

Difficulties in Prayer: Part III

Dryness and Distractions

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This morning we talked about the **preparation** and **availability** needed to live out a **life of prayer**. When we talk about prayer, we mainly talk about the **time** we have available to devote to it. This is not the **goal of prayer**.

We move from **punctual prayer** to a **time of prayer** with the **goal of developing a life of prayer**. We can't settle for the time we spend in prayer and then, turn the **'God page'** and go on with our life. No, the **goal of prayer** is to learn to **live our entire life in God's presence** and under his watchful eye and influence. It is important that after a certain time nothing in our life escapes God's presence. We move from saying prayers to **becoming prayer**; this is what our Lord means when he says to **pray without ceasing**. Our whole life should take place with an **awareness of God's presence**. God never leaves us. We leave him. We forget that he is there.

When we understand this, we have understood what silent prayer is. In other words, it's about **living in God's presence**. It's a habitual awareness of God that wherever we are, we are with our Lord.

I like to tell the youth to invite Jesus along to the night club and to remember when they're going crazy on the dance floor Jesus is watching them. It's this **acute awareness** that nothing of our lives happens without him. This allows us to be **aware of our lives**. We can't hide from God.

We looked at the **difficulties** related to the **preparation** for prayer and to the **conception** or idea we have of prayer. We are now going to study the **difficulties** related to the **practice of prayer, distractions** and **contemplative dryness**.

We will only be looking at the essential elements. This study is important as it **frees** us in our **life of prayer**. **Distractions**. What happens? In the **beginning** of our spiritual life, there is a certain intensity at the time of conversion. We resolutely turned towards God and took our **Baptismal life or our life with God** seriously. We experienced a certain intensity and our soul enjoyed a sensory fervor.

God is a very savvy teacher. He knows that we have left worldly things behind. If you take a toy away from a child you must replace it or he won't stop crying. When **God takes away our worldly pleasures**, he must keep

our senses occupied with something else. He gives us **graces** that **impact** them. He delights us with this sensory fervor that makes practicing spiritual exercises easy and pleasurable.

It is **easy in the beginning** to go to mass, to spend hours in prayer, to recite the rosary, to meditate on God's word. We experience spontaneous bursts of good thoughts, feelings of love and a fluttering of the heart. It's natural, it just bursts forth. We are filled with joy at the thought of recollecting ourselves alone with God in prayer. The time we spend in prayer goes by very quickly, we don't even realize it. We had decided to spend thirty minutes and before you know it, one and a half hour has gone by. We are almost able to **feel God's presence**. We fast and practice the virtues. Before our conversion, we reacted violently, and now, if something upsets us we remain calm. We establish ourselves in the virtues. We are carried by grace. God has replaced what we let go of. This state however, **doesn't last very long**. If it does, we need to ask ourselves if it is in fact authentic. The **sensory consolations** are quickly **withdrawn**. We **feel nothing**. The sensory devotion seems to have disappeared. We are now in a state of **aridity and dryness**. This state can have diverse causes that St. John of the Cross lays out for us in the Dark Night, Book 1, Chapter 9.

So, we are faced with aridity and dryness. **Why are we experiencing this aridity?** Our Lord sees that we are more interested in what we feel or can control than in him. He wants to **raise us up** from an **inferior way of loving**, which is fulfilling our agenda and satisfying of our senses, to a **higher way of loving**. God will take away our **sensory desires** with the intention of giving us **spiritual desires** or something even more wonderful. This is hard for us. We are not used to what God is beginning to give us, we are still attached to our sensory desires. This ripping away, this change, casts us into the **night**.

This spiritual or contemplative dryness is a necessary passage. We don't get anything out of our meditation now. **Everything is dry!** We are completely **lost**. God wants to move us from **meditation to contemplation**. This aridity is a form of **relationship with God**. It is a relationship according to the spirit, not according to the senses. God, a spirit, has this limited way of adapting to us and gives himself to us through our senses. He does this for us, but it's by the spirit that he gives himself to us fully, just as he is. He wants to bring us up to this level. That's why dryness is not a time of abandonment

by God. No, God doesn't abandon us. He is calling us to go further.

The question becomes will we allow ourselves to be led along this spiritual dynamic or will we remain attached to our sensory world?

There are people who recite litanies all day long and when they can't it's catastrophic for them. They are very attached to this ritual and very uncomfortable without it. They are **blocking the anointing of the Holy Spirit** who wants to take them further.

