

GROWTH IN HOLINESS: THE THREE STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE THE UNITIVE WAY: ADULT HOLINESS

This series focuses on the growth process to becoming holy. God calls some of us from the dark state of mortal sin, where we have no love for God. Our upward journey begins with the acknowledgment that we are sinners. Our initial baby steps in the purgative way - spiritual infancy - exhibit a minimal love for God that is merely mercenary, for it is motivated by what's in it for me. After all, eternal damnation is a terrible alternative to a short life span of sinful choices. At this stage our love is on life support, as we can easily fall back into mortal sin. Gradually, however, by God's grace our resistance to sin toughens. Then God strengthens our love in the dark night of the senses as we enter the illuminative way. During this adolescent period our love for God becomes more committed and self-sacrificing, but it is still imperfect. We are learning to do the little tasks of life with love. We are also acquiring the habit of interior silence, "for God doesn't give himself to a chattering soul."¹

Nevertheless, we need a third conversion as is evident in the life of St. Peter and the Apostles. Even after the events of Good Friday, the Apostles were resistant to accepting the reality of the Resurrection. The report of the holy women "seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them" (Lk 24:11). When the resurrected Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, Peter could only declare the imperfect love of friendship (Jn 21:15-17). Even on the day of the Ascension they exhibited their lack of understanding, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They suffered the distress of his departures, for he would never again be with them as he was before.

Their feelings of loneliness, desolation and apprehension were transformed during their third conversion on Pentecost. Now they were "all in" ready to enthusiastically embrace all the trials and suffering that awaited them. Thus when the Sanhedrin had them flogged, they rejoiced, "that they had been worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (Acts 5:41). St. Bernard of Clairvaux referred to this third conversion as the kiss of the mouth (Song 1:1) – total intimacy with our Lord.

The dark night of the senses is the arduous trial that leads us into and advances us in the illuminative way. Tragically, many of us back away at this point and do not courageously follow our inner longing and desperate need to love God for his own sake. We tend to be soft and are repulsed by the suffering in our senses. For the few who are malleable, the Holy Spirit draws them into the unitive way - adult holiness - by ushering in the terrible dark night of the spirit. Consider how St. Faustina describes her experience of the dark night of the spirit:

"The soul is engulfed in a horrible night. It sees within itself only sin. It feels terrible. It sees itself completely abandoned by God. It feels itself to be the object of His hatred. It is but one step away from despair. The soul does its best to defend itself; it tries to stir up its confidence; but prayer is an even greater torment for it, as this prayer seems to arouse God to an even greater anger. The soul finds itself poised on

¹ *The Diary of Sister M. Faustina Kowalska*, #118.

the summit of a lofty mountain on the very brink of a precipice. The soul is drawn to God, but feels repulsed. All other sufferings and tortures in the world are as nothing compared with this sensation into which it has been plunged; namely, that of being rejected by God.”²

The theological virtues of faith, hope and love stagger under the onslaught of temptations against them. We tremble under this assault. The struggle is intense as we are invited into the agony of Gethsemane. The sense of God’s rejection is unimaginable. We discover that our soul is now plunged into a frightful darkness never before experienced. Consider some examples of how we are tormented with frightful challenges to our faith:

“Does God really exist? Are the Gospel stories just myths? Shouldn’t the Bible be called the Book of Fables? No one rises from the dead, so how can you believe in the fantasy of the Resurrection? Only a fool would believe that God would assume human nature to suffer the horrible death of crucifixion. How can you possibly believe that the Eucharist is the body, blood soul and divinity of Jesus, when your own senses affirm that it’s only bread and wine? If sin did exist, only the naïve would believe that a man could forgive them in confession. The proliferation of Christian denominations disagreeing with one another in vital matters of faith and morals is the definitive proof that there is no authentic Christian religion established by Jesus. It’s all make believe! Everyone makes their own rules as they go along, so why should you follow the rules of your rigid Church?”

During this trial we must not grapple with these fierce temptations, but gently and humbly turn to God with the fervent prayer of a grieving father, “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mk 9:24).

