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DARK NIGHT

Weaning from One's Image of God Toward Spiritual Maturity

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St. John of the Cross, in his magnum opus *Dark Night of the Soul*, gives a poignant and vivid image of God as a mother nurturing her child:

> The soul, after it has been definitely converted to the service of God, is as a rule, spiritually nurtured and caressed by God, even as is the tender child by its loving mother, who warms it with the heat of her bosom and nurtures it with sweet milk and soft and pleasant food, and carries it and caresses it in her arms.[1]

Such a relationship speaks of a loving tenderness of the mother for the child in his/her fragility. It presupposes a passive dependence on the mother on the part of the child for all that he/she needs for survival as regards physiological needs—couched in the words *sweet milk* and *pleasant food*—and psycho-emotional well-being—expressed tactilely as *heat of her bosom* and *caresses [of the mother's] arms*.

However, the child needs to be weaned from maternal dependency to find himself/herself independent from his/her mother yet united in the profound reality of the mother-child bond. And by juxtaposition

[1]John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, ed. & trans. E. Peers (NY: Doubleday, 1959), 38. Inline citations indicate chapter and paragraph numbers.

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of the image of God as mother, one must move eventually beyond the infantile image of God if one is to mature in the spiritual life. St. John of the Cross refers to this transition of imaging God through his words:

> But, as the child grows bigger, the mother gradually ceases caressing it, and, hiding her tender love, put[s] bitter aloes upon her sweet breast, sets down the child from her arms and makes it walk upon its feet, so that it may lose the habits of a child and betake itself more important and substantial occupations.[2]

This essay supposes that this transition of one's image of God is an experience of the dark night of the soul. It attempts to capture the experience of the dark night as one of being weaned from his/her nurturant image of God proper for an infant to find his/her image of God as revealed through the Scriptures: as the *Other* who enters into a relationship with the *other*—having the disposition of freedom and responsibility—in mature intimacy.

God as Mother in the Sacred Scriptures

The Sacred Scriptures in the Old Testament are not void of the maternal image of God "related to birth and motherhood":

> Isaiah 42:14 speaks of God "cry[ing] out like a woman in labor" with gasps and pants. Similarly, Isaiah 46:3–4 describes God as having carried the house of Jacob "from the womb." In Numbers 11:12, Moses tells God that having birthed Israel, God (not Moses) should "carry [the nation] in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child" to the Promised Land. In Isaiah 66:13, the Lord tells Jerusalem, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."[3]

In the New Testament, Jesus alludes to himself the image of mother in Luke 13:34 as he "expresses the wish to gather Jerusalem's

[2]John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 38.

[3]K. Attanasi, "Can We Call God 'Mother'?" *U.S. Catholic* 79:6 (2014): 46.

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people like a mother hen."[4] St. John of the Cross must have had this image of God as mother which found its way into his writings such as *Dark Night of the Soul* I, 1, 2.

Two other metaphors—*breast* and *milk*—associated with the personification of God as mother stand out in *Dark Night of the Soul* I, 1, 2, which could provide a glimpse into the mother-child bond. The "child at its mother's breast" captures an "intimacy" that no other image can profoundly express:

> Isaiah invites Israel to rejoice and to "nurse and be satisfied" from the "consoling breast" of Jerusalem (shodh, 66:11), a metaphor for contentment, peace, and security.…[5]

Whereas in the New Testament, such intimacy is expressed in the relationship between "Jesus and the Beloved Disciple" as the "latter reclines against Jesus' breast … at the Last Supper (John 13:23)" in as much as "Jesus is 'close to the Father's heart,' literally, 'in the breast … of the Father' (John 1:18)."[6]

Milk as the other metaphor sustains and nourishes the body with its nutritional value. It is a "symbol of fruitfulness" together with honey in Ex. 3:8. In the New Testament, it is a "symbol for learning or teaching."[7] In reference to 1 Cor. 3:2, Claassens writes

> that [Paul] has fed the young converts with milk, not solid food. Milk … functions as an image for elementary Christian teachings that are easily digested by those who are "babies" in the faith.[8]

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[4]P. Tull, "Mother," in K. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 156.

[5]B. Reid, "Breast," in K. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 501.

[6]Reid, "Breast," 501.

[7]L. Claassens, "Milk," in Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, 86.

