

## Contemplative Dryness

### Chapter VI

(An Extract taken from...)

I am a Daughter of the Church

Blessed Fr. Marie-Eugene, ocd

**As the sun, when it rises in the morning, will enter your house if you open the shutter, even so will God, who sleeps not in keeping Israel, ... enter the soul.** Living Flame

Contemplative dryness is the name given the **first forms of contemplation** described by Saint John of the Cross.

Between the **contemplative dryness** and the **delightful quiet** of Saint Teresa there are **points of resemblance** that allow us to place them at the **same stage of spiritual life**.

These **two forms of contemplative experience** introduce us into **different spiritual climates**.

**Teresian quiet** produces its **effects**, positive and delightful ones, in the **will**. The Joannine (Saint John) **dryness** seems to affect particularly the **understanding** (or intellect) and produces in it **effects** that are **privative (gloomy)** because dazzling with contemplative light.

Today's contemplative is generally attracted to the Joannine climate, because he finds it more in line with his experience.

To avoid all confusion, it is important to say the **dryness** in question is **contemplative**. In other words it bears the **three signs** required by Saint John of the Cross: lack of satisfaction in the things of God or of creatures; solicitous care about not serving God; impossibility to meditate. Should these signs **not** be found **together** it is best, according to the Saint to return to **meditation** to nourish the exchange of **friendship with God**.

But when the dryness is recognized as the **fruit of God's action in the soul**, then it is **obliged** to both **respect God's action** and to **act itself**... The Saint likes to insist on the **first duty**...respect for God's action.

... **Delight** is actually not experienced in this dryness because the delight is too subtle for a soul having the **memory of former graces** and experiencing the **wandering of the faculties**...It tends to arouse in these **intellectual temperaments** the painful reactions of **powerlessness, disquiet, and restlessness**...

The attitude to be maintained during **dryness** ...is marked by suppleness and tenacious **fidelity**. **Two directives** are suggested to maintain it:

A-To tend by **faith** toward the **peaceful region of the spirit** and **remain there**.

B-To **ignore the turmoil** in the **sense region of the soul** and **calm** it at times by means of certain **activities**.

**A-To tend by faith toward the peaceful region of the spirit.**

We are now in the passive night of sense—a passage from sense to spirit by adapting God's action to one's own. Contemplative light brings about this passage.

The **first directive points** out what must be the **soul's active cooperation**: The soul should...cooperate actively with **grace** which affects it, by **making acts of faith** such as – God I believe you are here; that you love me; that you have been waiting for me; that you are making me over in your image...

...The mystics speak of an **"interior cell,"** of a **"depth of the soul,"** of a more **intimate** and more **peaceful region** which is the **seat of God's presence and action in the soul**. For Saint John of the Cross, the senses and the intellectual faculties immediately relating to them represent the periphery of the soul. Spirit designates its more interior parts.

... In the **Teresian quiet** there is an interior perception indicating that the sweetness arises from a **deep source**. In this way it is **easy to identify** the spirit with those **profound regions** which **produce quiet**. The soul understands that it is the **movement from sense to spirit** that ...**leads it to the water springing up within it**.

In **contemplative dryness**, at least initially, **greyness envelopes** the soul and its **faculties** ...reducing them to the powerlessness and immobility ...How is one then to discover the location of the spirit...?

...yet there is the **practical criterion** of **peace and silence** within the **soul's reach**. **"The senses"** for Saint John of the Cross are the **suburbs** of the soul where turmoil and agitation reign... **"Spirit"** is

**God's abode** where He dwells and acts in peace. It is where He lets Himself be grasped by faith and at times allows Himself to be experienced as the **transcendent Reality**... This **divine dwelling place** is **silent**... it is where in the **silence of the Spirit**, He engenders souls to a life of grace.

... One can attain it even in contemplative aridity by means of **an act of faith**.

In fact **faith**, a theological virtue received at Baptism is "**the only proportionate and proximate means for attaining God**." It elevates the intellect that submits to it; and with the intellect, the whole soul, bringing it into **contact with God**. **Faith** leads one into the **supernatural world** and into that **region of the spirit where God acts and gives Himself**.

