

## Night of the spirit Part II<sup>1</sup>

Having looked at the night into which we are plunged as we are drawn deeper and deeper into communion with God in contemplative prayer, let us now seek advice from the masters in the art of prayer as to what we are to do in this darkness. How are we to sustain the feeling of ‘a strange solitude’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.11.5), the pain of longing and the pain of knowing our own sinfulness?

We must first of all remember that the pain is brought about by the flame of love coming from the brazier of the heart of God (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4). Nothing stands between us and the one we love. The journey, though at times painful, is a journey into the arms of one who has promised himself to us. Whatever sufferings we have, ‘the soul knows they are great favours’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.1.15). ‘The soul feels that the pain is precious’ (VI.11.6).

‘The wound satisfies the soul much more than the delightful and painless absorption of the Prayer of Quiet’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.2).

The only one who can remove the pain is ‘the true comforter who consoles and strengthens the soul’ (VI.11.9). Moreover:

‘The divine visits of the betrothal complete the soul’s purification, enriching it and preparing it in a positive way for the spiritual marriage. With their extraordinary gifts of love in the depths of the soul, they destroy or render inactive the remaining evil tendencies. The meeting with God in the light, which they procure, perfects the psychological reorientation of the soul. Thereafter the soul is wholly turned towards the beloved’ (Marie-Eugène, page 538).

In an anonymous work entitled *The Hermitage Within*, a monk has this advice:

‘tirelessly plead for God to give himself to you’ (page 28).

‘You will be reduced to “wanting to believe,” to stumbling along groaning and no longer understanding a thing. “When I sing the bliss of heaven, the eternal possession of God,” wrote St Therese of the Child Jesus, “I feel no joy; for I am merely singing what I want to believe.” You must “behave as if” the light were lightening your path: you must deepen your faith not by devouring more and more books but by humbly submitting to this withdrawal of light and by putting your whole life, down to its minutest details, under the influence of faith’ (page 45).

Let us listen to Therese of Lisieux:

‘Jesus knows well that while I do not have the joy of faith, I am trying to carry out its works at least. I believe I have made more acts of faith in this past year than all through my whole life. At each new occasion of combat ... I run towards my Jesus ... I sing what I want to believe’ (*Spiritual Autobiography*, June 9, 1897).

The author of *The Hermitage Within* speaks also of humility:

‘Humility will save you. Accept not tasting God’s love, you who have savoured the love of creatures too much; accept walking in darkness without so much as feeling the fatherly hand bearing you without your knowing it. Guide yourself by his voice’ (page 47).

This is a theme dear to the heart of Therese of Lisieux:

‘Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart, which makes us always humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father’s goodness’ (August 3rd 1897).

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<sup>1</sup> Father Marie-Eugène OCD, *I am a Daughter of the Church*, pages 375-508.

‘You may think of a little child that is learning to stand but does not yet know how to walk. In his desire to reach the top of the stairs to find his mother, he lifts his little foot to climb the first step. It is all in vain, and at each renewed effort he falls. Well, be like that little child. Always keep lifting your foot to climb the ladder of holiness, and do not imagine that you can mount even the first step. All God asks of you is good will. From the top of the ladder he looks lovingly upon you, and soon, touched by your fruitless efforts, he will himself come down, and, taking you in his arms, will carry you to his kingdom never again to leave him’(Autobiography).

‘Do all in your power, give without counting, constantly renounce yourself, in a word, prove your love by all the works in your power. But in truth, since this is very little, it is urgent to put your confidence in him who alone sanctifies what you do, and to confess yourself to be a useless servant’(Advice to a novice).

When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night he was told that he had to be ‘born from above’. This was not something which he could achieve. He was to allow God’s Spirit to engender this new life in him (John chapter 2). This is the Spirit poured out from the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross. We have to learn resignation. We have to learn to surrender our will to the will of God. More than resignation and submission, we are actively to cooperate with grace, to want what God wants with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. All asceticism now is to respect divine initiative. We need to learn to cooperate energetically with grace. John of the Cross writes:

‘It is a great grace from God when God so darkens and impoverishes the soul that the senses cannot deceive it. And that it may not go astray it has nothing to do but to walk in the beaten path of the law of God and of the Church, living solely by faith, dim and true, in certain hope and perfect charity, looking for all its blessings in heaven; living here as a pilgrim, a beggar, an exile, an orphan, desolate, possessing nothing and looking for everything from God.’

(Letter to Dona Juana Pedraca)

Teresa writes:

‘There is no remedy for the tempest but to await the mercy of God’(*Interior Castle*, VI.1.10).