It's important to be **flexible** with the Holy Spirit. We can have a way of prayer today and little by little we aren't in that mode anymore. A change is occurring. For those who are very attached to their way of prayer, change can seem like the end of the world and they just won't accept it. They won't let go of the use of the imagination, the intellect and the senses or this active recollection.

At a certain point, we enter passivity, a **holy passivity** which is not laziness. The Holy Spirit introduces us into it. Thoughts and ideas cease in prayer. We can no longer use our imagination or our intelligence. It is as if our senses are paralyzed. We need to take this road.

St. John of the Cross tells us that **not all dryness comes from God**. It can come from us or have other causes. So be careful! Spiritual dryness from the Holy Spirit has **criteria**. St. John gives us 3 criteria to discern the origin of dryness, a **divine weaning** from the **sweet milk from the breast of grace**. It is the image of the child that the mother puts down so that he can learn to walk on his own. **God takes away the sensory graces** that give us the strength to move forward. A **weaning** takes place. John of the Cross gives us **three signs** to determine if the **dryness is from God**.

The **first sign** suggests that we are no longer interested or comforted by the things of God or the things of the world. What does this mean? A time comes when we are **no longer interested** in the **things of God** such as going to Mass, praying, meditating or the Word of God, but we are **no longer interested** in the **things of the world** either.

If we don't find pleasure in the things of God, but enjoy worldly events, then this dryness isn't from God. Some people who have had a conversion experience full of fervor, will fall away either from **indifference** or from **sin** and return to what they left behind. They once again enjoy worldly things. This dryness isn't from God.

For the **dryness to be from God** there must be a **lack of consolation in the Godly and in the earthly** because **God puts the soul in this dark night to purge and dry**

out its sensory appetites so that **God can give it something better**. For as long as the **soul** is at the **sensory level**, the **Spirit can't be deployed**.

The first sign then is about **letting go of sin**. St. John says that this isn't enough though to **determine if the dryness is from God**. There are **depressive personalities** who aren't interested in anything, neither God nor the world but, they aren't experiencing contemplative dryness. Their nature or personality is the root of their dryness.

The first sign is insufficient to determine if the dryness comes from God, a **second** one needed.

A **second sign** to identify a Godly purging is that we remember God with **longing** and have an **overwhelming worry** that we aren't **serving him** and are **regressing** because we see ourselves **devoid of interest in the things of God**. This sign makes up for the insufficiency of the first. We have the memory of God and are **not completely indifferent towards him**. We **constantly think about him**. We have the **troubling worry** that we aren't **serving** him well and that we are regressing rather than moving forward. We are **ill at ease**.

The **depressive personality** on the other hand, is **completely indifferent to God**. This soul has no interest in God nor does it have the crippling worry.

The second sign then is a **lively memory of God** that doesn't leave us despite the dryness and the fact that we feel nothing. This allows us to recognize that this dryness doesn't come from indifference or from cowardliness because indifference isn't associated with worry about the things of God. This distinguishes between depression and contemplative dryness.

According to St. John of the Cross, indifference brings about nonchalance and slowness in both the will and spirit and has no desire to serve God. While the soul experiencing purifying dryness has desire along with worry and pain at not serving God. This is the difference between spiritual dryness and indifference.

So, in dryness, there is a lack of desire but worry about God and desire to serve him. In real depression there is total disgust and no desire to serve God. At this level, we struggle with indifference.

The **third sign** to know if this is a purging of the senses, is when the soul can no longer **meditate or reflect with the imagination as it was used to**. We are entering the **grace of contemplative prayer**. There is active prayer, meditation, internal reflection and then God allows us through grace to enter **contemplative prayer** with its different degrees: quiet, union and transformation.

We need to accept that our senses are as if paralyzed. God communicates directly with the spirit without going through the senses. We are not used to this and continue to remain attached to the sensory world. We haven't yet grasped the spiritual process under way. We are lost. We are in the **night**.

We are incapable of recollecting our senses. Our senses remain unemployed, useless, sterile, paralyzed in our relationship to God in prayer. It's here that we must accept the prayer of the St. Pastor from Ars: "I look at him and he looks at me."

St. John tells us what attitudes to take on. We can't force things. There are people who spend their time in prayer reading because they can't use their senses. God nourishes the spirit in a new way and the soul doesn't feel the newness. It's the **passage from meditation to contemplation**; the **passage from human activity to passivity under the action of the Holy Spirit**. We need let go and let God and consent to enter this spiritual passivity.

This phenomenon that St. John describes is the **essential contribution that revolutionized mystical theology**.

St. John describes the **behavior** we need to adopt at the beginning of the **passive night**. Recommendations can be found in the **Ascent of Mount Carmel**, book 2, 12-15; the **Dark Night**, book 1, 9-13; and the **Living Flame**, stanza 3, 3 to the end.

