Journey Through the Dark: An Ignatian Approach

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by

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1. Introduction

In preparing this major paper in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the theological program, I was encouraged to choose a research area that I am interested in exploring. As a life-long lay person brought up in the Roman Catholic Church, at times I find my spiritual growth seems to have reached a point of stagnation, and at times I lose track of the path ahead. Moreover, living in a world which seems to have all kinds of disasters and human suffering, how am I to deepen my faith and find God in all things in everyday life? It is these personal experiences and thoughts that urge me to find out more about spiritual darkness and the universal call to the fullness of Christian life. I am grateful that in the process of working on this paper, I was led to a state of quietude. Moreover, my own spiritual journey and spiritual darkness also has been very much enlightened.

This research paper will examine some aspects of the Christian spiritual journey, and spiritual darkness that a Christian may experience along the journey. This will be done in the context of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The focus of this paper, in particular, will examine the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises insofar as they offer assistance to those who are experiencing spiritual darkness in their spiritual journey.

In examining the Christian spiritual journey and a spiritual growth model in this
paper, the historical three-fold model of *Purgation-Illumination-Union* that was
developed by Pseudo-Dionysius in the late fifth to the early sixth century is examined.

Although there have been other spiritual journey models developed by subsequent
doctors of the Church, such as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Three Kisses*, and Saint
Teresa of Avila’s *Seven Mansions*, the *Purgation-Illumination-Union* model is found to be
the most fundamental one to which many subsequent spiritual growth models refer. The
present paper also makes reference to a contemporary Jesuit scholar’s comment on the
inter-connected modes of progression in the three-fold model. The spiritual journey and
spiritual growth is not perceived merely in a linear progression but also may proceed
through circular and spiral progressions.

When examining spiritual darkness, the writings of Saint John of the Cross are
examined. His well known *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*
are concerned with the spiritual journey of one’s soul toward union with God. In his
writing, he uses the Dark Night to signify spiritual darkness or profound purification that
one experiences as one seeks to grow in spiritual maturity and union with God. Although
there are other authors who write about spiritual darkness and their own experiences of
tremendous trials and sufferings, such as Blessed Mother Teresa, and Dorothee Sölle, the
work of John of the Cross proves to be the most influential. Some spiritual authors may
use the terms ‘spiritual dryness’ and ‘spiritual darkness’ interchangeably, but they have
different meanings and lead to different interpretations. For clarification, in this paper,
spiritual darkness refers to the interpretation given by John of the Cross in his writing.

In examining an approach to spiritual darkness in one’s spiritual journey, the richness
and depth of Ignatian spirituality is examined. In order to focus on the progressive nature
of spiritual growth, the systematic Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* are applied. Another
reason for examining the *Spiritual Exercises* is because I believe that there are
commonalities between the spiritual darkness experience and the Third Week of the
*Spiritual Exercises*. In both situations, the soul of the person can undergo profound
purification through the apparent absence and abandonment of God. It is only in such a
state of complete emptiness and surrender of self that God’s transforming work takes place.
Moreover, there is not much literature that refers to the correlation between John of the
Cross’ Dark Night and the Third Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

This major paper is divided into five chapters: (i) Introduction, (ii) Methodology, (iii)
Literature Review, (iv) Discussion, and (v) Summary and Conclusions. The sections on
literature review and discussion are the core parts of the paper. The literature review was
done with reference to the three inter-related sub-topics: the spiritual journey, spiritual
darkness and Ignatian spirituality. Based on the findings from the literature review, the
discussion section is sub-divided into four parts: active purification, passive purification, finding God in all things, and areas for further exploration; here, the thoughts of John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola, and some other authors, as well as my own observations and reflections are applied.

Lastly, I also would like to note why I have not used gender-neutral language in this paper. Despite my full respect for the use of gender-inclusive language, I have chosen to use the pronoun ‘he’ as generic for both genders. This is mainly to avoid the excessive and very awkward use of ‘he or she’ or ‘s/he’ in a paper of this type.
2. Methodology

This research paper was prepared in three stages: the initial topic selection stage, the research proposal writing stage, and the actual paper writing stage. A wide range of secondary sources, such as books, academic journal articles, and the internet were used throughout all three stages. Books for this paper were mainly drawn from the three theological libraries on the University of British Columbia campus – the Dr. John Micallef Memorial Library at Saint Mark’s College, the John Richard Allison Library of Regent College and Carey Theological College, and the H. R. MacMillan Theological Library at Vancouver School of Theology. These, coupled with the scriptures and past studies in spirituality, formed the sources for this research paper. No primary research was conducted in the process of gathering information.

In carrying out the search for books in the library catalogue systems, electronic copies of articles, and information on the internet, Google was used as the primary search engine. In addition, a number of specific websites about Ignatian spirituality and Ignatian Spiritual Exercises were accessed directly, such as The Way, and Review of Ignatian Spirituality.

This paper, Journey Through the Dark: An Ignatian Approach, describes how Ignatian spirituality can help a person live through spiritual darkness in his spiritual journey. Accordingly, three inter-related topics were used for the process of information
gathering: the spiritual journey, spiritual darkness, and Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. Keywords such as ‘spiritual journey,’ ‘spirituality,’ ‘Christian spirituality,’ ‘Pseudo-Dionysius,’ and similar terms were used for searching information regarding spiritual journey. Keywords such as ‘spiritual darkness,’ ‘spiritual dryness,’ ‘dark night of the soul,’ ‘Mother Teresa,’ and similar terms were used for searching information regarding spiritual darkness. As for Ignatian spirituality, keywords such as ‘Ignatian spirituality,’ ‘Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises,*’ ‘Jesuits,’ ‘Ignatian Third Week,’ and similar terms were used. Moreover, combined keyword searches also were applied when looking for information regarding the inter-relationship among the three sub-topics, such as ‘spiritual journey darkness,’ ‘John of the Cross Ignatius,’ ‘spiritual journey Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises,*’ and similar terms.

Not all the information gathered from these sources was used. Information was selected for inclusion if it was relevant to the thesis statement of this paper.
3. Literature Review

3.1 The Spiritual Journey

3.1.1 Universal Call to Holiness and Perfection

Spirituality involves a belief in, and experience of, the supernatural and the transformation of one’s consciousness and life as an outcome of that belief and experience. Christian spirituality, specifically, is centered on the experience of God as savior through Jesus.¹ It is the quest for an ever-deepening union with God in and through Jesus Christ by living in accord with the Holy Spirit.² Christian spirituality also is described as a way of discipleship in the Church, which brings about a direction and a goal to follow Jesus Christ in the Christian life.

All Christians are called to be holy and perfect. Jesus summed up His own teaching by saying, “… Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”³ Scripture also says, “… You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”⁴ The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) affirmed the universal call to holiness whereby all the baptized are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity.⁵ Therefore, to

⁴ Leviticus 19:2, 1 Peter 1:15-16 (New Revised Standard Version).
become holy, or perfect, is a command to all followers of Christ. Blessed Mother Teresa perceives that there is nothing extraordinary about being holy, it is simply the duty of each person to be holy in the role God has given him. Holiness is not limited to a sacred place or to moments of private prayer; “… it is a call to direct one’s whole heart and life toward God according to His plan for this world.”

