

The Stages of Christian Mysticism – a Summary

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The Lord calls some people to a special life of contemplation that frequently includes mystical encounters with Him. Much of the time this takes the form of a call to monastic life – though not necessarily. Such a life requires great humility, discipline, and commitment to prayer, and in many cases, such as those of St. Theresa of Avila¹ and St. John of the Cross,² it is a call to mystical surrender. The three major stages of mystical life – the purgative, illuminative, and unitive – are described in detail by these two authors as well as contemporary mystics and scholars of mystical life³.

If one is called to a life of mystical union (i.e. mystical surrender to the unconditionally loving Absolute Being), it will entail dedicating several hours per day to contemplative prayer. This generally involves joining a contemplative monastery⁴ or living in a hermitage.⁵ In this

¹ St. Teresa of Avila was a 16th century Carmelite mystic responsible for the reform of the Carmelite order. She was a spiritual colleague of St. John of the Cross, and wrote extensively about the spiritual and mystical life – though in simpler and more autobiographical terms than he. Her most influential book which describes the stages toward mystical surrender-perfection-union is *Interior Castle*. In it, she describes seven mansions, the first three of which concern the stages of preparation from prayer and meditation to humility, openness to God's will, and the repudiation of sin in all its forms. The final four mansions describe perfection in the spiritual and mystical life – giving guidance on how to proceed from the purgative to the illuminative and unitive stages of prayer. Her emphasis on the beauty, transformative power, and ecstasy of divine love is among the most lucid in the history of spiritual writing. Her autobiography is a remarkably humble and captivating story about her call to the Carmelites and her personal progression through the seven mansions detailed in the *Interior Castle*. Novices may want to begin with the autobiography, and then proceed to the *Interior Castle* which is a more didactic approach to the seven stages of spiritual development. See St. Teresa of Avila 1976 *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, (Vol 1 and 2), trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh (Wash, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies).

² The well-known 16th century Carmelite mystic, St. John of the Cross, writes in a more poetic style making recourse to scholastic philosophy and the Church fathers. Though more difficult to comprehend than St. Theresa of Avila on initial readings, his works are at once practical, analytical, poetic, literary -- and of course, deeply biblical and spiritual. He gives a systematic progression from the purgative to the illuminative and to the unitive stage of mystical surrender (perfection) in his classic work, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. In other works he concentrates on the illuminative and unitive way – e.g. *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*. He also spends considerable time on an intermediary stage – the dark night of the soul which occurs before final union-surrender-perfection -- in a work by the same name.

See St. John of the Cross 2000 *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Wash, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies).

³ See Evelyn Underhill 2002 *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature....* See also Benedict Groeschel 1984 *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development* (Valley, NY: Crossroads Publishing Company). See also Bernard McGinn 2006 *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Random House/Modern Library).

⁴ These would include men's and women's monasteries in the following religious orders – the Cistercians, Trappists, Carthusians, and Discalced Carmelites. There are additional monasteries of religious women beyond those mentioned above, such as the Colettine Poor Clares, the Capuchin Poor Clares, and other monastic branches of women's religious orders.

⁵ Some hermitages welcome long term visitors such as the Camaldolese Hermitage in Big Sur, California, the Mt. Carmel Hermitage in Christoval, Texas, the Franciscan Contemplative Sisters in Toronto, Ohio, and the Benedictine Transfiguration Hermitage in Thorndike, Maine. There are many other contemplative

setting of silence and separation, a person in a state of grace makes a long-term interior journey with the Lord through three “states of the soul.”⁶

- the purgative state (in which the person begins building habits of charity⁷ enabling him to resist sin and vice⁸),
- the illuminative state (in which a person has sufficient habits of charity and virtue to resist major temptations enabling the Lord to come to him with significant beauty, grace, and affective consolation),
- the unitive state in which, after a period of final detachment from self – called “the dark night” (that enables near perfect charity and purity of heart – see below), a person enters into the fullness of divine love causing a state of unsurpassed ecstasy and union with the Absolute.