‘The best way to endure these afflictions of the spirit is to engage in external works of charity and to hope in the mercy of God’(*Interior Castle*, VI.1.13).

Julian of Norwich has the following advice:

‘Pray inwardly, even though you find no joy in it. For it does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing, yes, even though you think you cannot pray. For when you are dry and empty, sick and weak, your prayers please me, though there be little enough to please you. All believing prayer is precious to me. God accepts the good-will and work of his servants, no matter how we feel’(*Showings* ch. 41)

God sustains us by the virtue of hope, so that we continue to tend towards a communion with him which we know by faith but which we do not yet possess in the full measure of love’s longing. Our spirit groans because we seem not to be going forward, but we continue to long and to trust in Him who we know loves us and whom we love. We are to keep our gaze fixed beyond the storms and the darkness on Him who we know by faith is drawing us to himself. Marie-Eugène writes:

‘The dark night of the spirit brings with it this hour of supernatural hope. God reveals himself in the flowing in of grace and the extraordinary favours that mark this period, in that wisdom, secret and always acting, which creates a certain obsession for the divine transcendence. The darkness that prevails makes thicker the veil that separates Him, and

greater the distance. The soul, crushed by its misery and weakness, experiences an inability to go toward God, the only object that it can thenceforth desire. To go back it cannot, for it is already captivated by his love. It does not succeed in going toward him and it will not do so, since the divine flame is within it, assailing it. This is the hour of profound hope, ardent and peaceful. God awaits the sighs that mount up from the depths of the soul, opening them to his action. God needs these inner groanings that tell that the work of purification is being accomplished, and that give up to the flame's action all imperfections'(pages 380-381).

We are being invited to be 'poor in spirit', completely conscious of our utter dependence on God, and confident, like a child in a father's love. Trust is hope impregnated with love. We are to abandon ourselves to God. We are being called to cling to nothing, not even to remembered graces. For graces are not God.

'It is best to learn to silence the faculties and to cause them to be still, so that God may speak.'

(John of the Cross, *Ascent* III,2)

'The asceticism of the soul consists in preparing, by mortification and purity of heart, for the spiritual poverty that God himself works in it; in bearing this poverty humbly and peacefully when God gives it as a grace; in protecting it and furthering it, according to the grace that is given, by the practice of an interior silence ... In this solitude of peace and silent hope it purifies and flowers'(Marie-Eugène, page 387).

Teresa of Avila recognises that sometimes the darkness is such that we feel abandoned by God, including having no sense of the presence of Jesus. If this is so, we must accept it. However, she is insistent that we do not be deceived into thinking that we have to try, of ourselves, to distance ourselves from Jesus, as though his humanity could inhibit our entry into a communion with God who is spirit:

'If we lose our guide, the good Jesus, we will be unable to find our way.'

(*Interior Castle*, VI.7.6)

Jesus suffered. Should we expect to be with him and not suffer? Even though we seem to be in darkness, we are walking with the one who is the light of the world: 'If you walk with me, you will not walk in darkness'(John 8:12). Jesus experienced a profound sense of being abandoned by his Father. It may well be the same for us, but we can be confident that in the darkness, Jesus is drawing us to himself and so into communion with his Father: 'If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself'(John 12:32). Suffering with Jesus is purifying. It is also redemptive when embraced in love. In her acute sufferings, physical and mental, Therese could write:

'O divine Word, you are the adored Eagle. I love you and you draw me to you ... One day – such is my hope – you will come for your little bird, and mounting with it to the fire of love, you will plunge it for eternity in the burning abyss of the love to which it has offered itself as victim'(Letter to Marie of the Sacred Heart, September 14th, 1896).

Marie-Eugène writes:

'The link that is forged by gazing on Jesus' suffering, or simply the remembrance of the Passion, has brought about changes in depth. The external traits of the tableau and conceptual forms of thought disappear. The obscure depths of the soul find repose in the depths of the mystery of Christ suffering, in an outpouring of painful love that finds strength and love in this meeting. The soul that is suffering under love's action joins Christ who is in agony in his love for the world until the end of time'(I am a daughter of the Church, page 442).

