

purposes. Even good can emerge from sin. He integrates everything from our life into the story of our transformation and salvation. As Isaiah reminds us, God will not allow His word to return to Him empty, without carrying out what it was sent to do. (55.10-11)

2. We should not take the Three Stages too literally; they are a frame of reference, scaffolding, which we then need to let go so that we continue our journey to the Father by faith.

Nine principles for growth according to St. Teresa of Avila

1. To do God's will from moment to moment throughout the day.
2. Growth in prayer does not depend on our immediate situation.
3. It is not sufficient to simply keep the commandments; we need to go beyond this. Generosity is important.
4. We need to be actively working to overcome our faults.
5. We are to be guided by the principles of revelation and not by a naturalistic common sense.
6. God gives prayer growth precisely according to our degree of readiness for it. He forces no one.
7. We can regress, we can go backwards, if we become lax and stagnate, even giving up altogether.
8. There is a correlation between virtue and prayer. Virtues such as humility, temperance, patience, love of neighbour and so on, directly cause a deepening prayer.
9. We need determination.

Summary of the Threefold Way

The Awakening: The person comes to a realisation that there is something greater than themselves. **Conversion** relates to this and is the person's response to the awakening.

1. **The Purgative Way:** This is the stage of integration where the person begins to sort their life out in relation to God. For some this can be more difficult than for others depending on their life. There will be struggles and temptations. Sooner or later a darkness will descend and they will begin to experience the **Night of Sense**. The basic issue here will be can they trust God.
2. **The Illuminative Way:** Here the mystic way begins and infused prayer will be experienced. Now the person will be led more deeply into the ways of God. There is a heightened perception and the person will begin to notice God's presence in places they had never noticed before. The sacraments will be important and they will be intuitive environmentalists. There will be a zeal, but not fanaticism. There will be light, joy and peace and their prayer will become a kind of contemplative meditation.
3. **The Unitive Way:** Here they will also experience the **Dark Night of the Soul**. They will then experience a very deep union with God. MBH

Tuning to the heartbeat of God: the stages of our spiritual development

Session One:

An introduction



Beginnings

1. Just as there are developments in other areas of life (e.g. physical, moral, educational), so too, there is what can be called spiritual development. This course will focus on what has traditionally been called the Three Ways.
2. Our spiritual development is much, much more than gaining a body of information. Peggy Wilkinson describes it as *becoming*. Just as “we are what we eat”, so the soul “becomes” what it absorbs from God. It is a lifetime’s work that requires our active cooperation as well as allowing God to do the hidden work.
3. God is apprehended intuitively and not by knowledge about Him. Again it is Wilkinson who reminds us that through a kind of “spiritual osmosis” our souls gradually absorb God by silently spending time in His presence.
4. If you are acting in a play professionally, you have to do more than simply remember your lines: you need to study the character you are portraying, enter into them and let their spirit enter yours.
5. Summed up, reading about holiness and hearing about it and our spiritual journey is not enough; you and I have to live it.

History of the Three Ways or Stages

1. Origen (lived in Egypt 185-254 A.D.) first spoke of the *Three Stages*, and it arose out of his interpretation of the Old Testament book the *Song of Songs*.
2. Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-c.395, a Cappadocian Father in Turkey) developed the concept of progression in this journey of the spiritual life.
3. Augustine (354-430 in North Africa) took the next step in giving each of these three stages a name and a description.
4. Others in later centuries developed these in greater detail.
5. In many ways these three Stages were based not on theology in the sense that it has been revealed by God, but on observation by deeply spiritual people of their own lives, and the lives of others. And this is all firmly rooted in Scripture.

Objections

1. There are those who say it is not scriptural. They are correct in that there is no thought out statement on spiritual development. But then neither is the Trinity.
2. Second, they say, even beginners can experience union with God; those moments when God seems to be so close to the soul that that the two seem to be one. True, but the difference is that it is only momentary, whereas for someone in the Unitive State, it is an almost, if not permanent, abiding.
3. Third, it gives the appearance of a “ladder of success”. But the emphasis is on what God does in us and not what we do. It is about our openness to God and the transformation of the self. To see it as a “ladder of success” is to focus on self rather than God. It is to buy into the narcissism of our age with its self-centred focus on “me”.

4. Some people do not like the words purgative, illuminative and unitive. These words have been used since the time of (pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite (c.500) and though the words beginners, proficients, and perfects date from an earlier period it is these that have stuck. Today the word “integrative” is sometimes used instead of “purgative”. The words purgative, illuminative and unitive do fairly precisely describe the states.