St. Teresa of Avila describes the unitive state as follows:

The loving exchange that takes place between the soul and God is so sweet that I beg Him in His goodness to give a taste of this love to anyone who thinks I am lying. On the days this lasted I went about as though stupefied. I desired neither to see nor to speak.... [I]t seems the Lord carries the soul away and places it in ecstasy; thus there is no room for pain or suffering, because joy soon enters in.⁹

The mystical life is a special call to dedicated contemplation given to individuals seeking near perfect authenticity, purity of heart, and charity through surrender to the unconditionally loving God. The mystic identifies true freedom – that is, the freedom of authentic love – with surrender to the heart of God. In a secular context, freedom is rarely identified with surrender, but in the spiritual or mystical life, it is – for the only way we can reach near perfect authenticity and love is through the guidance and influence of the unconditionally loving Lord.

hermitages throughout the U.S. and Canada that can be located by a web search. Those seeking a long term stay at a hermitage must speak directly with the superior of the house. Serious commitment to this kind of life may best be accomplished by joining a specific cloistered contemplative religious order.

⁶ These three states were initially articulated by Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite in 525 A.D. See *The Divine Names*, I, 2; IV, 12 f.; VII, 13. See also *Mystical Theology*, I, 3; II. St. Thomas Aquinas commented on these states of surrender/perfection (*Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 183A:4). Since that time these states of perfection have been used by mystical theologians to articulate the journey to complete union with God (see the citations from St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross above).

⁷ “*Caritas*” is the Latin translation for “*Agapē*” -- the distinctive word selected by early Christians to refer to Jesus’ unique notion of “self-sacrificial love for the good of the unique intrinsically lovable other.” This love is defined by Jesus himself in the beatitudes – “poor in spirit” (“humble-hearted”), “meek” (“gentle-hearted”), “hungering for righteousness” (“zealous for our and others’ salvation”), “mercy” (which includes both “forgiveness” and “compassion for the neglected and marginalized”), “purity of heart,” “being a peacemaker,” and “sacrificing oneself for the faith.” An extensive definition of this is given in Spitzer 2016 *God So Loved the World* (Chapter 1) and also in Chapter 6 of this volume.

⁸ See the extensive treatment of the 7 Deadly Sins in Chapter 4 of this volume.

⁹ Saint Teresa of Avila, 1976 “The Book of Her Life.” In *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Vol. 1. Trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications), p.194.

Most of us living active lives (away from a monastery or hermitage) experience our purification process by meeting the challenges of the world around us trying to maintain the teachings of Christ with our spouses, children, colleagues and supervisors at work, and even our best friends and fellow church members. Though contemplatives certainly work in the monastery, they have a different kind of purification which occurs sometimes in community and work life, but also in times of contemplation and prayer. The contemplative is sensitive to states and feelings of consolation and desolation which occur both inside and outside of prayer (see Chapter 15, First Topic),¹⁰ and the Lord uses these consolations and desolations to guide the contemplative on the journey to near perfect authenticity and charity. Though the end of the journey is the life of ecstasy (recounted above by St. Teresa of Avila), the journey itself is punctuated by desolation, unfulfilled desire, and darkness. These painful experiences are not punishments from God, but instruments of God to guide the contemplative to greater detachment from self and “things of the world,” which leads to greater authenticity, greater freedom to love, and greater freedom to surrender ultimately to Him in spiritual union.

In his lucid and poetic work, *The Spiritual Canticle*,¹¹ St. John of the Cross describes the consolations and desolations involved in the purgative state, the illuminative state, the dark night of the soul, the dark night of the spirit, and the unitive state. This work is autobiographical, and so it describes the states of the soul in terms of St. John’s progressively developing relationship with the Lord who is at times drawing him, leaving him, leading him, and fulfilling him. He uses the terms “the soul,” “the Bride,” and “she” to refer to the contemplative on his interior journey with the Lord, and uses the terms “the beloved,” “The Bridegroom,” and “He” to refer to Christ – the Son of the unconditionally loving Lord who lies at the interior of the soul, guiding, enticing, and influencing it toward discovery, surrender, perfection in love, union, beauty, and ecstasy.

