



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“What is Divine Therapy? Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 5,

Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

Fr. Thomas Keating

This experience in deep prayer during the periods of Centering Prayer, when one notices intuitively that somehow one isn't interested in the thoughts; that there's a certain freedom in respect to them. And that even our feelings we can dis-identify with considerable ease, is, as I said, a sign that the contemplative prayer in its traditional sense of total receptivity, as John of the Cross calls it, is beginning to take root and that the great gift of interior silence is being seeded as we, too, enter into the secrecy of God or the silence of God. And this will produce in daily life more significant results than the ones that we've experienced up till now.

Well, suppose that the Spirit has grasped our will in such a way that we're not interested in the usual psychological panorama that goes by in our imagination during the prayer. Suppose the Holy Spirit grasps the will a little stronger. The reason we're not interested in thoughts is that in some mysterious way, the Spirit, or the Divine Indwelling within us is letting go, so to speak, from the depths of our inmost being this attraction that might be compared to perfume. This, of course, is just a metaphor, but it was a favorite one among the Fathers of the Church, who saw in the attraction to the scent of beautiful flowers something of how the Divine Presence – without being seen – attracts us of its very nature because our nose wants to follow this wonderful [sniff, sniff] sensation to its source.

And so, ever so delicately this inner attraction for silence and solitude and peace begins to insinuate itself more frequently. And once in a while the Spirit grasps the will even more strongly than that simple attraction, and this is what St. Teresa of Avila calls the Prayer of Quiet. This doesn't necessarily mean we now have no thoughts. On the contrary, sometimes the thoughts are even more intense or more disagreeable. But what the Spirit is grasping is not our imagination but only the will. And so, the will is aware of being united to God in some deep and satisfying way while this annoying barrage of thoughts is going by at a great rate. And, if anything, there's a certain interior fear that by looking at those thoughts, we'll lose this delicious sense of God's presence and love. It can take slightly different forms in different people, but it usually manifests itself by a certain delight, subdued perhaps, but so strong that one would like to sit there interminably.

That's because we never experienced this kind of joy before and, hence, we're just novices at this. We've never found out what true happiness is. So, since we've been basically looking for happiness all our lives in the wrong places and now you've suddenly found out the direction where it is to be found, naturally you're going to feel a certain delight and satisfaction and you want to prolong it. And, at this stage, sometimes people add a little more time to their prayer. They shouldn't add too much time because they have other duties and prayer is not meant to replace our other duties. But it's simply the great goodness and tenderness of God in which he sees that because of our emotional wounds or what we felt was a lack of adequate affection in early childhood, now, at least, we know that God loves us. And if you know that, you can put up with quite a bit of harassment or lack of love.

In any case it's the Spirit, now, who's taking over our prayer, ever so gently, but nonetheless relentlessly. And this may go on for a while, maybe years. And then maybe the Spirit decides to grasp the will just a little bit tighter. And the psychological experience that follows from this is that the imagination and memory itself are suspended. In other words, so strong is the divine communication or self-disclosure, you might say – God just, so to speak, opens his heart to us and to make sure that we don't miss the point or fail to receive the fullness of that marvelous grace, he suspends the obstacles in us, temporarily, usually not long. But even if God suspends it for 15 or 20 seconds, you've never experienced anything like this before. If it goes on a little longer, you're ready to take all the pleasures and all the symbols of the emotional programs for happiness and put them in the waste basket. They can't compare with this gift of God's presence.

Suppose now that God tightens that grip just one more knot, so to speak. And this is the Prayer of Full Union that takes away even our self-reflection, so that we're not even aware that we're in this prayer until it's over. But we know that we've been some place that was absolutely marvelous. So not only does the Spirit suspend our ordinary reflective faculties, but He suspends our sense of self, our sense of an individual self, and usually this doesn't last very long. According to St. Teresa, she says that she'd be surprised if, at its full intensity, it lasted more than half an hour. But it could. It could be repeated at various levels of intensity in the same prayer. Or it may subside and quiet down and go back to the Prayer of Quiet as I described it before.

Now this, all of these affirmations of our basic goodness, are only half the story. Because at the same time as these affirmations are going on, the Divine Therapist, proportionate to our trust in God and our desire to be healed of our faults and our wounds, is taking away, sometimes through external means by circumstances, but most of the time through modifying our interior attachments to the emotional programs for happiness or over-identification with our group and our roles. And so these delightful experiences of God are interrupted sometimes by periods which could be fairly long in which we're asked to face the dark side of our personality, to see how we project our humiliation on other people, so that we don't have to feel it ourselves, or indulge in compensatory activity in which we use other people to hide from ourselves the painful reality of our own weakness.

