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WAKING UP

We have the solid assurance in the Prologue to John's gospel: "All that came to be had life in God and that life was the light of men and women, a light shining in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower" (Jn 1:4,5).

At some point in our human journey, a powerful awakening can occur--a blessed arousal to the light of the Divine Presence. That light is always with us, but it can be shining in an almost hidden dimness while we switch on other lights to give us a direction for living. Bright sun may be illuminating the world but if we shut ourselves into a closed area with artificial light, we can see, and then we say to ourselves, "This light is bright enough." That often happens at a spiritual level. We're satisfied with what we have to see by. Then comes an awakening to God. We're taken by a divine hand and walk out into dazzling sunlight. We feel a new warmth pulsating through us. Where was this light before? It was with you all the time, but you did not have the vision for it. Your near-sighted eyes looked at the easy switch that turned on your inside 100-watt bulb.

Centuries ago Plato saw the lives of most human beings as existence in a cave where the only grasp of reality was through shadows cast on the walls of the cave. Some of us, maybe a good number of us, have known what it is to feel like Plato's cave dwellers. Then the moment of a powerful grace arrives. The shadows are no longer enough. There must be more light than what I'm seeing. And there is.

We are shown the way out of the cave. We recognize the presence of God as the supreme reality of our lives. Even in common everyday speech, when we suddenly understand something in a unique way, we say it dawned on us. This new grasp of the reality of God and of God's importance in our life is as dawn after darkness. It is a faint beginning of glory known and experienced: a revelation of God to us.

Listening to the Gospel narratives at Mass, we see many examples of this daybreak when fresh awareness of God grasps hold of human lives. The woman taken in adultery hears the words of absolution--the words we too hear from Jesus. "Go now and sin no more." Life for her could never be the same again. The grateful leper is healed and goes forth to praise the goodness of God. A Samaritan woman listens to Jesus say, "If only you knew the gift of God." Before He left her, she knew and went back to her village to tell her townsfolk she had met the Messiah. A man born blind has his sight restored by Jesus and then dares to argue with the powerful religious leaders of his day who could cast him out--and did cast him out. Afterwards the miracle worker finds him and gives him the greater gift of inward vision: faith in Jesus Christ. Light is overcoming the darkness.

This initial experience that makes our God a truly *living* God to us is generated in a wide variety of ways. Grace takes expected and unexpected forms, some of them so unpredictable that we don't agree grace was at work until afterwards when we can reflect on what transpired: how we were led out of the cave into the sunlight. The light tells us much more about the cave than we could understand when dwelling in its darkness.

Frequently the dawn comes through an intense experience generated by something like a religious retreat or similar gathering. The atmosphere pulls our attention in from all the concerns of our everyday world. We quiet the clamor of other noises and our own insistent voice wanting this or that. The restlessness of our bodies moves to a more relaxed rhythm. All of this helps us to gather our mental and emotional strength to a point of alert focus. And the focus is on God. Sometimes a sermon or a paragraph in a book, the conversation of a friend can have the power to pull in your attention and fix it on God.

Very often a personal event that shakes the relative calm of our days startles us into our need for a Savior. We lose something--a job, an assignment, a promised reward--we counted on. Or far worse, we lose someone in death, in divorce, or in their outright rejection of us. Conversely, we may gain something beyond what we had dreamed of. Jesus speaks to us in the joy or in the sorrow, speaks insistently enough to command our attention. Christ calls us by name and refuses to let us shut the door of our perception as He knocks. The experience is too strong to be overlooked and when we are drawn into its embrace, whether that embrace be invigorating or depleting, we see God at its inner core.

For some people, God comes not in any single event but from the build-up of a succession of happenings that convey so little satisfaction that the emptiness demands some fulfillment. These are the cries of "Is this all life is about? Isn't there more to living? What's the point of it all? What am I striving for anyway?" The questions spring out of the darkness but can lead to the light, to an illumination like the rising of the sun.

John of the Cross describes this moment of awakening in his introduction to the book-length commentary on his poem, *The Spiritual Canticle*. He says, "The soul has grown aware of her obligations and observed that life is short, the path leading to eternal life narrow...the things of the world vain and deceitful, that all comes to an end and fails like falling water, and that the time is uncertain."

Our 2003 world is filled with uncertainties. John goes on, "The soul knows on the other hand of her immense indebtedness to God for having created her solely for Himself, and that for this she owes God the service of her whole life...She owes God every response of love....She knows too that a good part of her life has vanished "(Collected Works, ICS Publications, p. 477, 478). John is describing the moment of truth when a person comprehends what his or her life amounts to: what it is, what it can be. All that John describes is recognition of an individual's human condition at this particular moment of existence. After the recognition comes the answer to the invitation of grace. It is your Yes, my Yes, that makes all the difference. I choose, you choose to leave the darkness for the light.

Then with the Psalmist we sing, **“On waking, I shall rejoice in Your Presence”**
(Ps 17:15).

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