on questions relating to contemplative life, which corresponds well with the statement of Brother Geraert, namely that it was written to help those seeking a life of contemplation.

The fourth book, *Vanden kersten ghelove*, *The Christian Faith*, is a short treatise which uses the Nicene Creed as its basis and elucidates each point carefully. It is written in a very clear yet profound manner and ends with a stark warning to abandon sins and choose God (Ruusbroec, 2014, pp. 277-278).

The fifth work, *Vanden gheesteliken tabernakel*, *The Spiritual Tabernacle*, had probably been started in Brussels, but was completed in Groenendael. It was also translated into Latin by Willem Jordaens, which indicates that the book was considered to be an important work. It is over twice the volume of Spiritual Espousals and the longest of Ruusbroec’s books (Faesen, 2007, p. 82).

The book starts with the words of St. Paul, (1 Cor, 24) ‘So run that you may obtain.’ He explains that we need to run spiritually, with love, and wisely. We must consider the end of our running and the things toward which we run so we obtain and possess it rather than miss it (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 79).

The book is based, however, around Exodus, 24-31. God wanted a tabernacle made according to the pattern He would show Moses on the mountain. Moses has written down seven points for us, which ‘pertain to a wise race of love’. (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 279). The book discusses Scripture and offers spiritual guidance which has as its goal to teach each rational person how to make a spiritual tabernacle for God (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 298). It ends by concluding that we are to run and to obtain, this is true holiness and eternal life which God may grant us all (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 513).

The sixth book, *Vanden vier becoringhen*, The Four Temptations, is believed to have been written in Brussels (Wiseman, 1985, p. 24). It is a short piece that warns of four temptations and discusses how to withstand them.

The seventh book, *The little book of clarification*, was written around 1362. The eighth work, *Vande seven sloten*, *The Seven Enclosures*, was written for Margriet van Meerbeke, a member of the Order of Saint Clare in Brussels which started in 1346. It appears that Ruusbroec felt connected with this new community, which was contemplative. Even though directed at her, the work is meant for all the members of this new community. It appears to be a guide for contemplative life in a community (Faesen, 2007, pp. 97-98).

The ninth work is entitled *Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit*, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*. It is said that this book, too was written for Margriet van Meerbeke. This belief is based on a comment written in one of the manuscripts that states Jan Ruusbroec made this book in 1359 and sent it to a sister of the Order of Saint Clare. However, it does not mention a particular name and Faesen argues that it is more likely to have been written for a different group of readers, and sent to a sister at a later stage, as certain passages do not seem specifically aimed at a female member of a religious order. Several manuscripts state that Ruusbroec wrote this work ‘after becoming a monk’ which means after the community in Groenendael joined the Augustinian Order in 1350. The year 1359 seems plausible (Faesen, 2007, p. 100).

The use of the word ‘mirror’ (*speculum*) is part of a tradition on spiritual writing, as can be seen by two titles of works of the era that were without a doubt known to Ruusbroec: *Speculum fidei* (Mirror of faith) by William of Saint-Thierry and *Speculum simplicium animarum* (Mirror of the simple souls) by Margaret Porete (Faesen, 2007, p. 101).

The book is clearly structured. Ruusbroec speaks of three groups of people, the first virtuous and of good will, the second inner, rich living people and the third, elevated and illuminated (Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 543). A considerable emphasis is placed in the second part of the work on the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Faesen, (2007, p.101) argues that the work is meant to show how the Christian spiritual life is in fact a communion with the person of Christ, who is a living mirror of eternal glory. The book has been translated into Latin by Geert Groote.

The tenth book, *Vanden seven trappen*, *Seven rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love*, is another short work and also by some believed to be written for Margriet van Meerbeke, but more likely to be written generally for readers from a religious community. It explores the depth of the relationship with God, when man is united with God in love. This too was translated into Latin by Willem Jordeans (Faesen, 2007, pp. 103-104).

As with the ‘Mirror; the title is a well-known metaphor from the tradition of spiritual literature. Examples of this are Plato’s Symposion and Richard of St. Victor’s *De quattuor gradibus violentae caritatis* (Four stairs of violent love), both works that were undoubtedly known to Ruusbroec (Faesen, 2007, p. 105).

The eleventh, and final book, *Vanden XII beghinen*, *The Twelve Beguines*, is slightly unusual in that it is not as clearly structured as the other books. It could be considered a combination of four separate works. The book was mentioned by Geert Groote in a letter to Ruusbroec around 1380 which indicates it was already assembled before his death, but it might have been the other brothers who compiled it. It discusses contemplative life, heresies versus truth, cosmology as a metaphor for spiritual life and the Passion (Faesen, 2007, pp. 107-108).

In addition to these books, several letters have also survived. They were mostly written to offer advice on spiritual life (Faesen, 2007, p. 111).

**Criticism during lifetime and visit to Herne. Connection with Carthusians**

When Jan Ruusbroec was invited by the Carthusians in Herne, Belgium, to visit them and clarify a number of crucial points in his teaching, he accepted the invitation and travelled to Herne on foot. He stayed for a number of days and had many discussions with the brothers. The event was documented by Brother Geraert van Saintes and Jan Ruusbroec wrote his *Little Book of Clarification* as a record of his explanations at Herne (Faesen, 2013, p. 11).

Some of my friends desire, and have prayed me to show and explain in a few words, to the best of my ability, and most precisely and clearly, the truth that I understand and feel about all the most profound doctrine that I have written, so that my words may not mislead anyone but may serve to improve each one; and that I most willingly do.

(Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 625)

The fact that Ruusbroec uses the word ‘friends’ is significant, as it shows the genuine affection he felt for the Carthusians. It also indicates the spirit in which the work was written. Rather than strongly defending his position, he clearly explains the matter that gave rise to confusion without changing or compromising his belief (Faesen, 2007, pp. 107-108).

The topic that became controversial and required clarification was the idea of unity with God ‘without difference’. This was discussed by Ruusbroec in his first book, *Kingdom of Lovers*. Referring to John 17:22, *ut sint unum, sicut et nos unum sumus*[[35]](#footnote-35)(That they may be one, as we also are one) (Faesen, 2013, p. 108).

Therefore, Christ prayed that we should become one just as He and His Father are one by means of enjoyable love and being sunken away into the modeless darkness, where the activity of God and of every creature is lost and into a state of having flowed away.

(Ruusbroec, 2014, p. 126)

Ruusbroec talks about the reciprocal dwelling in love of God and man, which is ‘without difference’ which is Christ’s explicit wish according to the Gospel of John. This was not a new concept, as can be seen from the text *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei*, also known as *Epistola aurea*. This was a well-known text, written by William of Saint Thierry (about 1085-1148). He had visited the Charterhouse of Mont Dieu and wrote it out of gratitude for the hospitality received and as an expression of his enthusiasm for the Carthusian way of life (Faesen, 2013, pp. 108-109).

William describes the growth of the ‘animalistic’ human to the rational human and the rational to the spiritual. Each time, the completion of the previous stage is the beginning of the next. He describes the following, when discussing the completion that the contemplative human can experience, which also consists of the deepest form of knowledge (Faesen, 2013, p. 109):

For he that before was sole or solitary, becomes now one, and solitude of the body turns for him unto unity of mind. And there is fulfilled in him that which the Lord prayed for His disciples in the summary of all perfection, saying: ‘Father, I would that as Thou and I are one, so they may be one in us’.

(William of Saint Thierry, quoted in Faesen, 2013, p. 109)

The fulfilment of this prayer, the unity for which Jesus prays is, according to William of Saint Thierry, the *clausula omnis perfectionis*, the conclusion of all perfection (Faesen, 2013, p. 109).

The unity with God, experienced by the contemplative man, is the same unity of the Father and Son in the Spirit; it is their reciprocal unity in love. The only difference is that man receives it by grace. For God it is of nature. William calls the unity of the Father and the Son *consubstantialis*, in accordance with the Nicene Creed. Traditionally, the terms *sine differentia* or *sine distinctio* were used to characterise the consubstantial unity in love of the Father and the Son (Faesen, 2013, p. 110).

Faesen emphasises (2013, pp. 111-112) that Ruusbroec shares Williams’s fundamental conviction; he is convinced that man shares in the Trinitarian life of God, and shares completely in this life of reciprocal love, so that man is united with God without difference, just as the Father and the Son are united in love in the Spirit *sine differentia*. Similar thoughts were also expressed in the writings of Hadewijch, the 13th century poet and mystic. The Carthusians of Herne owned a manuscript of her works.

The condemnation of Eckhart’s statements created a problem. As mentioned earlier, Eckhart died before there was a ruling. On March 27th 1329, Pope John XXII promulgated the bull *In agro dominico*. After thorough theological examination, seventeen statements from the works of Eckhart were condemned. Additionally, eleven statements were considered to sound heretical but, given thorough explanation, be understood as orthodox. The bull was meant to clarify the situation and sent to Cologne with the instruction to make it known both in the archdiocese and the ecclesiastical province (Faesen, 2013, p. 113).

The problem was that some of the statements that were condemned were at the heart of contemplative, mystical theology as can be seen from the following examples:

We are all transformed totally into God and changed into Him. In the same way, when in the sacrament bread is changed into Christ’s Body, I am so changed into Him that He makes me one existence, and not just similar. By the living God it is true that there is no distinction there.

Whatever God the Father gave to His Only-Begotten Son in human nature, He gave all this to me. I except nothing, neither union, nor sanctity; but He gave the whole to me, just as He did to Him.

(Eckhart, quoted in Faesen, 2013, p. 114)

And also, the following:

A person who thus remains in God’s love should be dead to himself and to all created things, so that he gives as little attention to himself as he does to something a thousand miles away. Such a person remains in equality and in unity and remains completely the same.

(McGinn, 1986, p. 270)

It was a great concern as not only isolated individual statements from Eckhart are being rejected, but now an entire theological tradition is threatened. The *Epistola aurea* by William of Saint-Thierry for example becomes suspicious when viewed from this perspective (Faesen, 2013, p. 114).

The Archbishop of Cologne, Walram of Jülich, had wanted to found a Charterhouse in his diocese from the time of his accession and finally succeeded in 1335. The first Carthusians of the Charterhouse of Saint Barbara must have been faced with a very difficult situation. They had arrived in the birthplace of their founder where for many years there had been bitter disagreement and controversy concerning contemplative life. The matter was so serious that Papal intervention had been required (Faesen, 2013, pp. 114-115).

*In agro dominico* distinguishes between heretical statements and statements that sound heretical but can be understood as orthodox with sufficient further clarification. From a theological perspective it is unclear wherein exactly the difference lies between the two groups, as far as content is concerned. It is possible that the pope, and the theological commission that prepared the bull, wanted to leave possibilities open for all the statements mentioned and were in fact arguing for the need to improve the basis of mystical theology. The ambiguity of the bull caused further concern. Its purpose was to protect simple people from being influenced by heretical thought but after its publication a lot of uncertainty remained. The foundations of contemplative, mystical theology were no longer clear and they required further explanation (Faesen, 2013, pp. 115- 116).

When the Carthusians invited Jan Ruusbroec in 1362, it was extremely unlikely that they considered him a heretic. They were concerned about the use of the expression ‘without difference’ and most likely considered him to be a respected authority who could elucidate the matter. The Royal Library in Brussels has a manuscript which is part of Ruusbroec’s ‘Tabernacle’, that was copied at Herne between 1350 and 1375 (Faesen, 2012, pp. 118-119). The Carthusians clearly valued and respected Ruusbroec’s work.

Geraert van Saintes writes that he studied the works of Ruusbroec carefully and considered them to be entirely in accordance with the doctrine of faith:

Since I found them in concordance with the faith of the Holy Church and with the teachings of the highest doctrine, I copied them and collected them in this volume, in order that I myself and other people might profit from them.

(Brother Geraert van Saintes, quoted in Faesen, 2013, p. 119)

There is also a letter written by Ruusbroec to three hermits in Cologne around 1364 as well as a letter from 1371 sent by the general chapter of the Carthusians from La Grande Chartreuse to Groenendael, mentioning their awareness of the friendship between Groenendael and the Carthusians, particularly with the house at Cologne. It also stated that the chapter wished to include Groenendael in the spiritual community of the order (Faesen, 2013, pp. 117-118).

Overall, the Carthusians were satisfied with the explanation Ruusbroec offered with his *Little Book of Clarification* and the friendship and respect between them remained strong.

**Geert Groote and the *Devotia Moderna***

The *Devotia Moderna* started in the Netherlands around deacon Geert Groote from Deventer. (Born around 1340, died 1384). Initially an ambitious academic who studied in Paris and taught at Cologne, Groote underwent a religious conversion in 1374 and began to lead a simpler and more devout life, spending three years at the Charterhouse of Monnikshuizen, near Arnhem (Tanner, 2008, p. 104).

This Charterhouse owned several works by Ruusbroec and Geert Groote studied these carefully. He was so impressed that he took it upon himself to translate several of his books into Latin: *The Spiritual Espousals*, *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*, and a part of *Seven Rungs in the Ladder of Spiritual Love* (Faesen, 2007, pp. 125-126). Willem Jordaens (ca. 1310-1372) entered Groenendael around 1353. He was from a well to do family and studied in Paris. He had both the advanced theological training and Latin literary skills that Ruusbroec lacked. He deeply revered Ruusbroec and was the first to translate his works into Latin. His style of translation was not word for word, but meaning for meaning, and he did not hesitate to add, subtract or change certain expressions in order to create an elegant style, suitable for a learned audience. Geert Groote took the opposite approach, attempting to be as literal as possible. It was Jordaens version that started the debate with Gerson (McGinn, 2012, pp. 62-63).

In 1379 Groote became a missionary preacher in the diocese of Utrecht, although he was not ordained as a priest. In his sermons he strongly condemned the clerical abuses of the time and this led to his license to preach being withdrawn. (Tanner, 2008, p. 104). Although his enemies managed to silence him for a period of time, his stress on the necessity for a return to an apostolic way of life struck a chord amongst many people, both laity and clergy (McGinn, 2012, p. 97).

Groote dedicated himself to preaching and he emphasised the need to deepen the spiritual life. He considered the *devotio* of his day to be too strongly characterised by outward appearances. He argued that a new and more personal and internal *devotio* was required which was more focused on having a personal relationship with the living Christ. This main characteristic of the *Devotio Moderna* came forth from his own spiritual awakening and confirmed by the texts he read from the Church Fathers and especially those of Jan Ruusbroec. His admiration for Ruusbroec was so great that he spent several days as a guest at Groenendael so he could speak with him in person (Faesen, 2007, p. 126).

Around 1374 he turned his parental home in Deventer into a hostel for poor women who wished to serve God. This marked the beginning of the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. An important term used was ‘*ghemeyn*’ ‘common’ as in ‘together’ common, communal life.[[36]](#footnote-36) The main occupations were copying books, providing education, and educating young people. (Faesen, 2007, p. 127). The importance of teaching was stressed and schools were founded all over The Netherlands and in parts of Germany. They provided excellent education without fees. The most famous students were Thomas a Kempis and Desiderius Erasmus (Tanner, 2008, p. 105).

In the seventeenth century, when the last of the houses of the Brothers disappeared, the Jesuits took over the education side. Ignatius of Loyola actually met the brothers during his time in Paris when he stayed at the Collège Montaigu. It had been organised and decorated exactly in accordance with the lifestyle of the Brothers of the Common Life. Additionally, during his stay in the abbey of Montserrat as well as during his travels through The Netherlands he got to know the spirituality of this movement. Faesen argues that when it is said that Ignatius was’ a contemplative in action’ it is the same as what *Devotia Moderna* considers the ‘*ghemeyne mensch*’. This shows that the influence of Ruusbroec is indirectly present in the Ignatian spirituality (Faesen, 2007, pp. 127-128).

**Death, legacy and Groenendael**

In 1381, Jan Ruusbroec died in Groenendael. (Faesen, 2007, p. 26) His works had already been translated into Latin during his lifetime, and even though considered controversial by some, he was greatly admired by many.

In 1552, Laurentius Surius, a Carthusian in Cologne, translated all of Jan Ruusbroec’s works in Latin. This translation was in wide circulation and remained, for many centuries, the version used by those who were unable to read Dutch. In the seventeenth century different translations appeared in French, by the Carthusian Richard Beaucousin in 1606, in German an adaptation of the translation by Rulman Merswin in 1621, in Dutch by Gabriel of Antwerp in 1624, and in 1698 by Blas Lopez (Faesen, 2007, p. 143). Important modern translations include 1891 version of *The Spiritual Espousals* in French by Maurice Maeterlinck, and the translation of all the works in French by the Benedictines of Wisques 1917-1938. In 2003 Renmin University of Beijing published the first Chinese translation of *The little book of Clarification* (Faesen, 2007, p. 143). According to Faesen (2007, p. 8) at the start of the twentieth century the Japanese poet Konosuke Hinatsu quoted from *The Spiritual Espousals* in one of his poems. There are currently translations available in many languages: French, German, English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Japanese and Chinese.

In the United Kingdom, the work of Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) brought forth a renewed interest in Ruusbroec. Her book *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, was published in 1911. Whilst she discussed Ruusbroec several times in this work, in 1914 she published a book entirely dedicated to Jan Ruusbroec entitled *Ruysbroeck*. In 1944, W. Somerset Maugham published *The Razor’s Edge*, in which Jan Ruusbroec is mentioned. The University of Antwerp has the Ruusbroec Institute, an institution for the study of the history of religious culture, spirituality and mysticism in the Low Countries.

Because of Ruusbroec’s fame, Groenendael was a well-known and flourishing priory. During his lifetime, the church was enlarged and new buildings were designed. Unfortunately, the buildings were destroyed in 1435 as the result of a fire. They were soon rebuilt, however, and the church was enlarged again between 1467 and 1483 (Hoeilaart, no date).[[37]](#footnote-37)

At the end of the 15th century and early 16th century, Groenendael became a popular spot for the Austrian Royal family. In order to protect the lifestyle of the monks whilst coping with visitors at the same time, around 1529 a new building was created, the ‘Huis van Ravestein’. It was named after Filips van Kleef, Lord of Ravestein, who had paid for it. In 1578 the monks left Groenendael to find refuge from the war. They went to Brussels and did not return until 1606. Thanks to donations, they were able to restore the buildings and create a chapel for Our Lady of Loretto as well as a fishpond.

Several buildings were demolished in the early 18th century. Around 1777 a new building was created in neo classical style. A few years later, in 1784, an edict from emperor Joseph II declared that all contemplative monasteries were to be closed. The monks received a sum of money to move elsewhere, and most of the buildings were destroyed. The majority of the artworks were sold. After the Brabant Revolution of 1789 several monks moved back in 1793. Unfortunately, in 1795 the monastery was closed for the second time. This time by the French Republic, who took over from the Austrians. This was the end of Groenendael. Only a few buildings remain and they were declared national monuments in 1998.

Although often portrayed as an avid fighter of heresies, and at the same time, accused of being a heretic himself, he might best be remembered as a uniquely gifted mystic whose writings continue to inspire people from all over the world. On December 9th, 1908, Pope Pius X beatified Jan Ruusbroec. The Feast of the Blessed Jan Ruusbroec is the 2nd December, the anniversary of his death. The next chapter will discuss the period after Ruusbroec’s death, specifically how his work came to be regarded as controversial and how both the Carthusians and his followers in Groenendael came to his defence.

**1.3 Ruusbroec controversy**

**Introduction**

This chapter will explore why Ruusbroec’s writings were deemed controversial, and concentrate in particular at the life of Jean Gerson, and his interpretation and criticism of the writings of Jan Ruusbroec.

McGinn (2012, p. 77) states that two major debates about mysticism took place in the fifteenth century. One revolved around the controversy over the mystical teaching of Nicholas of Cusa, conducted from 1450 to the early 1460s. The other dispute took place from 1400 to about 1415 and concerned Ruusbroec’s view of mystical union. Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, provides a link between these two debates as he was Ruusbroec’s main opponent in the first debate, and later linked with Cusa in the attacks of the Carthusian Vincent of Aggsbach (circa 1389 – 1464).

**Jean Gerson**

Born in 1363, Gerson came from a modest background. [[38]](#footnote-38)He was 14 years old when he left his home in 1377 to head for Paris. By 1395 Gerson possessed the highest degree the University offered: the doctorate in theology. He was made chancellor of the University that same year, a position that made him head of the faculty of theology and the person responsible for the granting of degrees (McGuire, 1998, pp. 4-5).[[39]](#footnote-39)

Not unlike many religious people, Gerson struggled greatly with the desire to be a true contemplative as opposed to accepting high prestige roles which always involved worldly matters such as politics, jealousy and corruption. He was indeed fortunate to have had the opportunity to study, by having the support of his family and receiving a scholarship, but judging by several of his letters, he did not always consider this a blessing. McGuire (1998, p. 6) refers to a letter written to his colleagues in Navarre, in which he remarks that he rarely had the opportunity to experience leisure and talk with others.

In his letter to his brother Nicolas, dated December 5th1401, he opens up about his struggles with loneliness and indicates how he misses his brother, who by then had left to lead a religious life by entering the Celestine Order.

The trauma of separation from you was devouring me. It caused great pain and mangled my soul. Amid my thoughts and my words about you, tears that were not asked for came from my eyes and I was in pain. (Gerson, McGuire, 1998, p. 196)

In addition to quoting from Scripture and encouraging his brother to remain humble and not to complain he appears to show just how much he struggles with the pressures of his position and how he too longed to live a life of contemplation.

God showed great mercy to you, since you had no relatives or friends who wanted you to become something great in the world and so would have been opposed to your intention. It is, and always has been, quite different for me, as well as for countless other people who read in the book of experience that one’s enemies are the members of one’s own household (Mt 10:36). In order that we can take care of their children, they want us never to be children. Even though this type of love was much less harmful to me, I did suffer from it. (Gerson, McGuire, 1998, p. 198)

Although Gerson may have felt isolated and lonely, he did have people who helped and protected him, most importantly Pierre d’Ailly, a respected theologian and politically central figure in Paris. He led a movement to reform the working of the University in the face of a corrupt chancellor, Jean Blanchard. D’Ailly’s hard work was rewarded with the chancellorship, which he then handed down to Gerson in 1395 (McGuire, 1998, p. 8). Gerson was involved with a large variety of affairs in addition to his university work such as trying to help resolve the Papal Schism as well as trying to reform the church of Saint Donatien in Bruges as well as write a treatise on the moral necessity that prisoners condemned to death be allowed to receive a priest and make a last confession, something that they had previously been denied. Gerson stated that any secular power, even the king, who defended the old practice, was in danger of losing his soul and going to hell. At times like this Gerson may have received protection from men like D’Ailly, overall, he had found a way to manoeuvre through the mazes of academic and political life (McGuire, 1998, pp. 9-10).

Between 1398 and 1400, Gerson underwent a profound personal crisis and questioned his achievements and everything he had learned. He went to Bruges and decided he was obliged, by conscience, to resign from his post in Paris (McGuire, 1998, p. 10)

In a long letter, written to an unknown person, possibly D’Ailly or his colleagues in Paris, written in Bruges and dated 1400, he extensively describes his concerns and struggles. He speaks of ‘difficulties’ and ‘calamities’ he experienced in the office of chancellor of the University of Paris. The fact that almost every paragraph starts with ‘I am forced’ indicates just how pressured he must have felt (pp. 161-168). Amongst his list of difficulties, he mentions being forced to please or serve great lords who are very hostile. Also, having to favour people who are not friends at all, but rather try to destroy him with slander, those who are morally corrupt and uncouth, having to listen to rumours and having to work on inane sermons, and being submerged in the vicissitudes of court life. Another great concern is missing masses and prayers or to say them without meditation.

Gerson managed to overcome his crisis and in a letter to D’Ailly dated April 1st, 1400 (McGuire, Gerson, 1998, pp. 168-175), he added a list of proposals for teaching theology and drew up plans for the university as a whole to be reformed.

Gerson’s return to Paris was delayed by several months due to an illness that rendered him bedridden. It was during this time that he began to reflect strongly on the character of mystical experience and wrote *The Mountain of Contemplation*, which was created specifically for his sisters (McGuire, 1998, p. 12). A brief summary of this work is written below.

Gerson wrote extensively during the period of 1401 and 1408 on a large variety of matters, which included two more works on contemplation, *Speculative mystical Theology* and *Practical Mystical Theology*. These were written in Latin and according to McGinn (2012, p. 89) meant for the clergy, with a view to helping the clergy distinguish between real as opposed to false mystical theology. They might, however, also have been used in a university setting as lectures.

Even though he left his crisis behind him and regained his enthusiasm for his duties, he faced many problems. Due to considerable political unrest, he left Paris in January 1415 and never returned. He was able to return to France after the death of the duke of Burgundy in 1419 and move in with his brother Jean the Celestine at Lyon as the area south of the Loire had not been taken by the English. He kept writing and also continued working with students, though not at university level as in Paris (McGuire, pp. 19-20).

At the end of his life, he became aware of Jean d’Arc and her role in gathering political and military forces to liberate the north of France. After her victory at Orleans, Gerson was asked to respond to challenges to the authenticity of the revelations Jeanne claimed to receive. In his answer, he largely accepts Jeanne as divinely inspired. He died before her execution in 1431 (McGuire, 1998, p. 21). Unfortunately, Gerson never experienced the end of the war and was therefore never able to return to Paris and resume his duties.

**The Mountain of Contemplation[[40]](#footnote-40)**

Gerson starts this work by explaining why he wrote in French rather than Latin, and why his work is meant for ordinary people. He states that many holy doctors have written about contemplative life in Latin in an outstanding manner, such as Saint Gregory, Saint Bernard, Richard of Saint Victor and many others. These works were written for clerics who have an understanding of Latin, not for ordinary people. He is particularly thinking of his sisters, who decided not to marry, so they may learn how to please God in constantly loving and honouring Him (McGuire, 1998, p. 75).

The work is written in a clear manner, well-structured and offering sound advice and explanations for leading a life aimed at pleasing God. It does not, however, get into details about the unification of the soul with God, most likely because of the complexity of the subject matter and the fact that this work was meant for his sisters and not members of the clergy. Section 31 does go into more detail about the elevation of the soul and will be discussed in further detail.

The work is divided into 45 sections that discuss a range of topics and ends with eleven rules. Throughout the book Gerson provides clear examples to explain his points. In order to get an understanding of Gerson’s ideas regarding contemplation, the following are some key points from the text.

Gerson explains that scholarship is not necessary for contemplative persons. Advanced scholarship and great learning in God’s law may be quite suitable for the person who wishes to come to the height of contemplation, nevertheless, such knowledge can sometimes block this pursuit. The problem is not the learning in itself, but the arrogance and the self-inflation that the learned person derives from his knowledge, and it is impossible to reach true contemplation except through humility. Gerson refers in the section to the words of St Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

Let no man deceive himself: if any man among you seems to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. (1 Cor 3:18)

This warning is not dissimilar to the words of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* who, in chapter 56, speaks of those people who because of their pride and the cleverness of their natural understanding and academic learning, desert the common teaching and counsel of holy Church. The author emphasises his firm belief that he who does not wish to go by the narrow way to heaven shall go the soft way to hell (Walsh, 1981, pp. 228-229).

Gerson clarifies that he does not mean that knowledge in itself is not profitable, it can be positive providing one has the grace to use it well and humbly. The danger is the arrogance that comes with it. Again, he refers to St Paul:

…we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. (1 Cor 8:1)

In section four he explains there are two different types of contemplation. The first is not for ordinary people except through divine inspiration or a unique miracle. It seeks the nature of God and His being and works through reasons based on the true faith. This form of contemplation is able to find new truths and make them known or teach them and defend against errors and lies. The second concentrates mainly on loving God and enjoying His goodness without trying to acquire clearer knowledge that that which faith has inspired and given. This type is attainable for ordinary people by leaving the cares of the world behind and keeping their hearts pure and spotless. He then refers to Dionysius and states he believes it was mostly this type of contemplation Dionysius taught in his books (McGuire, 1998, p. 78).

He further explains the difference between knowledge and wisdom, knowledge belongs chiefly to the understanding, and wisdom to the *affectus* (McGuire, 1998, p. 78). Gerson insists that the root and beginning and also the end of contemplative life should be the love of God (McGuire, 1998, p. 82). He then explains that earthly love should be removed and how to work towards this and encourages the reader to read and listen to the lives of the saints and honour our angel. In section 16 he explains the three parts of the stairway of contemplation, humble penitence, secrecy of place in silence and strong perseverance[[41]](#footnote-41) (McGuire, 1998, p. 88) and provides guidance and examples in the sections that follow.

Gerson’s description of contemplation, his references to Dionysius and his criticism of scholarship and knowledge are indicative of a strong leaning towards an approach of Affective Dionysianism, as developed by Thomas Gallus.

Gerson explains how the contemplative life is not only good for one self, but also for others. Contemplative persons provide a good example in their way of life. By their acts and deeds, they preach that God is to be loved above all, all else is vanity and meaningless. Furthermore, because of their devout prayers, contemplatives benefit all others. Although it is true that we can do nothing without the special grace of God, this grace is obtained more by good contemplatives than by actives. It is not right to call a person wanting to love God with all her heart and wanting to lead a life of contemplation presumptuous. Gerson believes that if a person is capable of doing so and has the grace for it, she would be failing herself if not making use of this gift. (McGuire, 1998, pp. 99-102).

In section 30 (McGuire, 1998, p. 103) he refers to Saint Bernard again when elaborating on the necessity of grace and the importance of being alone with Christ. St Bernard said that the soul’s groom, Jesus Christ, is a shy friend who does not willingly come to his friend in the midst of a multitude but sees to be alone with her. It is necessary for the soul to reject all occupations within and without, to recognise Him so that it can receive Him alone. In section 37 he also mentions how Saint Bernard, in all his sermons on the Song of songs, speaks of a kind of spiritual marriage between God and the soul (McGuire, 1998, p. 114).

Section 31 is of particular importance as it concerns the elevation of the soul and unity and it shows how the author proceeds to attempt to explain a very abstract concept, that of unification of the soul with God, to those who are not scholars and who have no knowledge of the concept. Gerson explains that the process of the elevation of the soul outside of this world and beyond corporal matters and the delivery of the soul to itself or to the angels or God where it cannot reach higher, takes place by means of powerful and holy meditation, as well as through burning love. This combination of thought and love is so powerful that is makes the soul forget or give up all other operations and fantasies. It is as if the soul is in a complete state of rest, or at least unable to weaken, extinguish or overcome the thinking and the loving mentioned, because of its virtuous power. The soul must completely concentrate upon and occupy itself with this thought and love and not take anything else into account or look elsewhere (McGuire, 1998, pp. 104-105).

Gerson then proceeds to provide some examples to try and explain how this state of the soul might be understood. He mentions how Aristotle says that it is possible for a person to focus so strongly on something that they may not see what is happening in front of them even though their eyes are open. Others may speak or act in their presence but notice nothing and continue in their train of thought as if asleep. Gerson remarks how students can often attain this type of self-absorption when wanting to go over a particular matter, as do painters and others who are engaged with intellectual skills that require a powerful imagination. Gerson further tells the story of Archimedes, a great geometrician, who made complex machines for warfare and for defending or assaulting cities when one day the city where he was living was captured. The prince has ordered that nobody should ever kill him. Someone found him by chance whilst he was drawing models on the ground and asked him who he was. He was so caught up in his work that he did not know what to say, except that he should not be bothered. Therefore, he was killed. His train of thought was so powerful that he did not even realise that the city was taken, nor recognise his enemies. Finally, Gerson mentions another philosopher, Carneades, who often forgot to eat as he lived solely in his soul and was covered by a body that he considered to be alien and useless. His maidservant would have to direct his hand to the food in order to keep him from starvation. Gerson concludes by stating he has provided these examples to show how the soul can rid itself of pointless fantasies and cares in order to rise to something more holy and fitting. To come to unity and simplicity and think and live only in God, who is its place, its end and its love. He considers this process to be more difficult than in the case of the people he mentioned, as more spiritual, unfamiliar and lofty thoughts must be cultivated (McGuire, pp. 104-105).

In section 32 Gerson speaks highly of Richard of St Victor and his work on contemplation, which according to Gerson, Richard treated with great subtlety and profound learning. He explains how his own work is less subtle and also brief (McGuire, p. 106).

