

PROGRESSIVE PURGATION IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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In order to arrive at the intimate union with God in which sanctity consists, it is not sufficient to win a victory against sin and its allies, the world, the flesh and the devil. It is also necessary to achieve an intense and profound purification of all the faculties and powers of soul and body. The reason is obvious. When a soul begins the journey to holiness, it is already in possession of sanctifying grace, without which it could not even begin. The soul has been endowed, together with grace, with the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. But, in spite of these graces, the soul is laden with imperfections and defects. Grace does not itself exclude anything more than mortal sin; it leaves us with all the natural and acquired imperfections we had at the moment of our justification. The soul remains subject to every kind of temptation, evil inclinations and acquired evil habits; the practice of virtue therefore is difficult and arduous.

The reason for the resistance and rebellion of our nature against virtue must be sought ultimately in original sin. That first sin caused a weakening of the natural inclination to good that human nature had in the state of original justice. From this follows the necessity for a profound purification of the faculties in which evil habits and vicious inclinations are rooted. In the process of purification God reserves to himself the better part (passive purification); but with the help of divine grace we must do all in our power to rid ourselves of all the impediments to the divine action (active purification).

The purpose of the active purification of the external senses is to restrain their excesses and to subject them to the rule of reason illuminated by faith. It is not necessary to deprive the senses of their proper object but only to avoid placing one's joy and final repose in the sensate pleasure these objects arouse, without rising to God through them.

Mortification or custody of the senses is necessary even in things that are lawful. Mortification is necessary for all, especially for beginners until they succeed in dominating their passions. In addition to serving as reparation for past sins, bodily mortifications have two other beneficial uses: immolation of self in imitation of Christ and a positive contribution to the Mystical Body by means of the apostolate of suffering.

However, in self-denial one should proceed prudently and slowly, increasing the exercises of penance as the powers of the soul increase and as the interior invitation of grace urge one on more and more. The majority of souls should practice ordinary bodily mortification by accepting the little crosses of daily life in a spirit of faith and perseverance.

The imagination has a great influence over the sensitive appetite, which is moved with great force to its proper object when the imagination clothes it with special attractiveness. There are two principal obstacles caused by an uncontrolled imagination: dissipation and temptation. Without recollection an interior life and a life of prayer are impossible, and there is nothing that impedes recollection as the inconstancy and dissipation of the imagination.

It is necessary to control the external senses, and especially the sense of sight, because they provide the images the imagination retains, reproduces and reassembles, thus arousing the passions and encouraging the consent of the will. There is no better way to avoid temptations from this source than to deprive the imagination of such images by custody of the external senses.

The habit of attending to the duty of the moment has the double advantage of concentrating our intellectual powers and of disciplining the imagination by preventing it from being distracted to other objects. It also helps a person avoid idleness which is one of the primary sources of dissipation.

There is no sure way of avoiding all distractions, but one can always ignore them. Indeed, this is a much more effective measure than to combat them directly. One should take no account of them but should do what one must do, in spite of the uncontrolled imagination. It is possible to keep one's heart and mind fixed on God even in the midst of involuntary distractions.

The memory can give inestimable service to the intellect and can be its most powerful ally. Precisely because the memory stores up all kinds of knowledge, both good and evil, it is necessary to subject it to purification. With regard to the past, it pertains to virtue and is indispensable for any soul that wishes to sanctify itself to cease thinking of past injuries. In spite of a pardon that has been given, the remembrance of a past offence will disturb the peace of conscience and present the guilty party in an unfavorable light. One should forget the disagreeable

episode and realize that our offences against God are much greater, and that he demands that we pardon in order to receive his pardon.

Remembering benefits from God pertains to the positive purgation of the memory and is an effective means for directing the memory to God. The recollection of the immense benefits we have received from God, of the times that he has pardoned our faults, of the dangers from which he has preserved us, of the loving care that he has exercised over us, is an excellent means of arousing our gratitude toward him and the desire of corresponding more faithfully with his graces. And if to this we add the recollection of our disobedience and rebellion, of our ingratitude and resistance to grace, our soul will be filled with humility and will experience the need of redoubling its vigilance and its efforts to be better in the future.

The consideration of motives for Christian hope is one of the most effective means for directing our memory to God and purifying it of contact with earthly things. St. John of the Cross makes the memory the seat of Christian hope and shows how growth in this virtue effectively purges the memory. The remembrance of an eternity of happiness, which is the central object of Christian hope, is most apt for making us disdain the things of earth and raise our spirits to God.