Further thoughts

1. The Three Ways are a kind of map of the spiritual life but it is important not to take them too literally. It could be described as like a car journey to a specific destination with signposts on the way. There are many routes and ours will be slightly different to the next person, but there are key points of commonality. But note there are no shortcuts.

The Scriptural basis

1. Our main concern is how do we let God love us, how do we allow God to invade us? Put another way how do we get to know God, where do we start? Psalm 63.1-2 can help us.
2. We also need to develop a deep desire for God, a passionate desire, rather than have a lukewarm faith which is condemned by John in the Book of Revelation (3.15-16)
3. As with Nicodemus we need to be reborn: “born from above” (John 3.7), “born of the Spirit” (John 3.9).
4. Through our baptism God dwells within us and we are His children by adoption and heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8.15-17).
5. Slowly through the years, with our cooperation, God will work His deep transformation in us. Paul reminds us that even though our bodies are wasting away our inner nature is being renewed each day, preparing us for a glory that is beyond our imagination. (2 Corinthians 4.16-17)
6. We are to desire to be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3.19) and we are being transformed ... from one degree of glory to another”. (2 Corinthians 3.18)
7. 2 Peter 1.3-4 tells us we are to “become participants of the divine nature” and Titus 2.12 tells us we have to give up *everything* that does not lead to God. 1 Corinthians 2.9-10 speaks of that which the human heart cannot conceive which God has prepared for those who love Him.
8. The “great high priestly prayer” of Jesus in John 17, particularly versus 21-23 goes to the heart of the matter, along with 2 Peter 1.3-4 and 2 Corinthians 3.18.

Some additional points

1. There is a degree of artificiality in this course for the spiritual dimension cannot be separated from the rest of our life. God uses everything for His

seems distant or even absent altogether. Trust is very hard in such circumstances, but trust we must and with this will come a growing sense of **humility**.

Our way of praying

1. Here at this stage we begin to learn how to pray. We may have said prayers before but at most it was to do with asking for things. If anything we saw it as something magical or trying to manipulate God.
2. Now we are beginning to see it in terms of a relationship and so we will develop devotional practices such as vocal prayers, and meditation on the Scriptures to deepen this relationship.

The Night of Sense

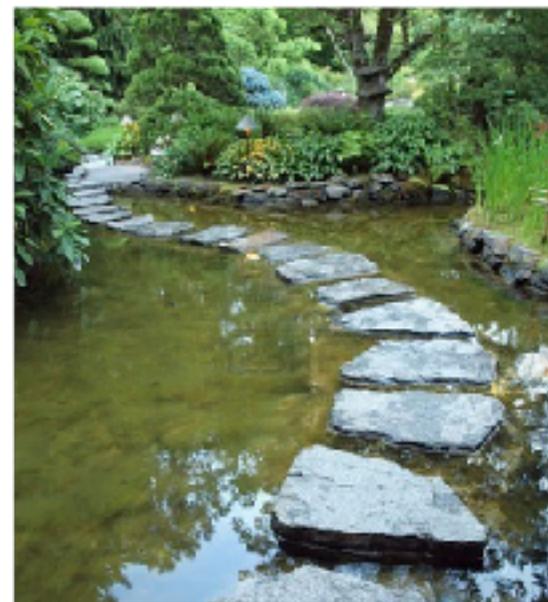
1. With all this happening, now comes this Night, more than likely in an intermittent fashion. God now seems somewhat distant, if not absent. We feel a sense of boredom and aridity in our prayers. Old temptations come back to haunt us. Was it all an illusion? People here often feel they have gone astray in their pursuit of God.
2. From a psychological point of view this is a normal response, for much positive developments have taken place and if you are going to have mountains you have to have valleys.
3. From a spiritual perspective this is actually a great grace and God is leading us forward even though we do not experience it in this way. Quite simply, we have become dependent on our feelings and have identified these with closeness to God: when we feel an almost inner glow then God is present and when we don't, God is absent. We could not be more mistaken.
4. God now set out to teach us a new lesson: that He is present irrespective of our feelings and we will need to learn to trust Him in the darkness. God is testing us: are we seeking God in Himself for Himself, or are we seeking Him for what we can get out of Him i.e. pleasant feelings of closeness?
5. This is a time of crisis and not all that many people will go beyond this stage, but perhaps more than we think. There are those (and probably it is all of us) who seem to go backwards and forwards at this stage, moving to the edge of illumination but never quite getting there and going back, before repeating it all once more. They can be like the Israelites in the deserts of Egypt who wandered for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. Faith and trust are needed; the alternative is despair and regression. Patience, perseverance and courage are required. The most important question for us to answer is: "What do we really want?"
6. For most, the darkness will end abruptly. As Benedict Groeschel says, We are rescued by God which marks the end of the darkness. It is like the resurrection on Easter morning. We arrive like Mary and often at first do not realise what has happened. The light dawns upon us gently and slowly until we realise that indeed we have learned something that we never really knew before.

