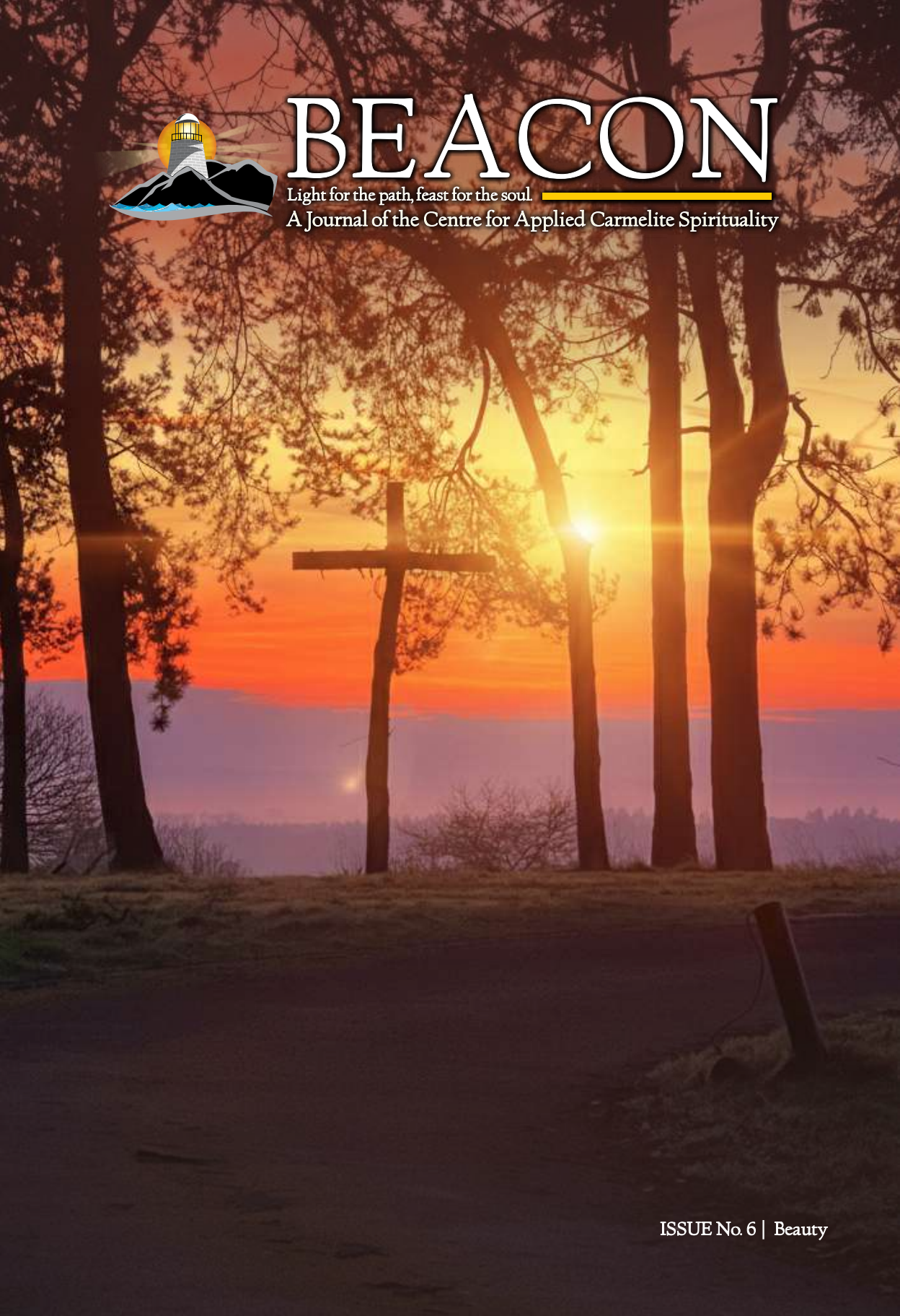

BEACON

Light for the path, feast for the soul

A Journal of the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality

ISSUE No. 6 | Beauty

Salvador Dalí's Christ of Saint John of the Cross

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SPRING 2026

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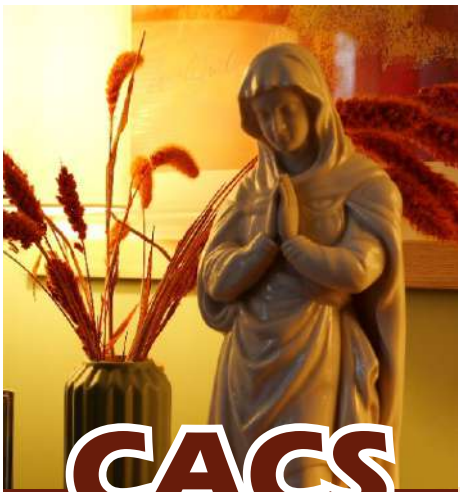

CACS PRAYER

Christ **A**mong us **C**oming **S**till.
Christ **A**lways **C**entring while **S**ending.
Christ **A**nointing **C**ommunities in **S**pirit.
Christ **A**gitating for **C**larity and **S**olidarity.
Christ **A**lone **C**alming **S**torms.
Christ **A**bsolving **C**onfusion and **S**in.
Christ **A**wakening **C**alling with **S**erenity.
Christ **A**ffirming gifts of **C**ounsel and **S**agacity.
Christ **A**ttending to us in **C**ontemplative **S**ilence.
Christ **A**nticipating our **C**ourageous **S**teps.
Christ **A**nimating our **C**hurch's **S**ynodality.
Christ **A**live in **C**armelite **S**pirituality.
Christ **A**mong us **C**oming **S**till.

John Della Costa
CACS, School of Prophets

FROM THE EDITOR:

Welcome to the Beacon Journal:

A Springtime Celebration of Beauty

Spring 2026

Chukwulote Clement Obiorah holds bachelor's degrees in philosophy and theology. He has worked in several capacities since his initial formation. He has been working as our director of communications and coordinator of community and belonging at the Centre.

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the *Beacon Journal*, presented by the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality. We launch this publication anchored deeply in the theme of Beauty, making a profound statement: the foundation of spiritual transformation is Beauty. In God's good pleasure, the ministry of time brings us to springtime—a season that universally suggests transformation as nature begins to flourish. Likewise, every year, the people of God embark upon the transformative journey of Lent. For St John of the Cross, the way of beauty is the sure path of transformation. He prayed that the soul might be so transformed in divine beauty that 'each looking at the other may see in the other their own beauty,' declaring, 'my beauty be your beauty and your beauty my beauty'.

Our purpose is to reinstate gaiety and beauty as vital pathways to holistic formation and integration. When our eyes are attuned to beauty, we find that no amount of it is ever truly enough. This insight profoundly impacts our perspective on the world and our approach to pastoral care and professional practice.

Christian spirituality is, first and foremost, a love rendezvous – a love for the Beloved, beheld in beauty. We are loved not as a derived character, but as an endowed signature. As captured in the poetry of this edition, beauty is 'God's handwriting, a vessel of grace' and a 'wayside sacrament, deeply understood'. To borrow from Ralph Waldo Emerson, we must welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, and in every fair flower, thanking God for this cup of blessing.

To express this divine beauty is to risk trivialising it. This is why St John of the Cross turns to the inspired words of Scripture; intangible beauty is clothed in the mad, sacrificial expressions of the lover. In this edition, our contributors delve into the many implications of reshaping our understanding of beauty.

As Tracey Rowland reveals, while wisdom walks a narrow path, beauty opens as a wide, welcoming thoroughfare into the Temple of Truth. Exploring this further, Mark

O'Keefe unpacks the magnificent beauty of a soul created in God's image, an intimacy that binds our moral life directly to deep prayer. What emerges from this place of deep prayer is the radiance of inner re-ordering—not simple self-improvement, but, as John Ashfield opines, a grace-enabled restoration that blooms into the profound beauty of cruciform love.

This theme is further illuminated in an interview with Liam Finnerty and Matt Blake, who peer through the divine prism where ancient wisdom meets modern longing. Following this, Kelvin Ekhoegbe elucidates how the spiritual journey ceases to be a harsh ladder we must tirelessly climb. Instead, we awaken to a new aesthetic vision, recognising the soul's quiet movement as a sacred icon, ever waiting to be contemplated.

Yet, the true realisation of this aesthetic vision requires a descent into the dialectics of light and night. Stephen Costello emphasises that this Dark Night is no mere absence of light; it is a 'difficult consolation' and a daring lover's rendezvous taken under the safe, quiet cover of the dark. Within this quiet cover, healing our memories is never an act of forgetting, but a purification forged in the shadows, as Iva Beranek shows us. Emerging from these shadows, Josie Marsden invites us into the art of sacred seeing – looking through the thin veil of the material world to touch the divine reality pulsing just beneath.

The ultimate joy of heaven is to behold the beauty of God and to see all things in that beauty for eternity. Yet, the great awakening to this love occurred on the Cross, in suffering and abandonment. Eternal beauty was hung upon the tree of life. He had no outward comeliness that we should look upon Him, but He possessed enough beauty for the detached lover. The heroism and madness of the Lover – who would die a thousand deaths to unite with our condition – is the true beauty of the whole plot.

Step into the silence, release the urge to possess, and let the enduring beauty of Carmel draw you through these reflections, interviews, poems, book reviews, and other content specifically curated for you.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the CACS Team for leading the relaunch of the *Beacon* as a journal. I also want to thank all our professors and contributors, with special appreciation for Susanna Page and Dharmisha Patel for their meticulous proofreading of the manuscripts. May the elegance of this journal serve as a shining beacon of hope for all.

Summoned and transformed into Beauty, I hope this edition encourages you in your work, knowing firsthand the glory in the beauty around us. I welcome you to the *Beacon Journal*, Spring 2026.

In Carmel,
Clement C. Obiorah, OCD Editor, The Beacon Journal
Beacon@cacs.org.uk

THE BEACON JOURNAL:

Our Mission
To serve as a research sanctuary and an enduring companion for those in ministry and spiritual formation. In a fast-paced world of fleeting trends, the Beacon Journal offers profound depth.

Our Vision: Going Deep
To forge a lasting library of applied wisdom, blending scholarly rigor with the poetic simplicity of the mystic.

As a premier quarterly journal, we provide a high-water mark of contemplative thought and prayer—a resource designed not simply to be consumed, but to be kept, consulted, and cherished.
We form competent ministers in the contemplative tradition by looking beyond the question of, "What must I do to inherit real life?" to ask the deeper question: "What must I become to embody it?"

Welcome to the Beacon Journal.

THE PORTAL OF BEAUTY

by Professor Tracey Rowland

Professor Tracey Rowland is an esteemed Australian theologian and academic, known for her contributions to Catholic theology and cultural discourse. She holds the St John Paul II Chair of Theology at the University of Notre Dame Australia and engages with the ideas of Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) and Karol Wojtyła (Pope St John Paul II). Rowland, who has a doctorate in Divinity from Cambridge University, focuses on fundamental theology, theological anthropology, and the relationship between faith and spirituality. She is also a member of the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences.

Abstract

Is beauty the widest gate to God? Vincent McNabb argued that while wisdom is the narrow path, beauty offers a thoroughfare for millions into the Temple of Truth. In this article, Tracey explores the "way of beauty" as a vital tool for spiritual transformation and flourishing, drawing on Pope Benedict XVI, St Augustine, and the splendour of Gothic architecture. Contrasting Catholic aesthetics with Calvinist austerity, the author illustrates how beauty, found in High Mass, in nature, or in Brideshead Revisited (written by the English novelist Evelyn Waugh), serves as the "radiance of truth." In a fractured world, the Church's most potent invitation may well be an encounter with the beautiful, leading restless hearts toward the Divine.

Keywords

Catholic Theology, Evangelisation, Aesthetics, Beauty, Truth, Pope Benedict XVI, Vincent McNabb, Gothic Architecture, Spiritual Transformation, Liturgy.

Methodology

Here, the author reflects on a personal journey that intertwines theology and philosophy, focusing on three dimensions of beauty: the beauty of liturgy, the grace of church literature, and the joy found in friendship. This reflection aims to illustrate how beauty can serve as a significant pathway to God. Through a comparative approach to aesthetics, the author argues that artistic expressions reveal beliefs and highlight theological differences. By employing phenomenological and narrative evidence, she showcases the profound emotional, practical, spiritual, and transformative effects of beauty on individuals in their spiritual journey.

The Two Gates

The Irish Dominican Vincent McNabb (1868–1943) wrote:

> Into the great Temple of Truth, the Church of God, there are two gates – the gates of wisdom and the gate of beauty. I am inclined to think that the narrow gate is the gate of wisdom, and the wide gate, through which millions pass, is the gate of beauty. The Catholic Church has these portals ever open. She welcomes from time to time the few philosophers and thinkers who crucify themselves by thought, but she welcomes unceasingly the countless numbers who come for her colour, for her song, for her smile… I believe that the way of beauty… is the wider way. It is God's own most perfect

thoroughfare – God's way to Himself (McNabb, 1942, p. 98).

Fr McNabb also suggested that beauty is the radiance of truth and the fragrance of goodness. The idea that evangelisation requires us to give people an experience of beauty and goodness along with an understanding of the truth is standard Catholic thinking. In our own time, it is showcased in Bishop Robert Barron's Word on Fire ministries and in many other communities that have taken to heart the idea that we need to keep truth, beauty and goodness working together in a Trinitarian harmony.

Some people, the intellectual types, often find their way to the Church through the gate of truth, but as Fr McNabb noted, the wider, more accessible gate is the gate of beauty. Even an intellectual like Pope Benedict XVI, one of the most highly educated men ever to hold the keys of Peter, thought that beauty was extremely important for leading people to God. He stated that 'the only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb' (Ratzinger, 1985, p. 129). He declared that: 'For faith to grow today, we must lead ourselves and the persons we meet to encounter the saints and to come into contact with the beautiful' (Ratzinger, 1985, p. 130).

This is not a novel position in the Catholic tradition but follows a long line of authorities who have regarded the aesthetic moment as essentially theophanic, that is, revealing something of the nature of God. Leading Catholic saints who emphasised the evangelical power of beauty include St Augustine, St Bonaventure, and St John Henry Newman, and all three are regarded as Church Doctors, that is, saints whose contribution to the life of the Church is foremost in the field of theology. Catholic theologians tend to follow the Greek philosopher Plato in holding that the beautiful and the good, ultimately the beautiful and God, coincide. As Pope Benedict remarked: "Through the appearance of the beautiful we are wounded in our innermost being, and that wound grips us and takes us beyond ourselves; it stirs longing into flight and moves us toward the truly Beautiful, to the Good in itself" (Ratzinger, 2002, para. 3), that is, to God. Of course, the God of Christianity is not the same as Plato's conception, for Plato, one might say, was on the right path in his understanding of the connection between beauty, goodness, truth, and the divine.

"Through the appearance of the beautiful we are wounded in our innermost being, and that wound grips us and takes us beyond ourselves; it stirs longing into flight and moves us toward the truly Beautiful, to the Good in itself" that is, to God.

When Pope Benedict spoke of a wound in our innermost being, he was referring to the fact that an experience of beauty creates in us a desire for the transcendent, for the eternal. We become aware of our own limitations, our need for an experience of something much greater than ourselves. The philosopher Eleanor Stump explained it this way:

> When we are in the grip of that Augustinian sort of desire, we often do not know what we are yearning for. But Augustine (as well as many others in the Christian tradition) thought that if both the beauty and the desire for it are real and great, then in effect the desire is a desire which will lead to God. If the desire for that beauty grows in a person, it will, in the end, bring a person to surrender to God in faith, in the process which culminates in the human will's being united to the goodness of God's will (Stump, 2010, p. 57).

As Saint Augustine famously prayed, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You' (Augustine, 397/2006, p. 3).

A concrete example of the beauty that has been created by the Church can be found in the numerous Gothic cathedrals scattered throughout the world, especially in Europe. The famous medieval abbot of St Denis in Paris, Abbot Suger (1081–1151), said this of his experience of praying in a Gothic-style Abbey:

> When, out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-coloured gems [in the rose windows] has called me away from external cares, and toward worthy meditation… then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth, nor entirely in the purity of heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world. (Panofsky, 1979, pp. 63–65).

If the desire for that beauty grows in a person, it will, in the end, bring a person to surrender to God in faith

Pope Benedict made a similar observation. He said:

> The windows of the Gothic cathedrals keep out the garishness of the light outside while concentrating that light and using it so that the whole history of God in relation to man, from creation to the Second Coming, shines through. The walls of the church, in interplay with the sun, become an image in their own right, the Iconostasis of the West, lending the place a sense of the sacred that can touch the hearts even of agnostics. (Ratzinger, 2000, p. 124) .

The philosopher Alain de Botton, who comes from a Jewish family, wrote an article comparing McDonald's restaurants to Westminster Cathedral. He said that the restaurant's true talent lay in the generation of anxiety. In particular, 'the harsh lighting, the intermittent sounds of frozen fries being sunk into vats of oil and the frenzied behaviour of the counter staff invited thoughts of the loneliness and meaninglessness of existence in a random and violent universe' (de Botton, 2006, p. 104). Conversely, for de Botton, 'after 10 minutes in [Westminster] cathedral, a range of ideas that would have been inconceivable outside began to assume an air of reasonableness' (*ibid*., p. 105). He said that under the influence of the marble, the darkness and the incense, it seemed entirely probable that Jesus was the Son of God and had walked across the Sea of Galilee. Moreover, 'in the presence of alabaster statues of the Virgin Mary set against rhythms of red, green and blue marble, it was no longer surprising to think that an angel might at any moment choose to descend through the layers of dense London cumulus, enter through a window in the nave, blow a golden trumpet and make an announcement in Latin about a forthcoming celestial event.' (*ibid* ., p. 105).

Gothic architecture is not, of course, the only example of beautiful Christian art. There are icons, great paintings, polyphonic music, Gregorian chant, splendid liturgies, great poetry and other literature. Pope Benedict said that for him, 'the greatness of Western music, from Gregorian chant to polyphony to the Baroque age, to the music of Anton Bruckner and beyond', was 'the most immediate and the most evident verification that history has to offer of the Christian image of mankind and of the Christian dogma of redemption.' (Benedict XVI, 2011).

Personal Encounters with Beauty

My earliest encounter with the beauty of Christian art was a visit to a convent when I was around four years old. The convent was built in the Spanish mission style with gardens surrounded by cloisters. Oil paintings of saints hung on the walls of the corridors. A piano took pride of place in a parlour where guests were received by the nuns. As a souvenir of my visit, the Mother Superior gave me a book of prayers for children, and on the cover of the book, there was a picture of two children walking across a broken bridge with their guardian angels escorting them. I was also given a little brooch in

the shape of a flower. I have no idea how the Mother Superior came by that, but I treasured it for years. The convent was another world from my suburban home. Even the convent cats had extraordinary names. The bluish-grey Persian male was called Thomas Aquinas, not simply Thomas, and the brindle Persian female was Juliette-Marie. Quite simply, I left that convent utterly enchanted.

Years later, on my first trip to London, aged 20, I discovered the Brompton Oratory. I had never heard of it, but I had heard of Harrods, and while searching for Harrods on foot in the days before iPhones and satellite navigation systems, I came across the Oratory. It was the Feast of Candlemas. Not long after I walked in, a High Mass began. As a child of the 1960s, I had never heard such glorious liturgical music. It was my first Novus Ordo Latin Mass. I felt as though I was suspended somewhere between heaven and earth. In the years since, whenever I am in London for whatever purpose, I try to make a visit to the Oratory. I also visit the Medici card shop near South Kensington station to stock up on beautiful cards and other stationery, and I sometimes have lunch with friends at the Polish Club. I get a triple shot of beauty: the beauty of the liturgy, the beauty of fine stationery, and the beauty of friendship.

Recently, I attended the Requiem Mass for Bishop Peter Elliott, who was, among many good things, a liturgist. He had left very detailed instructions about his funeral. He described the kinds of vestments he wanted to be worn and the brand of church candles that were to be used. We had a hymn written by St John Henry Newman and the music from Gabriel Fauré's famous Requiem. The casket was draped with a pall featuring an embroidered Jerusalem Cross. Scores of priests solemnly processed into their seats. Those concelebrating within the sanctuary included a number of bishops and three archbishops. Knights of the Holy Sepulchre dressed in their full regalia carried the casket to the waiting hearse, and Knights and Dames of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre formed a guard of honour along the street outside the cathedral. Nothing was slipshod. Every single moment was ordered and solemn, and it took the entire Catholic community, from the archbishops to the lowliest person in the pews, to bring it all together.

Bishop Peter Elliott was a convert from High Church Anglicanism, and the High Church Anglicans are renowned for their appreciation of beauty. It could be argued that their regard for beauty is that part of the Catholic heritage that the High Church Anglicans have best preserved. Calvinists, however, the Low Church types, are famous for their austerity, for their fear of beauty. They tend to regard it as something classically pagan, inconsistent with the horror of the Cross. There is a great line from the German writer Gerhard Nebel about the difference between Catholic and Protestant attitudes to beauty. He said: 'Anyone enamoured of beauty will shiver in the barn of the Reformation… and feel the pull of Rome' (as cited in Ratzinger, 2000, p. 129). Bishop Peter Elliott entered the Catholic Church when he was a student in Oxford and thus never risked shivering in the barn of some Calvinist church.

This contrast between the Catholic and Calvinist approaches to beauty is obvious in parts of Europe where Calvinists and Catholics live almost side by side. For example, the churches in Zürich are cold and austere, while 40 km down the road at Einsiedeln, there is the monastery of St Meinrad, renowned for the opulence of its Baroque architecture. The Catholic Baroque was the Counter-Reformers' response to the Protestant aversion to beauty.

For every statue the Puritan Protestants smashed, the Jesuits installed at least half a dozen trumpet-playing angels.

In addition to the beauty of art and music, there is also the beauty of nature itself and of human friendship. On a recent visit to Rome, I walked through a park where a young couple were playing a ball game with their five children and the family dog. The two youngest children were still toddlers, and the older children were giving them opportunities to catch the ball. The little ones looked so proud of themselves when they caught it, and the comedy of it was not lost on their parents, older siblings, and several onlookers, including myself, who just happened to be walking through the park and found the whole scene enchanting. The love that bound the family together was palpable, the tenderness of the older children towards the younger ones was heart-melting, and the parents were basking in the joy that their love for each other had generated. Without intending to do so, they were showcasing what St John Paul II called 'a civilisation of love'. The scene was, quite simply, beautiful.

Finally, one of my favourite books is Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. In it, there is a passage in which the agnostic Charles Ryder says to the Catholic Sebastian Flyte: 'My dear Sebastian, you can't seriously believe it all – I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass!' Sebastian replies, 'Oh yes, I believe that. It's a lovely idea.' Then Charles replies, 'But you can't believe things because they are a lovely idea.' Sebastian then replies, 'But I do. That's how I believe' (Waugh, 1945, p. 87). Charles, of course, eventually becomes a Catholic, entering through the gate of beauty.

As our civilisation continues to implode, as the fruits of sacramental graces become harder to source, as people say that they do not know what is true or who to believe, one of the best things that the Church can do is to provide little oases of Christian culture where people can experience the Trinitarian interplay of the true, the beautiful and the good. The youth who yearn for this come in large numbers wherever it is provided.

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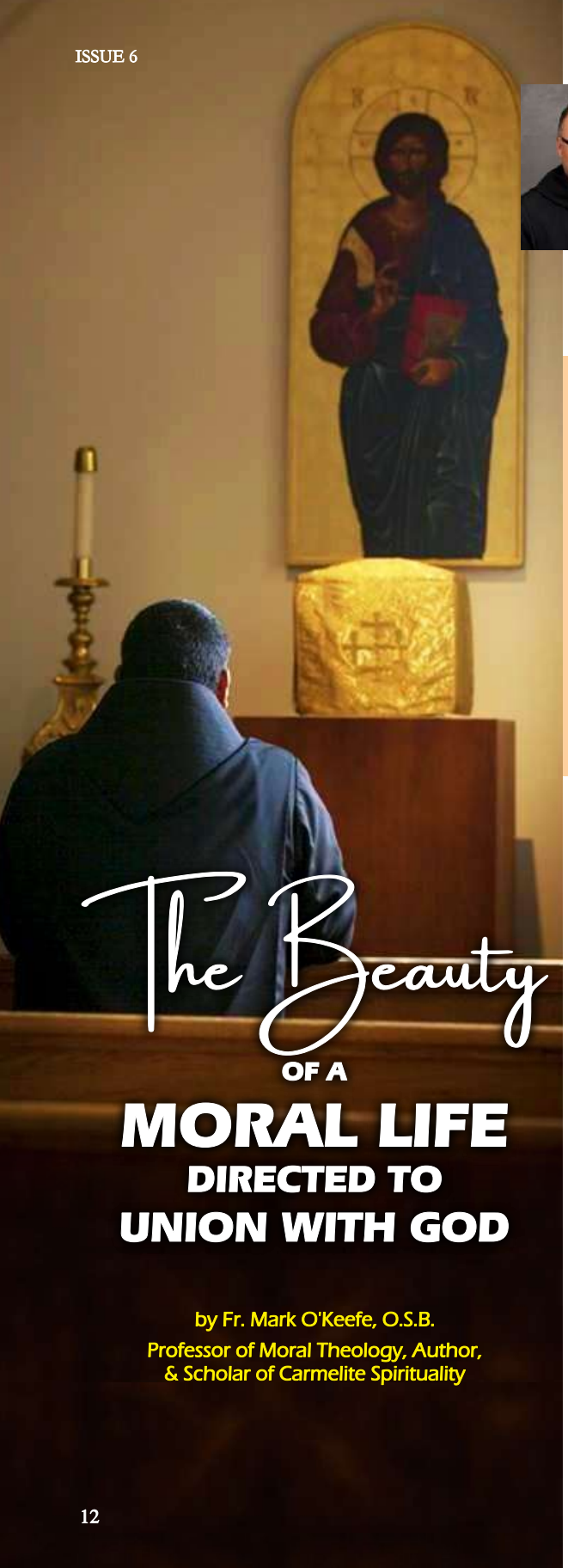

The Beauty OF A MORAL LIFE DIRECTED TO UNION WITH GOD

by Fr. Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B.
Professor of Moral Theology, Author, & Scholar of Carmelite Spirituality

Fr Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B., is a Benedictine monk, prolific author, professor of Moral Theology, and former President-Rector at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. Proficient in Christian ethics and Carmelite spirituality, he brings the profound wisdom of saints like Teresa of Avila to a modern audience. Through his decades in the classroom and his acclaimed books on the Catholic priesthood, moral theology and prayer, Fr Mark passionately guides ministers and everyday readers toward a deeper, more intimate friendship with God.

