



# Depression and Spiritual Integration

by Kathleen Hope Brown, D.Min.

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An integrated spiritual life involves both intellect and emotions, the mind and the heart. A person comes to know God through the teachings of their faith tradition but also through their experience of God working in their lives. An integrated spiritual journey involves joining the rational powers of the mind with the intuitive awareness of the heart. Either alone is incomplete.

Saint Francis DeSales contended that the spiritual life is inseparable from the rest of who we are:

*Our soul is spiritual, indivisible, immortal. It understands, it wills, and it wills freely. It is capable of judging, of reasoning, of knowing, and of having virtues. In all this it resembles God. It resides in the whole body, and whole in each of the body's parts, even as the divinity is whole in the whole world, and whole in each part of the world.<sup>1</sup>*

In this view of the human person, there is no dualism, no separation of mind, body, and spirit. The human person is an embodied spirit. There is no hint that the flesh is evil and no demeaning of our physical life. The soul resides in all of who we are, and God's grace is present in every part of us.

Most Saint Luke Institute clients are well-trained in theology, and their rational abilities are quite developed. While they trust the intellect, listening to the heart is almost always a bigger challenge. Talking about feelings can be difficult for anyone whose comfort zone is the intellect, but talking about feelings when depressed is especially challenging, because depression can numb a person's feelings. Even if a depressed person knows that God is present, they have little or no affective experience of that presence.

In cases of depression, a spiritual integrator witnesses to God's faithful love, holding the light of that love in what can seem like darkness. As depression begins to lift and feelings begin to return, the first emotions that emerge are often negative, including anger at God over the depression and whatever precipitated it. A spiritual integrator sometimes needs to encourage the client to express anger and other negative emotions in prayer, while affirming that prayer does not even require words. Sadness, desolation, frustration, and anger can be lifted to God as prayer. A spiritual integrator can

witness to their own belief that God's love is strong enough to hold any pain.

A spiritual integrator can also witness to the "God of the future approaching from the future."<sup>ii</sup> God does not intend for the client to remain stuck in the past, but always calls them forward. The spiritual integrator holds the light of hope that God calls all of us to fullness of life: "life in abundance." (John 10:10)

Sometimes clients equate the experience of depression with the Dark Night described by Saint John of the Cross. This spiritual experience can certainly have some overlap with depression. Both involve the feeling of God being absent. Both involve the loss of a healthy sense of self, a feeling that the "self" has been torn away. However, there are important differences.

The Dark Night is a spiritual experience. Other aspects of a person's life—physical health, emotions, human relationships—are not necessarily affected. Depression, on the other hand, can affect the mind, the body, and relationships as well as the spiritual life.

Another difference can be found in the wish to pray. Surrender to the Dark Night requires a deep desire for union with God; the hunger to pray usually

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# Case Study | Father Paul

Father Paul suffered from depression and carried a significant amount of pain from his childhood. His father was abusive—not physically cruel, but always giving him the message that he was not good enough and would never measure up to expectations. As a result, Father Paul always felt like a disappointment. He knew on some level that he was intelligent and capable, but as a child he was not in a position to resist or fight back against his father's cruel comments. Later, he was sexually abused as a high school student.

Father Paul was angry at God, but that emotion had been stuffed down for so long that it was like something frozen inside of him. Just as he felt defenseless

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against the male authority figures who abused him, he did not question or resist what seemed like God's rejection of him, God's judgment that he had little or no inherent dignity. He fell into depression. For a while, he turned to alcohol to numb the pain, but that left him sadder, discouraged, and more isolated.

Father Paul believed, at least intellectually, in a God who is loving and compassionate, but somehow, he did not feel that applied to him. He came to us for treatment with no real desire to pray, in part because he felt numb and in part because he knew it would mean facing memories and pain he did not want to face. However, he was able to admit that he wanted to cry out to God, "Where were you when those things happened?"

As Father Paul's depression began to lift and his anger began to thaw, the urge to cry out to God became stronger. He needed encouragement—even permission—to do so, and the reassurance that God's love is strong enough to hold his anger.

