

12. Signs of Contemplation and the 'Night of the Senses'



The difficulties that we encounter in the early stages of contemplative prayer might cause us to wonder if it really is contemplation that we are receiving from God. Could it be that we are caught up in distractions of our own making, because of some infidelity or carelessness? Are we losing our faith and our fervour? It is here, more than anywhere else, that we need the sure guidance of the recognised masters of the spiritual life.

Edith Stein *The Science of the Cross*

‘John of the Cross writes for contemplatives whom he wants to take by the hand at a definite point on their way: at the cross-roads where most of them are perplexed and know not what to do, because in the way they have so far pursued they are suddenly confronted by insuperable obstacles.

On the other hand the new way that opens before them leads through impenetrable darkness – who would be brave enough to enter on it? The two roads in question are those of meditation and contemplation.

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Edith Stein *The Science of the Cross* (continued)

‘So far the hour of meditation has been devoted to exercising the powers of the soul, perhaps according to the Ignatian method: we have used our senses, our imagination, memory, understanding and will. But now these refuse to work; all efforts are in vain. The spiritual exercises, until then a source of interior joy, now become a torment, unbearably arid and ineffective.

On the other hand, there is no inclination either to take interest in worldly things. We would like best to be quite still without moving, letting all our powers rest. But this seems sloth and waste of time. This, roughly, is our state which God wants to introduce into the dark night’ (page 24).

John of the Cross offers three indications by which we can test our prayer to discern whether it is indeed our responding to the gift of contemplation that is causing the change, or whether what we are experiencing is the result of our infidelity.

‘The first sign is when we realise that we can no longer meditate or use our imagination to reason. There is no longer any pleasure in doing so, but only dryness.’

(Ascent II.13.2)

‘When they have exercised themselves for some time in the way of virtue, been faithful to meditation and prayer and freed themselves from attachment and love for the things of this world, they have at last gained some spiritual strength in God. By this strength they are able to hold in check the desire for creatures and endure some hardships and dryness in prayer without longing for that better time when they felt more taste and enjoyment in spiritual practices ...

Then this light is turned into darkness, the door is shut and the source of the sweet waters of the spirit is blocked from which they had till then drunk whenever they wanted. Now they find themselves in darkness so that they do not know where to turn with their imagination and their thoughts’ (*Dark Night*, I.8.3).

John of the Cross

‘The second sign is an awareness of a disinclination to fix the imagination or sense faculties upon other particular objects, exterior or interior. I am not affirming that the imagination will cease to come and go (even in deep recollection it usually wanders freely), but that the person is disinclined to fix it purposely upon extraneous things’ (*Ascent* II.13.3).

While we no longer find pleasure in meditating, we also find no pleasure in focusing on anything else apart from God. The lack of pleasure in other things indicates that our dryness does not come from the infidelity of chasing after other pleasures.

John reassures us that the fact that we are upset that we find little relish in prayer 'is a sign that the dryness does not come from weakness or from being lukewarm; for it is the nature of being lukewarm not to care greatly for the things of God' (*Dark Night*, I.9.3).

John of the Cross

‘The third and surest sign is that we take pleasure in being alone and wait with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quiet and rest’ (*Ascent* II.13.4).

Night of the Senses

Because God is drawing us into a communion that is beyond our natural powers of understanding, we must journey in faith. John of the Cross speaks of our senses being in darkness. This includes our imagination, memory and understanding, which rely upon our senses.

Ideas from *The Science of the Cross*, pages 25-28

Edith Stein points out the rich symbolism in John's describing the lack of pleasure in these sense faculties as a 'night'.

On the one hand, night envelops us and all things; it threatens to swallow us up; what it hides is still there but is indistinct, invisible, without form; it impedes movement and paralyses our faculties; it induces fear; it condemns us to solitude and is a foretaste of death.

On the other hand, night softens and smooths what is hard, sharp or crude; it reveals subtle features that are lost in daylight; it drowns out the noises of the day; it quietens the spirit, freed from the busyness of the day and gives deep and gentle repose. So it is with the mystic night of infused contemplation, which arises from within.

There are pleasures enjoyed by our senses, which do not flow from this profound centre of communion.

On the contrary they distract us from our deepest yearnings. Some pleasure comes from feelings that lack the purity and clarity that is there when our emotions are fully tuned to our deepest longings. Such pleasures are transitory. They fail to satisfy us because they distract us from our heart's deepest longings.

We can find it hard to resist giving in to them and they can continue to attract us even when we are in communion with the One for whom our heart longs. This is partly for the pleasure, however superficial, which they give us and partly because they distract us from the pain that is part of growing and the demands of the inner journey and of the truth that such a journey reveals.

