

Class 4: Illumination and Union

The second stage of the spiritual life is all about falling in love. You start to love God not for what he does, but for who he is. And as you focus more on God, you begin to lose interest in the things of this world. I don't mean you don't care. Rather, you don't desire the things of this world as you did when you first embarked upon your journey to God.

You've probably experienced what I'm talking about on some level. Things become recognized for what they are - things. They can't satisfy you. That beautiful dress is merely a piece of fabric. That sweet car is simply a piece of metal that moves you from place to place. Your dream house simply doesn't excite anymore. You've lost your taste for this world and start to detach from it.

Some of you are whispering in your mind: "I don't *want* to lose my taste for this world. I have to live in it and I want to enjoy it." And I don't disagree with you. Life is meant for living to the full, something that Catholicism understands. Catholics view the world as good - ours is a very tactile religion, as we see in the sacraments and in our worship of God. We approach God through this physical world, and he wants us to enjoy this life.

But while he gave us this amazing universe and everything in it, we know at the end of the day it doesn't satisfy. This realization becomes stronger as you progress into the higher stages of the spiritual life and begin to long for the world to come. "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

Like previews of an upcoming blockbuster film, this world is just a foretaste of the glory ahead. As we mature and our gaze centers more on God, contemplating his wonders in prayer solidifies our identification with Paul, who declared, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

Sin in the Illuminative Way

Detachment from this world also helps us to love others more. We put others' needs in front of our own because we begin to love as Christ does. Interestingly,

this love comes into play even when we sin. Unfortunately, we know sin can occur all the way up to the moment we die. In fact, an Irish priest once told me I'd stop sinning three days after I was dead. (He wasn't an optimist.) The difference is that once you hit this stage of the spiritual life sin isn't typically premeditated.

At this point a person is making a very conscious effort to grow in holiness. That means the kinds of sin he commits are different from what he used to commit. They're typically venial - that is, they don't totally destroy our relationship with God - and deal more with deeper issues like pride, lack of patience, vanity, and such.

Of course, it's still possible for a person in the Illuminative Way to fall into grave sin. But when that happens, what usually follows is a very contrite admission of guilt - we understand the value of what's been lost. We're quicker to repent and do so more deeply. Remember how bitterly St. Peter wept when he denied Our Lord?

Like Peter's, our sorrow is greater because we now understand our relationship to God as true sons and daughters. We're not servants fearing punishment. Rather, it kills us to know we've let our Father down. It's awful. Remember how bad it was when you expected your parents to spank you and instead they said, "I'm really disappointed in you." That was the worst!

And just as we don't go back to being children even when we do something childish, we don't start back at the beginning of the spiritual life even when we sin gravely. The only way we lose all of our progress is if we just chuck it all and go back to a life of spiritual death.

Don't Drink the Kool-Aid

Growth at this point is so powerful that, as crazy as it sounds, people in the higher stages of the spiritual life actually begin to embrace trials and suffering. Yup. You heard me right. Now a bunch of us who thought we were doing really well are thinking - "Guess I'm not quite as holy as I thought" or "Not sure I want to be that holy." Embrace suffering? Are you nuts? How can this possibly be? Well, it's kind of like Kool-Aid.

Remember when you were a kid and the promise of Kool-Aid left you jittery with excitement? You thought, "Wouldn't it be awesome if I could yell, 'Hey Kool-Aid!' and a giant red pitcher in a leotard would come crashing through the wall and pour me a delicious glass of high fructose corn syrup laden with red dye number 5?" You might as well have strapped on a feed bag full of white granulated sugar. You couldn't pay me to drink that stuff now (though there remains a strong attraction to the red mustache).

Standing with a cool cup of sugary liquid death in my hand, I couldn't imagine how some adults could drink wine. Disgusting! What were they thinking? But now that I've matured, kind of, I love cabernets, malbecs, and pinot noirs.

My point is that even if you're convinced you'll never like certain things, at some point they might become desirable. Because of sin, the things that lead us to God are contrary to our current, fallen state. They're acquired tastes. My sister once took a sip of my wine and emphatically declared, "I don't like acquired tastes!" None of us do in the beginning. That's why they're called "acquired tastes," silly.

Unless you were one of those scary kids who matured really fast - you know, had a beard and a voice resembling a tuba in fifth grade - unless you were one of them, most guys only pretend to like their first beer. You'd much rather be drinking that strawberry-kiwi wine cooler - that is, alcoholic Kool-Aid - at your first adult party. But as time goes by and you keep forcing yourself to drink it because your manhood is on the line, beer no longer tastes like dirty dishwater. You actually start to desire that creamy, frothed mug filled with a smooth Belgian White. Now there's nothing better.

It's the same with growth in the spiritual life, especially suffering. Because it is leading us to God and we know it, we begin to desire it, because God is everything!

Somebody Turn On the Lights

As you develop and realize the shallowness of living only for this world and are striving for holiness and virtue; engaging in deep, regular prayer; and feeling the

presence of God - you suddenly come to a crisis. It's perhaps the most difficult thing you will experience in your spiritual journey: the transition of the soul from the Illuminative Way into the Unitive Way, the highest spiritual stage. This is the final rite of passage into spiritual adulthood.

