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ACTIVE NIGHT OF THE SENSES AND SPIRIT

By John Coates

No one can doubt the need for Carmelites to spend time with St. John of the Cross and his writings concerning the Dark Night. Here John speaks of Purgation; the soul's journey of surrender to God's love.

In our culture we have become accustomed to immediate gratification. We have instant coffee, instant meals; now we want instant holiness. Holiness means different things to different people, but whatever it is, it will not be what we expected it to be when and if we achieve it.

When John of the Cross asks God to "Perfect it, if it be Thy will," I do not believe he is asking for instant perfection. Perfection is not achieved overnight nor will it be achieved totally in this life. It is a life-long journey; a journey that we must travel with our own weaknesses, faults and imperfections as well as with the faults and shortcomings of others. This state we call perfection is a long, hard trek up the mountain. God will not make this journey for us, but He will make it with us.

Active and passive purgation of the spirit follows active and passive purgation of the senses. The former I have addressed earlier. No spiritual purgation can begin without God's inspiration. It is God Who inspires us and gives us the strength and perseverance to complete the task. God will not do for us that which we can do for ourselves; little or nothing can be done without our cooperation.

Purgation as used here means what, with God's help, we try to discipline certain inordinate appetites and things to which we are attached; things that we desire or use contrary to God's will and intention for us; persons or things we place between God and ourselves. When we love these persons or things inordinately they become a hindrance in our striving for union with God. When we inordinately seek after created things, they become obstacles and often can be removed only by God. However, most of them can and must be removed by our own determination and effort. To attain Divine Union with God, we must accept the fact that all of our attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God's sight.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Ascent, p 123, Collected Works of St John of the Cross)

Let us not forget that we become like that which we love, therefore, we must carefully choose the persons and things to which we become attached. If we are truly seeking God, we must avoid all that would distract us from Him. Of course this does not mean that we are not to love, respect and pray for others, only that we are not to let them lead us into occasions of sin. Most of us know some persons with whom we may spend only a few minutes and consequently become upset for the rest of the day. These persons should be avoided whenever possible. Therefore, if we are to ascend the mountain of God's love, we must choose our friends carefully and renounce all things that cause unrest in our soul by leaving them at the bottom of the mountain.

Likewise, we must restrict our appetites; a task which will never be easy. The road and ascent to God necessarily demand an habitual effort to renounce and mortify the appetites. This effort, in order to be most effective, needs to be focused and undivided. We must not try to do everything at once and must always ask God for His help.

By denying our untr restrained appetites and repenting of them we will soon find that they are no longer giants but only shadows on the walls of our imagination; shadows that once frightened us and held us in chains, possibly for years. Having made the effort, we will see, much to our surprise, that God will substitute new garments for the old ones. The soul will be clothed with a new understanding of God once the will is stripped of all the old cravings and satisfactions. God will vest the soul with new knowledge and the old ideas and images will be cast aside. It is God Who causes all that is of the old self, those abilities of our natural being, to cease and Who clothes all our faculties with new supernatural abilities. As a result, our human activities now become divine. This transformation is a slow process that takes much time. Although God could transform us instantly, He usually does not work that way. He has His own timetable: At the "appointed" time God will deliver us. Those faults deeply rooted in our character will be eradicated by prayer and effort. For as Christ said, "All the Father has given Me is Mine, and no one can pluck them out of My hand."

We must surrender to God totally if we are to be like Jesus. Total surrender means surrendering our loves, fears, faults and prejudices; our spouse, families and friends; and, most especially, our own will. This surrender is offered, not out of fear, but out of love for Christ.

In following our Holy Teachers, St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, in our imitation of Jesus, let us strive to love Christ excessively; let this be our only fault. It is in loving God excessively that we allow Him to make of us what He wills and not what we will. Following Christ is easy once we give up self. When we have chosen Christ we don't have to make any other choices.

Thus it must be: when we don't FEEL like loving — love; when we don't FEEL like being kind — be kind. We must work on those negative feelings that spring from our contrary nature and tap into the good things that make us like God, for God commands us to be like Him: "Be ye holy as I am holy." When we surrender our negative feelings, our forgetfulness, our poor health, our regrets of yesterday and our fears of tomorrow, our impure thoughts and desires — when we surrender all of these things to Christ — then God will use these imperfect things to make us perfect. Just as God created the world out of chaos and confusion, He will make us holy out of our unholiness.

Purification of the senses, passive purification, is God's work and is only made possible through the merits of Christ. We all believe in the Humanity of Christ and this makes Him our Brother. Since Christ was like us in everything but sin, what logically follows is that He experienced the same fears and anxieties that we experience. Just as Jesus relied on His faith in and love for His Heavenly Father, so must we.

Surrender and purgation should not be thought of as something negative but as that positive effort which draws us closer to God. However, this cannot be done without detachment.