Our hope is so furiously attacked that our salvation seems in doubt. One by one we are tormented by our past sins, along with the hammering by vile and vivid temptations of every type. These images remind us of what we have done or what we are capable of doing. We become painfully aware of our misery as we experience the frightful sense of God’s justice. We are tormented with the discouraging thoughts like the following:

“If nothingness does not await you, then eternal damnation does. How can you possibly think that someone as ungrateful and sinful as you will get to heaven? You are an utter fool to trust in a God that does not exist? Doesn’t real happiness consists in taking care of you, not caring for others? Be successful, then you can enjoy the pleasures of this world. Why are you denying yourself? Can’t you see that you are wasting your life by forgoing pleasures and opportunities that may never come again? How can you trust a so-called God who allows so much suffering in the world, which is the only real evil.”

In this awful trial our soul cries out in desperation, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” We must repeat with great conviction, “Jesus, I trust in you.”

The most painful ordeal is the challenge to the theological virtue of love. Our mind is flooded with frightful thoughts:

“You are a fool; God doesn’t love you. If there was a God, he would love himself, not you. If God loved you, why are you suffering, and why does he allow so much

² *The Diary of Sister M. Faustina Kowalska*, # 98; see also: #'s 77, 95.

suffering in the world? What have you faithfully done to deserve the love of the God you crave for? You need to face reality. Your life lived for a God that does not exist and the mirage of heaven is a wasted life. Even by your own standards you have done very little to please God. Deep down don't you know that God does not love you for he has abandoned you. You had better hope that there is no hell, because if hell did exist, you would certainly go there because of all those acts you call sins."

During this trial, when we feel rejected and abandoned by God, we must respond with the plea, "Lord, I love you; be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13). The dark night of the spirit is the final purification that strips away the last vestiges of self-love, so we can truly love God with our whole heart, mind and soul for his own sake. It is in the purifying fire of this ordeal we learn to love God with *total* self-sacrificing love and *absolute* commitment.

Amid this painful purging of our spirit, God quietly enlightens and inflames us with his love in a way that was formally beyond our imagination. We also gain a deeper understanding of Jesus' Passion, because we have been allowed to experience a tiny portion of it. Now we know what Jesus meant when he challenged us to take up our cross and follow him (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23), and St. Paul stated that he was "crucified with Christ." Then the second part of Paul's assertion can also apply to us: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

At this stage of spiritual maturity all sins are rejected as completely repulsive. A thousand deaths are preferable to offending our Lord in any way. Our faults are also gradually eliminated, as we strive to choose "the best part" (Lk 10:42) in our relationship with Jesus. We now completely trust in the divine mercy that never fails us. Finally, we free-fall in the lovable goodness of God for his own sake. From this point forward "the depth of the soul belongs completely to God."³

The dark night of the spirit lasts according to the timing of God's wisdom. He alone knows what we need. Prayer will often seem impossible and completely unsatisfactory, but it must never be abandoned for then we rely on ourselves, which is always a disaster. The reassurances from our confessor or spiritual director will be as ineffective as pellets bouncing off a tank. Surrendering to God's providence must be our response. We must join our heart with Jesus in Gethsemane and say with him, "not my will, but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42). The time will come when our suffering will be sweet. Then we can say with St. Paul: "Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church" (Col 1:24). During the dreadful suffering of the dark night of the spirit, we are still at peace. The people who live and work with us would have no inclination of the intense struggle we are experiencing.

During the unitive way we live in an habitual life of prayer, even when we are involved with other activities. Even in our sleep there is a sense that we are talking with God and he is talking with us. As our prayer life matures with the supernatural graces of

³ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Conversion in the Spiritual Life*, p. 65.

contemplation, God communicates directly with our soul. It's Heart to heart. Intermittently God breaks through the darkness with extraordinary consolations that reassures us of his tender love. When he seemed to be abandoning us he is always quietly supporting us with his tender love. As God's passionate love captures our heart our love naturally overflows to the needs of others. There is no thought of self.

Death for a person in the unitive way is ecstatically experiencing the everlasting embrace of divine love as the soul flies to the Beloved as a tiny piece of metal is irresistibly drawn to a powerful magnet. Home at last, we are ushered into the eternal "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9) to forever experience "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9; cf. Is 64:4; 65:17). Then the suffering or sacrifice we experienced in this life is fully understood as nothing in comparison to the everlasting joy and happiness of heaven.