Abstract

This article explores the deep connection between the Christian moral life and contemplative prayer, drawing on the wisdom of Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross. It asserts that the human soul possesses an inherent beauty, created in God's image. While sin obscures this dignity, cultivating theological and moral virtues restores it. Ultimately, the Christian moral journey is a transformative process. Guided by grace and rooted in love, believers are conformed to Christ through good works, culminating in divine union and the soul's magnificent beauty.

Keywords: ***Christian moral life, contemplative prayer, divine union, Carmelite spirituality, image of God (Imago Dei), human dignity, theological virtues, Saint Teresa of Ávila, Saint John of the Cross.***

Introductory Note on Citations and Abbreviations

Before reading the article, please note that citations for classical theological and spiritual works follow standard canonical abbreviations. This allows for precise referencing of specific passages across various translations and editions. A guide to the abbreviations and citation formats used in this text is provided below:

Works of Saint Teresa of Ávila

- **IC:** *The Interior Castle* (also known as *The Mansions*) - *Format:* **IC 1.1.1** refers to the First Dwelling, Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.
- **W:** *The Way of Perfection* - *Format:* **W 4.4** refers to Chapter 4, Paragraph 4.

Works of Saint John of the Cross

- **A:** *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* - *Format:* **A 2-3** refers to Book 2, Chapter 3.
- **C:** *The Spiritual Canticle* - *Format:* **C 39.4** refers to the explanation of Stanza 39, Paragraph 4.
- **N:** *The Dark Night of the Soul* - *Format:* **N 2.21.10** refers to Book 2, Chapter 21, Paragraph 10.

Other Major Theological Works

- **CCC:** *Catechism of the Catholic Church* - *Format:* **CCC 691** refers to paragraph 691.
- **ST:** *Summa Theologiae* by Saint Thomas Aquinas - *Format:* **ST 1a2ae, Prol.** refers to the First Part of the Second Part (*Prima Secundae*), Prologue. **ST 2a2ae, q.23, ad.8** refers to the Second Part of the Second Part (*Secunda Secundae*), Question 23, Reply to the 8th Objection.

"I don't find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul" (IC 1.1.1). This is the observation of Saint Teresa of Ávila as she begins to unfold the journey through the interior castle of the soul to union with God. This incomparable beauty is grounded in the fact that human persons are created in the image of God: "Saying that the soul is made in His own image makes it almost impossible for us to understand the sublime dignity and beauty of the soul" (IC 1.1.1). In the very next chapter, she tells us that sin can mar and cover this beauty, but nothing can erase the fundamental beauty of the human person created in the divine image. As Teresa guides the reader through the dwelling places of the interior castle, she is showing us how prayer and the graced work of ongoing conversion bring us both to the God who dwells in the centre of our souls, as well as to the restoration of the soul's true beauty in union with God. Increasing communion with God and the deeper uprooting of superficialities and attachment to passing things bring us, then, by God's gift, to what beings created in the image of God were meant to be.

The Christian moral life increasingly mirrors the ways of God in whose image we are created, and it is this conformity that marks the beauty of the Christian moral life.

In a similar way, although *The Way of Perfection* is meant as a kind of primer in contemplative prayer, it reminds us that human "perfection" means union with God. This end is attained by prayer but also by transformation that must precede, accompany, and flow from prayer. And so, there is no point in addressing contemplative prayer, Teresa says, if she has not first discussed the virtues necessary to prepare for the gift of contemplation. She identifies three essential virtues: practical love of neighbour, detachment, and humility (W 4.4). It becomes clear as she describes these virtues that their purpose is to tear away at a false self, systematically eliminating what stands in the way of contemplation and union with God. The "way of perfection" that leads to union with God is necessarily a "way of transformation" (O'Keefe, 2016).

Saint Teresa is inviting us to understand that the restoration of the soul's fundamental and magnificent beauty as the image of God will be found ultimately only in divine union. But the path to this union, in this life or in the next, necessarily involves not only prayer but also our own graced efforts to mirror the beauty of God in our living. As Christians, our moral and spiritual journeys are fundamentally one. They go hand-in-hand. The Christian moral life increasingly mirrors the ways of God in whose image we are created, and it is this conformity that marks the beauty of the Christian moral life.

As Saint John of the Cross tells us, when the advanced soul comes at last to participate in the trinitarian life of God, it will be transformed into what it was created to be: "This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created her in his image and likeness that she might attain such resemblance" (C 39.4). But for John, ever enthralled with the doctrine of the Incarnation, the beauty of the soul rests especially in the Incarnation of the Son of God and in the resurrection from the dead in a body like ours. "He clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he took on our human nature and elevated it in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all. … And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity" (C 5.4). Whether grounded in our creation as the image of God or in the Incarnation, human beauty will be fully realised when we are conformed to and united with God through Christ.

The Image of God, Dignity, and the Moral Life

The exposition of the Christian moral life in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Part Three: "Life in Christ") begins with a quotation from Pope St Leo the Great: "Christian, recognise your dignity and, now that you share in God's own

nature, do not return to your former base condition by sinning. Remember who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Never forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of the Kingdom of God" (Catholic Church, 1994, CCC 691). This mirrors the beginning of the second part of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (ST 1a2ae, Prol.) in which he discusses the moral life as a return to the God in whose image we have been created.

And the following paragraphs of the introductory section of the *Catechism* remind us that our task in this life is to consistently live our dignity by overcoming our sin, growing in virtue, and being conformed to Christ. In this way, we can truly live what we are: the image of God.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith recently offered a distinction between "ontological" dignity and "moral dignity." Ontological dignity is our indelible dignity created in the image of God, which cannot be taken away or removed. Our moral dignity is the actual manifestation or realisation of our inherent dignity through the exercise of our freedom (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024). It is precisely in choosing to live as the image of God in our attitudes and choices that we build up in ourselves, with God's help, the true moral dignity that is in keeping with what we have been created to be and to become. We can say, then, that our human dignity is a divine gift and an indelible and essential reality, as well as being an invitation and a constant challenge to become what we are.

The Christian moral life, by which we strive, with God's help, to be conformed to the image of God, involves growth in those habitual attitudes or dispositions that we call virtues.

The Beauty of a Life of Virtue

The Christian moral life, by which we strive, with God's help, to be conformed to the image of God, involves growth in those habitual attitudes or dispositions that we call virtues. Beginning with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, the developing life of virtue—as the foundation of prayer and as its fruit—makes us truly like God. The virtues, John of the Cross tells us, when developed to their fullest with the help of God, adorn the human soul with its true beauty like a garland of flowers:

> It should be known that all the virtues and gifts the soul (and God within her) acquires are like a garland of various flowers within her, with which she is wonderfully adorned, as though in a robe of rich variety. … And when these spiritual flowers are wholly obtained, the garland of perfection in the soul is complete. Both the soul and the Bridegroom rejoice in the beauty and adornment of this garland, as is proper to the state of perfection. These are the garlands she declares they must weave, that is, she must be girded, surrounded with an assortment of flowers and emeralds that are perfect virtues and gifts, so that, wearing this beautiful and costly adornment, she may appear worthily before the King and deserve that he make her his equal and place her at his side like a queen; this she merits through the beauty of such variety. (C 30.6)

By the full flowering of these virtues, John says, we come to resemble Christ, who is the perfection of all of the virtues (C 31.1).

The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity come to us as a gift from God; but they are gifts that we must embrace, nurture, and put into practice. They are called "theological" virtues because they come from God, direct us to God, conform us to God, and allow us already to participate in the life of God. By faith, we come to know God and the things of God, but we also begin to enter mysteriously into God's own knowing. By hope, we come to expect eternal life and all of the help necessary to attain it; and, looking always forward to our full participation in the life of the triune God, we already begin to share in it. And, with love, we are enabled to enter into friendship with God. These virtues, then, are the heart of an authentic Christian moral life and the life of communion with God. John of the Cross points further to how these three virtues purge us of what prevents us from entering into union with

God—faith purifying the intellect, hope purifying the memory, and love purifying the will (A 2-3).

The moral virtues of the Christian—beginning with the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—are formed in distinctively Christian ways by the theological virtues. Because we have faith in God and begin to see with God's vision, because we live in hope-filled expectation of union with God and therefore see the passing nature of what we see around us, and because we already share in the deepening friendship of love with God in Christ, the attitudes and dispositions from which our actions will come are formed in distinctive ways so that they mirror the life of Christ. While Christians share the moral virtues with all people striving to live good lives, these virtues take a distinctive form, with a distinctive end, empowered by grace to form lives in keeping with the image of God manifested perfectly in Jesus Christ.

Our virtues, with the help of God, rightly order our appetites so that we desire what is truly and ultimately good for ourselves and others.

Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us that charity is the form, mother, root, and end of all the virtues. Charity, as the divine gift of friendship with God, shapes, directs, and empowers all of the other virtues, directing them to God and making them God-like (ST 2a2ae, q.23, ad.8). With this insight, John of the Cross is in firm agreement: "For where there is true love of God, love of self and of one's own things finds no entry. Not only does charity protect her, but it even makes the other virtues genuine, strengthens and invigorates them in order to fortify the soul, and bestows on them loveliness and charm so as to please the Beloved thereby. For without charity no virtue is pleasing to God" (N 2.21.10).

Saint Augustine teaches us that the virtues are ultimately all forms of love. He says, therefore, of the cardinal virtues: "I hold virtue to be nothing else than perfect love of God. For the fourfold division of virtue I regard as taken from four forms of love. … Temperance is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; fortitude is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it" (*On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, ch. 15, para. 25). Since God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16), when our attitudes and actions are shaped by love, we manifest the image of God in our living and acting.

While the theological virtues are a gift of God, we build up—aided by grace—the moral virtues by making good choices, consistently over time. As Christians, we do so, motivated and empowered by love, directing our actions in faith and in hope to be in conformity with God's will and ways. These virtues (as habitual dispositions), then, encompassed by the theological virtues, are manifest in good actions that are in keeping with the teaching and example of Jesus. All of the virtues become increasingly the fruit of a deeper communion with God and allow us to mirror the divine life within us.

From Virtue into Works of Love

Aquinas teaches us that the virtues are habitual dispositions to the good. When we possess a virtue, we are able to do the good "with ease, smoothness, and promptitude"—that is, with the abiding tendency to the good, we can choose what is right without the moral inertia and without the inner struggle that we might otherwise experience in light of the temptations that can afflict us. Our virtues, with the help of God, rightly order our appetites so that we desire what is truly and ultimately good for ourselves and others. In fact, the theological virtues—and the moral virtues with them—help us to see the true good more clearly even in the face of complexity; and they make us more inclined to do what is right.

Together with our ongoing conversion through growth in virtue and leaving behind sin and vice, a deepening communion with God in prayer gives us new motivation and new power to make our choices in keeping with our desire for God and with our dignity as the image of God, as children of God, and as disciples of Jesus. Especially in *The Interior Castle*, as Saint Teresa describes growth in prayer and even mystical experiences, she is also describing how prayer bears fruit in our attitudes and in our living. Each time that she describes a mystical grace, she recounts the fruit that it bore in her life. When she describes the soul that has entered into the transforming union in the seventh dwellings of *The Interior Castle*, she tells us the challenge is precisely good works—works of love for God and for neighbour: "This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of this spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works" (IC 7.4.6). The theological and the moral virtues conform us to the God who is Love, and they are manifest in good, loving actions.

Conclusion

Our creation in the image of God is the source of the foundational and essential dignity and beauty of the human soul. The Christian moral life is the graced effort, partnered with the life of prayer, to overcome the reality of sin that has marred that beauty, so that we can enter into union with God whose eternal beauty we were meant to mirror. Saint John of the Cross marvels at the beauty of the human soul, mirroring the divine beauty revealed in Jesus:

> Let us so act that by means of this loving activity we may attain to the vision of ourselves in your beauty in eternal life. That is: That I be so transformed in your beauty that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold ourselves in your beauty, possessing then your very beauty; this, in such a way that each looking at the other may see in the other their own beauty, since both are your beauty alone, I being absorbed in your beauty; hence, I shall see you in your beauty, and you will see me in your beauty, and I shall see myself in you in your beauty, and you will see yourself in me in your beauty; that I may resemble you in your beauty, and you resemble me in your beauty, and my beauty be your beauty and your beauty my beauty; wherefore I shall be you in your beauty, and you will be me in your beauty, because your very beauty will be my beauty; and thus we shall behold each other in your beauty. (C 36.5)

The moral life of the Christian is a pursuit of beauty—the Beauty which is God and the beauty of divine union, and it is the pursuit of the authentic realisation of the beauty of the divine image within us.

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THE MANY-SPLENDOURED THING: MUSINGS ON BEAUTY

by Vincent O.Hara, OCD
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Abstract

"The Many-Splendoured Thing: Musings on Beauty" explores the profound role that beauty plays in nourishing the human spirit and acting as a vital conduit to the divine. Drawing upon theology, philosophy, mysticism, and the arts, the essay argues that cultivating a mindful awareness of everyday beauty—whether observed in the subtle details of nature or experienced through the liberating power of music—provides an essential antidote to the world's darkness and disharmony. By engaging with the wisdom of figures such as St Thomas Aquinas, St John of the Cross, and Pope Francis, the text frames beauty as a "transcendental" quality that reveals God's joyful presence within creation. Ultimately, the essay suggests that recognising and protecting this beauty not only deepens spiritual prayer and inner freedom but also fosters a necessary ecological responsibility, offering humanity a tangible foretaste of eternal contemplation.

Keywords

Spirituality & Beauty, Transcendence, Divine Presence, Christian Mysticism (St John of the Cross, St Thomas Aquinas), Nature Contemplation, Sacred Music, Ecological Stewardship

No life is 100% exhilarating all the time, just as no life is 100% dull either. Every life has its moments, and every day has its slivers of light, however dark it might otherwise be. Every day we touch beauty, but the question remains: do we have the alertness to notice? At the end of every day, we should be able to say, "I saw something beautiful today".

We need beauty in our lives to lift the spirit, widen our horizons, and relieve the ugliness around us—whether that is the pollution that sullies our lovely earth, the pornography that defaces the human body and demeans the human person, or the greed that tramples on the poor. When prayer stagnates, when the music dies, when the fire goes out of life and the embers are turned low, beauty can bring light, renewed vigour, and inject vitality into our spirituality.

The Beauty of the Small and Unnoticed

When we begin to notice small things, our life is enriched. There is a lovely episode in the film *Doctor Zhivago* where the poetic heart of Zhivago is touched by a captivating scene. During a long train journey across Russia, where people were herded together like cattle, the train stopped. Zhivago goes for a walk in the forest and is entranced by the sun coming through the trees—a sliver of light in a very dark world.

There is a profound beauty in small things that tends to get overlooked in the hustle and bustle of life. A story is told of a Belgian Carmelite imprisoned during the Second World War. In his solitary confinement, a fly landed on his dinner plate one day. He struck up a great rapport with this fly—the only other living thing in that hovel—to such an extent that, upon his release, the friar could not abide the killing of any insect. As the American environmentalist Thomas Berry startlingly stated:

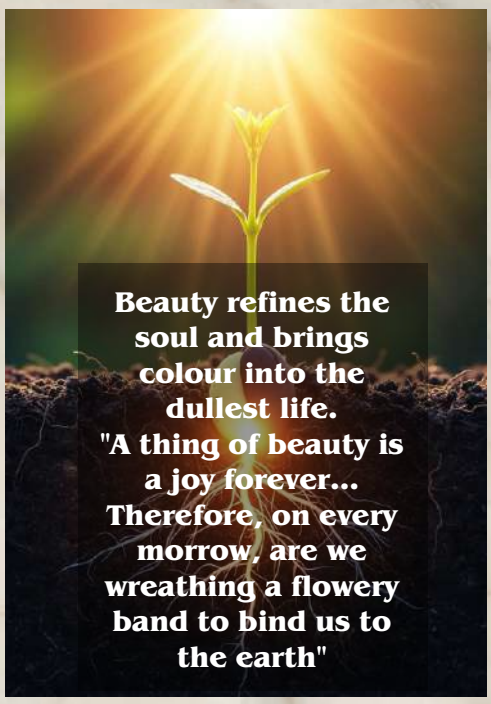
"To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice" (Berry, 1999).

Beauty refines the soul and brings colour into the dullest life. Amidst noise and haste, we can become blind to beauty and lose our sense of wonder. This leads to an impoverishment of the spirit—a spirit that only grows by opening to beauty as a flower opens to the sun.

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!
— *Francis Thompson, 'The Kingdom of God (In No Strange Land)'*

Beauty as a Window to the Divine

We might not be able to define beauty, but we all know what it is and how it can brighten life. As Bernard DeVoto wrote, "One may lack words to express the impact of beauty, but no one who has felt it remains untouched. It is renewal, enlargement, intensification".



In philosophy, particularly in the study of St Thomas Aquinas on the nature of being, there is a category called the transcendentals—qualities ascribed to everything that exists. The general consensus is that beauty is one of these transcendentals. This means that, looking out on the world, if we are sufficiently aware, we see beauty at every turn.

St Thomas Aquinas said that God created the world in a spirit of joy. The Scriptures echo this at every turn, thrilling to the beauty of nature:

> "He put his own light into their hearts, to show them the magnificence of his works ... their eyes saw his glorious majesty." (Ecclesiasticus 17:8, 13)

> "Look upon the rainbow and praise its Maker, exceedingly beautiful in its brightness ... The eye marvels at the beauty of its whiteness, and the mind is amazed at its falling." (Ecclesiasticus 43:11–12, 18)

The great French religious thinker Simone Weil puts it strikingly:

> "It is only beauty that will save the world. Beauty is a sacrament; it is Christ's tender smile coming through the world. He is really present in the universal beauty. The love of this beauty proceeds from God dwelling in our souls and goes out to God present in the universe." (Weil, 1951)

The Vision of the Poets and Mystics

The poetic soul is native to the human species. The Romantic poets were intoxicated with beauty, viewing it as an eternal anchor: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever... Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing a flowery band to bind us to the earth" (Keats, *Endymion*, Bk. I).

Similarly, the saintly, if eccentric, Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins deplored the havoc the Industrial Revolution wreaked on the English countryside. He appealed with a passion to "Give beauty back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver" (Hopkins, *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*), observing a world "charged with the grandeur of God" (Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*).

St John of the Cross, sometimes known as the Doctor of Beauty, drew constantly on imagery from creation. In his *Spiritual Canticle*, written largely during his imprisonment in Toledo, he writes:

Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
With his image alone,

Clothed them in beauty.
(Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 5)

And in Stanza 14, which is unsurpassed in its musicality in Spanish:
My Beloved is the mountains,
The lonely wooded valleys,
Rare islands,
Thundering rivers,
the whisper of love-stirring breezes.

To embrace this beauty requires time and stillness. I remember a Carmelite nun once saying to me, as she reflected on how busy her life was: "I don't give the Lord enough time to ravish me". This echoes a conversation St John of the Cross once had with another Carmelite, Sr Francisca. When he asked her, "How do you pray?" she replied: "By gazing on God's beauty and rejoicing that He has it!"

The Liberating Power of Music

Music, too, is a profound expression of beauty, counteracting the widespread disharmony of our world. It is a spark of the divine, a means of tapping into the core of life and listening to "the still sad music of humanity" (Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*).

There is a moving scene in the film *The Shawshank Redemption* where Andy plays an aria from *The Marriage of Figaro* over the prison's public address system. For a brief moment, the prisoners stand still, captivated. His friend Red reflects:

> "I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words and makes the heart ache because of it... It was as if some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free."

That is the power of music: it cleanses, brings freedom, and gives us a taste of heaven. We see this in Mozart, whose *Clarinet Concerto*—written just three months before his death while in dire straits—melts the heart with its simplicity. We see it in the genius of Beethoven, who forged musical gems in the crucible of his deafness. Beethoven viewed his music as part of the melody of creation, stating: "Always art represents the divine... what we obtain through art comes from God, is divine inspiration".

Bishop Helder Camara beautifully summarised the music of the universe:

> "God has stamped a rhythm in human beings, animals, plants, and even stones. A person walking, a bird flying, a leaf falling – everything proclaims the beginning of a dance... Listening to music, watching dance – these are true prayers."

Caring for the Canvas

Because the earth is God's masterpiece, we must protect it. Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* serves as a prophetic template for caring for our common home:

> "The earth cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse... We have forgotten that we are dust of the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air, and we receive life and refreshment from her." (*Laudato Si'*, para. 2)

A Foretaste of Eternity

A large part of eternity will be contemplating Beauty—what St Augustine calls "Beauty ever ancient, ever new" (*Confessions*, Bk. X, Ch. 27). We can begin here below. Every life has its shafts of light and moments of beauty. We must become alert to these moments, savour them, and allow them to be vehicles that enable us to touch mystery. Doing so adds substance to our prayer and leads us toward the never-ending enjoyment of divine Beauty.

As Michael Casey notes in *Wisdom at the Crossroads*:

> "God is love, not passive but flowing, energising, transforming. Like a work of beauty to the power of infinity. Like ourselves at our full range of wonder and of giving, and yet beyond all our imagining." (Casey, 2021)

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Beauty ABOUNDS"

Look closely now, for the sacred is small,
A shimmering raindrop, a fly on the wall,
A sliver of sun through a darkening wood,
A wayside sacrament, deeply understood.

When embers burn low and our prayers stagnate,
When the earth feels heavy with sorrow and weight,
Beauty awakens the spirit's deep fire,
Lifting our gaze and our heavy hearts higher.

It speaks in the soaring of prison-yard songs,
In the melody where every lost spirit belongs.
It breathes in the art that is born out of pain,
Like a bird taking flight from an iron chain.

For beauty is more than the eye can embrace,
It is God's handwriting, a vessel of grace.
A window to heaven, both ancient and new,
Where the love of the Maker comes shimmering through.

Based on Reflections of Fr Vincent O'Hara

Spiritual & Aspiration PSYCHOLOGICAL REALITY

by John Ashfield, PhD | john1ashfield@gmail.com
Psychologist, Author, and Spiritual Director in the Carmelite tradition

John Ashfield, PhD, is a psychology practitioner in private practice with a career in human services and education spanning 35 years. He also has experience as a tertiary educator in several universities (including acting as a PhD examiner). His specialities include psychobiology, mental health, palliative care, male psychology, and pastoral theology. He is known internationally for his books and published works. John is a member of the congregation of Saint Athanasius Coptic Orthodox Monastery in Scarborough, North Yorkshire.

Abstract

This article argues that Christian transformation is not psychological self-improvement but a grace-enabled re-ordering of the person toward union with God. Transformation is not about techniques; it appears as gradual Christification through purification and love, exhibiting beauty as the radiance of an inner re-ordering and restoration in holiness, silence, and cruciform love. Drawing on Patristic, Carmelite, Thomistic, and Orthodox sources, it frames spiritual aspiration and psychological reality within classical theological anthropology and soteriology. It distinguishes a primordial Christian psychology of the interior life from modern therapeutic psychologies, affirming that whilst some of the latter have instrumental value, one must warn against importing certain perspectives and approaches into pastoral theology without diligent theological scrutiny and discernment.

Keywords
Transformation, Beauty, Carmelite Spirituality, Grace and Nature, Theological Anthropology, Soteriology, Primordial Psychology, Deification, Christification, Virtue, Contemplation.

Introduction

The theme of Transformation and Beauty leads us to the very heart of Carmel and reflects a continuity and relationship that is much deserving of exposition and appreciation. For in it, we discover the profound, divinely created originality of our humanity; our capacity for participation in Christ's nature and union with Him; the promise of our proper destiny; and our most important service: *Christianus alter Christus*—the Christian, every Christian, is another Christ. (John Paul II, 1977 The expression *Christianus alter Christus* reflects a patristic conviction of conformity to Christ found especially in Cyprian of Carthage's *De Unitate Ecclesiae* and the *Epistles*, though not as a verbatim formula there).

Exploration of our theme will unfold the inseparable and proper relationship between spiritual aspiration and human psychology the

true end of the person (union with God and Christlikeness) and the context and inner "mechanisms" of change by which this aspiration is lived out and the resultant beauty it radiates. Here, Carmel uniquely holds together the highest mystical aspiration with the deepest depths of ordinary human experience and transformation. (Teresa of Avila, 1980, *Fourth Mansions*, Chaps. 1–3)

It will also be important to define what is meant by psychology. The term "Primordial Psychology" will be used to denote a specifically Christian psychology consonant with Catholic and Orthodox anthropology and soteriology, rather than modern psychology. The latter, though useful if employed cautiously and discerningly, can be seen in a number of ways to introduce emphases antithetical to the orthodox Christian perspective. (Ware, 1995, pp. 63–82) This distinction will be of particular importance to those concerned with pastoral care (and psychotherapy in a parish context), spiritual accompaniment, and the education of clergy and religious in pastoral theology and practice. An example of the potential and possibilities of primordial psychology will be highlighted with a practical example that will reconceptualise the phenomena described by psychiatry in its category of affective disorders, which psychology shares by focusing on the potency of the three theological virtues.

Methodology of Research

We shall explore the dynamics between mystical aspiration and ordinary psychological transformation within Carmelite spirituality. This then establishes a "Primordial Psychology" rooted in traditional Christian anthropology to critically evaluate modern psychology. Finally, practically applying this framework to pastoral care, reconceptualising clinical affective disorders through the theological virtues, offers a great deal of anchor for genuine transformation.

Transformation: The Meeting Point of Grace and Nature

Grace does not somehow bypass nature; it emancipates, heals, redeems, and elevates it (Thomas Aquinas, n.d., *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, Q. 109, Art. 2–8). An important and decisive truth of Catholic spiritual theology is often summarised as "grace builds on nature", thus affirming that God's transforming work of grace does not bypass our human psychology but enters us as we are—embodied, affective, relational, and historically formed—and draws us toward our true end in God (Thomas Aquinas, n.d., *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 1, Art. 8, ad 2; cf. John of the Cross, 1991, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, Chaps. 5–8).

The classic Thomistic axiom, *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit* - grace does not destroy nature but perfects it - makes clear that grace presupposes nature. (Thomas Aquinas, n.d., *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 1, Art. 8, ad 2) It works through our human faculties of intellect, will, memory, and imagination, and the affective or felt experience of fears, desires, griefs, and longings. These dimensions of our humanity are the very place where God meets us, heals us, leads us into freedom, and transforms us.

