



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“The Spiritual Senses, Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 4, Contemplation: The Divine Therapy

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HABITUAL STATE

Once the spiritual attentiveness of our spiritual faculties has been awakened by this take-off point, whether it be listening, with the help of a sacred word, or looking at God with the help of a sacred glance, or breathing God using one’s natural breath and its rhythmic flow as the reception and the return of the Spirit breathing us, so to speak, little by little this attentiveness, this “cloud of unknowing,” of not knowing with our concepts and emotions, begins to become more habitual. And thus, the undifferentiated presence of God begins to insinuate itself into our awareness in prayer and becomes part of it, as a fairly habitual state, a part that continues to grow and unfold.

THE PERFUME OF GOD

It’s precisely at this point that the Fathers of the Church offered this teaching on the spiritual senses to help us to understand what spiritual attentiveness actually means. They spoke of the first spiritual experience out of that place as the “perfume” of God. I suppose that’s the symbol of incense in sacred ceremonies. Using another one of the external senses as a starting point is to suggest this interior experience of perfume. Now as you know if you smell some delicious flowers in the neighborhood, you start looking around to see where is this bush. Is it a rose? Is it a hyacinth? Is it lilacs, wisteria? And the more delicious it is, the more you feel an attraction to go smell. And those of you who love the ocean will identify with this parable also ... as you’re walking towards the sea and it’s hidden by sand dunes, you smell the salt air coming from the sea breezes, and as it enters your lungs and passes through your olfactory system, you get more and more stimulated and excited. You can’t wait to get in the water. You don’t see it yet. It’s this irresistible attraction that the sea air arouses.

ATTRACTION FOR INTERIOR SILENCE

Similarly, what the Fathers mean is that the first sign of spiritual attentiveness is the attraction for interior silence, the desire for a time of prayer in which to be still, for a place of solitude, for a few moments of quiet. And this is an almost irresistible attraction as the perfume of the Divine Presence

increases in intensity. It's as if God, who dwells here in the ground unconscious and beyond [points to top of skyscraper chart], lifts a corner, so to speak, of the veil and a little whiff of the delicious and delightful scent, so to speak, of God's beauty and goodness slips out, and a waft, or a little breeze of this, gets down into the spiritual faculties of passive intellect. And the will, then, is attracted with great desire to rest in this presence, to open to it, and to surrender to it. The Fathers used to interpret that wonderful love poem in the Old Testament, the Song of Songs, or the Canticle as it is sometimes called. And one of those verses is "Draw me" – that is attract me – "we will run after you in the delicious odors of your ointments." And this is simply a symbol, not of an external perfume or a flower bed, but of the interior attractiveness that is imaged as if it were an external scent of a delicious character. But it's rather a spiritual attraction for silence, stillness, and rest.

COME TO ME

It's to this that Jesus invites us in the New Testament, saying: "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." And it's the attraction for that substantial rest, that spiritual rest, that freedom from emotional turmoil, from the fascination of nothing that is so characteristic of the false self system that brings this deep, deep rest and which rescues us from the division of many desires and brings our appetitive faculty of will into that sharp focus, or what Jesus calls "the single eye" of the Gospel. The single eye is freedom from the domination of any emotion, so that now, free from that division of our energies, this focus on true happiness and rest ... and in experiencing the presence of God ... begins to grow as we persevere daily, hopefully twice daily, in the practice of contemplative prayer, which is the use of one of those three take off points. And there may be some others that are also useful, but for the sake of this discussion, three will be enough, especially these which are hallowed in the Christian tradition.

IN THE BOSOM OF CHRIST

The first experience, then, of undifferentiated presence of God, of this call to divine union which is now becoming an existential experience is precisely the attraction. And this attraction is present, even if when you go to prayer, silence or solitude, you feel like a mess and thoughts bombard you, and you can't get anything out of it, and, above all, you can't return to the place of rest that you had maybe enjoyed the day before. So, it teaches you that you can't control this Presence or this perfume. You can only receive it or put yourself in its path so that it can communicate itself to you on its own terms, when and where God wills. Now the second experience is deeper. In other words what the Fathers of the Church are trying to communicate is that the undifferentiated presence of God awakened by the practice of listening, looking, breathing is not one thing. It's a dynamic and marvelous life, friendship, union that unfolds and deepens and becomes more intimate, more unifying, more profound, and, hence, more energizing for service and presence to other people and their needs. Well, anyway, Scripture provides us with another paradigm of this experience. The beloved disciple John leaning his head on the breast of Christ at the Last Supper is a paradigm of this second awakening deeper and more profound than the perfume. Notice that the Scripture says John was resting his head in the bosom of Christ. Now this is a particular word. He wasn't just in his lap or something at the Last Supper, where, as you know, it was customary in those times to recline at table on one arm. You laid down and rested on one arm while you gobbled your victuals with the other. And so, it was easy for John just to lie back, and he was sitting next to Jesus, and to rest his head ... not in his lap, not on his chest, but in his bosom. And the bosom means, in that language, the empty place between the breasts. That is, he couldn't get any closer. That is, he had his ear right up against the heart of Christ where divine transmission takes place. The divine love, then, was filling John from that delightful posture and proximity to the source.

