

## Chapter 8

### Progressive Purgation

***In order to arrive at the intimate union with God in which sanctity consists, it is not sufficient to win a victory against sin and its principal allies, the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is also necessary to achieve an intense and a profound purification of all the faculties and powers of soul and body.*** The reason is obvious. When a soul begins the journey to holiness, it is already in possession of sanctifying grace, without which it could not even begin. The soul has been endowed, together with grace, with the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity dwells in the soul as in a living temple, and the grace of adoption makes the soul an heir of heaven for all eternity.

***But, in spite of these graces, the soul is laden with imperfections and defects. Grace does not of itself exclude anything more than mortal sin; it leaves us with all the natural and acquired imperfections we had at the moment of our justification.*** The soul remains subject to every kind of temptation, evil inclinations and acquired evil habits; the practice of virtue is therefore difficult and arduous. ***The infused virtues, received with sanctifying grace, give the soul the power to perform the corresponding acts, but they do not automatically rid the soul of its acquired evil habits or of its natural indispositions to the practice of virtue.*** These are destroyed only by the practice of the acquired virtues. Then, when the supernatural habit no longer finds any resistance or obstacle to its exercise by reason of a contrary habit, the virtuous act will be produced with facility and delight.

The reason for the resistance and rebellion of our nature against virtue must be sought ultimately in original sin. That first sin caused a weakening of the natural inclination to good that human nature had in the state of original justice. From this follows the necessity of a profound purification of the faculties in which evil habits and vicious inclinations are rooted. In the process of purification ***God reserves to himself the better part (passive purifications); but, with the help of grace, we must do all in our power to rid ourselves of all the impediments to the divine action (active purifications).***

#### Purification of the External Senses

***The purpose of the active purification of the external senses is to restrain their excesses and to subject them to the rule of reason illumined by faith.*** A disciplined human body is an excellent instrument for sanctification, but in the present state of fallen nature it has an almost irresistible tendency to anything that can give pleasure to the senses. ***If it is not subjected, it becomes indomitable, and its demands become more and more excessive until it constitutes an obstacle incompatible with the spiritual perfection of the soul.*** St. Paul speaks of the necessity of mortifying the body in order to be liberated from its tyranny and to assure one's own salvation: "I treat my body hard and make it obey me, for, having been an announcer myself, I should not want to be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27). In another place he says: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). St. John of the Cross repeats St. Paul's teaching and gives a reason that is intimately connected with the divine union to which the soul travels:

It is necessary to assume one truth, which is that the sense of the lower part of man, which is that whereof we are treating, is not and cannot be capable of knowing or comprehending God as God is. So that the eye cannot see him or anything that is like him; neither can the ear hear his voice or any sound that resembles it; neither can the sense of smell perceive a perfume so sweet as he; neither can the taste detect a savor so sublime and delectable; neither can the touch feel a movement so delicate and full of delight, nor ought like to it; neither can his form or any figure that represents him enter into, the thought or imagination. Even as Isaias says: "Eye hath not seen him, nor hath ear heard him, neither hath it entered into the heart of man" (Isa. 64:4).

It would be, at the least, but vanity to set the rejoicing of the will upon pleasure caused by any of these apprehensions, and it would be hindering the power of the will from occupying itself with God and from setting its rejoicing upon him alone. This the soul cannot perfectly accomplish, except by purging itself and remaining in darkness as to rejoicing of this kind, as also with respect to other things.[\(1\)](#)

Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand this doctrine correctly in order not to draw erroneous conclusions. ***It is not necessary to deprive the senses of their proper objects but only to avoid placing one's joy and final repose in the sensate pleasure these objects arouse without rising to God through them.*** Creatures are, in the words of St. John of the Cross, "mere crumbs or fragments which fall from the table of God,"[\(2\)](#) but if one can see the vestige or trace of God in them, they not only cease to be an obstacle to sanctification, but can be converted into means and instruments for growth in the spiritual life. The evil or the disorder lies in resting in creatures as if they were our ultimate end, prescinding from their relation to God; but when we enjoy their beauty, or the pleasure that they give, and are thereby led to God, they become excellent aids for our sanctification. St. John of the Cross explains this doctrine as follows:

I said advisedly that, if the rejoicing of the will were to rest in any of these things, it would be vanity. But when it does not rest in them, but as soon as the will finds pleasure in that which it hears, sees, and does, soars upward to rejoice in God, so that its pleasure acts as a motive and strengthens it to that end, this is very good. In such a case not only need the said motions not be shunned when they cause this devotion and prayer, but the soul may profit by them and indeed should so profit to the end that it may accomplish this holy exercise. For there are souls who are greatly moved by objects of sense to seek God.

***I wish, therefore, to propose a test whereby it may be seen when these delights of the senses aforementioned are profitable and when they are not.*** And it is that whenever a person hears music and other things, and sees pleasant things, and is conscious of sweet perfumes, or tastes things that are delicious, or feels soft touches, ***if his thought and the affection of his will are at once centered upon God and if that thought of God gives him more pleasure than the movement of sense which causes it,*** and save for that he finds no pleasure in the said movement, this is a sign that he is receiving benefit therefrom and that this thing of sense is a help to his spirit. In this way such things may be used, for then such things of sense subserve the end for which God created and gave them, which is that he should be the better loved and known because of them.[\(3\)](#)

Mortification or custody of the senses is necessary even in things that are lawful. But here, as in all else, it is necessary to observe prudence and equilibrium, without going to extravagant or ridiculous extremes. Some of the mortifications practiced by the saints are more to be admired than imitated. **The two principal means of mortifying the senses are (1) to deprive them of anything that may produce unlawful pleasure, and eventually to curtail even lawful pleasure, as one's circumstances permit or one's spiritual needs require; (2) to practice positive mortification by means of bodily self-denial.**

Mortification is necessary for all, especially for beginners until they succeed in dominating their passions. **In addition to serving as reparation for past sins, bodily mortifications have two other beneficial uses: immolation of self in imitation of Christ and a positive contribution to the Mystical Body by means of the apostolate of suffering.** These two functions of suffering pertain to the saints as much as or more than to imperfect souls, for no one is excused from practicing bodily mortification in one form or another. St. Vincent de Paul says: "He who has little regard for bodily mortification, under the pretext that interior mortifications are much more perfect, demonstrates very clearly that he is not mortified either interiorly or exteriorly."<sup>(4)</sup>

However, one should proceed prudently and slowly, increasing the exercises of penance as the powers of the soul increase and as the interior invitations of grace urge one on more and more. Especially at the beginning, one should avoid any kind of severe bodily penance. It must never be harmful to one's health or make one incapable of fulfilling the duties of state, which are more important than the voluntary practice of mortification. **And the soul should take care not to make an end or goal of that which is only a means, believing that sanctity consists in punishing the body.**

If the Holy Spirit wishes to lead a soul by way of extraordinary penances, he will inspire the soul to that effect and will give the strength necessary to carry it out. Meanwhile, the majority of souls should practice ordinary bodily mortification by accepting the little crosses of daily life with a spirit of faith and perseverance. This last point is very important. **It is better to accept and carry faithfully the little crosses of daily life than to give oneself to occasional periods of great penance, alternated with other periods of relaxation.**

### **Purification of the Internal Senses**

Of the **four internal senses** -- **imagination, memory, common sense, and the estimative power** - the common sense (*sensus communis*) is controlled and purified by the custody and purification of the external senses. The estimative power is purified and controlled when the imagination is purified and the intellectual judgment exercises its proper function. Therefore, we shall speak only of the purification of the imagination and the memory.