Transformation is ordinarily slow, purifying, and often hidden. If grace perfects nature, then the path of purification is not the abolition of what is human, but its re-ordering and restoration: it is gradually liberated from attachments, compulsions, false securities, and disordered desires and loves, so that through Christification and growing union with God it reflects beauty. As St Irenaeus observed: "The glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God" (Irenaeus of Lyons, n.d., *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chap. 20, Sections 7–8). Transformation is therefore not merely moral refinement but teleological fulfilment, the restoration of the person toward their created and redeemed end in God (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 2:20).

A caution seems important here: transformation must not be mistaken for heightened spiritual experience. Carmelite wisdom makes clear that authentic transformation is characterised above all by humility, stability, self-giving, truthfulness, non-attachment, greater charity, and balance, a life integrated and steady. In short, a life increasingly embodying the likeness of Christ (John of the Cross, 1991, *The Dark Night*, Book I, Chaps. 10–11). Who better than the incarnate Christ to

be at the centre of this mystery of human transformation? St Athanasius writes: "The Word of God came in His own person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, who could recreate man made after the Image" (Athanasius, 2011, Chap. 13). He also writes: "He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God." (Athanasius, 2011, Chap. 54) The Son of God assumed our nature in order to divinise us; nothing less than this is God's intention.

St Sophrony the Athonite affirmed: "The incarnation is evidence of the high value of man. There is some kind of commensurability between God and man. The possibility of God's incarnation has its parallel in the possibility of man's deification" (Sophrony, 1988, pp. 51–60). "The fact remains that man lives in two dimensions: the heavenly and the earthly. He is created for this life and for the next. Here below, it is important to harmonise the two by responding to the corporal and spiritual needs without neglecting either" (Sarah & Diat, 2017, pp. 80–105).

Beauty: The Crowning Glory of the Spiritual Life

As we have noted, spiritual growth appears as deeply human and exhibits fundamental psychological change beyond the scope of mere self-development—the predominant *telos* of modern psychology. It is change wrought supernaturally (by grace) in the natural: the incarnational mystery of the human and the divine played out in us, evidenced by radiant beauty (Stein, 2002). Beauty is the fruit of inner transformation: the radiance of a soul integrated, purified, re-ordered, and made whole through encounter with and participation in God's own beauty. This beauty is a trace of God, subsuming an infinite array of good (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978, Book II, Sections 231–239).

The soul becomes beautiful not by self-decoration or self-development but by docility to being remade by the Holy Spirit. Wherever and whenever God acts, He leaves traces of His own nature, which is beauty. God is good and beautiful, and we are created in His sublime image—an image obscured by any privation of its profound good (John of the Cross, 1991, *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza II, Section 34). Thus, beauty is what remains once falsity and illusion are stripped away, revealing our true nature and identity (Ward, 1975, "Pambo," No. 12).

The soul becomes beautiful not by self-decoration or self-development, but by docility to being remade by the Holy Spirit.

The sayings of the Desert Fathers preserve a brief but penetrating account of a visit by Theophilus of Alexandria to the monks of Scetis. The brethren urged Abba Pambo to speak a word of edification to the Archbishop. Instead, he answered: "If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech… and the Archbishop went away greatly helped." The beauty of being requires no words (John of the Cross, 1991, *Sayings of Light and Love*, No. 103). This witness of silent holiness is not confined to the desert tradition but reappears wherever transformed lives radiate love in action (Stark, 1997, pp. 73–94; cf. Eusebius, n.d., *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IX, Chap. 8).

In the early years of the Church, when Christians were brutally persecuted and martyred, terrible plagues swept through the Roman Empire. Christians not only cared for their own but also for their enemies. They risked their lives for them and even buried their dead. They exhibited the beauty of goodness—the unmistakable likeness of the Father. Their enemies questioned how such compassion was possible. A wave of former enemies became people of The Way, for here was evidence of God incarnate (Maximus the Confessor, 1981, pp. 54–98).

Words may resound, but charity thunders. The potency of such beauty is at the heart of authentic evangelisation. Words are rarely needed. The presence of Beauty, the Great

Silence—in simple being and charity suffices. And so it is, by the very beauty of being that we can place a person's hand in God's hand. Our God-bearing presence can quicken the indelible image of God in others. That which is restless finds its repose in Him.

St Augustine confessed: "Late have I loved you, Beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you" (Augustine, 1991, Book I, Chap. 1). Beauty awakens a nostalgia for God that converts the heart from lesser loves to the Highest. A heart that is touched by beauty is turned, reoriented to its source. A heart that touches the hem of Christ's garment—the garment of His likeness (our proper apparel)—can be healed, whatever a person's brokenness, disfigurement, or disorientation of soul. St Seraphim of Sarov famously said: "Acquire the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved."

Beauty is also cruciform. In Carmel, beauty is marked by the Cross; being surrendered and abandoned to God's will. The Cross is ever the sign of God calling us to Himself, yet a reminder that this is not all delight—it demands fidelity through purgation and purification: the beauty of love that endures in faith, hope, and charity. It evidences God's presence and the extravagant compassion and profound wisdom of His providence of transformation, the mark of a life flourishing in virtue (John of the Cross, 1991, *The Dark Night*, Book II, Chaps. 6–8; Teresa of Avila, 1980, *The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4).

Mary as the Exemplar of Transformation: Beauty

Mary, in the Carmelite tradition, embodies the flourishing of human and theological virtues. Her *fiat*, "Let it be done to me according to your word" —is not merely an act of consent but the moment in which divine life enters human history. The Holy Spirit "overshadows" Mary not with coercion but with intimate gentleness; her humanity is neither overridden nor diminished but hallowed and transfigured (Luke 1:38). Christ is conceived in Mary. Yet this pattern has profound resonance for all: Christ conceived in us through consent, prayer, obedience, and docility to the Holy Spirit, the quickener of life. Through hidden gestation, Christ becomes a growing presence until His life and likeness are born in our moral life and conduct, characterising the life and emanations of our soul, psychological transformation displaying the beauty of the Creator (John Paul II, 1987, para. 13).

Through Mary, we learn that transformation is not rushed. Though conception is instantaneous, gestation is not. Carmel insists that God's deepest work in us is often silent, obscure, and imperceptible. The "Dark Night" is not the absence of transformation but its protection, guarding the soul from pride, self-display, and control. Here, beauty is often cruciform, marked by endurance, humility, and fidelity under trial (John of the Cross, 1991, *The Dark Night*, Book II, Chaps. 6–8; Teresa of Avila, 1980, *The Interior Castle*, Seventh Mansions, Chap. 4).

PRIMORDIAL PSYCHOLOGY VERSUS MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

As was suggested in the introduction, there is value in briefly making a distinction between primordial psychology and modern psychology. As will be discussed, the former is not only consonant with Catholic and Orthodox theology but is already richly developed and historically grounded in ascetical and mystical theology. As such, it is an indispensable component of pastoral theology which sits at the intersection of doctrine, anthropology, soteriology, spiritual formation, and the care of persons.

Primordial Psychology and Grace Builds on Nature

"Primordial psychology" is used here in a descriptive rather than technical sense to name the most original, fundamental account of the human person, human experience, and behaviour existing centuries before modern psychological theory. It represents a psychology at the level of first things.

The following individuals represent only a small but significant sample of contributors to primordial psychology, a long, multi-century tradition of disciplined interior observation and spiritual anthropology. Among its earliest witnesses are the Desert Fathers,

whose ascetical sayings and narratives preserve sustained phenomenological attention to thoughts, temptations, affective movements, and habits of attention within the interior life; within this stream, Evagrius Ponticus stands out for his structured analysis of intrusive and formative thoughts (*logismoi*) and their transformation through watchfulness and prayer. In the scholastic synthesis, Thomas Aquinas articulated a faculty psychology of intellect, will, passions, and virtue governed by the principle that grace perfects nature.

Within the Carmelite mystical tradition, the Doctors of the Church Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross offered finely grained experiential descriptions of purification and transformation in the movement toward union with God.

In the Greek and wider Orthodox theological stream, Maximus the Confessor provided a profound account of desire, freedom, and deification that integrates anthropology and spiritual praxis, whilst in the modern Orthodox pastoral tradition, shaped in part by Athonite and hesychast spirituality, Thaddeus of Vitovnica restated core patristic insights in practical psychological terms: "Our thoughts determine our lives." Taken together, these examples, among many others, witness to a continuous Christian psychology oriented toward the purification, integration, and transfiguration of the human person; a scope of change that reaches to depths of transformation lying outside the effective reach and capacity of modern psychology (Evagrius Ponticus, 1979, pp. 33–91).

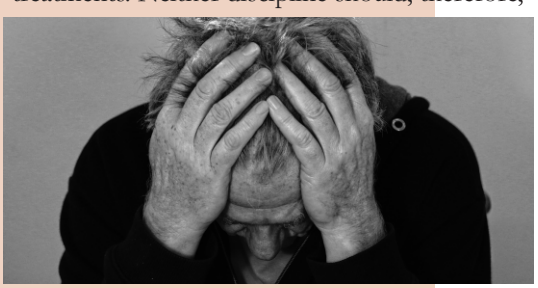
As previously mentioned, modern psychology, which may be useful if employed cautiously and discerningly, can nevertheless be seen in a number of ways to introduce ideological and philosophical emphases into pastoral theology that are not naturally ordered to the Christian *telos* of conversion and holiness. It is also the case that in mainstream therapeutic psychology settings, goals are typically framed in terms of 'symptom relief', improved functioning, and quality of life—effects that are real, yet which fall short of realising full human potential as intended within the economy and purpose of the Creator (National Institute of Mental Health, and American Psychological Association).

"Scripture by introducing into the definition of the human person the element of a constitutive relationship with the creator, introduces insights of profound wisdom (Psalm 119:73). First of all, it liberates every creature from the naïve pretension of being the origin of itself, and at the same time calls for an appreciation of the fact that every person has been desired and loved by the Father of life who "keeps in mind" and "cares for" every child of man (Psalm 8:5)" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, Section II.A).

Who we are in this relation, of which the Incarnation is a profound reminder, is blessed indeed and beyond intelligible description. And let us note, as does St Sophrony the Athonite: "There is some kind of commensurability between God and man. The possibility of God's incarnation has its parallel in the possibility of man's deification" (Sophrony, 1988, pp. 19–34). The alternative to this is described by the Psalmist: "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God" (Psalm 14:1). What inevitably follows this foolishness is a verification of Dostoyevsky's gruesome visions of "…a world without God and of how that world turns into a madman's dream." (Benedict XVI, 2009, p. 28)

Modern Psychology and Psychiatry

Modern psychology borrows heavily from psychiatry, often sharing assumptions and approaches that tend to pathologise a wide range of ordinary human experience as "mental disorder", corralling such experience into diagnostic categories and, in some cases, recommending highly questionable drug treatments. Neither discipline should, therefore,



be uncritically adopted as an equal partner alongside pastoral care or spiritual accompaniment. With good reason, pastoral education needs to incorporate clarification of these issues, establish proper theological priority, and present viable Christian alternatives for understanding the inner life and its healing. (World Health Organisation, 2025)

Experiences of psychological distress such as anxiety, stress, despondency and despair, obsessional thinking, sleeplessness, and existential crisis—affective difficulties that account for by far the majority of "mental disorders"—are often too quickly framed as conditions requiring technical management and medication. This narrowing of interpretation can unintentionally shift pastoral authority away from spiritual and moral categories toward clinical ones (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; see also First et al., 2022). A framework of pastoral theology and Christian anthropology rightly recognises conscience, moral struggle, disordered desire, and the formative role of suffering.

From the standpoint of Christian anthropology and soteriology, the human person is not primarily a patient to be stabilised but a creature called to transformation through grace. Salvation is not equivalent to symptom reduction or improved functioning but to reconciliation with God and the re-ordering of love, desire, and perception. For this reason, neither psychology nor psychiatry should be uncritically deferred to, irrespective of the status exerted by their mystique of technicality. Theological priority must be clearly established, even whilst legitimate forms of professional assistance are acknowledged.

Putting Affective Difficulties and Psychological Distress into Perspective

In contemporary mental health classification, a large proportion of presentations in community and hospital settings fall under anxiety and depressive disorders and related stress conditions—experiences that, despite their labelling as "disorders", are often intelligible responses to adversity, loss, moral struggle, or spiritual trial, rather than phenomena deserving of medical diagnoses. Anxiety and depressive difficulties are consistently among the most common difficulties, and most commonly catalogued in symptom-based diagnostic manuals used in mental health clinical settings (World Health Organisation, 2025 and American Psychiatric Association, 2022; see also First et al., 2022).

By contrast, schizophrenia-spectrum and other primary psychotic conditions (which are often most conspicuous because of their strange presentation) account for well under 1% of the population, whereas around 90% of what are clinically described as "mental health disorders" are in fact common affective difficulties, most commonly involving anxiety, low mood, grief, or demoralisation. This distinction matters pastorally. The language of "disorder" can suggest defect or medical inevitability, yet affective suffering typically arises within the lived field of meaning, relationship, conscience, and hope, and therefore calls first for discernment and accompaniment rather than diagnosis and intervention (McGrath et al., 2008, pp. 67–76; Saha et al., 2005).

Even when a person loses touch with consensual reality—through delusions, hallucinations, or severe disturbances of thought—there remain strong reasons to resist an uncritical assumption of a purely 'mental' disorder. A growing body of research suggests that such experiences may, at least in part, reflect poorly understood physical disease processes, whilst current medical and psychiatric interventions are largely palliative: managing symptoms and reducing relapse rather than offering a cure (Insel, 2010, pp. 187–193; Kahn et al., 2015). In these circumstances, diagnostic labels can easily harden into identities, obscuring the person beneath the category and diminishing moral agency and spiritual dignity (Sims et al., 2021; Altmann et al., 2024; cf. Link et al., 1989).

Psychology, Psychiatry, and Pathologising Language

Language is not merely descriptive; it is formative. The ways in which psychological distress is named and conceptualised can profoundly shape how individuals understand themselves and how others respond to them. When a person comes to see themselves

primarily as mentally ill or disordered, this can alter self-perception, expectations, and future possibilities, and can subtly reinforce dependency and diminished agency, particularly when combined with long-term pharmacological treatment. (Sims et al., 2021; Altmann et al., 2024; cf. Link et al., 1989)

Such labelling can negate both the necessity and the opportunity for a person to rise above expectation. Instead of being supported toward wholeness and growth, individuals may become fixed within limited identities and prognoses. In this way, many are drawn into what has been described as a pattern of "career patients" or "career clients," a phenomenon that undermines hope and obstructs genuine transformation. (John of the Cross, 1991, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, Chap. 11; Frankl, 2006)

The pastoral task, therefore, is neither to deny the reality or gravity of psychological suffering nor to reject other legitimate forms of professional care where it is prudent and defensibly needful. Rather, it is to resist the temptation to treat diagnostic categories as if they were the person themselves—to distinguish compassionate accompaniment from diagnostic overreach. Such an approach safeguards dignity, preserves hope, and remains faithful to the Christian vision of the human being as more than a bundle of symptoms: a person called to transformation, even in and through suffering.

Potential and Possibilities of Primordial Psychology

As defined previously, primordial psychology represents the most original, fundamental account of the human person (human experience and behaviour) that is in harmony with Catholic and Orthodox anthropology and soteriology, existing centuries before modern psychological theory. It represents a psychology at the level of first things. This distinction is of particular importance and value to those concerned with pastoral care (and psychotherapy in a parish context), spiritual accompaniment, and the education of clergy and religious in pastoral theology and practice.

Primordial psychology is a psychology of the interior life. And though it may discerningly utilise some elements of modern therapeutic psychologies, it recognises both the limited instrumental value and the anthropological risks of uncritical adoption of modern psychological and psychiatric assumptions and methods in pastoral settings.

A psychology without grace - without God - can only nibble around the edges of the human predicament; it cannot fundamentally change it.

Primordial psychology is psychology with a soul, receptive to and fully welcoming the role and necessity of grace in human transformation. A psychology without grace—without God—can only nibble around the edges of the human predicament; it cannot fundamentally change it. And it might be noted that, though all our efforts and asceticism are vital and necessary in the transformation of our nature, they constitute little more than a "yes" compared to the indispensable and essential role of transformative grace.

Affective Difficulties as an Inversion of the Three Theological Virtues

"So faith, hope, and charity abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Primordial psychology and grace build on nature. A prime example of this is how the three theological virtues can, if nourished and developed, fundamentally reorientate and reintegrate the faculties and energies of our human psychology — our way of experiencing, behaving, and being in the world. This grace of transformation is beyond the scope of modern psychology. Moreover, it brings into focus virtues, moral imperatives, and a salvific *telos* absent from modern psychology.

We have already briefly touched on the nature and scope of what have been termed

"affective difficulties" —a range of forms of psychological distress frequently described as "disorders" in psychiatric diagnostic language. Within a classical Catholic and Orthodox moral–spiritual anthropology, these may be understood in relation to the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. These virtues are infused, God-given potentials which, when nurtured and developed, order the soul rightly toward God as its end, enabling the person to bear His likeness and radiate His beauty.

Affective difficulties can be described as an *inversion* of these virtues, in the sense that they tend to bend the soul away from God — often slowly and imperceptibly — so that it becomes less readily open to grace and more susceptible to fear, discouragement, despair, and an inward collapse into isolation and paralysis. This "inversion" is best understood as a spiritual distortion in experience. However, calling affective difficulties an "inversion" does not imply moral blame. In Catholic and Orthodox moral theology, thoughts, passions, moods, and behaviours are not necessarily due to culpable choice; they may be reflexive, involuntary, or, as St John of the Cross identified, of the nature of "first movements". They may be physically mediated, due to trauma, emanating from or exacerbated by fatigue, poor nutrition, insomnia, social isolation, medication, or illness. Notwithstanding, as Viktor Frankl points out, though many things happen to us over which we have little or no immediate control, the one freedom that we aren't deprived of is the freedom to choose how we will respond. In Carmelite terms, such initial stirrings may be "first movements"—non-voluntary impulses that become morally determinative only with consent. And as Frankl famously observed, even under extreme constraint, the person retains "the last of the human freedoms" to choose one's attitude and response (John of the Cross, 1991, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book I, Chap. 11; Frankl, 2006).

Two broad fields of affective difficulties: anxiety and depression

When **faith** becomes inverted, a person loses sight of God. This can result in many affective difficulties, especially acute or chronic anxiety (in all its various manifestations). The basic posture of anxiety is that the world is unsafe; the future is threatening; I must secure myself by exercising control over my physical and social environments. Thus, the inversion of faith is not so much "doubt" but existential distrust, a felt suspicion that God cannot be relied upon. The experience of anxiety is that: "I am not held," "I must manage everything," "If I loosen my grip, I will collapse." This is the opposite of faith: not merely "I don't believe," but "I cannot entrust myself."

When **hope** becomes inverted, I lose sight of God as essentially good; the One who is always committed to and working for my good. Hope is Christian optimism; it is the supernatural confidence that God will bring me to my true end, and that He has all future contingencies covered.

The affective difficulty termed depression (in all its many manifestations) frequently carries a moral-spiritual mindset of: "nothing will change; no good is coming; I am closed in; the future is shut to me. I collapse in on myself through despair." Thus, depression can be seen as an inversion of hope because it is characterised by pessimism about the future; my soul feels exiled from the horizon of hope.

Love means willing the good of another - I go out of myself toward God and others in self-giving. Love is, as St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) expressed, "…goodness giving itself away. Affective difficulties are often the result of the inversion of love: I withdraw and retreat into myself; I protect and only focus on myself; others feel unsafe, threatened, or burdensome." These features are common in depression and anxiety, although anxiety is also characterised by the exercise of control, energetic self-protection, and sometimes irritability and hostility. In summary, love is inverted largely by the loss of generous interpersonal interaction and outward self-giving movement of the heart. It represents the loss of capacity for self-transcendence.

Problems of Retrospective and Prospective Thinking and Orientation

Not unrelated to the disorientation and inversion of virtue previously discussed are

affective difficulties relating to focusing too much on the past (raking over past memories —which are often less accurate than we might imagine) and too much on an imagined future (anticipating what could or might happen to us).

God is ever present to us and relates to us in our existence now, in the present moment. We deprive ourselves of His grace for dealing with the demands and exigencies of the present moment to the extent that we are 'absent' due to a mental and emotional orientation either in the past (retrospectively), or the future (prospectively).

Interestingly, research shows that raking over the past can and often does tend to be depressogenic—originating, or at least liable to give rise to, depression—whilst interrogating and imagining the future (what might happen or could happen) tends to be anxiogenic—originating, or at least liable to give rise to, anxiety. In their own way, these orientations of retrospectivity and prospectivity may be a reflection of a similar but perhaps more subtle inversion of the virtues previously discussed; turning a person from the present moment and absenting them from the need to respond in faith, hope, and charity to God's providence in each unfolding moment (Joubert et al., 2022; Stade & Ruscio, 2023; cf. Hong, 2007).

Let us call to mind the words of Isaiah: "Forget the former things: do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19); and from the Gospel according to Matthew: "Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

Pastoral Responses

From a pastoral standpoint, the task is not to treat anxiety or depression as technical problems to be managed but to discern the way in which theological virtue has been wounded or obscured and to respond accordingly. Where faith is weakened, the person struggles to entrust themselves to God; where hope is eclipsed, the future appears closed; where charity is wounded, love of God and neighbour contracts inwardly. Pastoral care or accompaniment, therefore, seeks not merely the relief of symptoms but the gradual re-ordering of the soul toward God. And it goes without saying that all efforts must be bathed in prayer.

This re-ordering is ordinarily slow, relational, and participatory. The pastoral carer or accompanier assists first by sensitively and truthfully naming what is happening, helping the person recognise fear, discouragement, or despair not as personal failure or disorder, but as a sign of spiritual vulnerability calling for accompaniment. Such naming alone can begin to facilitate the progress of reorientation and the resolution of difficulty —not as a technique, but as a welcoming of God's ever-present transformative grace.

Where anxiety dominates, pastoral care and accompaniment encourage acts of trust rather than control—simple practices of entrustment, stability, and fidelity to the One who is always and unfailingly trustworthy and declares: "You are my beloved upon whom my favour rests." Where depression narrows hope, the task is not forced optimism, but slowly and progressively entrusting the future to God, who is already there providentially waiting with all the grace needed to face what He has in store. Where charity has been wounded, pastoral care and accompaniment gently and progressively restore relational openness and reaching out—first toward God, and then, as strength permits, toward others—resisting isolation and withdrawal, yet without demanding too much immediate emotional performance.

In all cases, pastoral carers and accompaniers must resist the temptation to substitute technique for presence. What arrests the inversion of the virtues is not technique, but faithful prayerful accompaniment, sacramental life, and the steady reassurance that transformation does not depend on feeling well but on remaining oriented toward God. Grace does not bypass human psychology; it slowly reintegrates it by restoring the primacy of faith, hope, and charity, even when these are experienced only as fragile dispositions rather than confident acts.

Conclusion

Transformation, in the Carmelite and wider Christian vision, is understood as the slow, often hidden work of grace perfecting nature—re-ordering intellect, will, memory, imagination, and the affective life toward the living God. When this re-ordering takes root, it becomes visible. It is beautiful, not as a spiritual display but as steadiness, humility, fidelity under trial, and a growing capacity to love beyond oneself.

The experience of affective suffering, therefore, calls for intelligent compassion, discernment, and pastoral accompaniment far more than for forms of clinical intervention that are unmindful of the fullness of human potentiality and of the role of grace that builds upon nature. Such support attends to the exquisite meaning and complexity of the human person made in the image of God: embodied, limited, shaped by thoughts, memories, impulses, emotions, and circumstance, yet also bearing a God-given capacity to participate in the restorative love and life of the Infinite God.

Transformation and Beauty thus names the inseparable unity of spiritual aspiration and psychological reality within the Christian, incarnational faith—a gratuity of grace that sustains the lifelong path of deification, by which the human person becomes more fully human and more fully alive, opening a widening horizon of meaning and a deepening communion with Christ.

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DISCOVER THE DIVINE PRISM: BEAUTY IN THE CARMELITE TRADITION

An Interview with Fr. Matt Blake, OCD

Is beauty merely an aesthetic luxury, or is it a profound pathway to God? In this captivating feature for the inaugural edition of the Beacon Journal, we invite you to journey into the heart of Carmelite mysticism to uncover the transformative power of beauty.

Hosted at the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality in Boars Hill, Oxford, Fr. Liam Finnerty, OCD, sits down with renowned Carmelite scholar and retreat guide Fr. Matt Blake, OCD. Together, they unearth the rich, visual heritage of the Carmelite order—from the rugged, breathtaking slopes of Mount Carmel to the profound artistic sensibilities that shaped St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross.

About the Speakers

Fr. Liam Finnerty, OCD Host

Fr. Liam serves as a key figure at the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality, Oxford. With a background in pastoral ministry and spiritual accompaniment, he is dedicated to making the "treasures of Carmel" accessible to all who seek a deeper interior life in the contemporary world.

Fr. Matt Blake, OCD Guest

A deeply respected member of the Discalced Carmelite Order, Fr. Matt is widely known for his profound ability to bridge ancient Carmelite wisdom with modern psychological and spiritual needs. Based at Boars Hill, he is a frequent lecturer on the works of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila.

Whether you are a seasoned spiritual director or someone simply seeking a deeper connection with the Divine, this conversation bridges ancient wisdom with modern longing. Step into the silence, release the urge to possess, and let the enduring beauty of Carmel draw you inward.