The sensitive appetite, an organic faculty through which we seek the good so far as it is known through the senses, is divided into two species: the concupiscible or pleasure appetite and the irascible or utility appetite. The former has as its object the delightful good which is easy to obtain, the latter has as its object the arduous good which is difficult to obtain. These two movements of the sensitive appetite give rise to the passions. The passions are movements or energies we can use for good or for evil, but in themselves they are neither good nor evil. In the concupiscible appetite the food engenders three movements of passions. The simple awareness of good arouses love; if it is a question future good it gives rise to desire, if it is a good already possessed and present it produces pleasure. On the other hand the apprehension of evil, which is in itself repulsive, produces hatred. If it is an impending evil, it causes a movement of flight or aversion; but if the evil has overtaken us, it causes sadness. In the irascible appetite the absent good if it is considered possible of attainment, engenders hope; but if it is impossible of attainment, it produces despair. In like manner, the difficult evil that is absent if it can be avoided produces courage; but if the evil is unavoidable it arouses fear. Lastly, the presence of a difficult evil

produces anger in the irascible appetite and sadness in the concupiscible appetite, while the presence of a difficult good produces joy.

In the moral life the passions can increase or diminish the goodness or malice, the merit or demerit of our actions. They diminish human responsibility when a person seeks a good or evil more because of the impulse of passion than by the free choice of the will; they increase human responsibility when the will confirms the antecedent movement of passion and uses it in order to work with greater intensity. The following principles can be helpful in achieving control and proper use of the passions. Every idea tends to produce its corresponding act. Consequently, it is necessary to formulate ideas that are in accordance with Christian morality and carefully avoid the concepts and ideas that relate to actions that should be rejected. In this way one's actions will always be in accordance with one's ideas and values. Every act arouses the sentiment of which it is a normal expression. The rule of conduct following from this principle is that in order to acquire the desired sentiment or to intensify the emotion already experienced, one should act as if already experiencing it. In this way one's sentiments and emotions are controlled by one's actions. Passion augments and intensifies the psychological forces of the individual and uses them for attaining the good one seeks. Consequently, it is necessary to choose the emotion carefully in order to gain the most from its psychological potential. In this way one's ideas and actions are effectively promoted by the correct use of emotional energy.

Such are the basic principles concerning the control and use of the passions, but we must now make some detailed applications regarding the rule of conduct in relation to Christian living. First of all, one must be firmly convinced of the need to combat disorderly passions, for these disturb the spirit, impede prayer and reflection, prejudice our judgment, stimulate the imagination, weaken the power of the will, and disturb one's conscience. Lastly, it should be stressed what is being advocated is not the extinction or repression of the emotions, but their control and proper use, for without great passion for God and the good, sanctity would be impossible.

It is necessary that purification reach the very depths of one's spirit, there to rectify the deviations of intellect and will. The intellect is the spiritual faculty by which we apprehend things in an immaterial way. Its proper effect is the idea or essence it abstracts from external reality by means of the abstractive power of the intellect acting on the phantasm in the imagination. We possess sensitive knowledge in common with

animals; we possess intellectual knowledge in common with spiritual beings. When the intellect compares two ideas and affirms or denies the connection between them, it pronounces a judgment, which is the second act or function of the intellect. When it compares two judgments and draws a conclusion it performs the act of reasoning. The intellectual functions of simple apprehension, judgment and reasoning can be greatly influenced by the appetitive powers of will and emotions. The latter tend to draw the intellect downward to the things of the senses or inward to selfish pursuits.

The active purification of the intellect normally requires first of all the removal of obstacles to the virtuous use of the faculty. This means that the individual must at the outset reject all vain, useless, and sinful thoughts. Secondly, it is necessary to overcome ignorance by studying the truths of faith and seeking to probe their deeper meaning and their application to Christian living. Lastly, it is necessary to avoid excessive attachment to one's own ideas and opinion, especially in matters of faith.