#### ***The Imagination***

**Every idea acquired by the natural operation of our facilities corresponds to an image impressed upon the imagination. Without images, the intellect cannot know naturally.** Our Lord frequently made use of the imagination to place the great mysteries within the grasp of the people by means of his beautiful parables and allegories. The imagination also has a great

influence over the sensitive appetite, which is moved with great force toward its proper object when the imagination clothes it with special attractiveness.

Because of its great importance and influence, the imagination needs a profound purification. When used in the service of the good, it can give incalculable assistance; but **there is nothing that can cause greater difficulty on the way to sanctification than an imagination that has broken away from the control of reason enlightened by faith.**

**There are two principal obstacles caused by an uncontrolled imagination: dissipation and temptation. Without recollection, an interior life and a life of prayer are impossible, and there is nothing that so impedes recollection as the inconstancy and dissipation of the imagination. Freed of any restraint, it paints in vivid colors the pleasure sin provides for the concupiscible appetite, or exaggerates the difficulty the irascible appetite will encounter on the road to virtue, thus leading to discouragement.** But the difficulties can be avoided if we use the proper means.

### **Custody of the External Senses.**

**It is necessary to control the external senses, and especially the sense of sight,** because they provide the images the imagination retains, reproduces, and reassembles, thus, arousing the passions and encouraging the consent of the will. There is no better way to avoid temptations from this source than to deprive the imagination of such images by custody of the external senses.

### **Prudent Selection of Reading Matter.**

**It is not only a question of reading matter that is evil or obviously dangerous, but also that which fills the imagination with useless images.** There are occasions, of course, when it is beneficial to engage in light reading for relaxation. It is, in fact, a good practice to relieve tension or to rest one's mental powers in this way. But it is likewise necessary to provide holy and profitable material so that the imagination will be directed positively to the good. This is where spiritual reading can contribute a great deal to the proper use of the imagination.

### **Attention to the Duty of the Moment.**

**The habit of attending to the duty of the moment has the double advantage of concentrating our intellectual powers and of disciplining the imagination by preventing it from being distracted to other objects. It also helps a person avoid idleness, which is one of the primary sources of dissipation.**

### **Indifference to Distractions.**

**There is no sure way of avoiding all distractions, but one can always ignore them.** Indeed, this is a much more effective measure than to combat them directly. One should take no account of them but should do what one must do, in spite of the uncontrolled imagination. It is possible to keep one's mind and heart fixed on God even in the midst of involuntary distractions.

## ***The Memory***

We make a distinction between the sense memory, which has for its object only the sensible, the particular, and the concrete, and the intellectual memory, which deals with the suprasensible, the abstract, and the universal; but the process of purification is the same. The memory can give inestimable service to the intellect and can be its most powerful ally. Without it, our spirit would be like a sieve that is always empty, however much water is poured into it. For certain types of knowledge, such as languages, history, the physical and natural sciences, an excellent memory is indispensable.

Precisely because the memory stores up all kinds of knowledge, both good and evil, it is necessary to subject it to purification. Throughout life we experience many things that are of no use whatever for the sanctification of the soul. Many of them destroy the soul's peace and tranquillity, which are so necessary for a life of prayer and recollection. We can offer some suggestions for the active purgation of this faculty.

### **Forget Past Sins.**

***This is the first step, and it is absolutely indispensable for all who aspire to eternal salvation. The remembrance of one's own sins or of those of another has a strong power for suggesting to the soul the same things by way of a new temptation, and of disposing it to sin again,*** especially if a vivid imagination is associated with the recollection. The soul must reject immediately and energetically any remembrance of this kind.

### **Cease Thinking of Past Injuries.**

This pertains to virtue and is indispensable for any soul that wishes to sanctify itself. ***In spite of a pardon that has been given, the remembrance of a past offense will disturb the peace of conscience and present the guilty party in an unfavorable light.*** One should forget the disagreeable episode and realize that our offenses against God are much greater, and that he demands that we pardon others in order to receive his pardon. The soul that nourishes rancor, however justifiable it may seem (and it never is in the eyes of God), can forget about reaching sanctity.

### **Remember Benefits From God.**

This pertains to the positive purgation of the memory and is an effective means for directing the memory to God. ***The recollection of the immense benefits we have received from God, of the times he has pardoned our faults, of the dangers from which he has preserved us, of the loving care he has exercised over us, is an excellent means of arousing our gratitude toward him and the desire of corresponding more faithfully with his graces.*** And if to this we add the recollection of our disobedience and rebellion, of our ingratitude and resistance to grace, our soul will be filled with humility and confusion and will experience the need of redoubling its vigilance and its efforts to be better in the future.

## Consider Motives for Christian Hope.

This is one of the most efficacious means for directing our memory to God and for purifying it of contact with earthly things. St. John of the Cross makes the memory the seat of Christian hope and shows how growth in this virtue effectively purges the memory. The remembrance of an eternity of happiness, which is the central object of Christian hope, is most apt for making us disdain the things of earth and raise our spirits to God.

## Purification of the Passions

The sensitive appetite is the organic faculty through which we seek the good so far as it is known through the senses. It is generically distinct from the rational appetite or the will, which seeks the good as apprehended by the intellect. Hence, St. Paul says: "The Flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; the two are directly opposed" (Gal. 5:17).

*The sensitive appetite, also called sensuality, is divided into two species: the concupiscible or pleasure appetite and the irascible or utility appetite.* The former has as its object the delightful good that is easy to obtain; the latter has as its object the arduous good that is difficult to obtain. These two movements of the sensitive appetite give rise to the passions.

*The passions are movements or energies we can use for good or for evil, but in themselves, they are neither good nor evil.* When placed at the service of the good, the passions can be of incalculable assistance, even to the point that one could say that it is morally impossible for a soul to arrive at great sanctity without possessing a great energy or passion directed to God. But when placed at the service of evil, the passions are converted into a destructive force that is truly terrifying.

As movements of the sensitive appetite caused by the apprehension of the sensible good or evil, the passions are accompanied by a certain change, more or less intense, in the organism. *Some psychologists use the word passion to designate the more vehement and intense movements of the sensitive appetite, reserving the word emotion for those movements that are gentler and more ordinary.* In any case, the passions always presuppose some knowledge of the good that is sought or the evil that is feared, and the judgment made is always in terms of self. *The passions are by nature expressions of love of self.*

In the concupiscible appetite, the good, which has a power of attraction, engenders three movements of passion. The simple awareness of good *arouses love*; if it is a question of a future good, it *gives rise to desire*; if it is a good already possessed and present, it *produces pleasure*. On the other hand, the apprehension of evil, which is of itself repulsive, *produces hatred*; if it is an impending evil, it *causes a movement of flight or aversion*; but if the evil has overtaken us, it *causes sadness*.