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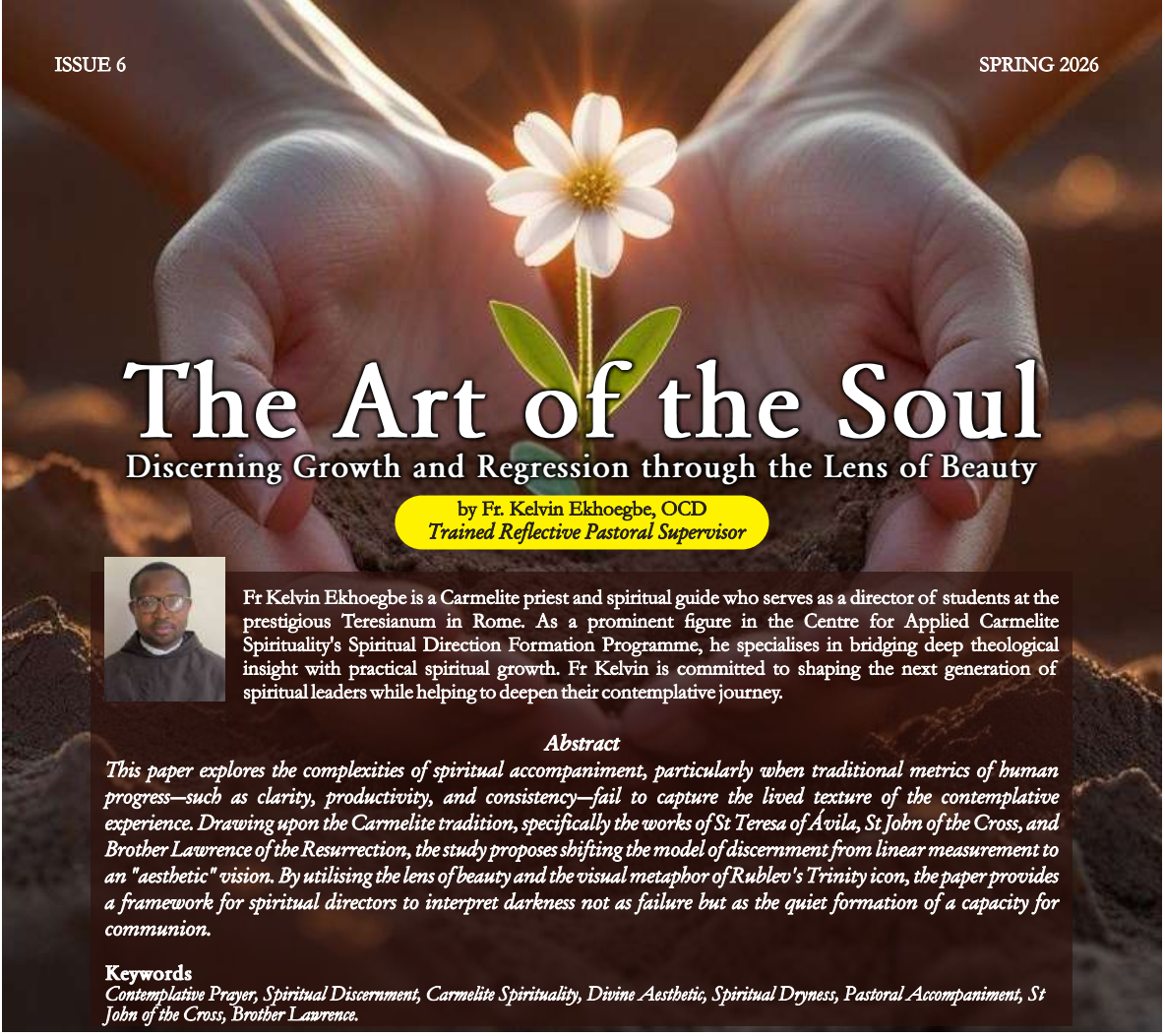

The Art of the Soul

Discerning Growth and Regression through the Lens of Beauty

by Fr. Kelvin Ekhoegbe, OCD
Trained Reflective Pastoral Supervisor

Fr Kelvin Ekhoegbe is a Carmelite priest and spiritual guide who serves as a director of students at the prestigious Teresianum in Rome. As a prominent figure in the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality's Spiritual Direction Formation Programme, he specialises in bridging deep theological insight with practical spiritual growth. Fr Kelvin is committed to shaping the next generation of spiritual leaders while helping to deepen their contemplative journey.

Abstract

This paper explores the complexities of spiritual accompaniment, particularly when traditional metrics of human progress—such as clarity, productivity, and consistency—fail to capture the lived texture of the contemplative experience. Drawing upon the Carmelite tradition, specifically the works of St Teresa of Ávila, St John of the Cross, and Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, the study proposes shifting the model of discernment from linear measurement to an "aesthetic" vision. By utilising the lens of beauty and the visual metaphor of Rublev's Trinity icon, the paper provides a framework for spiritual directors to interpret darkness not as failure but as the quiet formation of a capacity for communion.

Keywords
Contemplative Prayer, Spiritual Discernment, Carmelite Spirituality, Divine Aesthetic, Spiritual Dryness, Pastoral Accompaniment, St John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence.

In contemporary pastoral accompaniment, there is a prevailing tendency to assess the soul through categories borrowed from psychology and performance management. However, these clinical and linear models often fail to account for the mystery of prayer, where "progress" does not always feel like advancement. The objective of this study is to expose a Carmelite way of seeing—a contemplative gaze that views spiritual movement not as a ladder to be climbed but as an icon to be contemplated for its beauty. This approach reframes growth and regression as necessary rhythms of light and shadow, woven by a divine hand.

Methodology

This study employs a theological and hermeneutical approach, integrating classical Carmelite texts with contemporary pastoral observation. It explores aesthetic analysis in the concept of "beauty" and the visual theology of Andrei Rublev's *Icon of the Trinity* as a primary heuristic tool. The insights are grounded in a professional experience of spiritual direction and supervision, observing the "lived texture" of souls who feel they are failing despite evidence of interior fruitfulness.

Search for Meaning

There are moments in spiritual accompaniment when the soul simply refuses the scale. The familiar instruments by which human progress is measured—clarity, productivity, consistency, visible success—fall silent before the mystery of prayer. I have seen this quite unsettle people who are otherwise confident and disciplined. Something in the contemplative life resists being reduced to measurable gain. Spiritual writers across the centuries have noticed that discernment in prayer is often framed through models of progress and regression that feel clinical, linear, and even subtly performance driven. These models are not without value. They

offer structure, create reassurance and suggest movement and direction. Yet they frequently fail to capture the lived texture of contemplative experience. Those who remain faithful before God often discover—sometimes with a disarming honesty—that the deeper they enter prayer, the less certain they become about their own "progress." Consolation fades, desire fluctuates, and distraction becomes familiar. The language of advancement begins to lose its solidity. The question that emerges is rarely theoretical. It is usually voiced quietly, sometimes hesitantly: *Am I growing, or am I regressing?*

It is precisely at this threshold—where clarity recedes, and self-assurance softens—that the Carmelite tradition becomes particularly illuminating. It does not offer a new method to master. It offers a way of seeing. The question shifts from measurement to vision. Instead of asking how far the soul has advanced, we begin to ask what God may be forming. Growth and regression begin to appear less as upward or downward movement and more as rhythms—movements of light and shadow, fullness and emptiness, concealment and disclosure. These movements do not cancel one another; they belong together. They are woven, patiently and often invisibly, by a divine hand that does not rush. In this light, the spiritual life feels less like a ladder to be climbed and more like an icon before which one stands. An icon is not conquered. It is contemplated. It does not demand achievement; it invites attention. What unfolds is not a measurable ascent but a gradual unveiling—the slow emergence of beauty shaped from within, often without the soul fully realising it.

If one image were to accompany this reflection, it would be the icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev. The icon does not attempt to explain God. It renders communion visible while preserving mystery. The three Persons incline toward one another in stillness that is somehow alive. Their silence is not absence; it is attentive presence. At the centre remains an open space. It does not resolve the mystery. It invites participation. Contemplative prayer unfolds in a similar way. It is not confirmed by intensity or secured by clarity of experience. It is recognised gradually, often retrospectively, in the quiet formation of communion within the person. What matters, finally, is not whether one feels spiritually elevated but whether one is being drawn—sometimes imperceptibly—into deeper participation in divine life.

Such an aesthetic vision has practical implications. It gently frees spiritual directors, pastoral supervisors, chaplains, and therapists from interpreting dryness as failure or obscurity as regression. Prayer begins to look less like a staircase and more like a tapestry whose pattern can only be discerned with time. Threads of illumination and threads of obscurity are not enemies; they belong to the same design. At the heart of this vision lies a simple but demanding conviction: *becoming holy is God's work in us*. The reflections that follow propose that growth and regression are best discerned through the lens of beauty—beauty that is often hidden, sometimes paradoxical, and most reliably recognised not in the immediate texture of prayer but in its enduring fruit: humility, obedience, truthfulness, and love.

Contemplative Vision

In many contemporary contexts of pastoral accompaniment, the soul is approached – often without anyone quite intending it—through categories borrowed from psychology, development, and performance. Growth is inferred from coherence, emotional steadiness, clarity of intention, and regularity of practice. When these are present, reassurance follows. When they waver, concern arises. These markers are not without value; in situations of psychological fragility or genuine distress, they may even be indispensable. Yet something in the contemplative life resists being fully interpreted through such lenses.

The Carmelite tradition proposes a quieter way of seeing. It does not begin with evaluation. It begins with perception. Before asking *what* is happening in prayer, the director must learn *how* to gaze—and this gaze is already a contemplative posture. It requires a disciplined attentiveness to God's hidden work, the kind of attentiveness that waits rather than diagnoses. Over time, one discovers that discernment is less about deciding and more about receiving.

Teresa of Ávila understood this through experience. She repeatedly cautions that interior experiences — even when vivid, consoling, or apparently elevated — cannot be taken as reliable indicators of spiritual growth. "It is not necessary

to desire consolations in prayer," she writes, "what the Lord desires is works" (*Interior Castle* IV.1). The danger lies not in consolation itself but in the weight we place upon it. Directors and those they accompany can easily mistake intensity for maturity. Teresa knew the confusion firsthand. She speaks candidly of years during which she struggled to interpret what was unfolding within her, and of being misunderstood by those charged with guiding her. "The Lord was leading me by a way I did not understand" (*Life* 31). There is something deeply consoling in that admission. Divine action is often obscure from within. The soul may feel diminished precisely at the moment when God is drawing it beyond its former supports. What appears as loss of devotion may be the loosening of dependence upon sensible reassurance.

For Teresa, the decisive question is not how prayer feels but what it gradually produces. Experiences—whether lofty or dry—must be tested against humility, truthfulness, and charity. Without such testing, even extraordinary phenomena may foster subtle spiritual self-satisfaction. "The proof of prayer," she insists elsewhere, "lies in works" (*Way of Perfection* 38). Growth, then, becomes visible not in texture but in orientation: a quiet reordering of the will toward God.

St John of the Cross presses this insight further, and at times more unsettlingly. He dismantles the assumption that growth should feel like an increase. Many souls, he observes, believe they are regressing when consolation fades. In reality, something far deeper may be taking place. "God is freeing them from their imperfections," he writes of those entering the Night (*Dark Night* I.9), though they themselves often conclude they are lost. In the Night of the Senses, and more profoundly in the Night of the Spirit, God withdraws the supports by which the soul once recognised divine nearness. This is not punishment. It is purification. Love is being disentangled from its need for emotional confirmation. The process rarely feels triumphant. It feels obscure. It may feel like failure. And yet John insists that prayer at this stage is more intense, more simplified, more rooted in faith than before—though the faculties can no longer register it clearly (*Ascent*, Prologue 6). This reversal unsettles performance-based discernment. Stability of feeling may conceal stagnation; instability may accompany deep transformation. What matters is whether the soul is being freed for love—freed even from attachment to its own spiritual success. That freedom cannot always be perceived immediately. It unfolds slowly, often beneath awareness.

Contemplative vision, therefore, requires restraint; it tolerates ambiguity, it refuses premature conclusions. Like the gaze trained by art, it learns to dwell with form before interpretation. The director does not rush to name growth or regression but attends to the whole gesture of a life—its direction, its fruits, its quiet shifts. This takes patience. Perhaps more patience than most of us prefer. It also requires humility. Discernment is not mastery over another's interior process; it is participation in a mystery that exceeds both director and directee. The soul is not an object to be analysed but a living reality to be received. And sometimes the most faithful accompaniment consists simply in standing before that reality without haste, trusting that God's work, however hidden, is not absent.

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Divine Aesthetic Movements

When discernment slows down enough to see contemplatively, it begins to recognise patterns that are easily missed when we are preoccupied with measuring progress. In the Carmelite tradition, the spiritual life rarely unfolds as a neat sequence of stages. It moves more like music than mathematics—recurring themes, unexpected pauses, crescendos, silence. The movements are seldom symmetrical. There is advance and withdrawal, illumination and obscurity, consolation and aridity. And often they overlap. Growth does not always feel expansive. At times, it feels like contraction. At other times, it feels like loss.

This is why reading works such as *The Interior Castle* as though they were step-by-step manuals risks flattening their contemplative depth. Teresa's imagery is architectural, yes but it is also organic. The soul does not simply "progress" from room to room by effort or achievement. It is drawn, invited, and sometimes it lingers longer than expected in spaces that feel dry or obscure. The movement is not mechanical but relational. Eugene McCaffery notes that growth in the Carmelite tradition often unfolds not through heightened fervour but through a gradual dispossession; a decrease in self-reliance and in the need to measure oneself spiritually. I have seen how unsettling this can be. The subtle conviction that holiness should be recognisable or even felt runs deep. Yet maturation frequently involves relinquishing the reassurance of felt progress. What is relinquished is not love itself but the need to verify love through emotional confirmation. The soul begins, sometimes reluctantly, to stand before God without insisting on signs.

Seen through this lens, experiences of diminishment take on a different resonance. Loss of fervour, clarity and even loss of spiritual warmth. What appears as regression may in fact be the quiet dismantling of self-referential habits that once structured the relationship with God. The subtraction of spiritual self-measurement creates space for a deeper trust, one anchored less in experience and more in faith. Returning to John of the Cross, we encounter this logic of dispossession in its most radical form. For John, attachment to one's own spiritual satisfaction can become an obstacle precisely because it remains subtly self-directed. Detachment is not a rejection of beauty; it is love being freed from its instinct to grasp. As he writes in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the soul must pass through a purification of sense so that love may be purified of attachment (Ascent I. 8). This passage is not triumphant. It is often obscure. Many who enter it believe they have lost their way. Yet, as John observes, beginners may think they are lost when God is in fact freeing them from their imperfections (*Dark Night* I. 9).

John's poetry makes this purification luminous. In *The Spiritual Canticle*, beauty is no longer something the soul seeks to enjoy but something it learns to behold without appropriation:

> "My Beloved, the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys… the silent music, the murmuring solitude." (*Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 14)

Beauty here is inseparable from silence and waiting. The soul ceases to pursue satisfaction and learns to receive presence. In *The Living Flame of Love*, John gives voice to this transformation in language that is at once intimate and daring:

> "O living flame of love, that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest centre." (*Living Flame*, I.1)

The wound here is not destruction but enlargement; the fire does not consume but illumines. Later, he dares to speak of the soul becoming "God by participation" (*Living Flame*, Stanza 4 commentary). Such language can startle us. Yet it reveals the horizon toward which all subtraction tends: not diminishment but participation in divine beauty. The Carmelite tradition recognises that God's deepest works are often accompanied by silence. Consolations are withdrawn. Familiar supports loosen. The soul stands without the reassurance it once depended upon. And yet this is not abandonment. It is a transformation. Absence becomes formative – like negative space in a painting, shaping what is seen precisely by what is not there.

Blessed Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus introduces a necessary realism here. Discernment requires prudence and patience. "God is not in haste," he writes, "and we must learn to wait for His hour" (*I Want to See God*, p 283). The temptation to interpret intense experiences quickly, whether consoling or disturbing, can lead to misjudgement. The director must resist outrunning the pace of grace. These aesthetic movements are rarely dramatic. They do not announce themselves as achievements. They resemble harmonies slowly composed, threads gradually woven. And it is here that discernment matures. Growth is recognised less by the immediacy of feeling and more by the endurance of love.

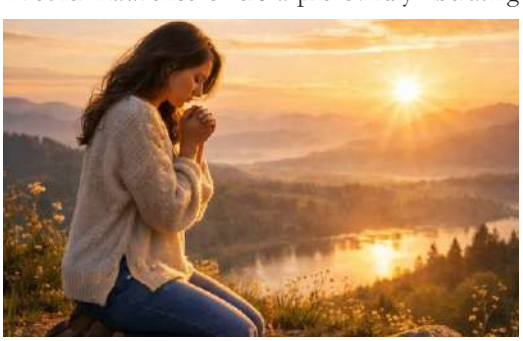
At a certain point, John allows us to glimpse the culmination of this journey. Transformation is not presented as moral refinement or psychological stability but as

participation in divine beauty itself. The intellect illumined by divine knowledge. The will inflamed by divine love. The memory resting in possession of glory. What once appeared as loss of clarity, fervour, and self-reliance is revealed, retrospectively, as preparation. The soul relinquishes its claim to a beauty of its own and discovers that its beauty is gift — received, not achieved.

Elizabeth of the Trinity receives this vision and gives it a distinctly Trinitarian interiority. Where John speaks of participation, Elizabeth speaks of indwelling. She prays, "Let me be a heaven, an abode for you" (*Heaven in Faith*). Growth, for her, is not measured by intensity but by interior relocation, the gradual shift of the centre from self-reference to loving attentiveness to the Presence within. In her *Last Retreat*, she writes: "I have found my heaven on earth, since heaven is God, and God is in my soul." The journey of subtraction resolves not into emptiness but into habitation. What began as dispossession matures into indwelling. What felt like diminishment becomes space – space for God. Discernment, in this light, learns to recognise that silence may be gestational, that obscurity may conceal enlargement, and that beauty often emerges most clearly when the soul has ceased trying to secure it for itself.

Simplicity of Beauty

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection translates this indwelling into the language of the ordinary. His *practice of the presence of God* insists that divine beauty does not belong exclusively to the chapel, to elevated states of recollection, or to rare moments of spiritual intensity. It inhabits the ordinary – pots and pans, corridors and courtyards, routine labour and repeated interruption. In his hands, contemplation is not diminished by the everyday; it is disclosed there. For those overwhelmed by busy lives or pastoral demands, Brother Lawrence offers a profoundly liberating aesthetic: holiness as habitual loving attention. "[We] must establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with him" (*Practice of the Presence of God*, Fourth Conversation).



This translation matters profoundly for discernment. Brother Lawrence shifts the question from whether prayer is successfully shielded from distraction to whether the heart is learning to return. In his experience, distraction does not destroy prayer; it uncovers the place where conversion occurs. Each interruption becomes an invitation to simplicity—a turning again, without self-reproach, toward the God who is already present. Prayer gradually expands beyond an enclosed activity into a posture of life, an attentiveness that may be lost and rediscovered many times a day without anxiety. Growth, in this vision, is measured less by uninterrupted focus and more by the ease, humility, and gentleness with which the soul returns.

Here the aesthetic dimension becomes unmistakable. Brother Lawrence's holiness carries the beauty of restraint and fidelity instead of brilliance. Dramatic ascent and catalogues of extraordinary experiences give way to a quiet coherence, slowly formed as love learns to inhabit the present moment. The soul is shaped through constancy rather than intensity, through steady availability rather than effortful recollection, allowing God to permeate the texture of daily existence. Beauty emerges as harmony between prayer and life, contemplation and action, interior attention and exterior service.

In my work of forming spiritual directors, I have seen how deeply liberating this vision can be. For spiritual directors and pastoral practitioners, it reframes accompaniment as an act of contemplative presence rather than spiritual management. Many of those entrusted to their care—parents, ministers, caregivers, chaplains—live under the weight of constant demand. They often conclude that their prayer is inadequate precisely because it is repeatedly interrupted. Brother Lawrence offers a different discernment: the very conditions that seem to undermine prayer may be the soil in which a more incarnate contemplation takes root. The question shifts from "*Can I protect my prayer*?" to "*Can I allow God to meet me where I am*?" In this light, habitual loving attention emerges as a reliable sign

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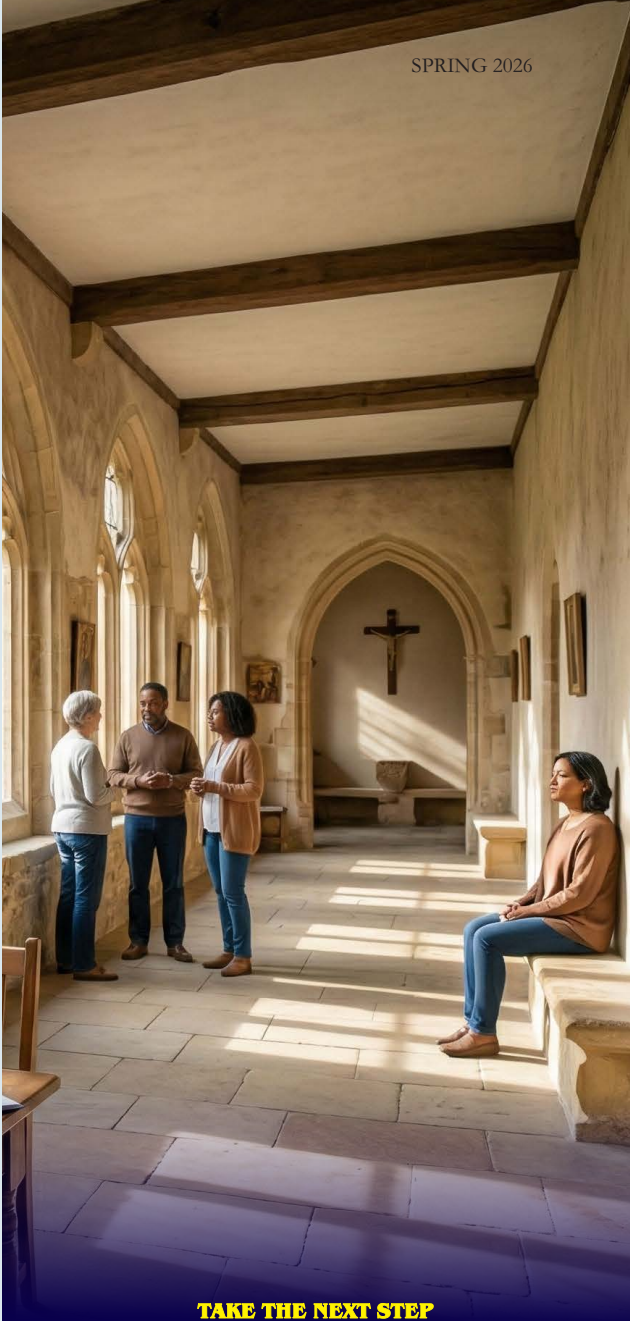

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of growth. Not the absence of distraction but the diminishing drama around it; not the achievement of recollection, but the growing trust that God is present before, during, and after every task. Over time, this attention reshapes the person. Anxiety loosens its grip, self-judgment softens, and a gentle realism replaces spiritual ambition. The soul becomes, quietly and almost unnoticed, a place where God is welcomed again and again.

Brother Lawrence thus safeguards the Carmelite aesthetic from becoming rarefied or elitist. He reminds the Church that the indwelling Trinity does not wait for ideal conditions. Divine beauty does not require silence to exist; it creates silence within noise. In kitchens and corridors, in fatigue and routine, the soul learns the art of presence. Holiness, in this regard, takes the form of a faithful inhabiting of the moment rather than a peak experience—a beauty composed through the steady rhythm of love returning home instead of dramatic gestures.

Divine beauty does not require silence to exist; it creates silence within noise. In kitchens and corridors, in fatigue and routine, the soul learns the art of presence.

Learning to See What God is Quietly Forming

Across years of pastoral ministry and formation in the art of spiritual direction, one pattern has returned with quiet persistence: people often misread God's work because they evaluate prayer by the standards they use to evaluate performance. Without fully realising it, they carry into the spiritual life the logic of productivity, efficiency, and visible achievement. If prayer feels clear, focused, and emotionally resonant, they assume growth. When it feels dry, distracted, or unproductive, anxiety begins to surface. Yet the soul does not mature according to the metrics of output. Grace does not submit to our expectations of measurable progress.

I have accompanied many who came to direction burdened by dryness in prayer. They described sitting before the tabernacle for twenty minutes and feeling nothing but restlessness. Some spoke almost apologetically, as though they had failed an examination they had not known they were taking. They named the absence of consolation as regression. And yet, when we looked more closely over time, another story began to emerge. These same individuals were becoming more truthful in their self-knowledge. They were less reactive in relationships. They were gentler with the weakness of others. Old compulsions were loosening their hold. There was more patience in the face of frustration. Their prayer felt barren; their lives were quietly bearing fruit. What appeared, through the lens of performance, as spiritual failure revealed itself through the lens of beauty as deepening coherence.

Conversely, I have encountered luminous experiences of prayer that appeared rich, elevated, even compelling, but left little trace in the concrete demands of charity. There were moments of insight, emotional intensity, and apparent spiritual clarity. Yet patience under correction remained fragile. Humility did not deepen. Generosity toward difficult neighbours did not increase. In such cases, the brightness of experience concealed a certain instability beneath. The aesthetic lens does not dismiss these experiences, nor does it idolise them. It simply asks a different question: *What kind of life is taking shape?* Beauty, in this sense, is not measured by brilliance but by integration.

This approach to discernment neither condemns nor flatters. It resists the temptation to reassure too quickly but it also refuses harsh judgment. It allows complexity. It recognises that God's work is often hidden and sometimes hidden most deeply from those who are sincerely committed to prayer. To discern growth and regression through the lens of beauty is not to romanticise suffering or to spiritualise confusion. Psychological fatigue remains real. Emotional pain requires attention. Human wounds need care. The aesthetic vision does not bypass these realities. It simply insists that transformation does not unfold mechanically. The soul is not assembled piece by piece through effort. It is shaped through encounter.

Holiness is not engineered through the mastery of spiritual technique. It is received, often slowly, through consent. And here something subtle shifts. Surrender becomes less a dramatic gesture and more a steady posture. Not passivity, but availability. Not resignation, but trust. The soul

gradually learns, sometimes reluctantly, that it does not need to manage its own transformation. What once looked like regression may, in time, be recognised as the stripping away of illusion. What felt like loss may disclose itself as freedom. Beauty begins to emerge precisely where success, as previously imagined, has been relinquished.

At this point, the icon of Andrei Rublev returns almost naturally. The Trinity offers no verdict, no measurable standard. The open space at the table remains. The viewer is not evaluated or corrected. The viewer is invited. Discernment unfolds in this same posture. It is not a final judgment pronounced upon a soul's progress. It is an invitation to remain, to attend, to consent to a mystery already at work even when its pattern cannot yet be seen. To learn to see in this way is already to be transformed.

When directors, formators, pastors, and chaplains adopt this contemplative gaze, they cease to treat the souls entrusted to them as projects to be advanced or problems to be solved. They become witnesses to divine artistry. They learn to trust that God is at work even when obscurity persists. And in doing so, they help others discover something profoundly consoling: the soul, held patiently in God's hands, is not failing; it is becoming.

