



Pearls from Day 7: The Three Ages of the Interior Life

In all aspects of life we can identify three stages of progress. For example, in human development: childhood, adolescence, adulthood. In skilled trades: novice, journeyman, master/expert. In the arts: beginner, intermediate, master.

In the spiritual life, if we enter the mystical way, we move through three ages: purgative, illuminative and unitive. These three ways are founded in scripture and expounded by tradition.

The Purgative Way is the way of beginners (although a person has advanced far in relationship with God to desire to enter the purgative way). It is marked by:

1. Purity of heart – we come to avoid all mortal sin and abhor deliberate venial sin.
2. Mortified Passions – we gain the self-control over our disordered passions. This enables us to practice the positive side of virtue and thus gradually come nearer to the Divine Model.
3. Profound convictions on all the great truths – our souls come to deeply comprehend and believe God's truth, particularly through discursive meditation.
4. The prayer of the purgative way is meditation – in *discursive* meditation we move from topic to topic (discursive) and apply all of our mental faculties to come to know and believe God's truth. Over time our meditation simplifies and becomes simple expressions of love and affection, thus this is known as *affective* meditation (or affective prayer).

The Illuminative Way, it is thus named because the great aim of the soul is now the imitation of Christ (we walk by His light). It is marked by:

1. Contemplation – prayer simplifies further from affective meditation to infused contemplation. Contemplation is wholly a work of God, we can do nothing to initiate it, we only receive.
2. Growth in Virtue – a sustained effort to practice the moral and then theological virtues.
3. Warfare against the new offenses of the enemy – while we labor in the acquisition of the virtues, our spiritual foes are not idle.

The Unitive Way is a life of habitual and intimate union with God. It is marked by:

1. Great Purity of Heart – not merely the expiation and reparation of past faults, but detachment from whatever may lead to sin, horror for all deliberate venial sins and even for any willful resistance to grace. Purification is completed in the Unitive Way by passive trials.
2. Great Mastery Over Self – acquired by the mortification of the passions and the practice of the moral and theological virtues. The original order of things is to some extent restored, and the soul now in full control, can give itself entirely to God.
3. Constant need of Thinking of God – real suffering is experienced at not being able to be constantly occupied with the thought of God, and strenuous efforts are made to keep His presence in mind when duties demand attention to earthly cares.
4. Mystical union - the most advanced form of contemplation. The soul is fully transformed and in a state of deep communion with God.