**"He needed encouragement . . . and the reassurance that God's love is strong enough to hold his anger."**

Journaling was easier than conversation with God, at least in the beginning. The physical act of writing helped to move the anger from inside of him to outside of him. His prayer life before he fell into depression was structured: just going through motions and reciting words. He was telling God what he believed God wanted to hear. Compartmentalizing his prayer life was a way of burying the pain. He did not want to bring the pain to God.

However, a healthy, intimate relationship requires authenticity. Gradually, Father Paul was able to give expression to his pain, even saying tearfully at one point when he prayed, "Where were you, God?" When his spiritual integrator said, "When those

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## Case Studies *continued*

things happened to you, I think God's heart was the first to break," he sobbed, and it was as though floodgates had opened.

The journey of spiritual as well as emotional healing will be ongoing for

Father Paul. He recognizes that he can still isolate from God and even lose some of his desire to pray, but he has learned the power of journaling, and he has come to believe—in his heart as well as his mind—that God is there for him.

*For confidentiality, reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.*

## Depression and Spiritual Integration *continued*

remains. Depression, in contrast, can often involve the numbing of the desire or even the inclination to pray.

The Dark Night is God's work in a self that has been "over-constructed" by human attachments and ambitions. What John of the Cross calls the "passive night of the spirit" involves God's work in a person to remove attachments that have become barriers to their relationship with God. God is at work forming a new self in right relationship with God. The person desires this new self, if not the pain involved in its evolution. The spiritual Dark Night involves a conscious surrender to what God is doing. Depression, on the other hand, is the human psyche dealing with a self that has been "under-constructed" and the disintegration of the person's sense of agency. The person seeks simply to function once again as the former self. When the Dark Night recedes, the result is transformation. When depression recedes, the result is restoration.<sup>iii</sup>

Both the Dark Night and depression involve what can seem like passivity. The Dark Night requires an intentional

surrender to any suffering required in pursuit of deeper union with God.<sup>iv</sup> Depression, to the extent that it involves an intentional emptying of the self, often requires surrender to the care of health professionals and cooperation with them.

Perhaps most importantly, a spiritual integrator can witness to the belief that, despite what a person might feel, God is never absent.

*Because God is the ground of our being, the relationship between creature and Creator is such that, by sheer grace, separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent. The fact that most of us experience throughout most of our lives a sense of absence or distance from God is the great illusion that we are caught up in; it is the human condition. The sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word.<sup>v</sup>*

Even in what seems like darkness, God is never absent.

*There is no such thing, either in the world or in the heart, as literal vacancy,*

*as a vacuum. And whenever space is really left—by death, by renunciation, by parting, by apparent emptiness, provided the emptiness that cannot remain empty is not filled by the world, or activity, or chatter, or the deadly grief of the world—there is God.<sup>vi</sup>*

## Bibliography

<sup>i</sup>Francis DeSales, *Treatise on the Love of God* (1:15)

<sup>ii</sup>Constance Fitzgerald, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope," address to the Catholic Theological Society

<sup>iii</sup>Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 243.

<sup>iv</sup>Ibid, p. 236.

<sup>v</sup>Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Practice of Christian Contemplation* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 15

<sup>vi</sup>Karl Rahner, *Biblical Homilies*, 77.

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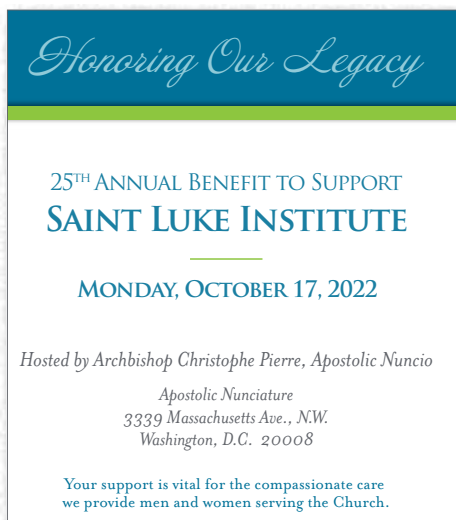
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