

The Influence of Emotions on Spiritual Life in the Discernment of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint John of the Cross

Received July 5, 2019

Revised July 12, 2019

Accepted July 14, 2019

Key words

Ignatius of Loyola,
John of the Cross,
spirituality, emotions,
discernment of spirits

Spiritual life must be seen as an integration of physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Neglecting an integral approach has resulted in many misconceptions and problems among Christians. The presented paper introduces the notion of spiritual discernment that reflects the role that emotions and God's grace have in creating a more profound relationship with God. The paper outlines the principal themes of Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross, whose personal experience with spiritual life became a lasting inspiration in spirituality in the Christian West. For both Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross, understanding emotions and their place in spiritual life played a major role in their effort to retain some realism. In Christian spirituality, this is a very important precondition for attaining interior freedom and maturity.

1 Introduction

Emotions constitute an essential element of our everyday reality and play a significant role in both physical and cognitive life. Damasio (1994, 158) argues that one cannot consider the brain or mind activity separate from the bodily activity. What we have in mind here are not only the emotions of which we are conscious, but also the so-called “basal emotions” that accompany the constant experience with our own body. They are also the source of information for our mind to process and appraise. It may seem that the Self is a product of the mind alone and that the way we perceive ourselves originates in our mind. In fact, we use information sent from our whole body. Therefore, it is impossible to separate purely cognitive functioning from the functions of the body (Barret, Dunbar and Lycet 2007, 376–378).

These findings must be applied to a spiritual life, too. In Christian spirituality, reflection on emotions can be found in “the spiritual discernment”, as one of its key concepts. We discern mainly when we immerse in our inner selves in a quest to understand ourselves, our hidden motivations, both positive and negative, and the callings to change our lives.

Christian Western spirituality adopts a more analytic approach than the Eastern one. That is why we can encounter different stages of personal transformation and improvement of one’s spiritual life. Most commonly, we talk about the stage of *purification*, *enlightenment* and *union*.

These stages represent both the level of perfection as well as the ability to work with our own emotions and inclinations, to which we become more resistant and make them a part of the ultimate goal of our spiritual lives. Emotions play a crucial role here, particularly in the stage of purification. Being able to reflect upon one’s own emotions is essential to the experience of spiritual discernment.

In the process of discernment, we try to understand the emotional movements within our souls and the desires that bring us closer to more profound spiritual life. Ignatius noted that our motives are provoked not only by our own decisions, but



About the author

ThDr. Radovan Šoltés, PhD., serves as Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the Faculty of Greek Catholic Theology of University of Prešov. He has a long professional record in Christian social ethics and spirituality studies conducted at the crossroad of religion, philosophy and psychology. He authored numerous books and articles and is available at radovan.soltes@unipo.sk.

also by the movements that occur in our mind without us initiating them. There is nothing extraordinary about that, though. It can be argued that what is explained here could be just an activity of our mind on a more or less conscious level. What puzzled and surprised Ignatius was the fact that these impulses always occurred in certain contexts associated with advancement in spiritual life. Reflecting upon these emotional states and the effects they have, Ignatius recognized that the path God wants us to take becomes clearer (Lonsdale 2003, 93).

Discernment involves thoughts and emotions that spring from within. It is up to us to recognize which of them should be given consideration and which should be rejected. We are all conscious of them when experiencing sadness, joy, fear, anger, freedom, discomfort, peace, affection, aversion, etc., but we do not always give them our full attention. Once we truly understand these movements, we get to understand ourselves better and move closer to maturity.

In this paper, we are going to outline the link between emotional experience and spiritual life as presented by Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross. At the same time, we are going to provide a psychological and religious view on spiritual discernment. The author is fully aware that the topic is rather broad and goes beyond the scope of this paper. Since reflecting upon emotions in the spiritual life has become rather relevant today, the paper attempts at showing a possible way of discerning the emotional from the spiritual as presented by St. Ignatius and St. John. We based our analysis on *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the essential works of John of the Cross, notably *The Dark Night*.

2 A Brief Exposition of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint John of the Cross

The 16th and 17th centuries in the history of Western Christian spirituality gave us several prominent spiritual figures. Spain, a birthplace of two great mystics, Ignatius of Loyola and John of the Cross, has definitely earned its place in history. Ignatius focused more on practical application of contemplative experience, whereas John made use of his theological education.

