

The Night of the spirit, Part I¹

We have already reflected on what John of the Cross speaks of as the Night of the Senses. The gift of contemplative prayer drew us into communion with God beyond the reach of the imagination, memory or thoughts. Though we were in communion with God in the depth of our soul, our consciousness insofar as it depends upon the senses could no longer be part of this communion. John speaks of the confusion and sense of deprivation that we experience as a kind of darkness. To trust the gift of prayer being offered us we had to learn to let go the pleasure we experience through holy thoughts and feelings of closeness. We had to learn the discipline of trusting that the communion being experienced in our will was what really mattered and that we were praying in order to be in communion with God not to feel close to God. In this darkness we learned to focus on God's action within, without being distracted by our senses, by our memory and imagination, or by the mind searching for understanding. We came to a certain harmony in which our bodies and our senses submitted to the longing of the intellect to gaze upon God and of the will to be united with God in love.

With the deepening of contemplation in what Teresa speaks of as the Prayer of Quiet and the Prayer of Union, the inflowing of God is experienced, and with it a deep peace and a profound joy. But for the most part the tide of love seems to ebb. God who has touched our soul in such an intimate way seems to withdraw and to be absent. We have seen that this is in order to stretch the soul by desire, making us capable of more love. It also purifies us of all attachments, making our love more pure. The point upon which we are focusing here is that this is a painful experience. It is though we are plunged in darkness in the very centre of our soul: we long to see the one who has drawn us into love but we cannot. No longer is it our senses and the faculties that depend upon them that are being purified; now it is the core of our ego. God is calling us to himself and therefore we are being drawn into a prayer which relies solely on faith. The light with which God illumines the soul cannot be registered by any of our faculties; they are all plunged into darkness. We are journeying in the darkness of faith. Divine warmth and fragrance are not registered in the normal way, for the flowing in of love coming from God draws us beyond ourselves into communion with him in the inmost dwelling places of the soul. The attraction and the union occur in a darkness which John of the Cross speaks of as the 'night of the spirit'.

Two centuries before John of the Cross, the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec wrote:

'Desire and affection will make your heart expand, so that you will love, thank and praise God and yet fall short in all this, for all that you are able to do will seem as little or nothing compared to what you will wish to do and what love will rightly demand of you. Through such desire your heart will suffer a painful wound. The pain will constantly increase and be renewed through the practice of desirous affection for God, so that you will grow weak from love. Sometimes it will seem that your heart and your senses will be broken to pieces, that your nature will die and come to naught through the impatience of its desires, and that this impatience will have to last as long as you live. But then, when you least expect it, God will hide himself and withdraw his hand, placing between himself and you a darkness which you will not be able to see through. You will then lament, moan, and groan like a poor, abandoned exile. "Now are the poor abandoned to God", says the Prophet. Then let God have what is his own, and prefer to live outcast and scorned in his house rather than to dwell in the house of the proud' (*A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*).

Let us listen to two young French Carmelite saints recording their experiences of this night. Therese Martin joined the convent in Lisieux in 1888 and died 9 years later. In a letter composed the year after her entry she wrote:

¹Marie-Eugène OCD, *I am a daughter of the Church*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1955, 300-374.

‘He prefers leaving me in darkness to giving me a false light which would not be Himself’ (Letter, 7.1.1889).

The following year, she wrote:

‘Jesus took me by the hand, and He made me enter a subterranean passage ... where I see nothing but a half-veiled light, the light which was diffused by the lowered eyes of my Fiancé’s face! My Fiancé says nothing to me, and I say nothing to Him either except that I love Him more than myself’ (Letter, 30.8.1890).

A year before her death she wrote:

‘If at times you seem to hide yourself, it is you yourself who come to help me search for you’ (15.8.1896).

She continues the same theme just months before her death:

‘If you leave me deprived of your caresses, I will not cease to smile. In peace, I will wait for your return, and never stop praying my canticles of love’ (31.5.1897).

Elizabeth Catez joined the convent in Dijon in 1901 and died in 1906. Her name in religion was Elizabeth of the Trinity. A letter written the year of her entry includes the following:

‘It is no longer a veil but a thick wall which hides Him from me. I find it hard after having felt Him so near, but I am ready to remain in this state as long as it pleases my Beloved to leave me in it, for faith tells me that He is there all the same. Of what use are consolations and sensible sweetness? All that is not God; and it is God alone we seek. So let us go to Him in pure faith’ (Letter to M.G. 1901).