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Tuning to the heartbeat of God: the stages of our spiritual development

Session Two:

The Awakening, Conversion and the Stage of Integration



The Awakening. Conversion

1. These two are not necessarily the same but they can be intimately linked. It is not something that a person does, but something that happens to them. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. For the person there can be great confusion now, because they have been the centre of their world and now there is a shift in perception and they must take into account something greater than themselves whom we as Christians name God.
2. Consider the confusion of Nicodemus (John 3.1-21). His framework of faith was no longer satisfactory.
3. This Awakening is often an experience of light and darkness, of conflict and contrast. The person feels both lifted up and cast down. The experience may be consoling or threatening depending on the character of the person or the circumstances of their life. There are many ways this experience can happen.
4. A response is always called for and their life will now be changed, whether they accept or reject the experience. The choice is always theirs.
5. The experience can happen at any stage in life but it often happens in late adolescence, a time of upheaval, or at key transition points in adulthood.
6. Evelyn Underhill, an early 20th-century writer on mysticism, says that conversion has three marked characteristics –
 - 1) A sense of liberation and victory;
 - 2) a conviction of the nearness of God;
 - 3) a sentiment of love towards God.
7. Benedict Groeschel tells us there are some dangers at this point –
 - 1) Spiritual pride – the experience leads the person to think, “I am special”. This is linked to narcissism.
 - 2) Fixation and defensiveness – the person denies the reality of their own helplessness and sinfulness.
 - 3) And as we have seen, the person might reject the grace being given in that they reject the experience.
8. It may take years for an awakening to “take hold” and it may re-occur frequently.

First stage – Purgation

1. The person is now embracing their Awakening. Those words of the prophet Ezekiel, speaking in the name of God, begin to become a reality: “...I will give you a heart of flesh ...” (36.25). They have said “yes” to God even if hesitantly.
2. Their first task is to begin sorting their life out and a spiritual guide at this stage, in fact for most of the journey, is extremely helpful.
3. For those who are truly beginning to fall in love with God this experience gives them a new direction and purpose in life. Their deepest desire can be summed up in the fourth century Eucharistic prayer of Serapion of Thmuis: “We entreat you, make us truly a life.”

4. In Ruth Burrows words, this stage is an island shrouded in mist but it does not seem this way to its inhabitants who feel very much in control and often feel quite spiritually capable. How we relate to God here is still our own way and through created realities – concepts and ideas.
5. Ironically we do not know our need for God at this stage, despite any protestations on our part. It is very much “We must first increase so that Christ can increase”, in the words of Nemeck and Coombs. It must be stressed that there is a sense of well-being and we feel in control. The emotional dimension looms large though they are mostly unaware of this. By this I mean their relationship with God is dependent on how they *feel* at any moment.
6. We cannot muddle through this stage. We have to set our hands to the plough. (Luke 9.62) Gradually it dawns on the person that their relationship with God is not as perfect as they thought it was and there are inconsistencies in their life. Put bluntly, there is sin. This is actually a grace-filled moment, for God is triggering this re-evaluation, wanting them to go deeper.
7. Moral integration is a key here, for as Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6.24). Our prayer at this stage can be very much Augustine’s: “Lord, help me to stop sinning, but not just yet.” It is not that they are being facetious or hypocritical, but rather that they are really struggling. Again, Jesus’ words “Enter by the narrow gate” (Matthew 7.13-14) apply here.
8. There are two areas we need to focus on at this stage –
 - 1) **Detachment:** This is to learn to surrender the false values of the world. It is not an end in itself and it would be impossible for us to become completely detached, if ever, at this stage. It is about freeing us from the false values that ensnare us.
 - 2) **Mortification:** this concerns the controlling and disciplining of our behaviour in the broadest sense. It is not an end in itself. St Paul’s words on running the race sums it up. (I Corinthians 9.24-25)
9. Detachment and mortification are not ends in themselves, but rather means of helping our immature self to die in order that we may grow towards union with God.