This period saw a certain shift not only in spiritual life, but also in the realm of science and education in general. The Enlightenment philosophers later termed this milestone the modern age. Among others, Ignatius and John contributed

significantly to the development of spirituality, especially for their ability to grasp and explore their spiritual experience on the intuitive psychological level of that time in a manner, which is still inspiring today.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) was born into a noble Basque family. A tragic injury halted his promising military career as a knight in the service of the Navarra king. Ignatius underwent a religious conversion and gave himself in an unselfish service to Christ and the Church. He is known as a founder of the *Society of Jesus*. His seminal work *The Spiritual Exercises* emerged gradually during his religious conversion. The set of spiritual exercises is a method that can be instrumental in reforming one's spiritual life. In this context, Ignatius introduced the rules for the discernment of the interior movements that we will discuss later in this paper. Other essential texts of Ignatian spirituality are Ignatius's autobiography *A Pilgrim's Journey*, *The Spiritual Diary of St. Ignatius*, *Letters of St. Ignatius*, *The Jesuit Constitution*, and *The Directory of the Spiritual Exercises*.

John of the Cross (1542–1591) was born into a poor Spanish family. His life was greatly affected by the encounter with Saint Teresa of Avila, who talked him into becoming a founding member of the reformed – discalced (barefoot) Carmelites. The Calced Carmelites did not show much understanding, though. On the night of 3 December 1577, they took John captive and incarcerated him in Toledo. They wanted to make him renounce the reform. John's incarceration, full of great physical suffering and mental anguish, lasted nine months. All of John's major works were written in that period, namely four books in which he commented his poems about souls longing for the union with God: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love*. John's minor works include *Sayings of Light and Love* and *Letters*. Although *The Dark Night* was written later, it reflects John's own spiritual experience. He interpreted his experience with desolation as a process of purgation from ideas and emotions oriented on benefit and not on our love for God.

3 Dealing with Emotions in the Rules of Ignatius of Loyola

The notion of *discernment* is often linked with the prompting of the good and evil spirits. The Desert Fathers described their experience with discernment in the similar vein. At the same time, the Fathers acknowledged that the bad thought does not necessarily mean the prompting of the evil spirit.

First of all, it is necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by terms such as *the good spirit, the evil spirit, interior movements, the enemy, or the enemy of human nature* used by Ignatius of Loyola in his rules, especially those concerning the relation between emotions and spiritual life. Given the limited scope of this paper, we will focus on the first four rules.

The easiest option would be to reduce the issue of discernment to the prompting of the good or evil spirits and associate them with demons or good angels or even with God's spirit. The idea of discernment is far more complex. The simplified interpretation, prevailing in folk piety, has it that the good and evil spirits wage the battle for this world, while the human person is being omitted. We can then ask, "*Where in all this are our spirit, intellect, and experience?*" In his teaching on discernment, Ignatius focused on better understanding of our own desires, inclinations, and plans that have an effect on our spiritual life and our view of God and the world around us [1].

Ignatius' rules for the stage of purification concern mostly managing the emotions we encounter while advancing in our spiritual lives. When Ignatius talk about managing our emotions, he does not mean only the positive emotions in consolation, but mainly understanding the negative emotions that evoke different desires and motivate us to act in a certain manner. We should not undermine the importance of emotions, but at the same time, we must not let them become a decisive factor in our decision-making and actions in spiritual life.

Karl Rahner thinks modern people have a problem distinguishing between psychological and spiritual life. Living life spontaneously, they will hardly be able to discern something they have discovered in their consciousness as a true work of God and understand His motivations. They are more likely to seek explanations in hormones, impacts of weather, genetic factors, echoes of the subconscious, complexes, and thousands of other things instead of accepting that they experience the work of God, His angel, or the Devil (Rahner 2007, 133–134). Naturally, psychology has its important place here, too. It needs to be said, however, that discernment is about experience with different interior movements that come from situations related to advancement in spiritual life.

Speaking about temptation, we mean thoughts and movements that distract us from our life purpose of being in relationship with God. Temptation does not present itself as something evil, but rather under the appearance of something good and attractive. On the other hand, we somehow sense that the attractive does not always mean good and

right. The first rule of Ignatius explains this inner conflict (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 314):

In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins. With such persons, the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse.

According to the tradition of the Fathers, human nature participates in the Divine life. To live in harmony with one's human nature means to pursue the ideal of spiritual life. It is in human nature to enter into communion with God and transcend oneself towards Him (Mikluščák 1996, 24). It is the aim of the enemy to break this communion, which is only possible if one focuses too much on himself or herself. It is understandable that those who are self-absorbed seek satisfaction in fulfilling their different desires, while ignoring the deeper moral judgement and consideration of faith. The action of the "evil spirit" is therefore linked with everything that makes us lose faith, hope, and love (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 317). A person who decides to reform one's life or improve its quality is going to be confronted with various thoughts that could inspire and sway them in different directions. These thoughts also penetrate into a somatic life and can induce the states of consolation, peace and joy, and even frustration or discomfort.