In her last retreat just before her death, she wrote:

‘I ought to plunge into the sacred darkness, keeping all my powers in night and emptiness. Then I shall meet my Master, and the light which clothes Him as a garment will enwrap me, too, with his light alone.’

This darkness brings its own special suffering. First and foremost is the suffering caused by the profound but passing touch of God’s love. This passing is a cause of pain - the pain of longing for the union to be granted again (see *Interior Castle* V.2.9). Teresa writes:

‘It is as though from the fire enkindled in the brazier that is my God, a spark leapt forth and so struck the soul that the flaming fire was felt by it’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4).

The spark, however, was not enough to set the soul on fire - hence the loving pain of longing

‘The soul is left so full of longings to enjoy completely the One who grants these wonderful favours that it lives in a great, though delightful, torment ... Everything it sees wearies it. When it is alone it finds some relief ... yet when it does not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.6.1).

‘The soul feels a strange solitude because no creature in all the earth provides it company, not being the One it loves. The soul sees that it is like a person hanging, who cannot support himself on any earthly thing; nor can it ascend into heaven. On fire with this thirst, it cannot get to the water; and the thirst is not one that is endurable but already at such a point that nothing will take it away. Nor does the soul desire that it be taken away save by that water of which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman. Yet no one gives such water to the soul’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.5).

Frequently cited are the words of the Song of Songs: ‘I sought him but did not find him, I called to him but he did not answer’ (5:6). Father Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Divine Wisdom reveals herself so as to set the soul on fire and hides herself so as to fan the flames of the soul’s desires; crushes the soul to make it docile, and wounds it so as to heal. Thus Divine Wisdom purifies, transforms and quietens the soul.’

(I am a daughter of the Church, page 204).

God seems silent, hidden, absent. This is so that, with our heart thus pierced and hurt by desire, we may finally open up to him, with a greater capacity for receiving him. This is a recurring theme in spiritual writing as we saw in our earlier reflection on Longing.

Over and above this pain of unfulfilled longing, there are other causes for suffering that can accompany the deepening of contemplative prayer. Teresa names the following in her Interior Castle (VI.1). We can be afflicted by others accusing us of posing to be holy, or by our own imagining that this is what we are doing. We can also be afflicted by others praising us, when we know that all is gift, and that gratitude to God and not praise of ourselves is the proper response to grace. These disturb us because we are not at all sure of ourselves. We have to learn to take both blame and praise lightly, and quickly turn from both to God.

We can find ourselves being misunderstood by a spiritual director, who may be incapable of giving us wise help. We can be disturbed by thoughts that we are being deceived and are deceiving others. Our reason may assure us that this is not the case, but reason is powerless to help us against such thoughts. Teresa’s advice is clear:

‘If the Lord has granted you the touch of this love, you should thank him very much. You do not have to fear deception. Your only fear is that you might prove ungrateful for so generous a gift. So strive to better your entire life, and to serve’ (*Interior Castle*, VI,2,5).

Finally, we can experience pain because of our sins. Teresa writes:

‘Suffering over one’s sins increases the more one receives from God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI,7.1)

‘God’s favours are like the waves of a large river in that they come and go; but the memory these souls have of their sins clings like thick mire. It always seems that these sins are alive in the memory, and this is a heavy cross’ (*Interior Castle*, VI,7.2).

God is now working in the soul for its final purging from all imperfection till all that remains is love. When all resistance to love is conquered, when the soul has fully surrendered to love, then and only then there is experienced the peace of being fully in God’s love. Let us listen to John of the Cross:

‘The dark night is a certain flowing in of God into the human creature, which purges it of the ignorance and imperfections belonging to its very nature. God teaches it in a strange, secret way, educating it to perfect love. He does this himself; the creature can only be lovingly attentive, listening, receptive, allowing itself to be enlightened without understanding how.’

(Dark Night, II.5.1)

‘There is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow which of itself can give pain; contemplation rather bestows sweetness and delight. The cause for not experiencing these agreeable effects is the soul’s weakness and imperfection at the time, its inadequate preparation, and the qualities it possesses which are contrary to this light. Because of these the soul has to suffer when the divine light shines upon it’ (*Dark Night*, II.9.11).

