

# APOPHATIC PRAYER AND THE ASCETICAL-MYSTICAL PATH OF MONASTIC SPIRITUALITY

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Welcome to the monastery. I hope that your stay here will be a time of spiritual rest and light in the Lord.

Christ wants us to live in the light, that we may become sons of light, filled with light. This is why he came to the earth, to give us a participation in the splendor in which he himself lives with his Father in glory. He came from this splendor, and, without leaving it, became incarnate; and this splendor was *in him*; and he became incarnate so that we might see his glory and draw from his fullness, as St. John says: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten Son from the Father... And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:14,16). Christ wants us to live in this light and splendor. He wants to *shine* in our hearts, as St. Paul says, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has *shone* in our *hearts* to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4, 6). And truly he does this, because he dwells in our hearts if we *obey* him, as Jesus said: “He who loves me will *keep* my *word*, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14, 23). This is *our* part, that is, to *keep* his *word*, which means to *obey* him. Then he will come with the Father and make his dwelling in our heart. This is something *more* than the natural presence of God in everything, sustaining it in existence. This is a special and supernatural indwelling, which not everyone knows. Only those who *obey* him know it.

But what do *we* have to do in order to *experience* and *live in* this *splendor*? We have to be *purified*. We have to be *empty* so that God can fill us with himself, with his light. This is *our* part, the *ascetical* part. And since the majority does not want to do its ascetical part, only a few live regularly in this splendor which the Son was sent from the Father to bring us. Would you like to be among these few? If you want to remain in this splendor, you have to walk along this *ascetical* path.

Even with all this, it is *not we* ourselves who produce this light. Only God can give it to us. But he only gives this *habitual* light to those who walk by this *ascetical* path. That is, by walking along this *ascetical* path, we *prepare* and *dispose* ourselves so that he can illumine us. It is as though we were a radio receiver and God the transmitter. Only the transmitter produces the music; not our receiver. But to receive and hear the music which

the transmitter sends out, *we* have to turn our radio on and tune it in to the right frequency to receive the broadcast. This is *our* part.

We do *our* part in two ways: 1) by walking the *ascetical* path of *renunciation*, by which we empty ourselves of everything else in order to be empty so that God can fill us. If I want to fill a glass with water, I first have to empty it, and then fill it with water. And we do *our* part also by 2) walking the path of *prayer*—every kind of prayer—but especially silent prayer without ideas, thoughts, or images. For this, we can use an ejaculatory prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer.

This is the teaching of Jesus. In order to obtain the buried treasure, what did the man who found it have to do? *Sell all, detach* himself from all, *disencumber* himself from everything, and he had to do so radically, selling all he had. This is the only way he could buy the field and obtain the treasure (Mt 13, 44). What is the treasure? It is Christ. It is the kingdom of God. It is Christ shining in our hearts. Do you want this treasure, this pearl of great price? What does Jesus teach you that you have to do to obtain it? You have to sell everything else. Only in this way can you buy the pearl, which is the illumined life, this life which basks in the splendor of God. Of course, we have to adapt this teaching of Jesus to our state of life and to the obligations of our vocation. What monks do in a very literal and radical way, others do in other ways, according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Truly, Jesus wants us to walk in the light. He said: “I am the light of the world; he who *follows* me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). We have to *follow* him—there is a *condition* here—“he who *follows* me,” says Jesus, “will not walk in darkness.” To *follow* him is to *obey* him. The promise then is that if we obey him, we shall walk in the light, and become sons of light, as St. Paul says, “You are all sons of light and sons of the day” (1 Thess 5:5). St. Paul also says, “...for *once* you were *darkness*, but *now* you are *light* in the Lord; *walk* as children of light” (Eph 5:8). God called us *from* the darkness *to* his light, as St. Paul says: We are “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in *light*. He has delivered us *from* the dominion of *darkness* and transferred us *to* the kingdom of his beloved Son...” (Col 1:12-13). Thus, as St. Peter says, “you are a chosen race...that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you *out of* darkness *into* his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