Ignatius believes that at this stage, the "evil spirit" affects mostly our emotional being and is ready to offer all-rational reasons to justify such actions. According to Marko Rupnik, the "evil spirit" finds every pretext to ensure us that we are on the right path. What prevails is the impression of seeming pleasure from sin. The "evil spirit" stirs our imagination and prompts our rationalization and justification into thinking that the way of life we have chosen is right and not as immoral as we might have thought and that we actually need it (Rupnik 2001, 80).

It is important to acknowledge that Ignatius believed that temptation enters into an already flowing stream of thoughts, reflections, emotions, perceptions, and motivations utilizing the contents from the various means of culture, media, art, etc. This day and age provide us with a plethora of stimuli that foster the mentality of sin. We live in a culture that places a great emphasis on an individual and his or her needs at any cost; it is a culture governed by the rules of economics and finances resulting in aggressive attitudes to-

wards one another; it is a culture with a prevailing dictate of fashion and keeping up with media trends, etc. (Rupnik 2002, 60). From time to time, we can pause in our routine way of life, feel regrets, and even enter into the sacrament of reconciliation. After a short while, however, many of us return to the way of life we are accustomed to.

In the phase when a person “*goes from one grave sin to another*”, the evil spirit plays with *emotions*, while the good spirit takes care of *reason* in order to detach it from the emotions and create discomfort, we call *remorse*. *Peace* and *discomfort* are states somewhere in-between reason, will and emotions. *Peace* can be defined as a state in which our emotions and reason are in harmony, working together towards one common goal. On the other hand, *discomfort* arises when emotions and reason are in conflict working towards separate goals (Rupnik 2001, 77).

We are all familiar with a situation when our desires get into a conflict with rational judgement telling us, “[a]lthough it is pleasant, you know that what you are getting yourself into is not going to be good...” Surely, at times discomfort can even be provoked by contrasting thoughts. Important is to acknowledge that we all have a natural tendency to seek peace and follow the alluring movements that might not lead us to the good, even if they help us rid ourselves of the inner conflict. We often refer to it as rationalization of will when we come up with all the reasons that justify our behavior and action. Naturally, we can be very resourceful in finding enough arguments to justify our decisions or actions. In fact, we are somewhere between two poles of our being. We constantly need to discern where we are in our life and where we are heading.

In the two following rules of discernment, Ignatius shows us what is happening in the soul of a person who has decided to enter into the relationship with God and helps us make sense of it.

The second rule explains how “[i]n the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned in the first rule. Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus, he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing. It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This he does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good.” (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 315).

While the characteristic of the evil interior movement is to break the unity between a human being and God by raising doubts, the good spirit affects our emotional life when we experience peace, joy from a prayer, or love for God. We perceive our life as full of hope and purpose. Ignatius refers to this positive experience as *consolation*, which can also manifest itself through tears. The third rule describes consolation as follows (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 316):

I call it spiritual consolation when an interior movement aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own, but only in the Creator of them all. It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrows for sins, or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is immediately directed to praise and service God. Finally, I call consolation every increase of faith, hope, and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord.

However, it is important to note that consolation can be linked with some problems that can arise at the beginning of someone's spiritual life. At this crucial time, consolation might be perceived as a criterion for assessing the quality of the spiritual life. It needs to be pointed out that one must cautiously distinguish the time of consolation and its previous cause. Moments of *natural consolation* that come from listening to music, singing, a thought we heard in a sermon, natural beauty, watching sunrise or emotional religious events occur in our lives quite often. *Divinely effected consolation* must not be confused with the consolations when a believer experiences beautiful moments of joy that accompany his or her faith but do not inherently come from that faith. In this sense, consolation *is caused* by some external impulse [2].

For Ignatius, consolation is first and foremost the *consolation without any previous cause*, although he does not undermine the significance of *natural consolation* in our spiritual life, provided that it leads us to the good. The *divine consolation* is always coupled with the increase in hope, faith, and love for God. It must always be reflected in the context of relational orientation towards God.

We must bear in mind that for Ignatius, consolation is not the goal of spiritual life. Nor it is the assessment criterion of the spiritual life quality. It could even become a problem. When our interest is limited to seeking consolation, we might later

consider its absence and the state of *desolation* as our failure or even detachment from God. John of the Cross examined this theme in more detail. Today, we can see some renaissance of the teaching of the Messalians who equated consolation with the state of grace and desolation with the loss of it. It was a rather confusing concept with regard to spiritual life. Different Eastern synods denounced this Messalian heresy (Špidlík 2005, 38).