A Christian’s spiritual journey is a process of continual conversion and transformation in response to the universal call to holiness and perfection. It is God in His holiness who calls us to holiness. “… In the beginning He created us to be holy like Him. At the end He intends us to be with Him in His holy presence. And now (in the midst of the journey), He is in the process of drawing us into deeper union with Him and His holiness.” As the Israelites were led out of slavery into the desert and then on to the Promised Land, followers of Christ are pilgrims, who set out on a spiritual journey through the desert, expecting to be freed from the bondage (of sin); the ultimate goal is perfection, union with God. The journey to holiness can never be completed on this earth.

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8 Martin, *Called to Holiness*, 33.

9 Kieran Kavanaugh, *John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999), 190. Spiritually speaking, there are two levels of perfection in the journey to holiness. The ultimate perfection is beatific vision, which is attained after death. The other is union of love, which is acquired by the grace of God through complete mortification of one’s vices and indulgence of the pleasures of this world.
merely an individual journey, but a corporate one in solidarity with others who are on the same journey.\textsuperscript{10}

### 3.1.2 Four Principles of the Spiritual Journey

In his apostolic letter ‘At the Beginning of the New Millennium - Novo Millennio Ineunte’ of 2000, Pope John Paul II highlights that the spiritual journey is “… a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the Dark Night). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as ‘nuptial union’.”\textsuperscript{11} He also identifies four principles that are basic to a proper understanding of the spiritual journey:\textsuperscript{12}

i. To reach the goal of union with God in the spiritual life is a gift and grace of God. It is unattainable by human efforts alone. He is both the Way, and the destination of the journey.

ii. Even with God’s grace, human effort is still necessary to bring about such union. The efforts we make help dispose us to receive the gifts of God.

\textsuperscript{10} Cunningham et al., *Christian Spirituality*, 51.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4-6.
iii. In order to make us capable of deep union with God, a necessary, though painful, process of healing, purification and transformation is involved.

iv. All the effort and pain of the journey is worthwhile. It will appear in retrospect to have been light instead of darkness.

3.1.3 Pseudo-Dionysius: Purgation, Illumination and Union

There are different ways of perceiving the Christian spiritual journey. Historically, a spiritual journey is expressed by the three-fold process of purgation (or purification), illumination, and union (or perfection) that was formulated by Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite (late fifth to early sixth century). The purgative stage refers to a period of cleansing, which usually takes place in the initial phases of the spiritual life. It includes coming to conversion and turning away from sin, bringing one’s life into conformity with Christian practice.\footnote{Ibid., 11.} The illuminative stage refers to the light of God shining on the soul, and is one of continuing growth. “... It is characterized by deeper prayer, growth in the virtues, deepening love of neighbor, ... greater detachment from all that is not God, and increasing desire for full union.”\footnote{Ibid.} The unitive stage refers to the experience of oneness with God. “... It is characterized by deep joy, profound humility, freedom from fears of
suffering or trials, and great desire to serve God … Suffering now becomes primarily the grace of sharing in the redeeming suffering of Christ.”

The fundamental concern of all the three stages is spiritual knowledge and understanding. The concept of purgation concerns the purification from relative ignorance. Illumination concerns the enlightened contemplation of the sacraments. Perfection concerns perfect knowledge “… to behold sacred things with a perfected understanding or to be enlightened in the perfect understanding of the sacred illumination”.

The Pseudo-Dionysian negative way (via negativa) declares that God reveals and transcends Himself “… in all the created order and in human knowledge. But, … He is not fully known in creation or in any human concept.” No human concepts are capable of fully expressing the ineffable God and must therefore be negated and left behind as the journey nears its final goal. This implies the negation and abandonment of all human language, conceptions and knowledge of God that were previously attained; the silent darkness of unknowing results in union with God.

15 Ibid., 12.
17 Ibid., 140.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 140-141.
3.2 Spiritual Darkness

3.2.1 John of the Cross: The Night

John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Carmelite friar who joined with Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) in reforming the Carmelite order, is one of the great doctors of the Church and masters of prayer. In his writings of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul*, John of the Cross developed different schemes to describe the stages of transformation, but there are two basic patterns: the twofold and the threefold. The twofold scheme is based on the division of the soul into its sensory and spiritual parts in accordance with the Thomistic tradition of his day. Each of these parts is further subdivided into an active night and a passive night. The threefold scheme is based on the classical Pseudo-Dionysian division of the spiritual journey into “… purgation, illumination, and union; or the stages of ‘early evening’ or ‘twilight,’ ‘midnight,’ and ‘early dawn.’ It also corresponds to the stages of ‘beginners,’ ‘proficients,’ and ‘the perfect.’”

John of the Cross uses the Night to signify purification, and the Dark Night to signify spiritual darkness or the tremendous trials ordained by God in one’s spiritual journey.

The experience of the Dark Night is one of the possible experiences of dryness in prayer;

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21 Ibid.
however, for beginners in the spiritual life, tepidity or infidelity in spiritual practice, physical or emotional fatigue and illness are not considered by John of the Cross as the Dark Night experience. In cases like these, consolations may be found in things other than God, such as in indulging the flesh in the pleasures of this world. On the contrary, a true Dark Night is permitted by God, and consolations can only be found in Him. John of the Cross provides three indicators to help discern the nature of a true purgative dryness or Dark Night:

Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, He does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything. Through this sign it can in all likelihood be inferred that this dryness and distaste is not the outcome of newly committed sins and imperfections.²²

John of the Cross explains that a genuine purifying dryness may coexist with some elements of emotional problems, such as depression. If the concern to serve and please God persists in the midst of the difficulty, it is a sign of God’s purifying work.²³

Those suffering from the purgative dryness are ordinarily solicitous, concerned, and pained about not serving God. Even though the dryness may be furthered by melancholia [emotional difficulties such as depression], … it does not thereby fail to produce its purgative effect in the appetite, for the soul will be deprived of every satisfaction and concerned only about God.²⁴

John of the Cross further mentions that in the midst of the dryness, the soul is being

²² Martin, The Fulfillment of All Desire, 172.
²³ Ibid., 173.
²⁴ Ibid., 172-173.
invited to a new dimension of prayer, a ‘being still’ and simply knowing that He is God – meditative or reflective prayer becomes more contemplative and infused.\textsuperscript{25}

This purgation of the senses is the powerlessness, in spite of one’s efforts, to meditate and makes use of the imagination, the interior sense, as was one’s previous custom …. God begins to communicate Himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation in which there is no discursive succession of thought.\textsuperscript{26}

3.2.2 The Night of the Senses and the Night of the Spirit

John of the Cross divides the human soul into senses and spirit in his writings.  The ‘senses’ refer to exterior bodily senses while the ‘spirit’ refers to the interior faculties of intellect, memory, and will.  The Dark Night must purify and transform both the exterior sensible faculties and the interior faculties of the soul.  He adds that the night of the senses is common and happens to many (beginners),\textsuperscript{27} whereas the night of the spirit is the portion of very few (proficients).\textsuperscript{28} Some people are satisfied remaining at the level of beginners.  This satisfaction with the status quo hinders them from progressing on the spiritual journey.  The purpose of the night of the senses is to bring the senses into

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 173.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Thomas H. Green, \textit{Opening to God: A Guide to Prayer}, Reprint (Manila, Philippines: St Pauls Philippines, 2006), 79.  John of the Cross uses the word ‘beginners’ to refer to those who experience the Dark Night of the senses rather than those who are generally beginning in Christian life.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Thomas H. Green, \textit{Drinking From a Dry Well: A Sequel to When the Well Runs Dry} (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 38.
\end{itemize}
harmony with the spirit, so that they can be accommodated and united to the spirit. The night of the senses is an initial purification in the earlier stages of the spiritual journey that brings about a reasonable ordering and control of our appetites. It is like cutting the weeds off at ground level, but still leaving the root underground. As the spiritual journey continues, a deeper purification is necessary to eradicate the roots of sin (from the spirit).

