

Skills for the Contemplative Disciple: Seasons of the Soul (Part II of III)

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- Susan came for spiritual direction for the first time, after experiencing a spiritual awakening. When she prayed, God was richly present to her. She secretly wondered why other people struggled to pray.
- Brian, an awakened disciple for some time, yearned for the consolation of God in prayer. Periodically, God seemed close while at other times miles away.
- Hector never seemed to lose trust that God was with him. He continued to feel a deep abiding presence of God loving him and could rest in deep quiet periods of prayer without words.
- Emily experienced cold and dry times of prayer persistently over the last three months. She worried that she had offended God for He seemed to have left her totally to her own devices. Others told her they sensed God through her.



Each of these disciples is actively trying to find God and serve Him but each is experiencing life and prayer quite differently. Archbishop Luis Martínez describes God as a target that moves, which makes the intention to find Him more difficult. In order to grow, we have to know where we are on the journey and how to profit from the different climates to grow in virtue and holiness. Using the examples above, try to determine which experience is closer to your own.



We see, as Venerable Concepción Cabrera guides us, that “the spiritual journey of the soul lives, grows and thrives with the same rhythm, predictability and certainty as do the seasons of the year.”^[1] Throughout our lives, the seasons repeat depending on what God wants to form in us. Very specific virtues can replace our imperfections if we know how to profit from both the consolations (rich, strengthening experiences) and from desolations (taxing experiences of temptations and the loss of a felt sense of God).

Without these insights, Martinez warns us that “the danger lies in desolations, because they trouble us, it is rarely that we know how to profit from them. We either despair, suffering terribly or we give up prayer, thinking there is no other solution.”^[ii] Likewise, in consolations, we begin to think that we are holy and can fall to spiritual pride. The tempo of the disciple’s soul changes to dislodge him from his attachments and comfort zone so God can shake loose subtle imperfections.

In the Springtime:



God is awakening in us (and Susan) a personal experience of His love—either at the beginning of our spiritual journey or later on prior to deeper or more difficult experiences, for He wants us to have ample provisions for the journey ahead. Concepción describes that here “the soul truly strolls among the flowers beneath a cloudless sky that is always serene and enchanting.”^[iii]

God wants us to surrender ourselves to Him, to make good resolutions for prayer and strive for virtue while we undertake good works according to our gifts. He does not want to keep us in this pristine air. Although in spring we are zealous to practice the virtues, we often judge others and become secretly pleased with ourselves and covetous towards the means of our own holiness.

In the Summertime:



While the consolations of God continue periodically, they are punctuated with dry, arid periods, without “rain.” Summer is usually “the longest period of the interior life, the hardest and the most difficult.

As disciples, we (and Brian) would do well to be alert when the climate of our soul becomes arid. We must choose to be more faithful to our times of prayer; even though this time might be distasteful; we must stay grounded in the hope of all that God is accomplishing in us. We want to savor consolation and be strengthened. We now recognize the limits of our own acts of devotion and service, and grow more humble in our behavior and attitudes.

Autumn:



is a time when many of the common vices of beginners have diminished and we (and Hector) see the benefits of weathering the storms of human life faithfully. God is ever present to the soul, and we welcome humiliations and even setbacks. Difficulties seem to feed our deepest spiritual needs, “satisfying a very intense need to resemble the Beloved” [iv] from the inside out. The greatest defects of autumn relate to some imprudence or over-the-top zeal for other souls, which may turn others off.

“Winter:



is the season of doubts, and the soul is all mixed up, fighting interior trials, having no other remedy in herself than blind obedience” to her earlier resolutions of prayer and service in her vocation. [v] We (and Emily) may experience a deep, frigid period of the spiritual life when God seems unmoved, our prayer ineffective; and we fear that we have lost our faith and that others experience us bearing this coldness. This extreme and terrible (yet infinitely loving) stage of growth may seem outside of anything the enthusiastic disciple should encounter.

In the spiritual life, these periodic difficulties seem strange because of our naivety, but they are precious and give us a special eternal beauty because they free us and purify us. Consider your own season and the particular imperfections you struggle with.

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[i] Cabrera de Armida, Concepción, *Seasons of the Soul*, Society of St. Pauls, Staten Island, 2005, p. vii.

[ii] Martinez, Luis, *Secrets of the Interior Life*, Sophia Institute Press, Manchester, New Hampshire, 2003, p.148-149.

[iii] Cabrera, Concepción, *Seasons of the Soul*. p.3.

[iv] Ibid, p.35.

[v] Ibid, p.49.

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Art/Photography: *Siervo de Dios Luis María Martínez y Rodríguez* and *Venerable Concepción Cabrera* used with permission. Spring flowers: *Beet mit Tulpen und Stiefmütterchen (fotografiert aus der Vogelperspektive)*, 3268zauber, 20 April 2009; Summer: *Road in Huta Żelechowska, Masovian Voivodeship, Poland*, Sfu own work, 28 June 2008; Autumn: *Copper Beech or Purple beech (fagus sylvatica)*, Jean-Pol GRANDMONT, self-photographed, 6 November 2007; *Winter scene taken at Shipka Pass, Bulgaria*, Psy guy own work, 8 January 2006; feature image from *The beach inside Manuel Antonio National Park, Costa Rica*, Kea Giles own work, 23 June 2013; all CC-SA, all Wikimedia Commons.

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