‘The living presence of Jesus remains with the soul in the dark night, hidden from the senses but perceived in deeper regions. The soul can travel securely in the darkness and reach the end only in that divine company, and in the half-light of the mystery of his suffering’(p. 444)

There are certain fruits which grace the soul which remains faithful to the prayer of faith. In the Carmelite commentary on John of the Cross to which we referred earlier, we read:

‘The first fruit of the Dark Night is freedom. Those experiencing this flowing in of contemplation feel as though they escaped from a dark dungeon and as though the world were an eternal springtime. They draw out much knowledge of God and of self. They also get much humility and become more understanding of others. Many troubles become relative that were once considered major problems. And, most of all, they have a loving solicitude about serving God and are determined to do so without recompense’(*God speaks in the Night* , page 185).

The last cords holding the soul back from flight to God are broken. The last deflections of the will under the impulse of desire cease. Nothing now holds us back from a complete surrender to love. In his Dark Night John of the Cross writes:

‘You remain in this condition until your spirit is humbled, softened and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God, according to the degree of union of love that God, in his mercy, desires to grant’(II.7,4).

‘Oh, then, spiritual soul, when you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constrained, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted; think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity. However well your actions may have succeeded you did not work so completely, perfectly and securely - owing to their impurity and awkwardness - as you do now that God takes you by the hand and guides you in darkness, as though you were blind, along a way and to a place you know not. You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes and your feet’(II.16,7).

The experience of the Night of the Spirit leads to a profound humility. John of the Cross writes:

‘The first and chief benefit that this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one’s own misery. Besides the fact that all the favours God imparts to the soul are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge, the dryness and emptiness of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make the soul recognise its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of its prosperity ... Now that the soul is clothed in the garments of labour, dryness and desolation, and that its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic lights in this most excellent virtue of self-knowledge. It considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in self because it is aware that of itself it neither does nor can do anything’(*Dark Night*, I.12,2).

We are practiced in learning through our senses. Now the soul is attentive only to God within.

‘As it has never experienced that new feeling which drives it forth and dazzles it and makes it depart recklessly from its former way of life, it thinks itself to be losing ground rather than gaining and progressing, since it sees that it is losing with respect to that which it knew and enjoyed. This soul is now, as it were, undergoing a cure in order that it may regain its health - its health being God himself ... In such a way does this dark night of contemplation absorb and immerse the soul in itself, and so near does it bring the soul to God, that it protects and delivers it from all that is not God’(*Dark Night*, II,16).

What we are experiencing is the triumph of divine Wisdom, for the transformed soul, united to God in undistracted love, radiates the divine light to those with faith to discern and so is a powerful instrument in effecting the kingdom of God in the world.

‘In the midst of these aridities, God frequently communicates to the soul, when it least expects, spiritual sweetness, a very pure love, and a spiritual knowledge which is sometimes most delicate. Each of these communications is more valuable than all that the soul previously sought. Yet in the beginning one will not think so because the spiritual inflow is very delicate and the senses do not perceive it’ (*Dark Night*, I.13.10).

Our faith assures us that the darkness which we are experiencing is the consequence of our being drawn by God into intimate communion with him in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Union and the Spiritual Betrothal. Experience of being one with God as the Word is given to the soul as a spouse. During the period of betrothal the work of the purifying darkness is completed and there is a special quality to the experience of delight which at times overwhelms the soul: the soul knows that perfect union has been promised. Let us listen again to a passage from John of the Cross quoted earlier:

‘In that sweet draught of God, wherein the soul is immersed in God, it wholly surrenders itself most willingly and with great sweetness to Him, desiring to be wholly His and never again to have anything in itself that is alien from Him ... Inasmuch as He transforms the soul into Himself, He makes it to be wholly His and empties it of all that it possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore the soul is indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to its will, but also according to what it does, even as God has given Himself freely to the soul. So these two wills are surrendered, satisfied and given up the one to the other, so that neither shall fail the other, as in the faithfulness and stability of a betrothal’ (*Spiritual Canticle*, 18).

Father Marie-Eugène writes:

‘God has been attracted by the perfume of love arising from good works. God is conquered by the soul’s silent and ardent gaze ... The discovery of the Spouse in the light of the spiritual betrothal dispels the darkness and brings comforting peace to the soul’ (page 529-530).

Let us conclude by listening to the experience of two saints:

‘Oh! I love you. I love you more than anyone else in this valley. It is I who come, and I bring you unknown joy. I will enter into the depths of your being. O my spouse! I have rested and taken my repose in you; now possess yourself and repose in me! Love me! All your life will please me, provided that you love me! I will do great things in you; I will be made known in you, glorified and praised in you’ (Angela of Foligno).

‘Remain silently in God’s presence while the soul immerses itself, expands, becomes enkindled and melts in Him’ (Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Heaven in Faith*, page 104).