Some of us take too much pride in our holiness. This causes us to spend great amounts of time trying to get some feeling and satisfaction in performing acts of love rather than humbly praising and reverencing God dwelling within us.<sup>2</sup> Some may go about this in such a way that, if they do not procure any sensible feeling and satisfaction, they think they have accomplished nothing. As a result, they judge very poorly of God and fail to understand that the sensory benefits are least important and that the invisible grace received is the greater blessing. God often withdraws sensory delight and pleasure so that the soul might set her eyes of faith on the invisible grace. We should no longer desire to feel or taste God as if He were comprehensible and accessible to us. This is the desire of beginners and can be a serious imperfection because it involves impurity of faith and is opposed to God's way.

<sup>2</sup> (p. 372, Mysticism by Evelyn Underhill. Image Books, Double Day.)

How many of us still seek sensory satisfaction in our prayer life? Perhaps not a few. Do we often neglect our spiritual exercises and the Corporal Works of Mercy because we get little or no comfort from them? True love of God is an act of the will. If God desires to console us, we should accept the gift with humility but not try to prolong the enjoyment of the consolations.

It is to be understood that purgation of the spirit raises us to a new level of understanding and to a new way of loving. Our sense of awareness is widened as regards our finding satisfaction in God and our memory is purified also. Some of this purification is done by our own efforts and some by God's intervention. God instructs the soul secretly and teaches her the perfection of love without the soul doing anything herself or understanding how this has happened.

Bear in mind that this activity in the soul is contemplative; this is God's loving wisdom acting on the soul; this infusion purges and illumines the soul. When these two contraries of purgation and illumination act on the soul, they cause great stress. At this time, advice from an experienced spiritual director and a deep faith in our Lord and Savior are much needed, since the soul feels she is rejected by God and thinks she will never be worthy of Him. This is due to the fact that, in this stage of spiritual development, the intellect is purged of its light, the will of its affections and the memory of its discursive knowledge. Since this new light is so pure and so general, it is not particularized by any distinct object of affection. This is a characteristic of the spirit purged and annihilated of all particular knowledge and affection. Psychologists would say this purgation contributes to the remaking of character, the growth of the new person and a transmutation in God.

The "game" of love, those rapid oscillations between an joyous and a painful consciousness, is when God plays, as it were, "hide and seek" with the questing soul. This seems to occur at the beginning of a new period of the mystical way: a period between purgation and illumination; between extreme joy and security.

Things try us when our strength is not adequate to overcome them: when they are abnormally difficult or we are abnormally weak. We are given an intense perception of the purity of God and, with this enlightened perception, we seem to become more and more impure. In reality, this state itself is very purifying. Although we don't realize it because our imagination, in a state of confusion, gives us no rest. While in this state we often find in ourselves a hardness toward God, an insensibility toward His mercies and a difficulty in perceiving or remembering any good thing that we might have done in our whole life. The good appears to be evil and that which is terrible seems to be the

state that will last for ever. Often those in this condition believe that both this world and the next are in league against them. Losses of health or friendships, domestic vexations, all these set-backs seem to increase and keep pace with our interior grief. Self-control and power-of-attention are diminished. Often these people feel stupefied and impotent; unable to follow or understand even the familiar liturgy of the Church; incapable of all prayer and good works; perpetually attracted by worldly things previously renounced yet quickly wearied by them. It is an amazing thing that a person advanced in the way of perfection often seems to go to pieces over the slightest set-back or mishap. Such souls may feel that God has given permission both to men and demons to torment His holy ones.

The self, in its necessary movement towards higher levels of reality, leaves behind certain familiar elements of its world, long beloved and not quite out-grown, as a child must do when the hard transition from nursery to school must be made. Destruction and construction go together. The exhaustion and ruin of the illuminated consciousness is the signal for the onward movement of the self toward other, deeper centers. The feeling of deprivation and inadequacy which comes from loss of that consciousness is an indirect stimulus to new growth. The self is being pushed into a new world where it does not feel at home. It has not yet reached the point when it can be at peace with this new way of life, this new way of experiencing God.

When God withdraws the soul from the old and familiar, the resulting darkness and confusion leave the soul frightened. The soul can do little but surrender to the inevitable process of things: the operation of that never-resting spirit of life which is pressing her on towards a new and higher state in which she shall not only see reality but become real herself.

In conclusion, the Dark Night of the soul is due to the double purgation of the exhaustion of an old state and the growth towards a new consciousness. It is a "growing pain" in the process of the self's growth toward attachment to the Absolute. Parallel with the mental oscillation, upheaval and readjustments through which the unstable psycho-physical person moves to new centers of consciousness runs the spiritual oscillation of the striving and ascending spiritual person whose soul feels more alone and weaker than before she entered this journey of the Dark Night. But, as our Holy Father, St. John of the Cross, has assured us, it is in journeying through this Dark Night of faith that the soul reaches the Light of Dawn that illumines our soul - union with God alone.