St. John does not speak about the states of soul as achievements of an individual (which would be a solitary venture and a stoic victory). Rather, he sees it as a relationship between an individual and the Lord, which as it progresses in intimacy and union with the beloved, transforms the soul in authenticity and the capacity for charity (*agapē*). For St. John, we do not bring ourselves to the higher states of soul; rather, the Lord leads us by consolations and desolations, love and absence, and light and darkness to the state of perfection commensurate with union with Him. Yes—we must exert our will--and be disciplined, trusting, and persistent—to follow the bridegroom’s lead, but in the end, it is not we who conquer ourselves, but the Lord who leads us into a love that is self-perfecting. We may now look at some of the poetic descriptions that St. John uses to describe progressive growth in love—which is at once perfection and surrender—in the stages along the contemplative’s way.

The first or purgative stage (stanzas 1-21 in the poem and commentary of *The Spiritual Canticle*) is not the beginning of a life of faith. It assumes that an individual already has a vibrant faith life and is trying to purify the capacity for authenticity and charity by contending with the

¹⁰ See Spitzer 2015, *Finding True Happiness*, Chapter 8, Section II.

¹¹ Using the imagery of the biblical book *Canticle of Canticles (Song of Songs)*, St. John of the Cross describes the major states of the soul in an allegory about the changing and progressive relationship between the soul (“the bride”) and the Lord (“The Bridegroom”). See St. John of the Cross 1979 *Spiritual Canticle* in *The collected Works of St. John of the Cross I ed. by Kieran Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D.* (Wash. DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies pp 405-465.

seven deadly sins—gluttony/drunkenness, sloth, lust, greed, anger, envy and pride. Notice that these “sins” do not describe behaviors but rather interior attitudes that undermine authenticity and charity--thereby undermining progress in faith and relationship with the Lord. Thus an individual in the purgative state must already have a living faith, a desire to love and serve the Lord more deeply, and a commitment to resist the attitudes (deadly sins) that undermine this faith and desire.

In a word, an individual in the purgative state must already be on the road to salvation through virtue, faith, and prayer. This is precisely what allows the relationship between him and the Beloved (Christ) to develop and flourish in progressive states of surrender and perfection.

The Lord calls some individuals in this state to an intense longing for Him in the innermost depth of their spirit. This leads to a search for Him. He sees glimmers of the Beloved in the natural world – the majesty of mountains, sea, and forests – as well as signs of His love in the littlest of things – leaves, birds, and other creatures. When the contemplative walks through a forest or a garden, he does not simply see trees and leaves—he does not simply hear birds and the wind. The Lord makes his presence known, in these natural objects, and when the contemplative’s soul becomes attuned to the presence of his beloved in natural beauty and the voice of his beloved in wind and birds—his desire is awakened even more intensely. He is so filled with love that he speaks poetically—even without this literary capacity. It is almost as if the poetry that comes from him is assisted by the one whom he loves. In such states, his heart is filled with the awareness of being loved, and he cannot help himself -- he loves the One who has loved him first—out of sheer excitement, fulfillment, and gratitude.¹² After this intense experience, the Beloved fades away, and the contemplative is once again filled with desire and longing for the Beloved.

The purgative way may last for years – with the contemplative trying to remain vigilant in virtue, faith, and prayer despite temptations coming from the senses, egocentricity, and even the devil. Inasmuch as the contemplative perseveres in his deepening of virtue, faith, and prayer, he is gradually purified of the desire to give into temptations which enkindles his desire to experience the love of his Beloved (Christ). If the Beloved does not respond with at least momentary glimmers of loving consolation, the absence is acutely felt which causes spiritual heartache. Yet if he perseveres in trust, hope, and love – perseveres on the path to deeper virtue, faith, and prayer – this heartache will have the effect of even deeper purification.

We might specify the dimensions of the purgative way – using Saint John’s vocabulary and concepts -- as follows. When a contemplative enters the purgative way, he has already decided to dedicate himself to the pursuit of holiness in order to make himself a perfect offering to the one he loves – the unconditionally loving Lord who has loved him first. He is filled with an awareness that his true dignity, fulfillment, and destiny are to be found in this loving God, and is grateful for all that God has given him – not only family, talents, his immortal soul, and many blessings throughout life, but also for being led to faith, awareness, and understanding of Jesus Christ and His Father. Moved by this need for and gratitude to God, the contemplative embarks

¹² St. John of the Cross *Spiritual Canticle* pp. 432-437. This corresponds to the commentary on stanzas 4-6 of the poem.

on the path to greater holiness – authenticity and purity of love through the pursuit of virtue and the purification of the senses, the imagination, and the mind.

