

# The Dark Night of the Senses & Dark Night of the Soul

The following is taken from [Dr. Taylor Marshall's](#) on-line article entitled, "The Difference Between Dark Night of the Soul and Dark Night of the Senses according to St. John of the Cross."<sup>45</sup>

According to Saint Paul and Saint John of the Cross and the masters of Mystical Theology, such as John Tauler, the spiritual life consists in three ages:

- Beginners (Purgative Way)
- Proficients (Illuminative Way) ▪ Perfect (Unitive Way)

Incidentally, by Perfect we mean not absolute perfection (like the saints in Heaven) but relative perfection.

These three ages mirror natural human life:

- Childhood
- Adolescence ▪ Adulthood

Just as these three stages are transitioned by a crisis, so also progress in the spiritual life is marked by crisis.

Saint John of the Cross, the Doctor of the Church with regard to Mystical Theology, teaches that the transition from the Purgative to the Illuminative is occasioned by the "Dark Night of the Senses" and the transition from the Illuminative to the Unitive is occasioned by the "Dark Night of the Soul."

- Beginners (Purgative Way) ▪ **Dark Night of Senses**
- Proficients (Illuminative Way)
- **Dark Night of the Soul** - Perfect (Unitive Way)

The Dark Night of the Senses is the crisis in which God purposefully withdraws consolations of the senses. Warm fuzzies in prayer. Discursive pictorial visions in the imagination, physical comfort, lack of external distraction.

This is very difficult because the Christian begins to worry that he is regressing or has done something to lose God's favor. Instead, God is preparing him to enter more deeply in the love of God. The soul learns to seek the God of consolation, but not merely the consolations of God. Perhaps this Dark Night of the Senses is one of the most misunderstood elements of daily Christian living.

The Dark Night of the Spirit or Dark Night of the Soul is a crushing desolation where the soul learns to love the cross of Christ. With a desire to be more like Christ and to share in His life, the perfect learn to love persecution, humiliations, disgrace, and other problems in life since they see in them a perfect conformity to God. Two well-known modern examples are Saint Pio and Saint Therese.

We see this state of perfection in the Apostles:

"And calling in the apostles, after they had scourged them, they charged them that they should not speak at all in the name of Jesus. And they dismissed them. And they indeed went from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus." —Acts 5:40–41, D-R

Saints Peter and John rejoiced in their sufferings. This is not something naturally, but something utterly supernatural – it is a sign of the unitive way. The Apostles, we might say,

went through the Dark Night of the Senses from Good Friday till Easter and the Dark Night of the Soul from the Ascension to Pentecost. This, at least, is the position of Fr Garrigou-Lagrange.

The following is taken from: [Dr Mark Miravelle's](#) online course "Christian Spirituality"<sup>46</sup>. Dr. Miravele writes:

Fr. Garrigous Lagrange (Dominican theologian); one of the foremost experts in this century on dogmatic theology and the mystical life. He had a pupil we know as Pope John Paul II. The Pope when he was a priest studying for his doctorate was sent to the Angelicum under this great theologian Fr Garrigou Lagrange, and eventually received his doctorate. Fr Garrigou Lagrange wrote many books, one just came back into print by TAN publishers which is called, *The 3 Ages of the Interior Life*. He writes that conversion is an ongoing process. We must experience the power of God more than just once, the Lord must invade our world. This phenomenon must be experienced as an adult. The 3 stages of the interior life are:

- (1) The purgative stage – where we recognize that we are sinners and we are purged from the love of sin.
- (2) The illuminative stage – where we are enlightened or illumined about the truth of God in Christ. We're falling in love with God.
- (3) The unitive stage – where our will is so united to Gods will that you want what God wants no matter what suffering this may entail. Very few people ever reach this stage of maturity where they can truly say the words of St Paul in Philippians 1:21 "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain..." or John 3:30 "he must increase and I must decrease..." or Galatians 2:20 "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me..." God is pouring himself into us.

The dark night of the sense is the transition between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> stage, dark night of the sense God is pulling back from us, no more candy, the dark night of the soul feels like God totally abandons us. It's a time of growing up and trust by faith. These stages from the 1, 2, 3 are not clear cut, they are kind of organic. We take 2 steps forward and 1 step backwards.

In the beginning stage of our spiritual life we really feel the presence of God. As we start maturing God starts pulling away from us. God wants us to be rooted in God versus sentiments. God is teaching us to grow up. The dark night of the soul is the transition between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stage. God is there no matter how we feel.

## **What are the Dangers that can Arise During the Dark Night of the Soul?**

This is the bridge to the unitive way. This is a series of passive purgation's that seeks to complete what was started in the 1<sup>st</sup> dark night. The 1<sup>st</sup> night sought perfection of sense (lower part of the soul), the 2<sup>nd</sup> purification seeks the internal faculties of the soul (the highest abilities: the intellect and the will). The defects in this stage are: 1) involuntary distractions in prayer, 2) a dullness in prayer – a full sensitivity of taking for granted spiritual things, 3) a temptation to over zealousness instead of fraternal charity, 4) Lastly, a final purification of the will from an unconscious egoism.

God must take complete possession of the soul and occupy it. These souls can get puffed up with pride in an undetected manner, ergo, the need for the final process of purification. This stage is a purification of the interior faculties: will, intellect and memory (the powers of the soul).