In the irascible appetite the absent good, if it is considered possible of attainment, engenders *hope*; but if it is impossible of attainment, it produces *despair*. In like manner, the difficult evil that is absent, if it can be avoided, produces *courage*; but if the evil is unavoidable, it arouses *fear*. Lastly, the presence of a difficult evil produces *anger* in the irascible appetite and *sadness*

in the concupiscible appetite, while the presence of a difficult good does not arouse any movement in the irascible appetite, but causes joy in the concupiscible appetite. For that reason ***the irascible appetite has only five passions, while there are six passions in the concupiscible appetite.***

The great importance of the passions can be deduced from their decisive influence in our physical, intellectual, and moral life. Without the previous stimulation of the emotions, we would take scarcely one step in our physical life, since the stimulation of the emotions is what enables us to expend an extraordinary amount of effort for good or for evil. Add to this the fact that the passions can have a powerful influence on bodily health, especially the emotions of sadness, anger, and fear. In the moral life the passions can increase or diminish the goodness or malice, the merit or demerit of our actions. They diminish human responsibility when a person seeks a good or evil more because of the impulse of passion than by the free choice of the will; they increase human responsibility when the will confirms the antecedent movement of passion and uses it in order to work with greater intensity.

A prudent organization of all our psychological resources can result in a near-perfect control of our passions, excepting, of course, the first spontaneous movements of passion, but these do not affect morality. ***People who have lived for years under the domination or disorderly passions have been able to free themselves from this slavery and begin to live a life that is in harmony with the moral law.*** There is no doubt that there are great difficulties at the beginning, but gradually the individual can achieve self-mastery. The following principles can be helpful in achieving control and proper use of the passions.

1. ***Every idea tends to produce its corresponding act.*** This is especially true if the idea or sentiment is accompanied by strong emotions and a vivid representation. Consequently, it is necessary to formulate ideas that are in accordance with Christian morality and carefully to avoid the concepts and ideas that relate to actions that should be rejected. In this way one's action will always be in accordance with one's ideas and values.
2. ***Every act arouses the sentiment of which it is a normal expression.*** The rule of conduct following from this principle is that in order to acquire the desired sentiment or to intensify the emotion already experienced, one should act as if already experiencing it. In this way one's sentiments and emotions are controlled by one's actions.
3. ***Passion augments and intensifies the psychological forces of 'the individual and uses them for attaining the goal that one seeks.*** Consequently, it is necessary to choose the emotion carefully in order to gain the most from its psychological potential. In this way one's ideas and actions are effectively promoted by the correct use of emotional energy.

Such are the basic principles concerning the control and use of a passions, but we must now make some detailed applications regarding the rule of conduct in relation to Christian living. ***First of all, one must be firmly convinced of the need to combat disorderly passions,*** for these disturb our spirit, impede prayer and reflection, prejudice our judgment, stimulate the imagination, weaken the power of the will, and disturb one's conscience. The remedies, of course, will vary with the particular emotion that must be controlled. Against the passions

aroused by one's environment, a good remedy is wholesome recreation, distraction, or a journey; against those that proceed from the organism itself, work, custody of the senses and the imagination, and a regular schedule are helpful; ***against those originating from one's temperament, the best remedy is reflection and will power.***

From a psychological point of view the most important requisite for controlling the passions is the firm and resolute will to do so, but wishful thinking will not suffice; there must be a determined resolution translated into effective action, especially if it is a question of a deeply rooted disorder on the emotional level. Hence, ***it is necessary to avoid those situations that arouse the emotions in relation to sinful objects; to prevent any new manifestation of the emotion; and to realize that although giving in to the passion may quiet the urge temporarily, it also gives the passion greater strength for making future demands.***

Lastly, one should make use of the technique of sublimation or transference, whereby one is able to direct the energy of the passion to morally good and beneficial objects. St. Augustine touched on this when he stated that one should choose wisely the objects of love and then love with all one's heart. The same thing applies to all the passions; they are powers for good and should be utilized as such, but they can promote one's spiritual perfection and human fulfillment only if directed to the proper objects.

Spiritual directors should carefully examine the passion or passions that predominate in the souls under their care. Having done this, they can propose as material for self-examination the control and proper use of the passion as we have just indicated. They should ***concentrate principally on the control of the dominant passion,*** but without neglecting the others, for frequently more than one passion will be involved.

The persons receiving direction should faithfully and honestly report to the director regarding progress or failure in this struggle, and they should not be content until they have successfully directed their emotional energies to God and to morally good objects. ***This is no easy task and for many persons it is the work of a lifetime.*** On the other hand, it is precisely because they have given up the battle against their own passions that many persons abandon the struggle for sanctity. Lastly, we would stress that we are not here advocating the extinction or repression of the emotions, but their control and proper use, for without great passion for God and the good, sanctity is impossible.

### **Purification of the Intellect**

***The active purification of the external and internal senses and of the sensitive appetite constitutes a great step toward Christian perfection. But it is necessary that the purification reach the very depths of one's spirit, there to rectify the deviations of intellect and will.*** After that, the passive purifications will complete what a person cannot accomplish by his or her own efforts under ordinary grace.

***According to traditional psychology, there are two spiritual faculties of the soul: the intellect and the will.*** Some mystical authors, including St. John of the Cross, considered the intellectual memory as a faculty distinct from the intellect and will, but modern psychology classifies it as a

function of the intellect. We shall therefore speak of the active purgation of the two spiritual faculties that are really distinct: the intellect and the will.

***The intellect is the spiritual faculty by which we apprehend things in an immaterial way.*** Its proper effect is the idea or essence it abstracts from external reality by means of the abstractive power of the intellect acting upon the phantasm in the imagination. ***Intellectual knowledge is completely distinct and far superior to sense knowledge.*** Knowledge acquired through the senses always refers to singular objects in the existential order, but knowledge through ideas or concepts is always universal, abstract, and undetermined as to individuality. We possess sensitive knowledge in common with animals; ***we possess intellectual knowledge in common with purely spiritual beings.***

***When the intellect compares two ideas and affirms or denies the connection between them, it pronounces a judgment, which is the second act or function of the intellect. When it compares two judgments or statements and draws a conclusion, it performs the act of reasoning.*** The function proper to the intellect is judgment, and it is there that we speak of truth or error, but prior to that it is necessary that one exercise proper attention and concentration so that the concepts received by the intellect will be in conformity with objective truth.

