

## Difficulties in Prayer Part 1

An Overview: Spirituality St. John of the Cross  
Fr. Moise, ocd Broussey 8/19

To fully understand the **difficulties in prayer**, a rapid overview of the soul's **spiritual journey** in the school of St. John of the Cross is important. The Saint calls this journey the **Blessed Adventure** or the quest of the soul for union with God.

A discussion of the difficulties in prayer can't be properly understood and loses its relevance unless it is situated within the context of the big picture. Without a sound foundation, it is hard to grasp the **dynamic at the root of the difficulties** because they distinguish themselves in relationship to the major guideposts of spiritual life.

The spiritual journey doesn't occur as successive steps, but as guideposts that are connected to the difficulties. If we don't understand the big picture, we will study the difficulties but won't know **when to expect them**.

In the spiritual journey there is a **beginning and an endpoint**. The endpoint is union of the soul with God. We are made to be united with God. We strive towards this union which can take place in this world through love. It takes place completely in the vision when we see God face to face. We are made to be loved by God. It is the endpoint that St. John of the Cross lays out for us.

John of the Cross is a **spiritual father, a teacher, a spiritual guide**. He doesn't talk about doctrine. He takes us by the hand and leads us along this path. He points out the **traps and the difficulties** along the way, and what to do about them. If you have understood this, you won't have any trouble reading his works that can appear daunting if you consider his style, but it isn't intellectual doctrine.

He is a spiritual father who only wants to **guide us to union with God**. He wants us to journey on this path and shows us the traps to avoid and the attitudes to adopt to correspond with God's love.

## Active Nights

Once again, there is an end, a goal, but there is also a beginning. The **beginning** is the world of passions and appearances. It is a narrow world where the **senses are in charge** and control the intellect which rebels against God. There is an **egocentricity** of the **appetites** within us, a certain deviation of the senses and of what is created. The **soul** is as if **blinded and no longer reflects the image of God**. The future of man is paralyzed, it is even regressing.

This is the beginning. We all started here. Then we had a **conversion** that turned us towards God. We learned on our own to turn away from all that brought us pleasure and happiness. This is what St. John of the Cross calls the **active night**. The **active purification** of both the **senses** and the **spirit**.

We were still very much anchored to the world and enjoyed worldly pleasures at the time of conversion. Gradually these worldly occupations leave us **indifferent**. When invited, we go, but reluctantly, and only out of courtesy to maintain family relationships. These activities are no longer important to us.

There is work that we need to do to support this grace that causes us to leave behind all that we once enjoyed. This is the **active night of the senses**. We force ourselves to leave these things behind for God. We 'make room' in ourselves and our lives not just to 'make room' but to **'make room' for God**.

At one point perhaps, we avidly read detective novels along with the many other things that fed our intellect. Then, we noticed that we had an interest in the word of God. There is work being done at the level of the spirit. Our will is turning towards God. Our memory is striving to reflect the image of God. There is **active** work taking place at the level of the senses and the spirit. It is the **active night of the senses**.

## Passive Nights

The work that we do on our own is not enough however to make us over in God's image. God needs to help us because he alone can fully adapt us to himself. God now takes over and does the work in our place. We begin to experience God's passive action in us. It's the **purifying action of God**, God's transformative action or the **passive night of the senses and of the spirit**.

It is God who **purifies our senses** by no longer communicating with us at the level of our senses but through our **spirit**.

Before, when we prayed we would get good feelings. We felt God's presence. At mass the Word of God spoke to our intellect and produced ideas in our imagination that enchanted us.

But suddenly it **ended**, and now we feel nothing. We are having trouble praying. We think God has left us. He seems absent. Work is however being done at a spiritual level. God wants to get us used to him, used to his spirit. He is spiritual. He isn't a part of the sensory world.

He initially adapted himself to us and filled us with **sensory graces** that were **felt** and that led to our **conversion**. We exalted in him.

At a certain point, however, God wants to fill us even more. He wants to raise us up to the spiritual level. This is very challenging for us as sensory beings in the flesh.

Our **senses** are put at '**half-mast**'. They are not being used. We are lost. We will understand better when we look at spiritual dryness (Part 3) how this work is accomplished, how God acts and what attitudes to adopt at this stage.

In the **beginning**, in the **active night of the senses and of the spirit**, we particularly notice the **distractions** because we just left the world and turned towards God. The world isn't going to let us go so easily though. Our memories and our senses have been spoiled for a long time by the things of the world. It will be difficult for us to become recollected.