We can offer the following positive principle as a guide in the purification of the intellect; the soul must let itself be led by the light of faith, which is the proximate and proportionate means for the union of the intellect with God in this life. The soul must travel in pure faith if it wishes to arrive at the perfect purification of the intellect and be ultimately united with God. The first movement towards God is through faith, and therefore the first principle of purification is faith, vivified by charity. The clear vision and knowledge of God are reserved for us in the beatific vision in glory, but even in this life faith enables us to attain in some measure to the unfathomable mystery of God though the knowledge be dark and obscure. It is necessary that the soul inform all its life and actions with the light of faith, and cling ever more firmly to the truths proposed by faith on the authority of God. Gradually one can reach the point of judging all things through the light of faith and, indeed, to see all things as God sees them.

The will, also called the rational appetite, is the faculty by which we seek the good as known by the intellect. It is distinguished from the sensitive appetite, which instinctively seeks the good as known by the senses. The intellect can judge as a true good something that is only an apparent good, and the will which is a blind faculty and always follows the apprehension of the intellect, will be impelled towards that object that is taken as if it were a true good. The proper act of the will is love, or the affective union of the will with a known object. By reason of its object love can be sensual or spiritual. By reason of its modality love can be

natural or supernatural; by reason of its formal object love can be love of concupiscence or benevolence. It is called love of concupiscence when one desires the good so far as it is good for oneself; it is a love of benevolence if one loves another precisely as the other is good and lovable; it is a love of friendship if the love is directed to a person and is a mutual benevolent love. The people sanctified by grace here on earth love God with the love of friendship under the impulse of the virtue of charity.

Acts of the will may be elicited or imperated. They are called elicited if they proceed directly from the will (e.g. to consent, to choose, to love). They are called imperated (commanded) acts when they are performed by some other faculty under the command of the will (e.g. to study, to paint, to mortify oneself voluntarily). Human nature and all its faculties have been profoundly affected by original sin. Once the orientation to God was weakened, the dominion of reason over the sensible faculties was also weakened, and the will itself was readily inclined to selfishness. Hence the necessity of a double effort involved in the rectification of the will.: one required to subject the will to God by means of a total submission and conformity to his divine will; the other to increase the power of the will with regard to the inferior faculties until it can subject them completely to itself. We cannot achieve total submission of our will to God unless we first detach ourselves from excessive love that runs counter to the demands of charity. St. John of the Cross reduces his whole spiritual doctrine to the detachment from creatures, as the negative element and to union with God as the positive element. God is the necessary and absolute being, most pure act without the shadow of potency, who exists of himself and possesses the absolute plenitude of being. Creatures are contingent beings that have more of potency than of act. Detachment from created things is absolutely indispensable for arriving at Christian perfection, but it would be of little avail to detach oneself from external things if one is not likewise detached from one's own ego, which constitutes the greatest of all obstacles to one's flight to God. St. Thomas states that egoism or disordered love is the root of all sin (I-II, 77, 4). The soul that aspires to perfect union with God must also strive energetically against its own self-love, which subtly penetrates even holy things. It must examine the true motive for its actions, continually rectify its intentions, and not place as its goal anything other than the glory of God and the perfect fulfillment of his divine will.

Up to this point we have been examining the active purifications the soul can effect by its own efforts with the help of grace in order to purge itself of its defects. Now we will consider the part that God reserves for himself in the purification of the soul: the passive

purifications, which are divided into the night of the senses and the night of the spirit. The teaching of St. John of the Cross on the necessity of the passive purifications is very clear. The night of the senses consists of a prolonged series of profound and persistent aridities that submerge the soul in a very painful state and severely test its perseverance in the desire for sanctification. This is the result of the gift of infused contemplation. Beginners in the spiritual life usually experience sweetness in the service of God. They may become strongly attached to the sensible consolations and, without realizing it, make the delight and sweetness they find in the practice of devotion the principal motive for which they practise them. A profound purification is needed, but those souls could never achieve it by their own efforts, even if they could recognize all their faults. Therefore God intervenes and leads them into the night of the senses. The soul finds delight or consolation neither in the things of God nor in any created thing. If the soul were to find consolation in the latter, it is evident that its distaste for the things of God would be due to a dissipation of the soul. Not all souls suffer the night of the senses in the same degree. It depends on the grade of perfection to which God intends to elevate the soul, the greater or fewer number of imperfections from which the soul must be purified, the forces and energies of the soul itself, and its docility and patience in supporting the painful trial.