Although the intellect as a spiritual faculty is eminently simple, ***mystical authors have made distinctions or divisions of that faculty in order to explain certain phenomena*** of mystical experience otherwise difficult to understand. Thus, ***some of them have referred to the mens, or high point, of the intellect to designate that part of the soul that always reflects the image of God*** and can experience the divine even in the midst of trials and darkness. ***They also speak of the superior reason and the inferior reason.*** The former reaches its conclusions from the principles of pure understanding, unaffected by the passions or lower powers of the soul, whereas the latter tends toward that which is useful or delightful and is therefore much more closely related to the movements of passion or what is called the ***"animal man."***

What this means in practice is that the intellectual functions of simple apprehension, judgment, and reasoning can be greatly influenced by the appetitive powers of will and emotions. ***The latter tend to draw the intellect downward to the things of the senses or inward to selfish pursuits.*** For this reason the mystical writers have consistently extolled the speculative and contemplative aspects of the intellectual activity.

***The active purification of the intellect normally requires first of all the removal of obstacles to the virtuous use of this faculty.*** This means that the individual must at the outset reject all vain, useless, and sinful thoughts. The imagination, as we have seen, is practically uncontrollable directly, and therefore it will frequently present to the intellect phantasms that must be rejected or ignored. ***Secondly, it is necessary to overcome ignorance by studying the truths of faith and seeking to probe their deeper meaning and their application to Christian living. At the same time, one should avoid the vice of intellectual curiosity that engages in the study of sacred truths as a purely scholastic pursuit instead of seeing them as truths by which one lives.*** Lastly, it is necessary to avoid excessive attachment to one's own ideas and opinions, especially in matters of faith. ***The two attitudes that are especially important here are obedience to the***

**Magisterium of the Church and the cultivation of a mentality that is open and receptive to new developments and applications of revealed truths or theological conclusions.**

We can offer the following positive principle as a guide in the purification of the intellect: **the soul must let itself be led by the light of faith, which is the proximate and proportionate means for the union of the intellect with God in this life**. No one has expounded this principle so well as St. John of the Cross. He repeats it constantly in his Ascent of Mount Carmel.

“Among all creatures, the highest or the lowest, there is none that comes near to God or bears any resemblance to his being. For although it is true, as theologians say, that all creatures have a certain relation to God and bear a divine impress (some more and others less, according to the greater or lesser excellence of their nature), yet there is no essential resemblance or connection between them and God; on the contrary, the distance between their being and his divine being is infinite. Hence it is impossible for the intellect to attain to God by means of creatures, whether these be celestial or earthly, because there is no proportion or resemblance between them ....

The reason for this is that the imagination cannot fashion or imagine anything whatever beyond that which it has experienced through the external senses, namely, that which it has seen with the eyes, heard with the ears, etc. At most it can only compose likenesses of those things which it has seen or heard or felt ....

Just so, all that the imagination can imagine and the intellect can receive and understand in this life is not, nor can it be, a proximate means of union with God ....

From what has been said it is to be inferred that, in order that **the intellect be prepared for this divine union, it must be pure and void of all that pertains to sense, and detached and freed from all that can be clearly apprehended by the intellect, profoundly hushed and put to silence, and leaning upon faith, which alone is the proximate and proportionate means whereby the soul is united with God .... Therefore, the greater the faith of the soul, the more closely is it united with God.**”(5)

Therefore the soul must travel in pure faith if it wishes to arrive at the perfect purification of the intellect and be intimately united with God. The reason is that since the rational creature has far greater dignity and excellence than all temporal and earthly creatures, it is made impure by attaching itself to these things through love, but purified by tending to those things above itself, and especially to God. But **the first movement toward God is through faith, and therefore the first principle of purification is faith, vivified by charity.**

It does not matter that faith is essentially about things that are not seen clearly and is therefore necessarily obscure. In fact, it is precisely because of this that **faith can provide the only knowledge possible concerning the intimate life of God**, who cannot be adequately represented by any created intelligible species. The clear vision and knowledge of God are reserved for us in the beatific vision in glory, but **even in this life faith enables us to attain in some measure to the unfathomable mystery of God, though the knowledge be dark and obscure**. By reason of its object, the knowledge of faith is superior to all sensible and intellectual evidence that we could have of God in this life.

***It is necessary that the soul inform all its life and actions with the light of faith, and cling ever more firmly to the truths proposed for faith on the authority of God.*** Gradually one can reach the point of judging all things through the light of faith and, indeed, ***to see all things as God sees them.***

## **Purification of the Will**

***The will, also called the rational appetite, is the faculty by which we seek the good as known by the intellect. It is distinguished from the sensitive appetite, which instinctively seeks the good as known by the senses.*** Even the animals possess a sensitive appetite, but the rational appetite is proper to intellectual beings.

The proper object of the will is the good proposed to it by the intellect, but in the appreciation or evaluation of the good, error may creep in. The intellect can judge as a true good something that is only an apparent good, and the will, which is a blind faculty and always follows the apprehension of the intellect, will be impelled toward that object that is taken as if it were a true good.

The proper act of the will is love, or the effective union of the will with a known good. All the movements or partial aspects of the human acts that take place in the will, such as simple volition, efficacious tendencies, consent, active use of the faculties, and fruition, proceed from love, directly or indirectly.

***Love can be divided in many ways. The principal division for our purposes is the following: by reason of the object, love can be sensual or spiritual; by reason of the modality, love can be natural or supernatural; by reason of the formal object or motive, love can be a love of concupiscence or of benevolence. It is called a love of concupiscence when one desires the good so far as it is good for oneself (egotistic motive); it is a love of benevolence if one loves another precisely so far as the other is good and lovable; it is a love of friendship if the love is directed to a person and is a mutual benevolent love.*** Thus the sensual person loves with a love of concupiscence the object that gives pleasure; the blessed in heaven habitually love God with a love of benevolence, taking complacency in his infinite perfection and rejoicing that God is infinitely happy in himself; and the blessed in heaven and the people sanctified by grace here on earth love God with the love of friendship under the impulse of the virtue of charity.

***Acts of the will may be elicited or imperated. They are called elicited if they proceed directly from the will (e.g., to consent, to choose, to love). They are called imperated (commanded) acts when they are performed by some other faculty under the command of the will*** (e.g., to study, to paint, to mortify oneself voluntarily).

As we have already seen, human nature and all its faculties were profoundly affected by original sin. Once the orientation to God had been weakened, the dominion of reason over the sensible faculties was also weakened, and the will itself was readily inclined to selfishness.

Hence the necessity of a double effort involved in the rectification of the will: one required to subject the will to God by means of a total submission and conformity to his divine will; the

other to increase the power of the will with regard to the inferior faculties until it can subject them completely to itself. In other words, **one must attempt to regain, at the cost of great effort and with the help of grace, that initial rectitude that the will enjoyed when it came forth from the creative hand of God.**

It should be evident that we cannot achieve total submission of our will to God unless we first detach ourselves from excessive love of created things and from the self-centered love that runs counter to the demands of charity.

**St. John of the Cross reduces his whole spiritual doctrine to this detachment from creatures, as the negative element, and to union with God through love as the positive element. It is a fact that the soul is filled with God in the measure and to the degree that it empties itself of creatures.**

The reasons for the necessity of detachment from creatures for perfect union with God, as stated by St. John of the Cross, can be summarized in the following synthesis.