This pursuit of deeper holiness and purification includes what John calls “dark nights”. There are four dark nights – the active dark night of the senses, the passive dark night of the senses, then the active dark night of the spirit, and the passive dark night of the spirit. The first two (the active and passive dark nights of the *senses*) are part of the purgative way that prepare the contemplative to move to the illuminative way¹³ -- while the second two (the active and passive dark nights of the *spirit*) are part of the illuminative way—preparing the contemplative to move toward the unitive way.¹⁴ We will restrict ourselves to the first two dark nights here, and then address the others when we explain the illuminative way below.

An active dark night is one that is actively pursued by the contemplative seeking greater holiness while a passive dark night is one that God initiates by withdrawing consolations, depriving the soul or the spirit of even the ordinary sense of divine love, peace, and beauty.

In the purgative way, the contemplative moved by need, gratitude and love, pursues the path of virtue, first, by a purification of the senses. This entails greatly simplifying life – restricting food, drink, and “creature comforts”. He also significantly limits television, radio, other forms of media, and even convivial, but unnecessary talking. He does this not because there is anything wrong with them per se, but because they distract him from his true intention which is to open himself to the love of God alone – and to discipline himself in simplicity and modesty, putting prayer, study, and spiritual work before comfort. The objective is to become detached or free from desires of the senses, particularly excesses leading toward the deadly sins of gluttony/drunkenness, lust, and sloth.

Though St. John indicates that he wrote *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* for some of his Carmelite brothers and sisters—tailoring many of his suggestions for them and other contemplatives—he states explicitly that he intends to give others important advice on how to pursue perfectly loving union with the Lord. This does not mean that all non-contemplatives seeking mystical union with God in this life should follow all of his suggestions, but only those that they can reasonably accomplish with the responsibilities they have in life. The main point John is trying to make for all of us is that simplicity of life -- e.g. simplicity of goods and sensory stimulation (and the discipline necessary to restrain the desires for them) – is necessary for detachment or freedom from creature comforts – and detachment or freedom from creature comforts is necessary to open oneself ever more deeply to loving union with the Lord. Thus, if we really desire deeply consoling and loving union with God through prayer, we will have to

¹³ These dark nights are described in detail—with instructions for moving through them—in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. See St. John of the Cross, 1979 “The Ascent of Mount Carmel” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ed and trans by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Wash DC: ICS Publications pp 73-292

¹⁴ St. John speaks of the active and passive dark night of the spirit particularly in the *Dark Night of the Soul* which is an extension of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Most scholars believe that the two books should be considered a single work with two parts--the former (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*) which emphasizes the purification of the senses, and the latter (*The Dark Night of the Soul*) which emphasizes the purification of the spirit (the mind, memory, and will). See St. John of the Cross 1979 “The Dark night of the Soul” in *the Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* pp 293-389.

detach ourselves from creature comforts, and this, in turn, requires simplicity, self-discipline, and even voluntary deprivation from these stimuli.¹⁵

The active night of the senses is also concerned with resistance to three deadly sins of the body (gluttony/drunkenness, lust and sloth) and the cultivation of virtues (good habits of the will) to actively oppose these deadly sins and the temptations that initiate them in the long term. St. John recommends a three-fold process to do this:

1. Training the mind to recognize when temptation toward the three deadly bodily sins is beginning to occur (originating either from within the self or from the devil), and then training the will to “nip them in the bud” – that is to choose the love of God before the temptation begins to gain momentum. This is a difficult and long road, but continued practice builds virtue.
2. By recalling the peace, consolation and love experienced from the Divine Beloved – causing true gratitude for His blessings -- and by giving more time to contemplative prayer, our desire for union with God becomes more intense-- which can be compared to and levered against our aberrant desires for sins of the body (gluttony/drunkenness, sloth, and lust).
3. By repeatedly nipping aberrant desires in the bud (self-discipline), by recalling the consolations of the Lord, and by intensifying our contemplative prayer, we conscientiously cultivate virtues opposed to the three deadly sins of the body—temperance to oppose gluttony/drunkenness, fortitude to oppose sloth, and chastity (viewed through the examples of Jesus and Mary) to oppose lust.

This pursuit is not pure asceticism because God rewards the contemplative with an increased sense of His presence, peace, consolation, and joy. Though this increased sense of peace, love, consolation, and joy is not continuously present, the Lord provides it frequently during times of prayer and also unexpectedly throughout the day.

