



# THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

## “Silence and the Spiritual Journey” Audio conversation

**Gail Fitzpatrick-Hopler and Mary Anne Best**

Gail: We wanted to start our little section here on the night of sense. Let's have a little reading. I'll do a little reading from Father Thomas' book, *Invitation to Love*. “The night of sense is about dismantling our immature programs for happiness which can't possibly work in adult life. Little do we realize when we embark on the spiritual journey that our first fervor is itself immature and under the influence of these programs. It will have some growing up to do. Thus, at some point in our journey, a pervasive sense of God's absence begins to manifest itself during prayer and spreads into other areas of our life. This is actually the beginning of a deeper union with Christ. Most of us, however, do not experience it that way. When the biblical desert opens up within us, we worry that something is going wrong in our relationship with God.”

To reassure us, we'll just have a short little reading from, excerpt actually, from Isaiah. “Remember these things. I formed you. I shall not forget you.”

Mary Anne: Well, good morning, Gail. This process of the dark night, as they are called, begins in that inner room with the divine therapy. That it was actually a series of movements and the undercurrent of the whole spiritual journey, so to speak, that begins with an invitation from God and eventually allows us to be ... to be God with us. It is an ongoing process. As you noted, the night of sense, when we're in it, it may not look like a profound invitation from God, but it leads to deep healing and purification of our motivations in our hearts into all of the other fruits that were given by the spirit. I, myself, think of it as illuminations in the soul by God.

The night of sense is about freedom from our egoic self and a movement towards freedom in God. This begins with self-knowledge. Nothing perhaps is more helpful but perhaps more painful than seeing our own pride in action and being able to see this almost in the third person.

I remember one of my own early signs when I did see myself almost as a third person and I experienced it as an emptiness and a lack of satisfaction with all that I was and all of the worldly things and accomplishments that had been given to me. As well as aridity in anything that might be approaching prayer or daily life or any kind of devotional aspect—without any consolation.

That's how my own experience began of the ... perhaps the very first of the dark nights so ...

Gail: Interesting because I realized I had similar experience in that, and I suppose it's an earmark of going deeper. The God I knew was gone and I didn't feel anything, or I didn't know anything anymore. And I didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the people, with my peers and my family members. I felt separated in a certain kind of way. I felt really kind of perplexed and I was having some sort of, I would call it suffering, I was suffering internally in a way because of the losses. I guess I was experiencing the loss of God, my friends, of myself.

I remember sharing this with this very wise man and he said to me, "Once you find God in suffering, you'll never lose him again, and in darkness." I think that was ... I've never forgotten it. I carry it with me. When things are going a little askew in one way or the other, I remember that God is with me because of that statement. That was a real help to me. It's sort of that ... goes after that reading, "I formed you, I will never forget you." In fact, I will never forget God because the darkness is now a representation of him in some ways to me, because I figure, well, we must be going deeper at this particular point in time and I'm more willing. I recognize it a little more I guess.

Mary Anne: I think that's perhaps what I've grown to understand overtime that the difference between outright depression and being in a dark night is an intuition that the trial is going someplace and that God is with us. Whereas a depression period maybe one where one is unable to function really at a normal level of functioning and everything seems bleak and dark, whereas there is this certain assurance. Father Thomas talks about the assurance could be that the dark night actually represents in St. John of the Cross' mind like the starry nights, that these little stars are twinkling behind the darkness or through the darkness and they exist.

Depression can be a self-absorption, sometimes severe, when our world seems to collapse whereas an awareness of being in the dark night however vague it maybe, is some assurance even deep inside of us that God, yes, God is there with us. God is with me throughout this trial.

Gail: So that there's always a sparkle of light. As you said, God is illuminating your soul or your heart and soul. That isn't recognizable right away. Those little tiny illuminations are things that God has kind of boring through us in a way to open that space for more God and more grace and more things to flow. We're letting of things that are not, kind of in a way, of the free flow of grace and of allowing love to really flow through us.

Mary Anne: The struggle that might be going on within us, an important thing that we can tell our friends who are listening is not to become discouraged, to think that there's something wrong that, that we're doing something wrong, that we are offending God, even if we question God, that we should abandon this spiritual journey, that it is for somebody else, that I have things to do, I have a family, I have responsibilities, I can't deal with this in my life, it belongs to someone else. I think it is just to keep going and to assure ourselves, if you will, through the grace of God I won't give up and I resolve for the love of Christ and the love of God to go through this desert no matter what.

This kind of inner orientation and commitment allows the work of the night of sense which we're talking about today to do its work and to complete it for this point in time. We might also emphasize that, again, as Father Thomas had mentioned because we're living so much longer today than it used to be, that the dark nights may not, are not a one-time event. That they may be thought of as kind of transitional periods on a spiral staircase, if you will, and that we could go through many

of these as our props, if you will, internally and externally of how we craft our lives are one by one dismantled inwardly and outwardly.

