

GROWTH IN HOLINESS: THE THREE STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE THE ILLUMINATIVE WAY: ADOLESCENT HOINESS

In the baby stage of the spiritual life, the purgative way, the battle is against mortal sin. Imagine our soul as a large field with the big ugly tree of mortal sin standing in the middle. We must cut it down and dig it out with an ax and a shovel. This is an arduous task, but it is only the beginning of our spiritual journey. We need a second conversion to advance spiritually. This may be a long time in coming because we often neglect prayer, rely on ourselves, and our commitment to cutting down that tree of death is half-hearted like St. Augustine who once prayed: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!” Infant piety based on feelings is a flabby piety that rests on vague beliefs, love without strength, and virtues that lack deep roots. Thus we are dragged this way and that’s by our feelings and imagination.¹

The apostles also needed a second conversion. They experienced their first conversion when they became Jesus’ disciples. Subsequently, their spiritual immaturity was evident when they were arguing, like little boys, about which of them was the greatest. Therefore Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn [convert] and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3). Like all beginners they needed the malleability of youth “that will make it possible for Jesus to use them as he sees fit.”² The apostles’ second conversion occurred on Good Friday as is evident in the life of St. Peter, when at the moment he denied Jesus for the third time, “the Lord turned and looked at Peter...and he went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:61-62).

Peter’s shameful denials along with Jesus’ crucifixion gave Peter a profound understanding of his sinfulness and the horror of sin. In his intense repentance a more intimate relationship was forged with his Lord that was not subject to the whims of Peter’s feelings and the enthusiasm of the moment. St. Bernard of Clairvaux refers to this second conversion as the kiss of the hand. It recalls Jesus lifting us up by the hand from the deep of spiritual infancy like he once lifted Peter as he was sinking like a rock in the Sea of Galilee (Mt 14:28-33).

Our entrance into the illuminative way is marked by the passive purgation of our senses of which God is fully in charge. No human activity or degree of learning can be remotely compared to the action of God on the soul. It is a common experience that God soon begins to free beginners from the prison of their feelings and emotions once habits of mortal sin are eliminated. This creates the condition for a more mature relationship with the divine Lover. However, we must surrender to this difficult process for Love never forces. We, too, must empty ourselves and “become obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8).³ Many of us pull back and never make it through this is a painful trial.⁴

¹ Dom Dean-Batiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, p. 128.

² Erasmo Leiva-Merikasis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Vol II, p. 6-8.

³ Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), *The Sacrifice of the Cross*, pp. 17-18.

⁴ St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1:8:4, 14; Thomas Dubay, *The Fire Within*, p. 162-163.

Once we begin to give adequate time to prayer and courageously combat mortal sin, God sprinkles dryness in our prayers along with a feeling that he is pulling away from us. He wants to purify our love from the consolations of God to the God of consolations. However, the reality is God only withdraws from our feelings. He never withdraws his grace because he always supports us. Meditation becomes difficult, as we can no longer focus and distractions assail our mind and imagination. Prayer becomes unsatisfying because it brings no delight, only dryness. We no longer experience consolations in the things of God. In addition this dark night may be accompanied by a myriad of temptations aimed at the seven capital sins: pride, envy, lust, avarice, gluttony, sloth, and anger - particularly in those areas where we had formally sinned. Then our soul wants to cry out in desperation, "Where is my God?" During these moments we need to remind ourselves of God's reassurance: "Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is 49:15).

This suffering is designed to advance us from the mercenary love of God that was based on self-interest and the joy of consolations, all of which is feeling based. While we are experiencing these trials we are actually on the upward path to love God for his own sake. At the same time there is a powerful temptation to quit prayer initiating a slide backwards. Our imperfect love for God can fade quicker than Peter denial of Jesus. A great deal of growth must take place before our relationship with God is not based on our profit, our satisfaction, and the pleasure that we found in him.

St. John of the Cross gives three signs that indicate we have entered the illuminative way:

1. "The soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, but it also fails to find it in any thing created.
2. "The memory is centered upon God, with painful care and solicitude, thinking that it is not serving God, but backsliding, because it finds itself without sweetness in the things of God. Thomas Dubay adds: 'There is a concern for and a habitual turning to God, even though there may be little pleasurable taste for him.' We ardently 'desire to give everything to God,'⁵ but we feel we are letting him down.
3. "The soul can no longer meditate or reflect in the sense of the imagination....For God now begins to communicate himself to it, no longer through sense [our feelings], as he did aforetime ... but by a act of simple contemplation, to which neither the exterior nor the interior senses of the lower part of the soul can attain."⁶

During this painful period God is very actively communicating with our soul, but not through the senses. This direct communication is called illumination or infused contemplation.

The difficulties we experience during the dark night of the senses helps us grow in humility as we become keenly aware of the fickle nature of our love, the ease in which we are distracted during prayer and the growing knowledge of our attachment to many

⁵ Thomas Dubay, *The Fire Within*, p. 165.

⁶ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Book 1, chapter 9.

false loves. Yes, we have successfully cut down the ugly tree of mortal sin, but we now discover the many weeds in the garden of our soul that need to be uprooted: pride, selfishness, unforgiveness, gossiping, judgmentalism, holding grudges, attachment to material things, and the desire to be in control – to provide a short list.

During this trial God illuminates us in the true art of loving. Gradually God gives us the insight to penetrate his mysteries and understand their marvelous application to every day life.⁷ Sin is no longer viewed as merely breaking a commandment, but breaking Jesus' heart. We also grieve over past relationships when we realize that we failed to protect the soul of someone we loved. As our sorrow over our past sins reach a deeper level, we can say with David, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Ps 51:3). Nevertheless, we are comforted with the awareness of God's mercy toward repentant sinners as David said, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps 51:17).