Why is it a crisis? St. John of the Cross says it's the purification of the spirit, popularly known as "the dark night of the soul." I know. It even sounds scary. It's like something Vincent Price or Darth Vader should be introducing.

The dark night of the soul is a feeling of abandonment by God experienced by people who have reached the higher stages of prayer and the spiritual life. It's the final purging process, during which we learn to seek God, no matter how distant he seems. Whereas in the earlier stages of spiritual growth a strong sense of God's presence is typically felt, in the dark night he disappears. He's not gone, but you can't feel him anymore at all.

John of the Cross knew what he was talking about, too. "The Dark Night of the Soul" is a poem he wrote while imprisoned by his own brother monks who were opposed to reforms he was attempting to make in the Carmelite order. The poem describes a soul's journey to union with God and the dark trials it must endure while detaching from this world.

The dark night of the soul is all about cleaning house getting rid of anything and everything in our lives opposed to God. You can't move new furniture in until you've moved the old out. Because of our weaknesses, we can't do this ourselves. God has to be involved. His purification of our soul happens on so deep a level we're not even aware of his movements. For this reason, this transition stage of the spiritual life is often called the passive purification of the spirit.

The paradox of this purification is that, on one hand, we've progressed far enough in the spiritual life to have experienced the mad desire for God, like the bride awaiting her lover in Song of Songs. (Check it out. Way better than a Harlequin romance.) We know he is everything, all we want. "O guiding night! O night more lovely than dawn! O night that has united the Lover with his beloved," cries John.¹² On the other hand, the overwhelming sentiment of the dark night is one of total

aridity of spirit. There's a lack of desire to love, gnawing emptiness, and a sense of abandonment by God. Of course, the reality is that God never abandons us. The reason it feels this way is because our impurities are being exposed to the purity of God. It's like walking out of a pitch-black theater into the bright sun and being forced to squint or shade your eyes. For a time it feels as if the sun is against us, when in reality we just haven't yet fully adjusted to its illumination.

The dark night exposes the soul to the white-hot love of God. Our own filth causes us great misery and "the soul understands distinctly that it is worthy neither of God nor of any creature," says St. John. He indicates that people suffer interiorly so much at this stage that any "soul would consider death a relief.' It reminds one of David's wailing in Psalm 18, "The sighs of death encircled me, the sorrows of hell surrounded me, in my tribulation I cried out" (18:5-6).

"Well, thanks for the pep talk! Can't wait to get there! (C'mon guys, let's blow this joint.)" Hold on, partner. I'm not finished. Or rather, God's not finished. Like a log being consumed and transformed by fire, this passive purification in the dark night is transforming us into the likeness of God. Don't be afraid because this is it, the final transformation before encountering his glory. When you get right down to it, this purification is the beginning of the process completed in purgatory, which ends with entrance into the eternal bliss of full union with God.

Father Reginald Garrigou-LaGrange, the great Dominican spiritual writer, likens the dark night to the ascension of Christ. There were the poor apostles - intimate friends with Jesus for years, growing in understanding and love of the Lord. They heard powerful teaching. They saw miracles. Some were present at the Transfiguration and beheld Our Lord's glory. At the pinnacle of their lives they even saw the Resurrected Christ. Everything was great! He was the real deal, and they were part of his team. It couldn't get any better. But forty days after he rose from the dead he disappeared into the clouds (see Acts 1:9).

That wasn't the end of the road for the apostles, though. Their experience of God didn't end in spiritual darkness and abandonment. Similarly, we don't stay in the dark night forever. This third conversion of the spiritual life leads to an even deeper relationship with God.

Father Garrigou-LaGrange points out that nine days after the Ascension the apostles entered into an entirely new relationship with Christ, a union with him that changed everything. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended, transforming them into spiritual dynamos. They entered more deeply into the mysteries of God and the supernatural life. They preached with abandon. They performed miracles. They prayed with power. Thousands came to God through their work, and they built the Catholic Church. The apostles wielded great power because their love of God had exploded through an encounter with his Spirit. They belonged completely to him and were full to the brim with life.

This is like the Unitive Way, says Father Garrigou-LaGrange. We have entered into a new dimension in our bond with God. A man and woman enter more deeply into relationship through marriage, and in a similar way we are unified with God in an ecstasy that makes everything else pale in comparison. We come to understand more profoundly the mysteries of God and experience him in a way that often defies description. Why? Because we're tasting eternity.

This is the final death of the "old man" and the putting on of the "new man," described by St. Paul in Colossians 3:9-10. The dark night of the soul is the trial through which we finally learn to love God with our whole heart, whole soul, and whole strength.

The life that follows in this final stage of spiritual development is nothing short of spiritual bliss. We've found the peace that passes all understanding, the unspeakable joy of encountering God. We revel in his love for us as his children, secure in the knowledge that no matter what happens all is well. We've moved into a new state of being, with which nothing else but heaven itself can compete. This is what it's all about. This is what we're striving for. And prayer is the key that unlocks the door to this new life.