Gail: I think we just make the commitment to take ourselves to our prayer chair every morning and just sit down and do it. The whole idea of practice is we practice every day and we make the commitment to practice every day. It's not about sitting down and feeling good. It's about sitting down and deepening our relationship with God for the 20 minutes. We just take ourselves and do that and in faith believe that this is what we're doing even if it doesn't feel comfortable or right, we do it anyway. In fact, I think St. John of the Cross had said when your life is busy, and you feel discouraged, don't do less prayer, do more.

If you could add a few more minutes, just sit down and then take yourself back to your chair in the afternoon or early evening and do your practice and just get up from there, not trying to figure out what happened in the inner room or not trying to understand what's going on per se, but just go about your life. And allow your life to show you markers about where you are in your relationship with God and others – and it will be an interesting experience but not to hold onto the time of prayer as like the place where you and God are working on something. It's just an opening so that God can do the work. It's really kind of a break.

I remember one time, Father Thomas said to me, I don't know, I said something about doing my Centering Prayer and he said to me, "Well, that's kind of like a vacation, a vacation from yourself and you just sit down and it's like a relief." That was another good tip for me and kind of helpful – a vacation from myself, a vacation from that constant inner chatter.

Mary Anne: What about spiritual direction during this time? And /or spiritual companions particularly during the dark nights? Do you have any thoughts about ...?

Gail: I think that's a great idea if you have spiritual companions. And also, to share it in your Centering Prayer group if you have one or if you have a close friend to talk with them because I think those are the kinds of things you need from others. It's an encouragement to continue, to keep it going and I remember talking with a good friend. I was getting a little discouraged and I said something to them, and they said, "Well, my dear. You've hit a goldmine. This is evidence that your prayer is taking hold."

Mary Anne: Even the community of companions on the way, like on this course, I think is very important. Knowing that others are going through either periods of trial or questioning or seeking and that we have this community of hundreds of people around the world with an intention to God—to me, that is so exhilarating, both for myself and the world, that those who are traveling with me and actually, we don't even have to say anything, just knowing that we're there on the way together is motivating in and of itself, actually.

Gail: I would agree. I would agree, that we're all companioning one another. When you go in the practice circle of the course and you hear some of the things that people are experiencing and how encouraging others are. It will right away say, "Oh, keep on going," or, "Yes" or "I understand," whatever it is but there's a whole bunch of encouragement and "I'll pray with you about this intention," whatever it is. But it makes you really have a tangible experience of knowing that others are walking this journey with you. The journey of Lent is about the way of the cross and what that means, but I think we always think of the ... you may want to think of the dark part of it,

that you're suffering, you're dying, you're getting buried, but remember the resurrection is all part of it too, and the ascension.

Here you are, you're moving through this. It's kind of almost like a roller coaster in some ways, you go down and then you move up. It's a spiraling down but as you let go in the spiraling down, then the inner resurrection spirals up and that grace of God supports you even more. It's making space for the love of God. I think once you, kind of really, not only know it with your head, but know it with your heart then you're encouraged by this. This is on the sensible level, the night of sense, the psychological level is being purified from your ego attachments that aren't really serving you anymore. It's like trying to wear a dress that fit you when you were five years old.

Mary Anne: Yes, I think we can maybe just remind ourselves this process is initiated by God. That it is the work of the Spirit and it's all part of a process. We're in the desert. Yes, we affirm that we're there and we're on the way and God is with us and we're not alone.

Gail: Yes, that's the beauty of it. That's the beauty of it. You're not alone interiorly because of the presence of God lives and dwells within you and exteriorly there are companions on the journey who are all experiencing similar things. So, I think those words, I hope those words of encouragements are helpful and of deeper understanding both intellectually and intuitively, people are able to really know a little bit more about the process.

I have a little, another little reading from *Invitation to Love* that we can close with and I think it really affirms what we've been saying, "The night of sense enables us to face our distorted views of God and to lay them aside then we are free to relate to God as he is and to use the immense energy that this freedom releases to relate to others with respect and love. One way, God deals with the limits we have of relating to him is by reducing our concepts of him to silence. As resting in God as contemplative practice becomes habitual, we spontaneously disidentify with our emotional programs for happiness and our cultural conditioning. Already, we are meeting God at a deeper level. In time, we will grow from the reflective relationship with God to one of communion. The latter is of being to being, presence to presence relationship which is the knowledge of God in pure faith."

Mary Anne: That's beautiful. May it be so for us.

Gail: Today and always. Amen.

Mary Anne: Amen.