John of the Cross explains that for a soul to journey through the Dark Night to divine union, only the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and charity – can lead to emptiness and purification: faith causes darkness and a void of understanding in the intellect; hope begets an emptiness of possessions in the memory; and charity produces the nakedness and emptiness of affection and joy in all that is not God. God purposely removes the sensation of His presence in order for the person to mature in faith, hope and love. This purification of faith (believing without seeing), hope (hoping without possessing), and love (loving without demanding) is the means and preparation for the soul’s union with God.

3.2.3 The Active Night and the Passive Night

John of the Cross also distinguishes between the active night and the passive night of

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29 Ibid., 42.
30 Martin, The Fulfillment of All Desire, 350.
31 Kieran Kavanaugh, John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love, 144.
32 Martin, The Fulfillment of All Desire, 170.
the soul. The active night refers to what one must do to dispose oneself to encounter God, whereas the passive night refers to what God does to purify the person.\textsuperscript{33} To purify the senses, intellect, memory and will of any attachments by human effort (the active night) is not sufficient. Souls, who are in the illuminative stage (the state of proficients,) may experience intervals of purification in a relatively stable, peaceful state for years, but a deeper and more intense form of purification by God is still necessary for union with Him. John of the Cross calls this deeper transformation by God passive purification, and it is considered more important than the active purification; this is the subject matter of the Dark Night of the soul. He uses the analogy of a burning log to describe how the purifying action of God’s Spirit works and what it accomplishes in the Dark Night:

\begin{quote}
The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Once transformed, the soul (the wood) no longer has any activity or passivity of its own, for it possesses the properties and performs the actions of God (fire). The passive night is the period when God strips the soul of the disordered attachments that one is still

\textsuperscript{33} Thomas H. Green, \textit{Opening to God}, 78.
\textsuperscript{34} Martin, \textit{The Fulfillment of All Desire}, 352.
holding onto. John of the Cross makes clear that what one is undergoing “… is not just a trial, a suffering, or a temptation, but an actual work of God deep in the soul … who infuses pure light and love into the soul (‘dark contemplation’’).\textsuperscript{35}

God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings …. The Lord works all of this in the soul by means of a pure and dark contemplation.

\subsection{3.2.4 Transformation in the Dark Night}

The darkness does not come from distance, but from God’s communication itself.\textsuperscript{36} Despite the revelation through the Son, Jesus Christ, God continues to be present in the darkness, and makes darkness His hiding place.\textsuperscript{37} John of the Cross applies the Pseudo-Dionysian view that illumination is to see God not as light, but rather, as a ‘ray of darkness’.\textsuperscript{38} The light of God cannot be seen as light in the stage of illumination because it goes beyond the soul’s natural capacity.\textsuperscript{39} Purification (of both the senses and the spirit) increases rather than decreases in the stage of illumination, as the light comes into

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 358.
\item Kavanaugh, \textit{John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love}, 146.
\item Psalm 18:11 (New Revised Standard Version).
\item Howells, \textit{John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila}, 129.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
immediate contact with the rational faculties, ‘darkening’ them.\textsuperscript{40} The soul is unable to feel or know God in the midnight of the Dark Night. However, “… the dark illumination ceases to be so dark, as the light of early dawn arrives, and the soul comes to know the spiritual light it possesses.”\textsuperscript{41} The soul only attains the ability to feel and know God positively, when it enters into union proper.

John of the Cross’ emphasis on the Pseudo-Dionysian negativity of the Dark Night stresses God’s communication through His absence, rather than His presence, in the progress toward union. The suffering of the soul in the early stages of union serves to conform the soul to the humanity of Christ. ‘Christ is the Way’ for the entire Dark Night.\textsuperscript{42} He says:

> Our annihilation is a death … patterned on Christ’s, just as Christ in His humanity was certainly annihilated in His soul, without any consolation or relief. We receive the humanity of Christ through the dark nights in our own living, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior death of the cross.\textsuperscript{43}

One can identify with the humanity of Christ in one’s own Dark Night. John of the Cross’ writings emphasize the suffering of the soul in the process of transformation. He does not intend to deny one’s humanity, but to achieve the encounter with Christ and conform the person to Christ. “Suffering is the means of her [the soul] penetrating further,

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
deep into the thicket of the delectable wisdom of God.” Therefore, only by following in the footsteps of Jesus, who achieved the “… union of the human race with God … at the moment in which He was most annihilated in all things,” can one rise with Him in union in the midst of rejection and abandonment.

In the Dark Night, one can find the Wisdom of God. Since Jesus Christ is the divine Wisdom, the Word, the Son of God, then dark contemplation is “… the presence of Jesus Christ as Wisdom, and the Dark Night is the time when the image of Jesus-Wisdom takes on all the marks of crucifixion: suffering, isolation, failure, marginality, rejection, abandonment, hopelessness, meaninglessness, death. The image of the crucified one, reflective of a seemingly silent, incomprehensible God, functions in the Dark Night as incomprehensible, secret, hidden and yet loving Wisdom.” The Dark Night is therefore not something, such as a difficult situation or distressful psychological condition, but someone, like “… a presence leaving an indelible imprint on the human spirit and consequently on one’s entire life.” It is through the image of the suffering Jesus that God purifies and transforms one’s human personality, and ultimately, leads the person into the experience of communion and connectedness with Him.

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44 Ibid., 134.
45 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
3.3 The Ignatian Approach

3.3.1 Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), an older contemporary of John of the Cross, was the founder and the first Father General of the Society of Jesus. He held that both prayer and action done according to God’s will are two complementary aspects of one’s spiritual life. He emphasized discerning God’s presence in ordinary daily activities, and saw God as an active God who is constantly laboring in all things in the world. Ignatian spirituality involves an awareness of the interior disposition of the soul; this disposition leads to a union with God that is centered on contemplation and wholehearted action for the greater glory of God and the kingdom of Christ.48 Ignatius developed the Spiritual Exercises from his own personal experience as a man seeking to grow in union with God and to discern God’s will. Ignatius wrote that the Spiritual Exercises embrace:

every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities … of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.49

Their purpose is to lead a person to a true spiritual freedom by “… the conquest of self and the regulation of one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of

any inordinate attachment.”