[8]Claassens, "Milk," 86–87.

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Hence, bringing together the metaphors of breast and milk into the image of God as mother speaks of a maternal bond between mother and child, one characterized by nurturance and dependence on the former for the latter's physical survival and psychological security, which are basic prerequisites for learning the rubrics of the faith. The mother-child bond can even be the precursor for the child's maternal imaging of God based on early experiences with his/her own maternal figure.

Human Developmental Theories of the Imaging of God

A-M. Rizzuto, taking on Winnicott[9] and Kohut,[10] proposes that the child's "first integrated experience—and representation—of the mother is used in the formation of the God representation."[11] Rizzuto writes:

> The eyes of the mother, and the entire face of the mother, are the child's first mirror. Later on, the experience is to be used directly in the first representation of God, whose mirroring function … echoes the biblical account of [humankind's] creation.… The first elaboration of a God representation … begins with eye contact between mother and child. It also shows that to create a God that is not oneself, the child has to pass through the glass of the mirror to where the real mother dwells.[12]

Nevertheless, the relational dynamic is grounded on the fact that the "child needs the other, whether mother or God. All the child can do is hope to be found acceptable."[13]

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[9]D. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971).

[10]H. Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

[11]A-M. Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 185.

[12]Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God*, 186–187.

[13]Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God*, 188.

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Meissner thinks along the line of Rizzuto:

> The child's earliest imaginings about God are cast … in the image of the parents. From about the age of three or four years, the child has no difficulty in imagining a God. But the universe of the divine is filled with fantasy and fascination, not unlike the world of fairy tales. And from the beginning, the child's image of God is colored with ambivalence; while there may be feelings of trust [in] and dependence on a kind, loving, and protecting God, there are also elements of awe and fear. This ambivalence can be colored by the child's emerging experience with the mother.[14]

For Vergote and Tamayo, one's image of God is closely "bound up with the symbolic parental figures that belong to the psychological realm."[15] However, more often than not, the representation of God is attributed to the mother than to the father:

> The representation of God integrates to a high degree the two parental dimensions, and is therefore more complex than the father figure.… The representation of God is more maternal than paternal because it stresses more the maternal qualities than the paternal.… Thus the divine presence is perceived, as an affective relation, as immediate as the attachment of the child to the mother.[16]

Contextualizing the Imaging of God in Faith Development

James W. Fowler, in his book *Stages of Faith* (1981),[17] proposes seven developmental-stage models in faith development: 1) undifferentiated

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[14]W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven, CT / London: Yale University Press, 1984), 139.

[15]A. Vergote & A. Tamayo, *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God: A Psychological and Cross-Cultural Study* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1980), 19.

[16]Vergote & Tamayo, *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God*, 206.

[17]J. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981).

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faith; 2) intuitive-projective faith; 3) mythic-literal faith; 4) synthetic-conventional faith; 5) individuative-reflective faith; 6) conjunctive faith; and 7) universalizing faith. A. Desrosiers describes them as a

> progression from one stage to the next [which] is hierarchical and sequential, with each new stage incorporating and expanding on the operations of the previous stage. Backward movement, however, also may occur, requiring reworking of faith issues in the previous stage.[18]

Moreover, Fowler's model is based on "faith stage transitions" that "represent significant alterations in the structures of one's knowing and valuing and, therefore in the basic orientation and responses of the self."[19] Hence, the transition from one stage to the next does not put the milestones of the previous stage into oblivion; rather, these are either modified or integrated into the new scheme of grasping and giving meaning to life's experiences toward the maturity of faith. These contents of faith organized into schemas give witness to the experiences of the human person as they unfold through temporal time and space according to the signification that the experience-r bestows on them. Fowler elaborates:

> In the process of transition … "everything nailed down is coming loose." Because of new operations and comprehensiveness in our knowing and valuing, both our previous knowledge and values and our ways of verifying and justifying our perspectives and our actions undergo change and must be reworked.[20]

The notion of transition in the stage theory of faith development as applied to the representation of God implies that the human person also reworks his/her image of God. One's image of God is not formed in a sterile vacuum; rather, it is worked and re-worked progressively according to the meaning that the experience-r attributes to a string

[18]A. Desrosiers, "Development of Religion and Spirituality Across the Life Span," in J. Aten, K. O'Grady, & E. Worthington, Jr., eds., *The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality for Clinicians* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 14.

