

The Stages of Spiritual Growth:

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Stage I: The Purgative Way

- The beginning stage of the Spiritual life for those who decide that they wish to grow in their relationship with God.
- This stage is marked by two distinctive characteristics: 1.) Great consolations (see: St. Ignatius of Loyola – 16th Century). 2.) The purification from habituated sin and the over-attraction to the pleasures of the senses.
- “Purity of Soul” is said to be the proper end of the purgative way.
- Forms of prayer suitable for this stage should largely focus on sin, its consequences, death, judgment, heaven, hell (final things).
- The man/woman should begin to truly seek not his/her will but that of God more and more.
- 2 forms of Purifications in the Purgative Way: 1.) Active (accomplished by mortifications, sacrifices, labors, and sufferings on the part of the person). 2.) Passive (accomplished by God as a means of purifying the person from attachment to sin).
- *Key Point:* In the beginning stages of the Purgative Way many times, though not always, a soul is given the joys of “sensible consolations” (they enjoy the ‘feelings’ associated with prayer, sacrifices, mass, etc.), and later these consolations are withdrawn by God and a passive purification begins. It is said that this is to teach the person to go deeper than simply ‘feeling’ the joys of prayer but to desire a relationship with Christ based on greater depth.

- When one is in the midst of ongoing stress and great fear they are usually in this stage.

Stage II: The Illuminative Way

- During this stage the person is making true spiritual progress by avoiding all mortal sin and attachment to the world.
- Called the Illuminative Way because in this stage the mind/heart become more and more enlightened with the practice of virtue (Cardinal Virtues/Theological Virtues) and filled with a greater desire for total union with Christ.
- In this stage charitable acts begin to increase within the person's life as they begin to look beyond oneself to the other in service.
- The prayer that is most often associated with this stage is meditation (see: CCC#2705). It is good to truly meditate on the mysteries of the rosary, to attend Ignatian silent retreats, Lectio Divina/reading scriptures, etc.
- There should be a greater desire for silence in prayer and a greater attentiveness to personal integrity of word and action and the intentions of acts performed.
- It is not uncommon that this stage lasts for many years after one passes from the purgative stage. Quite often there is a series of great desolations and consolations (see: Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola [bottom of this handout]).
- St. John of the Cross says that during this stage one can occupy their mind with God with much greater ease and joy than in the later part of the Purgative Way.

- There are still purifications to encounter in this stage, though usually with occasional dryness, boredom, trials, and darkness in prayer (see: CCC#2729).
- Many times during this stage one experiences external suffering (persecution from others, detraction, loss), which God permits and which fortifies one's faith. One should slowly persevere through them with constancy in prayer.

Stage III: The Unitive Way

- The Unitive Way is the way of those who have persevered to the general state of desiring absolutely and only God's will. This is the stage of perfection (see: St. Teresa of Avila – *The Interior Castle*).
- In this stage one is almost completely detached from the ego, the desire to be praised, and the worries that accompany the world.
- These people have found great peace, although they still experience day-to-day trials, because they have found a peace that is not dependant upon the world but is unchanging and unwavering.
- Called the state of “perfect charity” because one is perpetually ‘other’ oriented in service.
- This is referred to as the Unitive Way because one's soul is united to God by pure love, not simply the feelings associated with love.
- 1 Cor.6:17: “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit.”
- The prayer most often associated with this stage of prayer is contemplation on the Glories of Christ's Life (Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, appearances to the disciples).
- Many in this stage pray the simplest form of prayer known as Contemplation (see:CCC#2709-2719). It is a

silent reception of love, much like Mary's total "yes" at the Annunciation.

- Many souls who have attained this stage of prayer are graced with mystical experiences and extraordinary graces.
- St. John of the Cross, however, warns us that those who have attained this stage are still subject to being even further purified by greater crosses/difficulties than one experienced in the Purgative and Illuminative stages. The Lord permits certain souls to experience this in order to fully unify them in this life with Him. Thus this stage is not always free from further purification and anguish.

General Terms:

**Consolation*: The feeling of fervor, joy and devotion within the spiritual life. This often comes within the senses, with an increase in virtues, and within the intellect and will.

**Desolation*: One experiences a feeling of abandonment by God. This may come as the result of poor decision making, attacks by the Evil One, or by permission from God in order that one may be purified by it.

Key Point:

Frequent reception of Holy Communion is the primary and greatest way of maintaining one's efforts in advancing in the spiritual life and in total union with God.