Sections 34 and 35 speak of the mountain of contemplation. The road to contemplation is compared to a journey up a steep and high mountain. There are distractions, discomforts and different types of travellers. In section 38 Gerson once again refers to Saint Bernard by recommending the way he started his contemplative life, which is by thinking about the life of Christ (McGuire, p. 115). Another method would be through mendicity. Gerson speaks of William, a former bishop of Paris, who declared that the poor, tramps and prisoners have taught him how to pray to God (McGuire, p. 117).

Section 44 contains another image of a mountain, and a very high rock in a dangerous ocean which has three dwelling places of faith, hope and charity. Gerson explains that every time in your contemplation when you think of God and you know wat you are looking at, and it looks similar to the things below, then know for sure that you are not seeing God through clear vision (McGuire, p. 123). He ends this section by saying that when the devout soul has become accustomed to remaining in the crag or mountain through deep meditation and thinking, it will become easier for it to return there and to have faith, hope and charity and to reach no end of beautiful acts of contemplation that it will find there. Here will be its harbour and safe haven against al the tribulations of the present world (McGuire, p. 124).

The final section, 45, concerns the three manners of having grace. The third manner is through union, and Gerson refers here to Saint Paul, 2 Corinthians 12. He states that concerning this manner I am not worthy to open my mouth, and he will leave it to the great (McGuire, p. 125). It is possible that Gerson finds this topic too complex to discuss in a book written for women, or too controversial. The book ends with a chapter entitled ‘Eleven Rules’ which are simple guidelines.

**Gerson criticises Jan Ruusbroec**

In the late 1390s Bartholomew Clantier, a Carthusian from Herne, sent Gerson a copy of *The Spiritual Espousals*. It was not the original, Middle Dutch version, but a Latin translation by Willem Jordaens. It is not known why he sent it, the Carthusians were after all content with the explanations Ruusbroec had provided during his visit and in *The Little Book of Clarification*. It came as a surprise and disappointment when Gerson wrote a letter in response in 1398 or 1399[[42]](#footnote-42) in which he provides his opinion on the work. He offered a very stern warning with regard to the third part of the book, most likely he meant for this letter to be circulated to a large audience (Faesen, 2007, p. 128).

Gerson states initially that the book contains much material that is beneficial and profound. However, the first point of criticism appears to be due to a genuine confusion on his side regarding who actually wrote the work. Gerson is under the impression that the author claims to be ‘an ignorant person who cannot read or write’ (McGuire, 1998, pp. 202-203). Because of this claim, readers might believe it was created through a miracle or divine inspiration and as a result, believe the contents are completely true and holy. This could potentially lead to people falling into error, blindly following any claims made by the author. Gerson recognises it is written by an educated person, stating that attentive and diligent labour went into the writing this work yet the style of divine Scripture, of the prophets and Evangelists, is quite different from this manner of speaking.

Gerson approves of the first and second parts of the book, the first offering advice on the active life and the second on the spiritual or affective life. It is the third part, about the excellence of contemplative life, that he strongly disapproves of. He believes the third part should be wholly rejected and removed. He believes it to be either badly expressed or plainly objectionable and states that it deviates from the teachings of the holy doctors who have spoken of our beatitude. It does not agree with the clear decision that that sets forth how our beatitude consists in two actions, vision and enjoyment, with the light of glory. Gerson asks, and if this process is completed in beatitude, so that God is not our vision and splendour in essence but only its object, then how much more distant will this experience be from any incomplete grasp of beatitude that we might be able to taste here, on the way to heaven (McGuire, 1998, p. 204)?

Gerson cites several passages from *The Spiritual Espousals* and analyses why he considers them to be wrong. He starts by saying that the third part of the book asserts that the soul which perfectly contemplates God not only sees Him through the splendour that is the divine essence, but also is the divine splendour itself. The author believes that the soul then ceases to be in the existence it formerly had on its own and is converted or transformed and absorbed into the divine being. In that divinity it would then be lost in the ideal existence it had from eternity in the divine essence. Gerson continues to state that the author asserts that this is the cause of our temporal existence and is one with it according to its essential existence, adding that the soul of the one who contemplates is lost in such an abyss of divine being that it cannot be recovered by any creature. Gerson continues to say that a comparison can be adduced which Ruusbroec does not use: if a small drop of wine be cast into the sea, it is clear that it is soon absorbed and converted into the sea (McGuire, 1998 p. 204).

Gerson believes this point of view to be defective in many ways but indicates that he struggled to admit there were falsities in the third book because in the previous sections he saw many truths and deep matters (McGuire, 1998, pp. 204-205). It almost seems as if he feels bad having to criticise the book as he was genuinely impressed by the first two sections. He also indicates how he was encouraged when he read the protests of the author against his quickly being condemned by those who did not understand and would spoil the work completely. Gerson feels strongly that every Doctor of Theology should be quite open to interpreting in a positive way what others say, if it can be done without danger to the faith or for the uneducated, rather than to harshly issue condemnations. Nevertheless, Gerson believes a diligent and repeated inspection of what he said showed more and more error in his writing.

Gerson continues to reveal further passages that he considers to show errors. The author, in the second chapter of the third section, claims that the spirit loses itself in that emptiness through a fruitful love. Without intermediary, it takes on the splendour of God and is made into that splendour which it receives. In the third chapter, another passage stands out to Gerson: Our created being depends on the eternal being and according to essential existence is one with it. Then: All who are lifted above their creation on to the height of contemplative life are made one with this deifying splendour. In fact, they are the splendour itself. They then see, perceive and find through this deifying light that they exist according to its being and uncreated life and that they are the same simple abyss of divinity. Also: And with that light by which they see they become one (McGuire, 1998, p. 205).

Gerson ends his list of passages he considers to be erroneous with two more examples. He writes that in the first chapter the author states all devout spirits are made one with God in the profound flow of love. This takes place not through any unity whatsoever but through that which is the divine being in itself, in the way that deifying blessedness requires. Then, in the fourth chapter: There the spirit is translated above itself and unified with God, tasting and seeing in the unity of the living abyss in which it possesses in itself according to its own uncreated being immense riches that he has according to the manner by which God tastes and sees them (McGuire, 1998, p. 205).

Gerson now makes two important points. Firstly, he makes it clear that ‘it is by these statements that we judge the intention of the author’. It is impossible to judge the author by what he might imply, we can only concentrate on the writings themselves. Gerson shows that he disapproves of the language used, and feels it is the responsibility of the author to be clear and able to convey his message to both the learned and educated and the untaught and ignorant (McGuire, 1998, pp. 205-206). It seems that Gerson strongly disapproves of the language used by Ruusbroec and considers it too ambiguous.

Secondly, Gerson believes a person should have sound theological knowledge on which he bases any claims rather than just the affective experience. He points out that the third section of the book does not deal with those matters that are known and written down through affectivity and experience but through the inspired intellect in holy persons and claims:

But the knowledge of such things and their discernment are especially to be sought among trained theologians and not among devout persons alone.

(Gerson, quoted in McGuire, 1998, p. 206)

Gerson continues by discussing the nature of beatitude. He states that he is aware that there were and are certain theologians who like to discuss, out of curiosity, if, on the basis of God’s absolute power, a rational soul can know and reach beatitude formally through the divine essence without any medium, so that God would be knowledge and enjoyment for that soul, not as its object but as its form. In this way, God not only would be the cognition, which is known by the soul, but that through which the soul would know. And similarly concerning enjoyment. Gerson adds that whatever might be possible, nobody should be so presumptuous as to make assertions as if they were facts, pointing out that the decision of the Church is opposed (McGuire, 1998, p. 206).

Gerson writes that the author shows how the soul can see God and find beatitude in Him, not as a fact or as a possibility, but as if the soul ceases to exist in its own being and is transformed into that divine idea being it had from eternity in God. He then proceeds to elaborate on some consequences that could flow from this statement. If the Body of Christ or another beatified body in this way through contemplation or beatification should come to discard its soul, then it would have the essence of God to provide its formal principle of life, otherwise this body would be without life. Neither would the soul then be of the same species as before, since it would have no other life and existence than what it had from eternity in God’s making. Gerson then explains how this would mean that in this being, as it was from eternity, any soul, even a damned one, was divine life and its beatitude. The human body then would not be able to find its soul in glory as a formal principle giving it life, or if the soul did function in this way, then it would not now be lost in the manner of which the author speaks (McGuire, 1998, pp. 206-207). Gerson concludes by saying countless other absurdities would follow which are too time consuming to pursue.

Having analysed what he believes to be errors and inconsistencies in Ruusbroec’s work, Gerson now tries to understand what has led the author to be so wrong. Gerson’s first suggestion is that perhaps he used the following passage from Saint Paul:

But he who is joined to the Lord, is one spirit. (1 Cor 6:17)

He also quotes from Saint John:

And the glory which thou hast given me, I have given to them; that they may be one, as we also are one. (John 17:22)

Gerson explains the holy fathers have thoroughly examined these passages and they concluded that this unity is not essential, and it does not exist through a precise likeness but only assimilation and participation are meant, as in the quote from the Acts:

And the multitude of believers had but one heart and one soul: neither did any one say that aught of the things that he possessed, was his own; but all things were common unto them. (Acts 4:32).

The concern here appears to be related to the interpretation of image and likeness, a matter further explored by McGinn in his article *Humans as Imago Dei: Mystical Anthropology Then and Now*. McGinn argues that in the history of Christian thought there have been three main ways of understanding the nature of humanity as image of God: the intellectual, the volitional, and the interpersonal. These three traditions are by no means to be thought of as opposed or even discrete, and most of the patristic and medieval thinkers who wrote about the nature of humanity have elements of all three, although they usually tend to emphasise one more than the others (Howells, Tyler, 2010, pp. 22-23).

The intellectual tradition places the essential nature of the image in man’s rational nature as a subject endowed with a reason or intelligence participating in the transcendent divine intellection. Since mind and reason is what sets man above other creatures and relates it directly to God, the image is essentially found in here (Howells, Tyler, 2010, p. 23).

The volitional tradition does not deny that the image is located in the human mind, but it emphasises human ability to act freely as the core of the *imago dei*. God alone is totally and sovereignly free, and the greatest measure of His election of humanity to bear His image consists in the share He offers human beings in this freedom, even to the extent of allowing them to turn to sin, as Adam did. True freedom is not pure autonomy, but consists in the ability to act freely in accord with the divine freedom. This ability was lost in sin, so that until the coming of Christ all that humans possessed was the truncated freedom from necessity *(libertas a necessitate*) meaning the ability to act without external compulsion, but not apart from an inner inclination to sin (*cupiditas/concupiscentia*). Christ’s redeeming act restored the freedom of counsel that enables us to do good and avoid sin (*libertas a peccato*). This exercise of freedom is meant to lead us on to the ‘freedom from misery’ (*libertas a miseria*), the delight that will only be complete in heaven (Howells, Tyler, 2010, p. 23).

The third tradition places the *imago dei* in interpersonal relationality. McGinn (Howells, Tyler, 2010, p. 24) states that Richard of St Victor, the twelfth century canon, is a good illustration of this option. Richard develops his notion of person primarily in relation to the Trinity but conceiving of the Trinity as the supreme shared love among three equal persons is based upon an analysis of human loving. A person, human or divine, is defined as an individual self, an incommunicable existence, that is, a self-identity capable of being shared in an act of self-transcendence. The human person, like the divine person, is called upon to share self-transcending love: this is what makes it what it is truly meant to be. Being made in the image and likeness of love means being made to share in the shared love of the Trinity, and, like the Trinity, to communicate this love to others.

In the Fathers of Eastern and Western Christianity, who form the bedrock of later theological speculation, the implications of seeing human dignity as founded in humanity’s nature as *imago dei* are already clear. According to Lars Thunberg, three key aspects of considering humans as God’s image on earth are found in Greek patristic authors. The first is the status of humans as God’s rational envoys over the rest of creation. Even though this has by some Christians been used as a warrant to rape and pillage the earth, the Fathers saw this command as an invitation to a spiritual task, one that was disrupted through Adam’s fall, so that it is only through redemption and the mastering of one’s passions of selfishness and acquisitiveness that humanity’s true control over nature can be exercised (Howells, Tyler, 2010, p. 24).

According to the Fathers, the true purpose of all created beings can only be understood through contemplation of them in their *logoi*, or higher existence in the divine mind. This perspective helps us understand the second aspect. To be made in the image of God is to be made for contemplation (*contemplation/**theôria*), meaning, for ‘deep gazing, attention, vision’ into the fundamental reality of the universe (*the**ôria physik**ȇ/ contemplatio naturalis*) and even into the incomprehensible nature of God (*theôria theologikȇ/ contemplatio theologica*). To see the human person as fundamentally contemplative is rooted deep in the Greek Fathers, and also found among the Latin Fathers such as Ambrose, John Cassian and Gregory the Great. The patristic views of *theôria/contemplatio* used a rich tradition of Greek philosophical speculation reaching back to Plato. However, Christian understanding of contemplation, as well as the relation between the effort to attain contemplative vision of higher reality (*bios theôretikos*) and the concrete demands of the active or practical life (*bios praktikos*) formed a new stage in the understanding of human nature and destiny (Howells, Tyler, 2010, pp. 24-25).

A third implication of *imago dei* anthropology relates to what it implies for the unity of mankind. In the New Testament the unity of humanity is restored by Christ, God’s true image, but there is also an ecclesiological aspect to the restoration of humanity’s likeness to God. We become more like Christ through our participation in the saving community of the new people of God (Howells, Tyler, 2010, p. 25).

Returning to Gerson’s letter, he states that it may be surprising that a man so devout and educated could fall into such error or ignorance and urges the reader to not only be amazed but also afraid. Then humbly desire to have wisdom when hearing that not only he but many others of significant sanctity left the path of truth. These, the author himself justly criticised in the end of the second part, people who arrogated to themselves the sublimity of contemplation. He shows they have been seduced by the devil. They were the sect of the Beghards, who were condemned by the Church’s decree. Gerson appears to suggest there may be a link:

The author was, as I think, close to them in time. (McGuire, 1998, p. 208)

Gerson offers a strong warning to those who are not sufficiently trained or formed in theology through constant and dedicated occupation, not to become too attached to books like this. They can contain many truths, for the devil does not persuade us of falsity without mixing in truths. Gerson is concerned that people like that will presume that these are difficult theological matters which are being treated with new words and can be looked upon with admiration and devotion. He quotes Saint Augustine who says we need to speak according to a certain rule, otherwise, those who act differently will make ready an easy road to the precipice (McGuire, 1998, p. 208).

Gerson again emphasises how it is not enough to be devout or have acquired this type of contemplation, however holy and good it might be. He notes how even uneducated women and ignorant people who cannot read or write have the capacity of ascending to and obtaining this type of contemplation, assuming they have a simple faith. It is much easier for them than for men of great intelligence who are educated in theology. Those theologians, however, greatly excel in another type of contemplation. According to Gerson, this contemplation is concerned with the investigation of the divine truths by which saving faith is conceived, nourished, defended and strengthened, as Saint Augustine says. These types of contemplation can be distinguished from each other. Gerson firmly states that no one should with his own words be called a contemplative or a wise and excellent theologian who lacks the first type of contemplation (McGuire, 1998, p. 209).

According to Gerson, a person wanting to be called truly wise should have both types of contemplation. Affectivity, which gives taste, and that of intellect, which provides the brightness of knowledge, so that wisdom, meaning wise science, is formed. If one must be lacking, Gerson believes it would be better to share in the first than in the second type, as having good and humble affectivity, devout toward God, is more desirable than a cold intellect that is enlightened by study alone (p. 209).

However, when seeking to find the truth of faith as handed over in the Holy Scriptures, it is best to consult theologians who concentrate on the second type of contemplation, unless it is obvious that they are corrupt in morals. Gerson adds that the most learned theologians may sometimes err due to lack of pious affectivity (McGuire, 1998, p. 209).

Gerson also urges those with insufficient learning not to write or teach with a light heart. They are not to be followed without great caution and without previous examination and discussion by those who are learned. Often in such persons much is found that is false or badly explained. Although the writings can be profound, it provides abundant material for error in the uneducated and he proceeds to provide some examples of such writing and concludes: We are to have faith in each who is an expert in his art (McGuire, 1998, p. 210).

The Carthusians did not respond directly to Gerson’s letter. Instead, the response came from Groenendael. It is unclear when exactly Gerson’s attack on Ruusbroec came to the attention of the Augustinians at Groenendael but the community instantly commissioned its most theologically adept member to reply to the chancellor. It was Jan van Schoonhoven, who himself had studied at Paris, who wrote two works defending Ruusbroec, entitled *Commendation or Defense* and the *Letter of Response*, dated circa 1402-1408 (McGinn, 2012, p. 80).[[43]](#footnote-43)

In the *Commendation*, Van Schoonhoven explains that he will defend Ruusbroec under three headings. Firstly, by explaining the intention of the words in relation to what is confuted, condemned, and judged erroneous. Secondly, by showing how this teaching is not a new and foreign creation, but totally in agreement with the views of the most noted doctors of the Catholic Faith and approved and commended by their authority as granted by God. And thirdly, by arguing that the objections made are not sufficient to cancel out this teaching[[44]](#footnote-44) (Combes, 1945, pp. 684-685). Van Schoonhoven argues that in the matter of mystical teaching only those who have had the experience of tasting divine delight are true teachers and judges[[45]](#footnote-45) Combes, 1945, pp. 686-687). Furthermore, nouns are sounds that become significant by convention, and therefore their meaning is to be determined by their context and use (McGinn, 2012, p. 80). He also insists the criticism is due to the fact that the work has been translated into Latin. The translator perhaps paid more attention to descriptive and fluent writing which could explain why the book appears now more reminiscent of human eloquence than divine, however, this cannot be blamed on the author[[46]](#footnote-46)(Combes, 1945, p. 696).

He explains and defends Ruusbroec’s teaching, discussing the union of transforming deification and true beatitude, and explain how Ruusbroec insisted that such a union does not negate the permanent distinction between Creator and creature. He sees union in terms of regaining oneness with the uncreated image in the mind of God, a return to the ‘ideal existence’ (*esse ideale*) where we enjoy a bliss that is both essential and actual. He also uses Ruusbroec’s distinction of union with and without an intermediary and notes that Ruusbroec strongly opposed the false view of union put forth by the Free Spirit heretics (McGinn, 2012, p. 81).

Van Schoonhoven denies that Ruusbroec was speaking of our union with God as equivalent to the ‘union through identity of real existence’ that Christ enjoys with the Father, noting that in all his works Ruusbroec publicly testified that the creature cannot become the Creator. Van Schoonhoven also denies that Ruusbroec was speaking of the general union of wills that all believers have with the Lord mentioned in Act 4:32, quoted by Gerson. According to Van Schoonhoven, Ruusbroec was speaking of a union of deifying love by which the soul is totally transformed into Christ and speaks with Christ’s voice: what is melted and dissolved does not exist in itself, but it has flowed away and been transformed into that image which is revealed to itself as present. Consequently, the image of the rational soul can be divinely transformed into its uncreated image through the power of the divine light. Van Schoonhoven insists that this understanding of union is in perfect conformity with the teaching of the established masters of the mystical life (McGinn, 2012, p. 81).

Furthermore, Van Schoonhoven corrects Gerson’s mistaken view of Ruusbroec as an uneducated man (McGinn, 2012, p.81). In the *Letter* he also emphasises that in speaking of ecstatic union the holy fathers use certain words not in the proper sense but metaphorically (*transsumptive*) as the matter requires. According to Van Schoonhoven, this can also be applied to the language of annihilation. He explains that when the mind is raptured and let into an ecstasy of itself, then it is said to be annihilated, because when the mind is placed in ecstasy it dies completely to itself and to creatures insofar as it does not know itself and forgets all creatures. This emphasis on the mental state of the mystic shows that for Jan van Schoonhoven annihilation language does not signify an ontological loss of being but rather expresses a cessation of the consciousness of any reality except God (McGinn, 2012, p. 82).

McGinn notes how Van Schoonhoven, in order to explain the nature of this ecstatic union, introduces a distinction of three forms of union that can be visualised in this life. Sometimes union is perceived by a transitory vision and contemplation of the divine splendour and essence, the kind of union enjoyed by Saint Paul in 2 Cor 12:

Yet the signs of my apostleship have been wrought on you, in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds. (2 Cor 12)

At other times, ecstatic union is obtained from an anticipatory enjoinment of divine sweetness, as mentioned by David in Psalm 15:11:

Thou hast made known to me the ways of life, thou shalt fill me with joy with thy countenance: at thy right hand are delights even to the end. (Psalm 15:11)

Finally, it can also come from a joyful delight of the divine immensity as manifested in the queen of Sheba’s fainting before Solomon:

And when the queen of Saba saw all the wisdom of Solomon, and the house which he had built, And the meat of his table, and the apartments of his servants, and the order of his ministers, and their apparel, and the cupbearers, and the holocausts, which he offered in the house of the Lord: she had no longer any spirit in her… (3 Kings 10: 4-5)

Van Schoonhoven was anxious to defend Ruusbroec against the accusation that his teaching contradicted the papal decretal on the nature of the beatific vision. He cites passages from the prior’s work that prove that Ruusbroec taught that our beatitude consists in the vision and enjoyment of God and its actual practice. This objective beatitude implies a subjective transformation of the creature into the Creator, and this is realised primarily in loving but also in knowing God. The uncreated beatitude that consists in the vision of God’s essence in heaven is always a pure gift, beyond any human power. He then proceeds, arguing that, just like Thomas Aquinas, Ruusbroec believed that, while the vison of God’s essence belongs to heaven, by miraculous exception some privileged souls could be elevated to a foretaste of this vision even in life. He further claims that Ruusbroec’s teaching agrees with Aquinas in insisting that in the vision of the divine essence God becomes, as it were, the form by which we understand, not in the sense that form and matter are one being in the natural world, but in the sense that the proportion of the divine essence to our intellect is like the proportion of form to matter and that it becomes one with it in what pertains to the act of understanding. Van Schoonhoven concludes by stating he believes that Gerson misread the work, and that he could not accept that the book, which he believes to be put together by the Holy Spirit, could be rejected and held in contempt (McGinn, 2012, pp. 82-83).

In April June of 1408 Gerson responded to Van Schoonhoven’s letter, by writing another letter to Bartholomew Clantier. In this new letter, Gerson does not recant any of his previous sentiments or modify any of his statements. The letter is divided into eight sections. Gerson starts by rejecting the argument that was put forward regarding the arbitrary use of nouns and explains it is against the practice of the Fathers (McGuire, 1998, pp. 249-250).

He then addresses the manner of speaking of theologians. If it is found to be unsuitable and metaphorical or usual and figurative it should not be randomly used but explained in its proper sense. It is important that men of inferior academic training and knowledge are tolerant if their sayings are adjusted to conform to proper usage and if they are not allowed to be expanded due to them undermining the Catholic faith. Gerson believes that this consideration influenced doctors like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure in leaving out all verbal decoration and in handing down a theology through questions, with fixed rues and a precise form of words (McGuire, 1998, p. 250). Gerson would prefer to see theological uniformity. Ruusbroec wrote in the vernacular, with Gerson reading a Latin translation, and it appears he disapproves of the use of the vernacular as opposed to Latin. Furthermore, Gerson strongly rejects the suggestion, made in the defence by Van Schoonhoven, that mysticism should not just be discussed in schools but also by the laity and in the vernacular. He points out that the mystical comes from the highest theology and Albert the Great and others dealt with it in their own clear language. He has strong reservations about sharing mystical theology with random people and has a genuine concern that mystical thought must be protected from misinterpretations.

Thus are they to be made public, now in writings, now in talk in the vernacular language among servants, uneducated youths, slow-witted old people, the uneducated crowd, broken-down old woman, at one time in the marketplace, at another in the back streets?

(McGuire, 1998, p. 251)

The next part of Gerson’s letter pertains to the most essential part of the controversy, the matter of union. He again quotes 1 Corinthians 6:17, He is joined to the Lord is one spirit. He emphasises that nobody can understand this unity in any other sense than through assimilation, and any other manner of speaking in the holy doctors, as in Dionysius and others, is metaphorical or figurative, hyperbolic or emphatic and if it is not related to this rule, it is to be rejected (McGuire, 1998, p.251). Gerson states that assimilation does not take away our nature but perfects it. He then attacks the analogy of ‘some doctor’[[47]](#footnote-47) that the adding of a drop of water into a large jar of the strongest wine is like the union of the contemplative soul, stating that this should be totally rejected and has the error, or madness of Amaury (Amalric of Bena, died circa 1202). Amaury was condemned because he said that the creature is converted into God and into his own first ideal existence)).

The devotion of those who mix up their theological conclusions with statements that are unlearned, alien and unusual should be rejected. Gerson proceeds to cite an anonymous sermon made in the chapter of the Carthusians in 1406, with as theme ‘Let us see if the vines are budding’ (Sg 7:12). This sermon strongly condemns false teachings and speaks of spiritual lechery (pp. 252-253). Gerson shows how others, too, are concerned about this matter.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Gerson makes a further warning not to get too attached to a particular doctor or teaching as this not only perverts practical judgment but also one’s speculative powers. It is wrong to be in persistent and heated defence of any particular doctrine as it created hateful controversy and jealous insults (McGuire, 1998, p. 253). It is important for Gerson to emphasise that what he wrote was not out of hatred and adds that he is aware that the author of the book had expressed elsewhere more clearly how a creature in no way loses the being that it has in its proper genus. Had the author inserted this into the statements of the third part of his treatise, he would not have given any reason for error or incriminating himself (McGuire, 1998, p. 254).

Gerson proceeds to quote Vergil ‘whether they who love are making up dreams for themselves’. He then quotes directly from his previous letter and adds a story of a certain woman he saw and to whom he spoke. She was considered by many to be a prophetess and miracle worker. She stated that her spirit in contemplating God was annihilated in true destruction and then recreated. When asked how she could know this, she answered that she had experienced it. Gerson the summarises:

The day would not be long enough if I wanted to count such countless insanities of these people who are not so much in love as out of their minds.

(McGuire, 1998, p. 255)

Gerson ends his letter by explaining that if he was aware of these teachings at the university of Paris, he would proceed immediately, on the basis of his position, to seek censure of the faculty of theology so that these matters may be examined, and once examined, be judged according to their merits (McGuire, 1998, p. 256).

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the life of Gerson and his ideas about Ruusbroec’s mystical writings. I would argue that Gerson’s criticism of Ruusbroec’s work is extremely important. Firstly, it reveals how strictly mystical texts were still being scrutinised. Ruusbroec would have been aware of Eckhart’s predicament and he would have been careful to avoid controversy or misinterpretation. Secondly, it also reveals the relationship between Gerson and the Carthusians, the Carthusians and the monastery in Groenendael and also between Groenendael and Gerson. Gerson was highly respected by both parties and a man with considerable power, yet both the Carthusians and the monks at Groenendael felt so strongly about the value of Ruusbroec’s work that they were adamant in their defence.

McGinn (2012, p. 87) states that it is impossible to provide a full picture of Gerson’s multifaceted career as an academic, theologian, conciliarist, humanist, polemicist, preacher, biblical commentator and much more. Gerson was truly a man of great intellect and many talents, but also complex and, particularly with regard to his view on mysticism, ambivalent. As seen in *The Mountain of Contemplation*, he refers to the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite several times and insists on the essential role of love in the process union of the soul, indicating a strong inclination towards affective Dionysianism. In his criticism of Ruusbroec he insists that these matters are best left to those who are highly educated and without this education and knowledge it is not truly possible to reach contemplation, in other words, love alone is insufficient. At the same time, his desire to write in the vernacular, to make the knowledge of contemplation available to the laity and particularly women, is very progressive, yet in his second letter he criticises Van Schoonhoven for suggesting mysticism should be accessible not only to those with learning.

Jean Gerson was highly respected and considered a true authority. Faesen (2007, pp. 130-131) argues that the fact that he was so highly regarded meant that his criticism of Ruusbroec remained noticeable for several centuries. As an example, he mentions how in 1575 Evrard Mercurian compiled a list of books that Jesuits were only allowed to read when given permission by their superior. Ruusbroec was one of the authors on that list. The Carthusians, however remained loyal to Jan Ruusbroec. The death of Gerson did not end the controversy. The debate about the meaning of mystical union continued and the next chapter will reveal how Denys the Carthusian played a crucial role in defending Ruusbroec’s teachings.

**2.1 On Contemplation - De Contemplatione**

In this chapter Denys’ work De Contemplatione will be analysed, with a strong emphasis on the references he makes to Jan Ruusbroec. This analysis will reveal not only his considerable knowledge of mystical theology in general but specifically reveal his strongest influences.

*De Contemplatione* was written in the period 1440 – 1445 (Bagonneau, 2003 p. 19). It is important to take note of this time frame as it falls directly in the period following the *Protestatio* that was discussed in the previous chapter. During this period, Denys was under close scrutiny and not allowed to continue his work on the biblical commentaries. This event was certainly one of the three most significant of his life, the others being his studies in Cologne and his subsequent entry into the Carthusian order in 1425.

In Section 1 Denys explains his motivation for writing the book:

Therefore, since our perfection and happiness consists in contemplation, therefore I desire and intend to write something (as the Spirit of truth will deign to give) about contemplation, as the quietest and sweetest end of all our exercises, desires, and labours, rather for the edification of myself than of others. Instruction, especially when it comes to my smallness and experience, has already been written abundantly by great men. I am inexperienced, lowly, and weak. It is true that I do not rebuke it entirely from rashness, but I intend to speak of the present matter in a simple manner, adhering to the doctrines of the great Doctors and holy Fathers and contemplative men[[49]](#footnote-49).

(Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 136)

Denys stresses that the work is not to be seen as a means to instruct others, but rather to encourage his own longings. Also, he emphasises that in his own mind he is not an expert but relies strongly on the teaching of the Doctors and holy Fathers. This is an important point as it could explain the deeply personal nature and the often very direct language used. Additionally, he might be emphasising that it is not linked to the work he is at that time still forbidden to continue. It is not a Biblical commentary; it is a piece of work created to help him deepen his faith and the process of contemplation.

The work is divided in three books, the first being the longest. It consists of 71 sections[[50]](#footnote-50). The second consists of 11 sections and the third of 25. In this chapter I have selected some of the most significant parts of the work and sections that provide more of an insight into Denys’ thoughts on contemplation and mysticism, as well as his personality, whilst emphasising on those sections that reference Jan Ruusbroec. The relationship between Denys and his views of Jan Ruusbroec’s writings and legacy is a particularly interesting one as it could be seen as rather complex. In *De Contemplatione* he praises him and he discusses his work at great length.

Turner (no date[[51]](#footnote-51)) explains that whilst Ruusbroec, through his own foundation of Groenendaal, exercised considerable influence on the ‘founder’ of the Devotia Moderna, Geert Groote, the impact on the thought of Denys the Carthusian is more direct. For Denys, Jan Ruusbroec was, after Dionysius the Areopagite, his chiefly acknowledged influence. He felt confident to call him a *vir mirabilis et divinus unctus…magnifice eruditus*, (De Contemplatione, Book II, section 9) a wonderful and divinely anointed man, magnificently learned, adding that just as Hugh of St Victor has been described as a ‘second Augustine’ so Ruusbroec may legitimately be described as a ‘second Dionysius’. Denys was immensely proud of his compatriot and Turner further states that he quotes Ruusbroec using his own translation, rather than the translation by Geert Groote which was available to him. Denys read the work in their native, common tongue. This will be explored further in my chapter on *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*.

Turner (no date) argues that his affinities with and partiality for the theology of Jan Ruusbroec placed Denys in touch with the best-known school of mystical theology of his native hinterland, the ‘Rhineland mystics’. With those thinkers of the fourteenth century, he shares an intensely speculative nature, a committed intellectualism combined with a strongly apophatic emphasis in all of which he conveys and acknowledges the predominant influence of Dionysius the Areopagite. Stylistically, Denys parts ways with the style and rhetoric of the Rhineland mystics; unlike the great mystical writers of Northern Europe in the later Middle Ages, Eckhart, Tauler and Suso, he did not write one word in his native Middle Dutch. He preferred a highly conservative scholastic Latin.