In any case, the divine therapy at each point of this intensification of our experience of God within is working on and through the deep rest that occurs from such experiences to loosen up and to draw out of us and to heal us of the trauma of a lifetime that in early childhood, in order to escape the pain, we repressed into the unconscious and have been unwilling to look at, at that depth. It's important to remember that God doesn't do this all in one day; that he begins ever so gently to bring up these subjects. It's something like an archeological dig. He works through our whole

personal history and works with our faults in such a way as to enable us to let them go or give them up or to surrender to God at a certain level.

Then you have a period of peace and maybe some of these experiences that I've described. And then, when God thinks you've had enough of a plateau or a rest ... he's relentless ... he comes back and says; "Well now, let's look at this other issue." And it feels as if it was the same issue, we thought we had handled and given up. And in a sense, it is. In a horizontal sense, it's the same old problem or routine or stubbornness or envy ... or any one of the scenarios of the capital sins: pride, envy, greed, gluttony, lust and the others.

But it really isn't. It's rather dealing with the same subject at a deeper level of hiddenness or stuckness, so to speak, in a deeper part of our unconscious ... that God has mercifully not asked us to look at just yet. This is the marvelous character of this therapy. God knows us through and through and still loves us infinitely and he doesn't impose upon us more than we can handle at this point in our life. But then, a little later we're loosened up a bit more. We become more flexible. We lose a little of our rigidity, our need for compensatory activity.

But there's one aspect in the therapy in which this process is accelerated and St. John of the Cross calls this the night of sense. It's the fruit of the gift of knowledge which is one of the seven gifts of the Spirit. And this is an intuitive awareness that is not reached through reflection or rationality but it simply spontaneously arises as a result of the prayer and the silence that we're cultivating in which, little by little or perhaps all at once, there's a breakthrough in which we realize, perhaps for the first time, that we desperately want happiness – unlimited happiness, infinite love, infinite truth, infinite goodness and there's only one place to find it. In other words, happiness can only be found ultimately in the God who is happiness, and this instantly relativizes all of the expectations we had to find happiness in those cravings or concupiscence for the gratification of the emotional programs for happiness in the symbols of the local culture and environment in which we're in.

Now we know we can't find happiness in symbols of success or wealth or power or approval or ambition or security. An enormous freedom opens up inside, but because we had loved it so much; that's why Jesus says: if you love it that much, cut it off! Take strong measures to let go of that over-identification with an emotional program. And so, this is really what is happening.

But because we loved it, naturally when we see that it's gone; and we can no longer hope to have happiness come to us through those sources, that's when we move into a period of dryness, aridity, disappointment, grief. Grief, remember, is the presence of what we feel to be a kind of evil. And so, it's a natural reaction to anything we had hoped not to have to experience. We had hoped so much that these programs would work that when we know it doesn't, one experiences depressed feelings; and these must be carefully distinguished from a clinical depression which is something quite different and which is a disease.

This is rather, simply, the natural mourning process when you lose something you love. And if you go through it patiently, you feel the stress, you feel the tears coming down your face, you feel the disappointment, your heart sinks and so on, and you feel that the relationship you had with God is somehow undermined. But these are just rationalities, or just the old commentaries trying to interpret this very valuable and treasured experience in a way that you can understand, and you can't understand it because there's nothing before that ever happened to you like this. You're grieving as if you had lost something you loved very much and, hence, you tend to allow that grief to

settle on the presence of God or on your relationship with Jesus Christ or the Divine Therapist, however you envisage this, whether as Christ or as the Holy Spirit.

But all that's happened is that you are projecting your grief onto God and, hence, it feels as though God was displeased with us or rejecting us because some of our relationships with God that we had had in the past were under the influence of those emotional programs for happiness translated onto a spiritual plane.

We actually were praying with mixed motivation. We were serving God, yes, and we were inspired by grace, but there were some human expectations there still rooted in the unredeemed recesses of our unconscious that the divine therapy hadn't quite reached yet. And so, all that God asks us to do is to accept the mourning period and then very quickly it changes into something else. Or, sometimes, the night of sense may have to be intensified again in order to reach ... to do its full work. Its basic work is to undermine the false self at its roots. The ultimate goal God has in mind is the death of the false self. But that only takes place in a further therapeutic situation that John of the Cross calls the night of spirit, which is a purification sponsored and caused by the infusion of divine love which is now coming to us not only through those consoling experiences that I described earlier, but is coming to us just as surely, because of the growth of faith, through the experience of God's absence and through the diminishment of the support systems that we've used to sustain our spiritual journey. They're still there. They're still of value.

The selfish kind of support that we had taken from our spiritual exercises is gone. Hence there's a sense of being deprived, a sense of being left; and, again, the human mind starts figuring this out and says: "Well, I must have committed a secret sin or displeased God, or he's lost interest in me." All a lot of rubbish! But that's the way the commentaries function. And so, it takes some experience and some mistakes and some renewal. And some advice is a great help. But from what I've said, there's no greater grace than the dark nights, because it's not in ecstatic experiences or highly enlightened states that seems to be the essence of contemplative prayer, but rather the purification of the unconscious. Because that's what enables the Holy Spirit to take over the whole of our prayer and the whole of our life.