[19]J. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 58.

[20]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 58.

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of significant experiences which is expressive of his/her level of psychological development as lived out in the faith life. Henceforth, one's image of God is challenged from its core, making the experience-r question his/her conception of God at each crucial point of life's transitions. However, one's image of God is founded on previous conceptions by holding on to those that are still in synchrony with and letting go of those that are contradictory to the newly emerging image of God. The dynamic at the point of transition is self-correcting and self-transcending to a personal encounter with God in depth, width, and breadth.

While they do not deny the transitions between stages, there seem to be two landmark transition points in Fowler's faith-stage model in relation to one's imaging of God. The first transition unravels between Stages 1–3 and Stage 4. Stages 1–3 presuppose a rather long period of unarticulated perception of an omnipotent Being, one borne from the relationship of mutuality between the mother or primary care giver and the child which Fowler labels as Stage 1: Primal Faith. He writes:

> The first symbols of faith are likely to take primitive form in the baby's hard-won memories of maternal and paternal presence. As dependable realities who go away but can be trusted to return, our primary care givers constitute our first experiences of superordinate power and wisdom, as well as [of] our dependence.… [Their] mixtures of rigidity and grace, of arbitrary harshness and nurturing love, are doubtless present in the images of God that take more or less conscious form.[21]

Stage 2: Intuitive-Projective Faith is initiated with the child's acquisition of his/her first words through the interaction between mother and child. For the child, God can be identified with the mother or the father as expressed through human language. The idea of God gets it meaning through the child's relationship with his/her primary caregiver.

> The preschool child who has access to the symbols, stories, and shared liturgical life of a religious tradition awakens to an expanded horizon of meanings. Though such symbols, in their archetypal power, can be misused … they also enrich the child's stores of meaning and can

[21]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 53.

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> provide powerful identifications and aspirations, as well as sources of guidance and reassurance.[22]

In Stage 3: Mythic-Literal Faith, the school-age child learns to think concretely in terms of causal relationships.[23] Moreover, the child learns that "good" behavior is rewarded while the "bad" is punished by the parent/s. And the child's image of the parent as one who both rewards and punishes could be projected unto one's image of God. J. Fowler expounds:

> One does not yet, however, construct the interiority (the feelings, attitudes, and internal guiding process) of oneself or others. In making sense of the larger order of things, therefore, this stage typically relies on the external structures of simple fairness. It most frequently constructs an ultimate environment on the analogy of a consistent, caring, but just ruler or parent.[24]

And just before one enters Stage 4: Synthetic-Conventional Faith, the adolescent could go into a transitional phase of existential questioning of one's "values, commitments, and relationships … as central to identity and worth."[25] The adolescent tends to fight against any imposition of authority based on reward and punishment. The word of any authoritative figure is challenged for its rationality and justifiability rather than accepted as it is. Institutional faith falls into the crevices of skepticism as one challenges his/her image of God in view of one's assertion of identity and independence from the parental influence. Hence, it is in this stage where one will have to reshape his/her imaging of God based on the premise that God is qualitatively different from that of parental representations. Fowler exhorts:

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[22]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 55.

[23]J. Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," in C. Dykstra & S. Parks, eds., *Faith Development and Fowler* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 28.

[24]J. Fowler, "Pluralism, Particularity, and Paideia," *Journal of Law and Religion* 2:2 (1984): 297.

[25]Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 29.

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> the images of self that one discerns that others have constructed do not necessarily fit nicely together. Nor are they necessarily congruent with one's felt images of self.[26]

It is at this stage that the kernel of desire for a personal relationship with God is discernible as one searches for and establishes who he/she is. There is a seeming simultaneity between the encounter of self and of God. Fowler writes:

> This stage holds together a vital but fragile dance in which we try to shape the movements of our life to give expression to a way of being forming from within, while at the same time trying to maintain connections and exchanges with all those to whom our becoming seems integrally connected.… From within this stage, we construct the ultimate environment in terms of the personal. God is one who knows us better than we can know ourselves—knows who we are and who we are becoming—and, in connecting deeply with others and ourselves, we are somehow linked with the depth, or height, of ultimacy.[27]