Jesus is calling us to come away to a lonely place and rest a while (Mk 11:31). In meditation we engaged our senses, imagination, understanding and will. But now these efforts are in vain. We must remain interiorly quiet. After all, even Jell-O must be still!

This is not an easy transition because we are accustomed to being mentally active and we live in a world of noise. So this new passive prayer in which God is in control seems like a waste of time because we don't *feel* anything is happening. Yet amid the dryness of our prayer God is quietly active as our prayer leaves the realm of our senses and becomes a simple gaze of love. This cessation of our senses is uncomfortable as we may also experience desolation, and emptiness. Prayer and other spiritual exercises seem distasteful, even repugnant. Sacred Scripture has lost its sweetness. We yearn for God, but we feel that we are far from him, perhaps even on the wrong path.

Praying the mysteries of the Rosary is particularly helpful because this beautiful prayer focuses our attention on all the mysteries of Jesus' life. The Rosary is the great Christocentric prayer. We simply need to gaze lovingly as we recall these mysteries, but without trying to analyze them as we did once before. Even within our dryness and distractions God will communicate directly with us in a quiet and unobtrusive way. Formally, for example, when we meditated on the fifth Joyful Mystery, the Finding of Jesus in the Temple, we were inclined to place ourselves in the scene imagining the joy Mary and Joseph experienced during the hidden years as they spent time with Jesus. Now in the simple gaze of love we know that Jesus is also with us.

As we advance in the illuminative way there occurs a natural growth in virtue. Venial sin, particularly deliberate venial sin, becomes less frequent, and moral sin is forcefully avoided. If we sink back into moral sin in the beginning of the illuminative way, we are usually caught off guard and there may be a full consent of the will. Repentance is immediate and our lack of love is profoundly lamented. As we mature in adolescent holiness the fruits of the spirit unconsciously begin to ooze out of us: love, joy, peace,

⁷ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Vol. II, pp. 66-68.

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God is changing us from the inside out.

The greatest danger during the illuminative way is pride and the neglect of prayer, which is the antidote for pride. Think of Peter's overconfident boast: "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away...Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you" (Mt 26:33, 35). Peter relied on Peter as he failed to heed Jesus admonition: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41). We should see ourselves in Peter's vulnerability. Saint Catherine of Siena was of the opinion that God sometimes allows mercenary souls to commit a grave sin, like Peter, in order that we might learn humility and take a true measure of our weakness.⁸

It is critical that we commit a minimum of 30 minutes each morning to quietly conversing with God. This prayer time is essential for three reasons. First, it is our love language with God. How can we love the God whose company we rarely seek? Second, experience demonstrates that unless we make this daily commitment, we will rarely pray during the rest of the day, as a multitude of activities will sweep away our resolutions. Then we easily fall into the deadly trap of being over worked and under prayed. We can easily rationalize, "There is no time to pray today, but tomorrow, tomorrow," but it rarely comes.⁹ Finally, prayer by its very nature is a cry for help and the acknowledgment that we desperately need God's strength. When Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5), he meant it!

As was indicated earlier our prayer is often beset with distractions. We can't meditate and we shouldn't try to force ourselves to do so. At this stage we may find prayer repugnant, feel lazy and believe that our distracted prayer is valueless. In addition, we may experience "temptations against purity or faith, blasphemous thoughts or scruples."¹⁰ According to Thomas Dubay: "God begins to give this new, dry, nondiscursive type of prayer ... very soon after a person begins to take the Gospel seriously, to live it generously and to give *adequate time to mental prayer*."¹¹ He is merely expressing the teaching of St. John of the Cross.

How long we remain in the illuminative way depends on three factors. The first is the speed and the degree of love to which God chooses to raise us. We are all called to holiness, but not necessarily to the same degree or at the same pace. God is fully in command. Secondly, the duration of this process is often related to the amount of imperfections and attachment to sin that needs to be burned away by God's love. Old habits die hard! Often, we discover that we are very inward, that is, self-focused. Then we can easily become critical of others partialling out our love and kindness with the generosity of a miser. Finally, the generosity with which we surrender to God's actions

⁸ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, chapter 63.

⁹ Dom Dean-Batiste Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, p. 94.

¹⁰ Thomas Dubay, *The Fire Within*, p. 162.

¹¹ Thomas Dubay, *The Fire Within*, p. 162 emphasis mine.

in our soul is vital. Our failure to respond generously with real courage keeps many of us from not progressing in the illuminative way or even falling out of it altogether. Then we remain crippled souls, who never experience the great love that beckons us.¹² It is far easier to say, “We are all in,” than it is to live it out in the day-to-day combat of spiritual warfare. In this becomes our condition the words of John Greenleaf Whittier apply to us: “Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’”

Discouragement is also a real danger as we progress spiritually, because we feel that our inner world is caving in. We also experience the grave peril of abandoning prayer, because it has become very difficult, even odious. Continuing to pray or increasing our prayer time is crucial. During the times of trial we must remain at peace and be quietly attentive to God. We need to surrender our desire to *feel* God’s actions and presence. We must ignore the thoughts that we are wasting our time. Anxiety does not come from God, so we must be at peace.

When our senses are sufficiently purified and we begin to love God for himself alone, the divine Director of Souls brings us into the process of spiritual maturity, the Unitive Way, by a third conversion. It is called the dark night of the spirit. This is needed because the purification of our senses is only partially completed because all our imperfections are rooted in the spirit. Unfortunately, there are too few of us willing to surrender to God’s action in the illuminative, much less be guided into the world of spiritual adulthood.

¹² Thomas Dubay, *The Fire Within*, p. 166 citing John of the Cross in book I of *The Dark Night of the Soul*.