Results and Implication for Practitioners
1. The Deception of Sensory Consolation
The study finds that reliance on "felt" progress is a significant obstacle to maturity. St Teresa of Ávila cautions that vivid or consoling experiences are not reliable indicators of growth. Spiritual directors must help directees distinguish between "feeling holy" and "becoming holy."

2. Reinterpreting Regression as Purification
Practitioners should avoid reassuring directees too quickly with psychological categories. Instead, they should frame dryness as "negative space" in a painting, an absence that is formative and gestational.

3. The Simplicity of "Habitual Loving Attention"
Holiness is defined not by uninterrupted focus but by the "ease, humility, and gentleness" with which the soul returns to God after distraction. For those in active ministry or parenthood, discernment should shift from "protecting prayer from distraction" to "allowing God to meet the soul in the distraction". Growth is evidenced by a decrease in anxiety regarding performance.

Conclusion
The Carmelite tradition offers a corrective to the performance-driven anxiety that plagues modern spiritual practice. By adopting an "aesthetic" lens, we learn that growth and regression are not opposing forces but woven threads of a single design. The spiritual life is less like a staircase and more like a tapestry or an icon; it is not conquered but contemplated.

Ultimately, discernment is an invitation to consent to a mystery. When we relinquish the need to measure our own transformation, we discover that the soul is not failing, but "becoming". The role of the spiritual guide is to witness this divine artistry, trusting that God is at work even when the work remains hidden.

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BEAUTY:

THE NIGHT AS CLEAR AS THE DAY

SanJuanist Dark Nights, Ignatian Desolation, & Noögenic Depression

By Dr Stephen J. Costello, MA, PhD
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Dr Stephen is a prominent philosopher, psychoanalyst, logotherapist, founder of the Viktor Frankl Institute of Ireland, accredited Enneagram practitioner, and author of 17 books. Dr Costello combines this ancient system with psychoanalytic insight to aid self-discovery. He lectures on the CACS Spiritual Direction Formation Programme. Through his writing, clinical practice, and teaching, Dr Costello inspires others to "know thyself," helping them find meaning and resilience in a complex world.

Abstract

This research probes into the differences and connections between St John of the Cross's idea of the Dark Night of the Soul, St Ignatius of Loyola's notion of spiritual desolation, and Viktor Frankl's noogenic depression. It combines elements of Carmelite spirituality, Ignatian discernment, and depth psychology (including Jungian and Logotherapy) to show that spiritual darkness is not just empty, but can be a "difficult consolation" that leads to personal transformation. The study explores the active and passive parts of the SanJuanist nights, connects them to St Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle, and looks at the psychological effects of the night sea journey. In the end, the research suggests a way to blend these traditions to help spiritual directors tell the difference between clinical depression and the purifying darkness of mystical union.

Keywords
Dark Night of the Soul, Spiritual Desolation, Noögenic Depression, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila, Carl Jung, Ignatian Discernment, Logotherapy, Mysticism, Nigredo.

Introduction

The experience of darkness is essential to the beauty of our spiritual journey, often expressed as a blend of felt presence and experienced absence. This article will examine the confusion between clinical depression, spiritual desolation, and the mystical Dark Night. Rather than simply an absence of light, this night represents a dialectic of beauty, where divine absence enhances the understanding of divine presence. As Karl Rahner suggests, darkness is perceived by an eye meant for light. The article explores this divine darkness in the works of Dante, T.S. Eliot, and St John of the Cross, arguing that the light of the Logos is most discerned in obscurity. It aims to distinguish between the night of sense and spirit, the night of self, and concepts like Ignatius's "obtuseness of soul" and Frankl's existential despair.

Methodology

This research employs a comparative and interdisciplinary hermeneutic approach. It synthesises three distinct frameworks:

1. Mystical Theology: Analysing the primary texts of St John of the Cross (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night*) and St Teresa of Avila (*Interior Castle*).

2. Ignatian Spirituality: Examining the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola, specifically the Rules for Discernment of Spirits.

3. Depth Psychology and Existential Analysis: Applying Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and Carl Jung's analytical psychology (archetypes, alchemy) to interpret spiritual phenomena.

The study utilises “parallel mapping” to correlate the stages of prayer in Teresian

spirituality with SanJuanist nights and Alchemical states.

The Dialectics of Light and Night

"Darkness can only be perceived by an eye which was created for light." (Rahner, 1986). Night and bright: in prayer, this is the dialectic of felt presence and experienced absence. In the cell of Carmel, which is the cave of the heart, experiences of divine absence can paradoxically deepen our understanding of what I call the flow of divine presence. Light and night, presence and absence, are not opposites but sides of a Moebius strip which, when given half a twist, joins the ends together.

The great Dante opens his *Divine Comedy* with the famous line: "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost" (*Inferno*, Canto I, lines 1–3). Sometimes we come to ourselves only when we have lost ourselves; the light of the Logos is discerned in the divine darkness. The Spanish poet Federico García Lorca ran into the woods one night, attempting unsuccessfully to escape Franco's forces. In *Romance de la Guardia Civil Española*, he relates the story of a police raid on a gypsy community: "*en la noche platinoche/ noche, que noche nochera*" — "in the night, the silver night, night that darkened night" (my translation). Night symbolises spiritual darkness and ignorance (*avidya* in Sanskrit). A theme related to night is negation (mystical apophasis). This is expressed by T.S. Eliot, who was heavily influenced by St John of the Cross, in his *Four Quartets*. Compare the lines in *East Coker III* ("In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not") with John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (I:13:11): "To arrive at being all / Desire to be nothing".

All and nothing: *Todo y nada*. Another dialectic. In *The Story of a Soul*, St Thérèse of Lisieux admits: "there was only night, utter desolation, like death itself". There are crossovers and connections between these divergent concepts and symbols: desolation, Dark Night, and depression.

Depression vs. Desolation

Viktor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor, founded logotherapy and existential analysis. He interpreted depression in three modalities:

1. **Psychogenic or reactive depression** (psychological)
2. **Somatogenic or psychotic depression** (biological)
3. **Noogenic depression** (existential, philosophical, spiritual despair)

If the first two constitute clinical depression, the last one indicates spiritual desolation (Frankl, 2004; Costello, 2019). In *Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* in his *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius of Loyola describes spiritual desolation as "obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations" (Ganss, 2021, para. 317, p. 122). These move one toward a lack of faith, leaving one without hope and love. One becomes listless, tepid, unhappy, and feels separated from the Creator.

The opposite is spiritual consolation, which occurs when "some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it becomes inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord". Ignatius includes in this "every increase in hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things, and to the salvation of one's soul, by bringing tranquillity and peace" (Ganss, 2021, para. 316, p. 122). Interestingly, when John of the Cross wrote of the Dark Night in his *Canticles*, Ignatius—who seemingly never experienced a classic Dark Night of the soul—wrote of desolation.

A son of St Ignatius, the Jesuit poet Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins, penned what became known as the *Terrible Sonnets*. These detail his experiences of emotional desolation. The *Sonnets of Desolation*, written during 1885–86, suggest Hopkins suffered from depression. In *To Seem the Stranger*, he writes: "my heart breeds dark heaven's baffling ban / Bars or hell's spell thwarts" (Hopkins, 2011, p. 59). Another begins, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day / What hours, O what black hours we have spent / This night... I am gall, I am heartburn" (*Hopkins*, 2011, pp. 59–60).

Norman White notes that for most of 1885, depression was a usual part of Hopkins' life (White, 2002, p. 62). Yet there were positive aspects; he indulged in conversations with friends and artistic endeavours. The beauty of nature still

uplifted him. We might say that consolation and desolation were both at play in his life, but the desolation he experienced was one of "painful consolation".

Distinguishing the States

Ignatian desolation is distinct from the SanJuanist Dark Night.

1. Desolation: The experience of God's absence, characterised by hopelessness, agitation, and inner tumult. No hope, faith, or love is felt.

2. Dark Night: Actually, a form of painful or difficult consolation. In the Dark Night, one still experiences God's presence, albeit obscurely. There is seldom the acute, morbid guilt or self-loathing that characterises clinical depression.

3. Depression: Profound sadness, often accompanied by clinical symptoms.

Mark Thibodeaux rightly recognises that not all consolations and desolations are spiritual. One might experience emotional desolation in the midst of spiritual consolation—feeling sadness—while retaining an acute sense of God's presence. However, a question arises: what do we call the state that feels like desolation but is actually consolation? Thibodeaux calls it "difficult consolation," citing Mother Teresa as an example (Thibodeaux, 2020, p. 26).

We can summarise these four states thus:

	Actually is Consolation	**Actually is Desolation**
Feels like Consolation	Consolation	False Consolation
Feels like Desolation	Difficult Consolation (Dark Night)	Desolation

False consolation = desolation
Dark Night of the Soul = Difficult consolation

Often, the path from desolation to consolation passes through difficult consolation. Thibodeaux distinguishes eight states of spiritual experience (Thibodeaux, 2020, pp. 37–42):

1. Dramatic Consolation: I am overwhelmed with joy.

2. Placid Consolation: I am happy and at peace but not overwhelmed.

3. Dramatic Desolation: I am in despair and feel miserable, fearful, or hopeless.

4. Placid Desolation: I feel lethargic and apathetic, lacking energy and initiative.

5. Dramatic False Consolation: It feels like dramatic consolation; I am manic and do not know it.

6. Placid False Consolation: I believe I am in placid consolation, but what I call peace is really indolence.

7. Dramatic Difficult Consolation: I am sad or lonely, but I know God stands by me; though I may be tempted to make a dramatic decision, I realise it is the depression talking.

8. Placid Difficult Consolation: I am feeling lethargic, but I force myself to get up and go to work (*agere contra*).

Our primary focus should be on the discernment of spirits rather than the discernment of choices, for bad decisions are the result of bad discernment. We can discern not just consciously, but through synchronicity, dreams, and other means. Finally, what Ignatius calls consolation without previous cause (Rule Two of the Second Week) is not an unmediated experience of the divine for Thibodeaux; he argues this is impossible on this side of heaven. Rather, it is a spiritual experience wherein the intensity of the consolation is far out of proportion to the preceding cause (Thibodeaux, 2020, pp. 53–55).

The pertinent question to ask is: *What state of being am I in—desolation, consolation, false consolation, or difficult consolation?* What am I feeling? What am I thinking? Journalling is a crucial exercise in this regard. For example, here are some questions we might ask if we are experiencing a desolation:

- When did the desolation begin? When did it end?
- What were the external events and internal thoughts and feelings that preceded the desolation?
- In the midst of the desolation, what things did I do, say, or think that helped me feel better?
- What kinds of things made the experience worse?
- What were the twisted truths being proposed to me by the false spirit?
- What brought me into consolation?

We need to track and trace the causes and cures. This involves paying attention to both *psyche* (soul) and *polis* (society) to discern not only that

God is present but how God is present "in the pots and pans" (as Teresa of Avila put it), in people as well as places.

The Sanjuanist Nights

St John of the Cross distinguishes between two types of Dark Nights:

1. The Dark Night of the Senses: A removal of attachment to the consolations felt in prayer.

2. The Dark Night of the Soul (Spirit): A crisis of faith.

If the first is a passive process of purgation occurring as one grows closer to God, the second is an experience of no consolations being present. In the darkness, one can encounter God in the *nada*—the nothingness. John's poem, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (c. 1577–1579), narrates the soul's journey to mystical union. The darkness in question symbolises that the destination is unknowable.

- *"En una noche oscura"* ("On a Dark Night"): The pilgrim ventures forth, disguised.
- *"En la noche dichosa"* ("In the happy night"): The light guides the pilgrim more securely than the noonday sun.
- *"Oh noche que guiaste!"* (Oh, night that guided!): *Amada en el amado transformada!* (Lover transformed in the beloved!) (St John of the Cross, 1990, pp. 33–34).

The Dark Night is akin to *nigredo* in alchemy. It is not negative; it is the process of being liberated from disordered desires and attachments. It is dusk rather than black darkness. In *The Science of the Cross*, Edith Stein (St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) suggests that one reaches a crossroad where previous methods—drawing on the senses, imagination, and the will—no longer work (Stein, 2002, p. 39). This Dark Night is uncanny, distinct from the cosmic night. The former has its origin in the interior of the soul; the latter comes from without. It casts the soul into "loneliness, desolation, and emptiness" (Stein, 2002, p. 41), a shapeless state where meaning is indicated but not exhausted. To our senses, God is *nada*—no-thing. The life of the soul (*alma*) proceeds beneath conscious awareness. This unconscious dimension is what Teresa and John refer to as dark. It is mysterious rather than macabre. The sinister, devilish darkness would be *tinieblas*. As Gerald May notes, "In *oscuras* things are hidden; in *tinieblas* one is blind" (May, 2005, p. 68). If the Dark Night of the Senses is like dusk, the Night of the Spirit is like midnight.

Active and Passive Dimensions

For John, there are active and passive dimensions to the Nights:

1. Active Nights: We are aware of participating via prayers, practices, exercises, and virtues. The movement is subtraction and simplification.

2. Passive Nights: We experience the pain and loss associated with suffering. We are freed from possessions and feelings—an act of *kenosis*.

These nights interpenetrate. The Dark Night is an inflow of God into the soul. We can depict four main points in John diagrammatically as four quadrants, adopted from Carl McColman (2020):

	Night of the Senses	**Night of the Spirit**
Active	Our efforts to detach from things obstructing our relationship with God (Teresa's 'reptiles'). *(Ascent, Bk I)*	Our response to God's seeming absence; persevering in contemplative prayer. *(Ascent, Bks II & III)*
Passive	God seems hidden. A sign to move from meditation to contemplation. *(Dark Night, Bk I)*	God seems radically absent. We experience powerlessness and persevere in dark contemplation. *(Dark Night, Bk II)*

John's *noche oscura* is a darkness that is light. The spiritual life requires a re-visioning of polarity and paradox. The lover's quest is *todo y nada* (all and nothing). The summit of Carmel is nothing because it holds everything—Presence Itself.

The Third Night: The Self

The process of mystical transformation moves from dusk, through midnight, to the dawn. In *Thomas Keating: The Making of a Modern Christian Mystic*, Cynthia Bourgeault distinguishes the Nights thus:

1. Dark Night of the Sense: Dismantling of the false self system (ego) and emotional programmes for happiness.

2. Dark Night of the Spirit: Affective purification—upending of the illusion of a separate self structure.

However, Bourgeault hints at a third Night—the **Dark Night of the Self** (Bourgeault, 2024, p. 131). This is the cessation of the separate self sense, a "no-self". As Keating writes: "Once the separate self has been laid to rest,/The Divine Presence alone remains" (cited in Bourgeault, 2024, p. 150). Bourgeault outlines a taxonomy of selfhood which expands the Carmelite framework (Bourgeault, 2024, p. 154):

1. False Self: The pathological, homemade self; dismantled in the Dark Night of the Senses.

2. Ego: Limited autonomous selfhood; disarmed in the Night of Spirit.

3. Separate Self: Dualistic perception dividing subject from object; transcended in the Night of Self.

4. True Self: The Word of God manifesting in our uniqueness; the 'I AM'.

5. Ultimate Self: Unmediated participation in the UnmanifeSt

Union is attained not in the collapse of two into one, but in the expansion of two into three: Trinitarian nonduality.

Teresa of Avila: Meditation and Contemplation

Turning now to Teresa, she identifies two forms of active prayer: vocal prayer (rote recitation) and mental prayer (meditation). She considers three types of meditation (May, 2005, p. 105):

1. Reflection (visualisation)

2. Active Recollection (attentiveness to the divine presence, like centring prayer and Christian Meditation)

3. Passive Recollection (the first step toward contemplation)

Meditation is something we do, such as reading Scripture or journalling, whereas contemplation is done *to* us (it is gifted). Meditation includes all acts and exercises; contemplation, by contrast, cannot be practised. It is the difference between effort and grace. There are two psychological qualities present in contemplation singled out in classical descriptions:

- Open awareness, as distinct from the focused awareness in meditation
- Centredness in the present moment (eternal now)

We can say with the Carmelite mystics—indeed, with all the mystics—that contemplation is loving. Both John and Teresa rely on metaphor to convey its mysteries; indeed, they have created some of the most compelling imagery of mystical literature ever written. Teresa likens the soul to an interior garden (also to a castle) with God dwelling in the centre. The water is prayer, and prayer is loving attentiveness (did Simone Weil not tell us that pure attention is prayer?). For Teresa, there are four ways or degrees of watering the soul garden with prayer (*grados de oración*). The first is meditation, with the other three requiring deepening dimensions of contemplation:

1. Hauling water from a well: Great labour (meditation).

2. Using a waterwheel: Less work, more water. This is the prayer of quiet, the beginning of contemplation.

3. A stream or spring: Does most of the watering naturally; the gardener needs to supplement it only occasionally.

4. Rain: Waters the garden. This is the prayer of union (May, 2005, p. 114).

The progression is from meditation through contemplation to the prayer of union. These phases are cyclical rather than linear, fluid rather than fixed. They are experiences more than steady states or chronological stages. Now, consolations (*contentos*) come in meditation during moments Teresa calls active recollection, when the work of meditation quiets the mind and brings one into awareness of the present moment. For Teresa, contemplative experience brings *gustos* or delights—a type of consolation. Gerald May describes the Dark Night as "nothing other than our ongoing relationship with the Divine" (May, 2005, p. 132). The darkness is holy unknowing.

Signs of the Night

St John describes three signs to help differentiate an authentic dark night experience from other causes, such as depression (melancholia). The signs are for spiritual people to notice within themselves. It is important to begin by recognising what is *not* the Dark Night in oneself.

1. Dryness: The first sign is a diminishment of consolation (the soul finds no consolation in God or in any created things).

2. Lack of desire: No desire for the old ways of praying.

3. Desire to love God: This third way is certain. Here, the soul wishes to remain alone in loving attentiveness to God (May, 2005, pp. 138–142).

In his commentary on the first stanza of the *Dark Night* poem, John says that three spirits may visit people during the night:

1. The spirit of fornication: Immoral sexual activity; a flailing around in the attempt to procure pleasure.

2. The spirit of blasphemy: The impulse to rage against God.

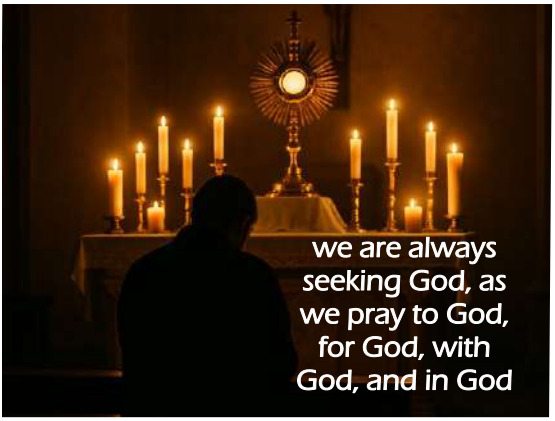
3. Spiritus vertiginis: A dizzy spirit, which tries to puzzle things out oneself (e.g., "if only I could understand things, I would make them right") (May, 2005, pp. 143–149).

Centuries before Freud, Teresa and John, as perspicacious psychologists, described defence mechanisms, addictions, and depressive disorders. The Dark Night of the Soul is commonly confused with depression. Of course, the Dark Night can be depressing—liberation involves loss. However, the Dark Night cannot be equated with persistent sadness, pessimism, guilt, hopelessness, lack of energy, insomnia, fatigue, or suicidal ideation, as noted above.

In relation to addiction, the first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are strikingly reminiscent of the language of the Dark Night:

- Admitting we are powerless over alcohol (or any addiction).
- Believing in a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.
- Deciding to turn our will over to God (as we understand Him).

Spiritual awakenings lead to what May calls the "Dark Night of Recovery" (May, 2005, p. 161). If



the Dark Night is experienced in terms of obscurity, daybreak brings clarity and composure. The light at dawn, though, is not like the midday sun—it is, rather, the muted light of early morning. It still partakes of some apophatic mystery. According to May, John speaks of the soul being like a log set afire: "warming, steaming, lighting, blazing, and finally being transformed into God's own fire of love" (May, 2005, p. 188). May singles out three qualities that characterise contemplation (May, 2005, p. 190):

- Freedom.
- Realisation.
- Easing/erasing of wilfulness.

The intellect, in such a scenario, is transformed into faith, the will into love, and the memory into hope. Ultimately, contemplation is beyond comprehension. Like St Ignatius and St Francis, Saints John and Teresa emphasise God's immanence as well as transcendence. For all these mystics, we are always seeking God, as we pray to God, for God, with God, and in God. As Teresa put it in her poem, *Buscando a Dios* (Seeking God): *"Alma, buscarte has en Mi"* ("Soul, seek yourself in Me") (*May, p. 199*).

Correspondences: Teresa, John, and Ignatius

In *Shoeless: Carmelite Spirituality in a Disquieted World*, Secular Discalced Carmelite philosopher Donald Wallenfang (with Megan Wallenfang) observes regarding John of the Cross's Dark Night: "There is no via negativa of the Dark Night without a prior via positiva of noonday light" (Wallenfang, 2021, p. 65). Apophasis, in other words, happens only against the backdrop of Kataphatic theological correlates.

The Kataphatic approach for Teresa is found in the five stages of prayer:

- Vocal prayer.
- Mental prayer (meditation)
- Prayer of recollection (first contemplation).
- Prayer of quiet (second contemplation).
- Prayer of union (third contemplation).

Aligning this with St Ignatius, Wallenfang notes: "The *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola are essential for every person who is serious about knowing how to go about mental prayer" (Wallenfang, 2021, p. 69). Let us combine the SanJuanist Two Dark Nights with the Teresian Seven Dwelling Places (or Mansions) of the *Interior Castle*, following Wallenfang (2021, *p. 76*):

1. Active Night of Sense: Accords with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd dwelling places.
2. Passive Night of Sense / Active Night of Spirit: Accords with the 4th dwelling place.
3. Passive Night of Spirit: Accords with the 5th and 6th dwelling places.
4. Passive Night of the Spirit (Final): Accords with the 7th dwelling place.

So, mapping Teresa's seven stages (*Interior Castle*) with John's four (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*), we arrive at the following:

1. Vocal and mental prayer correspond to the act of drawing water from a well, to the active night of sense, and to the first, second, and third dwelling places.
2. The prayer of recollection corresponds to the waterwheel, the transition from the passive night of sense to the active night of spirit, and the fourth dwelling place.
3. The prayer of quiet corresponds to water flowing through a stream, the beginning of the passive night of spirit, and the fifth and sixth dwelling places.
4. The prayer of union corresponds to the water from the rain, the last stages of the passive night of spirit, and the seventh dwelling place.

The Night Sea Journey and Alchemy

Teresa and John confronted their shadows and plumbed the depths of their psyches. Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychologist, characterised this inner journey—which Ignatius, Teresa, and John made to the centre of themselves (a Platonic *katabasis*)—as a "night sea journey". This is a kind of *descensus ad inferos*, a descent into Hades, a journey to the underworld or the land of ghosts "beyond this world, beyond consciousness," as Jung describes it in *The Practice of Psychotherapy* (*Collected Works*, vol. 16, para. 455).

The night sea journey is an archetypal motif in mythology that is psychologically associated with depression. It usually involves being swallowed by a sea monster, such as a whale or a dragon. It is also represented by crucifixion and dismemberment. At night, the sun goes down, libido is withdrawn—there is a loss of energy, which is a prelude to rebirth. In Jungian terms, St John of the Cross's experience of the Dark Night is an encounter with the transpersonal dimensions of the psyche.

We can parallel map the three well-known mystical stages with three alchemical states:

Mystical Stages	Alchemical States	Symbolism
Purgation	*Nigredo* (blackening)	Moonlight
Illumination	*Albedo* (whitening)	Sunrise (dawn)
Union	*Rubedo* (reddening)	Midday Sun

God loves and wounds/withdraws. The Dark Night is the death of (our image of) God—the removal of shadow projections. The divine *imago* is cloaked in paradox (see Odorisio, 2015, pp. 64–82). The Dark Night is the seeming remoteness of the Absolute. The union (*coniunctio*) that is wrought is the mystical marriage of ego and Self. In terms of alchemical hermeneutics, *nigredo* signifies the Dark Night; it is meeting the shadow. This gives birth to a more integrated and incarnated Self. After the Dark Night of the ego comes the birth of the more luminous Self.

For Jung, psychology is the science of the soul's interiority—the soul has a logic of its own. The *logos* of the soul is also evident in the great Carmelites such as Thérèse of Lisieux (*The Story of a Soul*). The personality is crucified between spirit and instinct, as Evangelos Christou puts it in his *The Logos of the Soul*. Soul is as much qualified

by spirit as it is by body. We never observe an objective event, as it is always filtered by our personality, modified by our subjective experience. Soul is the experiencing subject. To take an example, a pain may or may not be imaginary—it may correspond to a physical object, but it is real all the same, as it can be *experienced*. We can never get away from the soul (Christou, 1976, p. 61).

1. Science: Matter
2. Philosophy: Mind
3. Psychology: Soul

Psyche (soul) is not synonymous with mind, as many philosophers and psychologists erroneously assume. If science deals with perceptions and philosophy with conceptions, the soul is that *tertium quid* which is neither mind nor body. Neither *esse in re* nor *esse in mente*, but *esse in anima*, to give it its full Jungian flavour and formulation.

The meaning of ego or self will derive from the logic of the soul, against whose background the other two terms move, live, and have their being. Recall that *psyche* refers to the experiencing soul. Christou asserts: "There is no such thing as an objective psychological experience in the sense in which there is an objective perception of a material object. But there is such a thing as an objective psychological experience provided it also includes the subject, namely the self and the soul" (Christou, 1976, p. 102). Now, the expression of the meanings of the soul is the symbol—an ontological reality of the soul.

For Jung, the Self is the principle of unity and totality, the spiritualising centre of the personality. Christou states: "The personality and its nucleus, the self, are the logical limits of psychology" (Christou, 1976, p. 118). In this sense, the Self is a fiction, an idealised point. If *psyche* is a process from below upwards, spirit is one from up downwards—the experience of intrusion from without, an interruption from the "Wholly Other". The goal of individuation is the coming into being of one's individualised self.