**God's action** which makes **faith a living faith**... **calms the soul**...

... The **activity of living faith** produces... a subtle impression of **silence** and of **peace**. The **silence indicates** to the soul the **region of the spirit** towards which it must tend... It will succeed in this by **making acts of faith**...

... It is the senses... which **impede the perfect receiving of the Holy Spirit**. Is it possible to render them less noxious, to free oneself from their troublesome agitations?

### **B-How to ignore the noise of sense and bring it calm**

The exercise of faith..., although always opening up the soul to God's light, does not always succeed in establishing peace in the **lower faculties** which are **restless and demanding**... **preventing the soul's escape** into the **region of the spirit**. What can one do to **quiet this noise**?

The **duty of the soul** is to **pay no heed** to this **noise**; but to **escape** it by a **determined movement** towards the **region of the spirit**... Saint John of the Cross notes that the soul that has arrived at perfection excels in **escaping the terrors** produced by the devil in the **senses**. It runs to shelter in the **dark hiding place of faith**, in the **realm of the spirit**. The **turmoil** of the **senses** is an **excellent means of purification** and plays a part in helping one **enjoy the silence of the spirit**. In this transition period however, man's way in the spiritual life is less of his own choosing than at any other time.

Whether it's his **lack of experience** as with a **beginner** that leads him to **squander his strength** in **violent efforts**; or his **temperament** making him **unable** to support **passivity**; or even the obsessing **preoccupation** that has invaded the faculties, it is often **difficult** and at times **impossible** for a soul to rise above the agitation or to dominate it sufficiently to maintain the **peace** of the higher regions **undisturbed**.

One gets **fatigued**, the body grows **weary** of **immobility**; **frustration** sets in. **Discretion** is necessary to direct one's strength and sustain the effort of resistance.

### **1-DISCRETION**

Will discretion demand that we leave prayer aside and engage in some activity to find rest? There are in fact times when diversion may be necessary. Saint Teresa tells us that ... it is good to leave prayer for activity. She writes:

**The best medicine—I do not say for removing the trouble, for I know none for that, but for enabling the soul to endure it—is to occupy oneself with external affairs and works of charity and to hope in God's mercy, which never fails those who hope in Him.** VI Mansions

... In the case of **contemplative dryness**, to abandon prayer for activity because of **the aridity experience**, would ordinarily be to yield to a dangerous and often seductive **temptation**... God at times makes Himself more **sensibly present** to the soul in exterior activities than in prayer. He seems to **withdraw Himself** when the soul goes in search of Him and hide behind a **thick veil**... This confirms the impression of **sterility** left by **contemplative dryness** which puts a seal of **certitude** that contemplative prayer is a **waste of time**. It is a **subtle temptation**... and a **grave danger**.

During **contemplation**, **light** and **love** flow into the **soul**. The **abundance of light** and the **unfitness of the faculties** to receive it, produces **dryness**. The **supernatural effects** of light and love seem to remain in the **region of the spirit**; hence the **lower faculties** are either **paralyzed** or **agitated**.

When the contemplation ends the **faculties resume their activity**. The soul becomes conscious of the

**work** that has been **accomplished** in it by contemplation and of the **riches** it has received. The faculties ... seem to be filled with **light** and **love**. Only a moment ago the soul **wearied itself** in its **search for a God** who did not reveal Himself and who seemed **nowhere to be found**. And now this soul, whom **aridity** has filled with **thirst** for God, sees all things filled with that hidden God and discovers the **divine secrets** hidden in their depths...The soul is in a **festive mood**. The **faculties**, now at **peace**, are **bathed in light** and overflow with **supernatural delight**.

Following the **dryness of contemplation**, this **feast** of the soul might cause it to think it has risen to a more **elevated spiritual state**. It is nothing of the kind. It is the **awareness** of the **benefits** of contemplation that is creating this joy which takes place **only** when contemplation has ceased...

What are we to think of one who would seek the joy of the awakening but refuse the immobility of the sleep? ...this would be the case of the soul so carried away by the **spiritual delights** found in activity following **contemplative dryness**, as to think it possible to enjoy these continually by **leaving the dryness** and giving itself up only to **activity**.