1. God is all, the necessary and absolute being, most pure act without the shadow of potency, who exists of himself and possesses **the absolute plenitude of being.** Compared with him, creatures are nothing; they are **contingent beings that have more of potency than of act.**

2. **Two contraries cannot exist in the same subject** because they mutually exclude each other. Therefore, light is incompatible with darkness and the All is incompatible with nothing.

3. If, then, creatures are nothing and darkness, and God is the All and light, it follows that **the soul that wishes to be united with God must detach itself from creatures. Without this, union with God is impossible.**

4. Hence it is necessary that the way and ascent to God should consist in mortifying the desires. Until these desires cease, the soul will not arrive at perfect union, although it may exercise many virtues, because it still does not perform those virtues with perfection, which requires that the soul be purged of every inordinate desire.

5. **Some persons burden themselves with extraordinary penances** and many other exercises and think that this or that will suffice for them to arrive at union with divine wisdom. **If they would exert half the effort in mortifying their desires, they would advance more in one month through this practice than they would in many years by means of the other exercises.** Just as it is necessary that one labor over the earth if it is to bear fruit, and without labor it will bear nothing but weeds, so also **mortification of the appetites is necessary if there is to be any fruit or profit in the soul.**<sup>(6)</sup>

St. John of the Cross develops these thoughts throughout all his writings, which teach both the negative element of detachment and the positive element of the love of God. Actually, the system of St. John of the Cross can be reduced to one important statement: God is all. His negations rest on affirmation, because they have as their object the detachment of the soul from the false appearances of creatures, in order to enable the soul, purified and ennobled, to lose

itself in the profundity of the All. **He does not disdain creatures; he wishes only to help the soul see in creatures the traces and vestiges of the divine being.**

**But no one can arrive at the All except by the narrow path of the absolute negation of the nothing:**

In order to arrive at having pleasure in everything, desire to have pleasure in nothing. In order to arrive at possessing everything, desire to possess nothing. In order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing. In order to arrive at knowing everything, desire to know nothing. In order to arrive at that in which you have no pleasure, you must go by a way in which you have no pleasure. In order to arrive at that which you do not know, you must go by a way which you do not know. In order to arrive at that which you do not possess, you must go by a way that you do not possess. In order to arrive at that which you are not, you must go through that which you are not. When your mind dwells on anything, you are no longer casting yourself upon the All. **In order to pass from the all to the All, you must deny yourself wholly in all.** And when you come to possess it wholly, you must possess it without desiring anything. And if you will have anything in having all, you do not have your treasure purely in God.[\(7\)](#)

St. John of the Cross does not intend to annihilate the natural tendencies of human nature by removing them from their object and leaving them suspended in a vacuum. He wishes to orientate them to God, to make God the only object of the soul. It is true that this can never be attained perfectly until the soul has been introduced into the passive purgations, **but God does not usually complete the purification of the soul until the soul has done all that it can by using the ordinary means within its grasp.** For that reason St. John of the Cross repeats with insistence that one must mortify the desires that divide the forces of the soul. When the soul has become detached from creatures, it will be filled with God.

Detachment from created things is absolutely indispensable for arriving at Christian perfection, but it would be of little avail to detach oneself from external things if one is not likewise detached from one's own ego, which constitutes the greatest of all the obstacles to one's free flight to God. **St. Thomas states that egoism or disordered self-love is the origin and root of all sin.**[\(8\)](#) **St. Augustine says: "Two loves have erected two cities: self-love, carried to the extreme of disdain of God, has built the city of the world; the love of God, carried to the point of disdain for one's self, has constructed the city of God. The one glories in itself; the other glories in the Lord."**[\(9\)](#)

Precisely because it is the root of all sins, the manifestations of self-love are varied and almost infinite. **So far as it affects spiritual things, self-love becomes the center around which everything else must rotate.** Some persons seek themselves in everything, even in holy things: in prayer, which they prolong when they find sweetness and consolation in it, but which they abandon when they experience aridity; in the reception of the sacraments, which they seek only for sensible consolation; in spiritual direction, which they consider a note of distinction and in which, therefore, they always seek the director who is most popular, or who will let them live in peace with their egoistic values and selfish aims; in the very desire for sanctification, which they do not subordinate to the greater glory of God and the good of souls, but which they direct to themselves as the best ornament of their souls here on earth and as the source of increased

happiness and glory in heaven. We would never finish if we were to attempt to list the manifestations of excessive self-love.

***The soul that aspires to perfect union with God must strive energetically against its own self-love, which subtly penetrates even holy things.*** It must examine the true motive for its actions, continually rectify its intentions, and not place as its goal or the goal of all its activities and efforts anything other than the glory of God and the perfect fulfillment of his divine will. It must keep constantly in mind the decisive words of Christ himself, who makes perfect self-abnegation the indispensable condition for following him: ***"Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps" (Luke 9:23).***

## Passive Purgations

Up to this point we have been examining the active purifications the soul can effect by its own efforts with the help of grace in order to purge itself of its defects. Now we shall consider the part that God reserves for himself in the purification of the soul: ***the passive purifications, which are divided into the night of the senses and the night of the spirit.***

The teaching of St. John of the Cross on the necessity of the passive purgations is very clear. In Book I of *The Dark Night*, he treats of the imperfections of beginners. After describing these imperfections in the chapters that follow, he terminates with these words:

However assiduously the beginner in mortification exercises himself in all these actions and passions, he can never completely succeed -- far from it -- until God shall effect it in him passively by means of the purgation of said night. [\(10\)](#)

To speak of perfection and sanctity without the soul's having endured any of the passive purifications is to depart radically from the doctrine of St. John of the Cross. It cannot be said, as they who are defenders of the double way have said, that the passive purifications pertain only to those souls who are to attain perfection by the mystical way and not to those who are to reach perfection by the ascetical way. ***St. John of the Cross teaches that, however much the soul may exert itself, it cannot correct its imperfections unless God does this for the soul in a passive manner.*** Therefore, one or the other conclusion must be accepted: either we must say that there is a perfection that is filled with imperfections (which is manifestly a contradiction), or there is no other perfection than that which results in the passive purification and is manifestly a mystical perfection.

Theological reason fully confirms the teaching of St. John of the Cross. As a result of original sin, human nature is strongly inclined to evil. Egoism, which is imbedded in the very depths of our being, disturbs the clarity of our intellect and impedes our objective view of things, especially when self-love makes us see things through the perspective of its own evaluations.

The passive purifications are, therefore, necessary from the very nature of things. Naturally, not all souls will suffer them with the same rigor, because there are many degrees of impurity that have been contracted, and there are many grades of perfection to which various souls are destined. ***But in every case, in order to conquer egoism, sensuality, self-love, the immoderate***

**desire for sensible consolations, intellectual pride, and whatever opposes the spirit of faith, it is absolutely indispensable that there be a complete and total renewal of the soul through the passive purifications.**

This doctrine has the advantage of opening wide horizons to souls and of saving them from many dangers and illusions into which they could easily fall if they were obliged to remain in that which has been called the "ordinary" way of sanctity. Some authors do not look with sympathy on the mystical way because they believe it to be filled with dangers and pitfalls, but in reality the contrary is true. In the mystical state souls are governed in a special manner by the Holy Spirit himself, operating through his precious gifts and divine motion. Illumined by the light of contemplation, they discover much better their nothingness and their misery, at the same time that they see the snares of their enemies and their own sensuality. They are much more cautious, prudent, and docile to their spiritual masters precisely because of the passive purifications to which they have been subjected.