From psychological and spiritual perspectives, spiritual life cannot be a state of permanent spiritual euphoria. After all, the experience of many mystics proves just that. In the state affected by emotions, one cannot be free enough. Strong positive movements awake grand resolutions, which often turn out to be impossible to fulfil once the motivation built on emotions fades away.

The fourth rule revolves around the theme of *desolation*. Desolation is nothing extraordinary; it belongs to every person's spiritual experience and Ignatius describes it as follows (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 317):

I call desolation what is entirely the opposite of what is described in the third rule, as darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord: because as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts which come from desolation.

Desolation can result in emotional abatement, feelings of helplessness and despair. The feelings of spiritual abandonment and loneliness are painful inner states of spiritual desolation. It may seem to us that God has forgotten about us or that He does not care and punishes us instead (Królíkowsky 2010, 40). The enemy turns this emotional turmoil, our painful wounds and stressful situations to his advantage. There are times in our lives when we cannot say that we are well. Yet we are not aware of our relationship with God being disrupted by sin or neglect of our spiritual life. In other words, when we do not feel content, we often do not understand why we feel this way – and that is how we experience desolation. Desolation can provoke aversion towards the advancement in spiritual life and spiritual activities in general.

Since we have decided to take God seriously and are not easily consumed by desires that could lead to sin, the enemy's tactics is to shift the focus of attention from per-

son's emotions to reason. Giving rational justifications, the enemy questions the atmosphere of trust in which the relationship between God and a human person flourishes. Reason is confronted with different constructs, which always revolve around thinking: how am I going to feel? What am I going to do? It is always about caring for own "Self" (Rupnik 2001, 84).

Desolation, nevertheless, can have a natural character too. It may also be linked to our physical or mental weakness, e.g. when we feel overloaded and exhausted or experience failure. Negative feelings of being lonely, of self-doubt and detachment from God follow easily. This state of abandonment is not a sign of failure in one's spiritual life. These states carry an element of risk, though. In this "chaotic" inner turmoil, one tends to rethink previous resolutions and his or her relationship towards God and the others and, in an extreme scenario, thinking – *I am done, there is no point of moving further*. In time of desolation, one might think that this state will last for a long time and that the time of consolation will never come. This can sometimes lead to a state of depression. All those who decided to work on their spiritual life, including Ignatius, experienced such states of crisis. From his own experience with spiritual guidance, Ignatius knew that exercitants engaged in spiritual exercises had the same experience. Ignatius insists that the time of desolation is never the time to reverse previous good decisions (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 318).

It is therefore necessary to discern between the desolation arising from psychological distress manifesting itself in frustration, or even depression (here, the concerns about being tried by the evil spirit are not right) from the desolation connected with our spiritual life caused by our own lukewarmness and feelings of being separated from God. It can also be a result of the crisis in our relationships, and breakups.

Ignatius says that one cannot be just carried away willfully by various movements. Emotions are unstable and affected by our physiological setting at any given moment. Thomas Green argues that ninety percent of our problems seem easier after a good night's rest. If we leave our decision for the next day, we often learn that we no longer react to a certain problem, situation, or temptation as dramatically as the day before (Green 2001, 129). Surely, it is not an easy task to do. In situations when we experience great emotional movements within our souls that prod us into doing/or not doing something about which we know or perhaps suspect that it might not be good for us, it is advised to refrain from making any decision in that very moment. We are not free enough to do so.

4 Working with Emotions in Spiritual Life According to John of the Cross

John of the Cross, just like Ignatius of Loyola, applies the knowledge of psychology of his era to spiritual life. The mystical path to the Divine union is a transition from “a prison” of dissipated inclinations towards the inner spiritual freedom. We are transitioning in spiritual pain that accompanies the withering and dying of an old man. John of the Cross says that on his path to God, a mystic is *passively* immersed into two arenas of the “dark night” being purged from *emotions* (*the night of the senses*), through which he had perceived life and experienced the joy from God’s calling, and from the *desire* in spiritual life (*the night of the spirit*). Embarking on the spiritual journey of faith and deeper relationship with God entails *interior conversion*. This conversion, evoked by God’s calling, enkindles a strong desire for God. Therefore, faith is often accompanied with consolations; the human often finds pleasure in ascetic actions that he or she may not have before (or even after) considered important. But one must be vigilant, since these experiences pose a risk of becoming the main criterion determining spiritual life. Spiritual growth thus requires a transition into another phase of spiritual life, but people are not equipped to do so on their own. In the words of John of the Cross, “*how greatly they need God to set them in the state of proficients. This He does by bringing them into the dark night.*” (John of the Cross 1959, I, 7, 5). Since the relationship with God is realized through both the emotional and rational dimensions, one must be purged on a sensual as well as spiritual level.