The second phase

1. There are two tasks that need to be achieved here –
 - 1) **Mature faith:** We need to read the Scriptures and books about the Faith. It is not that we have to become an intellectual, nor that we have to consume books, but we do need to be thinking about our Faith and trying to understand it and see how it applies to our life. The danger is that we fall into endless sophisticated speculation which takes us nowhere.
 - 2) **Trust:** This now becomes a big issue and one on which many flounder. If we do not learn to trust God and His goodness for us we will not make further progress. We only really come to terms with this in adversity and our experience will be one of darkness for God

The experience of prayer in the Illuminative Way

1. *Affective Prayer and Contemplative Meditation*

1. Affective prayer comes at the beginning and there is now a gentle dialogue with Christ, characterised more by substance than words. Prayer has now slowed down.
2. Someone at this stage should not try and hold onto old forms of prayer. Vocal prayer, prayer meetings, enthusiastic hymns, and popular devotions were both helpful and necessary in the Purgative Way but now can be laid aside.
3. There is an intermingling of natural and supernatural prayer which can be summed up in the phrase *contemplative meditation*.

2. *Second phase: the Prayer of Quiet*

1. Their fervent prayer life has now blossomed into a deep and passionate love for God which grows into the *Prayer of Quiet* which is an almost silent adoration, marking the beginning of this phase. They will no longer be bothered by distractions, which are still there, but now not worried about. There is a stillness and gentleness with such a person.
2. Underhill says that this state of "Quiet" entails suspension of the surface-consciousness, yet consciousness of the subject's personality remains. To someone entering the state the external world seems to get further and further away ... The person is poised, resting, waiting, but does not know for what ... presently the person becomes aware that *Something* fills this emptiness.
3. This prayer is pure gift from God and should not be forced, engineered, prolonged, or controlled. We need to learn humility and patience.
4. A good many years have passed since they entered this Stage and generally it occurs in late middle or older age. They are particularly aware of their absolute poverty and dependence on God.

Visions and voices

1. These may well happen at this stage and the great spiritual writers do not consider them important and see them as the overflow from certain personality types. This is not to disparage the experience. Unfortunately many see these sorts of experiences as signs of God's grace. They are not, and we should take no notice of them, as John of the Cross says. The real sign of growth is our deepening love for both God and our love and concern for our fellow humans.

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*Tuning to the heartbeat of God:
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Session Three:

The Stage or Way of illumination



Entering the Illuminative Way

1. We have seen that there is darkness before entering the Illuminative Way. Apart from anything else this has been a time of upheaval. As the seeker works through this and continues relating to God they are beginning to realise they cannot control God. In remaining faithful and persevering a time will come when they move to the Illuminative Stage.
2. Here the person, to begin with, is likely to be very tentative and it seems like the morning after a bad storm. They may go backwards and forwards for a time, never quite managing to trust, which is the key issue.

Why called the Illuminative Way

1. The reason is that this is a time of enlightenment. There is a heightened perception, though one that is different to ordinary perception. It is as if everything is illuminated. It is important to recognise that the light we see is God's light and not our own. (Psalm 35.10)
2. The paradox is though, that most of the Illuminative Way is passed in darkness, for it is God who perfects us and not we ourselves. The contemplative act is essentially one of receiving rather than one of giving. That lesson takes time to learn.

Beginnings

1. The beginnings of illumination can be so delicate that the person is unaware that it is happening; in fact this is most likely the case. This is because it is a new way of "knowing" and so the spiritual seeker will not recognise what is actually happening. It is a "peace that cannot be dissected or analysed". It is the beginnings of mystical prayer.
2. Torkington says it begins with "little more than an inexplicable restlessness that can't rest in God and doesn't seem inclined to rest in anything else with any satisfaction."
3. What can be even more confusing is that the states of Purgation and Illumination can exist side-by-side.
4. People may now feel that their quest is finished, but in fact, according to John of the Cross, it is the beginning. This Stage is where we find most mystics, partly because they do not realise there is more and partly, as Underhill says, many will come to Bethlehem, but few will go on to Calvary.
5. Nemeck and Coombs: Now it is, "I must decrease so that Christ may further increase both within me and around me."