Turner (no date, p. 19) argues that there were three authorities of whom it was necessary for Denys to take particular note, partly because of his own personal respect for their theological authority and personal piety, partly because of their powerful influence within his own order, and so upon the very brothers who, on their account, were most inclined to question his approach to mystical theology. Those three were Thomas Gallus, Hugh of Balma and Jean Gerson. I will argue that Denys had his own distinctive mystical theological style, most strongly influenced by Carthusian thought, the Victorines as well as Jan Ruusbroec.

**Denys and the Victorines**

In the previous chapter on Jan Ruusbroec’s writings it was established that his terminology caused grave concern to Jean Gerson and others. In his essay *Essentiel, Superessentiel, Suressentiel* Albert Deblaere argues that whilst the Devotia Moderna avoided using any of this terminology, Denys was the first to move away from these words that had become ambiguous and to replace them with *eminens* and *supereminens* in their application to the spiritual life. He continued to use them for the ontological structure. In *De Contemplatione*, Denys describes Jan Ruusbroec’s thought in great detail, without once using any of the ambiguous terminology (Faesen, 2004, pp. 25-26). This is interesting as it could be argued that the word *overwezenlijc* is an essential part of Jan Ruusbroec’s work.

The restrictions placed on Denys which prevented him from working on his biblical commentaries showed a tension between contemplative life emphasising personal piety and scholarly learning. Turner (no date, pp. 9-10) argues that Denys is a traditionalist, racked with nostalgia for lost unities of thought of the *via antiqua* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries who attempts to achieve a new synthesis in his own fifteenth century without success, only rarely more than a scholarly eclecticism. Furthermore, he believes that Denys’ problem was knowing how to state the case for contemplative wisdom as the one compelling goal of the Christian life and considers Denys to be Aristotelian in this respect; there is one human activity which is the highest, most noble, most god-like in which a person can engage, and that is contemplation. It is not only the most fulfilling of all human activities to engage in, it is also the one purpose which fulfils and draws into unity all the other purposes and goals of human life, and this is true for both the actives and the contemplatives of the world. He believes that contemplation is formally an activity of *intellect*, and so is achieved in the *vision* of God, not as such, an activity of the *affective* power or will, achieved in the *love* of God. This does not mean, however, that for Denys, love is not intrinsic to contemplation in its highest forms. It is important to understand what intellectualism means to Denys.

A debate arose in the thirteenth century on the relation between love and knowledge in mystical consciousness, in particular in the highest stages. McGinn (1998, p. 79) argues that two broad streams of the interpretation of Dionysius can be found in the later Middle Ages; the speculative (or intellective) Dionysianism initiated by Albert the Great, and what is often referred to as affective Dionysianism, first given systematic formulation in the writings of Thomas Gallus.

In line with Victorine tradition, Thomas Gallus was devoted to understanding the role of the powers of the soul in the ascent to God. He was convinced that both love and knowledge were necessary to attain God, but his thought on the relation of love and knowledge differs from earlier conceptions and McGinn (1998, p. 82) argues that this marks an important departure from earlier conceptions. Mystics had previously taught that love goes further than knowledge in attaining God, but they had also asserted that the love by which we reach God implies a form of knowing above ordinary reason. According to Gregory the Great ‘Love itself is a kind of knowing’ *(amor ipse notitia est*). Thinkers like Bernard Clairvaux, William of St Thierry and Richard of St Victor had thoroughly explored the exact nature of this knowing and generally believed that the ‘understanding of love’ (*intellectus amoris*) was built upon all the mystic’s prior efforts to know and love God and that, therefore, lower forms of knowing God were subsumed and transformed in the higher state. In his *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, William of St Thierry states that in the contemplation of God where love is chiefly operative, reason passes into love and is transformed into a certain spiritual and divine understanding which transcends and absorbs all reason. Thomas Gallus’ understanding of the relation of knowledge to the higher uniting of love is different from this as it emphasises a separation, or cutting off, of all knowing before the flight into the loving unification with God *(unitio deificans*). That is to say, love no longer subsumes preparatory forms of knowing, however necessary, but discards or rejects them (McGinn, 1998, p. 82).

Chase (2003, p. 36) argues that his complete corpus, which include three commentaries on the Song of Songs, a Commentary on Isaiah 6, two mystical treatises, *On the Seven Grades of Contemplation* and *The Mirror of Contemplation*, and two major works on the Dionysian corpus, reflects the integration of monastic metaphysical, theological and spiritual themes as they developed within the Victorine spiritual tradition in particular and the Christian contemplative tradition in general. Furthermore, his work, along with that of Hugh and Richard of St Victor, serves to highlight the seminal work of Dionysius the Areopagite and its influence on subsequent centuries of Christian contemplative thought and practice.

In his *Prologue* to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Thomas Gallus assimilates and modifies the tradition of using angelic orders as symbols and visions of spiritual paths to God. Before him, Christian mystics and spiritual writers such a Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory the Great, Dionysius the Areopagite and John Scotus Eriugena considered the celestial hierarchy, mostly believed to be composed of nine angelic orders, to be a comprehensive map of the spiritual journey. Gallus’ modifications use the celestial hierarchy as an analogue to the human soul, developing, in a way, an angelic hierarchy of the soul with each angelic order corresponding to a level or grade of spiritual consciousness. This ‘angelic anthropology’ clarifies how we experience God and helps us practise and visualise the most intimate knowledge of God. Gallus believed that as the angels themselves clarify, call us to imagine, and teach their unique paths to God, through them we become more human and at the same time more Godlike. It is important to emphasise however, that for Gallus and all the other writers, the angels themselves do not represent the most comprehensive route to God. The angels are mediators between humanity and God, but they are not the Mediator. Christ alone is the Mediator (Chase, 2003, p. 53). This is clearly expressed in the following extract taken from Gallus’ first *Commentary on the Canticles*:

It is through the careful consideration of the blessed, beautiful and wounded Christ. For among all the mind’s exercises for the ascent of the spiritual intelligence, this is the most efficacious. Indeed, the more ardent we are in His most sweet love, through devout and blessed imaginative gazing upon Him, the higher shall we ascend in the apprehension of the things of the Godhead.

(Thomas Gallus, quoted in Walsh, 1988, pp. 189-190)

Gallus believed that this mediating activity of Christ is reflected to us through the diverse activity within the angelic orders that represent the many ways and forms of seeing God (Chase, 2003, p. 53). Gallus’ analysis of the angelic hierarchy emphasises his belief that both love and intellect are necessary in the highest stages of the mystical journey, but love surpasses intellect.

Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Celestial Hierarchy* is the inspiration for much of the writing concerning angels in the Latin West. Dionysius concentrates on nine angelic orders of which he says the seraphim, cherubim and thrones are in immediate proximity of God; the dominions, powers and authorities are in complete conformity to God and the principalities, archangels and angels participate in divine revelations to the world. These same nine orders are used by Gallus as analogues of the human soul., developing angelic hierarchies of the human soul that correlate to each of the nine orders. Each angelic order demonstrates its particular attribute while at the same time modelling a spiritual path to God. This enables us as humans to have the opportunity to imitate or to contemplate a particular attribute of some angelic order, while at the same time pursuing the spiritual path reflected by that order. The following chart explains Gallus’ nine ways of seeing God:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Angelic Order** | **Attribute/Spiritual Wisdom** | **Pathway to God** |
| Angels | Balanced use of Knowledge and Love | Messengers of Knowledge and Love to Others |
| Archangels | Appropriate use of Knowledge | Discerning Judgment and Love |
| Principalities | Flight from Evil and Attention to Good | Guide Lower Orders to Divine Light |
| Powers | Discernment between Good and Evil | Desire to seek the Highest Good |
| Virtues | Correct Course of Action leading to Virtue | Resolution to Follow Path of Virtue to Good |
| Dominions | Authentic Exercise of Free Will | ‘Sober’ use of Mind Extended to Highest Rays of Divine Intellect. |
| Thrones | Ecstasy of Mind Open to Divine Light | Total Receptivity to Divine Visitation |
| Cherubim | Death of Intellect | Union with Good in ‘Unknowing’ |
| Seraphim | Brilliant Radiance and Fiery Ardour of Love | Highest Love Uniting Soul to God; Receive and Pass on Flood of Divine Light |

(Chase, 2003, pp. 54-55)

Gallus sees each of the hierarchies as reflecting a portion of the divine light. Through the grace of God and as a kind of ontological chemistry of the soul, we may imitate and follow the angels into new depths of spiritual awareness. It is the Seraphim, circling in intimate proximity to God, who reflects the pathway that leads most deeply to God; the path of love and compassionate charity (Chase, 2003, p. 55). Ultimately for Gallus, love is the supreme path to God, but the route of love does not exclude the mind. Gallus is clear on that point: both the cherubim (mind) and the seraphim (love) are necessary components of the soul’s quest for God (Chase, 2003, p. 95).

Throughout Denys’ mystical works, he mentions the angels, but in section one of Book II, *De Contemplatione*, he refers specifically to the angelic hierarchy and Dionysius. The Victorine’s brilliant work on the Dionysian corpus on this specific topic was of great importance to him and specifically the conclusion that in the highest stages of the mystical journey, both wisdom and love are required, represented in the cherubim and the seraphim, but it is the seraphim’s love that tops wisdom

In Book II, Section 10, Denys calls Thomas Gallus, Abbott Vercellensis, a glorious man, a great contemplative and a scholar who is well versed in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite[[52]](#footnote-52) and proceeds to describe his comments on the Song of Songs, explaining how the contemplative soul begins to want to be separated from all existing things and to be united to the Spouse that is above all substances. Speculative intellect and the affective powers are the most robust forces of the mind or soul, and the soul is extended and part of the most marvellous speculations or delicious imitations of divine things. In death, these forces fall away or separate. When the soul, by most pure prayer, receives oneness with God, all operation and efficacy of intellect and heart fail, as regards created things. A spark, from the highest point of the affective powers, which is the principal and pure participation of divine goodness becomes, in an indescribable way, separated from all that is inferior to it. It is miraculously transformed into the divine life and supernaturally deified. Deification is, in so far is such a thing is possible, assimilation to and unification with the divine. This is the spiritual and happy death (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 251). This concept of deification is of particular importance as it is the main topic of debate with regard to the reception of Ruusbroec’s work by Gerson and the core criticism. Denys phrases it carefully here, by using the words ‘in so far as such a thing is possible[[53]](#footnote-53). Denys further states that according to Thomas Gallus, there are three means which the soul can employ to assist it in uniting itself with God. Firstly, by revelation of the soul, secondly, by aptitude towards union and thirdly, by prayer of the purest sort. Denys then explains how according to Thomas Gallus four things are required to seek God: frequent purification of the soul; blessed withdrawal through spiritual abstraction, prolonged distancing of the mind and unitive application of the mind once it has been withdrawn (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41,Tomus IX, p. 252).

From the many distinguished Victorine authors, it is Hugh of St Victor who is Denys’ principal inspiration. Mentioned in the *Protestatio* as one of the main people whose work he studied, Denys states that according to Richard, Hugh was the most eminent theologian of his time[[54]](#footnote-54). He is particularly interested in Hugh’s work regarding the three visions of the soul, the interior considerations or insights, namely thought, meditation and contemplation. Thought is described as when the mind is touched by a fleeting knowledge of things, when an image of the thing itself is suddenly presented to the mind, either entering by the senses or springing up from memory. Meditation is the assiduous and wise chewing over of the thought, striving to unravel something complex or peering into some mystery. Contemplation is the clear, free vision of the soul, poured out into the things it contemplates. The difference between meditation and contemplation appears to be the fact that meditation always has to do with matters hidden from man’s understanding, whilst contemplation has to do with things made known to man, either according to their own nature or to man’s capacity. Meditation always concerns something that has to be explored, whilst contemplation is poured out on many or all things which have been made intelligible to it. Therefore, meditation is an enquiring and wise action of the soul, involved in investigating the obscure, and solving complicated problems, whilst contemplation is a liveliness of the intelligence which, beholding all things openly, grasps them simply by seeing them. In essence, what meditation seeks, contemplation possesses (Ni Riain, 2005, p. 137).

Denys further states that according to Hugh, there are two kinds of contemplation. One pertains to the consideration of creatures. This he calls observation (*speculation*). The other lies in the contemplation of the Creator, and this is what he calls contemplation in the strict sense. Solomon proceeds by way of meditation in the book of Proverbs; he climbs the first step of contemplation in Ecclesiasts, and he reaches the highest level in the Song of Songs. In meditation, there is a sort of struggle that occurs between ignorance and knowledge, and then it is as if the light of truth shines out from the midst of the darkness of error. Hugh distinguishes three stages. The first is meditation, the second consideration and the third is contemplation. In meditation, the carnal passions crudely disturb and obscure the soul enflamed with pious devotion. In consideration, the newness and freshness of vision lifts up the soul in admiration. In contemplation, the flavour of wondrous sweetness turns into total joy and delight. Therefore, in meditation there is trouble, in consideration there is wonder and in contemplation there is enjoyment. However, even spiritual consideration can refresh the soul with great delight, when, after the struggle with temptation and the darkness of error, an unexpected peace suddenly calms the soul, and a light, that had not been hoped for, floods in (Ni Riain, 2005, p. 138).

As Turner explains (no date, p. 10) to us, intellect is a discursive power, used either in a theoretical or practical way. For Denys, *intellectus* is specifically different from our reasoning. It is not the discursive activity of arguing on *what grounds* something might be true or calculating *how* something might be got, but rather the non-discursive act of *seeing* truth as such. Reasoning is an activity of step-by-step argument *to* a truth; intellectual seeing is a form of contemplative rest *in* a truth and is a higher form of knowing than any achieved by reasoning, for it is typically exercised in the knowledge of those truths in which any power of reasoning itself depends.

Turner argues that although he considers Denys’ terminology to be identifiably Augustinian, his source for his conception of ‘intellect’ is distinctly Dionysian. When looking at Section 5 of book I, Denys discusses the nature of the rational soul and its powers, by which the soul is capable of receiving the grace of contemplation. This section clearly shows how he looks to the writings of Dionysius regarding the angelic hierarchy. He explains how in the angelic ranks and hierarchy of minds, the higher minds participate more fully in the intellectual light, but the human mind has the lowest place and grade in the series of intellectual substances. The rational soul flows directly from God at its creation, so its joy lies in its Creator.

Hence, according to excellent philosophers and theologians, the powers of the soul are really distinguished from its essence. But the higher incorruptible and inorganic powers of the soul, by which it is immediately conjoined to God as an object, are the intellect and the will, by which it is impressed upon God by contemplating and loving it, so that in the rational soul there is no force or power higher than the intellect and the will[[55]](#footnote-55). (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 139-140)

As Turner points out, regardless of differences of source or of vocabulary, in medieval thought common ground is found in a series of metaphors and a general direction. The purpose of these metaphors is to describe the place in the soul where the human mind transcends itself, this is the essential notion shared by Augustinian and Dionysian theologies, that even to be the human thing that it is, the human soul must be more than human. Turner (no date, p. 12) states that Augustine spoke of the *acies mentis*, the soul’s cutting edge, and in other places of *scintilla rationis*, the spark of reason. Bonaventura of the *acies intellectus*, Thomas Aquinas of the *apex intellectus* or *mentis* and yet others of the *scintilla synderesis*. All these metaphors denote the presence within the human mind of a source of its knowing which exceeds the human, the point in the soul where it overlaps with that which is above it. These metaphors all share the idea that to be a human and to know as a human requires our being *more than* human, both as to being and knowledge.

In the later Middle Ages there was a dispute concerning in which power of the soul *apex mentis* was to be found. An affectist like Thomas Gallus would have maintained that the *apex mentis* is an *apex amoris* or *affectus*. The deepest, highest, most intimate power of the soul is not the intellectual power, it lies in love rather than in discursive and dialectical powers of intellect, what is meant today by intellect (Turner, no date, p. 13).

This is not at all contrary to what Denys asserts. For Denys, *intellectus* is the human mind’s participation in that divine light itself, in an intimacy and union which can only be achieved by that love which is secured by grace. It is the soul’s depth, the mind’s highest reach, achieved in a loving vision impossible of attainment by anything we might consider by the word ‘intellect’ today (Turner, no date, p. 13).

Denys does not believe that intellectuals are in a better position to achieve the contemplation of God than the unlearned, the illiterate and the stupid. In Book I Section 36, Denys states that anyone who is devout, and anyone who is a religious, can, and ought, make an effort to attain to the most delicious contemplation of the Trinity; even though that person may be simple, slow to learn and uneducated.

Since a little while ago I admitted that the true and highest devotion, the chief merit and the greatest progress, consists in the contemplation of the ever living and most blessed Trinity, lest the simple should groan at having been robbed of such an exuberance of spiritual riches, I now think it necessary to explain how anyone, however simple, can attain the aforesaid species of contemplation. And indeed, in the first place, it is certain that the grace of God is not constrained by the condition, property, and limits of nature. For this reason God granted to some simpletons and unsophisticated people the grace of such a perfect and holy behaviour that they were led in this life to the most glorious and also the most profound contemplations and ecstatic raptures of the supreme Trinity and purest Deity, as will be shown more fully below, if God wills it.

(Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 177)

Denys does, however, strongly disagree with the contemporary view in his days that academic activity itself is an obstacle to the achievement of contemplative wisdom. He expressed his views on his own academic works clearly in his *Protestatio*.

Contemplation is a gift given by God alone and it is pure grace, it is not an achievement of human effort. It is a gift formally given to ‘intellect’ by the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit is Love, it is a gift given only in conjunction and to a degree corresponding with the degree of charity possessed by the soul, and that charity in the principal work of the Spirit alone (Turner, no date. 14).

**The process of contemplation according to Denys**

In Book I, article 24, Denys explains a step by step process to be followed in order for the soul to reach the height of contemplation. Denys writes that it sometimes happens that God, out of His extraordinary love and supreme goodness, chooses to surprise, touch, change, affect and convert people who are totally unprepared and who are completely unworthy of such kindness. Sometimes these people might actually be determined to do evil. He mentions the apostle Paul as an example. He emphasises however, that this is exceptional and as a general rule, a person must do what he can to prepare himself if he wants to receive grace. God is ready to give His grace to one who asks Him in the right way. There are certain ways and means that will help us to get what we pray for. Firstly, the contemplative must not get lazy about performing the customary exercises of devotion and must not grow tired of imploring Divine Mercy to come to their aid, whether or not any devotion is felt. Secondly, there is the matter of posture of the body. The Desert Fathers used to pray and contemplate standing with hands lifted to heaven. This might not suit everyone; some prefer sitting or lying down with arms outstretched in the form of a cross. The disposition of the person’s mind will decide what position to adopt. Thirdly, the place the contemplative choses to pray is important. A quiet spot is best for prayer and contemplation. It needs to be remote and secluded, as solitude is needed. Here contemplatives can stand and pour their heart out to God, without embarrassment and noise of others. Christ climbed the mountain to pray alone. (Mt. 14:23). Fourthly, it is important to decide on a time at which to pray. Night is considered best for uplifting the soul. Fifthly, it is wise to call upon the saints. Because of man’s shortcomings our own merits cannot be relied upon and contemplatives will have to seek out the merit of others. Sixthly, remember the words of the apostle Paul who said all things must be done decently and according to order. In the seventh place, the contemplative must take a good look at their natural disposition and temperament. They must ask God’s help fighting their vices, and develop those virtues that have been received naturally, so as not to waste God’s gifts. In the eighth place, the contemplative should strive daily to become more perfect in their vocation, and be moderate as regards food, drink, sleep and clothing. In the ninth pace, a change to different devotional exercises is required if the contemplative becomes tired and bored in a particular exercise of devotion or of contemplation. In the tenth place, the contemplative should help the poor and afflicted with loving compassion and heartfelt prayer, pray compassionately for the dead and always have a deep sincere desire to please God. There should always be something holy imprinted on the mind, something the devout soul can aim at and look at (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 162-164).

In praying for the gift of contemplation, the contemplative need not use many words, they can be few but fiery. The contemplative should recall the Passion of Christ daily, in order to become future partners in glory with Him and enjoy His grace in the present life. When contemplating the torments of the Passion of Christ, the contemplative thinks of who He is who endured this, what sort of Person He is, how great He is, understand the love with which He suffered, and realise for whom He suffered. It is important not to fail to ponder our own unworthiness. Lastly, an important part of contemplative life is singing, with pure hearts, hymns, psalms, and the praises of God. Whilst it is important to study the Bible, it is more important to depend on the holiness of life, true contrition for your sins and the help of divine grace (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 164). This shows how Denys is able to explain his ideas in a clear manner, and his Carthusian life and thought emerges unquestionably, emphasising the need for a quiet place, the necessity of solitude.

In Section 19 of Book I, Denys describes the Threefold Way. This is an important part of the mystical tradition and explained in great detail by Hugh of Balma in his book *The Roads to Zion Mourn*. Denys explains how a threefold way leads to contemplation. First, the purgative way. It is a serious effort of the soul, the following of a path or method, that leads to the purgation of the heart from passion, ignorance, error and sin. The purgative way frees the spirit for acts of penance, whilst subjecting the body to the spirit and the sense to the rational part of the soul.

Once the soul has been thoroughly cleansed, it becomes capable of containing the radiant light of saving wisdom. This leads to the illuminative way. This is where our mind in occupied in contemplation of divine things, striving to have some share in the divine light, by receiving the rays of supernatural, created and infused wisdom. Once the soul has been reformed and the mind has become a thing of beauty, it is ready to embark on the third way, the perfect or unitive way. This is when the mind becomes enflamed with love as a result of contemplation of divine things. It forgets itself and all things. It becomes free and is transformed and absorbed into God. The three ways include and enfold each other.

**Jan Ruusbroec in *De Contemplatione***

Denys was a highly educated man in his own right, based upon his vast legacy of writings and his in depth explanations of complex theological matters. Yet, early on his in section on Jan Ruusbroec, he emphasises his own inadequacy in fully understanding and therefore not precisely being able to explain his words, to do them justice. Apart from this he also stresses that Jan Ruusbroec was anointed by God, and his writings were deeply personal, based on his own experiences rather than merely theoretical statements.

In Section 9, Book II, Denys calls Jan Ruusbroec a wonderful man, *vir mirabilis*, and states he was anointed by God with great learning and wisdom, and that he wrote many profound things in his books on contemplation, and these were taken from his own experiences[[56]](#footnote-56).

Denys explains that Ruusbroec, in his book ‘*Perfection of the Children of God’[[57]](#footnote-57)*, says that whoever wishes to live in the most perfect state of the Church, must in the first place begin at once by being a really and truly good person. Three things are required to achieve this. Firstly, the purity of a conscience free from the stain of mortal sin. Secondly, in all things he should obey God, the Church, and his own right reason- it is important to obey all three. Thirdly, in all things he should look on God’s glory as his final and principal end and attempt to live according to God’s most gracious will[[58]](#footnote-58).

In the second place, he should have spiritual zeal. Three things are required for this: the first is purity of mind. The second is that he is spiritually free, not attached to any created things, so not impeded from reaching out to God. The third is to feel an intrinsic union with God.

In the third place, he must have elevated thought, be contemplative and supernatural. Three things are necessary for this. The first is that there is no crack or fissure in the foundation of his essence or being. The second is that his exercise should in every way be wanting. The third is that his dwelling place should be divine fruition[[59]](#footnote-59).

Here Denys states:

In the understanding of these words, I confess the smallness of my intellect and my experience to be clouded. Nevertheless, as far as The Spirit of Truth has provided, I will explain what I understand any way[[60]](#footnote-60).

(Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p.248)

The first requirement, for the foundation to be without crack or fissure, can be understood in two different ways. By the foundation of the essence or being of the soul, we might understand God who is the source of stability and the causal foundation of all beings, without crack or fissure, impenetrable, inscrutable, incomprehensible. The contemplative must take care not to presumptuously enter into the examination or scrutiny of divine mysteries. The contemplative can only possess this foundation by grateful and loving contemplation, recognising it is an inscrutable being and knowing that he, the contemplative, could not possibly understand it.

Secondly, by the contemplative’s foundation of essence or being, we might understand that he himself is the foundation, whether by his own nature which, especially as regards all things pertaining to him, is impenetrable to us, especially as regards his supernatural being, his life of sanctifying grace; even more especially as regards that which he is through the singular grace of sublime contemplation. It is by that grace that he is raised to a level above himself and above the investigation of his own mind so that the intimate and most secret being of his soul is closed to created things that can be investigated and carried by a most delightful union into God, to the extent that it is known to lose consciousness of its own self.

A spiritual person feels union with God as often as God, in the manner of an utterly inscrutable and impenetrable abyss, opens Himself to his spirit. This ‘abyss’ is unspeakable and immeasurably deep, long, wide and profound; this refers to God’s boundless majesty and unlimited, all powerful might. In this apparition God, through the grace of contemplation, opens Himself to the mind. The spirit sees itself contemplating in God’s very own wisdom, it finds itself in God Himself. The soul becomes like to God, lifted beyond all that is natural and thereby rendered flawless, without chink or fissure. If the soul feels this of itself, it recognises the grace of God and will ponder how incomparably flawless and sacred God is[[61]](#footnote-61).

From this arises the second point, freedom from intellectual exercise. The unity of God, which the spirit possesses in loving contemplation, is itself eternally entering and drawing into itself the divine Persons and all loving spirits. Jan Ruusbroec explains the unity of God that enters is internal and inscrutable love. By the force of love it draws into eternal fruition the Father, the Son all created souls united to God through the light of grace or glory. The divine and uncreated Persons enjoy each other in mutual love, and chosen souls enter into and experience this fruition.

Any contemplative who has renounced himself and all things and knows that he is neither distracted nor withdrawn from God, for he has no possessions, is free of baggage and can always, with God’s help, enter naked and pure into the depths of his own spirit. There he finds an eternal light, which is God opening Himself to the soul and showing Himself everywhere present penetrating the essences of all things. By this the soul is aware of the drawing in of divine and uncreated love. Its one delight is to be with God, its only pleasure to pay to God the debt he owes Him.

As the contemplative soul is formed by the fire of divine love, it is marvellously transformed until it becomes the special possession of the divine nature by supernatural assimilation and grace filled imitation. The spiritual powers fail to operate, unable to either attend to their function or transcend it. And although God remains visible and lovable, they can neither contemplate nor love Him.

However, in this state of immobility the spirit feels the eternal fire of love within itself. The soul feels it is being consumed by a salubrious and delicious fire. By this the soul finds itself transcendentally informed by the Spirit of God. The spirit begins to see its own self and becomes aware of the difference between itself and God, but when it melts in love it is simple and has no separateness, through love, not in essence, it is one with God and only aware of unity. Then there is an immense fore of divine love which absorbs, consumes and devours whatever can be embraced. It does this not by annihilating the substance but by enhancing it, totally drawing it into itself, enflaming and deifying it. When the soul has been totally absorbed it becomes insensible to the things of the world.

Jan Ruusbroec also says we want to burn and melt in this love forever. In it lies the happiness of all that belongs to us. We must lay the foundations of our life upon the abyss of infinite wisdom, on God. This way, we will be able to be plunged into eternal love, lifted out from ourselves to be immersed in immense wisdom itself.

The fourth stage looks to what concerns the most perfect state of the Church. This requires that the faithful soul must be adorned with the good qualities of which we have spoken, and overflowing with charity (love) and concern for the welfare of all. He must be a living instrument of God, a tool that God uses as He wants and for what He wants. The person of faith must be equally ready to engage in contemplation or in good works.

In his book *Spiritual Espousals[[62]](#footnote-62),* he speaks more fully on the three things necessary for contemplation. First is the light of grace. Second is the free turning and converting of the will. Third a conscience absolutely unstained by mortal sin. He also speaks of a fourth stage, the utter stripping of extraneous imagining, disturbances and anxieties.

A person has reached contemplative life when he reaches the stage of intimately knowing and loving God, loving God with a fruitful love and himself with an operative love that joins him with God and possesses his whole life in virtue with all justice and rectitude. God wishes to elevate the contemplative soul so it may become like God. Three things are required for this. First, the person must be adorned with all the moral virtues, inwardly unattached, so he is free from all exterior works.

Secondly, the souls must cling to God with the firm intention of being joined to Him and with love like fire that has been lit and cannot be extinguished. Thirdly, the soul must lose itself in the divine essence, in the way of ‘wanting’, and wander or stray fruitfully in a darkness, in which they cannot discover themselves in any created mode. They abandon and transcend their own being.

In the abyss of that darkness or obscurity, where the loving spirit dies to itself, we have the beginning of God’s epiphany and eternal life. In that darkness shines and is generated a sort of incomprehensible light, which is the Son of God in whom we see eternal life. In this light, the spirit begins to see. It accepts God’s clarity without any intermediary. This hidden clarity, this divine light, in which we see whatever we desire, is so great that the loving contemplative in the depths of his soul where he is at rest, feels nothing and sees nothing, except this incomprehensible light. When the soul has followed or portrayed his own eternal image, and in this light has gained, through the Son, the bosom of the Father, then he has been illumined by divine truth and receive hourly eternal impulses from the Word. The soul enters this divine contemplation in accordance with the measure of this light.

The eternal Father, together with all beings that live with Him, is, as a living foundation, actively turned towards His own Son. As to His own wisdom. The Son too is turned actively towards the Father as if to the foundation from which He flows. In this meeting of father and Son, a third Person shines forth from both. This mutual Love, with great richness and joy, actively and fruitfully embraces and penetrates Father and Son. When this moment is understood and savoured the spirit stands above itself and is one with the Spirit of God This is the active meeting in which through the Holy Spirit, we are embraced by Father and by Son in eternal love, there, in the embrace of the Trinity, the spirit has its everlasting home.

Denys ends this section by stating it would be long and difficult, and due to his inexperience quite impossible to adequately explain the above passage, even though, according to Denys, Jan Ruusbroec has written even more difficult things than these[[63]](#footnote-63).

In Book 3, section 6 Denys returns to Ruusbroec once more. Denys addresses the question whether the contemplation of God through unitive wisdom is of long duration or momentary. Denys argues that all contemplation is shrouded in darkness, its light is mystic light and it is above humankind. Its cause is supernatural, as it is dependant, from its beginning, continuation and end, on the Holy Spirit. However, although the Holy Spirit is the principal cause, the immediate causes, the formal and intrinsic causes, are an actual and fervent love of God, the abstraction of the mind from every human preoccupation, the gift of wisdom, and the soul’s own endeavour to reach out to God and fix itself on Him. The more enduring and powerful these causes are, and the more they are strengthened from above, the more lasting will be their effects. Consequently, the resulting rapture, contemplation, trance or ecstasy will endure for a longer time. Notwithstanding, all depends principally on the affection of the Holy Spirit. Denys proceeds to point out that when the saints say that contemplation lasts only a short period of time, they are bearing in mind the weakness of the human spirit and stating what is generally the rule. Also, they could be thinking of the everlasting joy of the beatific vision that awaits us in heaven by which comparison any contemplation is obscure and imperfect.

At this point, Denys refers again to Jan Ruusbroec ‘whom elsewhere I have called the Divine Doctor, and rightly so’[[64]](#footnote-64) citing his book *Sacraments of the Altar*[[65]](#footnote-65). When we have been carried out of ourselves and transfigured in the light of heaven, the eternal and uncreated light, we shall forget ourselves and become one with that light. We shall live in it and it in us, yet we shall always be divided by substance. The light of God which we shall see in us has no beginning or end and is timeless, without place, road, path form description or colour. It will completely surround us, hold us, penetrate and pass through us. It will so widely open up our simple vison that the eyes of our soul will always stand open, and we shall be unable to shut them. Denys completes this paragraph by saying that the words of this man, Jan Ruusbroec, are very difficult to understand. But he understands it as follows: the most brilliant contemplation of God causes in the mind a desire, a very vehement one, to remain in it or to constantly return to it so we cannot easily recall our mind from the vision or from the desire for it.

