

16. Darkness in the core of our being Part 2



Having looked at the night into which we are invited 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.II.5), the pain of longing and the pain of knowing our own sinfulness?

We must 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.I.I5). ‘**We feel that the pain is precious**’ (VI.II.6).

Teresa of Jesus

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

The only one who can remove the pain is ‘the true comforter who consoles and strengthens us’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.II.9).

Marie Eugène

‘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’ (*I am a Daughter of the Church*, page 538).

Carthusian Monk (*The Hermitage Within*)

‘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.

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

“When I sing the bliss of heaven, the eternal possession of God, 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’ (*Story of a Soul*, page 45).

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

‘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).

Carthusian Monk *The Hermitage Within*

‘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).

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

‘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).

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

‘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*).

Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face

‘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

‘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 of Jesus

‘There is no remedy for the tempest but to await the mercy of God’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.I.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.I.13).

Julian of Norwich

‘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. Beyond the storms and the darkness we are to keep our gaze fixed on God, who we know by faith is drawing us into communion.

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

‘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. These inner groanings tell that the work of purification is being accomplished, as we give up to the flame’s action all imperfections’ (pages 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.

John of the Cross

‘It is best to learn to silence the faculties and to cause them to be still, so that God may speak’ (*Ascent* III.2).

Marie-Eugène I am a Daughter of the Church

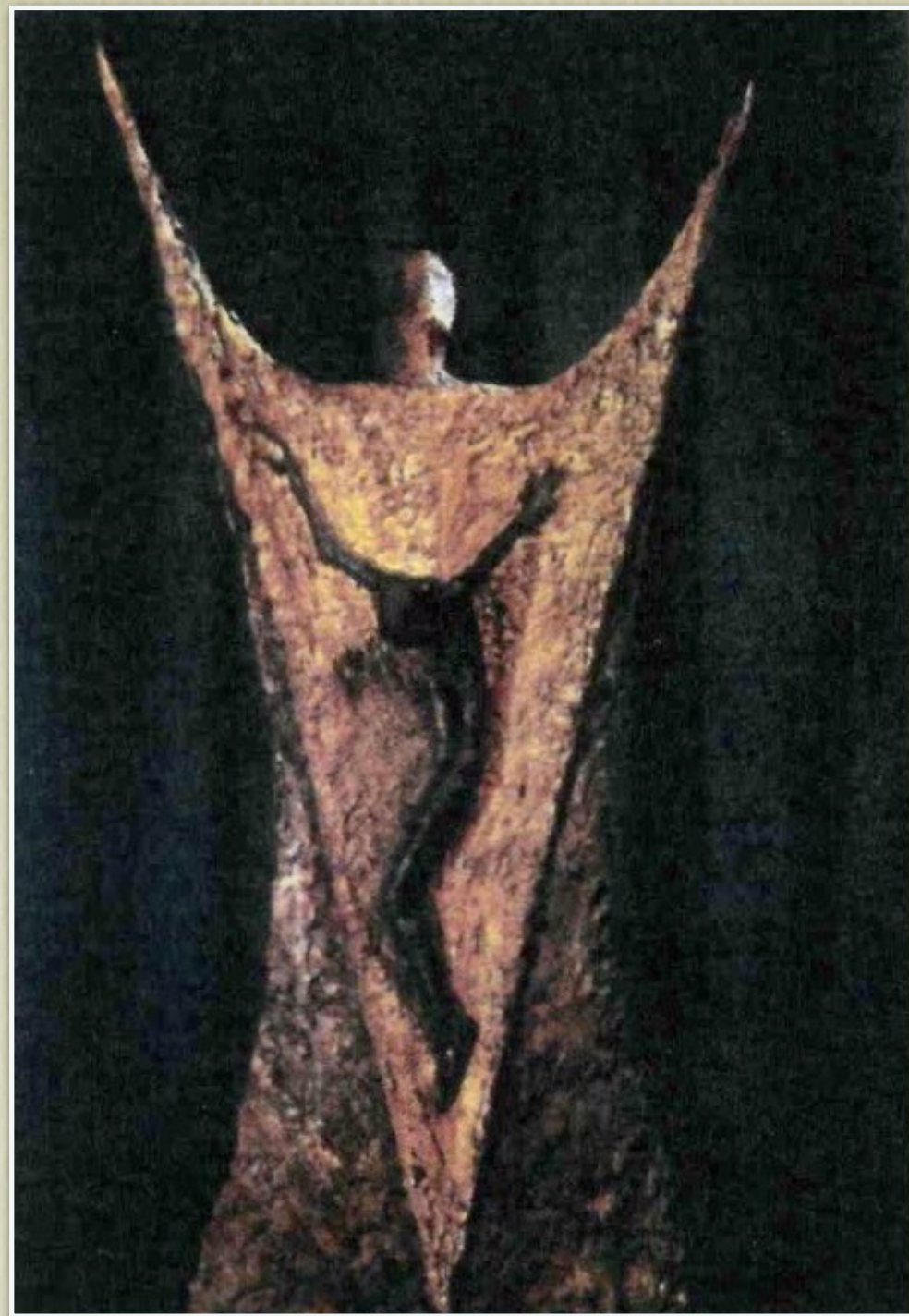
‘Asceticism consists in our preparing, by mortification and purity of heart, for the spiritual poverty that God works in us; in bearing this poverty humbly and peacefully when God gives it as a grace; in protecting it and furthering it, according to the grace that is given, by the practice of an interior silence ... In this solitude of peace and silent hope grace purifies and flowers’ (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.



Lyn Constable Maxwell MRBS
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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 *I am a daughter of the Church*

‘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’ (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’ (page 444).

Carmelite commentary on John of the Cross

‘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.

John of the Cross

‘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’ (*Dark Night*, II.7.4).

John of the Cross

‘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’ (*Dark Night*, II.16,7).

John of the Cross

‘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).

John of the Cross

‘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.

John of the Cross

‘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.

Marie-Eugène

‘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’ (*I am a Daughter of the Church*, page 529-530).

Angela of Foligno

‘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.’

Elizabeth of the Trinity

‘Remain silently in God’s presence while you immerse yourself, expand, become enkindled and melt in Him’ (*Heaven in Faith*, page 104).