There is, therefore, no doubt that the passive purifications, which according to the unanimous teaching of all the schools of spirituality are of a mystical order, are necessary and indispensable in one form or another for the full purification of the soul, and for arriving at complete Christian perfection.

Let us now see in particular the two principal manifestations of these passive purifications, which St. John of the Cross calls the night of the senses and the night of the spirit.

### *Night of the Senses*

**The night of the senses consists of a prolonged series of profound and persistent aridities that submerge the soul in a very painful state and severely test its perseverance in the desire for sanctification.** It is so difficult to support this crisis of the senses that the many souls draw back in fear and abandon the life of prayer.

No one has explained with such precision and clarity as has St. John of the Cross the nature, necessity, causes, and effects of the passive purifications. Above all, it is necessary to note that St. John of the Cross includes under the word senses not only the external and internal senses, but also the sensitive appetite and the discursive intellect so far as it uses the imagination to construct its discursus. He begins by describing the sweetness that beginners usually experience in the service of God. **They may become strongly attached to the sensible consolations and, without realizing it, make the delight and sweetness they find in the practices of devotion the principal motive for which they practice them.** On feeling themselves so favored by God, they think they are already saints, or not far from being saints. As a result, there they manifest many imperfections that flow from the seven capital sins.<sup>(11)</sup>

A profound purification is needed, but these souls could never achieve it by their own efforts, even if they could recognize all their faults. **Therefore God intervenes and leads them into the night of the senses.**

They have now had practice for some time in the way of virtue and have persevered in meditation and prayer, and because of the sweetness and pleasure they have therein found, they have lost their love of the things of the world and have gained some degree of spiritual strength in God .... When they are going about these spiritual exercises with the greatest delight and pleasure, and when they believe that the sun of divine favor is shining most brightly upon them, God turns all this light of theirs into darkness and shuts against them the door and the source of the sweet spiritual water which they were tasting in God whenever and for as long as they desired .... And thus he leaves them so completely in the dark that they know not whither to go with their sensible imagination and meditation, for they cannot advance a step in meditation, as they were accustomed to do before, their inward senses being submerged in this night and left with such dryness that not only do they experience no pleasure and consolation in spiritual things and good exercises in which they were wont to find their delights and pleasures, but instead they find insipidity and bitterness in the things mentioned.(12)

St. John of the Cross expressly states that the cause of this emptiness and insipidity of the senses is infused contemplation.

The soul can no longer meditate or reflect in the imaginative sphere of sense as it used to do, however much it may attempt to do so. For God now begins to communicate himself to it, no longer through sense, as he did before, ... but by an act of simple contemplation, to which neither the exterior nor the interior senses of the lower part of the soul can attain.(13)

***How can one discern the presence of the night of the senses and distinguish it from the dryness or aridity*** that may be caused by other reasons, such as dissipation, bodily indisposition, or influence of the devil? ***St. John of the Cross gives three signs:***(14)

1. ***The first sign is that the soul finds delight or consolation neither in the things of God nor in any created thing.*** If the soul were to find consolation in the latter, it is evident that its distaste for the things of God would be due to a dissipation of the soul. But since this universal dryness or distaste could come from some indisposition of the body that causes one to lose one's taste for everything, it is necessary to add the second sign.

2. The second sign is that ordinarily the memory is fixed on God with great care, but ***the soul thinks that, rather than serving God,*** it is falling back, because of its lack of taste for the things of God. One can see that the distaste does not proceed from lukewarmness, because it is the nature of lukewarmness not to have any interior solicitude for the things of God. And if it comes from some bodily infirmity, everything becomes distasteful, and there is not even any desire to serve God. Nor would the devil arouse any desire to serve God. For that reason this second sign is one of the most unmistakable.

3. The third sign is ***the inability to meditate or use reasoning*** by means of the imagination as one formerly did. The reason for this impotency is due to the initial infused contemplation.

When these three signs are all verified in a clear manner, the soul and the spiritual director can conclude that they are in the presence of the night of the senses and can act accordingly. But for greater certitude, we shall investigate the matter further in order to verify with certainty whether

the aridity that the soul experiences in this state is due to the night of the senses or to one of the other causes.

If it is an effect of lukewarmness, it can be known very easily because this distaste for the things of God will be accompanied by a strong inclination for recreation and worldly diversion, together with a dissipation of soul that sometimes runs the risk of mortal sin and commits venial sin without any resistance. The remedy for this is to repent sincerely and to return again with new fervor to the road of the spiritual life.

If it is a question of mental infirmity or nervous imbalance, it is not difficult to distinguish it from the aridity of the night of the senses.

To distinguish neurasthenia from the passive purification, we should note that the most frequent symptoms in neurasthenics are the following: almost continual fatigue, even when they have not worked, accompanied by a feeling of prostration, of discouragement; habitual headaches... ; insomnia, to the extent that the neurasthenic wakes up more tired than when he went to bed; difficulty in exercising the intellectual faculties and in maintaining attention; impressionability (intense emotions for very slight causes), which leads the sufferer to believe that he has illnesses that he does not really have; excessive self-analysis even to minute details. and continual preoccupation not to become ill.

Neurasthenics are, however, not imaginary invalids; the powerlessness they experience is real, and it would be very imprudent to urge them to disregard their fatigue and work to the limit of their strength. What they lack is not will but power.

We should also note that psychoneuroses may be associated with a developed intellectual life and a lofty moral life .... But we see also that the passive night is distinguished from this state of nervous fatigue by the second sign (the soul ordinarily keeps the memory of God with solicitude and painful anxiety for fear it may be falling back), and by the third sign (the quasi-impossibility to meditate, but the ability to keep a simple and loving gaze on God, the beginning of infused contemplation). The ardent desire for God and for perfection, which is manifested by these signs, distinguishes notably this passive purgation from neurasthenia, which may sometimes coexist with it.[\(15\)](#)

***If it is a question of diabolical temptation or disturbance, which God permits sometimes as a means of purifying a soul, it will be known from the fact that the aridity is accompanied by strong, sinful suggestions*** of an unusual tenacity, together with an instinctive horror of the soul toward such suggestions. The devil tries to disturb the peace and tranquillity of the soul and to withdraw it from the practice of prayer. The soul will conquer the devil by insisting, in spite of its repugnance, on its exercises of piety, and by using the other methods for conquering the devil that we indicated when discussing diabolical temptation (see Chapter 7).