Though the active dark night of the senses brings peace, consolation, and confidence—as well as an alleviation of guilt-- the contemplative may begin to develop a sense of pride (e.g., “I have really accomplished so much in the spiritual life”) or vanity (“I am making greater progress than Joe and Tom”) or a belief that he has reached the objective of the spiritual life because God has given him a sense of peace, consolation, and confidence. At this juncture, for the contemplative’s own good, the Lord begins to withdraw the above consolations and spiritual gifts, causing the contemplative to feel a sense of aridity (dryness), spiritual emptiness, or even a renewed sense of guilt. The contemplative may believe that he has done something wrong, and as a result intensify his efforts at restraining his senses. However, this is frequently not the problem—or the solution. A good spiritual director will help him to see that the Lord is withholding His consolation and felt presence to prevent him from falling into spiritual problems – and so the true solution is to become more *humble* about spiritual progress, more respectful of others’ relationship with the Lord, and more desirous of being in union with God (instead of

¹⁵ St. Ignatius of Loyola sets this same principal up for more active people in the very first part of his *Spiritual Exercises* called “The First Principle and Foundation.” See Ignatius of Loyola *Spiritual Exercises* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp XX

desiring the consolation of God). These last points concern the transition from the dark night of the senses (in the purgative way) to the dark night of the spirit (in the illuminative way).

As the contemplative moves from the purgative way into the illuminative way—having purified his senses in a spirit of humility, respect for others, and desire for the Divine Beloved Himself, he will experience freedom from the deadly sins of gluttony/drunkenness, lust and sloth and detachment from the sensorial world in order to be open to the Divine Beloved. The Lord rewards him with the fruits of this freedom and detachment with abundant consolation and intense joy. St. John describes this consolation in *The Spiritual Canticle* using metaphor and poetic language. Recall that “she” and “the bride” refer to the contemplative, and that “he” and “the Beloved” refer to the Lord of Love (Christ):

Since she desires the divine eyes with such yearnings, the Beloved reveals to her some rays of His grandeur and divinity, which cause her to go out of herself in rapture and ecstasy.

This flight in which the soul is placed after much spiritual activity is called spiritual espousal. God communicates great things about Himself, beautifies her and adorns her with gifts and virtues. Her vehement longings and complaints of love cease, and a state of peace, delight, and gentleness of love commences.¹⁶

The contemplative then pursues the active dark night of the spirit in which he moves beyond the purification of his senses and imagination, to the purification of his spirit. For John, the spirit is the domain in which God connects directly with the contemplative. Thus it is the psychic domain through which we become aware of God Himself as well as His perfection in truth, love, goodness and beauty, and is also the ground of mind, memory, and will. The mind is not the imagination (picture-thinking), but rather the agency through which conceptual ideas, abstraction, and syntactically meaningful language occurs. The memory is the ability to remember and recall, and the will is the capacity to choose – between egocentricity or love, self-aggrandizement or self-surrender, self-idolatry or worship of God, domination or respect—to choose between two fundamental directions—“toward the self” or “away from the self toward God and others.”

When we spoke of the purification of the senses, we addressed freedom from gluttony/drunkenness, lust, and sloth. Now as we address the purification of the spirit, we are concerned with freedom from the other four deadly sins—greed, anger, envy, and pride—which are sins of the spirit in which ego-centricity and self-aggrandizement are emphasized above the love of God and neighbor. The contemplative, who has moved from the purgative way is not in danger of overtly and directly choosing himself over God and others, but he is in danger of implicitly, indirectly and subtly doing so. There are many subtle and “rationalizable” ways of placing the self above God and others through greed, anger, envy, and pride (which includes both vanity and the lust for power), and as the contemplative moves into the illuminative way, he

¹⁶ St. John of the Cross 1979 “The Spiritual Canticle” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, p 406

finds himself besieged and hindered by them – and so he pursues the purification of his spirit in the active dark night of the spirit.

To do this, the contemplative focuses his mental activity on the single purpose of being united with God. Bolstered by the peace and consolations of God, he pursues virtue and prayer to purify his mind, memory, and will from the temptation toward greed, anger, envy, and pride (including vanity and the lust for power). Once again, a contemplative can implement the three techniques discussed above concerning the active night of the senses. This time, he takes the emphasis off of the sins of the senses and puts it on the sins of the spirit – greed, envy, anger, and pride.