The experience of the stage of illumination

1. The person begins to notice that their relationship with God seems to be now a more sustained state than something which is passing; it is more than a moment of illumination. Praying now becomes much easier and

things which hindered them in their journey no longer have the same hold over them.

2. God's presence now seems to be all around them in a way that they had never noticed. Their awareness of God becomes more spontaneous and does not have to be worked at. This does not mean they are thinking of God all day long.
3. The sacraments, and particularly the Eucharist, becomes much more important for them in their life. There is always reverence and awe; rarely will you find them slipping up on this and if they did, they would quickly repent. If you do not notice awe or reverence in a sustained way then the person is definitely not in the stage of illumination.
4. They are intuitive environmentalists which is not to say that all environmentalists are at this stage of illumination.
5. They find it much easier to do good and they recognise that this is not due to them, but God's grace working in them. There is a zeal with their work, though this is not fanaticism.
6. They achieve a good deal and doing good becomes much easier. Because of this they may annoy others. Much later in this Stage they will be able to "love their enemies".
7. The passions will begin to wane, particularly anger, fear and self-love. Now their central concern will be not so much with not sinning, but growing in the virtues. Generally this shift in emphasis is an unconscious movement.

Problems and dangers

1. They can often be thought to be holy people for they have journeyed far into this Way. Then we can be surprised to discover that they have faults: They can be impatient and critical, angry, they can regress, even giving up altogether. They can also be spiritually greedy soaking up the experiences and wanting more and more. They can also be a bit messianic.
2. Very serious sin becomes less likely now, but not impossible. There can be unforeseen challenges because more and more of our deepest self is beginning to emerge for both good and ill and a person can struggle to cope with this. Personal dishonesty and inconsistency have no place. Another danger is that there can come a preoccupation with oneself.
3. Ruth Burrows speaks of the Illuminative Stage as an island of light and pain. Later, in the second phase, our spiritual seeker can become impatient, in an attempt to find a shortcut out of the night. Not everyone is tempted in this way and for those who are, it must be resisted. It requires humility and a trust in God and a willingness to see significance in the ordinary things of life. We need to learn to remain in God's presence with a loving attention and a tranquil intellect.

with an inconspicuous and loving generosity. Persons in this state have great power to win people over, to read and touch hearts, and often to be a powerful healing presence. They are quiet and gentle and very unobtrusive. This can be accompanied sometimes by ecstasy.

The Dark Night of the Spirit

1. John of the Cross speaks of advanced souls undergoing purification by periods of darkness and aridity. Until now this darkness has been due to the pruning of the branches that relate to sin and the disorders in their life. Now it is not simply a pruning of the branches, but rather a pulling up by the roots.
2. This prepares the person for the ultimate experience possible for a human being in this earthly existence, a state of being so beautiful that those who have experienced it say it is the beginning of the vision of God.

Transforming Union or Spiritual (Mystical) Marriage

1. Language here fails. Usually it is described in terms of a vision of the Trinity and the union of all desire and decision, a complete harmony of the individual with the divine being. Now our desire is in total conformity with God's will. The union is now total; they are fully and almost constantly aware of God's indwelling presence. For the first time they can be actually sure of where they are on this journey.
2. Now there are no further stages, only a deepening and expansion of what they already possess. There is now no map but rather an expansive plain. Death will come in the not too distant future; it is as if the soul's psyche cannot be too much. Their soul has been divinised.

Further thoughts ...

1. Evelyn Underhill says that how they experience their union with God will depend on their personality. The metaphysical mystic who experiences God in an impersonal and transcendent way, will experience this union as deification. It is a union of likeness and not of essence. They have been wholly penetrated by God like a sponge in the sea.
2. The other type of mystic, she says, sees their relationship with God in terms of intimacy and personal communion and they will describe it in terms of spiritual marriage between the soul and God.
3. Can they still sin? In theory yes, but in practice this is highly unlikely if not impossible, because they have spent years dying to self. This does not mean they are perfect.
4. In their daily life they are almost totally absorbed elsewhere though they may not be aware of what they are absorbed in, but they do not try to get at what this is. They simply let be. Their sole occupation is that of love; prayer is their life. There is an ordinariness, no raptures. They have been healed.
5. **Examples:** Maximilian Kolbe, Father Solanus, Father Isodoras, John Bradburne, Father Gilbert Shaw.