Stage 5: Individuative-Reflective Faith makes explicit that which is implicit in the previous stage. "It is occasioned by a variety of experiences that make it necessary for persons to objectify, examine, and make critical choices about the defining elements of their identity and faith."[28] As one moves through individuation of self, the image of God surfaces as distinct from the foreground of the parental image. And as the person eventually begins to articulate explicitly the answers to his/her question—"Who am I?"—God reveals God's self as Yahweh—"I Am who Am." This could be the point of an authentic encounter between the person and God to forge a relationship of mutuality founded on faith, hope, and love rather than on the primitive dynamic of reward and punishment from childhood experiences, a relationship freed from the neurotic compulsions of the "Letter of the Law" in view of the "Spirit of the Law" and from ritualism in favor of dialogue through the discernment of the heart in God. Maturity in

[26]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 59.

[27]Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 29–30.

[28]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 62.

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faith would have to entail purifying the image of God of one's parental representations and identifications.

The second transition point takes place between Stage 5 and Stage 6: Conjunctive Faith. The integrity of the self at mid-life which has been held by the person after the Individuative-Reflective stage would be challenged by its own vulnerabilities of "contradictions, polarities, or at least, paradoxical elements."[29] Fowler explains:

> Faith … learns to be receptive, to balance initiative and control with waiting and seeking to be part of the larger movement of spirit or being. It develops a second willed naivete, an epistemological humility in [the] face of the intricacy and richness of mystery.[30]

One would have to live within the tensions of life. Tension places the polarities of the self into a dialectical relationship rather than taking them as extreme opposites of the axes. Existential life is a tension between the conscious and unconscious selves. It is through dynamic interaction that the clarification and purification of experiences that lead to greater understanding can take place so as to arrive at a judgement of values of the transcendental order that would bring one to a decisive act.[31] And, as applied to faith development, it is in the existential questioning of "Who is God?" vis-à-vis "Who am I?" that one lives through the tension between holding on to the image of God arising from his/her parental representations and letting go of such infantile images as one comes face-to-face with faith-life experiences such as pain, suffering, death, and separation that challenge one's integrity and authenticity. Nevertheless, it is also in the creative fidelity and openness of living through the tension that the opposites clarify and purify each other's pretension or unknowing. And in the internal push-and-pull of the believer in search of himself/herself, an image of God apart from parental representations springs forth

[29]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 64.

[30]Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning," 30.

[31]B. Lonergan, *Understanding and Being: The Halifax Lectures on Insight* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990), 33.

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contemporaneously with an image of self. God, Who Is I Am Who Am, manifests God's self to encounter the believer as who he/she truly is.

Finally, Stage 7: Universalizing Faith is the movement of inclusive expansion of one's radius of relationship emanating from the centrality of one's self-identity in God from the previous stage. One

> decenters in the valuing process to such an extent that he/she participates in the valuing of Creator and values other beings—and being—from a standpoint more nearly identical with the love of the Creator for creatures than from the standpoint of a vulnerable, defensive, anxious creature.[32]

And, as Fowler puts it explicitly, "[a]n identification with or participation in the Ultimate brings a transformation in which one begins to love and value from a centering located in the Ultimate."[33]

Weaning from the Maternal Figure of God

Transitions in the faith development theory can be seen from the point of view of weaning oneself from an upheld image of God that has become an inflexible faith scheme in relating with the Transcendent Being, one that can prevent growth toward maturity in a person's spiritual life. This is expressed implicitly in the explicit words of St. John of the Cross:

> But, as the child grows bigger, the mother gradually ceases caressing it, and, hiding her tender love, puts bitter aloes upon her sweet breasts, sets down the child from her arms and makes it walk upon its feet, so that it may lose the habits of a child and betake itself more important and substantial occupations.[34]

Such poignant verse speaks of the internal struggle that the mother needs to grapple with herself—between holding on and letting go of her child. It is a painful experience for the nurturant mother having

[32]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (2000 ed.), 55–56.

[33]Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 31.

[34]John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 38.