This is the new life which Christ brought us, but in order to *experience* it, we have to live as he lived. His life is a model for *how* to live in order to live in the splendor of divine love. And how did he live? He lived the *cross*, and he recommended it to all who wish to be his followers. He said, “If anyone wishes to come after me, let him *deny* himself and take up his *cross* and follow me. For whoever would *save* his life will *lose* it; and whoever *loses* his life for my sake and the gospel’s will *save* it” (Mk 8:34-35). This is God’s will for us. We have to follow his will if we wish him to dwell in this special way in our hearts, shining in them, for he indwells in this special way only in those who *obey* him and carry his *cross*. Only those who follow him walk in the light. “He who *follows* me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

And how can we *lose* (Mk 8:35) our life in order to *save* it? How can we *hate* (Jn 12:25) our life in this world in order to live in this *light*? “He who *loves* his life, will *lose* it; and he who *hates* his life in this world, will *keep* it for everlasting life” (Jn 12:25). We have to *hate* our life in this world if we want to *obey* him and walk in his *light* and

*experience* him *shining* in our hearts. And we *hate* our life by selling all that we have. Thus do we *obtain* the *hidden treasure* and the *pearl* of great price, which is life in the *light*. We have to *crucify* ourselves in *this* life, and live a *crucified life* in order to live in his splendor, as St. Paul says, “But far be it from me to *glory* except in the *cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the *world* has been *crucified* to me, and I to the *world*” (Gal 6:14). Thus we discover that the life which is *crucified* for the love of Christ *is* the *risen* life, with the splendor of the risen Christ radiating from it.

This is the monastic life, a life *crucified* to this *world* to be able to live in the *light* of the love of God, *purified* in the senses—in the sense of taste, of touch, of seeing, of hearing, and of smelling—and purified in the faculties of the spirit—in our thoughts, memories and imagination, and in our will, which is the faculty with which we love. This means that the love of our heart has to be *undivided*, not divided among other persons or things, not even divided by a human spouse. Monks are *celibate* because they want to love God *exclusively* in a radical and literal way with *all* the love of their heart, without any division. Thus we can live with more facility in the splendor of divine love.

For those who are married and want to live according to monastic spirituality, they can adapt this teaching to their state of life, and live together as husband or wife, but live chastely with all other men and women, not dividing their hearts with other men or women, and avoiding all attachments and “falling in love”.

Nor are they to allow their hearts to become divided among the good *things*, *pleasures*, and *delights* of this world. Traditionally, in the most fervent times, monks lived very strictly in this area, eating very austere food, without seasoning, except salt, without delicacies (thus did they live in the time of St. Bernard; see his first letter), and they lived in cloisters, apart, renouncing the diversions and entertainments of the world. They lived like this in order to have a *completely undivided* heart, reserved *only* and *totally* for the Lord in *everything*.

All this should bring a person to a state of peace, joy, and interior tranquility, rejoicing in the Lord, in the Holy Spirit. “Rejoice always” (1 Thess 5:16), says St. Paul. “Rejoice in the Lord *always*; *again* I say, Rejoice. Let all men know your moderation. The Lord is near” (Phil 4:4-5). If we *obey* God, perfectly doing his will, and if we are *purified* from the *world* and its pleasures, then we will walk in the light. This is the promise of Jesus: “He who *follows* me, will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12).

The problem is sin. If we sin, if we do not perfectly follow his will, if we fall into imperfections, then, yes, we will walk in darkness, and our spirit will be darkened. And I do not just mean mortal sins. Even the smallest imperfections deeply trouble a person who has long tried to purify himself from the world. The solution is *repentance* and the confession of our sins (sacramentally, if possible), and the emendation of our life, *correcting* our errors and sins, so that God can thus forgive us, and we can leave the darkness, and return again to his admirable light which rejoices the spirit as rivers of living water flowing within us (Jn 7:37-39), or as a fountain of living water ever leaping up within us unto eternal life (Jn 4:14). This is how the Holy Spirit acts, rejoicing us with the love of God. How important it, therefore, is to try to avoid all sin and imperfection.

In all this, silent prayer is very important. Thus do we wait for the revelation of the glory of God in our interior. Christ wants us to *contemplate* his *glory*. He wishes to *shine within us*, *illuminating* us from within. But we have to give him the opportunity by

being waiting upon him in silent prayer, so that when he wishes to transmit this light, we will be prepared, waiting for it. If we are not waiting silently to receive this light, he will transmit it, but we will not receive it—it is like a transmitter transmitting, but my receiver is turned off, and does not receive anything. And since we do *not* know *when* he is going to transmit this great light, we have to be listening regularly every day with our radio turned on and correctly tuned in to his frequency.

