



UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH DESERT PERIODS IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

The revelation of Mother Teresa's decades of spiritual darkness raises several questions for all people of faith:

- Why does God allow people to experience periods of spiritual darkness?
- Is God always the cause of desert times?
- How are we to deal with desert times?
- What do we mean by desert times or spiritual darkness?

Perhaps we can start with the last question first. For Mother Teresa and for most people times of spiritual darkness are those days, weeks, months or even years when we have little or no *felt* sense of God's presence. In faith we believe God is *always* present, but sometimes or maybe often, we may not experience his presence.

Sometimes the dryness is caused by ourselves, sometimes by circumstances of our lives and sometimes it is caused by God. Let us now look at all three.

Dryness caused by ourselves

The following are some indications that spiritual dryness is our doing and not God's:

- Our prayer has become disconnected from our real lives. The spiritual life is *all* of life and not just those times when we pray. The spiritual life includes every aspect of our lives, our relationships, work, business deals, recreation, and finances. Any attempt to exclude God from any area of our lives may result in a feeling of God's absence.
- We may be consciously, but more likely unconsciously angry or upset with God because he is not answering some prayer or helping us to deal with some painful aspect of our lives in a way *we* want him to do. When things go sour or bad in our lives and we cry out to God for help and no help seems to be coming we may withdraw from God. We may quit praying altogether or we may *say* prayers but in a rote fashion.
- We may be intentionally holding onto some resentment and refusing to even pray for the grace to forgive a particular hurt.
- We may be ignoring or denying some sinful pattern of behavior—which is very different from praying for

the grace to deal with some weakness or sin. In the former case, we are *excluding God*. In the latter we are *inviting God* into a weak or sinful area of our lives.

- We may be overworked and physically exhausted and unable to pray.
- Perhaps we are not being *honest* with God about how we truly feel about the real stuff in our lives. We may be doing a lot of 'sweet talk' to 'sweet Jesus', but failing to tell him how mad we are about something in our lives and even how mad we are with him. In human relationship when we stop being honest, the relationship flattens out and becomes boring and superficial. It is the same with our relationship with God.
- God may have become a low priority in our lives. Hence, our prayer is rote, superficial and most likely not very meaningful.

Sometimes desert times are caused by us and sometimes by God

So the above are some of the ways that *we* can push God away, some of the ways that *we* can build a wall between God and us, ways that *we* can cause our prayers to dry up.

The remedy for the above is in a sense easy enough. We just need to *repent* of wrongdoing on our part, repent of ways we have neglected our relationship with God, repent of our failure to be honest with God, repent any ways we have allowed other things to become more important than him.

Other circumstances that may cause our relationship with God to dry up

Sometimes our relationship with God is thrown into a time of spiritual darkness when bad things happen to us or to a loved one, e.g., sickness, loss of a loved one, relationship problems in our family. A relationship with a spouse, parent, child goes sour. We pray for help and it seems God is out to lunch. Mother Teresa wrote to a priest: "*Jesus has a special love for you. As for me - the silence and the emptiness is so great—that I look and do not see—I listen and do not hear.*"

Of course, for other people any or all of the above circumstances may lead them to draw closer to God.

A crisis of any kind can be a *danger* or *gift*. The danger is

that it may cause us to quit on God and church. The gift is that it may lead us back to God and church. Our *response* to the crisis can make us or break us.

Responding to the above forms of spiritual darkness

When bad things happen to good people, an enormous challenge is being issued even to people of strong faith.

Over the years, I have seen several responses:

- I have seen people lose faith in a good and loving God. They reason “if God is a loving and all powerful God, how could he allow such a terrible thing to happen to me and my family. I don’t need a God like that.”
- I have seen people go cold on God. They may still pray or go to church. But they seem to still carry a big hurt within them. It is as if they have not forgiven God for allowing the bad thing to happen.
- I have seen people struggle with God, get mad with God, withdraw for a while and finally ‘make-up’ with God. They don’t understand his ways (who does?), but they finally come to a point of saying “Ok. You are God, not me. Even though I don’t like some of your ways, I accept them.”
- I have seen people blessed with great faith ‘roll with the punches’. They don’t get mad with God. They may or may not question his ways. They just have a strong faith that enables them to believe God knows what he is doing and their job is to embrace his plan and ways even if they don’t like them.

We may be angry at God and unaware of it

What helps and hinders us as we try to embrace God’s ways in difficult times?

Obstacles

1. Pride, a big ego, a high need to control. Insofar as these characteristics are at work in us, we will find it very hard to *surrender and submit* to God’s strange ways. Unfortunately all too often, we may be blind to the extent of our pride, ego and our need for control.
2. Our inability to express anger with God about the painful stuff in our lives. A few of us may never need to express anger or disappointment at God, but it is very natural for the vast majority of us to feel this emotion. If we are upset with God and cannot *express* it in some way, there is a good chance we will remain stuck in our relationship with him.
3. Our refusal to seek help. If we tend to be very *self-sufficient* we will, most likely, have a difficult time reaching out for help. Very close to this may be our inability or unwillingness to be *vulnerable* with another.

