

15. Darkness in the core of our being Part 1



Night of the Senses (see Presentation 12)

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 not find a place in 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 we are acutely conscious of the transcendence of God and the distance between our longing (our soul) and the union with God that we have tasted, but do not fully enjoy.

We feel as though God who has touched us in such an intimate way seems to be withdrawing from us, and to be absent.

Of course it is not that God is withdrawing. It is that we have come to a deeper realisation of God's transcendence.

Darkness in the core of our being

The effect of this realisation is that our desire deepens, 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 us cannot be registered by any of our faculties. 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.

John of Ruusbroec (Flemish mystic d. 1381), *A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness*

‘Desire and affection will make your heart expand, so that you love, thank and praise God and yet fall short in all this, for all that you are able to do seems as little or nothing compared to what you wish to do and what love will rightly demand of you. Through such desire your heart suffers a painful wound. The pain constantly increases and is renewed through the practice of desirous affection for God, so that you grow weak from love. Sometimes it seems that your heart and your senses are broken to pieces, that your nature dies and comes to naught through the impatience of its desires, and that this impatience will have to last as long as you live.

[continued on next slide]

Ruusbroec (continued)

‘But then, when you least expect it, it seems that God hides and withdraws God’s hand, placing between God and you a darkness that you are not able to see through. You then lament, moan, and groan like a poor, abandoned exile. “Now are the poor abandoned to God”, says the Prophet.’

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

Therese Martin joined the Carmelite convent in Lisieux in 1888 and died 9 years later. In a letter composed the year after her entry she wrote: '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).

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

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 of the Trinity

Elizabeth Catez joined the convent in Dijon in 1901 and died in 1906. 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).

Elizabeth of the Trinity

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.’

Teresa of Jesus

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).

‘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).

Teresa of Jesus

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).

Teresa of Jesus

‘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.II.5).

Frequently cited are the words of the *Song of Songs* 5:6

‘I sought him but did not find him,
I called to him but he did not answer.’

Marie-Eugène

‘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 (Presentation 4).

Teresa

‘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).

We can experience pain because of our sins.

Teresa

‘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.

John of the Cross

‘The dark night is a certain flowing in of God into the human creature, which purges us of the ignorance and imperfections belonging to our 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).

John of the Cross

‘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 the 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.

When we experience this darkness in the core of our being, we must learn to receive rather than to determine our 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.

Lamentations 3:1-20

‘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.

[continued on next slide]

Lamentations (continued)

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.I).

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

‘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’ (*I am a daughter of the Church*, 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

‘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.

John of the Cross

‘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

‘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 further 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).