To have our radio turned on and tuned in means to sit silently for about half an hour or an hour in the morning, every day, without exception, focused on God, using perhaps an ejaculatory prayer in order to *focus* ourselves on God and prevent distractions. To have our radio turned on and tuned in to the right frequency also means to be *purified* and *prepared*, with an *undivided* heart and with a life *purified* of the *delights* of this world—and this purification requires time.

Then, when God wishes, he will descend into our heart and fill our whole being, when we are not meditating or thinking about anything, but only praying an ejaculatory prayer. We are in the darkness; we don't even know where we are. We are as though sleeping, but we are not asleep; and then suddenly a dazzling ray of the divine sun invades us and fills us with resplendent light, and we are intimately united with God in ineffable love which satiates us completely and fills our heart with light and divine love. This prayer can last about twenty minutes, according to St. Teresa of Avila; and she calls it “the prayer of union”. Others call it “apophatic prayer”.

This prayer can and should change our life, to live henceforth *only* for God, leaving all the rest. After this, the delights of this world lose their interest, and, in fact, we develop a new repugnance for them, knowing that they *diminish* and *extinguish* this splendor which illumines our whole life. The *ascetic* life prepared us to receive this light; and once received, this very light disposes us to live henceforth even *more* ascetically, *avoiding* the *pleasures* and *delights* of this world, so as *not* to *lose* this splendor, so as to remain *more* disposed to receive it, and so as to grow *more* in it.

Thus we continue growing spiritually, experiencing ever more often this prayer of union, which is something which *continually purifies* our life ever more, and leads us to a life ever more luminous, ever more in the light, to the point that we arrive at a new state of peace, light, and tranquility as our new normal state. At times this light is more intense and lasts for many hours and even days. I am not speaking now of the prayer of union, which lasts only about twenty minutes, according to St. Teresa, but I am speaking of this new state of peace and light which comes *after* we have grown *still further* after first experiencing the prayer of union. This new state of peace and light is unfortunately interrupted when we fall into imperfections and venial sins—at this point mortal sins have been overcome. Then we have to repent and wait until we feel truly pardoned in our human feelings, and then we can return again to our new state of light and peace.

St. Macarius (Pseudo-Macarius) of Egypt describes this new *state* of Light thus: “the soul contemplates uninterruptedly the splendorous light; it finds itself as though ‘mixed’ with the Holy Spirit. When it arrives at perfection, the soul is the temple of God, ‘it comes to be entirely light, entirely Spirit, entirely joy, entirely rest, entirely jubilation, entirely love...” (*Discourses and Letters* 13.2.4, in Cristofoor Wagenaar, “Macario de Egipto”, in Peter Dinzelbacher, *Diccionario de la Mística*, [Burgos, España: Monte Carmelo, 2000] p. 686).

Christ *gave* us his *glory* so that we might *contemplate* it and be *transformed* and *divinized*, as Jesus said, “The *glory* which you gave me [O Father], I have *given* to *them*” (Jn 17:22). He gave us his glory that we might *contemplate* it, as Jesus said, “Father, those whom you have given me, I wish that where I am, they also might be with me, so that they might *contemplate* my *glory* which you have given me; because you have loved me from before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17:24). And St. Paul tells us that this *contemplation* of the *glory* of Christ *transforms* us into the same *image* of the *Son*, filling us with glory, from one degree of glory to the next, “from glory to glory”. St. Paul says, “And we all, with unveiled face, *beholding* the *glory* of the Lord, are being *transformed* into *his likeness*, from glory to glory, by the working of the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18).

And St. Paul says that it is the *incredulity* of unbelievers which *blinds* them so that they do *not* see this *splendor*. He says: “if our gospel is still covered over, it is among those who are being lost that it is covered over, in whom the god of this age has *blinded* the understanding of the unbelievers so that the *light* of the gospel of the *glory* of Christ, who is the *image* of God, does *not shine* upon them” (2 Cor 4, 3-4). May we not be among those unbelievers. Thus we may live in and remain in the splendor of God.