Jung turned to alchemy because it spoke in symbols about the human soul. Jung's own descent into creative illness was an encounter with darkness as *nekyia*. It was similar to Dante's in the *Divine Comedy*, where Dante finds himself in a dusky wood (the *nigredo* experience), and mirrors T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. All three embarked on night sea journeys to Hades. Underworld is *psyche*. *Sol niger*—black sun—is an important image of the unconscious. Pseudo-Dionysius had emphasised the "divine darkness," the unapproachable light in which divinity dwells (see Marlan, 2005).

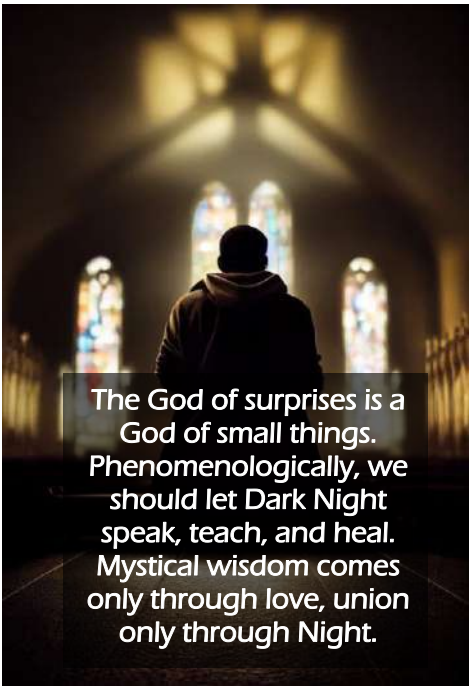
Following Hillman, Marlan makes the (post-Jungian) point that Jung's Self is not a substantiated/metaphysical entity. In principle, it is both unknown and unknowable, like God. Jung follows the apophatic alchemical dictum: *ignotum per ignotius* (the unknown is explained by the more unknown). The Self is a "no-self". If it was originally modelled on the Hindu notion of Atman/Brahman, it would need to fit too with the Buddhist notion of *Anatman*—a "no Self". We need this latter concept as a necessary complementarity principle to keep the Self from stagnating into a hypostasised idea. The Self has its shadow—its "impossible Otherness" that is essential to it (perhaps approaching the Lacanian *objet petit a*).

James Hillman deconstructs the Jungian transcendental signified. As Marlan makes clear: "When we speak of God or Self, we are naming something whose Being is never fully present and cannot be captured in any signification" (Marlan, 2005, p. 184). When we speak of God or Self, we always speak under erasure, with an X going through the word—Gxd. This absence of the signified, Derrida calls a "trace".

1. Jung: Arche-type
2. Derrida: Arche trace

The Self shows its Otherness when under erasure. "It is to symbolise that it is paradoxical, mysterious, both light and dark, yet neither" (Marlan, 2005, p. 185). We have reached the limits of language as the limits of my world (via Wittgenstein). Language does not refer to a nominalist or literalised thing. Derrida's word for this is *différance*. In psychoanalysis, the subject is decentred, just as in analytical psychology, the ego is relativised and displaced.

For Lacan, the subject is an effect of speech. The Self is not oneself. It is, though, perhaps, "oneself as another." The Self cannot be totally conscious—it is an unknown mystery which disseminates itself in multiple archetypal images. Marlan quotes Jung as saying: "The concept of the unconscious posits nothing; it designates only my unknowing" (Marlan, 2005, p. 213).



I said that the Self casts a shadow; this can be referred to as a "Divine Darkness". In short, the Self is like a shooting star which leaves a trail, a trace, in the margins of meaning. The Self is an image under erasure. As Marlan puts it: "It is a darkness that is light and a light that is darkness" (Marlan, 2005, p. 214), just like St John of the Cross's *noche oscura*. John experiences spirit as an infinite fire/flame of love. Like the sword that pierces Teresa's heart. *Llama de amor viva*.

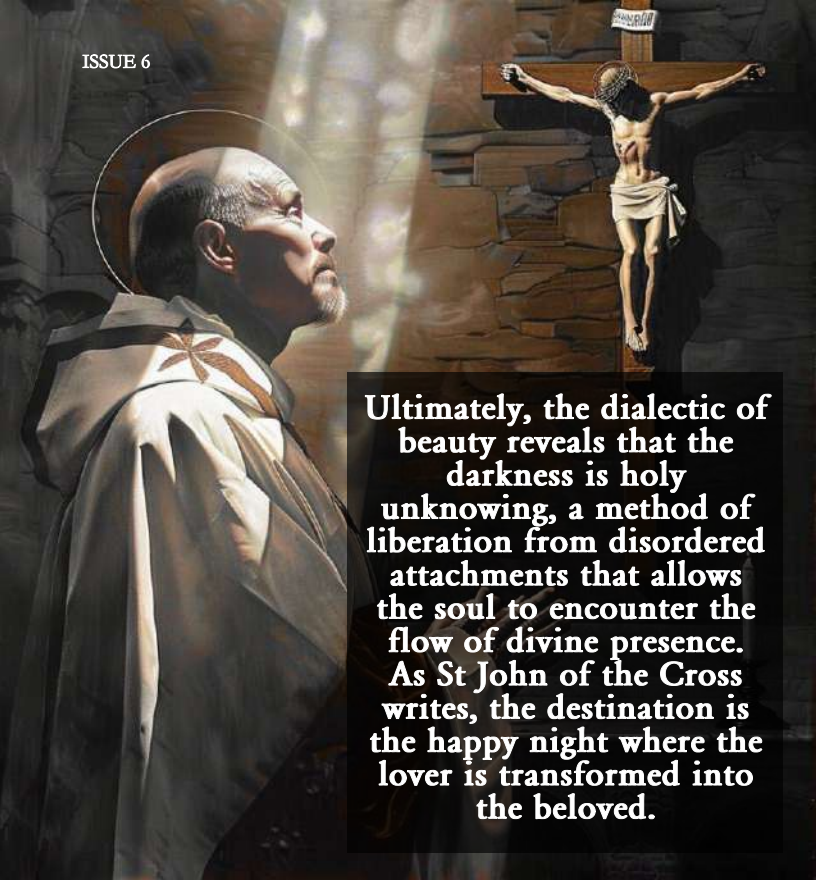
All and Nothing

The spiritual life requires a re-visioning in our perceptions, an understanding of polarity and paradox. The lover's quest is everything as well as nothing. To want satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing. The summit of Carmel is space, as peace is brought to passion; it is nothing because it holds everything—Presence Itself. The Gospel is written in poetry, not prose. We are brought to the threshold, not to what is more but to what is less: spiritual subtraction rather than addition. The God of surprises is a God of small things. Phenomenologically, we should let Dark Night speak, teach, and heal. Mystical wisdom comes only through love, union only through Night. The young Tobias had to wait three nights before he could unite with his bride. This Lover is Three and One. John of the Cross writes: "As the loved one in the lover / each in the other's heart resided; / And the love that makes them one / into one of them divided" (cited in McGinn, 2017, p. 247). The process of mystical transformation is *subir y bajar*: the dialectic of ascent and descent. It may be the case that the soul's centre is God, but by participation. "Its substance remains its own," as McGinn puts it (McGinn, 2017, p. 275). Spiritual Marriage is communion, deification (*theosis*), transformation, betrothal, as in the Song of Songs. To put it in Sanjuanist terms, we can say that, eschatologically, the reward of Heaven is serene Night but one on which shines the light of Christ as the Logos of creation.

Ignatian indifference parallels John's focus on cleansing passions, reminiscent of Stoic divestment. Dark Nights impact both senses and spirit, with passive nights being God's work on the soul. As the soul ascends to the Great Noonday, it must reject alien gods and practice virtues. The journey to the crystalline fount is challenging. St Augustine speaks of groans and tears, while John uses imagery of fire and furnace, presenting a sharper asceticism compared to Augustine and Ignatius, who avoid John's nuptial metaphors. The Night of Contemplation serves to prepare us for a deeper, transforming union and joy.

Meaning and the Dark Night

The Dark Night of the Soul gives meaning to life, the meaning of not knowing. Former Swedish Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), in his book *Markings*, in an entry made on Whitsunday, 1961, described this experience of not knowing



but of trust, nonetheless, thus:

> "I don't know Who – or what – put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal." (Hammarskjöld, 2006, p. 205)

He was led by Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of life to a source of ultimate meaning, a journey which paralleled Viktor Frankl's:

> "The dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces... I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere heard a victorious 'Yes' in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose." (Frankl, 2004, p. 51)

Application to Spirituality and Practice

1. Discernment of Spirits: Spiritual directors must discern what state of being the directee is in. The Key Question: *Is this clinical depression, spiritual desolation, or the Dark Night (difficult consolation)?*

Signs of the Dark Night:

Dryness: Diminishment of consolation in God and created things.

Lack of desire: No desire for old ways of praying.

Desire for God: A certainty of wanting to love God and remain in attentive solitude.

2. Journalling for Discernment: Practitioners are encouraged to track causes and cures through journalling.

3. The Dark Night of Recovery: The framework applies to addiction recovery, specifically the first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which mirror the language of the Dark Night. This involves admitting powerlessness (passive night) and turning the will over to a Higher Power, leading to a Dark Night of recovery.

Conclusion

The Dark Night is not a negative state to be avoided but a "difficult consolation" that prepares the soul for the beauty of transforming union. It is a night of meaning, as exemplified by Dag Hammarskjöld and Viktor Frankl, where the loss of the ego's certainties leads to a deeper "Yes" to an ultimate purpose. The spiritual journey moves from the dusk of sensory detachment, through the midnight of spiritual purgation, to the dawn of union. Ultimately, the dialectic of beauty reveals that the darkness is holy unknowing, a method of liberation from disordered attachments that allows the soul to encounter the flow of divine presence. As St John of the Cross writes, the destination is the happy night where the lover is transformed into the beloved.

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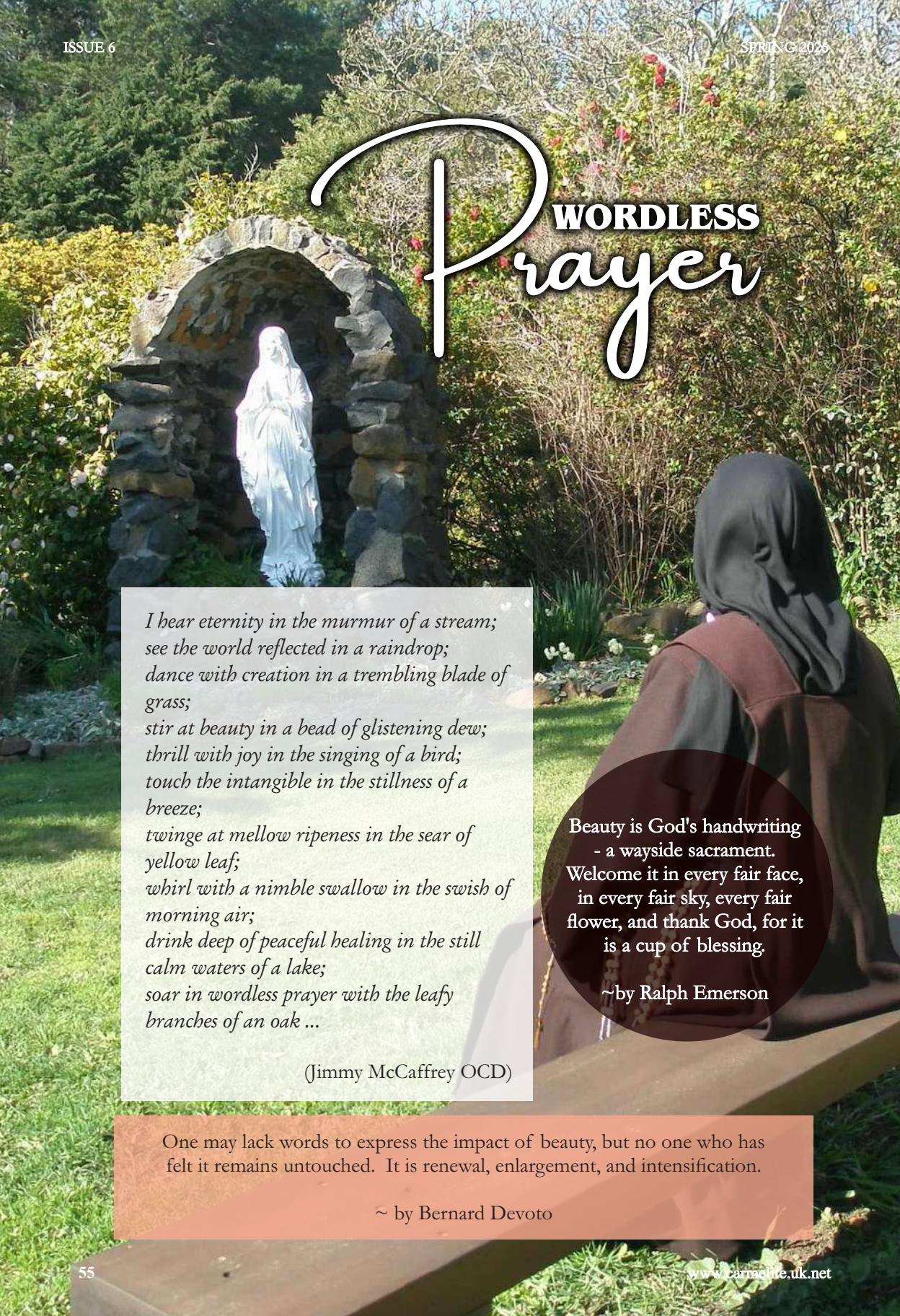
WORDLESS Prayer



I hear eternity in the murmur of a stream;
see the world reflected in a raindrop;
dance with creation in a trembling blade of grass;
stir at beauty in a bead of glistening dew;
thrill with joy in the singing of a bird;
touch the intangible in the stillness of a breeze;
twinge at mellow ripeness in the sear of yellow leaf;
whirl with a nimble swallow in the swish of morning air;
drink deep of peaceful healing in the still calm waters of a lake;
soar in wordless prayer with the leafy branches of an oak ...

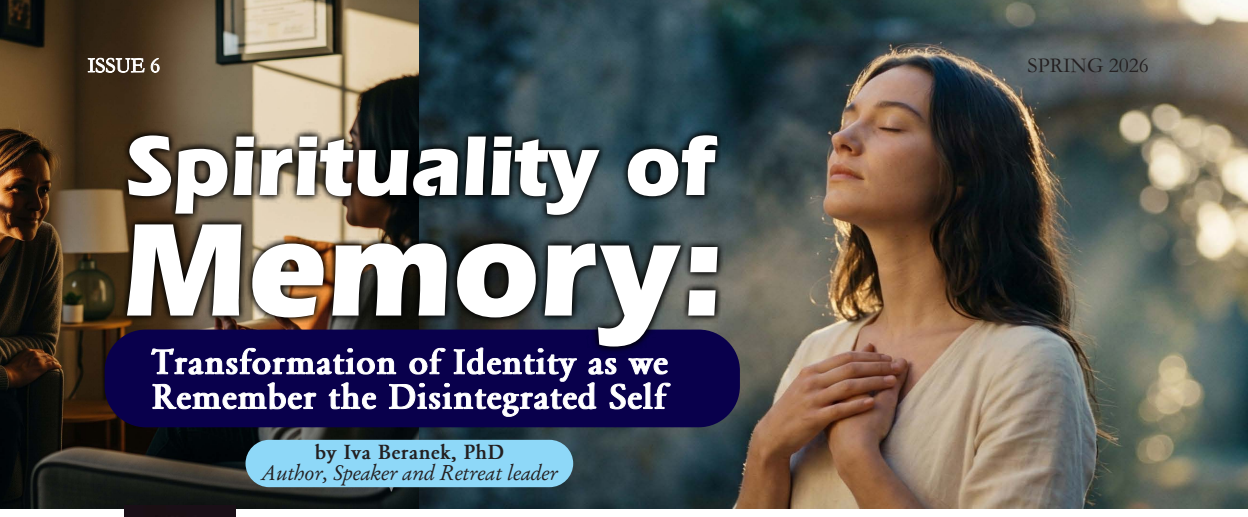
(Jimmy McCaffrey OCD)

Beauty is God's handwriting - a wayside sacrament. Welcome it in every fair face, in every fair sky, every fair flower, and thank God, for it is a cup of blessing.

~by Ralph Emerson

One may lack words to express the impact of beauty, but no one who has felt it remains untouched. It is renewal, enlargement, and intensification.

~ by Bernard Devoto



Spirituality of Memory:

Transformation of Identity as we Remember the Disintegrated Self

by Iva Beranek, PhD
Author, Speaker and Retreat leader

Iva Beranek, PhD, is a distinguished author and spiritual director, recognised for her contributions to children's literature (*Veronica's Bookstore* series), which are profoundly shaped by themes of prayer, family, faith, and love. She is a lecturer on the Spiritual Direction course at the Centre for Applied Carmelite Spirituality (CACS), where she imparts her knowledge and expertise. On 17th March, she launches I Arise Ministry, inspired by St Patrick, with a particular focus on healing of memories and deepening the inner life. You can follow her on Instagram @ivadublin.

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of spiritual identity, memory, and healing. It posits that while human identity is often constructed upon memories, national identity, and personal experiences, the core identity remains the Imago Dei—the image of God imprinted on the inner being. Drawing on the theological frameworks of St Teresa of Ávila and St John of the Cross, the study examines the dark night of the soul as a necessary purification process for the faculty of memory. It integrates these classical teachings with contemporary insights from Miroslav Volf regarding the interpretative work of memory in a violent world. The paper concludes that healing is not a process of forgetting, but of transforming how one remembers, ultimately allowing a new, God-rooted identity to emerge through the help of spiritual direction and prayer.

Keywords
Spirituality, Memory, Identity, Inner Diamond, Image of God, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Ávila, Dark Night of the Soul, Healing, Spiritual Direction, Miroslav Volf.

God hid Himself in our very being, and yet we do not often draw our identity from our depths. When we meet someone new, we are asked to introduce ourselves. "Where are you from?" is a common question, but I dislike it because it often fails to acknowledge that the place where we live also forms us. What we most likely wish to ask is a deeper, unspoken question: "Who are you? Tell me a little bit about whom I am talking to." This can also sound somewhat philosophical. However, we never really say:

> "I am Iva. I was created good and made in the image of God. When I was a child, this was affirmed through baptism and then slowly, through the influence of others, God has been reclaiming my true identity...." It would be odd to say this when meeting someone. And yet, it is true.

St Teresa of Ávila, at the beginning of *The Interior Castle*, says, "I thought of the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions" (Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*. I-I-2, 13). A few lines later, she continues: "the fact that it is made in God's image teaches us how great are its *dignity and loveliness*. It is no small misfortune and disgrace that, through our own fault, we neither understand our nature nor our origin" (Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*. I-I-3, 14).

Methodology

The primary theoretical framework rests on the writings of St Teresa of Ávila regarding the nature of the soul and St John of the Cross regarding the dark night of the soul and the purification of memory. These classical views are synthesised with the theological anthropology of the human person and a comparative outlook on Miroslav Volf's work, *The End of Memory*, to understand the role of memory in reconciliation and identity formation. A psychological integration underscores the understanding of the unconscious and the repression of trauma.

What is our Core Identity?

Our core identity is that we were created in the image of God, and a particular aspect of it is that we were created good. A mark of God's goodness is imprinted in our inner being. And yet we often build our identity on memories, national identity, and personal experiences—whether they were good or bad—and on what people say about us. It would be good if we allowed what God says about us to also form our identity. There is a meme that I saw a few years ago where two men are speaking, and one says to the other: "It says on your résumé that you were created in God's image. Impressive."

In my imagination, I often like to go to the Garden of Eden before the fall, not out of nostalgia for the harmony between all creation that we haven't experienced, since we were born long after Adam and Eve, but more so out of curiosity as to what of that harmony is still available to us, primarily because of Jesus.

A mark of God's goodness is imprinted in our inner being. And yet we often build our identity on memories, national identity, and personal experiences—whether they were good or bad—and on what people say about us.

In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, we read:

> In the beginning, God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:26-31).

I am always drawn to this line: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

People often find it challenging to hear this truth, so pay attention to how you feel thinking about the fact that YOU were created good. This inner goodness has nothing to do with what we did or didn't do, but how we were created. After the fall, the inner diamond that Teresa of Ávila speaks about has been marred, covered with dirt, and perhaps at times forgotten, but is still there – in everyone. Before the fall in the Garden of Eden, there was no anxiety, discord, stress, or illness. Recently, I heard an important detail that I hadn't taken into consideration previously: Adam and Eve were born in the context of war. In other words, some of the angels had already rebelled against God.

This makes the harmony in the Garden of Eden even more valuable. I find something about the quality of life in the Garden of Eden very attractive, at least what we can imagine about it. After the fall, we do experience stress and discord, and we need to embark on the journey of reconciliation both interiorly and among each other. What is more, we need God's help with it. Both in our spiritual life, as well as in everyday life in dealings with others, we long for the restoration of the harmony that was in the Garden of Eden. We will be able to tap into it if we allow God to be a part of the journey of restoring that harmony, which includes restoring our inner being. The harmony that we long for is a harmony that originates in the life of the Holy Trinity. Since we are created in God's image, we are called to imitate and nurture this harmony in and around us. After the fall, we struggle with fulfilling this calling.

Memories Shape our Identity

Our memories shape our identity. In a world where turmoil is a part of everyday reality for many people and where deep wounds can be inflicted and then forgotten for years, until they rear their ugly heads again, knowing how to deal with painful memories and how to allow them to heal will help us live more fulfilled lives. Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Yet life often brings challenges. If there was something painful in a person's past, or if they are going through something disturbing now, unless they deal with it

in depth, they will not be able to live their life to the full. Something will drag them down, like an extra weight that makes it harder to breathe, harder to walk, harder to find peace and joy, perhaps even harder to love.

In a lifetime, some people will be aware of the things that happened in the past that affected them badly, but even when willing to deal with it, not everyone knows how. Healing takes time. It is not uncommon that there might be one or more memories buried in our subconscious. I am personally more familiar with the buried memories coming out, surprising me with their need for healing, rather than always knowing there was something I needed to deal with. Until the unhealed memories surface, we can be somewhat unaware that they happened. I say 'somewhat' because they will still affect how we function in the world. Those memories are not only stored in our bodies, affecting our nervous system, but also in our minds and emotions. In other words, they are stored in our souls. In the classical understanding, the soul incorporates the faculties of intellect, memory and will, and all three need to go through a purification which St John of the Cross called the dark night of the soul.

The Dark Night of the Soul

There is a core within us, the deepest part of our being, that remains intact from our life choices. It is not affected by wrongs done to us, or wrongs we have done, nor by hurts. It is pure, shining like a diamond inside our hearts, and it belongs to God. It declares God's imprint on our being, and it proclaims the truth about us being created in the image of God. We all know too well that God's image in us needs to be restored throughout this life, and in a way, what that means is to allow this centre of our being to grow. Restoring this inner diamond to its full radiance can be a very painful process; excruciatingly so. In the Christian tradition, it has often been known as the dark night of the soul.

St John of the Cross explains that the dark night of the soul corresponds to the two parts of human nature: the sensual and the spiritual (John of the Cross, *The Dark Night* 1: 8: 1). Therefore, he distinguishes the dark night of the sense, which is more common, and the dark night of the spirit, which is rare. Each of these has an active aspect – what we do, and a passive aspect – what God does in us. Both passive and active aspects are accompanied by God's grace.

The deepest healing of memories, the dark night, is not something we can orchestrate. It will come, if it does, when God knows we are ready. If we measured our readiness ourselves, we would never deem the time right to deal with pain to such a deep extent as the dark night requires. You might know from experience, or from journeying with others, that the journey of healing requires courage.

Facing the Unknown Parts of the Self

Jasbinder Garnermann, speaking about Jung and the dark night, said that in the dark night, we come "face to face with ourselves." The purpose of this deep journey of healing is to integrate the parts of ourselves that were previously unknown. At a certain stage in life, we end up facing memories we "have completely forgotten about." Yet the "original feeling is there, original charge is there" hidden within these memories (Garnermann). As children, we don't have resources to deal with rejection or trauma of any kind, "so the only way we could deal with it, in order to survive psychologically intact, was to bury it" (Jasbinder Garnermann, 2016). But when we become adults, we develop resources.

Human beings have an enormous capacity to hold pain. Healing comes by allowing those memories to surface, and by holding the pain as it comes out in its original charge. Holding it will release it. This is a very painful process, but it is a process that leads to greater inner freedom. It is not uncommon that a trigger might start this further healing, so triggers can have a positive element. But we never try to bring a trigger purposefully to ourselves or to others, because a trigger can also be very destructive and bring further trauma. In His goodness, God might allow a trigger when He knows we are ready for the next step in our healing journey, and then we can respond to it. In any case, it is a destabilising process and needs to be treated with utmost care.

If painful memories were suppressed in childhood, often good things were suppressed too. Therefore, healing painful memories may release dreams we forgot we had. In my book, *Veronica's Bookstore,* eight-year-old Matthew reads about "a key of forgotten dream":

> This is a key of forgotten dream. Many people forget their dreams when they grow up… This key gives you hope. Hope, my dear child, is a treasure in this world. Some people, as they grow old, lose hope. It's as though they forget to live, and years go past. But this key leads them directly into their hearts, into their most sacred dreams. The key awakens hope, and after a long time, the once hopeless people feel alive again (Beranek, I., 2012, p. 50).

St John of the Cross teaches that hope purifies the faculty of memory. When he talks about memory, what he means is essentially "the person's capacity to retrieve, anticipate, possess the otherwise fleeting moments as her own; the faculty, then, of possession, of self-possession, roughly corresponding to what we mean by 'consciousness'" (Matthew, I., 1995, p 106). John does not explicitly write about memories of past hurts, but he is aware of how the roots from the past can torment the emotions and how the fear of the future can paralyse our present being (Matthew, I., 1995). John is concerned with purifying the affectivity of memories. In *The Ascent to Mount Carmel*, John points out that "disturbances never arise in a soul unless through the apprehensions of the memory. When all things are forgotten, nothing disturbs the peace or stirs the appetites" (John of the Cross, *Ascent* 3: 5, 1).