John does not limit the process of transformation to *the dark night*. Entering the dark night requires conversion and active work on one’s moral life. When John speaks about a change, he means an utter transition from the spiritual prison of sin through conversion, which is accompanied with active work on one’s spiritual life, through deadening, towards strengthening the virtues of faith, hope and love for God. John refers to this as *the active night* and elaborates it further in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Important is, however, that the conversion and the alleviation of one’s sins is not the end, but only the beginning of the “ascent of the mount”. At this moment, in the so-called *passive night*, God enters into the process of spiritual maturation, when He continues transforming the soul through *the night of the senses* and *the night of the spirit* towards *the union* in pure love between the Himself and the soul [3].

4.1 Entering the Night of Senses

John of the Cross compares this stage of spiritual life to the mother-child relationship (John of the Cross 1959, I, 1, 2).

It must be known, then, that 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; 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 to more important and substantial occupations. 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 the things of God, without any labor of its own, and also great pleasures in spiritual exercises, for here God is giving to it the breast of His tender love, even as to a tender child.

At first, beginners in spiritual life experience happy times. They find *great consolation* in different spiritual exercises: prayers, penance, sacred texts reading, etc. without any extra effort. They are drawn to it by the consolation and pleasure that they find in their new spiritual life and in many spiritual exercises and prayers. John warns, however, that just as children, these exercitants too are not prepared for the real life yet, since they have faults and imperfections. For instance, such persons see the purpose of prayer in, “*experiencing sensible pleasure and devotion and they strive to obtain this by great effort, wearying and fatiguing their faculties and their heads; and when they have not found this pleasure they become greatly discouraged, thinking that they have accomplished nothing. Through these efforts they lose true devotion and spirituality, which consist in perseverance, together with patience and humility and mistrust of themselves, that they may please God alone.*” (John of the Cross 1959, I, 6, 6).

The experience of faith can be easily confused with a psychological experience based only on the idea of faith. The experience of immediate closeness to God might only be a sign of fervor rather than something arising from the depth and purity of faith itself, which is the main determinant for us when talking about the actual presence and actions of God. What prevails in this stage of spiritual life, nevertheless, are images and different forms and techniques of meditation in which one easily finds pleasure.

In order to embark on a more advanced path of spiritual life, God must wean us from the “breasts of consolation”. It is not an easy task. The soul, just as a child, feels reluctant about abandoning all that brings it consolation. In that moment, the joy and consolation the soul had encountered before, starts to disappear. There are many who want God to guide them. In reality, they are unwilling to enter the maturity of spiritual life. They shun the trials, flee from the narrow road of life, and seek the broad road of their own consolation. They persistently beseech God to bring them to the state of perfection, yet when He wills to conduct them through the initial trials, they are unwilling to suffer them (John of the Cross 1973, II, 27).

Just like a small child learning to walk alone, a mystic begins with a *passive purgation of the dark night*. It is *the night of the senses*, through which a mystic detaches from himself in order to advance to a higher level of love for God (John of the Cross 1959, I, 7, 5–I, 8, 1). What John describes as the night is indeed *the darkness*; when we turn the light off in the room, the visual faculty is nourished by the objects in the room. Even if they cannot be seen, they did not change at all. *The night of the spirit* is “*the privation of every kind of pleasure which belongs to the desire*” (John of the Cross 1962, I, 3, 1), so that God can elevate us to a more profound spiritual life. John compares it to tearing through “the veil” that hindered us from seeing and reaching God, since all we had seen was the emotional aspect of this “sweet” encounter with God (John of the Cross 1973, I, 29–32).

At the outset of this spiritual life reform, we gradually lose pleasures and “appetite” for meditation. Despite that, beginners cannot, or dare not to detach themselves from meditation. They still labor, although they find little sweetness or none from a prayer. Their soul no longer feels God’s presence in the earlier manner. It must be *contemplated* [4].

Into the dark night souls begin to enter when God draws them forth from the state of beginners, which is the state of those who *meditate* [5] on the spiritual journey, and begins to set them in the state of *progressives*, which is the path of

those who *contemplate* – through to the state of the perfect, which is *the union of the souls with God* (John of the Cross 1959, I, 1, 1; I, 2, 8).