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Tuning to the heartbeat of God: the stages of our spiritual development

Session Four: The Stage or Way of Union



Initial thoughts

1. Evelyn Underhill says that the real distinction between the Illuminative and the Unitive Life is that in Illumination the individuality of the subject remain separate and independent. God is separate to them; they are serving God.
2. In the Illuminative Way there was a movement to: "I must decrease so that Christ may further increase both within me and around me". Now it is: "I must decrease so that Christ may increase".
3. One of the reasons why so few enter the Unitive Way is that people get caught up in their experiences of God and take a secret pride in them. But we need to remember, God's touch always produces humility.
4. Ruth Burrows says that our surrender even at the furthest shore of the Illuminative Way is within the human compass, enlightened by God's mystical help. This next step is God's alone. The person's consent cannot be given because it cannot be asked. What God does here is completely beyond their capacity to imagine or understand. Before now God's union was temporary and partial, but now it is permanent, total. Only now can we really speak of an indwelling.
5. Until now there has been a "map of the Way" which varies for each person. Now here in the Unitive Way there is no map.
6. We can struggle to understand what someone in the Unitive Way experiences for it is beyond our experience and imagination. We are like a small child listening to a great orchestral work and feeling bored. But for those who do have the eyes to see, it is a wonder to behold and never to be forgotten. We are seeing in Carolyn Humphreys phrase, "fragments of heaven".

Basic Outline

1. Here I rely heavily on the work of Benedict Groeschel. He says the Unitive Way has two quite distinct contemplative experiences –
 - 1) **Simple quiet contemplation:** this is *acquired contemplation* which introduces the spiritual seeker to union and develops gradually in the later phases of the illuminative way.
 - 2) Later, the phase of **total contemplative absorption:** This begins with a prayer of great quietness which initially is dry and arid. This then leads to "a time of sweet quietness" leading to a period of prayer which goes by the name of "full union with God". This leads to an almost complete overwhelming of the normal psychological processes of the person and is called "ecstatic union". This is followed by what is known as the Dark Night of the Spirit. Finally there is a transforming union also called Spiritual Marriage or Mystical Marriage.

1. **First phase of Contemplation – Simple Union with God**

1. Those at the end of illumination experience more and more episodes of contemplation quite beyond their own powers. These experiences of awareness are not so much overpowering as they are mentally captivating.

2. The person is suddenly confronted with the questions: Am I willing to surrender to and cherish these moments of intense awareness of the presence of God and am I willing to reinforce them by a life of habitual virtue and generous self giving? This is not a new problem, but there is now a special urgency about it.
3. There is now a great purity of heart and they do not fall into any deliberate sin even though frailty may cause them to regress in their behaviour at times. They have a great control and mastery over their behaviour, with little or no effort. They no longer rely upon repression, and other defences which are always inadequate and always cause conflict. An exception would be someone with deep psychological scars from their past.
4. It is now the time when the Gifts of the Holy Spirit have a more profound effect in the person's life. These gifts do not cause them to do things as virtues do, but rather opens them to a new sensitivity to grace.
5. It is here that the person is likely to experience **Personal Conversion** when God speaks to them in a deeply personal way that is never forgotten. This may have happened years before in the initial conversion experience, but this is not the norm. This is sometimes referred to as a second conversion and some call it a third.

Dark Night of the Senses

1. This Prayer of Simple Contemplation is a kind of darkness for our senses and hence its name. Groeschel thinks that this is the collapse of subliminal defence mechanisms and is experienced as aridity. It relates to issues such as denial, rationalisation, and intellectualisation, which have survived the illuminative way in a moderated form and are now all but obliterated, leaving the person defenceless and psychologically naked.

The Unitive Prayer of Quiet

1. Much of what has been said about the prayer of simple contemplation also applies here. This phase includes three successive steps:
 - 1) A profound passive recollection leading to great quietness in which all the person's faculties are held in joyful fascination at the awareness of God's presence.
 - 2) The overpowering awareness of the presence of God.
 - 3) A kind of wakeful sleep in which one is conscious, but in which all psychological powers have come to rest in God.

2. **Second phase of Contemplation – Full Union and Ecstasy**

1. Full union with God simply means that between the movement of the human mind and will in the loving designs of God there is complete harmony. Teresa of Avila used the illustration of the silkworm and the butterfly to demonstrate the totally transforming power of this gift.
2. There is a burning zeal, total detachment from self, and the perfect obedience of the individual. This makes for a totally new being. The person is perfectly at peace, unafraid of any harm that anyone might do, and filled