In the dark night of the senses the soul should submit with complete and loving submission to the will of God, accepting with patience and resignation the painful trial for as long a time as God decrees. The soul should not consider the purgative state as something evil but see in it a means of fortifying itself and of making progress in the spiritual life. The soul should also persevere in prayer in spite of all difficulty, in imitation of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, who even in his agony prayed with greater intensity. Prayer in the midst of these aridities is a veritable torment for the soul and only by means of force exerted upon oneself can the soul persevere in it asking God for strength if it does not wish to fall back and lose everything. This is the point at which many souls turn back. Tormented by these agonies of the dark night, they abandon the life of prayer when they were on the point of receiving the grace to make giant strides along the road to sanctity. But it is necessary that the soul know that it is being led into a new type of prayer and it would be a great imprudence to try to use the former method of prayer. The soul should remain in peace and quiet, content simply with a loving gaze on God, without any particular consideration and without any desire for delight or sensation. The reason is that the soul is receiving infused contemplation, which has nothing to do with the methods of ascetical prayer. The soul would actually be going back if it were at this

time to return to the discursive use of the faculties. And yet the soul should remember that in the beginning it will not receive any special attraction of the Holy Spirit to remain quiet and tranquil. In this case it ought to practice meditation in the usual manner in order not to remain without the one or the other. But as soon as the soul encounters difficulty in the operations of the faculties and perceives a strong desire to remain in loving attention to God by means of the simple gaze and without any particular consideration, it should then let itself be led by this impulse of grace. At no other time is the advice of a prudent and experienced director necessary as in this crisis. The duration of the painful trials of the night of the senses will vary in different cases. It depends upon the degree of love to which God wishes to raise the soul and the greater or lesser degree of imperfection from which the soul must be purified. God does not punish weak souls with such intensity and profundity as he does the stronger: there are alternate periods of light and obscurity so that weak souls will not become discouraged and fall back.

The night of the spirit is constituted by a series of passive purgations that are extremely painful and have for their object the completion of the purification that was begun but not completed by the night of the senses. By means of the terrifying trials of this second night, the defects of the soul are uprooted at their very source, something that could not be accomplished by the night of the senses. The causes of the night of the spirit are the same as those of the night of the senses, namely, infused contemplation and the imperfections of the soul, although in a higher degree of intensity as regards the contemplative light. The excess of this light torments and blinds the soul at the same time as it manifests to the soul its smallest and most insignificant imperfection. The contrast between the ineffable grandeur of God as seen through the splendour of contemplation and the dross of imperfections and miseries that the soul discovers in itself makes the soul feel that an intimate union between such great light and such great darkness is impossible and that the soul is condemned to live eternally separated from God. This situation, which seems to be most evident and beyond remedy, submerges the soul into a state of anguish and torture so terrifying that it surpasses the torments of purgatory, in which souls have the assurance of eternal salvation.

The principal source of suffering in this night is an apparent abandonment by God. The soul is deprived of all delight and satisfaction in relations with God. It is closed in upon itself faced with its own misery and lowliness. God appears as a ruthless and avenging judge. The soul desires more than ever to serve God but feels that it in no way can be acceptable to God. Although actually in a high state of perfection, it feels

desolate rather than favoured by God. It would welcome death as a release from its torture.

But the soul that passes through this night of the spirit comes forth from this trial resplendent and beautiful, completely transformed in God, and free forever from its weaknesses, miseries, and imperfections. Having been completely purified of them by the terrible mystical purgatory it has suffered, it scales the heights of sanctity, is confirmed in grace, and awaits only death to break the bonds that still hold it in this world in order to penetrate the eternal splendors of the beatific vision.

Is the night of the spirit necessary in order to reach Christian perfection? In order for anyone to reach the seventh mansion of transforming union and to scale the very heights of sanctity, the night of the spirit is indispensable. St. John of the Cross states this many times, and it must be so by the very nature of things. The soul cannot be united with God in the transforming union until it has been totally purified of all its weakness and misery. And this is the proper object of the night of the spirit. There cannot be any fixed rule concerning the night of the spirit because circumstances are too variable. But these painful purifications usually last for a long period of time, sometimes for years, before the soul is admitted to the transforming union of mystical marriage. From time to time God is wont to lift his hand and let the soul breathe but if it question of the true night of the spirit, these periods of relaxation are very brief. The soul immediately returns to the terrible pains and torture until the trial is finished by its entrance into the last classified degree of perfection, which is the transforming union, the final union to which the soul attains – the mystical marriage.