1. Training the mind to recognize when temptation toward egocentricity and its four deadly sins (originating either from within the self or from the devil) is starting to occur, and then training the will to “nip them in the bud” – that is to choose God and/or others above the self before these temptations begin to gain momentum. This is a difficult and long road, but continued practice builds virtue.
2. By recalling the peace, consolation and love experienced from the Divine Beloved—causing deep gratitude to Him—and by giving more time to contemplative prayer, our desire for union with God becomes more intense-- which can be compared to and levered against our desires for egocentric, dominating, self-aggrandizing and self-idolatrous desires (the aberrant desires of the spirit).
3. By repeatedly nipping aberrant desires in the bud (self-discipline), by recalling the consolations of the Lord, and by intensifying our contemplative prayer, we conscientiously cultivate virtues opposed to the four sins of the spirit – generosity to oppose greed, gentle-heartedness and forgiveness to oppose anger, gratitude to oppose envy, and humility and charity to oppose pride, vanity, and lust for power.

As the contemplative continues in his efforts to discipline the sins of the spirit – as well as continued temptations to the sins of the senses – he will once again find himself experiencing increased peace, sacredness, love, and joy. These experiences will lead him gradually to shift from meditation to contemplation. Meditation, for St. John, uses imagination and reason to move into prayer – reflecting on a particular passage of scripture, thinking about a theological truth, meditating on the mysteries of the rosary, reflecting on the beatitudes or reflecting on the imitation of Christ. Contemplation is passive from the vantage point of the contemplative, because God is responsible for the action. As the contemplative opens himself to the Lord in prayer, the Lord brings consolation – peace, joy, unity, sacredness, and love – to the contemplative. In order to do this, the contemplative must stop meditating – stop actively reflecting, imagining, and reasoning so that his soul will be clear to receive the consolations that the Lord is waiting to bestow on him.¹⁷

¹⁷ St. John of the Cross elucidates the signs that mark when a contemplative should stop meditating to clear his mind for the coming of the Lord in contemplation. See the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Chapter 13, Book 2.

A brief consideration of active thought versus passive thought may help to clarify this. There is no mystery about “active thought” (referred to as reason, or in Latin, “ratio”), because it is what we do every day—reflecting on the many disciplines of the arts and sciences (active *theoretical* thought) and studying and planning for practical activities we are about to perform (active *practical* thought). However, passive thought (contemplation -- or in Latin “intellectus”) is much more mysterious for contemporary culture.¹⁸ So what is passive thought? It is not assembling data, logically analyzing it, and anticipating results (the domain of active thoughts). Rather, it is opening oneself to the Divine Presence – first in the beauty of the natural world, then in the goodness and love of human beings (made in the image of God) then in the contemplation of Jesus Christ (the Incarnate Son of God) and then in the mystical presence of the Divine Beloved in prayer. The point of passive thought is not to gain an insight or to increase worldly knowledge, but rather to behold, and appreciate, and be filled with the Divine presence, beauty, goodness and love offered by the Divine Beloved—and to naturally respond to Him with an outpouring of love. As one progresses in the beholding, appreciating, and being filled with the presence, beauty and love of God in nature, in human beings, in Jesus Christ, and in the Divine Beloved Himself, one is simultaneously filled with a sense of joy, sacredness, and unity.

Contemplation can have an even purer form that goes beyond our openness and appreciation of the presence of God in nature, human beings, and Jesus Christ – it can be completely initiated by God Himself. This can occur by surprise – when God simply comes to the contemplative who is not praying or catching “sight” of Him in nature, people, or Jesus – or when the contemplative -- who is in the illuminative way (or progressing through the purgative way) -- enters into prayer with very little active thought. When the Lord comes in this purer form, He overwhelms the contemplative with His loving, sacred, unifying, consoling presence, and places him in a state of what St. Teresa of Avila calls “ecstasy.” The contemplative, as John notes above, loses the sense of time and worldly concern caught up in a state of loving rapture.