Miroslav Volf, the contemporary Yale scholar on memory, writes in *The End of Memory* that "starved of affective food memories are sapped of strength and lie dormant" (Volf, M., 2006, p 156). For that to happen, we would need to gradually let go of our need to hold onto these emotions of memories. We do that by facing these deep feelings with all intensity. Gradually, the emotions will reduce. This all takes time, and it cannot be rushed. Inner healing, which includes the healing of our memories, is a journey 'home' to our true self. Rev. Ruth Patterson said, "As we trust enough to enter the darkness, the secret places of our being and bring them out into the light, we discover more about ourselves and, because we have not gone there alone, even though it may have seemed like it, we discover, too, more about God. It is as if we are welcomed into our identity" (Patterson, R., 2009, p 64).

Thomas Keating, a Cistercian author, indicates:

> The unconscious is very powerful until the divine light of the Holy Spirit penetrates to its depths and reveals its dynamics. Here is where the great teaching of the dark nights of St John of the Cross corresponds to depth psychology, only the work of the Holy Spirit goes far deeper. Instead of trying to free us from what interferes with our ordinary human life, the Spirit calls us to transformation of our inmost being, and indeed of all our faculties, into the divine way of being and acting (Keating, T., 1999, p 22).

The reason for John's insistence on emptying the memory is that this process creates room for more hope, and hope releases the soul's capacity "for what is really meant to fill it", and "that is God."

There is no Dark Night without a Prayer Life

The purification of memory, as John of the Cross taught, is intense unlearning of our constructed selfhood so that our true inner self may emerge. John writes these instructions so that a reader can advance "in contemplation to union with God" (John of the Cross, *Ascent* 3: 2, 2). A dark night is very different from other difficulties we might be encountering in life, because in it, God's activity is what matters the most. This implies that those undergoing a purification of the dark night have a prayer life. God somehow needs to communicate with a person, and the person needs to be aware of this communication and respond, which we understand as prayer. Through this process, the diamond within us is purified and given more room to shine and grow.

John's urge to "free the memory from 'what happened', 'what might happen' or even 'what decidedly is happening', is not just a step towards [improved] mental health" (Matthews, I. 1995, p 107), or in other words, towards a life with less anxiety. The reason for John's insistence on

emptying the memory is that this process creates room for more hope, and hope releases the soul's capacity "for what is really meant to fill it", and "that is God" (Matthews, I. 1995, p 107).

A Carmelite scholar, Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, says, "where the human is despised or seen as totally deprived by the Fall, there can be no mysticism" (O'Donoghue, N. D., 1984, p 23). The Rev. Norman Hamilton, a Presbyterian minister from North Belfast, points out that

> …it is broadly true to say that Catholic theology starts with an optimistic view on [the human person] and Reformed Theology starts with a pessimistic view on [the human person] and therefore the extent to which the grace of God can work in the individual is determined by your starting theological position (Hamilton, N., during a conversation in his house on Crumlin Road, Belfast, 12thMarch 2007)

In practice, it is important to be aware that if the starting point of our anthropology and theology is that a human person is good, we give God a wider grounding for His grace to work within us. It is good to keep in mind that our view of God can limit how much we allow God to do in and around us.

Are We Larger than our Memories?

In talking about the memories of wrongs and suffering, Volf follows a Romanian-born Jewish-American writer, Nobel Laureate, and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel's claim that salvation lies in memory (Volf, M., 2005, p 44). The link is not obvious because the memory of a traumatic event brings the suffering and pain of the event to the present. David Stevens, the late leader of the Corrymeela community in Northern Ireland, acknowledged how "there is a dangerous power of memory to stir up hatred and desire for revenge" (Stevens, D., 2004, p 103). While we do need to remember in order to heal from deep wounds of the past, remembering itself cannot bring healing and is not sufficient in setting us free from being prisoners of the past. Miroslav Volf explains, "if salvation lies in memory of wrongs committed, it must therefore lie more in what we *do* with memories than in memories themselves" (Volf, M., 2006, p 47).

Volf's teaching is to an extent compatible with the active aspect of John's doctrine, since Volf states that the means of healing and transformation is "the interpretative work a person does with memory" (Volf, M., 2006, p 47). There is generally a level of freedom within each person regarding their memories, which signifies that we are more than our memories. Otherwise, we would be slaves of the past. Even though, unfortunately, this does happen at times. Our identities do not simply consist "in *what* we remember", but "the question of *how* we remember also comes into play" (Volf, M., 2006, p 47). The kind of remembering that will bring healing to our painful memories requires discipline. What is more, remembering which will bring healing is the one where our memories serve reconciliation (Volf, M., 2006, p 47). Furthermore, we learn from St John of the Cross, "that the contemplative attitude is not a flight from the world but rather the capacity to transform it" (Malley, J., 1991, p 82).

What is more, remembering which will bring healing is the one where our memories serve reconciliation.

Transformation of Identity

The transformation that happens within the person is gradual and slow. A spiritual director can best help by encouraging the person whose memory is being purified not to desert prayer. It would be good if they familiarised themselves with John's teaching on the dark night, so they can listen with care, understanding and encouragement. A listening disposition of the spiritual director will assist the person to allow God to continue His deep inner work in them. Teresa of Ávila was wary of unskilled spiritual directors who could also hinder the person's progress. God is the main actor and the main spiritual director. Spiritual directors can assist the person to go deeper and not to lose courage. However, when someone undergoes healing of a traumatic memory, they benefit from therapy, too, and other types of support.

A spiritual director may help the person understand that to 'forgive and forget' is a wrong concept. Forgiveness is a process that brings healing to the person who has been hurt; it should

neither be forced nor rushed. But in this world where evil exists, it is not safe to forget. When our memory is healed, we can gradually put it aside. It will no longer cause us pain whenever we remember it, the heaviness we carried for years might ease, and some of it turn into a new sense of joy. But we do not forget, because we know that something similar can happen again. A healed memory becomes like an inner boundary, a sort of shield of wisdom we carry in this world marred with evil.

Volf wants to teach us how to remember rightly in a violent world, in a world of conflict and division, and how to use our painful memories as a blessing rather than a curse. St John of the Cross, on the other hand, wants to help us grow into the full human development that is holiness so that we can be still more transformed into the likeness of God, united with Him in love (See John of the Cross, *Ascent* 3: 2-3 – 268-275 and *Night* 2: 3, 3 – 399). Because of his stated objectives, Volf emphasises that "one should never demand of those who have suffered wrong that they 'forget' and move on. This impossible advice would also be the wrong advice. The 'forgetting' of wrongs must happen as a consequence of the gift of a new world" (Volf, M., 2006, p 146). In the world to come – in Heaven – there will be no need to remember painful incidents, as there will be no more threat, and all the questions of injustice will have been settled.

This journey of transformation is a journey for courageous souls, those who allow themselves to be led into the adventure of God's love. When we speak about our identity in God, it is worth noting how the purification of memory changes one's identity. In other words, there is a question of how and to what extent the purification of memory brings about a transformation to our identity. Transformation is God's work. Similarly, through the purification of the Dark Night, God lets a new person emerge, a transformed person whose identity hidden in God is now being revealed.

Since our identity is based on our memories and how we remember, when memory is being purified through the dark night, our identity changes ever so slightly. Eventually, when the purification and inner transformation reach the deep ravines of our soul, our identity ends up being profoundly transformed. It is a process of inner dying and rising to new life, where our identity is more firmly rooted in God. God becomes our memory. As much as Jesus walking this earth until His death is *different* from His transformed self, which is glorified through the Resurrection, how much more is a person before the purification of memory different to the identity they have after reaching union with God. We say *more* because in Jesus, there was nothing false that needed to die, whereas in us, the false self needs to die so that our true self may shine in its full glory.

Patterson says that "it is not the job of the Church to give answers, but rather to sit down with the question, which means being in the place of vulnerability and tension" (Patterson, R., 2003, p 47). In other words, "people need to know that they have been heard, been understood, more than being given an answer" (Patterson, R., 2003, p 47). This is exactly how spiritual directors can help. Through listening to someone's story, healing can

occur, which then unlocks new possibilities to emerge out of suffering. As a person moves from being a victim to survivor to being able to live their life to the full, gradually a new identity is being formed; an identity which often carries within itself a new dream so that a vision for the future may be born.

St John of the Cross talked about a God who "constantly gazes at the universe, with a look that cleanses, makes beautiful, enriches and enlightens" (Matthew, I., 1995, p 112). When we are caught up in this gaze, we learn that in it lies our true identity, and His dream for our lives is reflected at us.

Conclusion

The spirituality of memory highlights a journey towards the restoration of the harmony found in the Garden of Eden. By undergoing the dark night of the soul and the purification of memory, the *inner diamond* is revealed, and a person's identity ends up being rooted more firmly in God. Ultimately, this transformation allows individuals to be caught up in God's gaze, discovering their true identity and the dream God has for their lives.

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THE GLORY AROUND ME

Praying with our Eyes: Visio Divina

by Josie Marsden

Abstract

In a world often overshadowed by noise and wastelands, how might we open our eyes to the sacred hiding in plain sight? This reflective piece explores the profound contemplative practice of Visio Divina—the grace-filled art of seeing through the material world to the divine reality beneath. Blending theological reflection with deeply personal testimony, we are invited to encounter God not just through words, but through the profound, relational beauty of creation. Drawing upon the wisdom of mystics such as Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, and John O'Donohue, the essay culminates in a striking, poetic encounter with the Holy Trinity on the Devon coast. It is a gentle but powerful reminder that when we look upon the world with the 'eyes of the heart', we discover a reality that is quite literally "crammed with heaven."

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes."
(from *Aurora Leigh,* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

There is much that can be said about Visio Divina, or Contemplative Seeing, but ultimately it is a way of being fully present in and to the world around us: present to God, to ourselves, to our environment, to those in our midst, and particularly to beauty. However, it is not just about being present to beauty for its own sake, or even photographing or painting beauty as an uplifting and contemplative art form. It is a way of seeing through this world to the spiritual world beyond our material one. It is a slowing down, a seeing deeply, with the 'eyes of the heart' (as so eloquently expressed by Sr Wendy Beckett).

We encounter God by seeing his beauty, understanding his communication to us through it, and finding encouragement or meaning because of it. Being present to beauty is both about seeing and being seen, beholding and being held. It somehow goes both ways.

As we gaze at beauty, we notice that it is often created by the interplay between darkness and light, or by the way light touches the natural world and brings it to life. A perfectly ordinary object can suddenly become backlit, for example, and take on a magnificent life and meaning of its own. A person, an animal, a flowering weed in a car park is suddenly seen as the profoundly precious creation that it is, when seen through the lens of love. God speaks, and God speaks… and God speaks, revealing himself as both immanent and transcendent, here with us always, hidden but not absent, perceived or not. Our part, surely, is to become silent on the inside, as well as on the outside, in order to see and hear him. Becoming

silent, and present, as many have said before me, is both simple, and not easy.

Visio Divina (sacred seeing) was recognised as a form of prayer after Lectio Divina (sacred reading) became better known. It is based on a heartful (or mindful) disposition: paying attention, with an open heart, in the present moment, and without judgement. One gazes as though at an icon: not at it, but through it to the spiritual world beyond it. This sacramental, grace-filled, contemplative seeing allows us to see traces of God through encountering the beauty of his creation, and in so doing, mysteriously, we too are seen.

This sacramental, grace-filled, contemplative seeing allows us to see traces of God through encountering the beauty of his creation, and in so doing, mysteriously, we too are seen.

There is another side to this: when gazing into the eyes of a homeless person, I might suddenly see their beautiful soul. When noticing a forlorn horse in a cold field, or a wild animal killed on the road, or while watching a sliver of world news, the image may slice through my open heart like a knife and lead me straight to prayer. Seeing with love, with compassion, is a way of simultaneously seeing the brokenness and the glory of the soul or object before me. All of its extraordinary potential is revealed. Allow me to quote some Carmelite thoughts about the process of formation, as they apply here too: first, form is created, then it can become deformed. God then reforms it, and ultimately, it has the potential to be transformed. When seeing the full range of form in this contemplative way, it becomes possible to see all the stages that lead to transformation simultaneously. Beholding in this way is not limited to a particular moment, but can simultaneously transcend time. Layers of both depth and meaning are revealed – all in one single deep, prayerful, present, and compassionate gaze.

Visio Divina can predispose one to being as open to beauty as to suffering, without filters. They go together. This is not always an easy way to be in the world.

Seeing in this heartful way allows us to notice what God might be saying or doing among the daily circumstances of our lives. Not only is it an opportunity to see through the material world, as mentioned above, but we allow God to see us and speak to us through what is seen. Deep calls unto deep, as David observed in Psalm 41. Might we add another level of understanding to this Psalm: can we be called (into the deep) without first being seen? This depth recognition is hard to put into words, as it comes closer to a heart-knowing that is far beyond what can be formulated in language. It also leads to a recognition of the heartbreaking sanctity and preciousness of the other, whether human, animal, or plant, or a natural scene too. Everyone and everything becomes sacred.

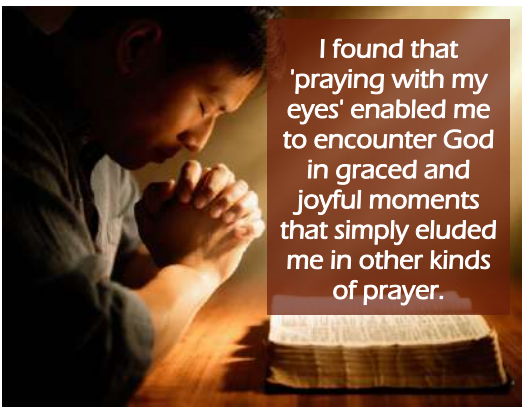
Perhaps Visio Divina brings us a little closer to understanding the famous quote by Meister Eckhart: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me."

There is something so important about being seen; it is the sacred gaze between a mother and a young child that is the very means by which the (true) self of the child is formed, i.e. the self is always formed in relationship. It is the gaze of love that calls forth life and love. How much more so when we can allow ourselves to be seen by Christ, below the level of our defences, as we truly are… "He looked at him, and he loved him." (Mark 10:21) In that gaze of love, Jesus surely saw the rich young ruler as he was, why he was as he was, and what he could still become.

Visio Divina could remind us of the quote by Thomas Merton, after his epiphany on the corner of 4th and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky, when he woke up from his dream of separateness: "I was suddenly overwhelmed by the realisation that I loved all these people…" and "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. If only they could see themselves as they really are." (From *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1958)

Teresa of Avila was famously converted by suddenly being seen by Christ, through the enlivened Ecce Homo statue. This encounter with his sacred gaze transformed her whole life and ministry, and enabled her to become such a magnificent teacher of prayer (after struggling to pray for 20 years). Prayer, she said, was ultimately

about simply looking at him and allowing him to look at us. Being seen happens in the context of profound friendship with Christ, but there is more. It is in this sacred seeing that we are restored, healed, and then commissioned. "He will help you in all your trials; you will find Him everywhere. Do you think it's some small matter to have a friend like this at your side?" And "I'm not asking you to do anything more than look at him." And "This suffering (of our shortcomings) wasn't enough for Him to cease looking at you." (*Way of Perfection*, Chapter 26:1 and 3)



Being surprised by beauty is an important part of Visio Divina. Although one has an expectant, open attitude, the revelation that comes through an encounter with Beauty/God can never be contrived or earned. We can trim our sails and be ready, as Martin Laird stated in his poetic book *Into the Silent Land*, but it is only when the wind (of the Holy Spirit) comes that the boat begins to sail.

"Beauty is a combination of surprise and order", said John-Mark Miravalle in his book *Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters*. The transformative element of Visio Divina, in my experience, is the gift that is given just when it is needed, and in a profoundly personal way. It is like a 'rhema' instead of a 'logos', a message enlivened by the Holy Spirit and delivered in a particular moment, and frequently pregnant with meaning. The 'rhema' comes like a reassurance or a love letter, not through words but through an invitation to see, to know, and to receive: love and connection are given, just when they are needed. Perhaps we give this love and connection to another when we truly see and hear them too.

Although my interest in contemplative photography began many years ago, it slowly evolved into a form of intentional prayer during two protracted 'dark nights' of the senses and spirit. When the experience of prayer was one of aridity, and my heart was leaden with grief, emptiness and loss, I found that 'praying with my eyes' enabled me to encounter God in graced and joyful moments that simply eluded me during other kinds of prayer. These were profound gifts during extremely challenging times, and reminded me of the oft-quoted definition of the Dark Night as being "the loving inflow of God into the soul." (*The Dark Night*, Book 1, Chapter 10:6, by John of the Cross).

"Seeing is not just a physical act: the heart of vision is shaped by the state of the soul," said John O'Donohue in *Beauty: The Divine Embrace*. There is something particularly profound and poignant about receiving a gift of beauty in the context of humility, not-knowing and emptiness. God fills the emptiness with himself, perhaps precisely because there is room to receive him. Perhaps a degree of emptiness is even a prerequisite to receiving such gifts of grace? The desert may yet provide some precious and most unexpected gifts.

Although these sacred moments of illumination are relatively rare, and always a surprise, I maintain an intentional attitude of childlike openness when going about my daily life. When and if God chooses to meet me in this way by revealing his divine beauty through the visual beauty of the interconnected, relational, natural world, I experience a combination of deep gratitude, awe, humility, and comfort. Although brief, these illumined, graced moments sustain and encourage me for a long time to come.

The ultimate biblical precedent I can think of in this context is the extraordinary and ultimate revelation of the Transfiguration. This pivotal example of the MORE breaking through is what motivates my love for this way of praying. In fact there is always more, but can we perceive it?

On the top of the mountain, Christ's sacred humanity was suddenly transformed; his divinity and glory were revealed to Peter, James, and John. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light. The supernatural appearance of Moses and Elijah

represented the law and the prophets who had preceded him, and prepared us for his coming. When God's voice then confirmed that Jesus was his beloved Son, he emphasised that they were in an altogether different dimension. The Father's approval spoke out of the cloud that covered Jesus, and revealed not only Christ's divinity, but also his sonship. (Matthew 17:1-9) This revelation confirmed a previous divine encounter during Jesus's baptism in the river Jordan. He was profoundly affirmed by his Father when God provided a dove above Jesus's head and spoke out of a cloud that he was well pleased with his Son. In these two instances the MORE broke through in the most dramatic of ways!

The following is nothing like the importance of the dove at Jesus's baptism, or the dove that returned after the flood. I hardly dare to mention it in this context. However, I have sometimes experienced the sudden appearance of a 'rhema' bird, especially a robin, that confirmed important truths at particularly poignant or important moments. These sudden appearances are totally different from the general presence of birds or birdsong, and come with the urgency of a little divine messenger.

"There are moments when life becomes incandescent, or transparent, to something MORE. Suddenly, light breaks through, as if from another world. The MORE – there's something beyond this world that can be glimpsed through this world. Suddenly the MORE becomes apparent." (Bishop Robert Barron, Lent Lecture, 2025)

In a much smaller way, the MORE can break through some seemingly ordinary, even utterly bleak moments of our lives. There is a shift, a change, and then… an encounter. What a grace, and what a gift.

Instead of discussing the more technical aspects of how we gaze (*visio*), reflect (*meditatio*), pray (*oratio*), and then rest (*contemplatio*) when practising Visio Divina, I shall offer the reader an example of when I was gifted with this way of praying, of seeing deeply.

A Glimpse into the Trinitarian Nature of Reality

It had been an unforgivingly cold and grey day last January when I ventured outside for a sunset walk; the air had suddenly become surprisingly mild, and the setting sun briefly gilded both sea and sky. I slipped through a hole in a broken, low stone wall above a small harbour in Devon. The grass was soft and long, the blazing sun had just set, and the sea was the deepest metallic blue.

(Come along, if you will, but only if your heart is open and your lips are sealed. It is too holy a space to speak.) The full moon rose slowly above the bay, invisibly drawn upward against the bluest, deepening sky. I listened to the breathing waves breaking gently on the rocks below. Apart from that… silence, stillness, Presence.

I met reality with stillness, without commentary. And because Presence is a relational term, I instinctively met Presence with presence.

There is no way to explain it, but I experienced it. I gazed in awe at the beauty around me, filled to the brim with wonder. And I knew…

He is here. Palpably present. His love is infusing every molecule of the air and water, sky and sea. His love is infusing me.

I am drawn by beauty and ambushed by intimacy. It is the sweetest solitude, silence, safety. It is a gentle, invisible embrace.

The shining moon rises, round, white, full, and suddenly... Suddenly, I am granted the gift of seeing 'through' this holy icon.

The white host is being held up against the silent blue sky. Time becomes fluid, non-linear, new.

Christ is here. The ocean moves softly, swaying gently, rocking and holding it all. God is here. The

shimmering trail of silver light is dancing and sparkling, so active, so alive. The Holy Spirit is here.

And then I notice her, Star of the Deep, And Portal of the Sky. Mary the Morning Star, Star of the Sea, quietly waiting off centre, humbly content not to be noticed at first sight. She is here.

A solitary lighthouse sweeps its bright beam across the darkening bay. A bird momentarily breaks the rule of silence, and stillness returns. The soft rhythmic sound of the water and waves below lulls my mind to sleep. My heart awakens to Christ within and without.

How is it possible that I am being gifted such? This encounter, this revelation could so easily have been missed! It was a response to a nudge, a prompt; that was all. There was an invitation to come, to see, and then… I met him as the relational, interconnected Mystery. Holy Trinity, the Dance. Love, Life, and Being itself. And I lingered, spellbound, hardly daring to breathe… lest I should stop seeing. I took off my shoes and simply… be-held… being… be-loved.

Deep resonances of the above experience of Visio Divina are echoed and amplified in the beautiful, mystical poetry of St John of the Cross. Here are a few examples:

From The Spiritual Canticle:

1:5 … and having looked at them, with his image alone, clothed them in beauty …

1:20 … stricken by love, I lost myself, and was found.

1:23 When you looked at me your eyes imprinted your grace in me;

From The Living Flame of Love:

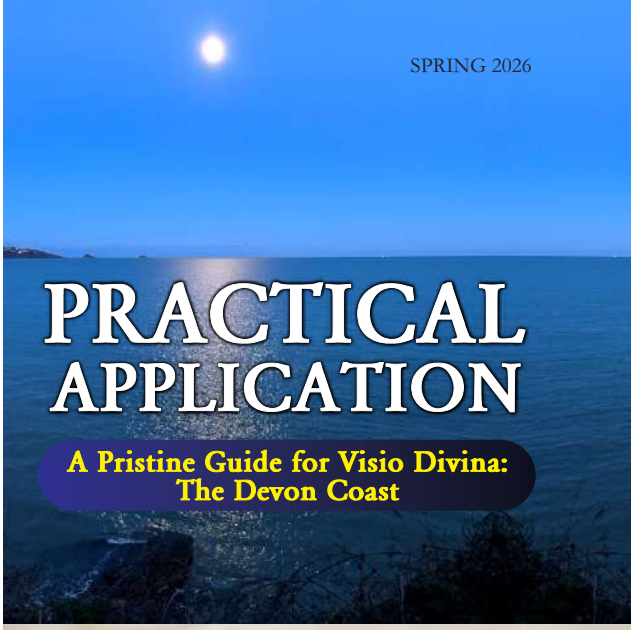
3:4 How gently and lovingly you wake in my heart, where in secret you dwell alone …

From Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God through Faith:

8:3 I know that nothing else is so beautiful, and that the heavens and the earth drink there, although it is night.

Romance (regarding the Blessed Trinity) On Creation/ Continues:

9:3 And by these words the world was created, a palace for the bride, made with great wisdom …



PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A Pristine Guide for Visio Divina: The Devon Coast

For the Accompanier: This session uses the photograph of the moonlit Devon coast and a corresponding poetic reflection to lead the directee through the traditional movements of *Visio Divina*: Preparation, Gazing (*Visio*), Reflecting (*Meditatio*), Responding (*Oratio*), and Resting (*Contemplatio*).

Allow ample silence between each spoken prompt. Do not rush the directee; the silence is where the "interacting wonder" takes place.

I. Preparation (Settling the Heart)

The goal here is to help the directee to detach from the busyness of the day and anchor themselves in the present moment.

Accompanier Prompt: "Take a moment to settle into your chair. Become aware of your breathing. We are going to spend some time praying with our eyes, looking at a scene from the Devon coast. As we begin, let go of any expectations. Simply ask God to open the 'eyes of your heart' to whatever He wishes to reveal to you today even in the most familiar."

II. Visio (The Sacred Gaze)

Present the image of the moon over the sea to the directee. Allow them a minute or two of uninterrupted silence to simply ***look.***

Accompanier Prompt: Let your eyes gently scan the image before you. Notice the darkening ocean and the gathering dusk. Observe the full moon and the long trail of shimmering light upon the water.

Pay attention to the colours—the deep, metallic blues and the brilliant white. Do not try to analyse the image; simply let it wash over you.

What specific detail is drawing your eye right now?

III. Meditatio (The Inner Echo)

This stage introduces the written reflection to deepen the visual encounter. Read the following text slowly and prayerfully to the directee.

Darkening ocean, the gathering dusk; full moon and trail of shimmering light. A trinity of interacting wonder. Stillness and fluidity. Silence. Beauty. Clarity. The attributes of God all around me. The moon reflects the light of the sun, the water reflects the light of the moon. The gull's cries reflect my longing For God's infinity, His ineffable light, His promised love.

Accompanier Prompt: "As you look at the stillness of the sky and the fluidity of the water, where do you find yourself in this 'trinity of interacting wonder'? Notice how the light is passed down—from the hidden sun, to the moon, to the water. What might God be reflecting into your own life in this season? Is there a longing within you that echoes the cry of the gull?"

IV. Oratio (The Prayerful Response)

Encourage the directee to respond to God based on what has been stirred in their heart by the image and the poem.

Accompanier Prompt: "Let us move deeper into the reflection. Listen to these final words:"

I belong here. Open sea, pine and palm trees, Wide, infinite seas and skies. No claims upon me, but my own faithfulness to your most sacred, faithful heart.

Accompanier Prompt: "Notice the phrase, *'No claims upon me, but my own faithfulness...'* Speak to God now, either silently or aloud. Share with Him your response to this image of infinite space and unconditional love. What does it feel like to stand in a place where there are no claims upon you, other than the invitation to be faithful to His sacred heart?"

V. Contemplatio (Resting in the Light)

This is the time for profound silence. No more words are needed from the directee. It is a time simply to be held in the gaze of God.

Accompanier Prompt: "Let us leave our words behind now. I will read one final piece of scripture, and then we will rest in silence for a few minutes, simply gazing at the light on the water, allowing God to gaze back at us with love."