If being macho is our game, we will have a strong resistance to seeking help.

In your opinion what are some other obstacles . . . ?

Helps

1. A high degree of *spiritual poverty*. The first and most important of the beatitudes says: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*” (Matt 5:1-12). The poor in spirit are those people who know their need for God. As a result, they have no problem getting down on their knees and admitting their neediness for God’s sufficient grace.
2. We are able to *name and give expression* to tough emotions, we may have around a particularly painful issue e.g., sadness, anger, jealousy of others, depression. These are sometimes called the ‘tough emotions’ - the ones we may be most uncomfortable with and have a tough time dealing with. If we have developed a certain capacity for dealing with these emotions, we will have a huge advantage over people who have little or no capacity for dealing with such emotions.
3. *Humility*—This virtue, often called the foundation virtue of the spiritual life, enables us to remember and embrace the fact that God is the Creator and I am the creature, he is the Potter and I am the clay, he is the One in charge, he is the Pilot and Director of life’s journey, not me.
4. A *resilient nature* that does not quit easily and is ready to do whatever it takes to turn the painful experiences of life into opportunities of growth.
5. A *strong faith* in God that helps us to believe in his presence even when he *seems* to be very absent.

What else helps us to make it through the tough times?

Spiritual Darkness sent to us by God

What are indications that a period of spiritual dryness or darkness may be sent to us by God?

- We are being faithful to and honest with God in prayer.
- We are seeking to allow God to be a part of every dimension of our lives.
- We are seeking to lead a life of loving concern for others.
- We thirst for a closer walk with God.

If we are doing all of the above and yet our prayer runs dry, if we have little or no *felt sense* of God’s presence we can probably assume that God is leading us into a time of spiritual purification.

Since none of us are perfect, all of us are *constantly* in need of spiritual purification.

It will happen in this life or in the next (in purgatory), for nothing unclean shall enter heaven. In general, we need to be purified of any or all *inordinate or excessive attachments* we have. This includes not only attachments to sinful patterns of behavior e.g., greediness, selfishness, the need to control others, health, lust, pride etc. but also excessive attachments to *persons, material things, to a particular pastime or passion* and even *spiritual experiences*. All *excessive attachments* can become little or not so little gods in our lives—often becoming *more important* than God himself. We may or may not be aware of the excessive attachments in our lives, but God is. Slowly but surely he seeks to veer us off these attachments either in this life or in the next—so that he may have front and center place in our life.

I don't know why God would keep Mother Teresa in a state of spiritual darkness for 50 years. Who knows the mind of God? Mother Teresa did ask Jesus to ONLY share in his Passion. Her years of spiritual darkness was certainly a big sharing in his Passion—probably in a way she was not expecting. Lesson: Be careful what you ask for. Mother Teresa's greatest legacy may not be her work amongst the poor, but her absolute fidelity to God during the 50+ years that he hid his face from her.

What can help us to not only survive but grow through desert periods?

- A strong faith that helps us to believe that God knows what he is doing (Romans 11:33-36).
- A faith that helps us believe that in the desert God is not punishing us but purifying us (Hosea 2:1-10).
- Remembering that in the desert God's *seeming absence* is just a different type of presence, one that we may not yet recognize.
- Fidelity to prayer. When we feel we are 'getting nothing out of prayer' there is a big temptation to quit. This is what the devil wants and all too often he wins. In general as we grow in prayer, we become less active—less rosaries, less reading and more sitting quietly in the presence of God, remembering the words of a Medieval mystic, "while we rest in him, he works in us." This is a huge challenge for Western people with a strong work ethic. We feel our prayer time is useless if we're not active and doing something. We become 'spiritual joggers'. We forget that spiritual transformation is *God's* work and not ours. He is the Potter, we are the clay.

While we rest in him God works in us

- The support of fellow pilgrims. In the desert of life all of us are beggars, sharing morsels of bread. Ideally, we

share our experiences with others, and let them share with us. Take what might be helpful, leave the rest. But we should resist the temptation to be advice givers or tell others what they need to do — especially if we do not have professional training in the area of spiritual guidance.

- Read good books about spiritual dryness. One author I highly recommend is Fr. Tom Green. S.J. Most of his books are published by Ave Maria Press. Three of his books that offer us much wisdom about spiritual dryness are:

When the Well Runs Dry
Darkness in the Marketplace
Wheat Among the Weeds

Recently, I just started to read a book called *The Fulfillment of all Desire* by Ralph Martin. This 400+ page book draws generously from the writings of the saints to offer us guidance as we journey into the life of the Blessed Trinity.

Have a great week,

