

An Introduction to the Dark Night

Jesus clearly warns His disciples that “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Lk 9:22, RSV). He is equally clear about the arduous path to be trod by His followers: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it” (Lk 9:23-24). Jesus’ words describe the road which leads to full transformation in Him and highlight the cost of discipleship: the identification with Jesus in His passion, the experience of physical and emotional sufferings, struggles against the devil, and the painful denial of self.

Perhaps no one addresses this drama of the soul’s purification and transformation into Christ like the sixteenth-century Mystical Doctor, St. John of the Cross, who employs the image of a *dark night* to express the path the soul must traverse in order to “lose its life” and “save it” in Christ. The dark night is a transition phase which leads the soul from one stage of the spiritual life to another, not unlike the difficult passage from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood.¹ In the stage of beginners God grants the person many sensual consolations in the exercises of piety so as to help the person detach from sinful activities and profit from spiritual ones. In time God discontinues these superficial graces so as to nourish the soul with graces of a more spiritual nature.² The painful transition purifies the senses so that they can be better united with the spiritual part of the soul. Thus, the ligature is termed by St. John of the Cross the passive dark night of sense. It is *passive* in that God is the agent causing the transition; it is a *dark night* as the senses are left empty and dry

¹ St. Thomas makes this comparison when treating growth in the spiritual life, which he understands simply as growth in charity. In the first stage, man “must devote himself mainly to withdrawing from sin and resisting the appetites, which drive him in the opposite direction to charity. This is the condition of beginners, who need to nourish and carefully foster charity to prevent its being lost. A second stage now follows, when a man’s chief preoccupation is to advance in virtue. This is the mark of those who are making progress, and who are principally concerned that their charity should grow and become strong. The third stage is when a man applies himself chiefly to the work of cleaving to God and enjoying him, which is characteristic of the perfect who long to depart and be with Christ (Phil 1:23)” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, Q. 24, a. 9, Blackfriars ed. vol. 34 [London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975], 63). Unless otherwise noted, the Blackfriars translation of St. Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* will be used.

² “It should be known, then, that God nurtures and caresses the soul, after it has been resolutely converted to His service, like a loving mother who warms her child with the heat of her bosom, nurses it with good milk and tender food, and carries and caresses it in her arms. But as the child grows older, the mother withholds her caresses and hides her tender love; she rubs bitter aloes on her sweet breast and sets the child down from her arms, letting it walk on its own feet so that it may put aside the habits of childhood and grow accustomed to greater and more important things” (*Dark Night*, Bk. 1, c. 1, p. 298).

without any consolation; it is of the *sense* as this is the part of the soul predominantly affected.

The passive night of sense introduces the soul into the state of the proficient, a stage normally characterized by spiritual peace and illumination. If the person in this middle phase of the spiritual life is generous, God normally leads him into a second passive night which prepares the soul for the most perfect union possible in this life – the spiritual marriage.³ As the first night orders the senses to the spirit, the second night prepares the integral soul for union with God. St. John of the Cross admits that few souls enter into this second night, and he claims that many who do enter it quickly draw back.⁴ Since darkness has no fellowship with light (cf. 2 Cor 6:14), souls normally traverse a passive purification of sense and spirit in order to become detached from creatures and perfectly united to God: “Until a man is purged of his attachments he will not be equipped to possess God, neither here below through the pure transformation of love, nor in heaven through the beatific vision.”⁵ The saints undergo this purification and arrive at this union in this life while less fervent souls generally experience it after death in purgatory. St. Thérèse is no exception to this principle. She experiences a terrible trial of faith towards the end of her life. It is this terrible trial that is seen by many to be similar to the darkness experienced by Mother Teresa.

(From *An Inquiry into the Relation between St. Thérèse of Lisieux and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta*, Michael Champagne, CJC, Rome, 2006).

³ In introducing the theme for his commentary on *The Spiritual Canticle*, St. John of the Cross identifies the spiritual marriage as “the ultimate state of perfection” (cf. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works*, 415).

⁴ “The soul enters this second night that it may journey to God in pure faith, for pure faith is the means whereby it is united with God. Few there are who walk along this road, because it is so narrow, dark, and terrible that, in obscurities and trials, the night of sense cannot be compared to it...” (*Dark Night*, Bk. I, c. 11, p. 320).

⁵ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. 1, c. 4, p. 78.