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius also outlines two sets of rules for discernment, which seek to help exercitants discern choices in life. Consolation and desolation are the two basic movements in the soul used in discernment. He wanted individuals to undertake the *Spiritual Exercises* with the assistance and companionship of a spiritual director who would help them understand what they were experiencing along their spiritual journey. Normally, the *Spiritual Exercises* are carried out in two ways – extended over approximately thirty days in a silent retreat away from home; or in the midst of daily life over a period of eight to twelve months. However, depending on the suitability of each exercitant, the *Spiritual Exercises* can also be adapted to the exercitant, and condensed into a weekend or an eight-day retreat based on selective Ignatian themes. This paper will consider the conventional way rather than the adapted way.

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50 Ibid., no. 21.
51 Ibid., no. 313-327, no. 328-336.
52 Ibid., no. 316-317.
53 Ibid., no. 19.
54 Ibid., no. 18.
3.3.2 The Structure of the *Spiritual Exercises*

Ignatius organized the *Spiritual Exercises* into Four Weeks, which are not literally seven-day weeks, but stages on a journey to spiritual freedom and wholehearted commitment to the service of God. This progressive Four Weeks division corresponds to the historical three-fold process to union with God that was formulated by Pseudo-Dionysius: the purgative way in the First Week, the illuminative way in the Second Week, and the unitive way in the Third and the Fourth Weeks.\(^{55}\) The First Week involves contemplation of human sin and God’s love. It deals with meditations on sin, examination of conscience, confession, penance, and God’s love. Through the seeing of himself as God’s continuing and dynamic creation, the exercitant comes to the realization of his personal sin and sin in the world, as well as God’s divine love. The exercitant is invited to work with God in bringing about God’s loving intention for which human beings are created. The Principle and Foundation, on which the whole *Spiritual Exercises* are grounded, is also laid down in the beginning of the Week.\(^{56}\) This will be discussed more in greater depth later in this paper.

The Second Week includes contemplation of the life and ministry of Christ, covering His birth, baptism, and teachings. The exercitant is also brought to four thematic

\(^{55}\) Ibid., no. 4, 10.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., no. 23.
meditations: the Call of the King, the Two Standards, the Three Classes of People, and the Three Kinds of Humility. They are designed to help the exercitant grow in a desire to follow Christ, the Eternal King, and to “… ask for an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love Him more and follow Him more closely.”57 This Week (as well as the First Week) also includes the guidelines for discernment that enable the exercitant to make an ‘election’ or choose a state of life in which God wishes him to serve.

The Third Week is meant to lead the exercitant deeply into Paschal Mystery through contemplating and sharing in Christ’s Passion and Death, and to confirm him in the election he has made. The exercitant meditates on the ultimate expression of God’s love: Christ’s Last Supper, Passion, and Death. The contemplations of Christ’s suffering and bearing of the sin of the world are a continuation of the meditation on the Principle and Foundation. The exercitant is invited to be present with Christ as He endures His Passion. It involves being present helplessly and painfully with a loved one who is suffering or dying. The exercitant may “… reach a point of extreme powerlessness, and experience inner darkness, abandonment, and reprobation.”58

57 Ibid., no. 104.
The Fourth Week is an invitation to share in the joy and consolation that Christ has acquired for us through His resurrection. The exercitant meditates on Jesus’ Resurrection, His apparitions to His disciples, and His continued life in the world today. It concludes and reaches its climax with the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God. The exercitant is called and commissioned to walk with the risen Christ and set out to love and serve Him in concrete ways in everyday life, finding Him in all things. Upon completion of the Spiritual Exercises, the exercitant has experienced and come to know God as the giver and the gift Himself. God is making the exercitant a dwelling place; He is also laboring for and present to him in all things.

3.3.3 The Spiritual Exercises and the Spiritual Journey

Spiritual growth may not be a completely linear progression as described by the Pseudo-Dionysian three-stage journey. A contemporary Jesuit scholar, Jean-Marc Laporte, explains that three inter-connected modes of progression are at work: the linear, the circular, and the spiral. His view is that going through one’s own spiritual journey is the work of God’s spirit within the exercitant. Thus, one could have experiences of mystical union at an earlier stage in life while still experiencing the need for a new

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59 Ibid., no. 230-237.
conversion in the stage of purgation. Likewise, persons predominantly in the illuminative stage may discover areas which require a return to the earlier stage of purgation.60

Laporte describes the purpose of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* as being “… to reform what is deformed;” the Second Week “… to conform what is reformed;” the Third Week “… to confirm what is conformed;” and the Fourth Week “… to transform what is confirmed.”61 He also illustrates that the classical stages overlap over the Four Weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises*. For example, the illuminative stage covers both the Second Week and the Third Week, since it requires “patience, perseverance, the ability to meet and to surmount obstacles and temptations; and readiness to give up one’s life” for union with Christ.62

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61 Ibid., 16-19.

62 Ibid., 17.
4. Discussion

4.1 Active Purification

Both John of the Cross and Ignatius of Loyola stress the need for an ongoing process of purification of soul, or conversion of life, in one’s spiritual journey in order to bring about interior freedom and ultimately union with God. This interior freedom corresponds to the ‘nothingness’ in the burning log analogy of John, and the ‘indifference’ of the Principle and Foundation of Ignatius. John of the Cross’ various schemes of Night signify the kind of purification that takes place in different stages of the spiritual journey. He emphasizes the need for active purification of the senses and the spirit for beginners in the purgation or early evening stage. Ignatius stresses a number of penitential practices in the First and the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises for gaining true self-knowledge, and “… preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies.” The exercitant is helped toward this by the techniques such as the examination of conscience, penance, meditation, contemplation, discernment of spirits, and three specific questions: “… What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?”63 By examining the Principle and Foundation and other spiritual practices outlined in the Spiritual Exercises, this section will discuss

63 Ibid., no. 53.
how these exercises can assist exercitants going through spiritual darkness in the stage of active purification.

4.1.1 The Principle and Foundation

The Principle and Foundation that is laid out in the very beginning of the *Spiritual Exercises* grounds the positive relationship between man and God, and presents the basic ordered set of values upon which the whole *Spiritual Exercises* are based. It outlines a vision of life and the most basic criteria for making choices. In order to facilitate making good choices, one must cultivate a spirit of indifference or detachment to bring about an inner freedom.\(^6^4\)

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created …. We must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things ….\(^6^5\)

After contemplating sin from the point of view of its cosmic, historical, and personal consequences in the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, the exercitant is led to a deep


\(^{65}\) Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, no. 23.
understanding and realization of God’s love and, consequently, to a call for conversion.

The First Week contains three meditation exercises on sin, namely, the ‘history of sin,’ the ‘psychology of sin,’ and the ‘eschatology of sin.’⁶⁶ In the context of salvation history, the Principle and Foundation was breached by the disobedience of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, then by the grave sin of individuals throughout the ages. The exercitant is invited to use the three powers of the soul to examine these sins: the memory, the understanding, and the will.⁶⁷ The meditations are not so much about the particulars of the sin of the angels, or Adam and Eve, but rather, about the notion that sin has a history. Their purpose is to lead the exercitant to acknowledge the shamefulness of all sin and find “… interior contrition for his sins, or to weep much over them, or over the pains and sufferings which Christ our Lord suffered in His Passion ….”⁶⁸ The exercitant is further invited to reflect on the whole course of his life, and to meditate on his own personal sin and sinful tendencies.⁶⁹ The realization of sin in the world and his personal sin is not meant to overwhelm the exercitant with pity, hatred, or guilt; rather, it is to bring him to a deeper understanding of God’s love for him while he is still a sinner, and to instill in him a sense of what sin is about, as well as to heighten his awareness of disordered attachments.