Once more, Denys refers to Jan Ruusbroec as doctor and proceeds to explain his writings. Whilst living this present life our state is that of union with God so long as He dwells in us, and we in Him. This union is life giving and fruitful, never idle as it is always being renewed in love by fresh visitations. The mutual indwelling of the soul and God is such that they cannot be separated. There is a drawing and a following, a giving and taking, a touching and being touched. For our heavenly Father dwells in us and visits us with His own presence raising us above reason and judgment. He strips us of all images and draws us back to our first beginning. We find nothing there but vast void stripped of every image which reflects the character of eternity. There, the Father gives us His Son who visits us in our nudity completely free of every image, visual or imagined, with the abysmal brightness which is Himself. He invites and teaches us to gaze into the brightness and to contemplate it with Him. Then we allow our interior vision to run with and to follow it, far, wide, high and deep, without any particular way of thinking about it, no construction of thought.[[66]](#footnote-66) Here we see the Son in the Father and the Father in the Son, and so they live in us, and the Holy Spirit gives Himself to us and visits us, and touches the burning spark of our soul.

In Section 11, Denys asks the question whether the contemplative lifting up towards God of mystic wisdom is painful and laborious rather than sweet and delightful. Some who write on contemplation and the fire of divine love say that the perfection of the whole contemplative life consists in three areas: in fervour, sweetness and song. Through fervour, understanding the intense emotion of divine love; through sweetness a spiritual delight and sweet consolation in God; through song, a secret and internal joy, which bursts forth from the soul through the fervour and sweetness.

Denys turns to Jan Ruusbroec once more and states that Ruusbroec, in his book *On High Contemplation[[67]](#footnote-67)*, explains that the grace of God overflows and pours down into the lower powers of the soul, and takes possession of our mind. From this, heartfelt love and a feeling of delight darts out towards God, also a love and delight that runs through flesh and blood and our whole body, and the person does not know how to behave and appears like someone who is drunk. Those who are under this influence can act in many very strange ways and sometimes cannot control their actions. With restless longing they often raise their heads to heaven with eyes wide open; one moment they are full of joy, another they are weeping; one moment they may be singing, at another shouting. First, they feel weal, then woe, and often both at once; they jump and run about, clap their hands together, kneel and bow down, and there are many other actions they perform when interior joy bursts its bounds and overflows.

Denys continues by stating that Ruusbroec, in his book *The Spiritual Marriage[[68]](#footnote-68)* says that from the love of God a pleasure of heart flows forth and all of the bodily powers such that this person feels truly embraced in the intimate embrace of divine love. This pleasure and delight is greater, more delightful and fulfilling than any pleasure that the world can give, even if one person were to have all the delights of the earth. This joy makes a person think of those living outside the divine love as living in exile.

In section 19, Denys discusses the contemplation, rapture and ecstasy of some of the saints. He lists many several famous names such a Dionysius, Jerome, Thomas Aquinas and St Francis. Interestingly, he mentions Elizabeth of Spalbeec, calling her his own compatriot since the town of Spalbeec is not far from Rijckel and also mentions Catherine of Sienna before ending with Jan Ruusbroec. He states that Ruusbroec would sometimes be found under a tree in the wood, whilst the tree itself appeared to be on fire which shows the brilliance and ardour of his contemplation[[69]](#footnote-69).

In the last section of *De Contemplatione*, 25, Denys analyses divine life, life that is like to God; deific, deifying and deified. This is the final part of his work, and the conclusion of Denys’ analysis of Christian contemplation.

Denys concludes that the created mind finds its perfection in being assimilated to the Uncreated Mind. The more perfectly it is assimilated, the more fully divine it becomes. This conformity is brought about supernaturally, mostly through acts of wisdom and love of God. As a person grows more perfect in love and contemplation he will become a better person, whether or not that person is a religious.

The life of the eternal and infinite God consists in the internal bringing forth (that is ‘generation’) of the uncreated Word; and it consists in the breathing forth (the ‘procession’) of the immense and uncreated Love, the mutual love and enjoyment of the three most holy, and measureless Persons, whose love for each other is intense, immense, and whose enjoyment of each other is infinitely sweet and supremely delicious. God draws the created spirit into this delightful; exchange of mutual love and the enjoyment into which the supremely high God draws it, go very far in making it like to God. This contentment and fruition make the soul very lovable and it will find itself lost in the caresses and clasped in the embrace of the most supreme and simple Trinity. To cling in this way to the most lovable God, to be united and conformed to this most noble God, and to be rooted in Him means that the soul becomes like to God. It is simplified, wonderfully sanctified, supernaturally stabilised and is drowned in God. It expires and dies in Him, is lifted up to the sincerest love of goodness, elevated above itself, it faints and flows away from itself and is drowned in God. It expires and dies in Him, is swallowed up by Him and with Him, becomes one. It has and it leads a life that is deifying and deified through the most gracious imitation of the Lord. All this comes about not by annihilation or desertion of what is created, not by transformation or permutation into the divine ideal, but rather by process of becoming better people, by a change in one’s quality of being, by excellent and outstanding imitation.

Charity transforms the lover into the beloved, and make the will of both join in harmony, in regard to wanting or not wanting something. When someone ceases to exercise his own will and no longer looks to his own interests and instead inclines more to the work and deeds of another person, or at least of another nature, he is said to pass away from himself, to become something else, to no longer be that what he used to be. Denys then makes his final reference to Jan Ruusbroec:

Jan Ruusbroec often says that we become one with God, one life, one happiness. This makes a certain scholar, attending more to his style of writing than to the intention of his mind, write that he wanted to revive the error of those who say that a rational creature, by its own elevation to God, can return and revert to the ideal and uncreated being, which was a very ignorant and foolish mistake. We must not think for a moment that Ruusbroec ever intended to either affirm or revive this error. On the contrary, he very sternly writes against this error. Nonetheless, his manner of writing was often hyperbolical as was that of certain other saints who got carried away, when speaking of spiritual things, by the excess of their charity and devotion[[70]](#footnote-70). (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41,Tomus IX, p. 288)

In conclusion, the fact that Denys refers to Jan Ruusbroec on a number of occasions strongly suggests that he considered his work to be of great value. It is important to realise that this all took place whilst Denys was still forbidden to continue his work on the Scriptural commentaries. He wrote with passion about the mystical journey, using a large number of sources, and in a time when Ruusbroec was still considered controversial, he goes against the general opinion and defends him in his book. Denys goes to great lengths to try and educate his reader, and when he ends his book, having presented various sources, he gives Ruusbroec pride of place with a strong defence, and subtly attacks Gerson, *the certain scholar*. The next chapter will present Denys work *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, where Denys’ defence of Ruusbroec is arguably even stronger.

**2.2 Gifts of the Holy Spirit - De Donis Spiritus Sancti tractatus quatuor**

This chapter will provide an analysis of Denys the Carthusian’s book *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*. I will argue that *Gifts of The Holy Spirit* is different in that in this book, Denys defends Jan Ruusbroec directly and extremely strongly. In both *De Contemplatione* and *The Fountain of Life and the Paths of Life*, to be discussed in the next chapter, the defence was more subtle. In addition to demonstrating the influence of Jan Ruusbroec on Denys’ thought, I will also argue once more that a strong Victorine influence can be seen by the references to Hugh and Richard of St Victor with more evidence suggesting that Denys leaned towards the Affective Dionysian as opposed to the Intellective.

The exact date when *Gifts of the Holy Spirit* was written is unknown. This book consists of four parts, the last being added about sixteen years later. When looking at the work, the structure is of importance. The first tract provides a general introduction to the topic, in which Denys address several points.

**Tract I**

In the prologue of the first part Denys explains that for among the sparks of divinity conferred onto man, the gifts of the Holy Spirit hold pride of place[[71]](#footnote-71), this is the reason he wishes to speak of these gifts and that is the aim of this book. He writes about the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit[[72]](#footnote-72) and argues that their order is of particular importance. The list descends from the highest to the lowest through coordinated stages. The gift of wisdom is highest, the gift of fear of the Lord the lowest. The nearer each gift is to the supreme gift of wisdom, the more perfect it is (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 159).

Intellect and will are the powers by which man communicates with immortal and divine substances and with God the most high. Other powers of the mind communicate with lower and palpable natures. Just as an act of will flows from a preceding act of the intellect, so, too every action of the mind not followed by an action of the will is incomplete and useless. The same applies to faith: when it engages the intellect but is without love, which is the concern of the will, it is monstrous[[73]](#footnote-73). Knowledge too, without a good and upright will is not only useless but moreover inflates and puffs up. This is taken from St Paul, and was used by Gerson too, in his *The Mountain of Contemplation[[74]](#footnote-74)*. The will must be in harmony with right reason, which informs and perfects the operation or the knowledge of the intellect. To grow in knowledge is useless without increase of divine love. Denys explains that there are three types of scholar, whether in the cloister or in schools. There are those who study to acquire knowledge, those who study to be virtuous and those who study both to acquire knowledge and to be virtuous. Better a little knowledge with a virtuous life than a dishonest life with abundant knowledge (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 160).

It is important to understand why they are called gifts of the Spirit rather than of the Father and the Son seeing that they are the works of the undivided Trinity. Whatever one divine person does, they all do, and each single one does. For they are one God, one Lord, One Creator and the cause of all things. It can only be because goodness, sweetness, joyfulness, communion and love, all of which agree in being reasons for giving with abundance one’s own self and gifts, are particularly appropriate to the Holy Spirit. So, the gift is properly ‘of the Holy Spirit’ by reason of its origin. For his is the reason of the first gift, seeing that he proceeds from the Father and the Son by means of love; being a result of the will, as the Word is a result of the mind. Love, therefore, is the cause and reason of all gratuitous giving, and is the first thing the lover can expect from the beloved (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 161-162).

The seven are called gifts of the Holy Spirit rather than other blessings divinely given. It is important to first realise that the virtues are in need of the gifts of the Holy Spirit if they are to get into action easily and without obstacle. In the first place because of the imperfection of our virtues, secondly because of the obstacles placed in the way of our virtues and thirdly, because of the need the increase within oneself the perfection of the theological virtues. In each single gift it becomes more clearly known if the Spirit of truth, who is the true God, is pleased to enlighten us. The gifts are of greater dignity than the virtues. Firstly, because they can operate only where there is sanctifying grace. Secondly, because they are ordained directly to adorn and enhance the theological virtues. Thirdly, because they make us prompt and agile to the movements of the Spirit, whose motion and inspiration is more sublime than that of our own reason. Under its guidance, the moral virtues and prudence ensure man is moved and governed by reason, able to control his passions and not allowing for excesses of passion the impede the act of reasoning. Fourthly, because the gifts by their own drive speed man to supernatural rapture. They are revealed by the Holy Spirit to the extent that by perfecting the theological virtues, they lead rational creatures more smoothly and excellently to everlasting happiness (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 162-164).

Man needs both supernatural law and supernatural grace. Since beatitude is twofold, the perfection or natural happiness of man of which the philosophers speak, and the divine, supernatural happiness which Scripture teaches man, it follows that there must be a twofold ruler or prime mover of human acts, namely natural reason and the Holy Spirit, or natural and divine law. In matters that are not outside the limit of natural order, man can be guided by the light of his own reason and natural law. In other matters, he needs divine inspiration and the guidance and enlightenment of divine law. Man’s reason may be considered as twofold. In the first place as something formed at the dictate of natural law; so, the good of man is not simply in accord with reason; therefore, man would not need to merit by the grace of God. In the second place, reason can be considered as informed or shaped by the illumination of divine law and by grace. Following this process, it can be argued that man’s good is to lean upon or to follow reason or intellect, which are the same thing. For reason shows the will what it should do, will however, is in command of all the inferior powers of the soul and moves or stirs them up to act. It follows that reason itself, provided God directs it, teaches or directs the will (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 164).

Just as the movement of the Holy Spirit is loftier than the movement of reason, so too the latter requires gifts more outstanding than the moral virtues. Thomas Aquinas argues that the gifts enable man to achieve heights beyond those of the virtues, for they exceed the general perfection of the virtues. This is not so much as regards the nature of the virtue, such as counsel, but as regards, the manner and degree in which it is exercised. No virtue can make man perfect enough to reach the final goal, unless it is aided by something higher, by the infusion of the Holy Spirit. When wondering whether the gifts of the Holy Spirit are something fixed or rooted in the rational creature or a kind of habit it is important to note that they are habitual perfections reposing, like the virtues, in the rational creature, to which habits he is willingly directed by divine inspirations. Moreover, the Holy Spirit himself, through his gifts, is said in like manner to abide in man (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 165-166).

According to the writings of St Bonaventure, whom Denys calls *Doctoris devoti*, God does not only perfect man through habits of virtue, against back sliding into vice, but he perfects man, through the habits that are His gifts, in such a way as to make him ready to throw off impediments to virtue and to disentangle himself from symptoms or relics of vice. The help which the soul needs, must be sevenfold if man is to avoid vice. The first gift is the shield against pride; fear of the Lord. The second is reverential love, this gift is opposed to hatred and envy and makes man wish his neighbour well and causes him to be ready to be of service to him. Thirdly the gift of knowledge, which is opposed to the madness of the soul known as anger. Fourthly there is the gift of fortitude, the remedy for sloth as it makes the mind robust and agile to pursue things divine. Fifthly there is the gift of counsel, by which man embraces poverty and is freed from love of worldly things, it opposes greed. Sixthly, the gift of understanding, against gluttony, rendering the mind keen and agile in rejecting whatever would obscure the use of reason. Seventhly is the gift of wisdom. Wisdom works against luxury, which blinds the mental vision and can enable the sexual act to render a person incapable of using the mental faculty. The spirit comes about through the gift of wisdom, whose radiance is able to expel this blindness of mind, or at least moderate it. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to man to hasten him on, the speed up the perfection of the rational creature in action. The seven gifts help the soul in contemplation, for the higher and contemplative life the soul has to be purged, illuminated and perfected. This was discussed in detail in the previous chapter. There are four gifts, wisdom, understanding, counsel and knowledge that illumine the intellect. The other three bring to perfection man’s affective powers. There are many gifts that regard the intellect so that the light of knowledge might most powerfully enable it to act as it should (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 166-168).

The gifts are found in those powers capable of being moved by the Holy Spirit, namely the intellect and the intellectual appetite or will. Thomas Aquinas asserts that certain Doctors distinguish between the gifts, saying that the gifts of counsel and knowledge are directed to practical knowledge, whilst understanding points to speculative knowledge. Denys points out that there appears to be a discrepancy, in one passage Thomas denies is, whereas elsewhere he uses and approves of this distinction. Denys’ reaction is interesting:

I must admit that, in the present instance, I should wish to be advised by someone more scholarly than myself, and to learn from him how best to untie the knot of this apparent contradiction, rather than to contradict irreverently so great a Doctor. I shall simply say that I do not find it easy to reconcile the two arguments.[[75]](#footnote-75)

(Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 168-169)

It could be argued that Denys is simply being very humble, downplaying his own vast knowledge of the subject. However, given the crisis he endured which led to the writing of the *Protestatio*, it seems more likely that Denys is acutely aware of the power of his words, given that his books were widely read by students and scholars alike, and wanted to refrain from placing himself in a situation where he could be accused of going against the teachings of the Church and placing himself above a Doctor of the Church.

St Anselm’s writings on the gifts also form part of Denys’ understanding and clarify the hierarchy and structure of the gifts. He states that fear of the Lord is the foundation of all others, for the Holy Spirit begins by inspiring fear into us, a fear we could be tormented with the demons. Then the Holy Spirit superimposes piety, breathing into the trembling soul a tender compassion for itself and all mankind, as it realises how terrible it would be to be separated from God and to suffer the torments of hell. The gift of knowledge is superimposed on the gift of piety. As man fears for himself and has compassion on his soul, he seeks for the means of salvation and the Holy Spirit bestows on him the knowledge required. Upon the gift of knowledge, the gift of fortitude is imposed. When the timid soul begins to fear and pity itself, it needs the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen it and enable it to carry out what has been learnt, confident that what has been taught can save it. Onto the gift of fortitude, the Holy Spirit superimposes the gift of counsel. The soul becomes strong because of holy and loving fear and is ready to undertake the good works it has been taught to do. In carrying out these works it learns from the Holy Spirit that is requires counsel. Counsel is a habitual perfection of mind, impressed on it by the Holy Spirit, which moves man to operate in all circumstances under the direction of divine guidance. The gift of understanding is superimposed onto counsel. Thanks to this gift man understands what to do and to expect and anticipate his reward from God alone. Above all these gifts, the Holy Spirit places wisdom. This gift enables man to make right use of his understanding, and what has been acquired by means of understanding becomes exceedingly sweet to his taste, so that he eagerly and lovingly follows what he knows to be just. Denys looks at Hugh who points out that the knowledge of truth does not make for perfection, unless one has learnt from experience the sweetness of its taste[[76]](#footnote-76). Experience of understanding is the teacher of understanding. St Anselm further claims that the last two gifts, understanding and wisdom, pertain to the contemplative life and the other five are directed to the active life. The perfection of all beings consists in the fact that each should observe the order for which it is ordained and should act in all things according to the need of that end intended for it by God. It is for this reason that Dionysius the Areopagite holds that not even the angelic minds dare to approach or venture anything than that which they know to be designated to them by God (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 169).

In article 13, Denys quotes from Scripture:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father from heaven give the good Spirit to them that ask Him?

(Luke 11:13, Douay Rheims)

The soul receiving such a gift and such a guest should banish all adulterous and worldly society, turn with scorn from anything that might offend the eyes of so majestic a judge, repel with chastity and courage all that might displease its guest so that it may be pure, holy and most lovely in the sight of God. The rational creature first needs to be set in a spiritual existence. In a natural order, grace precedes the virtues and the gifts so that the rational creature, through the medium of grace, makes progress in acts of virtue and of the gifts, and this grace is the formal cause of our good deeds. Because gifts presuppose virtues, for it is the virtues that expedite the coming of the gifts and perfect them, it follows that grace first branches into virtues, then into gifts, and finally into the beatitudes, which are the works of the virtues made perfect by the gifts. At the end, grace branches into the fruits which are the delights consummating and following on the works of the beatitudes. Grace and virtue are a prerequisite of the gifts (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 170-171).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is nothing other than a habitual and supernatural perfection of the created mind. Without intermediary, it is infused through creation by divine goodness. It is given to man to help and set free the growth in virtues. The gifts are habits, found not only in men but also in angels. When defining gift is important to note that it belongs to the created mind, because there is the created mind of man and the created mind that is angelic (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 171-172).

Wisdom, understanding, knowledge and counsel are planted in the intellective power or reason. Piety and fear, so far as it is a gift, lie in the will. Piety perfects justice, the subject of which is the will. Fear, that which is called a gift, is not servile but filial, and follows upon charity. Justice and charity are supported by will and subjected to it, the gifts of piety and fear exist in the will. All the gifts of the Holy Spirit are to be found in the intellect or in the will. Fortitude strengthens the will. The will, through the gift of fortitude, is readily guided by the Holy Spirit. The will is its subject. Denys ends Tract I by stating that the theological virtues have this differentiation, that God is their object in accordance with their distinct qualities. God is both the object, for one or other reason, of both the gift and the theological virtue of wisdom and he wishes to continue this topic in the next section (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 172-173).

**Tract II**

In the prologue of Tract two Denys emphasises the importance of having knowledge of the gifts. Firstly, because they are of the Holy Spirit, divine. Secondly because the knowledge is of practical use. A more ardent love of the gifts will ensure man will long to return, with all his might, gratitude for such abundance (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 175). Man must first understand there are three kinds of wisdom. Firstly, there is divine, uncreated eternal wisdom without bound, attributed to God. The divine essence is one wisdom for the whole Trinity. The second wisdom is, though supernatural, created. This is theology. Thirdly, there is wisdom that is natural and philosophical. Neither uncreated wisdom, nor natural and philosophical wisdom is a gift of the Holy Spirit, since neither of them is a grace giving gift, infused without intermediary by the Holy Spirit. The second mode must be further investigated before stating whether or not it could be considered a gift (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 175-176).

Man must be aware of a threefold wisdom that is false and vain. There is a certain earthly prudence, whose aim and end is to accumulate worldly riches, also a certain sensual prudence whose end is to acquire what is delightful to the flesh, and finally a diabolical prudence, whose end and aim is self-aggrandisement, which is what the devil wishes. It is possible for knowledge that is in itself natural, to be called supernatural. An example is King Solomon who was miraculously infused with a natural knowledge of things by God. Denys warns that there are many Doctors of Sacred Theology living in mortal sin and yet they are brilliant theologians[[77]](#footnote-77), but wisdom that is the gift of the Holy Spirit belongs only to the good. Whoever has the gifts of the Holy Spirit also has the Spirit, therefore he has both charity and grace. The wisdom previously discussed can be possessed without charity and grace and is therefore not a gift of the Holy Spirit. The gifts make the intellectual creature very readily moved by the Holy Spirit (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 176-178). Denys offers particularly harsh criticism here towards some of his superiors. This is rather different from the remark he made in section 7 of *The Fountain of Light and the Paths of Life* where he expresses sadness over the fact that many priests start out as very devout people but lose their fervour after some time. This might be seen as another indication that *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit* was written when he was a younger man and even more ardent.

Aristotle has laid down the foundation for metaphysics but theology, which is a supernatural science, has as the object of its contemplation the primal cause and ultimate goal of all beings, and the manner of its contemplation is much more sublime than any natural theorising on matters that regard the theological faculty. Wisdom through which we are given the power of judging all things through divine reasons and laws or rules is called a gift of the Holy Spirit (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 178-179).

Whilst it is correct that the gifts of the Holy Spirit swiftly expel all vices and expedite the growth of all virtues, it is important to remember that the gifts themselves are supernatural habits fitted to govern the mind supernaturally. The gift of wisdom includes two things, knowledge and a delicious sense of savouring, whose cause is love, a love that exists in the will. Therefore, by that delicious savouring of the gift of wisdom (*sapientiae, sapientale*) wisdom perfects our faith. The gift of wisdom brings charity to perfection, rendering it prompt in action, reliable and peaceful. Natural reason is not enough to arouse and direct the ardour of love through the faith of the intellect. It needs the gift of wisdom, by which the Holy Spirit fills man with joy and stirs him, as much in acts of faith as in acts of charity, whilst steering man away from any obstacles to works of holiness (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 180-181).

The Holy Spirit has a triple effect. Firstly, it clarifies the intellect, secondly, an innate discernment of the mind; because through wisdom the spiritual person judges of divine and other matters in the light of reason or contemplation and accordance with divine laws, based on his own experience and conviction of faith in the divine. Thirdly, enjoyment of the soul. Wisdom banishes anxiety by governing the mind. Anger is a sort of madness of the mind, and it is the greatest cause of anxiety. Since mildness is a moral virtue restraining anger, mildness or meekness is considered an offspring of wisdom, since it is caused by wisdom. Wisdom which is a gift is not a barren knowledge of divine matters but something sweet and delightful to the taste, something to be savoured. To some this gift is given not so much for their own salvation as for the purpose of governing and instructing others. Through piety and fear of the Lord wisdom is most clearly expressed; wisdom exists in the mind, whilst charity dwells in the will (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 181-184).

Article 13 marks a turning point in this book. Denys has made a considerable effort explaining and arguing the different types of wisdom and it is at this time that he makes reference to Jan Ruusbroec.

I turn now to that remarkable man, the lord John Ruysbroeck. I hardly know by what appellation worthily to name him, unless to compare him to that venerable man, Hugh de Saint Victor, who because of the eminence of his learning was called another Augustine[[78]](#footnote-78). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 59)

This reference to Hugh of St Victor is of importance, as in the previous chapter when discussing the *Protestatio*, I have shown how Denys’ defence relied heavily on the writings of Hugh of St Victor; he started his apology by stating how it is the monk’s duty to mourn and be illumined rather that to teach or illumine. Hugh’s analysis of the three visions of the soul and the two kinds of contemplation discussed in the chapter on *De Contemplatione*, was fundamental to Denys’ understanding and view of the mystical journey.

Thus this marvellous John of whom I speak might be named, for his most excellent wisdom, another Denis. For it is my opinion that if his books were translated in the same style as those of the great Denis, they would be quite as easy to study as are the books of Denis[[79]](#footnote-79).

Denys makes two important points here. Firstly, he compares Jan Ruusbroec to The Areopagite, and places him on the same level. Secondly, he argues that Ruusbroec’s books are not easy to study due to the style in which they have been translated. It is also interesting to note that Denys implies here that The Areopagite’s books are easy to study[[80]](#footnote-80). Perhaps what he really tries to convey here is that there were at the time, better translations of his work more readily available whereas with Ruusbroec’s work this was not the case.

Since this man was possessed of such great wisdom, I do not hesitate to call him the divine Doctor, for he had no instructor other than the Holy Spirit.  For he would otherwise have been illiterate and ignorant, just as Peter and John, arch apostles, were described by Luke in the Acts[[81]](#footnote-81) as illiterate. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 184)

In this section Denys again refers to Ruusbroec as the Divine Doctor, as he has done previously in *De Contemplatione*, book 3 section 6. The fact that Denys here so strongly emphasises that Ruusbroec was instructed directly by the Holy Spirit shows how he regards him a holy man whose words are the absolute truth and who should not be criticised. It could possibly be argued that Denys wrote this book, *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, with Jan Ruusbroec in mind, as a way to, by carefully explaining the different types of wisdom and the workings of the Holy Spirit, prove Ruusbroec was indeed blessed with the gifts and worthy of all respect and admiration. In *De Contemplatione*, Book III section 19, Denys mentions Ruusbroec in a list of saints who experienced rapture and ecstasy, and he here refers to the biography written by Pomerius, as discussed in Chapter 2 on Jan Ruusbroec, which describes a scene where Ruusbroec is seated under a tree, in contemplation, whilst the tree appears to be on fire. In *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, Denys writes more directly and does not feel the need to refer to other sources to support his claim that Ruusbroec is a saint.

So he wrote his books in the vernacular. Sadly their profundity and their depth of meaning, has, as yet, been fully admired by no one. And so, I am certain that this man has been instructed by the Holy Spirit, for which reason I hold him in the very greatest respect. Therefore I have studiously perused what he has written of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in his book entitled *Tabernaculum Moysis (The Spiritual Tabernacle)[[82]](#footnote-82)*. And because I can find no translation of this book I have tried, as best I could, to translate it myself so as to introduce his words to you[[83]](#footnote-83).

(Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 184)

Denys points out that Ruusbroec wrote in the vernacular, and he expresses his disappointment in the fact that the depth and wisdom of his words has never been appreciated by anyone. Once more he confirms that the Holy Spirit was Ruusbroec’s teacher and his respect for him. Denys now states that he has studied the works very carefully himself and was unable to find a translation of the book. He finds it of such importance that people should read the work that he himself has decided to translate it. He then proceeds to offer his own translation of a section of Jan Ruusbroec’s work relating to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the section he translated, Ruusbroec refers to Exodus 25:37:

Thou shalt make also seven lamps, and shalt set them upon the candlestick to give light over against. (Douay Rheims, Exodus 25:37)

Ruusbroec states that man should gaze upon the love of God, communicating itself to him, like a living spring from which seven streams flow. A splendid sun with seven rays, a consuming fire at work. This divine love is the spirit of God with His gifts, signified by the seven golden lamps. The higher lamp is the Holy Spirit and the gift of wisdom. Wherever the Spirit of God is, there is wisdom, and wherever true wisdom is, there too is the Spirit of God. The highest river flowing from the living font of divine love is the spirit of wisdom; the humanity of our Lord was poured out on all men by this river. This supreme river makes man’s spirit unaffected, at peace, simple, firm, free, without anxiety and always ready to die to self and live to God. The lamp burns eternally with divine wisdom, for as long has within him the upright flame of simple intention. Denys ends his translation by stating it would take a long time to comment fully on these words, but he will attempt to provide a brief explanation[[84]](#footnote-84). From this point on, throughout the book, he never mentions Jan Ruusbroec by name anymore but consistently refers to him as ‘the divine Doctor’.

According to Denys, Ruusbroec means that the gift of wisdom requires man to be simple, without anxiety and unaffected. As contemplation itself becomes more divine and sublime, the human mind becomes more God-like and sublime, transcending earthly matters, relinquishing what is corporeal, casting aside inordinate affection and anxiety and both abandoning and despising idle thoughts. The act of wisdom is a most high and God like and most divinely sweet contemplation. If it brings forth an act that is firm and perfect, it requires an intellect that is in itself simple, not inclined to bend in different ways nor channelled into a variety of matters. The soul must be at peace, undistracted by other matters. Here Denys quotes the Areopagite, stating one must turn towards the ray of light, to the inner brightness of divine clarity. He continues to state that as far as the rational mind in concerned, it too should die to itself and live to God. Eventually man reaches the stage mentioned by the Apostle Paul:

And I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me. And that I live now in the flesh: I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself for me. (Douay Rheims, Gal. 2:20)

Because we owe to God whatever we are or whatever we have, by living in this mode we are fulfilling all justice. In exercising justice, wisdom is found, or rather an increase of wisdom, and man senses and savours it. Since the gift of wisdom is the most perfect and most divine, it seems a peculiar thing that Sacred Scripture shows it to be so easily to be found and received from God. He emphasises that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are inseparably joined to charity and grace and that wisdom itself exists only through divine creation and inspiration, as is the case with charity and grace. One who is truly joined to God is said to merit, find and receive wisdom, so far as he uses and augments it. One who wishes to experience the flavour of true wisdom and to grow in the gift of wisdom, must refrain from excessive study, not find glory in his own opinions or intellect but build his foundations in true humility, root himself in divine charity and abandon any preoccupations of vain thoughts (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 187). The testimony of Richard (of St Victor) in his *De Contemplatione*, emphasises that as divine charity increases in man’s heart, so too wisdom equally grows and flourishes (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 187-188). Denys analyses Richard’s work with the entitled, *De Contemplatione*, to discuss the gift of charity. According to Richard, as divine charity increases in man’s heart, so too wisdom equally grows and flourishes. If man were to love perfectly and fully, the excess of his love and the eagerness of his ardent desire might carry him away and plunge him into an access of rapture. If he were fully worthy of divine love, if he were to show himself a fit subject for so great an honour, perhaps the eyes of his mind would be irradiated with so much clarity of light, and would inebriate the desire of his heart with such great and delicious sweetness that he would be snatched high above himself, and, through rapture of the mind, be raised up to the heights. Furthermore, Richard stresses that both charity and the gift of wisdom are at the root of spiritual sweetness. Whoever has these two things can continually be raised up to spiritual sweetness, providing he always has the support and help of God, which flows into each one according to a person’s own virtue and capacity (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 188).

In article 16 Denys makes another reference to Jan Ruusbroec, and this time he looks at the book *Perfection of the children of God[[85]](#footnote-85)* to explain the three grades of wisdom. The first stage of wisdom concerns and brings to perfection man’s animal status and the purgative way, the way of beginners. The second stage concerns man’s rational status and the way of illumination, the way of the proficient. The third stage concerns and enhances the truly spiritual status, the way also that is for those themselves that are perfect[[86]](#footnote-86). He then proceeds:

Finally, the first stage of wisdom pertains to faithful servants, the second to secret friends, the third to God’s dearest children whose distinction the divine Doctor beautifully and marvellously describes in his book on the perfection of the children of God[[87]](#footnote-87). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 189-190)

Once more Denys makes reference to Ruusbroec, not mentioning his name, but referring to him as the ‘divine Doctor’ whilst praising his writings, calling them beautiful and marvellous.

The gift of wisdom is as the sun through which the moon of our soul makes day out of darkness. It is the eye of the heart, the inner and delicious fruit, the delectable paradise of the soul. What is earthly is turned into what is heavenly, what is transient is made immortal, it turns man into God by authority of deific transformation. This wisdom makes the rational soul lovable and similar to angelic minds. It enhances, by its own splendour, all that is in man, directing, ruling and governing him according to divine laws. This wisdom is not obscured by night or darkened by shadows, on the contrary, in the dark it shines out with an even brighter light. Then, the soul becomes fit and ready to contemplate the divine (Dionysii, 1908, Tomus III, pp. 192-193). This comparison to the sun is interesting as it prepares the reader for the upcoming reference to Jan Ruusbroec in article 25. The section ends as follows:

I have drawn these comments on the gift of understanding from the teaching of the divine Doctor in his book *De Ornatu of Spiritual Espousals[[88]](#footnote-88)*. In this book he has written many other most beautiful and profound things on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, with which he mingles many other topics- according to the good pleasure of the Holy Spirit who is the director of this man’s soul[[89]](#footnote-89). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 197)

Once more, Ruusbroec is referred to as the divine Doctor, and Denys again affirms that it was the Holy Spirit who led him. By stating that there are many other most beautiful and profound things written in the book, Denys strongly implies that he has not yet even touched the surface. It appears that Ruusbroec’s writings on the Holy Spirit form the very basis of Denys’ own work and his true inspiration for writing his own book on the topic.