According to John, it is very important to distinguish the *cause of desolation*. Do spiritual aridities proceed from purgation or from sins and imperfections that lure us from God? John offers three principal signs for *the night of the senses* (John of the Cross 1959, I, 9):

- *A soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God; it also fails to find it in any created thing*. Spiritual desolation permeates the whole of the emotional life and it does not proceed from committed sins or some dissipated inclinations.
- *The second sign of desolation* is that a man immersed in desolation, which hinders him from intense experience of God, believes that he *experiences the said purgation with painful care and solitude*, thinking that he is not serving God, but is backsliding in his spiritual life.
- *The third sign of the night of the senses* is that the soul *can no longer meditate in the imaginative sense* as before, however effort it might put in it. God communicates Himself to the souls by an act of simple contemplation, which cannot be attained through imagination or fantasy on the sensual level [6].

John notes that not all those who walk are brought by God to contemplation. That is why He never completely weans some persons from the sensual and emotional experience in spiritual life, or He only does that for a short period of time. On the other hand, many cease to grow because they misunderstand their “dark aridity”, or even if they do, they are not willing to pay the price for their spiritual advancement.

4.2 The Night of the Spirit

The second night into which God leads the soul is *the night of the spirit*. It does not happen right away, though. John says: “*It is wont to pass a long time, even years, after leaving that state of beginners, in exercising itself in that of proficients*” (John of the Cross 1959, II, 1, 1). The need for the second night arises from the prevailing imperfection of the soul, which, despite the purgation of the senses, is left with imperfections that are deeply rooted within. John compares it to the roots and the branches of a tree. Even if you remove the branch, the roots remain. Removing the branch, which represents the sin, does not suffice. It is necessary to search for and remove its cause. Thus, the purpose behind the night of the spirit is to go down to the roots of imperfection that are

often hidden deep within our subconscious and in our desires, affections, and habits (John of the Cross 1959, II, 2, 1–5).

The soul suffers many afflictions prompted by the process of liberating itself from the deepest roots of chaos and disturbances, and from the fancy in its own “Self”: “*This is a painful disturbance, involving many misgivings, imaginings, and strivings which the soul has within itself, wherein, with the apprehension and realization of the miseries in which it sees itself, it fancies that it is lost and that its blessings have gone forever. Wherefore the spirit experiences pain and sighing so deep that they cause it vehement spiritual groans and cries, to which at times it gives vocal expression; when it has the necessary strength and power it dissolves into tears, although this relief comes but seldom.*” (John of the Cross 1959, II, 9, 7).

The process of a passage through the night is a challenge. For many it is like a suffering of purgatory [7], because they are “*being purged here on earth in the same manner as there, since this purgation is that which would have to be accomplished there*” (John of the Cross 1959, II, 6, 6). This purgatory is a transformation towards a new outlook on living with God. This is a very important realization. Leading the soul into afflictions of the night is not a result of God playing with it or a result of His arbitrary will. In John’s words, “*these afflictions are not felt by the soul as coming from the said Wisdom... They are felt as coming from the weakness and imperfection which belong to the soul; without such purgation, the soul cannot receive its Divine light, sweetness and delight*” (John of the Cross 1959, II, 10, 4).

Just as Thomas Green, we can ask, “*How long will the souls have to endure this suffering?*” The question is understandable. Although the road of suffering, which is the night, is profitable and purposeful, it is not easy to accept the necessity of being immersed into the night. Green responds that the state of the night will last as long as we shall live. The process of purgation in our earthly life *never really ends*. It will last as long as we are exposed to the struggle with our own sinfulness, which is a lifetime endeavor. What is important, however, is to change our perspective with regard to the process of purgation. The dark night is a formation towards the interior freedom, when questions are no longer asked. This kind of questioning entails subconscious sadness over the life before the night of the senses. Although we might accept the process of purgation as inevitable, when we actually go through it, we often wish to return to the state when religion brought benefits. Radicalism of the night of the senses, which culminates in the night of the spirit, truly liberates us from this kind of reasoning (Green 1998, 165).

For John, God is patient. He always respects our freedom, never forces us to act and we always have an option to set limits for His work within ourselves. If we backslide, we will never be able to complete our transformation as per our will. Thus, “*The night of sense is common and comes to many; these are the beginners... The night of the spirit is the portion of very few, and these are they that are already practiced and proficient.*” (John of the Cross 1959, I, 8, 1).

At times, the anguish of the night cuts so deep that we are voided of the light and all the securities we once vividly experienced. *The night* is not just a metaphor for weakness, but also a profound existential experience of finality. When the soul “*sees itself that which it saw not before, it is clear to it that not only it is unfit to be seen by God, but deserves His abhorrence, and that He does indeed abhor it*” (John of the Cross 1959, II, 10, 2). That is the common reason why so many people turn back and never move from *the night of the senses* to *the night of the spirit*.