This loving, joy-filled, unifying, and sacred consolation is in no way produced by the human psyche. It is not simply a feeling – it includes a profound awareness of another loving consciousness who is unmistakable – indeed more present than any human being could be (except of course, that there is not a sensory image accompanying the empathetic, interpersonal awareness of the other). Moreover, this hyper-present Consciousness is clearly transcendent and overwhelming in its love and beauty. It is not simply the wholly other – it is also the wholly loving and glorious other – at once completely beyond the contemplative and intimately present to him. Thus the divine beloved is not only hyper-present, but also hyper-loving, hyper-beautiful, and hyper-intimate. When He ceases to be present, the heart is left longing – nay, yearning – for Him to return which moves the contemplative to seek Him with even greater simplicity, discipline, and self-sacrifice.

Thus, the illuminative way is marked by consolations of many kinds – from little appearances of the Divine Beloved in nature, people, and Jesus – to profound appearances of the Divine Beloved filled with an overwhelming sense of His sacred, loving, consoling presence. Yet, the illuminative way is only spiritual espousal – the way of proficiency – it is not yet “marriage,” unity, or perfection. Thus the contemplative must work hard on the active night of

¹⁸ Josef Peiper has written an excellent treatise on passive thought (“intellectus”) and its decline in modern culture in his essay *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*.

the spirit – and contend with renewed temptations of the senses. As he actively disciplines himself, reflects on God’s goodness and gratitude, and gives himself to contemplative prayer, God graces him not only with the capacity and gift of virtue (to replace the deadly sins), but also the light of consolation to assure him of His presence and love.

There is still one more stage of purification required for the contemplative to move from the illuminative way to the unitive way – perhaps the most difficult purification of all – the passive dark night of the spirit. As can be seen, the illuminative way is marked by profound consolation coming from the loving presence of God, which can lead the contemplative to fix his desire and attention on this loving consolation. Yet the Lord desires the contemplative to fix his desire on Him – on His *self-sacrificial* love and His complete *gift of self*. This has often been described as refocusing the contemplative from the consolations of God to the God of all consolation. The final dimension of falling in love with God is to share in His self-sacrificial spirit – His Son’s complete gift of self in His passion and death – for the final triumph of love over evil. In order to give the contemplative the same opportunity to purify his love so that it becomes as pure as that of Jesus Christ, the Lord calls the contemplative to a period of self-sacrifice – a period of true death to self and gift of self, requiring total trust in Him. Here, God withdraws His loving presence from the contemplative who has formerly experienced it with profound consolation – and the contemplative finds himself wandering not just in a desert, but in a wasteland of emptiness, loneliness, and alienation filled with anxiety and even the darkness of depression. As the contemplative enters into this passive dark night of the spirit (oftentimes generically referred to as “the dark night of the soul”), God not only removes His *extraordinary* consolations -- which He has lavished on the contemplative – but also His ordinary consolation that keeps all of us wholly in hope and awareness of God.

Most people of faith do not even notice what might be termed “ordinary consolation” because it is so omnipresent. When we turn to the Lord in faith, He gives us a sense of His presence which alleviates our feelings of cosmic emptiness, alienation, and loneliness (see Chapter 13, Fifth Topic) and this ordinary consolation continues unabated unless we begin to move off of our faith journey to a life of overt sin or unbelief. When we first begin our faith journey, the movement from cosmic emptiness, alienation and loneliness, to one of peace, hope, and awareness of God’s presence can be quite palpable, and if we maintain our faith commitment it can become so “normal” that it is like a radio playing in the background of a household where it is turned on incessantly. After a while, the only time the residents notice it is when it is switched off. As noted above, God can “switch off” ordinary consolation when we are moving out of a life of faith toward a life of darkness, and He uses the resultant feelings of cosmic emptiness, alienation, and loneliness as a sort of warning to alert us to our self-destructive course of action. However, He does not need to do this for a contemplative who is in the illuminative way – who has reached a state of proficiency in virtue and the spiritual life.