The comparison between the gift of understanding and the light of the sun is well chosen, because, as the sun by its splendour fills the air with purest light, the eye is able to perceive all shapes and colours. The radiance or brilliance of the gift of understanding lights up the mind and reveals to it the truth of all that lies within it. Because of this, the mind itself starts to perceive the truths that it believes by faith, to penetrate and gaze into them. It recognises each of these distinctly and clearly contemplates the attributes and meanings of each in the light of this gift. The riches and beauty of this world reveal themselves while the air is illumined and penetrated by the light of the sun. Once the gift of understanding pours into man’s intellect, it is penetrated and clarified and enabled to see those very attributes that are in God. This gift also teaches man to value his own nobility and to look into the various distinctions or differences between one virtue and another, it shows the union he has in God through fervent love of God, and also the likeness man possesses within himself through charity and the virtues. It provides the light and clarity with which man is able to abide in the spirit, to contemplate God in spiritual likeness, to contemplate himself and all things according to mode and measure of his light in accordance with God’s will and the dignity of his own intellect. Another reason why the gift of understanding may be compared to the splendour or ray of the sun is because of the heat the sun in its splendour bestows on things. The sun can be seen as a blessing to the whole world, and often its heat becomes too intense. Similarly, when the gift of understanding enables man’s reason to grow bright, the will itself, which is a force of love, will often glow and burn and communicates itself with fidelity and love in a general and abundant outpouring. It is the gift of understanding that gives birth in man to a kind of love that is abundant and all-embracing which man perceives through recognition of truth, and in the clarity of its light. Man must remain simple at heart though and consider all things through the light of reason and to flow through or penetrate them so as to be one with them, through man’s all-embracing love. Man must be like the sun in heaven that remains in itself simple and unchangeable in spite of communicating its light to the whole world.  The more simple and better adjusted people are, the more they are at peace with themselves, and they are more deeply immersed in God. Through Christ, man ought to meet God and grow like Him in universal love. Purified by the light of God’s grace and the gift of understanding man should become united to God in essential unity. This means to adhere to God, to be joined directly to Him and always remain in union with Him, with God and all the saints to be poured out in perpetual and communal love, on the other hand always turning to God in thanksgiving, gratitude and praise, and, plunged in fruitful love, to turn from self to God, to be immersed there with Him and plunged in the very essence of Peace. This is the richer life, which the divine Doctor states he knows.  No one can truly sense God, His presence within His creation, no one can fully understand His wonderful works except by the gift of understanding, which no one can possess without grace (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 196-197).

 It is important to note how often the word love is used. When explaining the gift of understanding and the union with God, the emphasis is strongly placed on the importance of love. This again indicates that Denys places the most importance on love in the highest stages of the mystical union with God and arguably is inclined towards the idea of affective Dionysianism as opposed to intellective.

Man needs the supernatural light of the gift of understanding infused by the Holy Spirit. It is through this gift that man knows himself and supernaturally gazes into his own depths and contemplates the image of the Trinity that is stamped therein. Denys turns to Richard once more. Faith has to do with things supernatural and incomprehensible, which means the natural light of human intelligence finds itself out of depth. What is required is the supernatural light of the gift of understanding, infused by the Holy Spirit. Through this gift man knows himself and is able to supernaturally gaze into his own depths, contemplating the image of the most glorious Trinity that is stamped therein. There are other gifts of God, both those of nature and grace, that man understands and with praise and thankful heart ascribes and attributes to God, Richard states that it is by this exercise that the heart is cleansed, the mind is made keener and man’s intelligence widened. Mankind knows not what it should feel regarding either the angelic or the divine spirit if it does not know even its own spirit. If man is not yet qualified to enter into his own self, what hope has he of being able to see with clarity those things that lie above him? It is the gift of understanding that elevates and illuminates the mind (Dionysii, 1908, Tomus III, pp. 198-199).

The gift of understanding perfects human reason to the extent that it makes the mind of man very ready to be directed by the Holy Spirit with regard to knowledge of his final end or indeed knowledge of other truths that tend to his ultimate goal. The knowledge given to the mind, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, consists in a true recognition and appreciation of its final end. True recognition excludes error, those who do not adhere to the ultimate goal, God most glorious and holy, is not adhering to the supreme and highest good and is in error (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 201-202).

In article 32 Denys turns to the writings of Jan Ruusbroec again and explores the distinction and the harmony between the gifts of wisdom and understanding. They differ, firstly, because the characteristic of wisdom (*sapienta*) is to judge with certainty through savouring (*per saporem*) or tasting the very truth of things divine. Understanding, however, has the characteristic of clearly knowing the truth. Secondly wisdom is the aim and fruit of the gift of understanding, Understanding precedes wisdom and leads man to it, just as knowledge precedes judgement and speculation or contemplation precedes tasting and enjoyment:

This is what the divine Doctor says in his book *De Tabernaculo Moysis[[90]](#footnote-90)*: great is the distinction between wisdom and understanding; for wisdom leads us into, and unites us to, God; whereas understanding leads us to Him, and throws light on our approach to God[[91]](#footnote-91). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 202)

Thirdly, wisdom is concerned by definition with things divine and eternal, contemplating them without comparing them or relating them to created things. Understanding, however, approaches the divine and eternal by comparing and relating them to created things. The divine Doctor teaches, without doubt, that the gift of understanding shows clearly and without labour to contemplate the riches of God and the divine perfections, and how God is immensely generous in giving man Himself and His gifts. He also shows how man should join himself to Him and how he ought to aim at all the virtues. The gift of wisdom snatches man out of himself, lifts him up above himself, makes him reach out purely to the divine, to melt and to be annihilated, to die to self in loving union with God. The gift of understanding is a supernatural light, teaching man to turn his gaze to God and to contemplate Him in His multiple riches and kindnesses beyond number, how He in some way, makes Himself known to His creatures. It is through the gift of understanding that man contemplates the wisdom of the Creator. At the end, once more Denys returns to Ruusbroec stating that according to the divine Doctor, it is clear that the gift of understanding does, when in action, impart a sort of delight and savour, for he declares that by dying to ourselves we receive the gift of understanding, and it follows that there arises in us a spiritual expansion, a delightful opening up of ourselves to God. This causes our inner self to be ever awake and vigilant[[92]](#footnote-92).

Section 34 marks the final reference to Jan Ruusbroec in Tract II. This time Denys starts by stating that obviously a soul wrapped in a gloomy fog of vices cannot catch the glorious splendour, the radiant light of the Holy Spirit. The divine Doctor testifies that the gift of understanding is a supernatural light willing, by the splendour of its radiance, to enlighten man’s reason in its own sublimity, if man would only wish to be lifted up above himself, to obey this light. This light requires the inner self to go out of itself, die to nature and live to the spirit. Whoever wants to contemplate the divine with God enlightening him, must abandon what is inferior, purify his mind, fix his mental vision on God and cast away all the distractions of his heart[[93]](#footnote-93) (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 204).

**Tract III**

In Tract III Denys addresses the Gifts of counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear. In Tract II, I showed how strongly Denys defends Ruusbroec by emphasising the lack of a proper translation and also by stating it was the Holy Spirit who moved him, and on several occasions in the previous texts stated that his words are often difficult to understand because they are so profound. It could be argued that whenever Denys refers to Ruusbroec, he is in fact defending him as he is openly endorsing Ruusbroec’s Trinitarian theology and his specific ideas about mystical union. In this part of *Gifts of the Holy Spirit* Denys refers to him on many occasions and I will show that the way this part of the book is set up proves that Ruusbroec did much more than just influence Denys; he profoundly inspired him and his thought is the foundation of this book.

The first few articles provide a brief introduction to the topic of counsel. Denys look at the Areopagite and explains that in order for the soul to be truly docile, able to yield with ease to the inspiration poured in by the Holy Spirit, receiving it and being filled by it, it needs a corresponding perfection if it is to be moved by the Holy Spirit, and this is counsel. Counsel is threefold in act. Firstly, man is instructed by it how to discern what is true. Secondly man is raised up by means of it to choose what is the better course. Thirdly, it sets man free to carry out the counsel that has been given to him (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 208-209).

From this point, Denys dedicates the next three articles entirely to Jan Ruusbroec, whom he, throughout this tract, consistently refers to as the Divine Doctor. Firstly, he looks at *The Spiritual Tabernacle* and carefully describes Ruusbroec’s thought on the gift of counsel, which Ruusbroec describes as a kind of inner touch or feeling of the Holy Spirit. He acts upon the heart’s power to love and causes man to move away from and avoid all worldly preoccupation, people who drag him to worldly and external things as well as internal worries, to love only the union of his spirit[[94]](#footnote-94). The same advice is given by Christ:

Jesus saith to him: If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me. (Matthew 19:21)

If man were to follow this counsel, he would at once die to all distractions and would obtain a loving inclination to perfect union and forgetfulness of his multiplicity of worries.

Harken, O daughter, and see, and incline thy ear: and forget thy people and thy father's house. And the king shall greatly desire thy beauty; for he is the Lord thy God, and him they shall adore. (Psalm 44:11,12)

Listen to God’s counsel and turn your attention to union, forget your preoccupations and all created beings, for then God will be your Lord, and your whole being will worship Him. Man shall be forever offered to Him, for his potential to love will always incline towards spiritual union with Him. This loving inclination is the fragrant oil of man’s inner peace, and that fragrance will put all his enemies to flight. This is how man acquires perpetual peace within God, as long as he maintains in that peace spiritual union with Him, plunged in love in the union he has in God. This is the way man obtains simplicity of heart on which he can found, in God’s sight, his pure and spiritual converse with Him. Man will turn inward towards his soul and remain there, and God will dwell in him and he in God (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 210). It is important to note that there is a very strong emphasis on love in the mystical journey that continues throughout this text.

Denys next turns to *The Spiritual Espousals[[95]](#footnote-95).* According to the divine Doctor, it is by the gift of counsel that God the Father draws the heart of man and sets him among His chosen ones at His right hand and in union with him. The Son, speaking in the spirit, urges man to follow Him and it is the Holy Spirit who opens man’s heart, and kindles in it the fire of divine love. He who listens to counsel becomes violently in love and nothing less that God can satisfy him. This is how man abandons himself in all things to be with God. Man must seek God alone, by both reason and renouncing his own will in order to reach union with God. It may please God to grant man what he desires if the union is wanted freely and faithfully, and the spirit of counsel may be doubled within him. It is particularly emphasised that those are great who listen to the counsels of God and follow Him, giving up everything and proclaiming the coming of God’s kingdom with ardent and passionate love. Those who for love overcome their own will and practise self-denial are greater, as they show God obedience, subjection and veneration saying: ‘Not my will but thine will be done’ (Luke 22:42). When Christ, in His human nature, denied His own will, mankind were all redeemed and saved. In this way, the divine will becomes even more joyous to the loving and humble of heart. Whoever resigns himself in love, lives with greater freedom than anyone. Such a person lives without anxious care, for God cannot lose what is His own (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 210-211).

The gift of counsel is a deeply rooted or habitual disposition within the soul that renders is ready to be stirred by, and ever docile to the inspirations of the uncreated Spirit. It is the Spirit who directs man in all his deliberations and strengthens and reassures him in his infirmity. However, the gift of counsel is only concerned with human actions to the extent where they relate to the realms of faith and to man’s eternal felicity. Counsel is directed towards a deed or undertaking, it is a quality pressed upon reason and inclines it to follow God’s counsels. Therefore, the divine Doctor says that the gift of counsel is an eternal touch of the Holy Spirit that draws man’s potential to love virtue. It touches the will that is adorned with charity, or charity itself. It requires man to avoid all worldly lust, everything that might draw him to exterior pleasures and the many preoccupations of the heart with their various distractions and worries. The gift of counsel is engaged in works of perfection, to mould man so he might try with all his might to seek the one thing necessary. This is accomplished through sincere contemplation, ardent love and a blameless life (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 211).

In article 6, a particular phenomenon is explained:

Now you will find in the following words of the divine Doctor that he adds that, from the gift of counsel and the action it gives rise to, love can boil to such a pitch as to produce a kind of fury and a mad intensity of desire for things of the spirit. For whoever receives direction of this kind from the gift of counsel, is vehemently set on fire with desire to follow the counsels of Christ that bid us relinquish all things, plunge our whole heart in God, and heed nothing that would separate us from Him[[96]](#footnote-96).

(Dionyssi, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 212)

This phenomenon is known as *Orewoet* and is a middle Dutch word used in the works of both Jan Ruusbroec and Hadewijch. It is no longer used and known in the Dutch language, but it refers to an extreme emotion, a burning desire, an intense, impatient and passionate longing. It is important to note that Denys writes about this as both Jan Ruusbroec and Hadewijch were both considered to be controversial, and this term is strongly linked to their writings and their mystical thought. It is interesting to note how Denys speaks of a ‘kind of fury’. In *The Complete Ruusbroec, Volume I* (2014) the English translation uses the word *impetuosity[[97]](#footnote-97)*. The Dutch word for fury is ‘*woede*’, which indicates a strong emotion, although the exact etymology of *orewoe*t has long been debated and there is no clear answer.

Regarding the three grades of the gift of counsel, the first is for God’s faithful servant, the second for God’s secret friends and the third for His hidden sons and daughters. In *The Perfection of the Children of God[[98]](#footnote-98)*, Jan Ruusbroec, the divine Doctor, introduces a most excellent distinction. The faithful servants are not yet contemplative but keep the commandments lovingly and shun all mortal sin. The secret friends cling to God with internal and burning love but have not yet died to themselves and let go of their possessions. They require spiritual consolation and the enjoyment of loving devotion. When this delight is drawn from them, they are sad and shocked and complain to God that they have been abandoned. The hidden children of God die to all such consolations, being sincerely intent on God alone, content to value, love and desire Him. There are six requirements to attain the perfection of the hidden children of God: true peace, inner silence, a loving and close union, rest in the Beloved, a falling asleep, a sort of intuition of unutterably splendid darkness. This is the apex and dizzy height of the Christian religion and the counsels of Christ; finally, it is the glorious goal to which man is raised by the third step of the gift of counsel[[99]](#footnote-99) (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 213-214). The reference to ‘unutterably splendid darkness’ is strongly Dionysian and again, the emphasis is on love.

The next gift is fortitude. Fortitude as a virtue can be seen as a sort of firmness, a kind of vigour of the soul that resists vice and dominates the passions. Also, it can be an antidote to fear and on the other hand a moderator to audacity. The act of fortitude sustains man in times of adversity or depression, and it attacks these evils with courage (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, p. 216). The gift of fortitude is different (article 13). Whilst it may render man prompt to obey reason ad resist, as far as humanly possible, all impediments to the practice of the virtues, it does not avail in the case of every obstacle placed before it nor can it evade all perils. Therefore, man needs the gift of fortitude, so that man be more readily moved by the Holy Spirit and so reach the end of whatever good work he has begun in order to reach eternal happiness. Also, man is lacking in some sort of trust or confidence when faced with perils that must be met, a trust that would expel the fear that belies confidence, an assurance that would allow him to work strenuously and live confidently. This can only be given by the gift of the Holy Spirit (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 217). This gift makes man able and willing to do all that is pleasing to God, supernaturally swift to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, so that he wondrously exults to suffer insults and torments for the love of God. The most blessed martyrs, by virtue of this gift, suffer with incredible patience, with wondrous joy even, and with unshakable conviction the most horrific and indescribable tortures (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 219).

Denys quickly turns back to the teaching of the divine Doctor in article 17. In *The Spiritual Tabernacle[[100]](#footnote-100)*, Ruusbroec says that the gift of God-like fortitude touches man’s inmost being, and always demands or exacts an elevation of the mind above all things that are different from and unequal to God; it also teaches man to have a low opinion of himself and not rely on his own powers but rather to hand himself over freely to the divine Power and on that alone lay the foundation of all his virtue. By doing this, man will overcome in every battle. If man wishes to yield himself to this demand, his free will becomes united to divine power and he begins to feel true sorrow for sin; every doubt, every tremor, every temptation to run away is lifted from him and he stands steadfast in the gift of fortitude. After these powerful words, Denys writes in brackets that we must understand these words lovingly and wisely, that is to say, counting on God and on His gift to light is us the certitude of hope; not counting on ourselves, for we are weak and fragile[[101]](#footnote-101). By adding this sentence between brackets, it gives the impression that Denys is afraid Ruusbroec’s words might be misinterpreted and provides his readers with a warning. He continues to explain that the nobility of the soul united to divine virtue, lifts man above every creature and demands that he serves and acclaims, loves and adores Him who is God. If God is served with a free spirit and upright conduct on all occasions, man will become lively, brave and invincible. The more he is tempted, the stronger he will be for he battles with the help of divine virtue, which in itself is invincible (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 220-221).

Denys turns once more to *The Spiritual Espousals* and the words of the divine Doctor; when man has received the gift of fortitude, he is freed from either love or hate of terrestrial things, gain and loss, hope and worry as these and a multiplicity of other things have been overcome. Man is free, not in bondage to any created thing. When man is unmoved by any image, then he becomes the master of his soul, and without any labour from his part, he becomes unique and inward, free from all impediments, turning to God with burning devotion and a yearning beyond words, giving Him thanks and praising Him in the simplicity of his heart. The spirit of fortitude will be doubled, man will let self fall away and melts, not in the way of corporeal love, or turning towards desire for consolation and sweetness or any gifts from God such as a quiet mind and a heart at peace, on the contrary, man passes over all consolation and gifts in order to find the Beloved. Man is now strong, having left and overcome preoccupations of mind and earthly things. He rises above every creature, free and powerful, no creature can overcome him. No creature can draw man away from God (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 220-221).

The next gift is knowledge. Knowledge is threefold. There is natural knowledge, the habit of conclusion proved by demonstration. Then there is the knowledge of created things. Finally, there is knowledge which is the gift of the Holy Spirit, which cannot be acquired without grace and charity (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 223). Article 23 concerns the gift of knowledge, according to the sublime teaching of the divine Doctor, *de dono scientiae, secundum sublimem divini Doctoris doctrinam*. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, p. 225) Man’s growth in knowledge of God will correspond to his progress in inner diligence and in good works. Those who make progress in one of these will make progress in the other. It is important to have a love for all the virtues and offer up all acts of virtue in honour of the divinity. The gift of knowledge will reveal more closely the truth in all virtues (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 225-226).

In *The Spiritual Espousals[[102]](#footnote-102)*, Ruusbroec states that if man studies with much endeavour, purity of intention, and constant battle against sin, he will receive the gift of knowledge and discernment, making him a rational person knowing what he should and should not do, when he should give and when to receive. With the mediation of pure intention and divine love man will rise above himself and rest in God. Man will possess a fuller likeness to God, and every act will be done with overflowing delight. Man will be obedient and submissive to the Father, to whom power is attributed; rational and discerning to the Son, to whom wisdom is attributed and generous and loving to the Spirit, to whom clemency is attributed. Man will be at peace, bearing the image of the Holy Trinity, but only if he is in sanctifying grace and has prefect purity of intention, in God. Herein consists man’s whole active life. This is how man should conduct himself, following with discernment his own pure goal. Bravely fighting back to beat vice, planting his feet firmly and with humility in the footsteps of Christ. This will make him grow in virtue and likeness to him, whilst always remaining active. If man is taken up more nu his occupations and worries than in the point and purpose of the occupations and lingers longer in the customs and external things than in the causes and truth signified by these things, he will remain shallow and superficial. Whoever wants to draw closer to God and His works, should pass from the works to the causes. This is the way to progress towards the interior life (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 226-227).

Denys then states:

Here, then you have the teaching of the divine Doctor. In style most delightful, in profundity of meaning most difficult. If well understood, his words give you, in the purest eloquence, all that has been said and can be said on the gift of knowledge[[103]](#footnote-103). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 227)

Denys states here that Ruusbroec’s writing style is delightful but difficult to fully understand. However, he believes that these words, when understood properly, take away the need for another source; nothing more can be said, it is so profound and complete.

Article 33 introduces the gift of piety. Piety can have three meanings. Firstly, the kind that is a natural affection towards certain others, either because of a certain affinity or family bond or because a sense of pity is aroused. Secondly, piety that is a moral virtue, encouraging man to pay deference to parents and fellow citizens. The third kind id a gift of the Holy Spirit. The first kind is called innate, the second infused the third inspired (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 233). According to St Hugh piety is the sweetness of a kindly soul, a grace helpful to all, an infused affection and the religious devotion of divine worship. The gift of piety is a sweet and splendid ray from a source of measureless benignity which is essentially pious; it is infused into the soul and habituates it to worship, in a supernatural manner, God as its father[[104]](#footnote-104). This introduction leads in article 36 to the interpretation of the divine Doctor. The gift of piety obliges man to turn his thoughts away from self and out to others. If God poured the gift of counsel into man so that he might turn inwards towards himself, He gave man the gift of piety so that man might turn outwards towards others. Through the gift of piety that causes man to turn lovingly to those without, a beautiful virtue arises in him called mercy. The heart is softened, and compassion causes man to take action wherever he sees a need. This virtue is an ointment that heals all wounds, which is why it should always be liberally carried in the heart. For the honour and glory of God, man should mourn with those who mourn and grieve for their misfortune, and in man’s own affliction he should look lovingly at the abundant liberality of God and plunge himself lovingly in it. This way, man will continuously be renewed and refreshed in virtue and in the gifts. While man feels in himself the kindliness of God, a great desire to give is born within him. Through his union with it, man flows into his own self and through mercy he flows out towards others. A brilliant example of this is Christ. He gave Himself fully and entirely to the father in a pure and internal union. He followed, in charity, the wise promptings and counsels of the Holy Spirit. He gave Himself to man, too. He did so fully and entirely, living and dead, and present in the Blessed Sacrament. He gives Himself abundantly, by His grace and love, wanting man always to persevere in such a way as always to be entering in and venturing out, turning to the inner self and turning out to good works, always with the will to dwell lovingly in virtue. Denys adds here that if man makes good use of the gift of holy fear, God will generously give him the gift of piety, which is itself generosity. Man will then become great hearted, submissive and pious. He will become livelier, more like to God and feel himself more at peace with Him than before. The more like to God man becomes, the more sweetly shall he savour his likeness to Him and the peace he finds in Him (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 234-235). Thomas Aquinas[[105]](#footnote-105) asserts the gift of piety is concerned directly or principally with God. It makes man have a filial affliction with him that causes him to act appropriately towards his neighbour, because whoever is attached to God by holy love will be enflamed with an eagerness to help and support his fellow human beings. The words of the divine Doctor affirm, however, (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 235-236) that piety is infused directly into man in order to flow out or proceed from him, causing him to help his fellow man, to show compassion and be of benefit to him. Just as the gift of counsel moves and directs man to inner perfections which consist in those acts that concern himself, so too by the gift of piety man is directed by the uncreated Spirit to perfections which are required by acts that are of benefit to others. Just as the gift of wisdom perfects charity to the extent that man is on fire with love of God, so too, the gift of piety perfects charity to the extent that through it his heart is stirred to fraternal love. It is the same charity with which man loves God that he loves his neighbour.

When closing his arguments Denys states:

I do not see what I can say to Thomas, except to point out that the gift of piety is principally ordained to filial affection in God, while in second place it concerns itself with our neighbour. For by coming out of piety, to the help of our neighbour we are acting from a filial love of God, and what we do for our neighbour we are really doing for God[[106]](#footnote-106). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 236)

In article 39 Denys makes another reference to the divine Doctor who declares piety belongs to mercy, mercy, however, is a virtue connected with or joined to charity (love)[[107]](#footnote-107). From there Denys moves onto the last gift to be discussed, the gift of fear According to St Augustine, fear is avoidance of future evil, for it is while man is apprehensive of something harmful that lies in the future that he fears[[108]](#footnote-108). There are four types of fear. The first is worldly fear, the fear of losing worldly goods, so much so that a person would rather sin than incur material loss. The second fear is servile, the fear of doing wrong because of the threat of punishment. The third fear makes man refrain from sin from fear of punishment but principally for love of God. The fourth fear is filial and pure, holy and lovely and it holds God in reverence. Those who thus refrain from sin neither dishonour nor offend God (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 238-239).

As before, Denys uses a few articles as an introduction to his topic before moving to the divine Doctor (article 45) who holds that man must begin with fear of the Lord, and through it he will be filled with and continually possess the beauty of every virtue. This fear deprives man of his own will and makes him feel that he really belongs to God and not to himself. It drives out all sin and preserves man from all sin whilst inclining him to every virtue and every praiseworthy deed. The starting point of this divine fear is a sort of inward horror, infused by God, by which man’s sins are made plain to him. It reveals how loathsome, vile and poor he is and how unworthy to stand before God’s majesty, knowing that the angels tremble before Him. The greatness of His divine majesty causes man to fear he may perish for all eternity unless we obey him humbly in sincere repentance for his sins. God’s wisdom throws light upon man’s sins and shines a torch upon his inmost self. Unless man is converted, there lies before him perpetual alienation from God. Man must become one heart and soul with Him and adorn himself with the beauty of the virtues. If good works are undertaken from fear and not from divine love, they are of no avail until man first re-establishes love within himself. Man must practice self-denial moved by love, obey divine warning with humble reverence and submit to discipline. This way he receives the lovely gift of chaste fear of the Lord, a fear that will endure both in this life and in the age to come. This is the way by which man becomes spontaneously obedient to the divine majesty. Compliant to divine wisdom, one heart with and united to divine goodness. Through this he becomes awed in God’s presence, and replete with the gift of divine fear. Finally, he shall root out the audacity of hate and with fear and loving reverence to God, obtain humility. This should be the foundation of his entire life. This humility with fear makes man observe the precepts of God and the Church. It teaches him to speak little unless with good purpose, to restrain his senses, to be humble in heart and manner and even in dress and conversation to preserve humility. This must all be done to annihilate himself for the glory of God. Between ascending to God in praise and descending in humility, charity is at work within us. The gift of fortitude lights in man’s heart the fire of love of God, and lifts him up, so that he leaves all creatures behind, singing His praises climbs the heights to God. The gift of fear of God also lights the same fire in the mind causing man to bow low, with every creature, in reverence and humble obedience to God. Man must remember in what manner Christ, who is our model, humbled Himself to become man. It is not possible to imitate Him unless man receives His seven-form Spirit with His seven-fold gifts (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 240-241).

Article 49 (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 244-245) is a summary of the gifts and the virtues that spring from them. From the gift of wisdom the virtue of supreme justice is born. From the second gift, understanding, there emanates and arises in man from God a second and most glorious virtue, a spiritual delight arising to God, rendering man’s inmost self lively and agile. This lively delight causes man to look continually to God with a pleasure that is always new, for the gift of understanding is to contemplate the reason and nature of his faith and subtly turn over in his mind the truths he is bound to believe. From the third gift, counsel, a third capital virtue arises. A loving inclination towards union. This gift makes man grasp the seeds of perfection. Man separates himself from many things and strives to seek the one thing necessary. From fortitude, the fourth gift, arises the fourth principal virtue; greatness of heart, by which man spurns passing and unclean things. From knowledge, the fifth gift, discretion is born. The gift of knowledge teaches man to weave his way honourably through a perverse generation and shows him how to progress in comprehension. From the sixth gift, piety, shines out the sublime virtue of mercy. From the seventh gift, fear, humility springs. After completing this summary, Denys states that these have been introduced in accordance with the divine Doctor. Regarding them, many questions may spring to mind but it is not for us, here and now, to enter closely into the matter[[109]](#footnote-109).

Tract III ends with an explanation of in what modes the virtues were to be found in Christ. In Him, these gifts were present from the first moment and present ceaselessly and with an excellence that is without parallel.

**Tract IV**

The last part of Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Tract IV, is completely different to the previous sections. In the short prologue, Denys explains that many years, he believes 16, have passed since he wrote the book, but during this interval he has read considerably more on the subject in the writings of the scholastic Doctors, he has decided to make some additions to his original work.

What is extraordinary is the fact that in this addition, that consists of 6 parts, he never mentions Jan Ruusbroec. From the way Tract III ended, it was strongly suggested that Denys would return to the many questions he referred to and use the opportunity to explore the ideas of Ruusbroec further. Instead, he looks only at the Doctors of Church whilst also mentioning Aristotle. The areas that Denys felt needed further clarification were mainly the distinction between the virtues and the gifts, and the exact interpretations of the gifts and the number of them. He ends tract IV with this statement:

…as the scholastic Doctors are more inspired, more enlightened, more devout than others, take for example Saint Thomas, Alexander de Hales, Bonaventure, Albert, with their followers, have – after most diligent considerations, disputations and learned meetings – written with one accord that such is the truth of the matter, it is up to us firmly to hold that their conclusion is the right one. It is not for us to find enjoyment in barren curiosities and novelties. Rather we ought to adhere to holy and reliable teachers who are filled with wisdom. Such teachers, in this matter and in others, are devoutly to be believed, persons illumined from above – especially in questions wherein they are of one accord. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 262)

When looking at this book, the manner in which it is put together is of particular importance. The first tract provides a good insight into Denys’ understanding of Trinitarian Theology. The second tract introduces the reader to Jan Ruusbroec and it is here when Denys offers his strongest defence of him. It is also important to see how from that moment on, Denys refuses to mention Jan Ruusbroec by name, instead referring to him consistently as the divine Doctor.

Also, even though Denys throughout his works warns against those who are knowledgeable of theology but do not lead righteous lives, the criticism he offers in Tract II article 4, referring specifically to Doctors of Sacred Theology living in mortal sin is particularly strong. This goes much further to other mentions he made of priests who do not live as they are expected to, Denys here attacks some of his superiors. The language Denys used is stronger and more confrontational than in the other two works I analysed. Having looked at the entire book and comparing it to both *De Contemplatione* and *The Fountain of life and the Paths of Life* Denys has written *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit* using stronger and more direct language.

The difference between Tract IV and the previous tracts is extraordinary. As I have shown, Tract I provided an introduction to Denys’ Trinitarian theology, and Tracts II and III were in effect based on Jan Ruusbroec’s work. At the end of Tract III Denys writes:

These have been introduced in accordance with the divine Doctor. Regarding them many questions may spring to mind, but it is not for us, here and now, to enter closely into the matter[[110]](#footnote-110). (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 245)

From this wording, one would expect Tract IV to explore some of these questions in further detail. Instead, not a word is mentioned about Jan Ruusbroec. Denys looks at the Doctors of the Church to fine tune some of his earlier writings on the Gifts. What appears to be the most significant of this Tract is the ending, in which Denys urges the reader most strongly to stay true to their sound and wise teachings rather than be persuaded by novelties. It is this very noticeable difference that leads me to believe that the first three tracts were written before the *Protestatio*. It could also be argued that Denys was a lot younger and therefore wrote with a special zeal and passion.

In conclusion, *Gift of the Holy Spirit* reveals Denys’ most passionate defence of Ruusbroec, the comparison the Hugh of St Victor and Augustine are particularly powerful. The fact that he strongly emphasises the lack of a proper translation is also significant as well as his reference to The Areopagite; if only Ruusbroec’s work would have been translated properly, as the work of Dionysius, it would have been easy to study. Another interesting fact is how he manages to describe the concept of *orewoet*, which, as mentioned before has no Latin translation and is typical feature of Dutch/Flemish theology. Denys always remained true to Ruusbroec and also in his observations of abuses in the Church. He did however appear to see a need to moderate his language and be more subtle. As he was a well-known and respected man in his lifetime, he must also have had an understanding of the impact his words would have on his readers.

The final chapter concerns Denys’ short text *De Fonte lucis ac semitis vitae*, *The Fountain of Life and the Paths of Life*, which is the last mystical text written by Denys that refers to Jan Ruusbroec.