The mystery of the night is associated with *spiritual suffering* which is linked to the mystical silence of God who in our emotions was “too loud”. Suffering is something that *gets in our way*. We find ourselves in the state of feeling *helpless* and *lifeless* to change anything in our current state. In suffering, we are deprived of the authority over ourselves and as such, we are painfully confronted with the limitations of our own faculties. The active efforts to moderate the urgent attack of such passivity, to eliminate it or drive it away proves futile most of the time (Trajtelová 2011, 180). All there is left for us to do, is to *accept this suffering*. However, it is not about its blind acceptance or even seeking it out; that would surely be a sign of pathology. It is surely important to grapple with the suffering that can be relieved. On the other hand, in instances, when we are confronted with the suffering that transcends our abilities to eliminate it, it appears pointless to reason in an effort to suppress it or change the course of the events. Questioning the purpose goes beyond the active effort to overcome this suffering and opens up to believe that despite all, God is not “on the other side”. Despite the feelings of alienation, we can continue to establish our relationship with God.

Suffering guides a mystic into his relationship with God. A mystic learns to *accept God*, irrespective of whether he is experiencing joy or feeling empty. Love for God does not stand or fall on emotional ecstasy or any other form of validation. A mystic thus becomes equipped to receive the gift, which is God. He gives up all that is not God. *Passivity* then could be that unique disposition for this essential reception. It is also its inevitable prerequisite. The only thing that is

active is the effort to equip oneself for an adoption of this receptive attitude. According to John, this faculty come to us in *the dark night*. The faculty linked with *indifference* teaches us that *the gift* (of God) cannot be obtained, grasped or embraced by our own efforts alone. A mystic thus becomes *contemplative in action* and *active in contemplation*, as highlighted by Ignatius of Loyola (Trajtelová 2011, 188–189), John's spirituality can rightly be called the Paschal spirituality; hence, he came to be called "of the Cross".

5 Conclusion

Recent decades have witnessed that many, predominantly charisma-oriented movements within the Christian churches, place emphasis on joy (1 Thessalonians 5: 16) and invite us to be brave to establish our relationship with God on an emotional level too, for living with God must essentially lead to this joy.

Surely, joy is a very pleasant and rewarding emotion, but it should not be overrated. Our psyche is equipped with certain faculties that enable it to process external stimuli. If we find ourselves in a situation or an environment that is new, unsafe or worrying, perhaps we will be scared, experience distress, and insecurity. This initial experience might change after some time and we get used to it and learn to navigate our way through it. It is an *adaptation mechanism* of our psyche which is responsible for our coping with challenging (even the extremely challenging) situations. It works just as well when pleasant emotions are concerned. If we could get what we yearn for at this very moment, it would most likely make us happy. After some time, however, we would probably find out that what initially made us happy is taken for granted now. We adapt not only to unpleasant situations, but also to the pleasant and joy-evoking ones. A constant feeling of enjoyment and delight thus becomes impossible to attain, just as the emotional intensity of our mental experience cannot be permanent either (Šatura 2006, 27). In other words, our utopias "work" only in our minds, never in a real life. Our anticipated emotions brought about by some important positive event are always stronger than the real ones. With time, positive emotions fade away and the initial strong and positive event no longer fascinates us.

This natural faculty of our psyche also concerns the joy and delight enkindled by faith or positive religious experience. If such delight is coupled with the feeling of happiness, it will eventually lose its appeal. Such an intense emotion, which delight certainly is, is often experienced by people who have undergone a religious conversion. It can be a very strong

motivation for them. After all, our motivations and emotions are often intertwined. So, what appeals to us and touches us on emotional level, becomes the impetus for our motivation. For instance, people experiencing hardship or those finding themselves in situations over which they have no or minimal control, embrace the most intense emotions during a prayer (Zaviš 2012, 81). The problem arises when such delight becomes our goal, or the criterion determining whether our spiritual life, and the relationship with God, is the true one. The role of emotions in relation to praying should not be overestimated. Otherwise, we might fall into a trap of creating our own image of God based on our psychological and spiritual expectations (Zawada 1999, 23).

For this reason, mystics do not seek emotional delight in spiritual life. Just the contrary; immersion into contemplation requires, in a certain context, an attitude of indifference towards emotional delight. John of the Cross thinks that absence of emotional delight can indicate a beginning of spiritual transformation and embarking on a journey that leads to a deeper union with God. Spiritual delight is primarily about experiencing freedom and not about emotions. Emotions may be just its accompanying element. If we based our spiritual life only on "having some favors" from it and if the experiential aspect of our spiritual life became a main criterion for assessing its quality, we could eventually be disappointed. Ignatius of Loyola warned against the uncritical attitude towards different forms of consolation, especially the consolation presenting itself on the emotional level and against making decisions under the influence of such false consolation (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 336).

