I have become attentive recently to the experience of being momentarily enthralled by any number of things. Reflection on these experiences tells me much about myself and us. Some examples: I have watched crowds enthralled by Barack Obama, captivated by his eloquence. A documentary on the rare birds in the uninhabited forests of New Guinea left me simply astonished by their beauty. Every once in a while I can be amazed at a team’s play or at a player’s agility on the basketball court. I won’t even mention the effect music, dance, and cultural feats can have on audiences, who in their exuberance explode with applause. In all these, there are performances that exceed expectation howsoever fleeting and momentary. To be lifted out of oneself is what ecstasy means and genius generates.

My further wonder is how to understand the connection between these moments of enthrallment and the Holy Spirit as this Spirit cohabits or, scripturally, has made a home in me and us, together with the Father and the Son (John 14:23).

First of all, this kind of experience might tell us something about the Spirit who, sent from the Father and the Son, indwells persons. Insight about what is peculiar about the personhood of this indwelling Spirit could come from connecting it (spirit is neuter in the Greek) with our experience of fleeting moments of enthrallment. Abstracted from or independently of indwelling me and us, what is the personality of this Spirit like? The Spirit is wholly enthralled. By what? By the Father’s love for the Son and the Son’s for the Father. But this means that the Spirit is constitutively “into” love, maybe even is Love. As Spirit, God is love. Or better, God is ongoingly, tri-enfolded, eternally ecstatic. The moments this inner reality was revealed, after the incarnation, were at Jesus’ baptism and at the transfiguration when the belovedness of the Son to the Father is heard within human history.

So what to make of this? The first thing that must be said is that this ecstasy within the Godhead has been extended and prolonged as a capability in any number of human beings who have received this Spirit either in baptism by desire or by sacramental anointing. In other words, the Spirit of God would do in those who house this Gift what the Spirit has been doing for a living, so to speak, for all eternity, namely, being enthralled by the mutuality of the love of Father and Son. But this is the key to understanding the capacity the Spirit is trying to
bring about in us in the course of our brief histories in time. The apogee of our life in the Spirit crests with our entry into eternal life, readied to be enthralled by Love.

Another thing to notice is what the Spirit would craft of the clay of a life, were we wholly open to being crafted by the Spirit’s artistry. It would do something similar in us as was done with the malleable clay of Jesus of Nazareth, who opened himself so totally to God that he came to be “established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). The Gospels enable us to ponder the role of the Spirit in Christ’s earthly sojourn. It is easier to be conformed to the artistry of the Spirit if one learns that the pattern being followed is similar to the one that enabled Jesus to grow in wisdom, age, and grace in his lifetime. The Spirit was bringing the humanity of Jesus back into the enthralment that the Logos had enjoyed from all eternity. But by the plan the Three had worked out, “though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God something to be grasped or exploited or retained, but emptied himself. . . .” (becoming obedient to the leadings of the Spirit all the way to death on the cross) (Phil 2:6-8). The consequence was Jesus’ return to the enthralment he knew from the beginning but now knows in and through his humanity.

Let me interrupt this line of thinking to say that though this divine agenda is best implemented by those who know God through their knowledge of Christ and the Gospel, there is another huge population that implements the agenda of God, howsoever unknowingly. This is the baptism-by-desire crowd mentioned above. There is in their consciousness, howsoever subliminally, a deep desire to be enthralled by God. One of the more memorable descriptions of this need is found in Plato’s parable of the cave. Some of the cave’s denizens allow themselves to be dragged toward the light. Drawn away from just drifting in the darkness of the cave, they move toward the light that is their life and meaning. Aristotle picked up on Plato’s insights but did so with an emphasis on virtue—on the virtues needed for discernment and consistency in their moving toward the light.

Another way of looking at this drama between light and darkness is a favorite metaphor of Bernard Lonergan. He speaks about each of us publishing an edition of ourselves, a continuing publication done during our lives. The words that others read from our autobiographies are our deeds, hopefully taken from understandings and decisions and actions that have an integrity to them. If there is integrity, it is a joy to have such a “book” as a companion for our own lives. Plato’s parable and Lonergan’s metaphor convey the pulls and counterpulls at the level of desires and insights. The “book” can also be meaningless and sad, or it can be meaningful and enjoyable to read.

The best book to read, of course, is the book that describes desires discerned most accurately and enacted. Christians have such a person and such an account, Jesus and the Gospel. The Spirit-Potter led him to the enthralment that is the goal of the work of the Spirit in everyone. But in the lives of those on whom this Gift has been bestowed (both those who know of it and those who don’t) there are multitudinous little moments of enticements or desires—some good; some only seemingly so. Thus it would be highly desirable if we become skilled at discerning desires, our own and those whom we seek to companion in the Spirit. The gift of discernment needs to be petitioned, to have wisdom about the desires we find in our hearts, because these desires are always well dressed but their dress can be deceptive.

St. Paul provides an important note to ponder concerning this matter of discerned desires. He speaks of the consequences when
the Spirit-Potter has “his” way with someone. There are fruits that are produced in lives. They are empirically evident. There are nine such fruits: joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Of the nine of these mentioned by Paul in Galatians 5:22, I will underscore only joy. It seems to me that joy in the Lord is the experience on this side of eternity that will be in a continuum with the Spirit in the Spirit’s final success of bringing us into communion with the mutual enthrallment of love between the Father and the Son. The joy in the Lord that we experience this side of eternity will come to completion through the Spirit. When the Spirit brings us into communion with the mutual enthrallment of love between the Father and the Son, we will know full joy. The fruit of joy, then, is eschatological inasmuch as it anticipates the end times. As in Jesus’ own example, it can perdure, notwithstanding present suffering (1 Pet 4:13). The Beatitudes also put these two experiences together: “Blessed are you . . .” (Matt 5:11-12). In the very early descriptions of the Christian community, they experienced joy together in their meals and in their liturgical assemblies; they lived in a community “with exultation and sincerity of heart” (Acts 2: 26).

In conclusion, our future condition of enthrallment should have its beginnings in experiences operating in the present. The joy in the Spirit that we experience now gives us a foretaste of communion in the Trinity’s enthrallment, which will be our eternity. John’s words in the Last Supper discourse of Jesus about joy are memorable. It will be experienced by those who “remain in my love,” Jesus tells the disciples. “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). Then Jesus addresses his Father: “Now I am coming to you. I speak this . . . that they may share my joy completely” by consecrating them to the truth (John 17:13, 17).