## 2-Patience

**Contemplative dryness**, a benefit to the soul, must be **endured**...such is the law... **discretion** and **patience** were never more necessary...

In using **violence** against it, one would quickly **exhaust** one's forces and **disturb** the peaceful action of contemplation.... **Patience** is the only effective **remedy**.

When **agitation** of the faculties is very great...one can try and arrest its harmful effects by exercising some other **calming influence** over the faculties...to allow them to **escape** into the region of the spirit or **keep them in check** so as not to disturb contemplation.

## 3-Several Calming Influences

To find the means of this **happy evasion** is an **art** and its **efficacy** only **passing**. Each one must find what suits him and change when it's no longer effective. Suggestions only can be followed not exact advice.

a-...The **slow recitation** of a favorite **prayer**...can stop the first movements of a rising tempest...**Vocal prayer** is the **necessary companion** of contemplation for those whose habits of activity render the **passivity of contemplation intolerable**...the soul will devote itself less to the meaning of the words and more to drawing from them the **power of recollection** they contain.

The choice of prayer is of great importance...a psalm, for example, will express the solitude of the soul...experience will teach one which prayers are most helpful to him...this prayer will for the most part be a cry of the soul...The agitation may return; but to gain time is to gain much.

b-The **attitude of the body** during prayer is **not a matter of indifference** and can contribute to **calming the soul**...The physical attitude, while being restful, must not favor **sleepiness**...and must be a **support** for it and **sustain** it in its painful **waiting for God**.

c-Nor must one forget the tranquillizing influence of the **Eucharist**...the soul in **quest of recollection** may seek the **nearness of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament** to enthrall the interior senses.

d-For other souls, complete **solitude** seems preferable and more conducive to **calm**... and allows the individual to give themselves up completely to divine rapture... in the nourishing silence of the **desert**...

Each one discovers **his own way** to flee through the tumult to the **peace and silence** of the **depths of his soul**...

At times the soul must simply **groan** under its own **powerlessness** calling on **God's help** and the **intercession of the Saints**, who bring **calm** with **deliverance**... **Humble patience** is not always a disposition that **liberates** one but a humble person always derives from this **turmoil a purification**. In the **silence** that comes from **powerlessness**, from **emptiness**, Saint Teresa thinks of her **soul** as a **garden** of which God is the **gardener**.

... What matter the **manner of soul**, provided that it remain **peaceful** and that **God can act** in it in full liberty?

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus admits that she would sometimes go to sleep when the emptiness was too heavy. She was however not disturbed upon awakening for she felt that children are equally dear to their parents whether awake or asleep; that, in

order to perform operations, the doctor has to sometimes put his patient to sleep. Autobiography

With her gracious story of the little bird, Therese describes her attitude of contemplation, carried on with her **gaze** steadily fixed on God through all the aridities and the mists, in spite of her weaknesses and even the sleep that intervene to hinder it or interrupt it.

**I see myself as a feeble little bird...yet I dare to gaze upon the divine Sun, the Sun of love, and my heart feels within it all the eagle's aspirations...**

**With reckless abandon, it gazes upon its Divine Sun, nothing frightens it, not wind nor rain and if dark clouds come and hide the Star of Love, the little bird does not move, it knows that beyond the clouds its Sun shines still, that its radiance is not for a single instant eclipsed.... When....the clouds keep it from seeing a single ray, its little eyes close...its little head under its wing, and the poor little thing sleeps...When it awakes...it is not at all desolate...it resumes its task of love...**Collected letters of Saint Therese of Lisieux, 284-5

The experience of Saint Therese...sets before us the **suppleness the soul** must have ... if it would **hold firm, peaceful and alive** in its **faith**, and **open itself** wide to the **power of the divine light** that is **striking** it...The **only thing that matters** is to **watch peacefully in faith**, looking up to that loving Wisdom whose **presence** is indicated by the **darkness**, in this **mingling of silence and tumult**. **Out of the dark night** divine **Wisdom** causes **transforming waters to spring**.

AMEN