The contemplative has need of only one thing – the final purification of his love into the completely self-sacrificial love of Christ Himself -- a self-sacrificial love which can be joined to Jesus’, and offered up for the salvation of all souls and the good of His mystical body – the Church. Since the contemplative has already experienced the ardor, rapture, and ecstasy of God’s sacred and loving presence, the removal of ordinary consolation is incredibly painful – tantamount to a kind of slow torture – a passion in and of itself. Yet the contemplative will be

aware of why the Lord is doing this – at least mentally – and will know that the Lord is completing his process of purification and offering the opportunity to join Him on the cross for the salvation of the world. Though the contemplative is aware of this, and tries to place his trust completely in the Lord, it is incredibly painful and lonely and empty – and he is besieged with temptations to doubt the Lord – and even to doubt in His very presence. He cannot help but cry out in anguish, and ask the Lord for relief, but in the end, the Lord will challenge him to be like Himself – to trust that He is there even if the contemplative cannot feel Him – to trust that the emptiness and sacrifice will be joined to His sacrifice even though he cannot sense it – to trust that his sacrifice will lead to the salvation of the world even though he cannot see how – and to trust that he will be brought into the full purification of His love, and into a state of loving perfection so great that it is only exceeded by the beatific vision which is to come – the unitive way – the state of perfection.

St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Paul of the Cross, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and St. Teresa of Calcutta are but a few of the contemplatives who underwent this dark night, and came out to the other side in ecstasy. St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Teresa of Calcutta experienced this state of ecstasy for a very short time before proceeding to the beatific vision, but St. Teresa of Avila, St. John, and St. Paul of the Cross, among others, lived long enough to speak and write extensively about it.

Saint John summarizes the freedom from passions and the devil, and the blessings of being in unity with the Lord that occurs when the Lord leads the soul into spiritual marriage:

The bride knows that now her will's desire is detached from all things and attached to her God in most intimate love; that the sensory part of her soul, with all its strengths, faculties, and appetites, is in harmony with the spirit, and its rebelliousness brought into subjection; that the devil is now conquered and far withdrawn as a result of her varied and prolonged spiritual activity and combat; that her soul is united and transformed with an abundance of heavenly riches and gifts; and that consequently she is now well prepared, disposed, and strong, leaning on her Beloved, so as to come up from the desert of death, flowing with delights, to the glorious thrones of her Bridegroom.¹⁹

In *The living Flame of Love*, St. John gives a brief glimpse of what it is like to come up from the desert of death with spiritual delights to the throne of the Bridegroom:

And in your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory, How tenderly you swell my heart with love!
I do not desire to speak of this spiration, filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God, for I am aware of being incapable of doing so; and were I to try, it might seem less than it is. It is a spiration that God produces in the soul, in which, by that awakening of lofty knowledge of the Godhead, he breathes the Holy Spirit in it in the same proportion as its knowledge and understanding of him, absorbing it most profoundly in the Holy Spirit, rousing its love with a divine exquisite quality and delicacy according to what it beholds in him. Since

¹⁹ St. John of the Cross *Spiritual Canticle* Stanza 40, Section 1.

the breathing is filled with good and glory, the Holy Spirit, through this breathing, filled the soul with good and glory in which he enkindled it in love of himself, indescribably and incomprehensibly, in the depths of God, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.²⁰

Evelyn Underhill, who compiled one of the most deep and comprehensive studies of mysticism elaborates this final state of unity or communion with the Lord, and the ecstasy and rapture that accompanies it:

Since the object of all contemplation is the production of that state of intimate communion in which the mystics declare that the self is “in God and God is in her,” it might be supposed that the orison of union represented the end of mystical activity, in so far as it is concerned with the attainment of a transitory but exalted consciousness of “oneness with the Absolute.” Nearly all the great contemplatives, however, describe as a distinct, and regard as a more advanced phase of the spiritual consciousness, the group of definitely ecstatic states in which the concentration of interest on the Transcendent is so complete, the gathering up and pouring out of life on this one point so intense, that the subject is more or less entranced, and becomes, for the time of the ecstasy, unconscious of the external world.²¹

It must be reiterated that these are not mere feelings of rapture and ecstasy, but rather an awareness of the consciousness of the Absolute into whom the mystic is absorbed. Ecstasy and rapture accompany this relational state with the Absolute, but they are only the result of being filled by the one who is loving them – the One who is perfect and unconditional love, goodness, beauty, and being. This union with absolute love is the culmination of mystical life, and it anticipates only one greater state – the beatific vision in Heaven.

²⁰ St. John of the Cross *Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 17

²¹ Evelyn Underhill 191 *Mysticism* (Methuen p. 427).