Accompanier Reading: *"He who is the Lord of the Angels is the one to whom I am betrothed. The sun and moon reflect his beauty."* (Liturgy of the Hours, Lauds, 21.1.26)

Hold the silence for 3–5 minutes. To close, gently invite the directee to take a deep breath and offer a simple 'Amen'.

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POEMS

Darkening ocean, the gathering dusk,
Full moon and trail of shimmering light.
A trinity of interacting wonder.
Stillness and fluidity,
Silence. Beauty. Clarity.
The attributes of God all around me.

The moon reflecting the light of the sun,
The water reflecting the light of the moon.
The gull's cries reflecting my longing
For God's infinity,
His ineffable light,
His promised love.

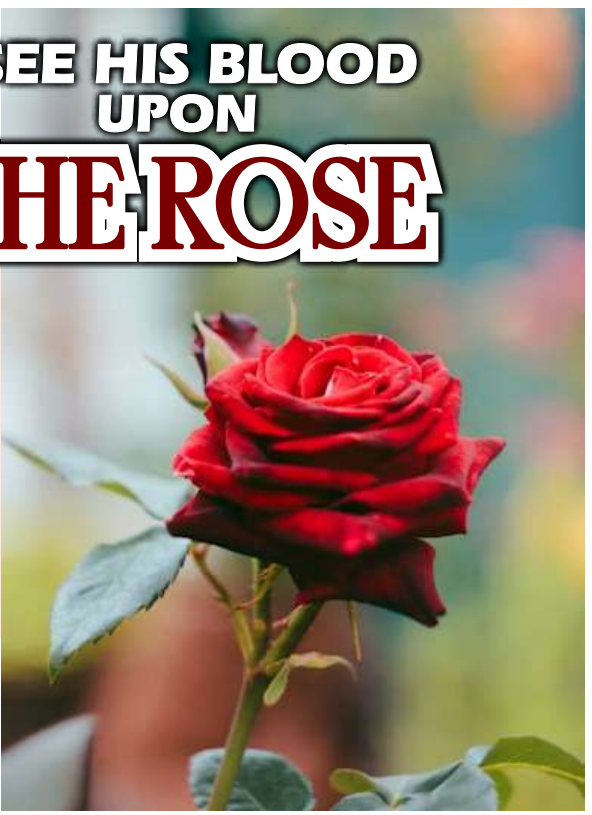
I belong here.
Open sea, pine and palm trees,
Wide, infinite seas and skies.
No claims upon me,
But my own faithfulness
To your most sacred, faithful heart.

"He who is the Lord of the Angels is the one to whom I am betrothed. The sun and moon reflect his beauty."

Liturgy of the Hours, Lauds, 21.1.26

By Josie Marsden

I SEE HIS BLOOD UPON THE ROSE



I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes.
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies

I see his face in every flower:
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice - and carven by his power
Rocks are his written words

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn
His cross is every tree.

By Joseph Mary Plunkett

BEAUTY GRACED IN THE FAMILY

Zelie and Louis Martin

Saints Marie-Azélie Guérin Martin (1831-1877) and Louis Martin (1823-1894)

They birthed their children into holiness--four daughters gone barefoot to
the Lord in Carmel-one canonized; one beatified; one a Servant of God.
The couple themselves canonized 90 years after
Thérèse in the basilica bearing her name.
Thérèse declared her parents More worthy of heaven than earth.

Zélie, a lace maker, sewed vestments; Louis, a watchmaker,
timed his soul according to the Liturgical Hours.
Their humble home, their daughters' first convent; Mass at 5:30 am, Holy
Hours, Eucharistic Adoration, devotion to Mother Mary; fasts.

Thérèse declared at four she wanted to be a saint, and especially liked
following Zélie into the garden over-flowing with poppies, cornflowers,
and little wildflowers. She loved white-clad roses the best.

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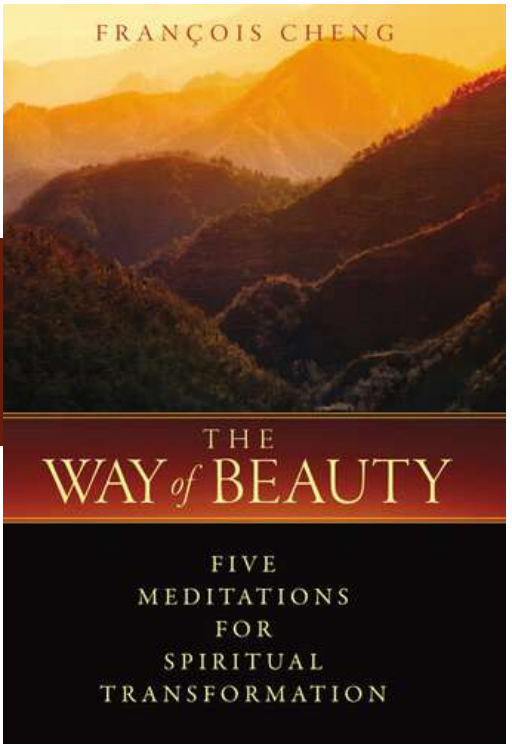
THE ONTOLOGICAL NECESSITY OF RADIANCE:

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE WAY OF BEAUTY



François Cheng,
The Way of Beauty: Five Meditations for Spiritual Transformation
(Jody Gladding, Trans.),
Inner Traditions, 2009. 84 pp., £5.81,
ISBN: 978-1-59477-287-0

INTRODUCTION: The Scandal of Beauty in a Broken World

In an era defined by geopolitical instability, ecological collapse, and the mechanisation of human relationships, the pursuit of beauty is often dismissed as a bourgeois distraction or a naive indulgence. In *The Way of Beauty: Five Meditations for Spiritual Transformation*, François Cheng challenges this cynicism with a quiet but radical proposition: beauty is not an ornament to existence but its very engine. It is the "other extreme" of reality, the only force capable of standing as a counterweight to the mystery of evil (Cheng, 2009, p. 6).

Cheng, a Chinese-born French academician, poet, and calligrapher, occupies a unique liminal space between the Taoist aesthetic of the East and the phenomenological philosophy of the West. His text, originally delivered as a series of oral meditations, retains the "spiralling" and organic quality of spoken wisdom (p. 5). For practitioners of soul care—chaplains, therapists, spiritual directors, and social workers—this book offers more than aesthetic theory; it provides a robust theological and psychological framework for restoring human dignity in the face of trauma.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: BEYOND AESTHETICS TO ONTOLOGY

The Twin Mysteries (Evil and Beauty) and Theodicy

Cheng does not begin with art but with trauma. He grounds his meditations in his childhood experience of the Sino-Japanese War and the Nanking Massacre, where he witnessed "bottomless depths" of human cruelty (pp. 6-8).

By juxtaposing the atrocity of violated bodies with the sublime "inexhaustible harbour" of Mount Lu (p. 7), Cheng establishes the stakes: we must "take a hard look at these two mysteries" together (p. 6). For the clinician or spiritual director, this is a crucial reframing. Beauty is not the denial of pain (the "rosy" discourse) but the response to it (p. 17). Cheng argues that evil creates a wound that never heals, but beauty provides the "desire" or "impulse" that makes life fundamentally worth living despite that wound (p. 16). He warns that beauty severed from truth and goodness, in deceit or domination, is actually "ugliness itself" (p. 16). True beauty must be founded on the Good; it is the "radiance of the good" (p. 35) and the splendour of truth.

Uniqueness and Presence

A central tenet of Cheng's insight is the concept of uniqueness. In a functional, robotic universe, elements would be interchangeable (p. 11) but beauty relies on the individuation of being, such as this specific flower or this specific face. Cheng argues that uniqueness transforms a "figure" into a "presence" (p. 12). This distinction is vital for care providers, as a medical model often reduces a patient or client to a set of symptoms (a figure), whereas *The Way of Beauty* invites the practitioner to encounter the client as a "presence" inhabited by a desire for well-being.

Cheng cites the French philosopher Henri Maldiney to suggest that the human face radiates an "unpossessable transcendence" that demands an encounter (Maldiney, 2000, p. 12). This is precisely the project of John of the Cross in his work, *Spiritual Canticle*, Stanza 5, where he establishes that all worldly beauty is merely a reflection of the Beloved passing by. To stop and grasp the reflection is to miss the "presence" of the Beloved. John, in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Book 1, Chapter 4), offers a guidebook for how to attune oneself to this unpossessive state of being; for to possess is to reduce the Infinite to the size of human appetite. Beauty can only be truly encountered when the hands and the intellect are empty.

> The Way of Beauty invites the practitioner to encounter the client as a "presence" inhabited by a desire for well-being.

The Median Void and the Third Breath

Drawing on Chinese cosmology, Cheng critiques Western dualism (subject/object, spirit/matter) by introducing the concept of the Median Void (p. 43).

In the Taoist triad of Yin, Yang, and the Void, the Void is not emptiness in the Western nihilistic sense, but a dynamic space where "breaths" circulate and regenerate (p. 43). It is the space of the relationship where transformation occurs. This offers a powerful metaphor for the therapeutic container, where the relationship between therapist and client is not a transaction but a "unifying interaction" (*yin-yun*) where a third reality is born from the encounter (p. 69).

Stylistic and Cultural Analysis

Cheng's style is phenomenological (see Edmund Husserl's phenomenology) rather than dogmatic. He describes himself as a "slightly naive phenomenologist" who prioritises "receptivity" over the establishment of theorems (p. 10). The text moves in a "spiralling thought" pattern (p. 5), revisiting core images—the rose, the mountain, the Mona Lisa—adding layers of depth with each pass.

Culturally, Cheng bridges the gap between the "conquering" gaze of Western art, mimesis as mastery, (p. 63) and the "resonant" gaze of Chinese art, mimesis as communion, (p. 63). He critiques the modern Western tendency to value the cynical as more "real" than the beautiful. By integrating the poetry of Rilke and Keats with the painting theories of Shitao and the philosophy of Lao Tzu, Cheng constructs a "world theology" of beauty that feels expansive and non-sectarian.

Appraisal for Practitioners of Soul Care

Cheng's meditations can be operationalised into practical "postures" for those who accompany others through suffering.

1. The Discipline of the "Double Gaze"

Concept: Cheng suggests that true perception is a chiasmus, an intersection where the seer and the seen "regard" one another (p. 46). He quotes Meister Eckhart: "The eye through which I see God is the eye through which God sees me" (Eckhart, 2004, p. 49).

Practical Application: In a clinical setting, practitioners often employ a diagnostic gaze assessing pathology, but Cheng invites a shift to a "mutual gaze" (p. 51). When sitting with a client, consciously shift from "analysing" to "beholding". Ask yourself how this person's uniqueness is manifesting right now. Recognise that by truly seeing them, you are allowing them to see themselves. As Cheng notes, a creature can only truly see itself when it perceives that it is being seen by another (p. 51). This validates their existence not as a problem to be solved, but as a "presence" to be witnessed.

2. Cultivating the Median Void (The Space Between)

Concept: The Median Void is the place where Yin and Yang interact to produce life (p. 44). It is the "between" where the unexpected arises.

Practical Application: Silence in therapy or chaplaincy is often treated as awkwardness or a space to be filled with interventions. Reframe silence as the "Median Void" and do not rush to fill it when a conversation stalls. Visualise this silence as the "breath" that allows the client's fragmented parts (Yin/Yang) to integrate. Cheng reminds us that the "best paintings are those that offer mediumistic space so that one can sojourn there indefinitely" (p. 65). Your office or bedside manner should be that painting: a spacious void that allows the soul to breathe.

3. Identifying the "Desire for Beauty" as a Resource

Concept: Cheng argues that every being is inhabited by a "desire for beauty", which is actually a desire for open life (p. 12). Even in depression or trauma, this impulse remains the pilot light of the soul.

Practical Application: Trauma recovery often focuses on the narrative of the injury, but Cheng suggests we must also recover the narrative of beauty. Ask "beauty-based" questions that bypass the pathology, such as, "When was the last time you felt a sense of awe?" or "What is a moment in your life that felt complete or radiant?" This is not a distraction technique; it is retrieving the "indestructible" part of the self. Cheng notes that even in the concentration camps (the ultimate disorder), the memory or glimpse of beauty was a lifeline (p. 11). Reconnecting a client to their capacity for wonder is an ontological intervention.

4. The Art of *Shen-yun* (Divine Resonance)

Concept: The highest form of art possesses *shen-yun*, or "divine resonance", where the work vibrates with the spirit of the universe (p. 71).

Practical Application: This speaks to the "vibe" or "presence" of the practitioner. Self-care is not just stress management; it is the cultivation of *shen-yun*. The practitioner must "hollow out" their own capacity for receptivity to become the "ravine of the world" (p. 10). Before a session, engage in a ritual of emptying (kenosis) so that you can resonate with the client. If you are full of your own noise, you cannot offer the resonance necessary for the client's transfiguration.

Critical Assessment

If *The Way of Beauty* has a flaw, it is perhaps its relentless high-mindedness, although Cheng acknowledges the risk of appearing "far too angelic" (p. 23). A pragmatic social worker dealing with systemic poverty or acute psychosis might find the talk of fragrant roses and misty mountains difficult to translate into the gritty reality of survival. Cheng's "solution" to evil is not political or structural, but spiritual and perceptual. He does not offer a way to stop the bayonet, but a way to survive the memory of it with one's soul intact.

However, this critique misses the point of the text; it is a book of wisdom, not a policy manual. Its power lies precisely in its refusal to be utilitarian. In a world of "robots" (p. 11) and "useful" things, Cheng argues that beauty is "superfluous" yet indispensable (p. 10). It is the only thing that makes "being" human.

Conclusion

The Way of Beauty is a luminous text that serves as a necessary corrective to the despair of the modern age. For the practitioner, it offers a reminder that our work is not merely to fix broken mechanisms but to accompany unique "presences" as they seek to unfurl toward their own radiance. Cheng teaches us that "beauty will save the world" not by ignoring evil, but by offering a *beau geste*—a gesture of beauty, goodness, and sacrifice—that transcends the tragic (p. 36). To read this book is to be reminded that in the face of death, the act of seeing, truly seeing, is a sacred act.

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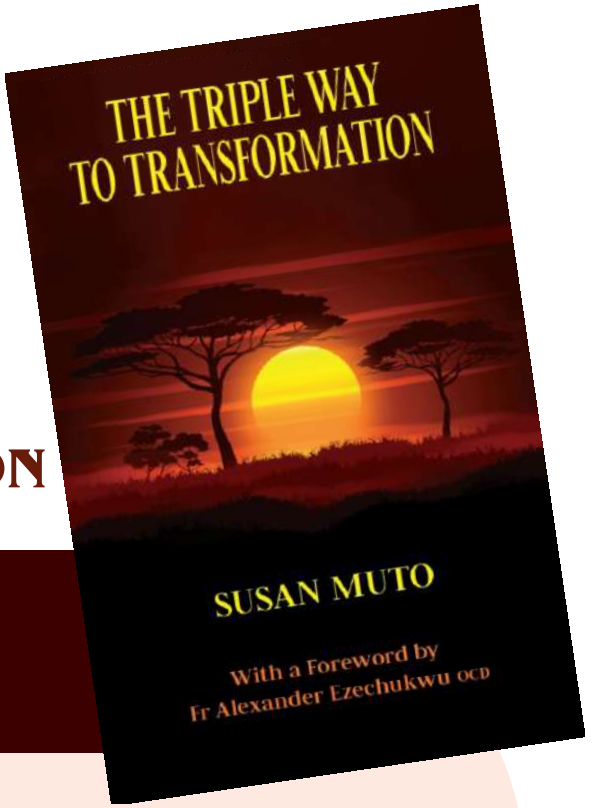
EVERYDAY MYSTIC: A REVIEW OF THE TRIPLE WAY TO TRANSFORMATION



Susan Muto, PhD,
The Triple Way to Transformation
(Fr Alexander Ezechukwu, Forw.),
Teresian Press, Oxford, 2021. 254 pp.,
£16.40 (Print), £13.12 (E-book),
ISBN: 978-0-947916-26-8

Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary Christian spirituality, few tasks are as daunting as translating the rigorous, often austere mysticism of the Carmelite tradition for the modern seeker. St John of the Cross, with his demanding ascents and dark nights, frequently remains an intimidating figure, revered but unread. In The Triple Way to Transformation, Dr Susan Muto, a distinguished scholar and executive director of the Epiphany Institute, Pittsburgh, bridges this chasm with characteristic insight and pastoral sensitivity. Published by Teresian Press in 2021, this work serves not merely as a commentary but as a formative manual, guiding the reader through the classic "three ways" of the spiritual life—purgative, illuminative, and unitive—reimagined through the lens of "formative spirituality." This review analyses the book's themes, style, and cultural impact while offering practical applications for practitioners of soul care.

Deep Analysis: A Modern Synthesis of Classical Mysticism

The structural backbone of this book is the "Triple Way," a framework deeply rooted in the Christian mystical tradition but often treated as abstract theory. Muto incarnates these stages into a "contemplative path" of Purifying Formation, Illuminating Reformation, and Unifying Transformation (pp. 4-5). By assessing the spiritual masters, it becomes clear that this book shines as a masterful act of translation and integration.

Style, Methodology, and Cultural Impact

The style of the book is best described as "formative" rather than purely academic or devotional. As a pioneer of the field of Formative Spirituality alongside Adrian van Kaam (2004), Muto writes with a precision that honours the complexity of the human psyche while maintaining a fluid, accessible prose. The book avoids the density of scholastic theology, opting instead for a "tapestry" of truth that weaves the wisdom of classical masters with contemporary psychological insights (p.58). Critically, the text is designed as a manual. It employs a pedagogy of formation-in-common, implicitly encouraging readers to engage the text in community. Her voice is that of a seasoned spiritual director—firm yet gentle, authoritative yet accompanying. The cultural significance of The Triple Way to

Transformation lies in its timing and its audience. Released just prior to the 2026 centenary of St John of the Cross being declared a Doctor of the Church, the book is positioned to be a primary vehicle for reintroducing his teaching to the English-speaking world. In a culture obsessed with self-help and instant gratification, Muto's insistence on the slow work of purification is a counter-cultural statement. She reclaims the science of the saints from the dusty shelves of seminaries and places it in the hands of the laity.

The Way of Purifying Formation.

The first movement of the book addresses the perennial obstacle to spiritual growth: the "illusion of self-sufficiency" (p. 26). Muto does not shy away from the hard truths of the purgative way. She identifies "cleansing our interiority" as a necessary precursor to divine union (p. 33). Muto roots this concept in the radical metanoia (conversion) of St Anthony of Egypt, who literally gave away his possessions to follow Christ's Gospel directive. (pp.27-28) She pairs this with the internal, psychological conversion of St Augustine in his Confessions, showcasing his release from the "prison of pride" (p.28). This makes a case for everyday purgation, as not necessarily fleeing to a literal desert, but undergoing a radical inner divestment from ego-driven agendas (pp.35-36), and "trust in the providence of God" amidst the collapse of egoic structures (p.58).

The Way of Illuminating Reformation

Transitioning to the illuminative way, Muto focuses on the "reformation" of the heart. Here, the theme shifts from emptying to orienting. She discusses "confirming our faith" and "witnessing to Gospel values" as the fruits of a heart that has survived the initial purification (pp.93, 103). Drawing upon Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy (1931), it reminds readers that the Love that moves the sun and every star is the very same love that providentially guides our daily lives (p.61). To ground this cosmic vision, Muto utilises St Teresa of Avila, whose insistence on the three essential virtues—humility, detachment, and charity—serves as the practical bedrock for the illuminative path (p.17). More so. Muto echoes Teresa's genius by refusing to separate the contemplative life from active service, insisting that Mary at the feet of Jesus and Martha in the kitchen are two sides of the same coin (pp.91, 204). The "illuminating" aspect is presented not as spectacular visions, but as the quiet, steady "peace and joy of Jesus" and the ability to "stay with grace".

The Way of Unifying Transformation

The culmination of the journey is "unifying transformation". The Triple Way… challenges the modern tendency to view union with God as a private spiritual luxury. Instead, it posits "solitary union with God as the ground of solidarity with others" (p.190). This is a profound insight: true mysticism leads inevitably to mission.

Perhaps Muto's greatest achievement in this text is making St John of the Cross accessible in using profound imageries, such as the "solitary bird" (pp.190-192), and the ten-step "mystical ladder of love"(pp.194-197), to map the soul's final ascent to union. By bringing in the 20th-century monastic giant Thomas Merton, she demonstrates how these lofty 16th-century counsels apply to modern consecration (p.217). Muto shows that the "dark night" is not a spiritual failure, but a necessary midnight of faith that purifies the soul for true union (pp.199-201). Ultimately, the goal is "becoming another Christ" to facilitate the "healing of our wounded world" (p.205).

Impact on the Practice of Soul Care

For spiritual directors, pastoral counsellors, and those engaged in soul care, Muto offers a robust, diagnostic, and therapeutic framework:

The Church as a "Spiritual Hospital": Muto adopts the Orthodox perspective of Metropolitan Hierotheos to present the Church not as an elite club, but as a "therapeutic centre" where the primary medicine is unceasing prayer and the sacraments (pp.169-170). Like Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift, soul care swings from a model of moral policing to one of spiritual healing.

For those seeking purpose or decision-making clarity, the Illuminating Reformation section offers tools for "being guided by divine directives," moving discernment from logical analysis to spiritual intuition (p.110).

The Four Pillars of Spiritual Direction: Muto explicitly outlines the necessary gifts for a spiritual healer or director:

1. Discretion/Wisdom: To detect the hidden dissonance and confusion beneath polite

appearances (p.173).
2. Words of Truth: The ability to offer precise, life-altering counsel that pierces the heart (pp.173-174).
3. Compassion: Assuming the sorrows of the directee to cushion their guilt and open them to God's forgiveness (p.175).
4. Hope: Maintaining a vision for the directee's ultimate transformation into a "new creation," even when the directee despairs (p.176).

Combating Ministry Burnout: By utilising St Bernard of Clairvaux's metaphor of the "reservoir" versus the "canal" (p.210), she provides practitioners with a vital corrective against functionalism and activism. She insists that "infusion" (receiving grace in contemplation) must precede "effusion" (pouring out in ministry) (p.210).

Impact on Genuine Seekers of Transformation

For the individual seeker, The Triple Way to Transformation democratises high mysticism without diluting its demands.

- **Reframing Suffering:** Instead of viewing setbacks, aridity, or the cross as signs of God's abandonment, the seeker is taught to view them through the lens of the Paschal Mystery (p.52). The book helps seekers realise that daily frustrations are the very "chisels" God uses to mortify the ego and shape the soul (pp.220-221).
- **Finding the Sacred in the Secular:** Muto dismantles the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. She reassures seekers that they do not need to enter a cloister to reach the heights of spiritual maturity; rather, holiness is forged in the "Nazareths of our own everydayness" (p.105). Activities as simple as pouring morning coffee, cleaning the house, or visiting a neighbour become profound acts of witnessing Gospel values (pp.109, 233).
- **A Roadmap for Lifelong Growth:** By understanding that the spiritual life moves in a progression, seekers are freed from the frustration of expecting instant perfection. They learn to practise "holy indifference" (pp.166, 182) to their own agendas and abandon themselves fully to Divine Providence.

Conclusion

The Triple Way to Transformation is a vital addition to the library of modern Christian spirituality. Susan Muto has successfully distilled the potent, often volatile essence of Sanjuanist mysticism into a potion that is both palatable and beautiful for the contemporary soul. While some academic purists might desire more dense theological footnotes, such a critique misses the point of the work: it is a handbook for living, not just studying. For the practitioner of soul care, it provides an indispensable map for guiding others through the perilous, beautiful terrain of the interior life, proving that the ancient paths are indeed the most reliable ways forward.

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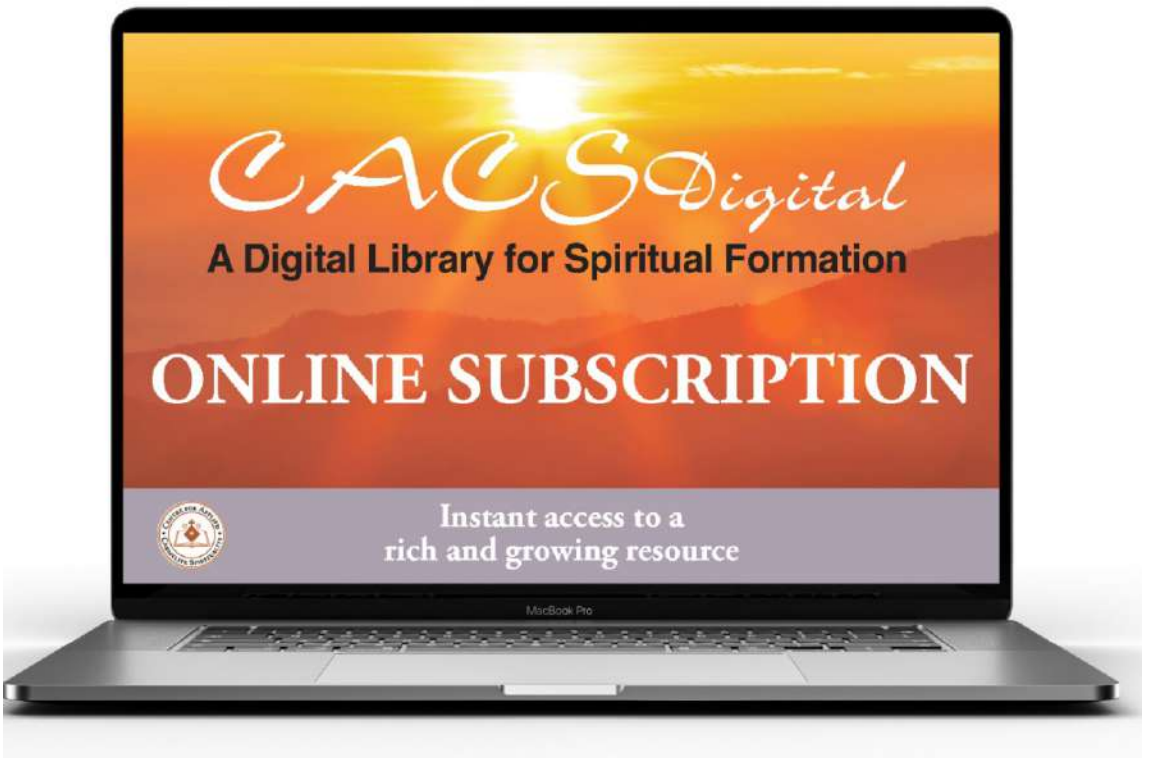

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