Now in this situation, it might be helpful to realize that this is nothing new. You see Jesus doing the same kind of program with his disciples and this encourages us with the realization that God is not angry at all. He thoroughly expects us to make mistakes. In some respects, he may like them because it enables him to exercise his infinite mercy. And so, in a sense, we're doing him a favor. So, there's no reason to be saddened by the fact that we don't measure up to our idealized image of what we should be in the spiritual journey or when we should attain those particular breakthroughs.

The whole thrust of our journey is to let go of the false self and eventually to allow it to die, which also involves letting go of our exaggerated sense of separation from God and others. This is an illusion. It's part of the false-self system. So as that apparatus goes down, one's sense of union with God perdures. And when the sense of God's presence disappears or recedes, well, obviously, this is not a disaster; because if you're constantly having internal consolation or spiritual experience such as St. Teresa describes in the Interior Castle, you couldn't function as an ordinary person. You couldn't lead an ordinary life; so that those experiences of consolation are only a phase to soften us up, to orientate us towards the levels of Divine Union that vastly transcend particular experiences. And this is the ultimate goal of the night of spirit which is to bring us to the permanent sense of God's presence.

Compared to that all other graces are very secondary and very diminished communications with God. But they have a great value in that they orientate us and help us to support our journey into the land of no-thing-ness where even our identity is not a source of importance to us. It's rather ... still less our role. Rather, it's to be what God wants us to be in the present moment and to be able to manifest God's goodness and tenderness in whatever the now moment seems to require, suggest or inspire.

Let's look a little more closely at the night of sense. It can last quite a long time, but not as a period of mourning, but rather as a period of adjusting in faith to the fact that God is not going to give us spiritual consolations on a day to day basis, but rather invites us to grow up in virtue of these graces and to take responsibility for bringing the message of Jesus Christ and the Word of God in whatever way is appropriate in our own daily life and immediate circumstances. So now with the night of sense, the inner room, that is to say the office of the Divine Therapist, begins to expand; the walls go down, and when we leave that room, the inner room doesn't get left behind. In other words, we bring in to daily life this attitude, this sense of deep silence and peace which is more and more aware of God's presence, but in such a way that it doesn't interfere with our ordinary activities.

The movement of transformation is towards an ever more ordinary kind of life which can almost completely conceal the enormous work of grace that is going on in that place. And so, this is because we've begun to learn what it means for the Father to be in secret and what it means to pray in secret; that is, to relate to God in secret. And what it means, of course, is that God's action is manifesting itself in us and our job is primarily to respond to the inspirations of grace as far as we can see it, and to allow ourselves to be moved by the Spirit and to manifest the fruits of the Spirit first, which are charity, joy, peace, gentleness, fidelity, patience, self-control, and goodness. And to manifest these in our daily life is the proof that Christ, as risen and communicating the Holy Spirit, is present in us. This is the empirical evidence, so to speak, that we are in Christ Jesus a term that Paul uses and that the Spirit of God is effective in our particular little holon within that greater holon of Christ's body and we are becoming gradually a kind of fifth Gospel ... not canonical, of course ... but someone who has interiorized not just the message of Christ, but the experience Christ had of the Father as Abba, as the loving God, and that this manifestation is a part of our very being. It's not just an idea. It's not just a form of behavior but has really taken over more and more; so that our movement, here, is from doing under our own activity to being, which is the share that we have in God's nature, the image.

This is what we mean by the true self. The true self is beginning to manifest itself and to build a new self, you might say, what Paul calls the new creation, and to experience what Paul means when he says that our life is hidden with Christ in God. We still have a life, but it's not the life of the false self. And the night of spirit is what completes the work that is still not quite complete in the night of sense and that means that the night of spirit is the process of the most profound sharing in the passion of Christ; and hence leads or concludes with the inner resurrection or assimilation to Christ's resurrection and ascension. The latter mystery is the celebration of Christ's experience of glory, of being seated at the right hand of the Father. And our assimilation with Christ is so close that this mystery is the essential completion of the Christian journey and of the Transforming Union that is the goal of the night of spirit.

The Transforming Union is the beginning of a new life. Perhaps we could say it's the real Christian life. That's where everybody should be. But there's a lot of work still to be done even from this perspective of union because the union, of course, is between two people. And the oneness is so

great that they each want to be the other or become the other or pour themselves into the other. But beyond that is the mystery of the Ascension in which even that union is, in some sense, transcendent as one becomes one with God and, hence, one with all creation, one with all other people and at last we're looking at life in the way that it was created and meant to be seen.