There are many impurities in these desires, and until they are purified they are a distraction from, and an obstacle to, the communion with God to which grace is drawing us. Unpurified desires weary, disturb, darken and defile us 'like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud, and there is no peace' (Isaiah 57:20-21). They afflict us and keep us bound.

John of the Cross makes it clear that unpurified desires are a problem only when they are voluntarily entertained. We should not be worried about feelings and desires that are part of our nature and that happen without our wanting them. There is no need for these to disturb us:

John of the Cross

‘I am not writing here of natural desires which are not voluntary, and of thoughts that do not go beyond the first movements, and other temptations to which we are not consenting; for these do not produce any of the evils that we have mentioned. For, although when we experience them we may think that the passion and disturbance which they are producing are defiling us and holding us bound, it is not the case’ (*Ascent* I.12.56).

In earlier reflections we looked at many of the things we can do to discipline our senses, feelings and emotions. Here we wish to look again at what happens when we begin to respond to God in the first experiences of contemplative prayer.

The fact is that ultimately we cannot purify our senses, feelings and emotions. Only God's love can do that, so now we must hand everything over to God and focus on responding as humbly and faithfully as we can to whatever discipline God is gracing us to undertake. We are to learn to look to God and to wait on God.

In offering us the sublime gift of contemplative prayer, God is offering us what our deepest spirit ultimately desires. What used to give pleasure to our unpurified senses, imagination and emotions gives pleasure no longer. Our feelings may rebel, but God is granting us an immense favour. God is offering God's Self to us. We should not be surprised that whatever is not God loses its appeal. Even in prayer we can no longer arouse feelings of devotion at will. Thinking about the mysteries of faith, something that used to give us consolation, now leaves us dry and distracted.

We can no longer achieve a sense of quiet communion with God the way we used to. This is because God is weaning us off such attractive, but not yet fully purified, pleasures. God is drawing us beyond the limits that we can attain by our own efforts. God wants to take us where our hearts wish to be but where we cannot go while we are holding on to control.

The lack of feeling in our prayer can be painful, but we are learning an important lesson about our limitations. We are learning humility and reliance on God. We are learning to live by faith. Any experience of pleasure is now recognised as a sheer gift of grace.

However, for the most part we will not experience any pleasure at all. This is because something very precious is happening in the depths of our being and God does not want us to be distracted from it. If we are unused to living at this depth, we will miss the more surface feelings, and this can be quite painful.

Depending on how much we need to be purified and how much courage we have to allow this purifying to take place, we may find ourselves in this arid place for a long time. We can be sure, however, that God will always graciously offer us the strength we need to endure:

‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’ (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Each person's experience here will be different. Some of us will experience more consolation. This may be because we are already so humble and unattached that we readily surrender to love. On the other hand, it may be because we have not the courage to go through the purifying fire of love, and so God meets us on the surface where we are used to meeting. We forfeit the attraction to the depths that we are afraid to explore.

If we are to enter into full communion with God we have to be weaned off surface feelings of consolation, and we have to surrender our reason and live by faith, however painful and bewildering this process may be. We will be encouraged to continue along this path if we recognise that it is precisely God's love that is taking us into the deep and dark recesses of our soul where our senses may feel nothing, and our understanding is unable to guide us. Since we cannot see God, we must long for God in the darkness.

Marie-Eugène *I am a daughter of the church*

‘This secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God, which is contemplation, liberates the spirit from its subjection to the senses, and calms the senses themselves little by little in this night, thus permitting us to have free and peaceful commerce with God, who communicates God’s Self to it through the gifts of the Holy Spirit’ (page 66).

One of the main graces of this time is growing in true humility through knowing ourselves as we really are.

John of the Cross

‘We see ourselves so dry and miserable, that the idea never even occurs to us that we are making better progress than others, as we believed ourselves to be doing before’ (*Night* I.12).

John of the Cross

‘Softened and humbled by hardship and other trials, we become meek with respect to God and to ourselves as well as to others. Now we are no longer angry with ourselves and disturbed because of our own faults, nor with others because of theirs. We are no longer displeased with God because God does not quickly make us holy. These times of dryness, therefore, cause us to journey in all purity in the love of God, since we are no longer influenced as previously in our actions by the pleasure and enjoyment of the actions themselves, but only by a desire to please God’ (*Night* I.13).

We are surrendering ourselves in love in contemplative prayer, but since God is not an object of unmediated human experience, God remains beyond the direct grasp of our human faculties. Contemplative loving, therefore, occurs in the 'darkness' of faith.

When we accept to be guided by faith, we are united to God and guided along the way inspired by God, though our intellect cannot see the path. God is leading us on the way of love. Learning to rely solely on faith can be quite painful as we grieve for the kinds of meditations that we previously had and the pleasure that they brought us. However, if we surrender ourselves to God, we will experience an even deeper and richer delight.