**2.3 The Fountain of Light and the Paths of Life -** **De Fonte lucis ac semitis vitae**

In the previous chapters I have shown how Denys referred to Jan Ruusbroec both in his work *De Contemplatione* and also in *De Donis Spiritus Sancti*.

The final work in which Denys makes reference to Jan Ruusbroec is *The Fountain of Light and the Paths of Life*. This work was written towards the end of his life and it is a relatively short text as opposed to the previously discussed books and concerns the threefold way. I will argue that Denys, apart from emphasising his devotion to Jan Ruusbroec’s writings, also shows how his mystical thought is profoundly influenced by the Victorines and their interpretation of the Dionysian corpus. I will analyse the key elements of this text, whilst comparing it to Hugh of Balma’s work The Roads to Zion Mourn. Finally, I will argue that with regard to the debate about intellective versus affective, Denys is strongly leaning toward the affective interpretation.

The book consists of 25 sections. Wessely (1968, p. 45) states that Denys wrote the work with the purpose of providing clear guidelines to those people who seriously strive to reach the goal of all life, the blessed vision of God. It is a gift, the individual chapters can and should serve as spiritual reading. Taken together, they form a blueprint of spiritual life that represents the threefold path of purification, illumination and union. The reader is given modes of conduct for the various stages of spiritual life. Whilst the practical goal is in the foreground, the great medieval theologian sees the spiritual life in close connection with philosophical and theological considerations and conclusions from religious truth. In the prologue Denys explains that the threefold way leads to the fountain of happiness, our final end, the Creator of all things, the blessed and sublime God[[111]](#footnote-111). With the help of the most sweet and Holy Spirit, and out of love, he has written something on the subject of God’s ways, those ways that are so pure, brilliant and beautiful. It is specifically written for priests, as Denys writes:

You assumed the sacred orders in your town out of devotion, intending henceforth to conduct yourself in a priestly and canonical manner.[[112]](#footnote-112).

(Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 94)

In section one, Denys writes that Scripture speaks of the manifold way. There are God’s ways, the way of the chosen souls and the other way, that of the wicked. The way of salvation is threefold. First the purgative way, then the illuminative way and thirdly the unitive way, or the way of perfection. The intention of this work is to treat the threefold way (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 95-96).

Possibly the most famous work on the threefold way is Hugh of Balma’s *The Roads to Zion Mourn*. It was most likely written before 1297, since the *On Contemplation* attributed to Guigo de Ponte (d. 1297) refers to it (Martin, 1997, p. 13). It starts by describing true and false wisdom, and then proceeds to briefly explain the Threefold Path, before providing a brief outline of the work. The work is then divided into *Via purgitiva*, *Via illuminativa* and *Via unitiva*. These sections are detailed with many references to Scripture and this work describes the topic more in depth than the short text by Denys. and most importantly, this work ends with a chapter that discusses the important question regarding the *affectus* versus i*ntellectus* debate:

A difficult question: whether the soul in her *affectus* can, by aspiration and yearning, be moved into God without any of the intellect’s cogitation leading the way or keeping her company.

(Martin, 1997, p. 155)

Hugh of Balma goes into great detail, carefully analysing the arguments on both sides using Scripture and also relying strongly on Dionysius the Areopagite. He first looks at the affirmative position. It would seem that some cogitation must necessarily take place before the *affectus* can, by love’s extension, be moved to God. When looking at the Psalms; *in my meditation a fire shall flame out[[113]](#footnote-113)*, (38:4) it is implied that the human spirit must first meditate reflectively before surging up in the fire of love to the Beloved himself through affection as the *affectus* grows inwardly. He then looks at Augustine, who said ‘We can love what we cannot see, but we can by no means love what we do not know.’ So, one must first know something by reasoning or by intellectual cogitation before one can love something with the *affectus* of love. Therefore, cogitation necessarily precedes the affection of love (Martin, 1997, pp. 155-156).

When looking at the *On the Divine Names*, it can be argued that the soul actually extending herself through love’s yearning into God, into the one she loves, is called deified, to the degree that it is possible for a creature to be conformed to the superexcellent Trinity through love’s stretching movement. In the Trinity the Father comes first in the order of nature. For He is the highest power. The Son, who is knowledge of the Father, or highest wisdom, comes next, The Holy Spirit, who is true love in his procession, binding the Father and the Son, is third. Since all three Persons exist equally from eternity, ‘former’ and ‘latter’ have nothing to do with time. The terms have to do with the nature of the three Persons and they are used for the sake of our understanding. The generation of the Son, who is the true and highest wisdom or knowledge, naturally precedes the procession of the Holy Spirit, who is true love. It can then further be argued that in the soul, who can strive in her own small way through outstretched love to imitate the Blessed Trinity, it can be expected that there first be some sort of pondering about Him toward whom she is tending or some sort of understanding knowledge, before she could, by love’s yearning, surge up to Him aspiratively. Therefore, cogitative knowing always precedes the affection of love (Martin, 1997, p. 156).

Dionysius the Areopagite wrote that the Church Militant imitates the Church Triumphant, as far as this is possible. This means that the faithful soul, wishing to surge upward through love in degrees that correspond to the angelic order imitates, above all, the spirits of those who love in the last part of the hierarchy, the Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. In order to imitate these, there must be three properties or offices in the soul who wishes to surge up. First come the Thrones, who symbolise how the soul must completely leave behind all other things, such as worldly honours, fleshly affections, and earthly delights in order to prepare a place where God alone will dwell. The Cherubim are second, their name is a word that means *fullness of knowledge*; imitation of them would be mediated by light coming from above, a mediation through which the human spirit, pondering supraintellectually, would know and understand divine and celestial things above human understanding. The Seraphim come third, the highest order. The human *affectus* now flames up with longing for Him whom the mind has already known cherubically, for Seraphim means ‘ardent’ and ‘burning’. Since the Cherubim, to whom the contemplating knowledge is proper, rightly precede the Seraphim, who must be understood as the ardour of love, if the soul is to try to imitate the triple angelic office, knowing through contemplation must precede any actual ardour through love. In no way should the affection of love surge up without cogitation leading the way (Martin, 1997, pp. 156-157).

The soul, surging up through love, tries to be conformed to the blessed spirits of the saints who gaze on God face to face. They see before they cling by love, since, unless they understood this inexpressible beauty, they simply would not be able to cling unwaveringly with fired-up affections to the beatitude that completes their delight. Therefore, unless we have knowledge before we have the affection of love, we cannot be conformed to the spirits of the saints in glory, who see the divine beauty in order to delight in it with inner affections through love that surpasses all understanding. Thus, understanding precedes love in the saints in heaven (Martin, 1997, p. 157).

The way the powers of the soul are arranged indicates a natural order for setting the soul in motion. From the very beginning of her creation the soul has three powers that are naturally distinct; memory, understanding and will. In humans, memory is nothing other than an extension of divine likeness. Understanding is the means by which, without reasoning or investigating, any soul naturally knows her Creator. Will is that power through which the soul loves her Creator and naturally moves towards Him, and it is because of the will that the human *affectus* is unable to be satisfied with the fullness of the earth’s riches and honours, for she moves toward God alone that she might in the end rest in Him. Since the power of understanding, in which contemplation takes place, naturally precedes the power of will, in which ardour or love’s affection is found, therefore the movement of understanding, that is contemplation, precedes the movement of will, that is, loving. No *affectus* is able to surge up by means of love’s affection without reflective intellection leading the way, regardless of how much it might be raised with ignited affections to encounter what comes down from above (Martin, 1997, pp. 157-158). The same appears to be true of the process of apprehending and the movements of the senses. If one is to be moved to delight in something imagined, one first would have to know it in advance by sensory means. Before something can be enjoyed, the external eye or another sense must apprehend it so one might desire to have it. Movement towards contemplation of things higher than the imagination is similar; one must first cognitively ponder God or some other delight if one is to be able to aspire to Him with inward affections or to take delight in Him in any way. It is therefore that contemplation in advance always precedes love’s upsurge (Martin, 1997, p. 158).

Dionysius the Areopagite, in the first chapter of *On Mystical Theology* states that all intellect and contemplation, even all pondering of God and the angels, must be left behind in love’s upsurge. This is a foolish proposition, for what does the soul do if she may not think of God, the Trinity or the angels? The soul would seem to be in a cloud or in the ocean, since knowledge of understanding must always direct love itself, otherwise mystical wisdom would be folly and an abuse of wisdom, no wisdom at all. Hugh proceeds to argue that everything that is apprehended is apprehended as some concept of being, whether related to the One, the True or the Good. Therefore God, regardless of how he be apprehended, is apprehended in relation to being, that is, as the supreme Unity, the supreme Truth or indeed the supreme Good. Since these modes can only be apprehended through contemplation therefore, since love’s apprehension apprehends God insofar as He is good, there must necessarily have bene some previous contemplation on goodness itself before the affection is actually moved toward God as good (Martin 1997, p. 158).

In the next part of the chapter, Hugh argues to the contrary. It seems that the *affectus* disposed in love can freely be moved into God without any of the intellect’s contemplation leading the way or accompanying her. Again, he looks at *On Mystical Theology* and concludes that in the ascent of mystical love one ought to abandon every intellectual operation and all contemplation and surge up solely according to the union of affective love, which surpasses all understanding and knowledge. Therefore, one does surge up, truly loving in love’s affection, without contemplation leading the way. Hugh then again turns to *On Mystical Theology* and states that God cannot be known through intellectual thinking, He is known most truly through the touch of love. Thus, all intellect must be abandoned ad one must surge up to God solely through the *affectus* of love. Hugh then turns *to The Divine Names* and argues that even if in human things one understands before being affected, in true and experiential knowledge of divine things, one ought to first sense through love before using understanding to ponder the One whom one has sensed. One must therefore surge up through love so that this state of knowing through love might leave true knowledge behinds in the human spirit. What the *affectus* senses experientially, namely her perception of divine names, she then truly understands in the intellect (Martin, 1997, p. 159).

According to the Areopagite, this wisdom is praised and it is irrational, it cannot proceed by investigation of reasons, is foolish as it cannot proceed like the other school sciences, that follow this procedure: we first know everything we understand. If therefore mystical theology were to proceed by first contemplating and meditating through reasonings, as other sciences are observed to do, it would not have been called foolish by Blessed Dionysius, nor would he have called it mindless. The *affectus* of love is set on fire without any mental thought or meditation. Therefore, knowledge is left behind in the mind as a result of the *affectus* of love, and not the other way around (Martin, 1997, pp. 159-160).

Oh taste and see that the Lord is sweet: blessed is the man that hopeth in Him. (Psalm 33:9, Douay Rheims)

‘Taste’ refers to the *affectus* of love, ‘see’ refers to the intellect’s contemplation and meditation. Therefore, one ought to first surge up in the movement of love before intellectually pondering in order to know the hidden God. The general rule in mystical theology is this: one ought to have practice before theory, that is, one ought to be well practised in the heart before one has knowledge of the things said about it. Hugh adds that this is also Thomas of Vercelli’s point in his commentary on *Mystical Theology*. No sort of contemplation or contemplation by the intellect is required in mystical affection (Martin, 1997, p. 160). This can also be proven by reasoning drawn from the deity, for the human spirit is perfected according to how she ascends by orderly stages to divine things. The Father is the highest power, the Son is the highest wisdom and the Holy Spirit is the love binding them. The Holy Spirit, who is true love, is the last person of the Trinity according to nature and according to our understanding, but not according to time. First one must understand the Father as the one who begets, then the Son as the begotten and then the Holy Spirit as the one who proceeds from both. The Holy Spirit, as the last, is closer to us. Therefore, since the soul progresses by ordered stages in the ascent, she must have love, which is appropriated to the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is closer to us, before having cogitative understanding or even wisdom, which is appropriated to the Son. Thus, the affection of love precedes knowing and not the other way around (Martin, 1997, p. 160).

The soul is perfected in the image of the Church Triumphant to the degree that she receives an infusion from God, who is the source of all happiness. At the same time, Dionysius affirms that since the order of the Seraphim (meaning ‘burning, ardent’) is first in line, they receive the infusion more richly and perfect than the order of Cherubim (meaning ‘fullness of knowledge’). Consequently, the *affectus*, which corresponds to the Seraphim, is affected and moved prominently into God through the ardour of love before the intellect, which corresponds to the Cherubim, can cogitatively understand the object of the *affectus’s* yearning. Thus, the *affectus* is first moved to God without prior pondering by the intellect, which follows behind the *affectus*. The rational spirit too, receives an influx from God first and foremost in accord with its degree of affinity to God. The *affectus* is supreme in the rational spirit and is therefore closer to the uncreated Spirit. The summit of the *affectus*, being closer, is thus touched by God through the radiant fire of love in the human spirit before the intellect can apprehend God, since the intellect is the power of the soul that is much farther from the supreme Creator than is the *affectus*. Therefore, the *affectus* is always moved into God sooner than the intellect understands God by cogitation (Martin, 1997, p. 161).

Because God is infinitely distant from any creature, the soul must come closer to Him if He is to be apprehended even slightly by the creature in her misery. Only love can make the soul extend herself and draw closer to God, and so the more ardently the soul loves, the closer she approaches the fountain of light. The closer the soul comes to the fountain of light through love, the more that fountain enlightens the intellect through knowledge. Therefore, as far as God is concerned, one must first love ardently before knowing understandingly (Martin, 1997, p. 161).

According to Dionysius the Areopagite, mystical theology alone can be called the wisdom of the Christians for it undergirds knowledge of faith and it is the foundation of charity. No human being, no matter how well educated or knowledgeable has ever been or will ever be able to comprehend by rational investigation or intellectual effort this wisdom found in the supreme *affectus*, far beyond the faculties of the mind. It is God alone who, in merciful and fatherly affection, opens it up, solely for His children eager for consolation. This is why it is called ‘mystical’, meaning hidden, closed off, known only to a few (Martin, 1997, pp. 161-162).

Every soul has a power of understanding, which is the faculty of the intellect, and a power of loving, which is called the *affectus*. With these, man can apprehend God, who is supreme Truth and supreme Good. The intellect allows man to grasp Truth, with the *affectus* he attains Good. One path is called contemplation, and on this path the human spirit, infused with divine light from on high, has what it takes to contemplate celestial things by meditation and cogitation. The other path is in the *affectus* and is called love’s ardour. It takes place in the fire of the Holy Spirit sent down from on high, as the soul aspires in flaming affections to God alone, yearning only to be untied with Him more intimately and tighter. The first path is symbolised by Rachel, the second path, called ‘the best part’, the one chosen by Mary, who ardently yearned. Thus, as the New Testament stands out compared to the Old, so too the way of love or perfection, which is found in ardent love and is designated by Mary, is nobler than all meditation or intellectual contemplation, which is designated by Rachel (Martin, 1997, p. 162).

The mediation, or contemplation, that moves from the lower to the higher is one type; the contemplation that in fact descends from the higher to the lower is the other. Hugh notes that the second type of contemplation proceeds in the reverse order. The human spirit makes judgements about the lower creatures aided by the light radiating from on high and according to the standards of truth and the eternal reasons, which she perceives as she meditates within herself according to divine illumination. The more abundantly the soul is flooded with light radiating from on high, that much more unnervingly can the mind (*animus*) scrutinise truth in the creatures and in all affects, in accord with the causes and reasons that are identical with God, from whom every conceived creature came forth in the very beginning. Hugh adds here that it should not be thought that this means that this second kind of contemplation from on high does not end in the *affectus*, otherwise there would be no contemplation, these two types of contemplation are not the present concern. The ardour of love far excels these and is much lovelier and easier to obtain. There are also two ways of attaining this ardour of love, one is the scholastic and common way the other is mystical and hidden (Martin, 1997, pp. 162-163).

The first way proceeds by means of searching and elevation, beginning with lower things and by long practice ascending to the highest. First, the faithful learner views the external creatures with the external eye or external sense. A bit later, when he ascends a little higher, he retains in his imagination what he has already perceived with the external eye. As he rises higher, by reasoning and comparing, he discovers a single, necessary, creating cause of everything. This is the way the philosophers arrived at knowledge of God. They knew this through the faculty that is higher than external sense or internal imagination, a faculty called reason. Pondering the creatures like this impresses a certain habit in the intellect. The human spirit is raised to a much clearer contemplation of the divine things, moving from viewing the creatures to being flooded by radiance and illumination somehow sent from God. This higher faculty is called the faculty of understanding, or the intellect, and it consists solely in pure meditation. Finally, all meditating or contemplating ends in yearning affection. If this is not the case, it does little or no good at all. Hugh here mentions Augustine, who said that rather than let meditation flit about, one ought to cling lovingly, so that contemplation or meditation might always precede affectionate love (Martin, 1997, p. 163).

The second method proceeds without using any other creatures, moving solely by cognition sent from God, as the faithful soul is drawn to God Himself. This second way of surging up to God is nobler and easier to achieve than all the other methods. Here unitive wisdom id found in love’s yearning, which aspires on high through flaming affections. *On the Divine Names* states that wisdom is the utterly divine knowledge of God known through ignorance, according to the union that is above the human spirit when withdrawing from all things, and then even dismissing herself, the spirit is united to the Inscrutable through supersplendid rays, having been enlightened by deep wisdom. In this wisdom, man is commanded to abandon all sense perception and sense-perceptible things, all intelligible and non intelligible things. This wisdom draws the lover’s *affectus* on high without any preceding meditation or investigation, it surges up as it aspires by means of the yearning found in the *affectus*. Hugh emphasises here that this wisdom is understood in one manner by those who have made progress and in another by those who are perfected. Those making progress must first cleanse themselves, and somewhat later as they contemplate, they encounter God Himself inflaming them from on high. They encounter God by surging up as they stick to the path that directly follows on the purgative path, according to the second exposition of the Lord’s Prayer which is a prayer made in spirit and in truth. After the *affectus* has exerted itself for a long time, after the mind has carefully raised itself in contemplation in the manner described earlier, it dismisses contemplation and meditation, and, aspiring to union with the Beloved Himself by yearning love alone, as often as it wishes, by day or night, inwardly or outwardly, the surging mind (animus) lifts itself upward. Now we find love’s affection preceding contemplation, for what the *affectus* feels, the intellect truly understands (Martin, 1997, p. 164).

Just as contemplation takes two forms, ascending and descending, so too with the affection of love. In the scholastic path the *affectus* ascends from love for the lower creatures to the *affectus* of love, but in mystical wisdom the opposite is true, for this true Love, which is the Holy Spirit, is closer to us and is the point of departure for the affective upsurge to God. The Holy Spirit touches the soul’s supreme affective apex with the fire of love and sets it ablaze, drawing it toward Himself without words without any contemplation. The apex of the *affectus* by its own weight is carried up to God directly. The highest power of the human spirit, the *affectus*, is capable of being joined directly to the Holy Spirit by chains of love. This highest power of the human spirit is unknown to almost everyone, except those whose apex is being moved and touched directly without mediation, by the Holy Spirit. According to Dionysius, this force in the soul is directly moved by the touch of the Holy Spirit and it is according to this touch that all of *On Mystical Theology* proceeds. By this power of the Holy Spirit comes a much greater and direct knowledge of God than is possible through any sort of investigating intellect or reason (Martin, 1997, pp. 164-165). When the apex of the *affectus* is touched, Gods touch leaves behind in the human spirit the truest of all understanding knowledge, for only in what the *affectus* senses of God can the intellect truly learn or apprehend. Dionysius states that through love’s union, which is an effective union of true knowledge, one is united to God in understanding ignorance that is far more noble than any understanding contemplation. Out of this union the mind is given marvellous clarity for the investigation of hidden things. The more the human spirit is raised up by aspiration, the more the corruption of evil fleshly inflammation decreases. Hugh then addresses the points he made at the start of his book. Starting with the phrase ‘in my meditation a fire shall flame out’ which he states must be understood as referring to those who are becoming proficient. When love’s affection is perfectly attained all the faithful service provided by reflection and meditation up to and through the proficients’ stage is removed. He then addresses Augustine’s statement ‘we are able to love what we see but we cannot at all love what we do not know’. Mystical wisdom underpins knowledge of God. Furthermore, knowledge is twofold. One kind precedes the *affectus* of love, in accordance with the common and scholastic path. Here one first has knowledge of God through sense perceptions of the creatures or through the intellect before the affection of love is kindled. The statement of Augustine should be understood in this light. In following along the mystical path, the *affectus* of love precedes understanding knowledge. The prophet David speaks of both of these. Regarding the first he says, ‘in my meditation a fire shall flame out’ and regarding the second ‘approach him’, namely by steps of love ‘and be enlightened’[[114]](#footnote-114) that is through knowledge of truth. This second kind of knowledge is more certain and unerring than the first (Martin, 1997, pp. 166-167).

Looking at the Cherubim and Seraphim, if one moves from lower to higher, then knowledge precedes love just as the Cherubim precede the Seraphim. In the contrary pattern, descending from higher to lower, the Seraphim receive influence from God first and foremost, ahead of the Cherubim. In the same descending way, the *affectus* is first moved by love to God before that which the *affectus* feels can be perceived by the intellect (Martin, 1997, p. 167).

One must be extremely vigilant to keep any intellectual contemplation from mixing into love’s unitive upsurge. The intellect illuminated from heaven apprehends God in a finite and limited way, and thus all intellectual contemplation always remains impure and unclean. Cogitation must be completely isolated from love’s *affectus* and one should rise up solely through love’s ardour. God is not wholly comprehensible, neither here and now nor in future. Therefore, the more effectively every sort of intellectual knowledge is removed in the upsurge, the more quickly the human spirit apprehends the object of her yearning (Martin, 1997, pp. 167-168). The mystical theology’s method of rising up may seem foolish and irrational to those who are unfamiliar with this wisdom, however, it proceeds most wisely according to a marvellous pattern. Entirely by the weight and discernment of love, the soul’s *affectus* is carried to the One she loves, and this happens more truly, surely and unerringly than the physical eye can see any sense perceptible object, even more certainly than the intellect is able to comprehend any sort of truth about God through cogitation. According to the method used un this upsurge, God is not apprehended like all other things are, namely by the mode of being, of being one, true or good. Rather, when the apex of the *affectus*, the supreme strength of the soul, is touched by the fire of love, by that motion and that touch the *affectus* sparks with aspiration for God. Blessed Dionysius astonishes all those scholastic and speculative doctors because they believe they know everything but in reality, next to nothing about this true wisdom by which the human spirit is drawn to God. They are unlearned because mystical theology is found entirely above the human mind, where every sort of intellect fails which apprehends only by means of the One, the True, the Good, the Being. Through the summit of affection, mystical theology in truth teaches the disciple of truth to surge up through love, and, additionally, the human spirit can never surge up in these sorts of loving movements if she is doing any kind of cogitating as she surges. In fact, whatever elevation or affection she might have gained would be taken away. The intellective power must be left behind (Martin, 1997, pp. 168-169).

Hugh recommends that if a speculative or scholastic teacher is unable to perceive this, he should listen to the Apostle Paul, who said that none of the wise Greeks could understand it because this wisdom is known only by spiritual scrutiny, he told the Corinthians that our spirit, united to the divine Spirit, has a feel for the things of God. This is the wisdom about which the spiritually mature converse. This is what the Lord promised when He said to the Apostles, ‘And you shall be clothed with power from on high’. (Luke 24:49) Just as a priest clothes himself from the head, so from the highest part down, so the soul is clothed from her highest past, the *affectus*, downward. Before any cogitation serves as a guide, she is touched by the fire of the Holy Spirit. Hugh ends this chapter, and his book, with this last, very clear statement that leaves no doubt as to his opinion concerning the *affectus* versus *intellectus* debate:

Thus the evidence is clear: The soul who truly loves is able to surge up to God through an *affectus* set afire by love’s yearning, without any cogitation leading the way. Amen. (Martin, 1997, p. 170)

*The Fountain of Life and the Paths of Life* is strongly influenced by Hugh’s work, even though Denys does not mention his name, but it does not directly discuss the question of *affectus* versus *intellectus*, neither does Denys in any of his mystical works. There are however some strong indications as to his views, particularly in section 12 which will be discussed later.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the purgative way, the illuminative way and the way of perfection. There are four reasons why Christ is the purgative way. Firstly, by His threats, rebukes and His holy teaching. He draws us away from sin and corrects us. Secondly, by the example of His most holy life he recalled us from the impurity of sin, snatched us away and made us clean. Thirdly, because by virtue of His saving Passion and merit He redeemed the whole human race from the bonds of sin. Fourthly, because He cleanses us daily through the sacraments of the Church. Christ is also the illuminative way, firstly because the wisdom of the Gospel law has instructed us and by the contemplation of divine things it has taught us. Here Denys quotes John 1:9, He was the true light, which enlightens everyone who comes into this world. Secondly, because the gifts of grace and the light of wisdom descend from Christ the head down to His members, by the virtue and merit of His most sacred life and Passion in this world, which were entirely meritorious for us. Christ is the way of perfection. Firstly, because He has given us a law containing the fullness of all perfection. He has laid down a rule of perfect charity; He has shown us the fullness of all perfection. He is the consummate Law Giver, and in His law all evil is driven off and all good is taught. Secondly, because He added the evangelical counsels to the Ten Commandments. By following these a person can obtain the most ardent charity, consummate purity, true perfection and the nearest thing to future blessedness that one can get in this life. Fourthly, because He practised to perfection, charity and every virtue. Fifthly, because by loving us so ardently and by doing and enduring so much for our salvation, He has incited us to a greater love of Him and has stirred in us the fervour of divine charity. He has lit in us the flame that burns in His own self. In conclusion, Christ the Saviour is the purgative way, Christ the Master and Teacher is also the illuminative way. Finally, as priest, pontiff and most ardent lover, He is the way of perfection (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 96-98).

The purgative way is an exercise, a striving, an earnest endeavour. Because of this way, man tends and strives to expel vice, to control passion and lust, to reform all the affections of the soul, to keep guard over the heart and senses, and to avoid every sin. Man must not conform to the pattern of this worthless world. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 98).

If a person wishes to exercise himself in the purgative way, truly doing penance, cleansing himself of vice and keeping clear of sin, three things have to be done. Firstly, the person must humble himself profoundly and consider himself worthy of every humiliation and punishment whilst praising and glorifying God with all his heart. Secondly, in place of the lustful delight taken in sinning, true sorrow should be felt from the heart and contrition that is in proportion to the sin. It is important to remember how much worse it is to wound the soul and merit eternal punishment than to incur any bodily loss or inconvenience. Such loss, if endured patiently can be of great spiritual advantage. Thirdly, for the penalty due to him because of his sin, the person should spontaneously chastise himself and humbly accept to be blamed and corrected (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 99).

It is essential to go forward on God’s way, as not going forward means to fall back, and a person should try every day to increase in virtue, hold fast to grace and to be unflagging in devotion. Wounds, when they are repeated, are graver, and to relapse after having been freely forgiven is more perverse and more ungrateful (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 101). A frequent and loving meditation on the Lord’s Passion is strongly recommended and allowing for careful reflection and meditation in different stages. This meditation is an excellent, virtuous and lifegiving exercise. Firstly, the charity by which we are bound to love Christ, and the virtue of gratitude, demand that we should remember what Christ did and suffered for us. Secondly, the Passion of Christ is like a book shining with the most outstanding doctrine. Thirdly, the remembrance of Christ’s Passion is a powerful armour against all temptations and against the advancing battle line of the vice (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 103).

In the prologue, Denys explained his intention to write this book to instruct priests and in section 7 he provides a detailed description of how a priest ought to behave before, during and after celebrating Mass. Denys concludes this section by expressing his sadness over the fact that a great many priests, though they start out quite devout, lose their fervour as time goes on. The more frequently they say Mass, the less devout they are in saying it. They become uninspiring and flat. They no longer prepare properly for their Mass; they no longer confess with true remorse. They approach the altar and celebrate the Eucharist without fervour, purity, reverence or fear. This terrible impiety, impudence, folly, ingratitude and blindless will lead to intolerable and immense damnation (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 105). He prays that this his reader will never be like this. The more often he confesses, the more often he celebrates, the more fervent he may be, more devout and more fruitful. He may be filled ever more copiously each passing day with the graces and effects of the Sacrament he celebrates, his heart growing and expanding in every spiritual richness, becoming more pleasing every day to our Saviour. It is essential to be an example to all in word and deed[[115]](#footnote-115) (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 105).

To Denys, the knowledge and understanding of mystical thought in the Victorine tradition, profoundly influenced by The Areopagite, is an essential part of being a priest. Ruusbroec’s thought fits perfectly into this theological tradition.

The illuminative way is the study, or occupation of the mind, with regard to contemplating the sublime truths of God. Specifically, the contemplation of the Most Blessed Trinity and the most pure and ineffably beautiful Deity. Additionally, it includes the contemplation of the heavenly gifts and of the supernatural truths of the Christian faith and of all spiritual things. Denys states that all our happiness consists in the clear, face to face vision of these things, our aim is to draw closer daily to that contemplation which is at once so beatific and so perfect. This can be achieved by going ahead in the light of faith, in the gift of wisdom, and in the knowledge of the supreme and uncreated Truth and of things divine (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 105). It is important to contemplate in such a manner that does not depart in any way from the truth of Scripture or from the teaching of the Church. The purgative way has to proceed the illuminative way. Here Denys refers to John Cassian[[116]](#footnote-116) and argues that the moral and ethical sciences, which concern the holding in check of the passions, must precede the theoretical sciences, by which the savouring and contemplation of divine things is meant. Anyone wishing to set out on the illuminative way must begin with humility and put all their hope in the Lord (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 106).

Denys defines contemplation as the loving, prompt and sincere recognition of the supreme God and His works. Contemplation is concerned firstly and principally with God, secondly with created things in view of the fact that God created them. Contemplation is an activity deriving from the gift of wisdom, which, of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is the one that comes first in rank. Contemplation is not an activity that proceeds from one’s own wisdom, nor is it the activity of this or that person. It flows from the wisdom that includes a sort of perfection. Contemplation is said to be a prompt and easy recognition of divine things. This prompt recognition is like a fire which suddenly leaps up and, transcending created things, reaches God. Here Denys quotes Richard of St Victor saying that contemplation, soaring freely on high, is, with wondrous agility, carried wheresoever the Spirit bears it. Contemplation is the free discernment of a mind suspended with admiration at the manifestations of wisdom. Denys then turns to Hugh of St Victor; contemplation is the discerning and free eye of the soul fixed intently on things whenever the moment is ripe for them to be discerned. Contemplation must be sincere, not sullied by error, passion or sin, but it should be upheld by the certainty and splendour of truth. The section ends with St Bernard’s concept of four types of contemplation. The first is admiration of majesty, the second the consideration of God’s judgments, the third the examination of God’s benefits and the fourth the consideration of His promised blessings (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 107-108).

Section 12, regarding ‘The unitive or perfect way’ is of particular interest because Denys offers an insight into his point of view with regard to the debate of *affectus* versus *intellectus*. Here, Denys refers strongly to The Areopagite, in particular *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *The Angelic Hierarchy*. Denys explains that when angels are said to be purified, it is not as if they are being cleansed from stain or sin, rather, they are gaining in light. The Seraphim enflame to burning heat of divine love the minds of the lesser angels. The Cherubim, by sharing gifts of wisdom given to them, illumine most copiously the celestial spirits of a lower order. If humans are to progress in knowledge and love of God they must be daily purified of sins. Firstly, to be cleansed of sin, secondly enlightened to be able to see the truth and thirdly be made perfect, that is to be set on fire with love and thus be made one with the God of our salvation. The unitive way pre supposes the purgative and the illuminative way since it cannot attain to union with God without illumination. Denys continues:

No one can be united to God without first being perfected in love or transfixed by love’s darts. So, too, the illuminative way contains in a matter of speaking the unitive way: for there cannot be knowledge of divine things nor contemplation, unless the subject is formed and perfected by ardent love.