In the **Ascent of Mount Carmel**, book 2, chapter 12, St. John tells us to:

-impose silence on our operation in relationship to the natural form and knowledge by the senses. This is the **passage from human activity to the action of the Holy Spirit**;

-strive to empty ourselves of all imagination and knowledge and remain in the darkness in relationship to the imagination and the memory;

-establish ourselves in a general and pure single act—**faith**;

-remain at rest in a loving attention to God without worrying about the imagination and its operation. The imagination will continue, but we need not concern ourselves with it.

-persevere with patience, don't worry and place your trust in God;

-persevere with patience in prayer without taking any action;

-strive not to get upset at seeing the powers deprived of their operation, to the contrary, be happy about it;

This **holy passivity** is very **difficult**. In daily life, we really like to be of service, we don't like to be served. We are always ready to serve others. This happens in prayer too. We want to do a lot for God, but now God wants to do something for us and we must peacefully let it happen.

St. Therese of the Little Flower experienced this **dryness in a radical way** when she went through her **night of faith**. She tells us the **story of the little bird**: All he can do is to raise his little wings, but to fly away isn't in his power. What will he become, full of sadness and seeing himself so powerless? No, the little bird will not despair and with an audacious abandonment, he remains before the divine sun, nothing will frighten him, not the wind, or the rain. If clouds appear that hide the loving star, the little bird won't move. He knows that behind the clouds, his sun continues to shine. His brilliance will not be eclipsed for even a second. It's true that sometimes the heart of the little bird finds itself overcome by the storm. He seems not to believe that anything else exists besides the clouds that engulf him. It's the moment of perfect joy for the poor little, weak being. What happiness for him to stare at the invisible light that hides from his faith.

This is the story of the little bird. It's very beautiful how he eats, totally lost, overwhelmed by the storm and the clouds. The sky of his soul grows dark. He knows that behind the clouds his sun continues to shine. So, he stays there without moving. He feels nothing but **enters into contact with God simply and uniquely by faith**, not by the senses.

When the sun was covered by clouds, we can't see it anymore, but we know it is still shining on the other side of the clouds. It's **faith** that puts us into contact with the sun. Our senses are no longer able to function. The only way to **reach God and unite with him is through faith**. The dark knowledge of faith is certain and leads the soul into the darkness of the senses. God lives beyond the region of the senses and of intelligence. We know that **God's love for us is certain**. Contact with God by faith is a **certain truth**. The **supernatural penetration of God** can happen without giving us any insight, feeling, or awareness of it other than the richness we acquire. We **don't feel it**. Accept it and live this contact with God uniquely by faith which **increases the supernatural life** in us, the **richness of charity**.

Why do we tend to doubt God's existence when faced with trials? We tend to say to ourselves that if God exists then...It's about entering **pure faith** that doesn't have

any tangible support. It's here that our transformation in God takes place. We become spiritual beings. We enter the **very beginning of the contemplative life**. It isn't transformative union but rather recollection of the senses. Contemplative life according to St. John of the Cross is both the knowledge and love of God; in other words, a loving knowledge, not an intellectual or conceptual knowledge.

Contemplation, where the intellect receives divine insight, is God's hidden wisdom; it is even hidden from the intellect itself who receives it. It's a loving knowledge, but it's not an understanding of God. We can't understand God. There is a knowing that doesn't grasp God.

Contemplation is obscure because it's **hidden and secret wisdom**. Without the noise of words or the competition or the help of bodily or spiritual senses as in the silence and quiet of the night, hidden from all that is sensory and natural, God teaches the soul in a very hidden and secret way without it understanding how.

This is contemplation.

We don't know how God teaches us. It's a secret way. We can attain this contemplation. It's the old farmer deep in the country, he knows who God is, but he doesn't know how he acquired this knowledge. It's not theological or conceptual knowledge. He knows it from experience, but he can't explain it. Bernadette never went to school. Therese of the Little Flower revolutionized theology with the discovery of the paternity of God, but never studied theology. She was taught by God in a hidden way. Contemplation is a **science of love or a loving and infused knowledge of God**.

At the beginning of our spiritual lives we fight to have a life of prayer and that's great! We need to take initiative for God, to grow spiritually, but we don't control it. God alone can reveal himself to us. God alone can enter contact with us. It's God that takes the initiative and introduces us into his mystery. **This is contemplative life**.

