**The Dark Night of the Soul – Message of Hope for the Secularized North**

As Christians we believe in Divine Providence. God is present in the reality where we live. He is at work in the ordinary life of ours. His saving grace can reach us wherever we are and however negative or positive our situation might be. It is very important for us to accept that we can only receive God’s grace here and now. The outward, surrounding reality can never be a hindrance to our relationship with God. However secular and seemingly void of religious influences our society in Northern Europe may be, it is here that we encounter God, it is here that we are transformed by his saving grace, it is here that we can proclaim the Gospel and help people to come closer to God.

Every time is a time of grace. Every culture and society is *le milieu Divin*, the divine atmosphere where God can be found and save us. We have to accept this fact in order to be able to be true to our vocation as Catholic Christians. It would be futile to dream of another time and culture where it would be easier and cosier to be Catholic. God is present among us, here and now in our secular atmosphere. We can live in a constant relationship of faith, hope and love with him. We can let ourselves be transformed by his saving power. We can find ways to make him known to our contemporary non-believers, so that they can receive God in their lives.

 In my opinion, Saint John of the Cross and his message about the Dark Night of the Soul has a special impact in this situation of ours. This saint, poet and mystic from *siglo de oro,* the Golden Age of the 16th century Spain, is actually extraordinarily close to the mentality of our contemporary situation in northern Europe. To know more about his message could prove providential for our personal spiritual life as well as for our way of explaining the mystery of salvation to non-religious people around us.

Saint John of the Cross wrote his poem about the Dark Night of the Soul when his Carmelite brothers put him in a dark and dirty prison in Toledo. Not all members of religious orders are saints – as we have seen very clearly recently when we have heard about all the terrible cases of abuse. During this period of suffering, John somehow could be able to see that God’s grace could become more relevant and fruitful for us in such circumstances. Even if everything is dark and we do not understand anything, even if God seems totally absent, we can come closer to him. In such a period of interior – and often also exterior – darkness, we are purified from all our *apetitos*. We have to discover a deeper level where we do not get any gratification whatsoever for our senses. We have to learn to live more according to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. We cannot rely upon having a feeling of God. Our feelings and senses cannot bring us closer to God. Even God’s absence can become a kind of sacrament of his presence. When someone we love is absent or far away, we long even more for him. It is the same with God.

In his explanation of this poem, John writes to his brothers and sisters in Carmel. In order to help those of them who cannot pray anymore he wants to teach them a new way to live in a constant and prayerful relationship with God. The darkness that they experience can help them not to rely upon the experience of theirs senses. The void and emptiness that they experience on the level of senses can help them to receive God on a deeper level. They have to learn to surrender totally to God, even if they do not feel his presence at all. This period of darkness is also a participation in the night of Jesus in the Garden of Getsemani. When we pass through the dark night of the soul we become closely united to the suffering of Jesus. His cross becomes our cross, our cross becomes his cross. When we finally come to realize this, and it can take much time to do so, we also see that the light of dawn is approaching, the light of Easter morning, the light of the Risen one.

Saint John of the Cross uses the image of the Dark Night of the Soul as explanation of the process of spiritual purification taking place in the praying person who accepts to be purified and surrender to God. He wants to help and teach them how to act and go further in faith, hope, and charity. But we can also use this image of the Dark Night for a community of people. In Latin America it was used to explain the darkness of persecution and oppression. A symbol from nature as the dark night can be understood in so many ways and by so many people, because we are constantly confronted by the fact that night follows upon day, over and over again.

In our Northern countries we are used to darkness. During much of the year it is dark and dreary around us, and often also inside us. In Sweden, they say that one million people take pills against depression. Many people experience life as a sad and dreary thing. When the Swedish poet Hjalmar Gullberg translated the poem of Saint John of the Cross, many people were profoundly touched. I am always surprised that so many say that they know from personal experience what the dark night of the soul is all about. Unfortunately, though, many of them will stick to the darkness without seeing that the suffering Christ is close to them and that he wants to share their night and bring them safely to the light. It ought to be the vocation of all of us to help and support all those people around us of good will, so that they can discover the healing and saving grace of God in this process of purification and salvation.

The main thing is to discover the hidden and unobtrusive presence of the Cross of Jesus in the midst of our night. He is more important than we and our darkness. Even if we do not hear or see anything, we believe in his saving presence. I know that a good many people in contemporary Sweden have been helped by John to see that their experience of the dark night is also an experience of salvation, liberation, and purification. So many people in our Nordic societies seem to live in a kind of collective depression. Life has no deeper meaning. They seek solace in money, sex, and drugs. They experience void inside themselves, and around themselves it is the same. Everything is without meaning and future. Some of them flee into a world of dreams that will never come true. Some look upon shopping or bingo or golf as a light in a dark world, yes, everything that make them forget how terribly empty their life can be helpful for the moment, but not for long. The evil one is very cunning, he is an expert in inventing false things that seem to take away the void inside us. And so is also our contemporary world with its consumerism. But void and emptiness are supposed to be filled with God. There is a hidden blessing in void, emptiness, even in all kinds of crises. To break down can even be the beginning of being built up as a renewed person by Christ himself.

It is important for us as Christians to recognize that we too share something of this situation. We also experience the void and emptiness. We cannot immediately tell them that everything will be well. As Thérèse of Lisieux, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, we too in a vicarious way take part in the dark night of the soul of our contemporaries. Our night as theirs is a night of reparation. Like Little Thérèse we long to help the Lord to save souls, and that implies that we have to take their burden upon our shoulders. Driven by a mystical solidarity and sincere love for them, we have to go through the dark night of the soul. We have to accompany them through their pilgrimage through the desert. Edith Stein wanted to share the suffering of her beloved Jewish people in order to show that the Cross of Jesus was at work in this terrible night of the Shoah.

When God became man in Jesus he took upon himself the suffering of all the world, from the beginnings of time up to the end of time. Jesus wants to share the dark night of every single human being. His message of universal salvation is meant for each and sundry. It is our task as his disciples to try to explain the mystery of immense mercy to those around us. In my opinion, the message of Saint John of the Cross about the Dark Night of the Soul has a special meaning for people around us in a society where God seems absent, where darkness and emptiness seem to invade the hearts of so many people. We are called to this New Evangelisation and often we do not know how to go about it. Maybe Saint John can help us. But then we also have to be willing to pass through this total purification in order to get rid of all our *apetitos*. So that’s the question: are we eager to surrender and give up everything in order to win everything? Are we willing to live a life of more simplicity and poverty in order to help our planet to survive? The climate crisis of our times is also a dark night.