With Prayer of Union comes a need for a psychological revolution in which the intellect and the will have to learn to surrender control to God and learn to be guided by God in the depths of the soul. In the night of the spirit, our human spirit must learn to receive rather than to determine its own activity. We are so used to being active, even in our searching for God and in our commitment to prayer. In this enforced passivity it will seem to us that God has abandoned us

and left us in darkness. Our intellect and our will are being purified till there is no longing in us except to be with God and to do God's holy will. God is digging out the deep roots of sin, consuming the soul and purging it in order to re-create us in the pure fire of his love.

John of the Cross goes to the Book of Lamentation to find a scriptural expression of the pain suffered by the soul in this night.

I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath;
he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light;
against me alone he turns his hand, again and again, all day long.
He has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago.
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me;
though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer;
he has blocked my ways with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked.
He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding;
he led me off my way and tore me to pieces; he has made me desolate;
he bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow.
He shot into my vitals the arrows of his quiver;
I have become the laughingstock of all my people, the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
He has filled me with bitterness, he has sated me with wormwood.
He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory, and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me' (*Lamentations* 3:1-20).

Teresa knows how gentle we must be with a person suffering the pain of this purifying love:

'Oh, Jesus, how sad it is to see a soul thus forsaken' (*Interior Castle*, VI Mansions, 1).

This suffering makes the soul more tender, more compassionate to others, more open to love. We learn to identify with Jesus in his cry: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' Marie-Eugène writes:

'By a painful experience of its own weakness, of the depths of sin in itself and in others, of the hateful power of sin in the world, of its blind violence in all people, the soul learns humility before God, before itself, before the work to be realised in the Church. It progressively discovers the human-divine conditions in which the kingdom of God is built up here below, the part of God in it and the part we are to play, the efficacious power of divine love, the indulgent and silent patience that this love requires of the human instrument, if it would triumph over the forces of sin' (page 333-334).

The soul's experience at this time is one of light and darkness - the measure of each depends on the person's need for purification and on the courage with which it opens itself to God's purifying love. John of the Cross writes:

'The soul never remains in the same state for long, but is continually up and down. This is because we cannot be in the state of perfection which consists in perfect love of God and contempt of self without knowing God and ourself. And so we are given a taste of one - that is exaltation - and then of the other - that is humiliation' (*Dark Night*, II.18).

It is when the fire is less purifying that we experience more the enkindling of love:

‘This enkindling of love is not always felt by the soul, but only at times when contemplation assails it less vehemently, for then it has occasion to see, and even to enjoy, the word which is being wrought in it, and which it then revealed to it. For it seems that the worker takes his hand from the work, and draws the iron out of the furnace, in order that something of the work that is being done may be seen’(*Dark Night*, II.10).

Father Marie-Eugène adds a caution:

‘We must be on our guard against any stereotyped notion of the dark night. The night is always an intervention of divine Wisdom by fire. The divine bellows fan to a blaze the depths of the soul with a force and rhythm as varied as are the designs of God for it and as are the forms of sin of which it must be purified’(page 371).

He reminds us also that the purification takes place in the midst of the circumstances of ordinary life:

‘The dark night is a realm of suffering, but also one of peace, a realm where love wounds painfully and with violence, only to purify, to liberate, to heal the soul and bring it into transforming union’(page 374).

A valuable caution is offered here by Ruth Burrows who warns us to beware of imagining suffering:

‘Real suffering is received moment by moment and is always bearable’(*The Ascent of Love*, page 111).

A final clarification is offered in a Carmelite commentary on the teaching of John of the Cross, entitled *God Speaks in the Night*:

‘The dark night is not the trials and afflictions, fears and temptations coming from the world; nor is it the temptations, dryness and affliction from the senses; nor is it the tribulations, darkness, distress, abandonment, temptations and other trials in the spirit. It is the attitude one has in dealing with these. This means interpreting the facts in faith, responding with love, and bearing them or seeking a solution with hope in God. Sufferings are the common lot, The dark night is a grace from God, but one must live it with much effort’(page 185).