At this second level, the **passive night, dryness** (Part 3) will be noticed the most. We have extracted our senses from the world to progress on the spiritual path. Our Lord wants us to **go deeper** so he puts our senses at '**half-mast**'. He wants to '**dry them out**'. It will be a period of dryness for the senses. They will no longer be used.

It is important to note however that **distractions** can occur at all levels along the **spiritual path** because the spiritual life is **not a linear progression**. There are **guideposts** along the way but there aren't **levels**. We can't say, I left this, now I am going here, then there, now this, then that. Even if we are **advanced** we can have **beginner's experiences**. If we allow ourselves to be **transformed** in this **passive night, total union** will happen for us.

When we take the works of St. John of the Cross, the Ascent of Mount Carmel describes the first effort the soul makes to leave the things of the world behind. The soul's effort to detach from the world continues in the Dark Night.

The now-liberated soul throws itself completely into the conquest of its Beloved. This reflects the Spiritual Canticle. The soul, now detached from creatures, throws itself totally into the pursuit of its Beloved and experiences love.

In the Spiritual Canticle we understand that this new freedom allows the soul to interact with creatures in a **just relationship**. The soul seeks God through creatures. It no longer seeks the creature for the creature, but now scours creation asking if anyone has seen the Beloved here or there. Yes, he came by here. In other words, he left the **impression of his beauty** in the creature. Our relationship with the creation is to contemplate the beauty of God in it.

A **just relationship** is established with the creation. It becomes a means to unite us to God. The soul contemplates the beauty of its God, of its spouse, in creation. It seeks out all creatures

to know if they didn't see the Beloved go by. The entire creation is seen in God. This is described in the Spiritual Canticle.

In the end, it will be in the Living Flame where the soul is completely adjusted to God, transformed into him (by participation not by nature). The soul's operation is the same as the operation of the Holy Spirit who acts in it. It is now spiritual, unified, simplified and aware of its internal world. Communion, or universalization of its being, has taken place with God. This process occurs at the end of our spiritual life.

At this level, the soul desires to see the **veil torn**. It still contemplates its beloved. **Death** is no longer a **rupture** but an **opening** to contemplation. The veil is very thin. We are fully united with God, but this union isn't yet the **vision**. The soul is dying to be one with its Beloved.

If we have understood the journey that St. John of the Cross teaches, we are able to **read his works** without struggling or becoming discouraged.

Once again, there is a **beginning, an end and a path**. To understand the challenges faced on the path it is important to keep mind the beginning and the end. If they are forgotten, we have trouble understanding the challenges of the path. No creature can reach the summit or the end solely by its own efforts. It needs the transcendence of God through the **theological virtues of faith, hope and charity**.

The path of seeking God in response to a force of attraction or love, through a dark night of faith, ends in a divine meeting. Because we seek God through love, we let go of all else to seek him.

St. John says that the soul needs to move away from all things with affection. It must leave behind all things created, not with rejection or disdain but with affection. This detachment is important to avoid all that isn't God. We aren't depriving ourselves for the sake of depriving

ourselves but to **make room for God, an even greater good**. We understand that Love alone creates emptiness.

This path leads to a process of transformation, of becoming divine, of being made spiritual.

At this level of becoming spiritual, the human spirit becomes flexible and pure enough to be completely moved by the Holy Spirit from within. This is the contemplative life.

Contemplation, a big word, simply means having the flexibility and purity necessary to be completely moved by the Holy Spirit.

It's our **Baptismal vocation**. It is not for special people. It's not for the elite. It's for all Christians. So, stop thinking that silent prayer isn't for you! There aren't any silent prayer specialists. We are **made for union with God** and to live out this **filial adoption** in God that **Baptism** generated in us and which develops progressively over time.

**A life of prayer is a Baptismal grace**. When Jesus came out of the water he was praying. God confirmed his filial relationship with him. A life of prayer is a way to live out this relationship with God.

It is important to see the big picture of the spiritual path because otherwise we focus on different aspects of it, and we end up lost. We wonder why dryness and distractions occur. They are however explainable as part of the path. There is a beginning and an end. To know why, helps us to choose a mode of life. When I don't know the goal of my life, it's hard to live life.

Once again and simply put, the **goal of the spiritual life is union with God**.