**GROW IN LOVE**

Fr Shenan J. Boquet

An excerpt from *Coronavirus and the ‘Great Lent’ of 2020*

It may seem strange that God should draw closer to us by means of the deprivation of the great sacrament of his Real Presence. And yet, if we knew anything of God’s ways, we would not be surprised!

Certainly, there are moments in our lives, analogous to the moment of the Transfiguration, when God unambiguously reveals himself to us, giving us some glimpse of his glory. Perhaps, a miracle for which we have prayed has come about, or we have had an intense experience of God’s presence in prayer, or some improbable “coincidence” has shown us God’s will for our life. But there are other moments, much more numerous, that are more akin to the great silence of Holy Saturday—when God chastely withdraws, leaving us without the tangible comforts of his presence. But if the Saints are to be believed, and if the details of Christ’s own life are to be taken as revelatory of God’s methods, then it is in these latter moments—the moments of God’s self-veiling—that he is, in fact, closest to us.

Early in her religious life, Mother Teresa had intense mystical experiences in which Christ revealed her life’s work to her—ministering to the poorest of the poor. Soon thereafter, however, Mother Teresa began to experience a dryness in her prayer, accompanied by a sense of abandonment by God. This lasted for decades, until her death. As she lamented in one letter: “In my soul, I feel just that terrible pain of loss—of God not wanting me—of God not being God—of God not really existing.” In this great darkness, Mother Teresa was forced to lean solely on faith. And through this faith, she achieved such intimate union with God that she was like a mirror for the divine, so that merely to be in her presence was to experience something of God’s infinite goodness. “Mother Teresa had a face charred by God’s silences,” wrote Cardinal Robert Sarah recently, “but she bore within her and breathed love. By dint of remaining long hours before the burning flame of the Blessed Sacrament, her face was tanned, transformed by a daily face-to-face encounter with the Lord” (*The Power of Silence*, p.98).

This may seem strange to us, but it is the almost-universal experience of the great mystics. Saints John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Padre Pio and many, many more, all, at some time, had overwhelmingly intense personal mystical experiences of God’s presence followed by long and excruciating periods of dryness in which it seemed as if God had abandoned them.

In his great mystical treatises, St. John of the Cross explains that this experience of abandonment is designed for our purification and the perfection of love. God is infinite. He is infinitely good, infinitely powerful, infinitely just, infinitely loving. Sometimes, God grants us a little taste of his goodness, an experience so delightful that it can surpass all earthly pleasures. The risk, however, says St. John, is that we may come to think that God is *like* these experiences, when in fact he infinitely transcends them. Even worse, we may come to *depend* upon these experiences, basing our faith on them, when in fact what God wishes, and what love demands, is a total and absolute trust in him, a trust that is willing to endure any hardship or trial or suffering for the beloved—including his apparent absence. And this is why God withdraws: to give us the opportunity to grow in love.