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⁶⁶ Hugo Rahner, Ignatius the Theologian (London, U.K.: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 67. Also, Spiritual Exercises, no. 45-54 for ‘the history of sin;’ no. 55-63 for ‘the psychology of sin;’ and no. 65-71 for ‘the eschatology of sin.’

⁶⁷ Ibid., 69-72. Also, Spiritual Exercises, no. 50, 51 and 52.

⁶⁸ Ignatius, The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, no. 87.

⁶⁹ Ibid., no. 56-57.
It is a time for gaining an honest interior knowledge of himself and a deeper knowledge of God. It is also about personal transformation or conversion of heart.

4.1.2 Examination of Conscience

Ignatius introduces two forms of examination of conscience: the particular and the general. The general examination stresses opening the heart to God, and patience with oneself. It challenges the exercitant to change the failings that impede growth and block the genuine encounter with God. Ignatius recommends that the examination be done once or twice daily, and suggests five points of prayer: (i) giving thanks to God for the favors that he has received; (ii) asking God for grace to know his sins and to rid himself of them; (iii) examining how he has lived his day from the time of rising up to the present examination; (iv) asking God for forgiveness; and (v) making resolution to amend with the grace of God. The particular examination follows logically after the general examination. When making the particular examination, the exercitant is invited to focus on one personal weakness that predominates his life. Gradually, the exercitant is made conscious of his failings at the very time he inclines to commit them. Both the general and particular examinations are ongoing exercises to help the exercitant gain interior

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70 Ibid., no. 24-31, and no. 32-42.
71 Ibid., no. 43.
knowledge of himself. This relates to John of the Cross’ active purification of the senses, so that help can be acquired in gaining true self-knowledge and positively disposing oneself to encounter God, whilst freeing oneself of disordered attachments.

4.1.3 Penance

Ignatius also introduces penance as a means of active purification of soul. He divides penance into interior and exterior forms. Interior penance is the grace which is sought throughout the First Week and can be described as a deep sorrow for one’s sins and a firm purpose of amendment. Exterior penance consists of taking on a certain self-inflicted chastisement to concretize one’s regret about failings and determination to love God and neighbor. Ignatius mentions three principal reasons for doing penance: to make satisfaction for past sins; to help overcome one’s selfish inclinations; and as a form of prayer for seeking grace or a gift that one earnestly desires. Penance is the agere contra of ascetical tradition – an act against natural inclinations which are in need of correction. Acts of bodily penance are a visible expression of one’s inner attitude; they are done for God, are a training of the will and mastering of desires that bring unruly instincts under control. This corresponds to what John of the Cross says about bringing the senses into

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72 Ibid., no. 82-90.
73 Ibid., no. 87.
harmony with the spirit, so that they can be accommodated and united to the spirit.

### 4.1.4 Meditation and Contemplation

Active purification of soul, such as examination of conscience and penance, demands not only self-knowledge (with self-acceptance), but also knowledge of God. The two key prayer methods that Ignatius uses in the *Spiritual Exercises* are meditation and contemplation. Meditation and contemplation of scripture use the faculties of reasoning and imagination to discover who God is. The exercitant reflects not only on the historical life of Jesus, but also on how God reveals Himself, through the life and teaching of Jesus in the exercitant’s life today. Meditation and contemplation complement each other and are techniques for positively preparing and disposing oneself to encounter God, especially in the early stages of purgation. God’s self-communication in contemplation creates in the person the corresponding receptive capacities and attitudes of faith, hope, and love.\(^7\) As one progresses in the illuminative stage, as John of the Cross explains, the soul is being invited to a new dimension of prayer. “God begins to communicate Himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation,”\(^7\) thus making meditative prayer less discursive but more contemplative and infused.

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75 Martin, *The Fulfillment of All Desire*, 173.
4.1.5 Discernment of Spirits

Discernment of spirits is another technique for disposing oneself to rid the soul of disordered attachments, and to see and find God’s will through the Spiritual Exercises. Discerning the good spirit from the evil spirit is done by a deepening dynamic of inner spiritual awareness. Consolation and desolation are the two basic inner spiritual movements for discernment. In general, if a person is honestly trying to grow in relationship with God, what comes from God causes consolation in the soul, and what comes from the evil spirit causes desolation. Consolation comes in several forms: when one is imbued deeply with the love of God; when one comes into a deep realization of himself as sinner; when one realizes he is Christ’s beloved in the face of His Passion; and when one finds his life much strengthened in faith, hope and love.\textsuperscript{76} It also bears signs of peace, intensity of faith, confidence and love for God. Consolation does not necessarily please the bodily senses, but at times may be accompanied by aridity and hardship, as in the Dark Night of John of the Cross. On the other hand, desolation exists when one is disturbed and agitated, or one experiences a lack of faith, hope or love, i.e., the opposite of consolation.\textsuperscript{77} Likewise, the signs of desolation can at times be accompanied by sensory pleasures.

\textsuperscript{76} Ignatius, The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, no. 316.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., no. 317.
Consolation and desolation can be expressed in subtle ways. Ignatius provides two different levels or sets of rules that govern the discernment of spirits. The first set of rules involves choosing between good and evil, and is more appropriate for use in the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*.\(^78\) The second set of rules is more subtle, and involves choosing among various alternative goods in order to follow Christ more closely in the Second or later weeks.\(^79\) Understanding that the evil spirit can deceive and obscure discernment by disguising itself under the appearance of good, the fruits that ultimately prevail in the soul are further used to discern the source of consolation.\(^80\) Both the good spirit and the evil spirit can give consolation to a soul, but for different purposes:

The good angel consoles for the progress of the soul, that it may advance and rise to what is more perfect. The evil spirit consoles for purposes that are the contrary, and that afterwards he might draw the soul to his own perverse intentions and wickedness.\(^81\)

Ignatius’ rules may be applied to John of the Cross’ Dark Night on two levels. John’s early evening or twilight corresponds to the purification from disordered attachments. Thus, discernment is to meant distinguish between good and evil, i.e., to identify the will of God in order to follow it.\(^82\) As the excercitant progresses in the Night,

\(^78\) Ibid., no. 313-327.
\(^79\) Ibid., no. 328-336.
\(^81\) Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, no. 331.
\(^82\) Segundo Galilea, “Temptation and Spiritual Discernment in Ignatius of Loyola and
John’s discernment presupposes that a choice (to follow Christ) has already been made, and focuses more toward the profound purification of the spirit by aridity and trial of the Dark Night of the soul.\textsuperscript{83} Thus, in the Dark Night, one is to discern whether the Night is from God who brings difficult consolation, or is from the evil spirit who takes advantage of the aridity and misleads the exercitant toward desolation.