John and Ignatius both believed that there is a place for positive emotions in our spiritual lives. What is there to remember, however, is that the key criterion for their acceptance should be the goal we all strive for. Only then are we equipped enough to discern whether we are indeed searching for the true relationship with God. This will essentially lead to our interior freedom. Otherwise, we run the risk of staying bound by our inclinations that in reality rob us of the opportunity to attain this freedom.

Notes

- [1] In one of his notes to *The Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius establishes three kinds of thoughts in a person's mind: "one which is strictly my own, and arises wholly from my own free will; two others which come from without, the one from the good spirit, and the other from the evil one." (Ignatius of Loyola 1968, 32).
- [2] In spirituality, consolation and desolation need to be distinguished. Just as consolation, desolation too can be a manifestation of psychological sensing or brain activity. In some states of epilepsy, without external manifestations in a form of epileptic spasms, patients exhibited feelings of ecstatic happiness and existential bliss that people often considered to be of divine nature. However, it is not always about the diagnosis of epilepsy, since the states mentioned above can also be provoked by the activity of neural systems in the brain, which can be affected by external factors (Koukolík 2012, 177).
- [3] See Norbert Cummins for more detailed schemes of the individual phases of spiritual growth (Cummins 1994, 46, 53, 84, 94, 104, 126). Another well-known interpreter is Antonio Maria Sicari (Sicari 2011).
- [4] For John of the Cross, *contemplation* is an expression of the state of the soul and its attitude towards God in times of spiritual aridity, when the soul is set at rest and becomes passive (not indifferent though). It means that the soul is left to God's initiative; He transforms the soul according to His will. (John of the Cross 1962, II, 12, 6).
- [5] It would be wrong to claim that John undervalued the beginner's stage in the spiritual life. As of his recommendations, beginners should engage in meditation and spiritual exercises as well as use the figurative imagination. He says about this beginner's stage, "*individuals in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world.*" (John of the Cross 1973, III, 32).
- [6] It is important to note that although we lack enthusiasm and consolation, our life in prayer is still healthy despite the emotional aridity, if our virtues are alive (Green 1998, 105).
- [7] "A person's suffering at this time cannot be exaggerated; they are but little less than the sufferings of purgatory." (John of the Cross 1973, I, 21).

References

- Barret, Louise, Rodin Dunbar, and John Lycet. 2007. *Evoluční psychologie člověka*. Praha: Portál.
- Cummins, Norbert. 1994. *Osvobození k radosti: úvod do nauky sv. Jana od Kříže*. Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství.
- Damasio, Antonio. 1994. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. New York: Putnam.
- Green, Thomas H. 1998. *Keď vy-schne studňa*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Green, Thomas H. 2001. *Kúkol' medzi pšenicoú*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Ignatius of Loyola. 1968. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Chicago: Loyola Press.
- John of the Cross. 1962. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Accessed June 30, 2019. jesus-passion.com.
- John of the Cross. 1959. *The Dark Nigh of the Soul*. Accessed June 30, 2019. jesus-passion.com.
- John of the Cross. 1973. *The Living Flame of Love*. Accessed June 30, 2019. www.saintsbooks.net.
- Koukolík, František. 2012. *Nejspanilejší ze všech bohů*. Praha: Karolinum.
- Królikowski, Waclaw. 2010. *Dynamika duchovných cvičení svätého Ignáca z Loyoly*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Lonsdale, David. 2003. *Oči k vidění, uši k slyšení: úvod do ignaciánské spirituality*. Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství.
- Mikluščák, Pavel. 1996. *Kristológia II*. Spišské Podhradie: CMBF UK.
- Rahner, Karl. 2007. *Dynamický prvek v církvi*. Olomouc: Refugium.
- Rupnik, Marko I. 2001. *O duchovním otcovství a rozlišování*. Velehrad: Refugium.
- Rupnik, Marko I. 2002. *O duchovním rozlišování: cesta ke zralosti*. Velehrad: Refugium.
- Sicari, Antonio M. 2011. *Divino cantico di San Giovanni della Croce*. Roma: Jaca Book.
- Šatura, Vladimír. 2006. *Žime intenzívnejšie*. Trnava: Dobrá kniha.
- Špidlík, Tomáš. 2005. *Ignác – starec*. Velehrad: Refugium.
- Trajtelová, Jana. 2011. *Vzdialenosť a blízkosť mystiky: fenomenologická štúdia*. Trnava: FF TU.
- Zaviš, Monika. 2012. "Fenomén modlitby v psychológii náboženstva." *Theologos* 14 (2): 79–87.
- Zawada, Marian. 1999. *Karmelitánska meditácia*. Bratislava: Lúč.