

Transfiguration

Ascent into Darkness

August 6 - *Feast of the Transfiguration*

Daniel 7:9-11, 13-14
Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 9 (1a, 9a)

2 Peter 1:16-19
Matthew 17:1-9

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC #2700-2724) describes three levels, or expressions, of prayer -- Vocal, Meditative and Contemplative. Vocal prayer is perhaps the most commonly known form. It is described as the physical engagement in which the body is associated with the interior prayer of the heart (#2700-2704, 2722). Meditation is primarily a quest, with the assistance of Scriptures, liturgical texts and holy images, to help make our own that upon which we are meditating, passing from our thoughts to reality as our will is strengthened to follow Christ (#2705-2708, 2723).

The third of these expressions, Contemplation, is described as "a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus...His gaze purifies our heart...illuminates the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men" (CCC #2725). Contemplation is also "a gift, a grace; it can be accepted only in humility and poverty" (CCC #2713). It is not an experience that we can actively seek. As



Theresa of Avila writes: "it shows a lack of humility to ask to be given what you have never deserved." Rather, it is a gift of God, granted in the midst of deep and disciplined prayer, in which we seek, and take time to be alone with Him, who loves us.

In both Scripture and the language of Spiritual Theology, while darkness is more often used to connote an absence of God, darkness is also used to illustrate how much God is far beyond our comprehension; how a mystical encounter of His presence, in the midst of deep, intense prayer, puts us into a state that is beyond our five senses, making sight, sound, smell, touch and taste completely irrelevant. In short, we enter into a state of all-encompassing darkness.

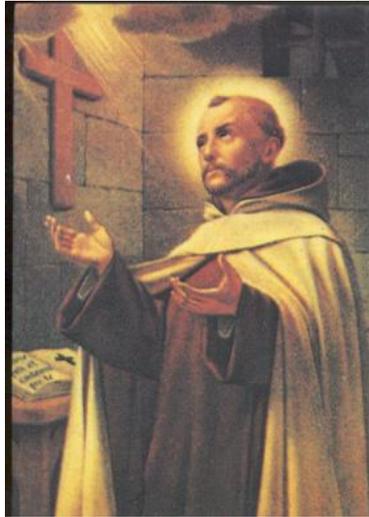
This is consistent with other encounters with God throughout the Holy Scriptures. When Abraham entered into covenant with God, in a sacrificial rite that would seal that covenant, "a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him" (Gn 15:12). Following the Exodus from Egypt as the people of Israel entered into a covenant with

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God, the mountain "was enveloped in a dense black cloud" (Dt 4:11) and they "heard [God's] voice from the midst of the darkness" (Dt 5:23) while Moses "drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Ex 20:21).

Some mystical theologians call this state of contemplation a "ray of darkness." St. John of the Cross describes it as a "Dark Night of the Soul", when God, who is beyond our senses, overwhelms and envelops the soul in darkness. "When this Divine light of contemplation assails the soul which is not yet wholly enlightened, it causes spiritual darkness in it...overwhelms it and darkens the act if it's natural intelligence" (*Dark Night of the Soul*, II, V).

In a number of places, the four Gospels tell us that Jesus went off by Himself to pray. On only one occasion does



the Gospel tell us of Jesus taking anyone with Him. The Transfiguration of Jesus is perhaps a glimpse of just what it may be like to join Jesus in prayer -- not a joyful, peaceful experience, but, for the three Apostles who joined Him, one beyond all comprehension, of overwhelming awe as a "bright" cloud cast a "shadow" upon them as they encountered the presence of the Almighty Father. It may well have been for Peter, James and John the experience of contemplative prayer -- frightening, over-whelming, tumultuous and beyond words -- written of so eloquently by such great mystics as Sts. John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila.

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