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to let her child stand with his/her own feet and take the initial steps on the path of faith. In the same manner, it is also difficult for the child to be out of sight of his/her mother's protective love and care. It opens the child to the world of uncertainty, doubt, and insecurity. As the mother painfully detaches herself from her child, the child helplessly attaches himself/herself to the mother almost with a quality of desperation. And yet the mother must decide to cut the umbilical cord that breeds mutual dependency if she desires the self-autonomy of her child as contemporaneous with establishing the child's self-identity. Moreover, the autonomy-and-identity-giving detachment of the mother-child bond opens the child to an image of God as Father who is also motherly in His nurturing care. Hence, the child's new image of God is an integration of paternal and maternal qualities but one that transcends the child's parental representations. As St. John of the Cross puts it:

> The loving mother is like the grace of God, for, as soon as the soul is regenerated by its new warmth and fervor for the service of God, He treats it in the same way; He makes it to find spiritual milk, sweet and delectable, in all things of God, without any labour of its own, and also great pleasure in spiritual exercises, for here God is giving to it the breast of His tender love, even as a tender child.[35]

The nature of spiritual weaning in this context is attributed to the transitional phases between Stages 1–3 and 4 and between Stages 5 and 6 as the defining leap in re-imaging God from the infantile to the adult representation of God rooted in a personal encounter of intimacy-in-relationship that opens to the consolidation and integration of the transcendent qualities of the God-image. Furthermore, the language of "weaning" being equated with "transition" in faith development could be analogous, in spirituality parlance, to St. John of the Cross's "Dark Night."

[35]John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 38.

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Weaning as Analogous to the Dark Night

Bäumer and Plattig echo the notion of the Dark Night as a transitional movement in the "spiritual development of [human persons] … in the context of … the decisive stages of transition, [in the] steps of development and maturation."[36] The authors continue:

> Becoming a Christian person therefore means growing to maturity, and this is a task of discerning, of separating. Regressive infantilism, longing in a certain sense to return to the womb, should therefore be distinguished from creatively giving shape to spiritual childhood in the correct proportion of dependence, freedom and self-reliance.… Convictions and principles of faith valid in the past, images of God hitherto shaped by experience, and a fulfilling prayer life are fundamentally called into question. To use the same metaphor, [the human person] weaned from the mother's breast and put [on their] own feet feels repudiated by God. Nothing is the same as before, the safety of spiritual wellbeing has turned into cold distance.[37]

Spiritual weaning is the dialectical movement between attachment and detachment. One must detach from one's infantile image of God to allow a new and more authentic image of God to surface into the consciousness of one's psychological and faith life. The human person is freed from the obsessive fear of punishment that breeds neurotic guilt which only leaves the human person with the compulsively ritualistic trappings of self-defined perfections. Holding on to one's image of God could be defensive maneuvering to evade having to confront an uncharted territory of the spiritual life. The human person clings to that which is seemingly comfortable and familiar, even to the point of controlling and manipulating the expression of the faith life according to the cognitive scheme that comes with one's image of God. Compulsive attachment is a movement favoring spiritual regression that follows the unending path of a vicious cycle. This is contrary to the promise that detachment offers to the human person who takes the risk of letting go of one's fears and inhibitions in favor

[36]R. Bäumer & M. Plattig, "Dark Night and Depression," *Carmelus* 61 (2014): 88.

[37]Bäumer & Plattig, "Dark Night and Depression," 88.

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of a real encounter with a living God, not just a mental image or construct, thereby leading one to spiritual progression. It could be the key, perhaps, to breaking out of suffocating circularity and open to the immensity of the transcendental horizon. Bäumer and Plattig write:

> As long as these closed systems function for individuals … as long as they yield the desired results, they continue to exist unchallenged. But if they are called into question by external or internal occurrences, e.g. by experiences of suffering and death, of dryness and absence of comfort, they enter a state of crisis and must be revised, restructured and maybe even completely left behind. This is the only way … development, maturation and growth will happen, which therefore are inextricably linked to abandonment, questioning, and crisis. This process, of course, might be more or less distinct, [for] the crises of human growth and maturation have varying degrees of intensity, but it remains to emphasize that every positive development includes an element of crisis.[38]

Dark Night of the Soul Experience

St. John of the Cross distinguishes between two phases of the dark night experience: the night of the senses and the night of the spirit, both with active and passive aspects. These are two phases of a single phenomenological experience. May writes:

> During the dark night of the senses, the soul finds freedom from its attachments to particular sensory gratifications, while the dark night of the spirit releases attachments to rigid beliefs and ways of thinking, frozen memories and expectations, and compulsive, automatic choices. Since the intellect, memory, and will cannot grasp God, they, like the senses, need to be "darkened," emptied of the false gods they cling to.[39]

The dark night can be a threatening experience for the human person. It situates one face-to-face with one's own vulnerable self. It can be a crisis of personal integrity and identity that challenges one's view of oneself and eventually impinges into one's image of God.

