

## 28. The Night of the spirit<sup>1</sup>

We have already reflected on what John of the Cross calls 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 our depths, 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 we were experiencing 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 our longing to gaze upon God and to be united with God in love.

With the deepening of contemplation in what Teresa calls 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 us in such an intimate way seems to withdraw and to be absent. We have seen that this is in order to deepen 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 as though we are plunged in darkness in the very centre of our being: 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. We are yielding to God who is drawing us and therefore we are being drawn into a prayer that 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 in our inmost dwelling places. The attraction and the union occur in a darkness that John of the Cross calls 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 and withdraw God's hand, placing between God and you a darkness that 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' (*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:

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<sup>1</sup>Marie-Eugène OCD, *I am a daughter of the Church*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1955, 300-508.

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

The following year, she wrote:

‘Jesus took me by the hand, and 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 God from me. I find it hard after having felt God 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 my Beloved 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 God 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 will 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 me that the flaming fire was felt by me’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4).

The spark, however, was not enough to set her on fire – hence the loving pain of longing.

‘We are left so full of longings to enjoy completely the One who grants these wonderful favours that we live in a great, though delightful, torment ... Everything we see wearies us. When alone we find some relief ... yet when we do not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.6.1).

‘We feel a strange solitude because no creature in all the earth provides us company, not being the One we love. We are like a person hanging. We cannot support ourselves on any earthly thing; nor can we ascend into heaven. On fire with this thirst, we 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 do we desire that it be taken away, save by that water of which our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman. Yet no one gives us such water’ (*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).

Marie-Eugène writes:

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

(*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 God, with a greater capacity for receiving God. This is a recurring theme in spiritual writing as we saw in our 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 people 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 us for our final purging from all imperfection till all that remains is love. When all resistance to love is conquered, when we have 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 us in a strange, secret way, educating us to perfect love. It is God who does this; 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 our weakness and imperfection at the time, our inadequate preparation, and the qualities we possess which are contrary to this light. Because of these we have to suffer when the divine light shines upon us’ (*Dark Night*, II.9.11).

With Prayer of Union comes a need for a psychological revolution in which we have to learn to surrender to God in our intellect and will. We have to learn to surrender to God and be guided by God in the depths of our being. 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 us and purging us in order to re-create us in the pure fire of God's 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;  
God has driven and brought me into darkness without any light;  
against me alone God turns God's hand, again and again, all day long.  
God has made my flesh and my skin waste away, and broken my bones;  
has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation;  
has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago.  
God has walled me about so that I cannot escape; has put heavy chains on me;  
though I call and cry for help, God shuts out my prayer;  
and blocks my ways with hewn stones. God has made my paths crooked.  
God is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding;  
God led me off my way and tore me to pieces; has made me desolate;  
bent the bow and set me as a mark for God's arrow.  
God 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.  
God has filled me with bitterness, has sated me with wormwood.  
God has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes;  
I am 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!  
I continually think of it and am bowed down' (*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 person thus forsaken' (*Interior Castle*, VI.1).

This suffering makes us 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 our own weakness, of the depths of sin in ourselves and in others, of the hateful power of sin in the world, of its blind violence in all people, we learn humility before God, before ourselves, before the work to be realised in the Church. We progressively discover 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 we would triumph over the forces of sin' (page 333-334).

Our experience at this time is one of light and darkness - the measure of each depends on our need for purification and on the courage with which we open ourselves to God's purifying love. John of the Cross writes:

'We never remain in the same state for long, but are 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 ourselves. 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 us, but only at times when contemplation assails us less vehemently, for then we have occasion to see, and even to enjoy, the word which is being wrought in us, and revealed to us. 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).

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 our being with a force and rhythm as varied as are the designs of God for us and as are the forms of sin of which we 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 us and bring us into transforming union’ (page 374).

A valuable caution is offered here by Ruth Burrows who warns us to beware of imagined 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).

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 is committed to us. Whatever sufferings we have, ‘we know they are great favours’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.1.15). ‘We feel that the pain is precious’ (VI.11.6).

‘The wound satisfies us 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 us’ (VI.11.9). Moreover:

‘The divine visits of the betrothal complete our purification, enriching us and preparing us in a positive way for the spiritual marriage. With their extraordinary gifts of love in our depths, these visits destroy or render inactive the remaining evil tendencies. The meeting

with God in the light, which they procure, perfects our psychological reorientation. Thereafter we are 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 God's Self 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 lighting up 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' (*Story of a Soul*, 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 God's 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).

'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 God looks lovingly upon you, and soon, touched by your fruitless efforts, will come down, and, taking you in God's arms, will carry you never again to leave God' (*Story of a Soul*).

'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 God 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 that he could achieve. He was to allow God's Spirit to engender this new life in him (John chapter 3). 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 us that the senses cannot deceive us. And that we may not go astray we have 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 our 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 received the following advice in prayer:

'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 God 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 God who we know loves us, and whom we love. We are to keep our gaze fixed beyond the storms and the darkness on God, who we know by faith is drawing us into communion.

Marie-Eugène writes:

'The dark night of the spirit brings with it this hour of supernatural hope. God is revealed 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 separating us. Crushed by our misery and weakness, we experience an inability to go toward God, the only object that we can thenceforth desire. We cannot go back, for we are already captivated by divine love. We do not succeed in going toward God and we will not do so, since the divine flame is within us, assailing us. This is the hour of profound hope, ardent and peaceful. God awaits the sighs that mount up from our depths, opening these depths to God's 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' (*I am a daughter of the Church*, 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, a mother'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).

'Asceticism consists in our preparing, by mortification and purity of heart, for the spiritual poverty that God works in us; 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 Jesus 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 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 one who 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 us in the Dark Night, hidden from the senses but perceived in deeper regions. We 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 that grace the person who 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 us 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).

‘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 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 us recognise our lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of our prosperity ... Now that we are clothed in the garments of labour, dryness and desolation, and that our former lights have been darkened, we possess more authentic lights in this most excellent virtue of self-knowledge. We consider ourselves to be nothing and find no satisfaction in self because we are aware that of ourselves we neither do nor can do anything' (*Dark Night*, I.12.2).

We are practiced in learning through our senses. Now we are attentive only to God within.

'As we have never experienced that new feeling which drives us forth and dazzles us and makes us depart recklessly from our former way of life, we think we are losing ground rather than gaining and progressing, since we see that we are losing what we knew and enjoyed. We are now, as it were, undergoing a cure in order that we may regain our health – our health being God ... In such a way does this dark night of contemplation absorb and immerse us in itself, and so near does it bring us to God, that it protects and delivers us from all that is not God' (*Dark Night*, II.16).

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

'In the midst of these aridities, God frequently communicates, when we least expect, 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 we previously sought. Yet in the beginning we 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 that we are experiencing is the consequence of our being drawn by God into intimate communion in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Union and the Spiritual Betrothal. We are being given an experience of being one with God 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 us for we know 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 we are immersed in God, we wholly surrender ourselves most willingly and with great sweetness to God, desiring to be wholly God's and never again to have anything in ourselves that is alien from God ... Inasmuch as God transforms us into God's Self, God makes us to be wholly God's and empties us of all that we possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore we are indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to our will, but also according to what we do, even as God has given God's Self freely to us. 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).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘God has been attracted by the perfume of love arising from good works. God is conquered by our silent and ardent gaze ... The discovery of the Spouse in the light of the spiritual betrothal dispels the darkness and brings us comforting peace’ (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 you immerse yourself, expand, become enkindled and melt in Him’ (Elizabeth of the Trinity, *Heaven in Faith*, page 104).