THE ATTRACTION PERDURES

And so, what is happening, then according to the Fathers as we practice the attraction to prayer, to silence, to stillness, to openness, to waiting upon God in patience whether we feel consoled or not ... the attraction perdures. And that is the sign that you got the grace of contemplative prayer. It isn't so much the consolations that prove that you've got it because they can be temporary, and they can move on downstream. Like everything else in time, it passes. But an attraction that pulls you into your daily practice of prayer, to which you are committed rain or shine, in sickness and health, no matter what the content of that is in the form from boredom, distress, bombardment of thoughts, the unloading of the unconscious, the intense purification and humiliation of the false self system that gradually takes place through the dynamic of purification, healing, unloading the unconscious damage of a lifetime.

SELF-FORGETFULNESS

So now the presence of God has become a touch, or it's like the proximity of someone you love whom you are touching. And this is much more intimate than simply smelling their delightful perfume at a distance. So here one isn't actually touching God with any of the senses or the body, but it's "as if" one's spirit were being touched, that is, embraced, and this can occur in numerous ways. It could be as if God were descending from above, enveloping one from all around one, coming from below, embracing us from within, or placing a great big kiss in the middle of your spirit. So that your heart melts in the Presence and one's own self-identity lets go into this divine union and self-forgetfulness in which God for that moment is all in all. It's like an embrace. It's like the peak of human relationships in their most intimate quality, only it isn't sensual. It's spiritual. Now it may overflow from this deep spiritual source and experience into the other senses. And then, at times, even the senses, even the body starts jumping or dancing or tingling or something because they're flooded with the divine breath, the Spirit of God, which totally transforms the whole organism into an experience of love, bliss, peace, rest, joy, whatever. So, the experience, then, of the sense of spiritual touch is marvelous indeed. But it's not yet the greatest experience. It corresponds to the Prayer of Union or Full Union in this explanation that we described that St. Teresa offers us.

THE EXPERIENCE OF TASTE

There comes, then, the experience of taste. Now when we taste something, we're eating it or drinking it, and so it's entering into us, penetrating us and becoming a part of us in this experience of divine union that corresponds to taste. One experiences the presence of God as an interpenetration of spirits, as a decisive presence within us that is living our life, so to speak, or living in us, or, more simply, living you and I.

THE EXPERIENCE OF TASTE – UNION ... MEANS GOD IS DECISIVELY PRESENT, LIVING OUR LIFE.

This, of course, is not the food of just one experience, obviously, at least not as a rule, but the developing of the spiritual senses. And sometimes one experiences the undifferentiated presence of God at the lower level, too; in other words, once one has accessed this level of spiritual taste, one still will move back and forth, like the angels up and down Jacob's ladder, symbols of consciousness of the divine, of different rungs, so to speak, of human experience.

WE ARE JUST ORDINARY FOLKS

And so now you might think: well, this gift that Mary of Bethany had, where she sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words, which obviously were more effective than the sacred word we use in Centering Prayer ... and if she moved beyond that, his words, to the sacred glance, in which she was just looking at him and absorbing his presence into her heart ... we're just ordinary folks. We didn't know Jesus in the flesh. And so, we don't have the same substantial gifts and graces, and so we easily rule ourselves out of the divine romance, or out of the incredible invitation to divine union that the Gospel offers us. And then we look at John, on the bosom of the Lord ... well we never had that grace. How could we ever have such a privileged position? And it's true. God gave to these two people the equivalent inwardly of what those external events symbolized; namely, he communicated his inner presence to Mary of Bethany through the perfume of his attractiveness. And he communicated to John the interior touch of the even deeper union that comes through that experience.

A STILL GREATER GRACE

But let me point out that God gave all the disciples and each of us a still greater grace at the Last Supper, by offering them the bread and wine transformed into his bodily presence. So that you and I, as we receive the Eucharist, are offered the interior grace that corresponds to the spiritual sense of taste, the highest of all the experiences of spiritual awakening, at least in the doctrine of these Fathers of the Church. Taste then is the most intimate of the spiritual experiences in which the object of our knowledge of God disappears. And because of the intensity of the union, the subject also drops out of sight. So that all that remains is the knowing through love; that is to say, pure awareness which is also pure love ... total attentiveness and pure consciousness. In other words, the Prayer of Full Union ...

THE PRAYER OF FULL UNION CHANGES OUR IDEAS OF GOD AT OUR DEEPEST LEVEL.