[38]Bäumer & Plattig, "Dark Night and Depression," 89.

[39]G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 80.

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Such vulnerability of self challenges the human person's core being by lifting off the layers of superficiality and pretensions built through psychological defense mechanisms. Thus, the dark night of the senses exposes the human person's defenses of un-freedom while the dark night of the spirit purges them. Here it is stressed empathically once again: an encounter of self is an encounter with God.

St. John of the Cross gives practical points for living through the dark night of the soul during the active phase. May summarizes:

> The active night of the senses usually involves spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, journaling, retreats, and spiritual guidance.… The active night of the spirit is characterized by similar disciplines and restraints applied to the intellect, memory, will, and imagination.… [T]hree theological virtues … are instrumental in freeing the spirit from its attachments. Faith darkens and empties the intellect, hope frees the memory, and love liberates the will.[40]

> Both of the active nights involve disciplines of restraint, [and] attempts to reverse usual habits of stuffing oneself with sensory, intellectual, spiritual, or any other kind of gratification. Both are movements toward subtraction rather than addition, simplification rather than complication, emptying instead of filling, relinquishment rather than accumulation.[41]

And, in the words of Bäumer and Plattig,

> In terms of developmental psychology the active Night of the Spirit signifies the process of [the human person's] coming of age, of weaning [oneself] from "the sensory breasts" (*Dark Night of the Soul* 1, 13, 13) and from the mother's milk of sweet attachment to religious experience.[42]

St. Thomas Aquinas's dictum "grace builds on nature" would probably encapsulate the active night of the soul. God's grace penetrates into the seeming void that is left over from the self-emptying dynamic of the passive night. It seeps into every crevice of the human soul to heal it from its pain and suffering. God empties God's self into the hollowness of the human heart that one's decision of self-

[40]May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 81.

[41]May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 83.

[42]Bäumer & Plattig, "Dark Night and Depression," 90.

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emptying has created. It is in this space that one encounters God to forge an alliance of intimacy. It is in this space that a new image of God contemporaneous with one's self-image comes to a new dawn in one's spiritual journey. May summarizes it well:

> Though we don't realize it at the time, when habitual senses of God do disappear in the process of the dark night, it is surely because it is time for us to relinquish our attachment to them. We have made an idol [out of] our images and feelings of God, giving them more importance than the true God they represent. This can happen with any image or sense of the Divine.… No matter what specific form they may take, all such [rigidly] held feelings about God restrict our openness to the incomprehensible divine reality.[43]

Nevertheless, God never promised that this path will always be a bed of roses. In the words of Bäumer and Plattig:

> The seriousness of the [dark] night experience, however, will only be achieved in the passive Night of the Spirit, when all the soul's activity is overtaken by the divine activity. For the soul this feels like being cast out into the darkness, abandoned by God, an experience of poverty and misery.[44]

Conclusion

The dialectic between attachment and detachment or holding on and letting go, respectively, of the dark night experience gives a concrete perspective to Lonergan's transcendental method of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding. The dialectical relationship clarifies, purifies, and liberates one's image of God from its preconceived prejudices as influenced by the psychological developmental context of the human person, viewed specifically through Fowler's faith development theory. The dialectical dynamic is put into play through the transitional phase of weaning the human person from dependency on an infantile image of God that is based

[43]May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 91–92.

[44]Bäumer & Plattig, "Dark Night and Depression," 90.

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on reward and punishment to an independent reliance on a personal God that invites him/her into a relationship of intimacy in faith, hope, and love without losing his/her identity. In Lonergan's conception, the dark night is the experience itself that, through reflection, leads the human person to an understanding of the limitations of one's imaging of God whereby holding on to it brings no promise, only the falling into the trap of a regressive and vicious cycle.

On the other hand, the glimpse of understanding, although not crystal clear, opens the human person to a transcendental image of God that goes beyond one's parental representations. However, it calls for a constant judgement of values and the subsequent decision to act on them to come closer to the "I Am Who Am" inasmuch as one becomes "who I am." Hence, an encounter of God is an encounter of self.

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