## Why is the dark night of the soul the bridge between the purgative way and the illuminative way?

The following is taken from the "Understanding the Dark Night of the Soul"<sup>47</sup> by [Emily Stimpson](#), OSV contributing editor:

The purgative way last until a certain bridge in the spiritual life – this bridge is called the dark night of the soul. The 1<sup>st</sup> dark night of the soul is where the Holy Spirit begins to purify the soul from sense desires alien to the Christian life. The dark night of the soul is the beginning of the mystical life; it is therefore technically the beginning of the illuminative way. Once the dark night begins the person is no longer in control – they do not begin the purification and they have no power of ending it unless they decide to regress and return to an earlier less mature state of

their walk with the Lord. To recap – the dark night (of sense) is the bridge between the purgative and the illuminative way. The 2<sup>nd</sup> dark night (of soul) is the bridge between the illuminative and unitive. This is the dark night of the soul, the purification between the intellect and the will.

*"Understanding the 'dark night of the soul' The feeling of spiritual emptiness, or being abandoned by God, is natural in the process of growing closer to Christ."*

### It is Necessary

Every fallen human being has disordered desires and attachments. We love what we shouldn't love, or we love what we should but in the wrong way. We seek our own comfort, our own pleasure, our own will. We value what we want more than we value what God wants. We do wrong, even if only in our hearts.

But we can't do wrong and stand before God. We can't even want to do wrong and stand before God. A prerequisite for seeing God face to face is that every attachment to sin, both in our lives and in our hearts, must be broken. If we want to become saints, we have to desire only God's will. And we have to desire God's will not out of fear of hell, but rather out of love for heaven, out of love for God. Some of that breaking we do, as we learn to avoid vice and pursue virtue. But some of that breaking only God can do. The dark night of the soul is, in part, how he does that. By seemingly withdrawing all spiritual consolations – all the little comforts and supports that typically come from pursuing a relationship with him – and allowing an almost crushing sense of abandonment to descend upon us, he purifies our desires and prepares us for heaven.

### It is Unique

The dark night of the soul looks different in different lives. Laypersons don't necessarily experience the dark night the way religious do. Nor do active religious necessarily experience the dark night the way contemplatives do. Some people experience it primarily through external circumstances. They find themselves persecuted or afflicted. In the midst of those afflictions, all calls for help go unanswered. To the person passing through this type of dark night, it feels like God has left them to deal with their cross on their own.

Others experience the dark night through temptations: Temptations to pride, vanity, anger, sexual sin, and even unbelief assail them. Then, there are those who experience the dark night of the soul mainly through inner desolation: The gates of heaven seem barred against them, and no matter how much they pray, no consolation seemingly comes. Lastly, there are those who experience the dark night as a combination of all three: trials, temptations and abandonment.

Likewise, for some, the dark night comes but once. For others, it comes many times. Usually, it lasts for only a short while. Occasionally, it lasts much longer. But when it finally ends, it ends for good. A definitive work has been accomplished in the soul.

### **It is Unpredictable**

The dark night of the soul doesn't come at the beginning of one's journey to God. Traditionally, spiritual directors identify three primary stages (or ways) of growth in holiness. The first is the purgative way, where we break habits of vice, acquire habits of virtue and learn to live a Catholic life. The second is the illuminative way, where we grow in virtue, charity and the life of prayer. And the third is the unitive way, where our wills and hearts move in perfect harmony with God's.

Near the end of the purgative stage, we experience a type of dark night — a time of trial and affliction where it feels as if God no longer loves us. This dark night, however, is not the dark night of the soul. Rather, it's the dark night of the senses.

In the dark night of the senses, God purifies us of our attachments to the things of the world — physical comfort, physical pleasure, material success, popular acclaim — as well as of our consolations in prayer. Sorrows afflict us, and things that used to comfort us — food, sex, shopping, compliments, even the liturgy — no longer do. Through this dark night, God prepares us for the illuminative way and a deeper, more contemplative life of prayer.

The dark night of the soul occurs at the end of the illuminative way, as we prepare to enter the unitive way. During this dark night, God roots out our deepest attachments to sin and self, and the desolation that accompanies that rooting out is overwhelming and crushing. More than just a lack of consolation, this dark night plunges a soul into an abyss of darkness and nothingness, essentially revealing to us what we are without God and preparing us to not only carry our crosses, but to love our crosses and carry them joyfully in union with Christ.

### **It isn't Depression**

From the outside, depression and the dark night of the soul bear a striking resemblance to one another. And they're not entirely separate things. As St. John of the Cross noted long ago, depression (or as they called it in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, melancholia) can go hand in hand with a dark night, whether by exacerbating it or resulting from it.

But while clinical depression is triggered by an objectively sad event (losing a loved one, fatal illness, etc.) or by a biochemical problem, the dark night of the soul is purely an act of God; it is God working in our souls to draw us closer to him. Likewise, while depression weighs down both body and soul, eventually rendering those who suffer from it unable to go about the normal business of their life, throughout the dark night, the spirit stays strong, and those suffering through it can perform great works of charity and service. They remain active and don't experience the same temptations to total self-loathing or suicide that those struggling with depression suffer, nor do they lose their faith in the midst of the dark night. Belief remains.

### **It isn't evil**

The dark night of the soul is not an evil to be endured; it's a good for which we should be grateful. Of course, it doesn't always seem that way. The thought of plunging into a spiritual abyss and losing all the sweetness in our relationship with God strikes few as appealing. But neither does surgery. Having cancer removed from our bodies isn't a fun process. Nevertheless, we submit to the surgeon's knife readily and quickly, knowing that the sooner we have the surgery, the sooner we can live a healthy, full life.

What's true on the natural level is true on the supernatural level. If we want to become the people God made us to be and live the lives he made us to live, we must let him excise sin and unhealthy attachments from our souls. There's no getting around it. Before we can enter heaven, it has to happen. It can happen in this life or it can happen in the next — in purgatory. But here is better. For the sooner we let God root out unhealthy attachments, the sooner we can get on with the business of being saints. And there's no better business than that.