A path of love that passes through pain toward the light of God

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Introduction: When the Soul Does Not Understand God's Silence

In the spiritual life, there are moments when we pray and feel nothing, seek God and He seems absent, try to move forward and only feel more lost. It is a time of darkness, of emptiness, of silence. Where is God when we need Him most? Why does He remain silent when we cry out?

Far from being a sign of abandonment, this time can actually be a stage of deep growth. St. John of the Cross, a mystical Doctor of the Church, offers us a luminous answer through his most well-known work: *The Dark Night of the Soul*. This poem, accompanied by his theological commentaries, is not simply a poetic expression of suffering but a true spiritual guide on how the soul, with the help of grace, passes through the purification of love toward the transformative union with God.

Today, more than ever, this message has unusual power. In an age marked by anxiety, uncertainty, and the search for meaning, St. John of the Cross teaches us that pain, when lived in the key of faith, can become a path of salvation and fulfillment.

Who Was St. John of the Cross?

St. John of the Cross (1542–1591), born Juan de Yepes Álvarez, was a mystic, poet, and Carmelite reformer. Along with St. Teresa of Ávila, he led the Carmelite Reform, seeking a more austere, contemplative life centered on God. His life was marked by prayer, penance, and also by many misunderstandings and sufferings, including unjust imprisonment by members of his own order.

He was canonized in 1726 and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1926 for his deep spiritual wisdom. His work is not only the heritage of religious or theologians: it is a compass for all who long to love God truly, even when that love passes through darkness.

What Is the “Dark Night”?

The *dark night* is a theological and mystical concept developed by St. John to describe a stage of spiritual growth in which God purifies the soul—through suffering and spiritual dryness—of all disordered attachments, even the most subtle. This purification prepares the soul for deeper union with Him.

There are two kinds of nights:

1. **The Night of the Senses**: God removes sensible consolations (emotions, tastes, fervors) to teach the soul to love Him for who He is, not for what we feel. It is the purification of sensory love.
2. **The Night of the Spirit**: deeper and more painful. Here, God works in the inmost part of the soul, uprooting spiritual attachments, false ideas of God, hidden pride, dependence on one’s own will. It is the threshold to mystical union—a death of the ego to live in God.

Why Does God Allow This Darkness?

The *dark night* is not a punishment but a work of love. Just as a goldsmith purifies gold with fire, God cleanses the soul of all impurity so it can reflect His light without blemish. St. John explains it this way:

> *“To reach the All, you must give up all. And when you come to possess the All, you must do so without wanting anything.”*
> *(Ascent of Mount Carmel, I, 13, 11)*

God wants to possess us entirely, but while we are full of ourselves—our plans, securities, emotions—there is no room for His grace. So, in the night, He removes everything that is not Him.

This may seem cruel, but it is actually merciful: it frees us from living attached to idols, even to our own religious feelings, and leads us to a purer love.

Biblical Roots: A Path Already Walked by the Saints

The *dark night* is not an invention of St. John but a deeply biblical experience. Many figures in Sacred Scripture went through these nights:

- **Job**, who loses everything and does not understand why: *"Oh, that I knew how to find him, that I might come to his seat!"* (Job 23:3)
- **Elijah**, who flees into the desert wishing to die, until God speaks to him in the silence (1 Kings 19:4–12).
- **Jesus Himself**, who in Gethsemane and on the cross cries out: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mt 27:46)

Christ teaches us that the night is not the end, but the threshold to the resurrection.

Relevance Today: What Does St. John of the Cross Say to Us Now?

In times when instant gratification is sought, where even faith can be reduced to feelings or emotional experiences, the dark night reminds us that God is not a feeling but a Person who loves us and wants to transform us in Him.

Many modern Christians are scandalized when they no longer "feel" God. They think they've lost their faith or done something wrong. But that's not always the case. Sometimes it is God Himself guiding us through the night, precisely because He trusts we can grow more.

In a world wounded by depression, brokenness, illness, and anxiety, the message of St. John is not resignation but hope: suffering is not useless when lived in union with Christ. Instead of fleeing from pain, we can embrace it with faith, allowing ourselves to be shaped by the Love that purifies.

Practical Applications: Living the Night with Faith

1. **Accept That Mature Faith Passes Through Trial**

We should not fear spiritual dryness. If you are going through a time where you do not feel God, do not stop praying. Don't base your faith on feelings, but on God's fidelity, which does not fail even when you don't sense it.

> *"The righteous shall live by faith." (Romans 1:17)*

2. **Purify Your Desires**

The night helps us discern: am I seeking God or the consolations of God? Am I attached to my image, my will, my spiritual successes? This stage calls us to let go of everything that is not God.

Practice humility, detachment, and blind trust.

3. **Seek Spiritual Guidance**

The night can be disorienting. It is important to have a good spiritual guide who, like a lighthouse, helps you not get lost. Reading the lives of the saints, who went through the same, is also helpful.

4. **Do Not Compare Yourself to Others**

Every soul has its own path. Perhaps others live their faith with joy while you experience dryness. Don't compare. What matters is being faithful in your own process.

5. **Turn to the Sacraments**

Especially the Eucharist and Confession. Even if you "feel" nothing, grace is still at work. The night should not draw us away from the means God gives us, but bring us closer to them with greater trust.

A Concrete Pastoral Guide for Dark Times

Need	Concrete Action
You feel that God is not listening	Persevere in prayer. Repeat: *"Lord, into your hands I abandon myself."*
You feel you are not progressing	Trust that God's silence is active. He is working in your soul silently.
You have doubts about your faith	Accept that not everything is meant to be understood. Faith is not the absence of questions, but adherence in the midst of them.
You are in dryness	Pray with the Psalms, especially 22, 42, and 130. Jesus also prayed this way.
You suffer loss or crisis	Offer it up to Christ. Say: *"Lord, I offer you this out of love."*

Conclusion: Beyond the Night, the Dawn

The *dark night* is not the goal but the path. At the end of this process, the soul enters such a deep intimacy with God that it no longer needs external proof. It lives in pure faith, firm hope, and selfless love.

St. John describes it with moving beauty:

> *"I remained, lost in oblivion;*
> *my face reclined on the Beloved.*
> *All ceased, and I abandoned myself,*
> *leaving my cares*
> *among the lilies forgotten."*
> *(Spiritual Canticle, final stanza)*

If you are in the night today, do not despair. You are being loved and transformed. Suffering does not have the last word—Love does.

May St. John of the Cross teach us to live the nights of the soul not with fear,

but with faith. For those who let themselves be guided by the Spirit in the darkness will see the dawn of true light: the risen Christ.