

Mother Theresa's Dark Night

The essence of the "Dark Night" according to St. John of the Cross is to choose "unknowing over knowing." This characterized Mother Theresa's experience throughout most of her religious life. This "Dark Night" follows upon some "wound of love" in which a person feels totally loved as s/he is.

Did Mother Theresa experience such a 'wound of love?'

At the age of 25, in her retreat, March 15, 1822, she shares the following:

"In Jesus—He has given me a part in his unspeakable mercy, his poverty, his hardship, suffering, anxiety and need. To him, now, I write this: I cannot describe my interior peace. Now I am in Jesus. May he do what he wants with me. Him will I trust. He will remain in me and I in him; on him I will build."

This quotation seems to indicate a deep mystical moment that was a turning point for the foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Her willingness to journey into "unknowing" led into her own "dark night."

Later in the same retreat entry of March 15, 1822, she continues: "...I know that my love is not yet sufficient, and my soul must be purified, but this purification I leave in the hand of the Vinedresser who will trim and prune the branches, even though this will be painful. All my life will be lived by Gods grace in the service of Christ through the mediation of his holy mother. Amen."¹

Returning to John of the Cross let us briefly examine some ideas on the Dark Night and the feelings that often accompany this experience.

There are five fundamental characteristics of this purifying experience.

1. The word "night" refers to the Hebrew understanding of mystery; moving into the dark night is not moving into something bad, but a willingness to move into mystery.
2. This movement into mystery spontaneously happens; it is not planned.
3. It happens in the concrete situations of one's daily life.
4. The only thing one has is faith; all other crutches are removed.

¹ *Letters of Mother M. Theresa Gerhardinger*, #1, March 15, 1822, edited by S. Mary Hester Valentine, SSND, 1977.

5. There is often a deep peace that accompanies one who has entered into the Dark Night; the individual often struggles with feelings of interior emptiness and confusion, while being able to continue in a ministry that is healing for others. The individual is experiencing dry contemplation.

John of the Cross describes this confusion and doubt as specified in three temptations: fornication, blasphemy and dizziness.² The individual surrendering to the Dark Night often begins to have a deep awareness of personal sinfulness.³

The purpose of the Dark Night is to lead to inner emptiness and purification so that God's love can fill the longing heart.

Some signs of movement into the Dark Night

1. Aridity – inability to be satisfied; lose enthusiasm about vows, sacraments, apostolate, etc. Quality becomes more important than quantity of work; compassion becomes vital; uncertain about everything else. “Lord, to whom shall I go?” There is a tendency that I must be doing something wrong. There is often a breakdown in communication with significant others; community, friends, etc.
2. Insatiable quest for God - almost a spiritual anxiety, longing for God out of an Augustinian quest; “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in thee.” There's a fear that one is back-sliding and self-doubt can predominate. It feels like one is living in an interior desert and doesn't even know oneself.
3. Radical change in praying habits – Scripture no longer speaks as formerly. It is being replaced by a longing to remain in an attentive gaze upon God. At this time one realizes that it is “desire not achievement” that is important. This is considered the Dark Night of the Senses in which one's emotions, intellect, will are being purified and one's spirit is becoming stronger although one is unaware of what's happening.

For Mother Theresa the Eucharist was her strength. Her nightly holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament was a wellspring of courage and wisdom as she carried out the administrative tasks of founding the congregation. Her sisters were another source of wisdom and courage.

The sea of doubt and confusion welling up inside her heart is well-documented in the letters (#1250 and #1364) that relate to this difficult time in her life.

² *Dark Night*, Bk.I, Ch. XIV.

³ *Dark Night*, Bk. I, Ch. II, “Spiritual Capital Sins”