Sometimes one or another of these states may coincide with the night of the senses, and especially the second or third. In this case, a careful and penetrating analysis is required in order to discern what pertains to one or another cause and to correct it with the proper remedies. Sometimes also there will be concomitant trials of various kinds. ***On the part of the devil there***

***are terrible temptations against faith, hope, and charity; strong suggestions against purity accompanied by phantasms in the imagination; a spirit of blasphemy so violent and strong that at times one is almost forced to pronounce the words, and this is grave torment to the soul, as St. John of the Cross states;*** obscurities that fill the soul with a thousand scruples and perplexities, and other similar afflictions.

Again there may be persecutions and ridicule, sometimes from the good people, which is one of the greatest tribulations one is forced to suffer; or one's own superior or friends or spiritual director may torment the soul by judging its state to be one of lukewarmness or by not being able to discover the proper remedies to alleviate its condition. Lastly, ***there may be infirmities, misfortunes, the loss of one's good name or friends or possessions. It would seem at times that heaven and earth have conspired against the soul,*** but God is permitting all these things in -- order to detach it completely from the things of earth, to remind it that it can do nothing without him, and how much it needs his divine mercy and assistance.

***Not all souls suffer the night of the senses to the same degree. It depends on the grade of perfection to which God intends to elevate the soul, the greater or fewer number of imperfections from which the soul must be purified, the forces and energies of the soul itself, and its docility and patience in supporting this painful trial.*** There are always degrees of more or less in these purifications, but God always gives his grace and strength in the measure needed by the soul.

***During the dark night of the senses, the soul should observe the following forms of conduct:***

1. ***Complete and loving submission to the will of God,*** accepting with patience and resignation the painful trial for as long a time as God decrees. ***The soul should not consider this purgative state as something evil but see in it a means of fortifying itself and of making progress in the spiritual life.*** This is the advice given by St. John of the Cross in Chapter 10, Book I of *The Dark Night*.
2. ***Perseverance in prayer in spite of all difficulty, in imitation of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane,*** who even in his agony prayed with greater intensity (Luke 22:43). Prayer in the midst of these terrible aridities is a veritable torment for the soul, and only by means of force exerted upon oneself can the soul persevere in it; but it is necessary that the soul should do so, asking God for strength, if it does not wish to fall back and lose everything. ***This is the point at which many souls turn back.*** Tormented by those agonies of the dark night, they abandon the life of prayer when they were on the point of receiving the grace to make giant strides along the road to sanctity. But it is necessary that the soul know that it is being led into a new type of prayer, and it would be a great imprudence to try to use the former method of prayer.
3. The soul should remain in peace and quiet, content simply with a loving gaze on God, without any particular consideration and without any desire for delight or sensation. The reason is that the soul is receiving infused contemplation, which has nothing to do with the methods of ascetical prayer.

St. John of the Cross explains:

And although further scruples may come to them -- that they are wasting their time and that it would be well for them to do something else, because they can neither do nor think anything in prayer -- let them suffer these scruples and remain in peace .... If such a soul should desire to make any effort of its own with its interior faculties, it will hinder and lose the blessings which ... God is instilling into it and impressing upon it....

For these reasons such a soul should pay no heed if the operations of its faculties become lost to it; it should rather desire that this happen quickly. For by not hindering the operation of infused contemplation which God is bestowing upon it, it can receive this with more peaceful abundance and cause its spirit to be enkindled and burn with the love which this dark and secret contemplation brings with it and sets firmly in the soul. For contemplation is naught else than a secret, peaceful, and loving infusion from God which, if it be permitted, enkindles the soul with the spirit of love.(16)

***The soul would actually be going back if it were at this time. to return to the discursive use of its faculties.*** And yet the soul should remember that in the beginning it will not perceive any special attraction of the Holy Spirit to remain quiet and tranquil. In this case, as St. John of the Cross advises, it ought to practice meditation in the usual manner in order to remain without the one or the other. But as soon as the soul encounters difficulty in the operations of the faculties and perceives a strong desire to remain in loving attention to God by means of a simple gaze and without any particular consideration, it should then let itself be led by this impulse of grace.

4. Docility to a prudent and experienced director. ***At no other time is the advice of a prudent spiritual director so necessary as in this crisis.***

However, the soul should therefore understand that, if it wants to make progress in perfection, it must be careful into whose hands it places itself, because as the master is, so also shall be the disciple. ***And if it does not have a spiritual director or does not have as excellent a one as would be desirable, God will supply in other ways so long as the soul remains humble and seeks only the will of God in all I things.***

St. John of the Cross enumerates the great benefits produced in the soul by the night of the senses. The following is a summary of his teaching, taken from *The Dark Night*, Book I, Chapters 12 and 13.

1. Knowledge of one's self and one's misery on finding oneself so full of obscurity and weakness.
2. Greater respect and courtesy toward God than one had when one enjoyed sensible consolation.
3. More vivid light concerning the grandeur and excellence of God.
4. Profound humility upon seeing oneself so wretched.
5. Love of neighbor.
6. Submission and obedience.
7. Purification of avarice, lust, and spiritual gluttony, and purification of anger, envy, and sloth.

8. Recollection in God with a fear of falling back.
9. Exercise of the virtues.
10. Liberty of spirit in which one enjoys the fruits of the Holy Ghost.
11. Victory against the three enemies of the soul; the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The duration of these painful trials of the night of the senses will vary in different cases. St. John of the Cross remarks that it depends upon the degree of love to which God wishes to raise the soul and the greater or lesser dross of imperfections from which the soul must be purified. **God does not purify weak souls with such intensity and profundity as he does the stronger; there are alternate periods of light and obscurity so that weak souls will not become discouraged and fall back.**

Some souls pass through the night of the senses without being able to know definitely and clearly when the night began and when it ended. The director must take into account this possibility so that he will not be deceived concerning the true state of the soul. But **when God wishes to raise a soul to a very high degree of perfection, he is wont to subject it for a long time and with great intensity to these painful purifications of the senses.**

Spiritual directors and theologians of the spiritual life may reasonably ask when one can expect the night of the senses to occur in the soul's progress to perfection. There is no agreement on the precise point at which the soul enters the dark night of the senses. However, **St. John of the Cross seems to teach that one should expect the passive purgation of the senses to start while the soul is still practicing acquired mental prayer, and to serve as a transition to the full illuminative stage.** This means that mystical activity has its beginnings in the illuminative stage. When the soul begins to experience infused contemplative prayer, it will, if it follows faithfully the movements of the Holy Spirit, soon enter fully into the night of the senses. St. John of the Cross expresses it as follows:

Into this dark night souls begin to enter when God draws them forth from the state of beginners, which is the state of those that meditate on the spiritual road, and begins to set them in the state of progressives, which is that of those who are already contemplatives, to the end that, after passing through it, they may arrive at the state of the perfect, which is that of the divine union of the soul with God.[\(17\)](#)

When this house of sensuality was now at rest, that is, was mortified, its passion being quenched and its desire put to rest and lulled to sleep by means of this blessed night of purgation of sense, the soul went forth, to set out upon the road and way of the spirit, which is that of progressives and proficients, and which, by another name, is called the way of illumination or of infused contemplation, wherein God himself feeds and refreshes the soul, without meditation or the soul's active help.[\(18\)](#)