(Ni Riain, 2005, p. 323)

This particular reference to ‘love’s darts’ is strongly reminiscent of The Cloud of Unknowing where the author states ‘You are to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love’. Father James Walsh, SJ, believes the quote to be taken from the work of the Carthusian monk Guigo de Ponte:

It often happens that God, for the soul’s sake, causes certain rents to occur in the cloud itself. Through these rents the divine goodness is reached by means of secret aspirations- sharp arrows of loving impulses (actuas sagittas piarum affectionum) which penetrate the Cloud. When this happens, the soul has a sweet and spiritual taste of divine things, which it savours but does not see. (Du Pont, no date, quoted in Walsh, 1981, p. 131)

I would argue that this specific reference, along with the other references to Richard and Hugh of St Victor, strongly suggest that Denys, with regard to the ongoing debate on affective versus intellective, was a supporter of the idea that the affective is the highest order and the determining factor in order to reach spiritual union with God.

Denys continues this section by emphasising that the purgative way has something of both the illuminative and unitive ways, for without being guided by true wisdom and without love and grace it never could be purged of sin, nor could it correct its passions. The way of perfection or union means that in every action or occupation there is a striving towards ardent charity, towards a burning and ecstatic love of God. It means turning the eyes of the soul to the burning, the tranquil, the most secret vision of mystic wisdom. The way of perfection lies in this: the mind, by denying itself and by contemplating God, is completely set on fire with divine love. It becomes something seraphic, a creature of fire. It leaves behind itself and all created things. Transcending all things, forgetting all things, it clings to the supremely unknowable God. It clings to something that is, as it were, unknown; it glides along the hierarchical orders of light, it reaches God through the language of the most intimate contemplation and through a supremely splendid darkness. It is united with Him by means of most wise ignorance. Again, the wording ‘supremely splendid darkness’ is very similar to that of The Cloud of Unknowing, where the author explains this darkness is not to be confused with what one might experience at night when the candle is out, but darkness is meant to be a privation of knowing, just as what you might have forgotten or do not know is dark to you, as it can’t be seen with your spiritual eyes. This is why the cloud between God and man is not a cloud of air but a cloud of unknowing (Walsh, 1981, p. 128). Also, ‘wise ignorance’ is arguably an interesting way of describing the limitations of knowledge in the highest stage of mystical union.

According to The Areopagite, there is a twofold way to proceed to the knowledge of God. The first is the positive or affirmative way, to attribute all that is good to God. The second way is the negative way, the way of rejection. This method declares that nothing that belongs to created things is of God’s essence. God is so supremely exalted, so pure and incomprehensible, He cannot be classed with any other kind or species of thing. There is no way we could possibly understand Him. This contemplation of God by negation is more sublime and more perfect than the positive way because it allows to discern more clearly, subtly and profoundly God’s infinite excellence and supremely essential majesty. This contemplation, by which God is seen by means of negation of all things is called mystical theology. It is the gift of wisdom, among the gifts of the Holy Spirit first in rank and dignity (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 111). It is important to note that it is possible for some people to arrive at this contemplation without effort or preparation, through Divine mercy (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 112).

The divine love is so pure and fervent and can never be attained unless self -love is rooted out. There are two kinds of love. Self-love, a love of the self that keeps growing until a person comes to despise God, makes man a slave and member of the devil, a citizen of Babylon, The Church Malignant. However, when love of God grows within a person, it makes him think little of himself, it makes people fellow citizens of the saints, members and soldiers of Christ, friends and children of the Most High. The love of God, called charity, causes man to love God with all his heart and above all things, and himself in God. Denys emphasises here that with loving oneself in God he means a proper, ordered love, one that is directed to our last end. This love wants and seeks only what is really for the benefit of the soul and pleasing to the Creator. It desires only what will further the progress in charity, grace and every virtue and what will lead the soul ultimately to perfect bliss. Self-love is the root of all vices and by eradicating it, all sins are eradicated. Once this is done, there will be in the heart’s core purity, sincere love of God, a love that is valiant, steadfast and fervent. One who has reached perfection in the love of God, abandons himself and depends totally on God. He worships God to the best of his ability, desires Him with all his heart, loves Him with intense fervour and attributes all things to His honour, praise and glory. He experiences sadness thinking of insults offered to God and happiness when he hears God is honoured. He is totally given to love of all that is good and transformed into the fire of charity. He will continually rise to greater heights, constantly being lifted up towards union, love’s embrace and the mystical vision (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 113-114).

God is incomprehensible, omnipotent and supremely generous. He enlightens, enflames, helps, transforms, corrects and enriches whomsoever He chooses. God’s hands are His wisdom and power, His justice, clemency and will. In these ‘hands’ God conceals the light. What is more, God, who holds in His hands both the light of theological contemplation and of mystical contemplation, sometimes pours it out in a burst of splendour on the soul that is purified. At other times, He withdraws and hides it. Denys continues this section describing the love with which God shines His light on the soul, and explains how the soul may, with God’s help, ascend towards the light and grow in it daily. At length, the soul will stand still, gazing in joy upon the Fountain of Light, God most fair and lovely. In this fruitful union it will remain lovingly and eternally immersed. God takes the soul into the marvellous splendour of supreme light. There the soul is at rest from the floods of carnal desires and disquieting fantasies. Free from the tumult of his thoughts, resting sweetly, slumbering in his Beloved. In a small measure and for a little space, the soul is permitted to see God as He is. In the meantime, God brings it to pass that the soul itself becomes, in some small measure, what He is. Then very often it happens that the soul finds that it is contemplating its own self, caught between the kiss of the Father and the Son (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 115-116).

This is where Denys turns to Jan Ruusbroec. He states that Jan Ruusbroec has written quite profoundly about this in his book *The perfection of the Children of God[[117]](#footnote-117)*. Among other things he says that we have to build our life upon the abyss of infinite profundity. This way, we can be eternally plunged into love, and, having been withdrawn from ourselves, submerged into love’s inscrutable depths. In this same love we shall somehow feel our way forward and take leave of ourselves; love itself will lead us and seduce us into the immense, incomprehensible vastness of God’s love. Into this love we shall flow, and away from ourselves we shall flow, into the unknown delights of the divine riches and bounty. There we shall melt and melt again. We shall be plunged, and plunged again, into God’s glory. Denys concludes by saying Jan Ruusbroec wrote this and many other things. He emphasises that we have to understand them devoutly and with discretion, for otherwise we might fall into error. But only those who have experience in these matters can fully understand them.

Haec et alia multa scribit: quae pie ac sapienter sunt intelligenda, ne fiant alicui erroris occasio. Clare siquidem nisi ab expertis nequent intelligi.

(Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 116)

Denys defends Ruusbroec here in two ways. Firstly, he explained in the previous paragraph that a little space of the soul is allowed to see God as He is, and it is God who enables and allows the soul to become, in a small measure, what God is. This is a reference to the writing of Jan Ruusbroec that was seen as heretical, the soul becoming one with God without separation. Denys appears to explain this very concept by describing it is a more subtle and careful way. Secondly, Denys emphasises that it takes a devout mindset and wisdom as there is the danger of falling into error if the writings are misinterpreted. The writings are best left for those who are experienced and knowledgeable. In other words, Denys is accurately aware of the fact that it is possible to misunderstand what Ruusbroec is saying and in order to fully grasp his meaning it is vital to have knowledge of mystical theology.

Section 19 discusses the similarities between carnal love and contemplation. Our sublime and most blessed God, whose truth is real and recognisable, whose goodness is immense, who is supremely lovable, transcends and overcomes every created intellect and heart. He therefore, at a very deep level, withdraws the soul from itself when it is in contemplation. Spiritual realities are indicated by bodily manifestations; therefore, the effects, acts and signs of spiritual and ecstatic love can be clearly shown through the acts and signs of carnal love. The first result and sign of carnal love is desiccation, a drying up of the members that form part of the body. The second is hollowness of the eyes. The third is a certain dryness of the eyes, an inability to shed tears, unless the sound of weeping should come from the beloved. Similarly, the soul that is spiritually in love, and whose love is of the ecstatic sort, cannot feel sad about any loss unless it affects the heavenly and supremely loved Bridegroom. The fourth result is that the lover is profoundly plunged in anxious pre-occupation, with his entire attention directed inwardly, not to what is spiritual or divine, but to foul and foolish fantasies. The fifth effect is an irregular pulse. The sixth effect is that the subject of this passion, on seeing anything very similar to the beloved object, becomes inflamed. The seventh and final effect is when the speech falters and becomes inarticulate, and the lover can speak but little in the presence of the beloved (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 121-123).

The number three signifies a kind of perfection and excellence. In all things shines a trace of the Most Blessed Trinity. There is also a trinity in the way we reach God. The purgative way, the illuminative way and the way of perfection. The purgative way pertains to beginners, the illuminative way to those who are proficient, and the way of perfection to those who have attained a state of perfect union. The animal side of our nature pertains to the purgative way, the rational side to the illuminative way and the spiritual side to the way of perfection. The purgative way belongs to the beginning of a reform of reason, will and memory; to the illuminative way belongs progress in reform of this sort, and to the unitive way belong the perfection of this reform. Truth is also threefold: truth of life, truth of doctrine and truth of justice. The purgative way belongs to truth of life, the illuminative way to truth of doctrine and the way of perfection belongs to truth of justice. To the purgative way belong the virtues of a good citizen; to the illuminative way belong the purgative virtues and to the unitive way belong the virtues of a fully cleansed soul. To the purgative way belong God’s faithful servants, to the illuminative way belong His particular friends, to the way of perfection belong His hidden children. The moral virtues pertain to the purgative way, to the illuminative way pertain the virtues of the intellect, and to the unitive way pertain the theological virtues, chiefly clarity, to each according to his own degree of perfection (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 123-124).

Denys starts explaining the distinction between servants and mercenaries, friends and hidden children by looking at Cassian again. The work he mentions here is taken from Conference Eleven. Denys states that according to Cassian, the incentive or motive that drives people to avoid sin and do good is threefold. First there is fear of punishment, this could be eternal damnation or a period of discomfort or pain. This fear is purely servile, and of course love drives out fear (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 124).

…someone who keeps away from the blandishments of sin because he is afraid will return to the object of his choice as soon as the obstacle of fear is removed. Hence he will not acquire any firm stand in what is good. He will have no rest from temptation since he will not be possessed by the sturdy and continuous peace of chastity.

(Luibheid, 1985, p. 146)

There is also the fear of those who avoid sin and do good partly out of fear of punishment and partly out of love of God and desire for the heavenly prize. This fear, though imperfect, is healthy. Finally, there is filial fear. This fear makes us shrink from offending God. It causes us to avoid sin and to do good in order that God might not be offended and in order that He might not abandon us. Such fear proceeds from love. Cassian describes as slaves those who avoid sin and do good out of servile fear, for servile fear arises from servitude. He describes as mercenaries those who serve God with an eye to getting a reward or payment. Those who serve God purely out of love are called friends and children by Cassian. He does not distinguish between them, and neither does Scripture (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 124).

Here once more, Denys refers to Jan Ruusbroec, calling him ‘that divine man’. He states that Ruusbroec sees the matter in a different light. He says that servants are those who observe the precepts of God out of love. They are innocent of mortal sin; they busy themselves with good works in the active life but are not yet occupied in the contemplative life or with the evangelical counsels. They are servants by reason of a servitude that arises initially from fear but they are also to some extent devoted. Denys further states that ‘our good Ruysbroeck’ says, regarding mercenaries, they serve God chiefly with an eye to payment. They want their wages and are therefore not in a state of charity and grace, because God must be served principally out of charity, out of love for what is good and for the greater glory of God. In this way God, not ourselves or our own advantage is the aim and object of our service. God calls those people ‘friends’ who not only keep the precepts out of love, and do good works out of charity, but who also live in contemplation, adhering to God in a loving and internal relationship, they are eager to savour the sweetness of the Spirit and the evangelical counsels are eagerly followed by them. However, these people have not yet wholly stripped themselves of possession, they are not wholly denuded of a certain self-love and certain attachment to spiritual gifts. They are more keen on inner consolation, feelings of devotion and sweet embraces than perfection would allow. This means that when these feelings are present, they are joyful and ready for anything, but when they are absent, they grow faint hearted. They are not quite dead to themselves yet, not fully riveted on God. They are God’s faithful friends. God’s hidden children dead to all, stripped of all attachment to themselves and the above mentioned gifts. They are fully and utterly given to God. They seek not the gifts but the Giver. These are the people who please God most. He visits them, fills them, seizes them and blesses them abundantly. Whether or not they experience feelings of devotion and inner consolation, they accept all with calmness, and cling to God, desiring nothing other than His honour and glory, they desire only to please Him and be united to Him in sincerest love (Ni Riain, 2005, pp. 341-342).

There are three supreme powers of the soul; intellect, memory and will. In these the likeness in the rational soul of the supreme and uncreated Trinity can be seen. Reform begins with the divine illumination of the minds of the faithful. Through this gift, the mind sees, enlightened from above it becomes versed in Scripture and it grows in the saving knowledge of supreme truth. Perfect reform of reason consists in the snatching of the mind out of and above itself. This is not achieved through arguments and logic, nor by comparisons with earthly mysteries, but by contemplating the Most High with a pure intelligence that bears one aloft. The reform of will, however, begins with a struggle against the vices and with the subjection of the will to the rule of the divine precepts. A person must not give in to the passions but overcome them. With regard to the reform of intellectual memory, the first step is to draw it back to God from its distractions. This is done by prayer, reading and meditations. Progress in the reform of the memory consist in keeping the mind fixed on God by these same prayers, readings and meditations, not allowing it to go wandering off unwisely (Ni Riain, 2005, pp. 342-343).

In Section 23 Denys describes truth. Truth reigns in the divine intellect. It understands the divine essence, and all other things besides. It understands them as they truly are. Truth conforms to created things to the degree that they match up to the divine intellect, to the extent that they harmonise with the ideal picture formed of them in the eternal mind and according to whether they lay hold of the picture which God the Creator so generously presents them. It is important to consider the Trinity: for though truth belongs absolutely to God, and the three Blessed Persons have all in common, the Three being one truth and one essence, nonetheless the following must be considered: truth is particularly associated with the Son, and charity with the Holy Spirit. This is because the Son is the emanation of intellect and truth pertains to the intellect. The Holy Spirit is the emanation of the will and charity pertains to the will. Accordingly, art, truth, wisdom, archetype, model, beauty, loveliness are attributed to the Son. Accordingly, it is said that uncreated truth in twofold, so too, uncreated wisdom is twofold, so too uncreated wisdom; there is truth that is begotten, namely the Son and truth that is unbegotten, namely the Divine Being (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 126-127.

Denys compares the Divine Being to an ocean that holds and contains all the fullness of being, all that is noble, all that is excellent. Consequently, it is certain that God is both a living being and an intellectual being. God is happy, His contemplative happiness lies in His knowledge of Himself and all things. He has within Himself perfection and immense wealth, possession of the entire universe, He has omnipotence (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 128-129).

The book concludes with an explanation of the requirements for progression in contemplation. The first requirement is frequent and fervent prayer. The second daily and vigorous examination of conscience. Thirdly, to bear in mind the presence of God, fourthly to consider deeply the rigour of divine judgment and the bitterness of the infernal fire. Fifthly, to avoid occasions of sin, especially bad company. The sixth requirement is to meditate frequently on the Lord’s Passion. The seventh, careful custody of the heart. He further recommends the following practices, firstly to adopt a posture that is suitable for devotion, Secondly, to find a quiet place. Thirdly, to choose a suitable time. Fourthly, to call upon the help of the Saints, particularly the Blessed Virgin and our own guardian angel. Fifthly, to practise discernment in all matters. Sixthly, to take careful note of one’s natural disposition. Seventhly, to weigh well one’s own vocation. Eighthly, to show a kind heart and be helpful. Ninthly, to always want to please God. Tenthly, to firmly imprint in the mind the goal towards all the exercises are pointed. In the eleventh place, to not let these good and customary practices of devotion die away. Finally, to try to spend every second, every fraction of every moment in the praise and glory of the All Powerful, who is God, sublime and blessed, Lord of all things (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 129-131).

Believed to have been written towards the end of his life, this text reveals that throughout his life, Denys never stopped defending and admiring Jan Ruusbroec. This relatively short book, written to instruct priests is also a way for Denys to emphasise the importance of having a sound understanding of contemplation. The fact that it is not an elaborate work strongly suggests that he considers this to be basic knowledge and essential to be a good priest, to be able to say Mass and also lead an exemplary life. Throughout the text, he looks at Dionysius, relying strongly on the important Victorine authors like Hugh and Richard. The reference he makes about not being able to be united with God without first being perfected in love or transfixed by love’s darts is strongly reminiscent of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and indicates how Denys too feels that love surpasses wisdom in the final stage of mystical union. He reveals again his strong affection and admiration for the writings of Jan Ruusbroec that remained a part of his life forever.

**Conclusion**

At the outset of this thesis the question was asked: to what extent has Denys the Carthusian been influenced by Jan Ruusbroec? The evidence presented suggests that the extent was significant and that the relationship between Denys and Ruusbroec provides a profound insight into the development of Denys’ own concept of mystical theology. Denys the Carthusian is well-known for his extensive Scriptural commentaries and his extensive knowledge of an enormous number of sources. As a theologian, he was able to filter and analyse these sources and by doing so allows his readers an extensive insight and understanding of western medieval scholasticism. His mystical theology, however, was most strongly influenced by Carthusian spirituality as well as the Victorines and Jan Ruusbroec.

This thesis started with an introduction to the life of St Bruno. A man with a strong vocation and a desire to forsake all in order to live in the wilderness, in complete solitude dedicated entirely to God in contemplation. During his life he was no stranger to conflict with people in authority and their abuse of power, yet he always stayed true to his principles and when he finally had the opportunity to reach his goal of founding a new order he did so, despite all the challenges. From the first Charterhouse, La Grande Chartreuse, founded in 1084, the order grew steadily throughout the twelfth and thirteenth century with around 70 Charterhouses by 1300. On the eve of the Reformation, there were nearly 200 monasteries situated throughout Europe. Their eremitical lifestyle was a source of fascination and attraction. Many of the Charterhouses founded in the later Middle Ages were situated in towns and played in important spiritual role in urban life. Thomas More spent several years in the London Charterhouse before his marriage in 1505 and when he was chancellor of England, he would return there for prayer and inspiration (Tanner, 2008, p. 49). Through their prolific writing, the Carthusians were able to preach the Gospel without the need to speak or leave their monasteries.

When studying the life of Denys the Carthusian, several events stand out as particularly significant in understanding his thought. Throughout his life, as St Bruno did before him, he showed a powerful vocation combined with bravery and determination. As a young boy herding his parents’ flock, he was a hard worker and not afraid to defend himself when confronted, something he later felt somewhat embarrassed about, yet from an early age he already had a vocation and aspired to being accepted into the Carthusian order. His disappointment must have been considerable when he was initially rejected due to his young age. However, for a young man to have the opportunity to travel to Cologne and study at the top university of its day must have been a particularly exciting prospect. His love for gaining knowledge and sharing that knowledge by writing books, remained an essential part of his life throughout the years. Denys life was centred around prayer, study and writing, all according to the Carthusian rule of solitude, silence and seclusion.

An important aspect of Denys’ life was the impact his friendships had on him, particularly with Brugman and Cusa. Brugman, the Franciscan renowned for being a brilliant orator, relied strongly on his writings. Denys in turn, would have enjoyed receiving insight into the problems and happenings in society at the time, something a cloistered monk would otherwise be completely oblivious to. Cusa was a brilliant man in his own right with a well-known library. This friendship would have allowed Denys access to every source available. Furthermore, the evidence suggests Cusa and Denys went on at least one trip together. Around 1452 they went on a trip to Germany to warn against the dangers of Islam and to preach Church reform as well as a crusade against the Turks. The fact that Denys dedicated two of his works to him reveals the depth of their relation. Apart from these friendships, Denys was also consulted by laypeople on many occasions as his fame as an author and a man with mystical experiences grew. This too enabled him to have a strong awareness of the world around him whilst staying true to the Carthusian way of life.

The period around 1446 was particularly traumatic for Denys as accusations were laid against him that required him to write a *Protestatio ad superiorem suum*. This document, because of its personal nature, offers a unique insight into Denys’ predicament and well as revealing some of his strongest influences. He starts by acknowledging how a monks’ task is to mourn and be illumined rather than to teach or illumine, immediately showing his understanding of and respect for Hugh of St Victor, whilst arguing that his writing, that was seen as excessive, was not for worldly gain but rather the heavy labour enabled him to better himself, learning humility, meekness and patience. The list of sources he uses is of particular interest as Denys mentions several Doctors of the Church as well as philosophers, and calls Dionysius the Areopagite ‘my most elect teacher’. There is no mention of Ruusbroec, but Gerson is mentioned. It is likely that Denys chose his words with particular care as he was in great danger of being forbidden to continue his writing altogether. When he finally did receive permission in 1452, he continued writing on his Scriptural Commentaries. It was during the period of uncertainty, when he had to pause his work on the Commentaries, that he devoted all his energy to writing his mystical masterpiece *De Contemplatione*.

I have argued that the influence of Jan Ruusbroec can be seen clearly in three of Denys’ mystical writings, *De Contemplatione*, *De Donis Spiritus Sancti* and *De Fonte lucis ac semitis vitae.* Ruusbroec was not as prolific a writer as Denys, and most importantly, all of his works were written in Middle Dutch, as opposed to Denys who wrote strictly in Latin. During his lifetime, the Carthusians and Jan Ruusbroec enjoyed a mutual respect and they held his work in high regard.

The period in which Ruusbroec lived was extremely tumultuous. There were wars and plagues and significant problems within the Church. These conditions provided a breeding ground for heretical sects and they began to form a serious problem. The Church was actively attempting to fight heresy and became more wary of vernacular writings. After all, the Free Spirit sect had used some of Eckhart’s statements, taken out of context, and used them to support their heretical ideas. With the condemnation of several works by Meister Eckhart in 1329 the Church sent a strong message and this would have certainly served as a warning to Jan Ruusbroec.

The topic that became controversial for Ruusbroec and required clarification was the idea of unity with God ‘without difference’. This was discussed in his first book, *Kingdom of Lovers* which discusses the reciprocal dwelling in love of God and man, which is ‘without difference’ which is Christ’s explicit wish according to the Gospel of John. I have shown how strongly Denys defends Jan Ruusbroec in his work *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit*. What is particularly significant is how Denys states that there is a lack of proper translations of Ruusbroec’s work, and he indicates that this is the source of the problem. The work would have been easy to understand if only proper translations would be available. He even goes so far as to translate a section of the work himself. Willem Jordaens provided a translation with the aim of making the work more appealing by changing and adding to it, Geert Groote attempted to stay as true to the original text as possible. It was not until 1552 that all of Jan Ruusbroec’s works were translated into Latin by Laurentius Surius, a Carthusian in Cologne. For those unable to read Middle Dutch, this was the version that was in circulation for several centuries. In the seventeenth century different translations appeared in French, by the Carthusian Richard Beaucousin.

If in the late 1390s, Gerson would have received a different translation of Ruusbroec’s work rather than the version of Willem Jordaens his opinion on the work might very well have been different as the arguments he puts forward in his letters in which he criticises, appear due to a lack of understanding, most likely caused by the translation. It is plausible that the Carthusians in Herne, who had received Ruusbroec in person as well as his *Little Book of Clarification*, already had a sound understanding of the meaning behind the words therefore a weak translation for them would not have been a serious concern. For Gerson, however, Ruusbroec was an unknown writer and as he wrote in the vernacular, during the time of the Beguines, his work might be heretical.

According to the letter he sent to the Carthusians in Herne, Gerson considered the first parts of Ruusbroec’s book very good but strongly objected to the last part. The Carthusians were understandably disappointed by Gerson’s response but it was Van Schoonhoven, from the monastery in Groenendael who responded and defended Ruusbroec’s work and addressed all Gerson’s concerns. The main points are that everything Ruusbroec has written is in agreement with the views of the most noted doctors of the Catholic Faith and approved and commended by their authority as granted by God. He further argues that only those who have had mystical experiences themselves are qualified to teach others on the topic. He also clarifies Ruusbroec’s point on mystical union, emphasising that Ruusbroec never meant man could become Creator. He further suggests that these misunderstanding might be due to the translation as the translator may have been concentrating more on a fluent and creative description rather than an accurate translation, this should however not be blamed on the author and does not take away the value of his work. Van Schoonhoven offered a strong, well-argued defence but it did little to change Gerson’s mind. The concept of unification with God remained a sensitive topic. Perhaps it was Gerson’s position as chancellor that made him particularly concerned about defending the teaching of the Church against any heresy, perhaps the translation was so poor that he could not justify considering the meaning as explained by Van Schoonhoven. Jean Gerson was highly regarded and respected. It seems strange that Ruusbroec’s work was readily available at the different Charterhouses, whilst his name was on the list of 1575 list of books that were forbidden for Jesuits to read unless given special permission.

In *de Contemplatione* Denys analyses a vast number of sources to explain the process of contemplation. The fact that he starts the work by emphasising it was written, not to instruct others, but rather to encourage his own longings is noteworthy. He appears to make it clear that it is not a Scriptural Commentary, as he is aware he is still forbidden to work on those, but rather a personal project. This period of uncertainty, not knowing if he would be able to continue his life’s work, must have been deeply distressing, however, when analysing the manner in which he wrote *De Contemplatione*, he must have enjoyed the opportunity to fully concentrate on this topic that was obviously so very close to his heart.

Amongst the many sources, the Victorines and Jan Ruusbroec stand out most strongly. Dionysius is mentioned throughout all the texts, but it is particularly the angelic hierarchy that inspired him, the role of the Cherubim and the Seraphim in the highest stages of the mystical union where the Seraphim’s love surpasses the Cherubim’s wisdom. He looks at Thomas Gallus, the glorious man, emphasising his profound knowledge of the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, but was also particularly concerned with Hugh’s explanation of the different stages of contemplation. Throughout Denys’ mystical texts, there are indications that he was on the affective as opposed to the intellective side of the debate on the highest stages of mystical union. He mentions how it is possible for simple people, without any knowledge, to experience mystical union, simply through divine grace. However, he strongly disagrees with the notion that knowledge could be a hindrance to the achievement of mystical union. In book 1, Denys provides an extensive explanation of the mystical process. When reading through this, one cannot help but realise it is, contrary to his words at the start of the book, very much a means of instructing others.

When Denys refers to Ruusbroec, he calls him a wonderful man, anointed by God with great learning and wisdom and he spoke from his own experiences. In other words, Ruusbroec was a genuine mystic, who had firsthand knowledge of mystical union. Denys himself had experienced the ecstasies which means he could relate to the writings on a deeply personal level.

When explain Ruusbroec’s words, Denys suggests his intellect is small and his experience clouded, and he also states that Ruusbroec has written many very difficult things. When he writes about Ruusbroec ‘whom elsewhere I have called the Divine Doctor, and rightly so’ he refers to his book *The Gifts of the Holy Spirit*. He also refers to the story of how Ruusbroec would sometimes be found under a tree in the wood, whilst the tree itself appeared to be on fire. All these remarks indicate that for Denys, Jan Ruusbroec was a Holy man. At the end of the book, he defends him against the attack by Gerson, stating that Ruusbroec never intended to suggest man could every become God but sometimes people like him, use exaggerated language and this could be the source of the confusion. The certain scholar who made this accusation paid more attention to his style of writing than the meaning of his words…

*In Gifts of the Holy Spirit* Denys defence of Ruusbroec is particularly strong. Tract one forms an introduction to the topic, but in the second tract Denys praises Ruusbroec, comparing him to both Dionysius the Areopagite and Hugh of St Victor. The suggestion that, had Ruusbroec’s work been as readily available as Dionysius’ they would have been just as easy to study is a particular interesting one. Firstly, because Denys suggests here that there is a serious lack of reliable translations available and secondly, whereas many would argue that Dionysius is particularly profound and not easy to understand at all, he considers the work to be on the same level. The lack of a good translation is such a problem, that Denys translated a section himself and he uses that to explain some of the work. Throughout the book, Denys refers to Ruusbroec as *The Divine Doctor*, never once mentioning his actual name again. The structure of the work is such that whenever Denys introduces a gift to be discussed, he offers an introduction and then turns to Ruusbroec to further analyse the matter.

Of particular interest is the section dedicated to the phenomenon of *orewoet*, the Middle Dutch word for the stage in the mystical journey where the soul can feel God but is still waiting to be accepted in union. Denys would have known this all, as he was able to understand the work in its original form, never having to rely on any translations, but he is making a genuine effort to explain the concept to his readers. It appears quite strange that in the fourth tract, which, according to Denys, was added about sixteen years later, there is no reference to Ruusbroec. It is possible that after reading back his own work, Denys felt the need to add some further references to enable him to emphasise the importance for people to stay true to the teachings of the Church rather than follow novelties.

In *The Fountain of Life and the Paths of Life*, a strong influence from Hugh of Balma can be detected, as Denys analyses the threefold way. However, the references to Jan Ruusbroec are of particular significance. Although no exact date is known, this work is widely believed to be written at the end of his life and from the prologue is becomes clear that the work was written for priests. From this fact, it can then be argued that according to Denys vison of what a priest should know, this work offers the basic knowledge that each priest should understand and live by.

The previous works offered many references to Victorine thought, but in this work in particular Denys includes a reference that is significant in the *affectus* versus *intellectus* debate:

No one can be united to God without first being perfected in love or transfixed by love’s darts. So, too, the illuminative way contains in a matter of speaking the unitive way: for there cannot be knowledge of divine things nor contemplation, unless the subject is formed and perfected by ardent love.

(Ni Riain, 2005, p. 323)

This is strikingly similar to the wording in *The Cloud of Unknowing* where the author states ‘You are to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love’ and also to the words of the Carthusian monk Guigo de Ponte :

It often happens that God, for the soul’s sake, causes certain rents to occur in the cloud itself. Through these rents the divine goodness is reached by means of secret aspirations- sharp arrows of loving impulses (actuas sagittas piarum affectionum) which penetrate the Cloud. When this happens, the soul has a sweet and spiritual taste of divine things, which it savours but does not see.

(Du Pont, no date, quoted in Walsh, 1981, p. 131)

I would argue that this strongly suggests that Denys, towards the end of his life, favoured the affective rather than the intellective approach to Dionysianism. Gaining and sharing knowledge through diligent study and writing was essential to him, but in the end, he saw love as the determining factor in the mystical journey.

In this short work, he still refers to Jan Ruusbroec twice. The first reference concerns Ruusbroec’s work *The perfection of the Children of God[[118]](#footnote-118)*. It specifically refers to love, how it is important for man build to build his life upon the abyss of infinite profundity. This way, he can be eternally plunged into love, and, having been withdrawn from himself, be submerged into love’s inscrutable depths. In this same love he will somehow feel his way forward and take leave of himself. Love itself will lead him and seduce him into the immense, incomprehensible vastness of God’s love. Into this love he will flow, and away from himself, into the unknown delights of the divine riches and bounty. There he will melt, and melt again, to be plunged, and plunged again, into God’s glory. Denys then adds a warning: Jan Ruusbroec wrote this and many other things. He emphasises that we have to understand them devoutly and with discretion, for otherwise we might fall into error, but only those who have experience in these matters can fully understand them.

When Denys later discusses Cassian, in particular the distinction between servants and mercenaries, friends and hidden children, he turns to Ruusbroec, ‘that divine man’ and states that he sees the matter differently and later on refers to him as ‘our good Ruysbroeck’.

Throughout his mystical works, Denys has shown how he holds Jan Ruusbroec in the highest regard. Anointed by God, led by The Spirit, the divine Doctor. Misunderstood because of inferior translations, not appreciated enough because his works were not as readily available as those of Dionysius the Areopagite. In him, Denys sees a fellow Dutchman, a fellow mystic whose words are reminiscent of those from the Victorines. Jan Ruusbroec continues the mystical thought from the 12th and 13th centuries. For Denys, his work is completely in line with the Carthusian tradition.

When Denys died in 1471, he left a legacy of one hundred and eighty-seven volumes making him most likely the most prolific writer of the Middle Ages. In addition to writing his books, he was often also asked to copy them. Few autographs remain, but his works were republished many times and remained popular long after his death as they were highly regarded as being true to the teachings of the Church. From his many writings the mystical works in particular stand out. However, the works that were republished most often were his Commentaries on the New Testament. It is difficult to comprehend that *De Contemplatione*, Denys’ masterpiece on mystical theology, was not reprinted until 1894.