In this process of discernment, it is important that the exercitant is accompanied by a spiritual director. For genuine discernment, the relationship between the spiritual director and the exercitant requires mutual respect; the exercitant is to open himself up to his spiritual director. The spiritual director helps the discernment by patiently listening, supporting, and assisting the exercitant to recognize the voice of God. He is not to impose his own ideas onto the exercitant, but rather, he is to facilitate the direct communication between God and the exercitant. This is emphasized by Ignatius at the beginning of the \textit{Spiritual Exercises}: the director is to “… leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with its Creator the Lord.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} John of the Cross."
\textsuperscript{84} Ignatius, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius}, no. 15.
4.2 Passive Purification

Despite all the human efforts that one puts into the process of active purification, it is still God’s transforming work that produces the end result. As the exercitant progresses faithfully in his spiritual journey, a deeper and more intense form of purification is necessary for perfection and union with God. The proficient exercitant is led to the midnight where God’s direct transformation takes place. The soul is unable to feel or know God in this dark illumination stage as God is seen as a ray of darkness instead of light. God uses this experience of spiritual darkness to strip the soul of disordered attachments.

By examining John of the Cross’ Dark Night of the soul experience and Ignatius’ Third Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, this section will discuss how the prayer experience in the exercises can assist an exercitant going through his profound passive purification of aridity and trial. It will also discuss how this prayer experience can bring about a wider perspective for apostolic work.

4.2.1 The Prayer Experience in the Third Week

John of the Cross’ Dark Night experience correlates with the Third Week experience of the *Spiritual Exercises*. As the exercitant progresses in the *Spiritual Exercises*, he is
able to have more self-knowledge, a sensitive awareness of his disordered attachments (in 
the First Week), and a deeper knowledge of God through the life and ministry of Jesus (in 
the Second Week). Through the contemplation of Christ’s Paschal Mystery in the Third 
Week, the exercitant is invited to seek confirmation regarding: firstly, the rightness of the 
election made in the Second Week; secondly, the mystery of God’s salvation throughout 
the whole universe; and thirdly, God’s unique plan for the exercitant in the suffering 
mystery of Jesus. 85

The Third Week focuses on the Cross, and how Jesus suffers in His humanity, through 
which the exercitant is drawn to the acceptance of his own humanity and suffering. The 
desire of this Week is for compassion for Christ, “… to ask for sorrow, compassion, and 
shame because the Lord is going to His suffering for my sins.” 86 One desires “… sorrow 
with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the 
great affliction Christ endures for me.” 87 Three points in particular are suggested in this 
Week to help the exercitant experience an empathy with Christ: consider what Christ 
suffers; consider how the divinity hides itself; and consider how Christ suffers all this for 
my sins. 88

85 George A. Aschenbrenner, Stretched for Greater Glory (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 120. 
87 Ibid., no. 203. 
88 Ibid., no. 192-197.
The prayer experience of the exercitant in the Third Week can be extremely dry and painful. The exercitant may find that he cannot use his imagination in prayer; or that he is unusually distracted; or that Jesus seems to be distant.\(^{89}\) Moreover, the contrasted images of an active, dynamic Jesus as a savior in the Second Week and a suffering, defeated Jesus in the Third Week may also bring about confusion, fear, bitterness, hopelessness, and helplessness. In contemplating the pain and sorrow of Christ, the exercitant may be overwhelmed by the experience of inner darkness, extreme powerlessness, loss, betrayal, abandonment and rejection, and feel like he is caught up in an impasse, a ‘no way out’ situation. It is like being present with a loved one who is suffering or dying. At the deepest levels of the contemplation, the exercitant sees himself as being failed by Jesus, the Son of God, whom he has earlier elected to follow. This extreme state of desperation, isolation, and emptiness correlates with John of the Cross’ Dark Night of the soul. In this experience, support systems, such as all kinds of close relationships, which the exercitant has depended on and trusted before, are removed, leading him to an experience of disintegration, and of deprivation of worth.\(^{90}\) It is also the time when accumulated intellectual knowledge falls apart and becomes unreliable; life’s experiences and memories

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become an illusion and a mockery; love and desires become the cause of agony of rejection.91

4.2.2 Compassion and Consolation in the Third Week

However, by totally surrendering himself to God, the exercitant’s interior faculties are transformed by God through the three theological virtues, thus bringing about compassion and consolation. In seeking to have compassion for Jesus, suffer with Him, and share His poverty and humiliation, God is at work at deeper levels in the exercitant’s interior faculties of intellect, memory and will; this frees him from disordered attachments. These three theological virtues are the only option for overcoming the fear and helplessness that the exercitant is undergoing interiorly; they open the possibility for radical change in consciousness and affectivity in contemplative posture or vision.92 Faith moves the exercitant into the mystery that is far beyond human understanding; hope forfeits his struggle to press meaning out of loss and build a trustful commitment to the impossible; and charity overcomes the will for hatred or violence and allows the exercitant to live honestly with the pain of his own woundedness and longing.93 The virtues of faith, hope and love slowly re-pattern or transform desire and consciousness, and prepare the

91 Fitzgerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 103-104.
92 Ibid., 105.
93 Ibid.
exercitant to participate in the knowledge of Jesus (Wisdom).\textsuperscript{94} By remaining faithfully in prayer, expressing his feelings and thoughts and asking for help, the exercitant is brought to a deeper level of compassion, even if he is feeling completely helpless and inadequate. In contemplating the humanity and the hidden divinity of Jesus, who chose to bear the sin of the world and suffer the consequences of it, the exercitant finds himself more and more focused on Jesus, and less focused on himself. He may also come to the realization of God’s complete solidarity with human weakness and suffering.\textsuperscript{95}

Consolation in the Third Week may come with the experience of compassion with Jesus in His suffering and dying. Instead of seeking to be consoled by Jesus, the exercitant is called upon to console Jesus. By staying with Jesus, the exercitant is also transformed at the same time. He is being attached to “… the God of consolations rather than to the consolations of God.”\textsuperscript{96} He may experience dryness, but with patience, sadness, and sorrow affirmed with love and hope. He may feel distance from Jesus but with understanding that He has to suffer this alone. He may have difficulties with distractions, but faith and trust may also persist.\textsuperscript{97} In this painful consolation, the exercitant is invited to surrender himself and be present with Jesus while He is suffering.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Dean Brackley, \textit{The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times} (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 182.
\textsuperscript{96} Society of Jesus, “Journey Through the Mystery of the Third Week.”
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
He may gradually join Jesus in praying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is not a cry of despair and abandonment, but “… a sign of love and longing in faith and hope for a God who … can bring light out of darkness, life out of death.”

In receiving the grace of compassion for Jesus, the exercitant may feel not only what Jesus Himself suffered, but also what He is still suffering in all the people who suffer in the present unjust and violent world. Such compassion for a suffering world means taking on the heart of Christ and the compassion of God, in which the mystical body of Christ is experienced in a mysterious way. It may also be that the deepest motivation and vision for the work of social justice and solidarity with those who are suffering in the world arises from the compassion of this Week.