... is going to change our ideas of God, of ourselves, everybody else, and the cosmos. Here, through those experiences, we are re-rooted in our source, at the still point, the deepest level of our being where God dwells, although he also dwells beyond us. But that is the "meeting tent," so to speak, to use a symbol from the Book of Exodus, where God and the soul converse or dialogue, but not in words, but through the interpenetration of knowledge that has become all love, knowledge that has become pure experience, pure awareness, pure consciousness so long as that experience persists. St. Teresa thinks that such moments are brief, that half an hour would be a long time. We're still talking about experiences that are temporary, passing, however substantial and transforming they may be while they are in the focus of our attention.

THERE IS A GREATER GRACE

And so, there is a still greater grace. And this is the grace that gradually develops from that prayer, the "lights on" mysticism, in which the presences of God gradually unfold as "felt" experiences at deepening levels of union, assimilation and transformation. This grace is the fruit of moving beyond experiences into the restructuring of consciousness and the transforming union where it takes place, in which the fruit of those experiences, of the undifferentiated presence of God, are now an abiding state of being so that not the experiences of perfume, of touching, and taste subsist ...

A GREATER GRACE UNFOLDS THE PRESENCES OF GOD IN UNION, ASSIMILATION AND AFFIRMATION.

... but the fruit of those experiences, which is to bring back into daily life the invincible conviction of always being in God and God in union with us. And this experience is not passing but is a permanent awareness that spontaneously enters into the whole of life, and, as I said earlier, gives us a kind of fourth dimension to all reality; that is to say, it sees all reality, with the x-ray eye of faith, in God or God in all things and in everything that happens.

WE CAN RETURN TO DAILY LIFE

And so, the fruit, then, of this movement from a take-off point using the external senses, to the awakening of spiritual attentiveness, to its unfolding in ever deeper levels of interior union and absorption of the faculties in God, terminates in a restructuring of our consciousness. We can return to daily life now without the sensational experiences of the past, but rather with the mature awareness of faith that accesses the divine energy directly, without all those interpretations of our faculties about what divine union is. In other words, all that we experience of God, however exalted, is only a radiance of God. It can't be God as he is in himself, because he infinitely transcends all our categories and experiences. So even these great experiences of union that St. Teresa describes, or the Fathers in the spiritual senses, is not the ultimate goal of the Christian life, but rather the transforming union in which the energy of faith and trust and love is constantly beamed to us, whether we experience it or not. And the body itself has become sufficiently stabilized and able to receive the divine communication. So that this gift of God's person, his self, his love can be manifested in all our activities in daily life, even in the most ordinary. So that the same union is now present in drinking a cup of tea, walking down the street, brushing your teeth, as is present in the most profound ecstasy ... doesn't matter. Externals and internals are now the same because all are experienced out of their source, and all are equally rooted in God, manifest God. Now you have an organism that is totally sensitized to all the ways in which the Divine Presence manifests itself, without getting hooked on any one of them as an attachment or as an ultimate expression of God's love.

THIS IS TOTAL FREEDOM

This is total freedom, the freedom not only of union, but of a union that is maturing into unity. Thus, if you could envisage the divine energy as infinite potentiality, infinite possibility, and it gets localized in you and I, then, if there's no obstacles in us, no self-projects, no false self system, then one becomes a pure light through which the Divine Presence can manifest itself as it is, as distinct from a stained-glass window ...

ONE BECOMES A PURE LIGHT THROUGH WHICH THE DIVINE PRESENCE REVEALS INFINITE POSSIBILITIES.

... in which the divine light is serving your virtues or your beauty. This sensitivity, then, to the divine light might be broken down into what the liturgy celebrates theologically as the theme of divine light at Advent, of divine love at Easter, and Pentecost ... divine life in his passion and resurrection. Thus, the purity ...

DIVINE ENERGY BREAKS DOWN INTO DIVINE LIFE, LIGHT, AND LOVE.

... of the divine energy breaks down into life, light, and love. And that energy, in turn, when it strikes our rational faculties, breaks down into all the colors of the rainbow, into the active intellect with reason, understanding, memory, and conscience, and all the particular acts and ramifications of all the other faculties.

THE UNITY WITH THE SOURCE

The spiritual journey is a reverse process in which we move back from our particularities, from our local life, activity, little by little into the life, light and love of grace and then into the still point, and into the divine energy, and to unify with that source, and out of that place to return into daily life, manifesting that perspective, God's perspective, in our daily life, however humdrum that may be.

PRAYER AS RELATIONSHIP	LECTIO DIVINA
ACQUAINTANCESHIP	READING
FRIENDLINESS	REFLECTION
FRIENDSHIP	SPONTANEOUS PRAYER
UNION OF LIFE	RESTING IN GOD CONTEMPLATION