We often have an active life, we are all about action. But an active life isn't about being charitable or feeding people. No, we can be active in our prayer life. We think that we alone are in control. No, it's God that allows us to know him and infuses a loving knowledge of himself into us, that shines a light on the soul and causes it to burn with love. It is raised from one degree to the next until it reaches God, its Creator. It's only love that unites and attaches the soul to God. We need to embrace the

dynamic of love. It's not about being perfect. It's about being in love. Perfection is not within man's reach. We will always have faults, sins. Don't wear yourself out trying to be perfect. Free yourself from this idea. The only worry we should have is whether we live for love, and are moved by love.

In confession we recite our sins. We don't see the light of love. It's love that refines us to discover our ugliness. When we aren't coming from love, we are unsavory. Love refines us.

Contemplation is an elevated place where God begins to show himself and communicate himself in this life. He never reaches completion. This is contemplation. God begins to communicate and show himself in this life without ever finishing the communication. In the Spiritual Canticle, the soul cries out that the veil be at last torn so that this union with God become complete. St. John tells us that contemplation is none other than a **secret infusion**, full of peace and calm, where the soul drinks the water of wisdom, love and suavity.

Contemplation which is obscure is an influence of God in the soul. It **purifies it of its ignorance and habitual imperfection**, both natural and spiritual. God invades us by his purifying presence. St. John tells us that pure contemplation is about **receiving**, not about **doing**. Contemplation is a serene night for sensory and natural intelligence. When we are in contemplation we are serene; it's a serene night. Contemplation is a secret wisdom which communicates and infuses itself through love. It's a sovereign wisdom; it's the language of God. We can think that these things are out of our reach, but God has granted this degree to the humblest of souls. It's not the theologians to whom God grants this degree of prayer.

There is theological wisdom and mystical wisdom. Theological wisdom helps us to approach and look for God. At a certain point, however, theological gives way to mystical wisdom which allows us to penetrate deeper into the mystery. Mystical wisdom doesn't depend on our intellectual knowledge. You must want it.

This determines the greatness of our vocation. We are called to something great. Our Baptism isn't about practicing charity in our neighborhood or about reciting the rosary. It's about entering the mystery of God.

Contemplation is our goal. We can't prevent its coronation.

At certain times throughout Church history, we have taken spirituality away from the faithful and have hidden it in the monasteries. It was reserved for the elite which

explained why people went looking for answers in the Orient.

The message was given that if you want to live a spiritual life, you must go to the convent.

All that we are looking for in Orient, we have in the treasure of the Church. We must discover it. We have nothing to envy in other Spiritual traditions. We have an immense richness, but as history would have it, we made the mistake of thinking that spirituality wasn't for the people in the pews.

Those responsible in the Church were afraid that spirituality would be accessible to all. But today, it's coming back. People are thirsty for God. We must liberate our spirituality and open the doors of the monasteries to give it back to the people.

This is our Christian or Baptismal life with all its greatness and coronation. We can never lose sight of this, or we end up wasting our time in little things, thinking that it's Christian life.

This explains why worldly people laugh at us and ask what we have more than they do. We aren't going to the height of our vocation. We stick with worldly things. We see those in other traditions who are deeper than us because we aren't living out the richness of the grace of our Baptism.

So, what are we going to do? Evangelize? With what? You have nothing special to bring them. We need to **anchor ourselves in the treasure of the faith, in the treasure of our Baptismal grace, in the treasure of contemplation.**

We have looked at dryness and habitual distractions. If you apply what we have discussed here today, you will find that you have far fewer distractions in prayer.

When meditating in the beginning we need to fight the distractions. It's only at the stage of contemplation where we can let them go. If we don't try to overcome them in meditation, we will never be able to meditate. It all depends on the grace of prayer we have.

Therese of the Little Flower says about the little bird—up until now I understand your love for the little bird who doesn't wander from you, but we both know that this imperfect creature in its place allows itself to be distracted from its unique occupation. Therese is describing the dissipation that she experienced.

Teresa of Avila said - Very often, for several years, I was more preoccupied by the desire to see the hour end and to hear the clock chime, than other thoughts.

They both experienced distractions and tell us to not be interested in them at the level of contemplation but at the beginning it important to struggle against them. It all depends on the preparation. I come to prayer with my life. It's important to take a few minutes to quiet down before beginning prayer or I will be distracted. If I haven't thought of God all day and I try to enter prayer, I will experience distractions. The living memory of God must accompany me all day and if so, entering prayer will be easy.

Adequate preparation will help us engage in prayer and have fewer distractions. We need to take care of our prayer lives, our meeting with God, **it's a sacred exercise that deserves the investment of our whole heart.**

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