4.2.3 The Dark Night at the Societal level

The Dark Night experience of abandonment, rejection, suffering, and ‘no way out’ takes place also at a broader societal or global level. At the personal level, God and the people we love and trust seem to fail us; whilst at the societal level, we are failed by the institutions, the social, economic, and political systems on which we depend. Our society

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today claims that avarice can create wealth, happiness, security and self-sufficiency.

These false promises mislead people to desire external things as ends in themselves. The market-driven life encourages competition and economic aggression rather than contentment. Instead of having the economy exist to serve the person, it works the other way around by having the person exist for the economy. In retrospect, economic greed was (and still is) the major factor behind the global economic crisis in 2008. Some politicians are greedy for power and thus fail to regulate and enact policies that could alleviate the economic crisis. Some stockbrokers and investors are greedy for quick money, and thus create unsustainable economic booms. Some corporations and owners are greedy for profits, and thus reduce wages and treat employees as objects of production.

In facing these economic situations of injustice, we may find ourselves helpless, oppressed, and dehumanized. In the midst of these Dark Night experiences in our society, there seems to be no way out.

By learning to read the signs of the Dark Night in our own inner lives and interpersonal relationships, and by bringing them into prayer, we may understand the deep meaning of the signs of the Dark Night in the world. Christ’s Passion teaches us to find God hidden today in our wounded society. The image of the suffering Jesus

101 Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night.”
(Wisdom) is in images of the poor, the oppressed, and the exploited. It reveals “… the collective darkness, the shadow of humanity.”\textsuperscript{102} It also draws us deeper into human suffering and solidarity with the suffering. The Dark Night not only brings to consciousness the collective longings of humanity, but also knowledge of Jesus.\textsuperscript{103} It is by bringing these Dark Night experiences to contemplative prayer, “… to the perspective of God, that our society will be freed, healed, changed, and brought to new vision.”\textsuperscript{104}

The 2011 Egyptian revolution has inspired the world, and demonstrated God’s presence in human suffering. It tells us that the oppressed, the persecuted, and the suffering ones have the power to bring about social change, collectively and non-violently. In the midst of their thirty years of impasse and situations of ‘no way out’ under a dictatorial regime, the Egyptian people found strength in their helplessness and hopelessness; they overcame their fear of the consequences of pursuing truth, justice, freedom and peace. Likewise, human history also confirms that pain and suffering are unavoidable in most revolutions and reforms in order to bring about a new regime, and a new life. It is in the Dark Night that God’s transforming work takes place.

\textsuperscript{102} Fitzgerald, “Desolation as Dark Night,” 101.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{104} Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night.”
4.2.4 Beyond the Dark Night

As suffering and death are means to a new life in the Paschal Mystery, the Dark Night experience is a sign of life and of growth. It is a sign to move on in hope to a new vision and new experiences. The Dark Night speaks of “… life buried in its opposite: life concealed, life invisible, and life unseen in death.”\textsuperscript{105} It is also a stage in the development of our relationship with God, with others, and it helps to develop our societal life. Therefore, the continuation of our spiritual journey through the Dark Night, the Paschal Mystery (Christ’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection) is to be seen as coherence and unity, and is not to be divided separately into individual events. Disproportionate emphasis on the Passion and Death may lead one to take life overly seriously, while too much emphasis on the Resurrection may lead to a superficial optimism in the misfortunes of life.\textsuperscript{106} Beyond the sadness and disappointment of the Passion is God’s love permeating the universe.\textsuperscript{107} The Passion is a compassionate joy “… accomplished by the risen Jesus and is also a way of life for His followers.”\textsuperscript{108} It is in the very experience of Dark Night, suffering and abandonment that God’s transformation work is taking place.

In the \textit{Spiritual Exercises}, the Third and Fourth Weeks taken together may be

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Aschenbrenner, \textit{Stretched for Greater Glory}, 118.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
considered “… the ‘unitive way,’ for the grace being sought is union with Christ, first in suffering and then in glory. The unitive way is the stage in our spiritual life when we move out of ourselves and toward Christ in much the same way as Jesus moves out of Himself all through the Passion.”

Mary Magdalene and other early disciples were not able to recognize the resurrected, glorified Christ in ordinary human interactions because they continued to hold on to earthly suffering and the death of Jesus, initially. The meditations of the Fourth Week reveal that the divinity of Jesus, hidden during the Passion, is “… appearing and manifesting itself so miraculously in the most Holy Resurrection in its true and most sacred effects.”

In contemplating Jesus’ apparitions, the full glorious vision and revelation that had been hidden and buried at Jesus’ death are now radiated in the risen Jesus, who is alive and present in our everyday life.

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111 Aschenbrenner, *Stretched for Greater Glory*, 130.
4.3 Finding God in All Things

Despite the fact that one may tend to believe that the risen Jesus is alive and present in one’s everyday life, this can remain an intellectual faith rather than a faith of the heart. At times, the extreme state of desperation and isolation that these Dark Night experiences bring is hard to bear, and it is difficult to see that God is present. In the midst of all kinds of disasters and human suffering in the world today, how are we able to find and see God in all things in our lives?

In Ignatian spirituality, ‘Finding God in All Things’ is the essence of union with God. For Ignatius, a person can achieve union with God in contemplation as well as through the actions of everyday life. The God of Ignatius is not deistic or remote, but is an almighty God who dwells in creatures and continues to work in the creation of the world and for the redemption of mankind. He also “… works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth.” Thus, union with God can be achieved through an awareness of God’s presence in the world as well as through prayer in the traditional sense. To find God in all things also means to seek and do God’s will. Ignatius believes that union with God is a union of human will with God’s will in action. This union of will requires a total

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112 George A. Lane, *Christianity Spirituality: A Historical Sketch* (Chicago: Loyola Press), 44.
obedience and a right intention in all things.\footnote{114}{Lane, \textit{Christianity Spirituality}, 46.} Obedience is not mechanical, but rather, motivated by a personal love of God, as Jesus learned through His suffering: “… remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”\footnote{115}{Mark 14:36 (New Revised Standard Version).} Jesus surrendered His own will and submitted to the will of the Father. In seeking God’s will, Ignatius also stresses discovering it through the discernment of spirits. He emphasizes the need to be attentive to the interior movements of the heart – consolation and desolation – through which we can discern the will of God.

Being able to find and see God in all things is a gift and grace of God’s self revelation, yet one still needs to co-operate with God to bring about union. In the last exercise of the \textit{Spiritual Exercises}, the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God, the exercitant is reminded that “… love consists in a mutual sharing of goods, … the lover gives and shares with the beloved what he possesses, … and vice versa, the beloved shares with the lover ….”\footnote{116}{Ignatius, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius}, no. 231.} God, being the lover and the gift, initiates a relationship with humans in and through creation and history. As in the Second Week, the exercitant is invited to ask for an intimate knowledge of God through “… the many blessings received, that filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Mystery.”\footnote{117}{Ibid., no. 233.} Profound
gratitude arises when the exercitant realizes through God’s grace that everything he has is gift, and gift undeserved.\textsuperscript{118} This growth in awareness is an intimate knowledge of God not gained by study, but through God’s revelation to the exercitant. “The more intimate we allow God to become, the more like God we become, … thus our love becomes more universal and embraces all that God dreams for the world.”\textsuperscript{119} The exercitant is also asked to remember with deep affection all the gifts he has received, both as part of the universe and of the human race, to the extent that he will want to give all of himself to God as expressed in the prayer ‘Take, Lord, and Receive.’\textsuperscript{120} The exercitant is further invited to reflect on how God dwells in all things, thereby, deepening his awareness of God’s immanence in the universe.\textsuperscript{121} He is also asked to experience God’s action in creating and sustaining the universe, and to consider “… all blessings and gifts as descending from above … as the rays of light descend from the sun. …”\textsuperscript{122} Through the gift and grace of divine revelation, the exercitant is able to have more intimate knowledge of God and the world, and ultimately, he will also be able to find God in all things.