Therefore, **according to St. John of the Cross, the passive night of the senses marks the transition from the purgative way to the illuminative way, from the ascetical phase to the mystical phase, from those who meditate in the spiritual life to those who begin to be enlightened by the splendors of infused contemplation.**

## *Night of the Spirit*

***The night of the spirit is constituted by a series of passive purgations that are extremely painful and have for their object the completion of the purification that was begun but not completed by the night of the senses.*** By means of the terrifying trials of this second night, the defects of the soul are uprooted at their very source, something that could not be accomplished by the purification of the senses. St. John of the Cross says:

The night which we have called that of sense may and should be called a kind of correction and restraint of desire rather than purgation. The reason is that all the imperfections and disorders of the sensual parts have their strength and root in the spirit, where all habits, both good and bad, are brought into subjection, and thus, until these are purged, the rebellions and depravities of sense cannot be purged thoroughly.<sup>(19)</sup>

The causes of the night of the spirit are the same as those of the night of the senses, namely, infused contemplation and the imperfection of the soul, although in a higher degree of intensity as regards the contemplative light. The excess of this light torments and blinds the soul at the same time that it manifests to the soul its smallest and most insignificant imperfection. ***The contrast between the ineffable grandeur of God as seen through the splendor of contemplation and the dross of imperfections and miseries that the soul discovers in itself makes the soul feel that an intimate union between such great light and such great darkness is impossible and that the soul is condemned*** to live eternally separated from God. This situation, which seems most evident and beyond remedy, submerges the soul into a state of anguish and torture so terrifying that it surpasses the torments of purgatory, in which the souls have the assurance of eternal salvation.

***The principal source of suffering in this night is an apparent abandonment by God.*** The soul is deprived of all delight and satisfaction in relations with God. It is closed in upon itself, faced with its own misery and lowliness; God appears as a ruthless and avenging judge. ***The soul desires more than ever to serve God but feels that it can in no way be acceptable to God.*** Although actually in a high state of perfection, it feels desolate rather than favored by God. It would welcome death as a release from its torture.

But the soul that passes through this night comes forth from this trial resplendent and beautiful, completely transformed in God, and free forever from its weaknesses, imperfections, and miseries. Having been completely purified of them by the terrible mystical purgatory it has suffered, it scales the heights of sanctity, is confirmed in grace, and awaits only death to break the bonds that still hold it in this world in order to penetrate the eternal splendors of the beatific vision:

Is the night of the spirit necessary in order to reach Christian perfection? In order to attain the relative perfection that corresponds to the souls that have passed through the fifth and are entering upon the sixth mansions described by St. Teresa (contemplative prayer of quiet and of union), the dark night of the spirit is not necessary. God can supply and has, in fact, supplied for the purifications of the night of the spirit by means of other intermittent trials, alternating light

with darkness, until he raises the soul to the degree of purity and perfection to which he has predestined it.

But in order for anyone to reach the seventh mansions of transforming union and to scale the very heights of sanctity, the night of the spirit is indispensable. St. John of the Cross states this many times, and it must be so by the very nature of things. The soul cannot be united with God in the transforming union until it has been totally purified of all its weakness and misery. And this is the proper effect of the night of the spirit.

It should be evident that there cannot be any fixed rule concerning the night of the spirit because circumstances are too variable. ***But these painful purifications usually last for a long period of time, sometimes for years, before the soul is admitted to the transforming union or mystical marriage.*** From time to time, God is wont to lift his hand and let the soul breathe, but if it is a question of the true night of the spirit, these periods of relaxation are very brief. The soul immediately returns to the terrible pains and torture until the trial is finished by its entrance into the last classified degree of perfection, which is the transforming union.

The passive purgations of the spirit, when they are intermittent, extend throughout the illuminative and the unitive way, but when it is a question of the true night of the spirit, they occur between the sixth and seventh mansions described by St. Teresa, that is to say, when the soul is already far advanced in the unitive way and prior to its entrance into the transforming union for which the night is a preparation.

Anyone who reads St. John of the Cross can see that, when he says that God places the soul in this terrible night to lead it to divine union, he is not referring to the unitive way taken in its entirety, but to the transforming union, which is the final union to which the soul attains. Otherwise, it would be necessary to exclude from the unitive way the marvelous phenomena of the ecstatic union, which do not appear in the transforming union, and which, nevertheless, pertain to the unitive way according to the traditional teaching.

The attempt to fit the purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages of the spiritual life into the fourfold active and passive nights of the senses and the spirit may appear rather tedious and strained to contemporary theologians. It is better, perhaps, to stress the continuous development, differentiated only by a greater or lesser intensity.

Father John Arintero has described the dark night of the spirit in great detail, and he places it at the height of the unitive way, prior to the transforming union. We quote a small part of his description as a fitting conclusion to our study of the active and passive purgations.

That this union may be changed from the conforming union to the transforming union, God himself must work in the soul in a manner that is hidden, mysterious, and painful. He rids the soul of all sensible delights which it experienced in the former union wherein the delight of the spirit redounded to the senses. God seems to hide himself now, but actually he is much more intimately united to the soul. The soul is amazed at the change it now experiences. It believes itself to be abandoned, yet it finds that it is improved in every way. The change is most profitable, but the soul is unable to understand how this can be so ....

In the formidable spiritual darkness wherein the soul is buried in its mystical cocoon and is incapacitated for working by itself or for possessing any initiative at all, it believes itself to be imprisoned or buried in hell itself. Nevertheless it is gradually undergoing the mysterious change from the conforming to the transforming union although the soul itself is scarcely aware of it ...

Thus is verified the obscure and prolonged interior activity which renews souls and disposes them for the mystical espousal. Later it leads them gradually to the total transformation which is required for the mystical marriage.[\(20\)](#)

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## CHAPTER NOTES

1. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), Book III, Chap. 24.
  2. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chap. 6.
  3. *Ibid.*, Book III, Chap. 24.
  4. Abbé Maynard, *Vertus et doctrine spirituelle de S. Vincent de Paul* (Paris: Tequi, 1924), Chap. 23.
  5. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, Chaps. 8-9.
  6. *Ibid.*, Book I, Chaps. 4-8.
  7. *The Dark Night*, Book I, Chap. 13.
  8. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 77, a. 4.
  9. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Demetrius Zema (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950), Book XIV, Chap. 28.
  10. *The Dark Night*, Book I, Chap. 7.
  11. *Ibid.*, Chaps. 2-7.
  12. *Ibid.*, Chap. 8.
  13. *Ibid.*, Chap. 9.
  14. *Ibid.*, loc. cit.
  15. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Vol. II, pp. 52-3, trans. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1947-48).
  16. *The Dark Night*, Book I, Chap. 10.
  17. *Ibid.*, Chap. 1.
  18. *Ibid.*, Chap. 14.
  19. *Ibid.*, Book II, Chap. 3.
  20. John G. Arintero, *The Mystical Evolution*, trans. Jordan Aumann (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1949) Vol. 2, pp. 175-79.
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