

THREE STAGES OF THE JOURNEY

The mystics speak of three stages along the way of the interior life: the *purgative way*, the *illuminative way*, and the *unitive way*.

a. "In reality, these are not three distinct ways, but three aspects of the same way, along which Christ calls everyone, as he once called the young man in the Gospel" (MI, p. 28).

The Purgative Stage

This first stage involves the firm resolve to follow God's commandments, despite the rebellion of our fallen nature. It demands a firm commitment of the will to what is good and a willingness to be "purged" of disordered desires and attractions.

- In this stage we learn how to restrain ourselves from sin with the help of the grace of God strengthening our will—that is, we are strengthened to act against the disorder of our passions.
- In the language of St. Thomas, such a person is "continent," but not yet *virtuous*.

b. Contenance falls short of being virtue since virtue presupposes a right desire, and this is lacking in the continent man (see St. Thomas, Summa, Prima Secundae, q. 58, a. 3, ad 2).

c. "Human virtues...order our passions.... They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life" (CCC 1804).

d. "Observance of the commandments, properly understood, is synonymous with the purgative way: it means conquering sin, moral evil in its various guises. And this leads to gradual inner purification. It also enables us to discover values. And hence we conclude that the purgative way leads organically into the illuminative way" (MI, p. 28).

The Illuminative Stage

In the illuminative stage, God's light "illuminates" our lives so that we come to see ever more clearly reality as God created it to be. We come inwardly to value that which God values and desire that which God desires.

- At this stage we move from mere "contenance" to *virtue*. We see that which is true, good, and beautiful and desire it with all our hearts.
- At this stage we are experiencing more and more "the freedom for which Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1).

e. "Values are lights which illuminate existence and, as we work on our lives, they shine ever more brightly on the horizon. So side by side with observance of the commandments – which has an essentially purgative meaning – we develop virtues. For example, in observing the commandment: 'You shall not kill!' we discover the value of life ... and we learn an ever deeper respect for it. In observing the commandment: 'You shall not commit adultery!' we acquire the virtue of purity, and this means that we come to an ever greater awareness of the gratuitous beauty of the human body, of masculinity and femininity. This gratuitous beauty becomes a light for our actions" (MI, pp. 28-29).

f. “So the illuminative stage in the interior life emerges gradually from the purgative stage. With the passage of time, if we persevere in following Christ our Teacher, we feel less and less burdened by the struggle against sin, and we enjoy more and more the divine light which pervades all creation. This is most important, because it allows us to escape from a situation of constant inner exposure to the risk of sin – even though, on this earth, the risk always remains present to some degree – so as to move with ever greater freedom within the whole created world. This same freedom and simplicity characterizes our relations with other human beings, including those of the opposite sex. Interior light illumines our actions and shows us all the good in the created world as coming from the hand of God” (MI, p. 29).

The Unitive Stage

If the purgative and illuminative stages represent a kind of “betrothal” of our lives to God – the beginning and maturing of a divine love affair – this final stage represents the consummation of the marriage, the fullest expression of union with God possible in this life.

g. “This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual betrothal, for it is a total transformation in the Beloved, in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life.... Just as in the consummation of carnal marriage there are two in one flesh, as Sacred Scripture points out (Gen 2:24), so also when the spiritual marriage between God and the soul is consummated, there are two natures in one spirit and love” (St. John of the Cross, Commentary on stanza 22:3 of the *Spiritual Canticle*, see TOB, p. 31).

h. “Thus the purgative way and then the illuminative way form the organic introduction to what is known as the unitive way. This is the final stage of the interior journey, when the soul experiences a special union with God. This union is realized in contemplation of the divine Being and in the experience of love which flows from it with growing intensity. In this way we somehow anticipate what is destined to be ours in eternity, beyond death and the grave. Christ, supreme Teacher of the spiritual life, together with all those who have been formed in his school, teaches that even in this life we can enter onto the path of union with God” (MI, pp. 29-30).

i. To the degree that we enter this unitive way we “can find God in everything, we can commune with him in and through all things. Created things cease to be a danger for us as once they were, particularly while we were still at the purgative stage of our journey. Creation, and other people in particular, not only regain their true light, given to them by God the Creator, but, so to speak, they lead us to God himself, in the way that he willed to reveal himself to us: as Father, Redeemer, and Spouse” (MI, p. 30).

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