God is present in everything. He makes darkness His hiding place. He is the ray of darkness as well as the ray of light. He is the defeated and the dead, but He is also the

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 183-184.
\textsuperscript{120} Ignatius, \textit{The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius}, no. 234.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., no. 235.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., no. 236-237.
victorious and the risen. He is the Wisdom who works and labors in the Dark Night of the soul. He is the lover and the love. He is with the millions of oppressed in the revolution in Egypt, and also in the social unrest in Libya. He is not only present with the many thousands of homeless who continue to suffer from the devastating 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami, but also with the groups of rescuers and the millions of compassionate hearts around the globe. These Dark Night experiences bring about strength in one’s helplessness, new vision, and new life. They call for solidarity with those who are suffering, and for the exercitant to be a compassionate, wounded healer to console others. The Dark Night experiences also lead to openness to spiritual growth on one’s spiritual journey. They involve submitting oneself to a process of deep purification and transformation in which one risks losing the reliance on the systems on which one would normally depend. It may not be easy for a person to sense God’s presence in life. However, learning to seek the risen Jesus in these experiences may lead to the deepest realization of God’s presence, consolation, and grace; ultimately, it also leads to holiness and perfection in one’s spiritual journey.
4.4 Areas for Further Exploration

This paper has so far examined some aspects of spiritual darkness in the context of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The exercitant is introduced to various awareness techniques, and brought to a deeper understanding of the Dark Night at both the personal and the societal levels through the prayer experience in the Third Week. Due to the length of this paper, extensive, in-depth discussion could not be carried out. A few possible areas for further exploration or research are, therefore, as follows:

Firstly, the Dark Night experience that John of the Cross describes seems to be based on the view that one’s spiritual journey proceeds as a linear progression. Further exploration of the circular and spiral modes of progression in the Dark Night experience would be beneficial. This would be especially helpful for those who have been undergoing a prolonged or complex period of spiritual darkness.

Secondly, John of the Cross emphasizes that the Dark Night is normally experienced by a ‘proficient’ or one who has progressed in the spiritual journey for some time. Since the Dark Night is permitted and infused by God for the good of the soul, it is possible that it takes place in other stages of the spiritual journey as well. Further exploration of this type of profound purification that may occur in other stages of a person’s spiritual journey would also be worthwhile.
Thirdly, the goals of the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises* are the knowledge and recognition of sin, as well as the realization of God’s love. The meditation exercises focus on the history of sin and individual sin. It would be beneficial if meditation on institutional or social sin\textsuperscript{123} and its effects in contemporary society could also be included in the exercises. This may be of help to those who are experiencing the Dark Night at a broader societal or national level.

Fourthly, meditation and contemplation of the scripture in the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* use the faculties of reasoning and imagination to encounter God, which are dialogical or discursive forms of prayer. The dark contemplation that John of the Cross emphasizes invites the soul to a new dimension of prayer that is more of an infused form of contemplative prayer. Further exploration of the process of contemplation in the *Spiritual Exercises*, in relation to infused contemplation, would be beneficial.

Lastly, in examining the spiritual journey and spiritual darkness, this paper has examined the traditional purgation-illumination-union model and John of the Cross’ writing. For further exploration or research, other spiritual journey or growth models and other spiritual authors can be considered. Likewise, in examining an approach to

\textsuperscript{123} Jose Aldunate, “Readjusting the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius – Social Sin,” 2, accessed 8 November 2010, available from http://www.jesuits.ca/orientations/social_se.html. The concept of social sin was developed in Liberation Theology and received ecclesiastical confirmation in the Latin American Bishops Conferences of Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979).
spiritual darkness in one’s spiritual journey, other aspects of Ignatian spirituality or other spirituality models can also be applied.
5. **Summary and Conclusions**

Christian spirituality is the quest for an ever-deepening union with the Trinitarian God. All the baptized are called to the fullness of Christian life. The Christian’s spiritual journey is a life-long process of continual conversion and transformation in response to the universal call to holiness and perfection. We are oriented in the very depths of our being toward this union. The journey to union with God is not an easy one. It always involves a painful process of purification and transformation. The spiritual journey can be described in terms of the Pseudo-Dionysian three-fold process of purgation (or purification), illumination, and union (or perfection). It is not simply a linear progressive journey, but may also be a circular and spiral one that draws us toward deeper purification for perfection.

John of the Cross’ threefold scheme (early evening, midnight and early dawn) correlates with the Pseudo-Dionysian journey model. He uses Night to signify purification through hardships and difficulties, and the Dark Night to signify a profound purification that is ordained by God in one’s spiritual journey. He divides the human soul into senses and spirit, and distinguishes between the active night and passive night of the soul, which are two aspects of the same experience. While the active night refers to the human role in cooperating with God’s transforming work in us and the passive night refers
to what God does to effect our transformation, he emphasizes that both purifications are ultimately God’s work. John of the Cross’ Dark Night stresses the sense of God’s absence rather than His presence. It is by conforming one’s soul to the suffering and abandoned Jesus-Wisdom that purification and transformation can take place.

The Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* are designed to help the exercitant to find the will of God by ridding the exercitant of all disordered attachments. This ultimately leads to union with God. The focus is on a deepening dynamic of inner spiritual freedom. The various awareness techniques, such as examination of conscience, penance, meditation, contemplation, and discernment of spirits that are introduced to exercitants in the *Spiritual Exercises* are the active purification to which John of the Cross refers. Moreover, the contemplation of Christ’s Passion and Death in the Third Week of the *Exercises* correlates with John of the Cross’ Dark Night experience. By examining the prayer experiences in the Third Week, the exercitant may be assisted by gaining more understanding when going through his Dark Night experience of aridity and trial. The prayer experiences also bring about a new perspective in seeing the Dark Night at the societal and the global levels: the exercitant may be drawn to deeper compassion and solidarity with those who are suffering.

Going beyond suffering and death, the Dark Night is a sign of life that brings about
strength, hope and new vision. One has to move out of the suffering and seek the risen Jesus in everyday life. Being able to find and see God in all things is a gift and grace of God’s divine revelation, however, one also needs to co-operate with Him by submitting one’s own will to His, and by seeking to have more intimate knowledge of Him. The profound gratitude for God’s grace in everything one has received will ultimately enlighten the Dark Night experiences in one’s spiritual journey to perfection and deep union with God.
6. Bibliography


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