I have shown how in his main works, *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, his masterpiece *De Contemplatione* as well as *The Fountain of Life and the Paths of Light*, Denys the Carthusian was strongly influenced by the Carthusians who went before him as well as the Victorines and specifically Jan Ruusbroec. It could be argued that Denys was a brave man for defending Ruusbroec in a time when his writings were under scrutiny and they received such harsh criticism from a highly esteemed scholar like Jean Gerson. He was a brave man, certainly, yet we must not forget that the Carthusians supported Ruusbroec right from the start and copies of his books were kept at their libraries. Being brave and determined, staying true to one’s beliefs appears to be very much part of the Carthusian tradition. St Bruno surely would not have wanted it any other way.

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1. Augustin Marie Pierre Ingold (1852-1923) was a French priest, historian and writer who contributed to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kent (1982, p. 131) states that the modern catalogue of the library of Cusa wrongly assigns another work to Denys, the *cordiale tractans de quatuor novissimus*. This is a common misattribution to Denys of a work composed in the fourteenth century, widely circulated thereafter, by Gerard van Vliederhoven. This confusion seems to have arisen because the title of Gerard’s work conflates the titles of two of Denys’ works, the *Cordiale sive praecordiale* and *De quator hominis novissimi*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. M. Kaiser published a work in 1873 entitled *Die Sammlungen der vereinten Familien and Privat Bibliothek Sr. M. Der Kaisers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wien, ÖNB 14089. (suppl 2632). Verschueren n.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wien, ÖNB SN 12836 (Becker 7914). Verschueren n. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. St Bruno ends this letter with: ‘P.S. Would you send us the life of St. Remigius? It is impossible to obtain it here. Farewell.’(Chartreux, no date) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hic otium celebrator negotiosum et in quieta pausatur actione. Leclercq, Jean. (1963) *Etudes sur le vocabulaire de la contemplation au moyen age.* Romae: Pontificium Institutum S. Anselmi/Orbis Catholicus Herder [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Msgr Professor P. Teeuwen (1908-1983) was the former President of the Seminary in Roermond. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gustav Schnürer, 1860-1941 was a German-Swiss historian best known for his works Church and Culture in the Middle Ages as well as articles in the Catholic Encyclopaedia of 1913. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. D. A. Mougel was a French Carthusian who created the first contemporary biography of Denys the Carthusian. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Accessed online 24.11.21 [Opera omnia in unum corpus digesta ad fidem editionum Coloniensium: cura et labore monachorum sacri ordinis Cartusiensis, favente pont. max. Leone XIII: Denis, the Carthusian, 1402-1471.](https://archive.org/details/operaomniainunum01deni/page/332/mode/2up) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. When he was thirteen, he went to boarding school in Zwolle, present day The Netherlands, where he studied Latin, the language in which he composed all his works. From an early age he showed a great desire for praying and study and in his late teens he became aware of his vocation to monastic life (Ni Riain, 2005, p. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. There appears to be some disagreement about this as pointed out by Teeuwen (1938, pp. 14-15). Schnürer (1929, book III, p. 201) believes the location to be Zwolle, ‘…den von dem Geiste Ruysbroecks in Zwolle genährten Dionysius’, in other words, according to Schnürer, Denys was nourished by the spirit of Ruusbroec in Zwolle. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Stoelen (1953, pp. 362-363) states that Denys’ first book was the *Contra detestabilem cordis inordinationem in Dei laudibus vel horis canonicis, vel Laus Cartusiana*. It is not dated but Denys wrote: *hoc quasi primum meum opusculum. Stoelen (1953, pp. 371-372)* explains that *De ente et essentia* was written whilst he was a student and was in fact his thesis, in which he wanted to argue the distinction between being and essence. Later on, when Denys had developed his own personal opinion on the matter, namely that there is no factual difference between essence and being, he had wanted to’ improve’ his thesis but the work had already been lost. Loer van Stratum said this work showed the competence Denys had acquired in Cologne. He wrote it was written immediately after having acquired the position of teacher (*illico post adepta magisterii insignia*). Denys, however, seems to refer to the work as a thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Denys Turner (no date, p. 1) argues that Denys wrote this letter in 1441. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Simplicitas monachi philosophia eius est. Sed docere, inquis, alios volo. Non est tuum docere, sed plangere. Si tamen doctor esse desideras, audi quid facias. Utilitas habitus tui, et simplicitas vultus, Innocentia vitae, et sanctitas conversationis tuae docere debent homines. *Didascalicon*, V, 8, PL 176, 796, quoted in Turner, no date, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ut quia ore non possumus, dei verbum minibus predicemus, Guigo I, *Consuetudines*, 28, 2-4, in *Coutumes des Chartreuses*, edited and translated by a Carthusian, Sources Chretiennes 313, Paris, 1984, p. 225. Quoted in Turner, no date, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Denys also stated that, in his own experience, the very intensity of his scholarly labours was itself a work of piety, needed to endure in freedom of spirit the long periods of solitude and silence which characterise the daily routine of the Carthusian monk, and stated that ‘it seems to me that the more spiritual this activity is, the more effort involved, and the more intense this study and labour is, the more it aids my salvation, since it is the more conducive to the mortification of carnal and worldly desires. Also, it enables me to persevere with greater freedom of spirit in my solitude (*Protestatio*, quoted in Turner, p. 3, unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Denys never mentions Meister Eckhart in either his *Protestatio* or other works. Cardinal de Cusa, does, and he also at times defends the writings of Eckhart (Schnürer, 1929, p. 204). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Lists of Denys’ writings mention ‘*Epistolae multae ad Car. Nico. De Cusa Leg.*’ Unfortunately, there are today no remnants of a correspondence between these two important theologians of the fifteenth century (Emery, 1982, p. 129). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Other works include *De auctoritate summi pontificatis et generalis conciii* and *Contra perfidiam Mahometi*. Lynn Thorndike observes that the subject of Denys’ Contra vitia superstitionum was a considerable concern of the Cusa legation. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In the Carolus Chapel in Roermond, on December 3rd, 2022, the reliquary box containing the skull of Denys the Carthusian was opened. Professor Larmuseau from the Catholic University of Leuven is conducting DNA and other scientific research into the remains. They have been kept with those of the Martyrs of Roermond; twelve monks who were slaughtered in July of 1572 along with the bishop’s secretary by the army of William of Orange. The research is still ongoing as of August 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This list, MS Rawl. C. 564 was bequeathed to the Bodleian in 1755 as part of the Richard Rawlinson collection <https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_8274> accessed 02.03.2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This list is kept in the Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek, catalogue details Hs 613-1552 f 90v-149r; Hs 631-1562 f 227v-229v. It has been part of the collection since 1803, when it was kept in the Stadsbibliothek, now known as the Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek. The Monastery of Maria ad Matryres is given as provenance. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Stoelen (1964, p. 220) explains how Denys would have spent the forty-six years he lived as a Carthusian observing the quiet, regular monastic life, the solitude of his cell, and leaving it only three times a day, for matins, Mass and vespers. According to his early biographers, he did not take any sleep or rest after the matins, ‘according to the rigour of the old rule’ but saved that time for study and prayer. This could be misunderstood. Following the introduction, at the end of the twelfth century, of the daily conventual Mass, and, towards the end of the thirteenth century, of the daily individual low Masses, Carthusian life at the beginning of the fifteenth century differed from both the old and modern observances in one important point: in order to ease the strain of the long, uninterrupted series of offices, an hour’s rest after lauds and before prime and conventual Mass was permitted. Since the ‘midnight’ office had not yet been adopted by the Carthusians at this time, the period of sleep before matins was still by far the longer. Denys did not regularly give up half of his sleep, he simply did not take advantage of the recent permission as his constitution did not need it. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kent Emery is a Professor Emeritus at the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. <https://www.parkminster.org.uk/shop/dom-denys-the-carthusian-opera-omnia-42-vol-2-vol-of-i/1207576761> accessed 27.02.2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. And they digged in the torrent and found living water. (Douay Rheims) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The Complete Ruusbroec, 2014, is the latest critical English translation of the Middle Dutch texts by Jan Ruusbroec published by Brepols. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Faesen (2007, pp. 22-23) notes that the decision to leave the safety of the city walls and live like recluses in the woods was similar to the lives of the desert fathers, it was extremely dangerous and not, as often thought in modern days, an opportunity to enjoy the tranquillity of the woods and leave the noise and mayhem of the city behind. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. James A. Wiseman (O.S.B.), Abbot at St. Anselm’s Abbey in Washington D.C. wrote his doctoral dissertation in spiritual theology at the Catholic University of America on the theme of love in *The Spiritual Espousals* of Jan Ruusbroec. He also delivered a paper on that theme at the Ruusbroec Colloquium at Louvain in 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Babinsky (1993, p. 26) argues that the manuscript evidence strongly suggests Marguerite’s book may have been popular at the time. Whilst the original text is no longer in existence, there are presumably three copies in Old French and many translations in Latin, Italian and Middle English. The Middle English translations are fifteenth century manuscripts and most likely done by Carthusians. Richard Methley (1451-1528), a Carthusian monk, translated the text from Middle English to Latin. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Durchbruch, durchbrechen, widerruk*, etc. ‘Breakthrough, breaking through, return, ‘ etc. These terms indicate the soul’s return to its primal source in God. (McGinn, 1986, p. 401) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. When Eckhart arrived in Cologne in 1323 or 1324 to act as regent (magister regens) of the Dominican studium generale in that city, he was at the height of his career, in that he had twice held a Parisian chair of theology, an honour he shared with Thomas Aquinas alone (Davies, 1990, pp. 433-434). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Although in his article, Faesen does not specify which Bible translation he used, the Latin verse is identical to that in Douay Rheims. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Common man would be the translation for Ruusbroec’s term *ghemeyne* mensch. Common refers to the community between God and man. Albert Deblaere describes it thus: Man discovers the intimate communion God has with all His creatures and takes part in the overflowing trinitarian love in the incarnation of the Son. Together with the incarnate Word man enters into a community with all other people and becomes ‘communal’ with all. His inner life, too, has both contemplation and action in common. He belongs so strongly to God that his abundance of contemplation overflows in charity. (Faesen, 2007, p. 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For this section on Groenendael I am relying strongly on ‘Overblijfselen van de priorij van Groenendael’ that I accessed online on 30.08.2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. His father was a skilled craftsman, his mother the daughter of a rural clan. Gerson was the firstborn of a family of 12 children, two of whom died as infants. His eldest sister Marion was the only one to marry. He had a brother, also named Jean, who became a Benedictine monk. In 1382 his brother Nicholas was born, who joined Gerson in Paris in the 1390s before entering the Celestine Order. In 1383 another boy was born, who was named Jean, too, and who also joined the Celestine Order (McGuire, 1998, p. 5). Gerson remained very close to his family and involved with their lives throughout his lifetime. He wrote letters to his brothers and offered spiritual advice to his sisters. In 1419 he moved in with his youngest brother Jean in Lyon, who had become a prior. Jean did not only provide lodgings for his brother but remained with him to the end of his life and became his literary executor, ensuring that Gerson’s treatises were accounted for (McGuire, 1998, p.15). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. In the following passages I am indebted to the work of Brian Patrick McGuire, American Danish professor emeritus of history, lecturer and author, especially his book entitled *Jean Gerson Early Works*. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The French text of the *Montaigne de Contemplation* used is in Palemon Glorieux, 1960-73, Jean Gerson. Oeuvres Complètes. Paris: Desclée & Cie. (McGuire, 1998, p. 399) [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Saint Bernard used this in *his Sermons on the Song of Songs* (McGuire, 1998, p. 88). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. There is some discrepancy as to the exact date of this letter. According to McGuire, 1998, p. 32, it was dated March 1402. McGinn, 2012, p. 77 states that according to André Combes the date should be 1398-1399. Faesen, 2007, p. 128 agrees with Combes. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. In the following section I am indebted to the work of Bernard McGinn, in particular *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism* (McGinn, 2012, pp. 80-83). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Primo, intentionem verborum suorum, quantam ad illa quae ibi arguuntur et reprehenduntur et tanquam erronea judicantur, explicabo. Secundo, qualiter haec doctrina non sit nova adinventio et superstitiosa, sed omnino sententiis nominatissimorum doctorum catholicae fidei consona et ipsorum auctoritate commendata et approbata, prout Dominus dederit, explanabo. Et tertio, qualiter rationes objectae minus efficaces sunt nec praedictam/ doctrinam evacuant declarabo. (Combes, 1945, pp. 684-685) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Hoc enim bonum inenarrabile quod praeparavit Deus diligentibus se potest dici perfecta conformitas et indicibilis claritas divinae assimilationis, quae omnia linguae indicibilis est, et incomprehensibilis omni menti, nec unquam perfecte cognoscitur, nisi in speculo auternitatis, quod est Verbum divinum et essentia divina. Et ergo de ista unione et transformatione magis credendum est notitiam affectualem et experimentalem habentibus quam solum intellectuam, qui a nemo haec scit nisi qui accipit per experientiam vel revelationem. (Combes, 1945, pp. 686-687) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Si ergo stilus libri in latinum translati magis redoleat humanam eloquentiam quam diviniam, hoc non imputandum est auctori, sed potius translatori, qui quidem translator, pro eo quod ornatui et eloquentiae sermonum plus operam dedit quam forte expedit, in praedicti libri translatione multum desudavit. (Combes, 1945, p. 696) [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The doctor in question is Bernard of Clairvaux, who had used this metaphor in his *On Loving God*. Gerson’s view on the union and rules for expressing it led him to attack even Bernard, who he considered one of his prime authorities in other contexts, both in this letter and in his 1402 treatise, *On Speculative Mystical Theology* (McGinn, 2012, p. 84). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. In his article *How Ruusbroec Tastes, Sounds and Smells* Tom Gaens argues that the sermon Gerson refers to was made by Henry of Coesfeld at the 1406 chapter of the Urbanist branch of the Carthusian order of Seitz. Gerson appears to have been attracted by the Carthusian’s description of different kinds of false devotion, particularly that of ‘vain and curious devotion’ (*devotio vana et curiosa*) in which Henry lashed out against the excesses of speculative thinking. However, Henry’s devotional theology and description of false and true devotion is dependent on Ruusbroec’s book *The Spiritual Espousals*. In the sermon, Coesfeld was not attacking Ruusbroec. The first sentence Henry mentioned, ‘immersion in an abyssal depth’ (*submersio in abissali profundo*) appears to be a problematic one, as it is similar to the language used by Ruusbroec. However, nowhere in *The Espousals* did Ruusbroec equate the humbling of oneself to an ‘immersion in an abyssal depth’. Gaens believes this to more of an Eckhartian expression. Ruusbroec did talk about ‘annihilation’ in the sense of ‘annihilation of the self’, as did Henry, but nowhere did he equate divine love with annihilation or reduction to nothing (*annihilatio vel in nihil reductio*). In line with the mystical tradition, Ruusbroec was very prodigal in the use of the terms ‘inflowing’ and ‘outflowing’, however, he never called the charitable movement of the mind in God an ‘inflowing in God’ (*influxum in Deum*), or the movement to good works because of God an ‘outflowing from God’ (*effluxum a Deo*). Henry seems to refer to phrasing which suggests that, in humility and contemplation, the human soul would somehow be reduced to nothing (by God) and to conflating language which contradicts the supernatural source of charity or grace, or the human role in meritorious works. Gaens provides another point that suggests Gerson was too eager to find support in Coesfeld’s sermon, namely the fact that Gerson used an expression by Ruusbroec, ‘spiritual lewdness’ (*spiritualis luxuria*). It is unclear whether or not Gerson was aware of the fact that he was using Ruusbroec’s own language to cast doubts on the *Espousals*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Itaque, quia in contemplatione perfectio nostra felicitasque consistit, idcirco de contemplatione, tanquam de omnium exercitiorum, desideriorum atque laborum nostrorum quietissimo ac suavissimo fine, aliquid scribere ((prout Spiritus veritatis dare dignabitur) cupio et intendo, potius pro mei ipsius excitatione, quam aliorum instructione, praesertim quum de hac re alios informare, parvitatis meae vires experientiamque transcendat. Jam quoque de contemplatione a viris magnis multa copiose conscripta sunt. Unde et fateor me praesumptionis argui posse, eo quod de contemplatione conscribere expertorum sit, divinorum sublimiumque virorum; ego autem inexpertus, vilis et infirmus sum. Verum ne de temeritate prorsus redarguar, de praesenti materia non nisi simplici modo loqui intendo, magnorum Doctorum sanctorumque Patrum ac contemplativorum virorum inhaerendo doctrinis. (Dionysii Cartusiani, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 136) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. For my summary and analysis of Book I and II I rely strongly on the translation by Ide M. Ni Riain (2005), for Book III I am using the unpublished translation of Professor Denys Turner as well as my own translations. The primary source used is obtained from St Hugh’s Charterhouse, *D. Dionysii Cartusiani, Opera Minora, Vol. 41, Tomus IX*. This work is used throughout the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. For this chapter and the analysis of *De Contemplatione*, I am relying strongly on the unpublished manuscript provided to me by Professor Denys Turner. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Vir gloriosus et contemplativus, atque in libris magni Dionysii studiosissimus, abbas Vercellensis, de contemplation sublimia multa conscripsit. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 251) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. …deification autem est ad divina, quantum possible est, assimilation atque unitio. (Dionyssi, 1912, Vol. 41,

    Tomus IX, p. 252) [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Hugo de S. Victore, quem Richardus affirmat sui temporis praecipuum fuisse theologum* (Dionyssi, Tomus IX, p. 240) [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Hinc, secundum excellentes phylosophos arque theologos, vires animae ab ejus essentia realiter distinguuntur. Vires autem superiores animae incorruptibiles et inorganicae, quibus ipsa immediate conjungitur Deo sicut objecto, sunt intellectus atque voluntas, quibus contemplando ac diligendo infigitur Deo, ita quod in anima rationali non est aliqua vis seu potentia intellectu voluntateque altior. (Dionysii, 1912,Vol. 41, Tomus IX, pp. 139-140) [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Vir mirabilis atque divinitus unctus magnifice et eruditus, Joannes Ruysbroeck, in suis codicibus de contemplation multa profunda secundum experientiam suam conscripsit. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 247) [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Denim in exordio libri de Perfectione filiorum Dei. (Dionysii, 1912,Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 247) This book is since known as *The Sparkling Stone*, *Vanden blinkenden steen*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 237-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 237-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. In horum verborum intelligentia parvitatem ingenii mei et experientiae meae fateor caligare. Verumtamen, quantum Spiritus Veritatis praestiterit, quid utcumque capio, explicabo. (Dionysii. 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 248) [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, p. 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume 1, pp. 147-235. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Longum atque difficile, meae quoque inexperientiae impossibile satis esset praeinducta liquide explanare, quanquam et quaedam his difficiliora praeallegato in loco praefatus auctor conscripserit. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 251) [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Unde de hac materia loquens Joannes Ruysbroeck, quem alibi non immerito appellavi Doctorem divinium… (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 261) The place where Denys referred to Ruusbroec as Divine Doctor is in his book *Gifts of the Holy Spirit* which will be discussed in the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. This book was written by Jan Ruusbroec in 1359, possibly for the same Poor Clare as his work *Enclosures*. It contains a long section on the Eucharist, which is why it has been called *The Blessed Sacrament* or *Sacraments of the Altar*. It is now known as *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness* (Walsh, 1985, p. 26); Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 541-593. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. In his translation, Turner (unpublished) points out the Latin *immode, id est absque manerie*, which literally translates to ‘without mode, that is, without manner’, stating that the expression is technical in Jan van Ruusbroec and the thought a commonplace of fourteenth century Rhineland mysticism. What Jan van Ruusbroec means is that in the light of God our minds are deprived of their own light, which consist in understanding things in terms of metaphors, models, analogies and concepts. Ruusbroec declined to say how this knowledge is characterised other than by the lack of its normal apparatus of understanding, except that he himself, paradoxically, has no alternative but to describe it in *images* of light. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. This is known now as *The Little Book of Clarification*. Wiseman, 1985, p. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *The Spiritual Espousals*, Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Denys has taken the section about Ruusbroec sitting under a tree whilst it appears to be on fire from the biography written by Pomerius. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Juxta hunc modum loquendi, Joannes Ruysbroeck ait frequenter fieri nos idem cum Deo, unam vitam, unam felicitatem: ita quod quidam verborum ejus superficiem magis quam mentis intentionem attendens, scribit eum voluisse renovare errorem dicentium rationale creaturam, per elevationem suam ad Deum, redire ac verti in esse ideale et increatum: quod fuit rudissimus atque stultissimus error. Neque putandum quod praefatus Joannes unquam intenderit id affirmare aut renovare: imo durissime contra praedictum scribit errorem. Verumtamen habet modum loquendi frequenter satis extensum, sicut et alii quidam Sanctorum secundum devotionis suae excessum et caritatis fervorem loquentium. (Dionyssii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 288) [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Quoniam autem inter prefectiones divinitus nobis collates, dona Sancti Spiritus excelsum obtinent locum. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 157) [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord. (Is 11:1-3) [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Nam et fides, quae intellectum concernit, sine caritate, quae in voluntate consistit, informis est. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 160) [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. I do not mean, however, that knowledge must not be not profitable in itself, providing one has the grace to use it well and humbly. The danger, however, is that arrogance comes with it. As the Apostle says, Knowledge puffs up’ (1 Cor 8:1). (McGuire, 1998, p. 77) [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Mallem, fateor, loco praesenti ab eruditiore doceri, et bonam resolutionem hujus contrarietatis addiscere, quam tantum doctorem irreventer negare: cujus tamen dicta in prompt concordare non valeo. (Dionyssi, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p.169) [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Non enim, ut Hugo testatur, perfectum facit cognition Veritatis, nisi comitetur notitia saporosa seu experimentalis: quoniam exp0erientia intelligentiae exstat magistra. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 169) [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Praeterea, sapientia illa seu habitus theologicalis, communis est bonis et malis: multi enim sacrae theologiae doctores, proh dolor! in peccatis mortabilus vivunt, qui nihilo minus hac sapientia fulgent. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 178) [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Vir autem mirabilis, dominus Joannes Ruysbroeck: quem qualiter digne appellem ignore, nisi ut quemadmodum venerabilisille Hugo de S. Victore propter eminentem suam scientiam vocatus est alter Augustinus. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 184) [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. …sic Joannes iste mirabilis propter excellentissiman suam sapientiam nominetur alter Dionysius. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 184) [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Puto enim quia si libri ejus in tali essent stilo translate ut libri magni Dionysii, non essent faciliores student quam libri Dionysii. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 184) [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Now seeing the constancy of Peter and of John, understanding that they were illiterate and ignorant men, they wondered; and they knew them that they had been with Jesus. (Douay Rheims Acts 4:13) [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 279-513. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Unde et libros suos in vulgari conscripsit: quorum tamen profunditatem atque sententiam nemum ad plentum mirari jam valet. Quoniam itaque certus sum virtum istum a Spiritu Sancto instructum, propterea magna est ejus auctoritas apud me: et quae de donis Spiritus Sancti scripsit in libro qui intitulatur Tabernaculum Moysis, studiose adspexi. Quoniam vero librum translatum non vidi, ego verba ejus, ut quivi, translate hic introduxi. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III p. 184) [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Haec verba plene exponere longum esset: sed quae in ipsis obscuriora videntur, breviter explanabo. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 185) [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *The Sparkling Stone.* Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 237-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Here Denys makes the short reference to the threefold way, which is the subject of his work *The Fountain of Life and the Paths of Life* which was strongly inspired by the work of Hugh of Balma. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Denique, primus sapientiae gradus ad fideles pertinent servos, secundus ad secretos amicos, tertius ad filios Dei carissimos: quorum distinctionem Doctor divinus in libro de Perfectione filiorum Dei pulchre ac mire describit. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 189-190) [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 147-235. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Haec de dono intellectus inducta sunt secundum doctrinam Doctoris divini in libro de Ornatu spiritualis desponsationis: in quo alia multa pulcherrima atque profunda de donis conscripsit, quibus et alia multa admiscet, secundum quod Spiritui Sancto complacuit animam hujus viri dirigere. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 197) [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 279-513. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Hoc est quod Doctor divinus in libro de Tabernaculo Moysis ait: Magna est (inquiens) distinction inter sapientiam et intellectum, quoniam sapientia introducit nos unitque Deo, intellectus autem adducit nos, atque accessum nostrum ad Deum clarificat. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35,

    Tomus III, p. 202) [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Quod enim donum intellectus in suo actu delectationem ac gustum quemdam sortitur, hinc liquet, quod Doctor divinus ait: Moeriendo nobismetipsis suscipimus donum intellectus, illudque sortiendo nobismetipsis mox morimur, et inde in nobis exoritur spiritualis et expansiva seu apertiva delectation ad Deum, quae interiorem hominem nostrum semper pervivacem facit ac vigilem. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, p. 203) [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Unde et Doctor divinus testatur: Donum (inquiens) intellectus, est supernatural lumen suo splendore rationem nostrum volens clarificare in sua sublimitate, dummodo velimus nos Ipsos intus erigere, huicque lumini obedire, quoniam lumen istud ab interior nostro homine exigit supergressionem atque excessum, seu derelictionem sensum omniumque sensibilium rerum atque imaginum , moriendo naturae et vivendo in spiritu. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, p. 204) [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Consilium, inquit, est quidam internus intractus seu tactus Spiritus Sancti, nostrum amorosam virtutem interius tangens, et exigens quatenus omnem occupationem, omnesque homines ad extra trahentes, cunctam quoque interiorem multiplicitatem fugiamus atque vitemus, et spiritus unionem amemus. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 210) [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 147-235. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Unde in sequentibus verbis secundum Doctorem istum inductis, adjicitur quod ex dono consilii et actione ipsius, furiosa quaedam vita causatur et importunitas ad intra. Qui enim consilii hujus directionem recipit, vehementer accenditur ad imitanda consilia Christi, in quibus docemur cuncta relinquere, totumque affectum Deo immergere, nil quoque quod a Deo elongat admittere. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 212) [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. When one can neither obtain God nor forgo Him: out of these two arise impetuosity and disquietude in some persons, without and within. In the moments when one is impetuous, no creature, either in heaven or on earth, can be of help to him as far as rest or anything else is concerned. In this impetuosity, sublime, useful words and special teaching and wisdom are sometimes granted within and announced. In inner impetuosity one is prepared to suffer all that can be suffered in order to obtain what one loves. The impetuosity of love is an inward unquietness that is scarcely willing to satisfy or to follow reason unless one obtains what one loves. Inner impetuosity eats a person’s heart and drinks his blood. Here the felt heat within is at its maximum in a person’s entire life; and one’s bodily nature is mysteriously lacerated and consumed without external labour, and the fruit of virtues ripens very swiftly, -more swiftly than in all the modes previously shown. (Ruusbroec (2014), pp. 182-183) [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. *The Sparkling Stone*. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 237-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Itaque occulti filii his omnibus moriuntur, soli Deo sincere intendunt, eum dumtaxat digni pendunt, amant ac cupiunt: hincque eatenus in superlucentes et superessentiales divinae et invisibilis lucis tenebras absorbentur, ut sibimetipsis penitus mori atque in nihilum redegi videantur. Porro in Deum transpositi deiformiter vivunt, eique tanquam prorsus ignoto uniti sunt. Ad hanc occultorum filiorum perfectionem sex requiruntur atque concurrunt, quae sunt: pax vera, internum silentium, adhaesio amorosa, quies in dilecto, obdormition, contuitio quaedam supersplendentis caliginis. Hic est apex et vertex christinanae religionis consiliorumque Christi, finis quoque praestantior, ad quem tertio gradu doni consilii sublevamur. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 214) [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 279-513. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Hoc intelligendum est pie et sapienter, videlicet ut certitudo spei accendatur ex parte Dei et doni ejus, non ex parte nostri, qui fragilitate implemur. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 220) [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 147-235. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Haec divini Doctoris eloquia, sicut in stilo facillima sunt, sic in profunditate sententiae difficillima exstant; et si bene intelligantur, tunc omnia quae de domo scientiae dicta sunt atque dicenda, limpidius innotescent. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 226) [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ait igitur Hugo: Pietas est benignae mentis dulcedo, gratia omnibus auxiliatrix infusa affectio, divinique cultus religiosa devotion. Sed in his non accipiuntur affection atque devotion prout respectus seu actus caritatis dicuntur aut latria, sed magis pro habitu per quem nos Deo devote liberaliterque offerimus, et aliis nostra largiflue communicamus. Itaque donum pietatis est dulcis ac splendidus radius, a fonte immensae benignitatis qui essentialiter pius est, menti infuses, quo ad Deum colendum ut patrem supernaturaliterhabituatur. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, pp. 233-234) [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Summa Theologica, II, 2a, 2ae, Question 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Quid ergo ad Thomam dicere possim, non video, nisi dicatur quod donum pietatis maxime ordinetur ad habendum filialem affectum in Deo, secundario vero circa Proximus subvenimus, ex filiali ad Deum affectu decet procedure, atque ad ipsum finaliter ordinary ac tendere. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 236) [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Unde et Doctor divinus eam ad misericordiam pertinere fatetur: misericordia autem est virtus caritati connexa seu conjuncta. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 237) [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Timor proinde, quemadmodum asserit Augustinus, est fuga mali future. Dum enim apprehendimus aliquid tanquam nocivum ac futurum, timemus. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 238) [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Haec secundum Doctorem divinum inducta sunt. Circa quae quaestiones plurimae occurrere possunt, quas non oportet hic plenarie determinare. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 245) [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Haec secundum Doctorem divinum inducta sunt. Circa quae quaestiones plurimae occurrere possunt, quas non oportet hic plenarie determinare. (Dionysii, 1908, Vol. 35, Tomus III, p. 245) [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. … triplicis viae qua qua itur ad fontem beatitudinis, ad ultimum finem, ad Creatorem omnium, Deum sublimem et benedictum. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 93) [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. …sacros in urbe ex devotione ordines assumpsisti, propopens posthac sacerdotalide atque canonice conversari. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 94) [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. My heart grew hot within me; and in my meditation a fire shall flame out. (Psalm 39:3) Come ye to him and be enlightened; and your faces shall not be confounded. (Psalm 34:5 Douay Rheims) [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. 102 ‘Unto the end, for Idithun himself, a canticle of David. I said: I will take heed to my ways: that I sin not with my tongue. I have set guard to my mouth, when the sinner stood against me. I was dumb, and was humbled, and kept silence from good things: and my sorrow was renewed. My heart grew hot within me: and in my meditation a fire shall flame out. I spoke with my tongue: O Lord, make me know my end. And what is the number of my days: that I may know what is wanting to me. (Douay Rheims, Psalms 38 1-5) [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Tu autem, carissime Christi Sacerdos, nunquam hujusmodi fias, sed quanto frequentius, tanto ferventius, tanto devotius ac fructuosis confitearis ac celebres: quatenus tanti sacramenti gratis, virtutibus atque effectibus quotidie copiosius implearis, et omni ejus spirituali pinguedine mentaliter dilateris, omnipotentique Domino ac munificentissimo Salvatori quotidie magis gratus efficiaris; nec tepidorum frangaris exemplis, sed sacris semper occupationibus, quantum tibi possible est, sis intentus, in cibo, potu, vestitu, somno, colloquio moderatus, verbis et factis omnibus exemplaris. (Dionysii, 1912, Vol. 41, Tomus IX, p. 105) [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Denys appears to refer to the following passage from Conference fourteen:

     Anyone wishing to master contemplation must, with all zeal and energy, acquire first the practical side. This practical mode can be reached independently of contemplation. But in no way can contemplation be arrived at without the practical. There are two arranged and separate stages by which human lowliness can reach up to the sublime. With these in the order which I have indicated, the human can attain the heights. But take away the first stage and there is no flying across it. Therefore, the one who does not avoid the stains of sin strives vainly for a sight of God: ‘For the spirit of God hates pretense and it does not make its abode in a body subdued by sin.’ (Wis 1:4, 5) Luibheid, 1985, p. 156) [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. *The Sparkling Stone*. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 237-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. *The Sparkling Stone*. Ruusbroec, 2014, Volume I, pp. 237-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)