

– Three Ways of the Interior Life – (Three Stages of the Spiritual Life)

(Summations given by Fr. John Hardon, S.J. and Msgr. Charles Pope)

In one's spiritual journey, Catholic spirituality generally notes three basic "ways" or "stages" of the interior life (or spiritual life) through which the soul must pass that draws one into deeper union with God: the Purgative, the Illuminative, and the Unitive. Those who seek union with God must realize that such union, while always the gift of God, still requires a process, often painful, that must "pave the way" for that union. Look at it this way: If a box is filled with sand, it cannot be filled with gold. The sand must be emptied, the vessel cleaned, and then there is room enough for the gold of God's presence. **(Msgr. Charles Pope)**

1. **The Purgative Way (Fr. John Hardon, S.J.)** – The Purgative Way is the primary stage in mental prayer, according to the teachings of the great Carmelite mystics St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. The soul's chief concern in this stage of perfection is an awareness of its sins, sorrow for the past, and a desire to expiate the offenses against God.

- **The Purgative Stage (Msgr. Charles Pope)** – In this stage, our desires and affections must be "purged" of attractions to sin. The disorder caused by sin must be set aright by the Lord, for a disordered soul cannot perceive or appreciate well enough the glory and beauty of God. The distractions of the world must be diminished and wrongful passions, attachments, and evil inclinations must be subjugated so that we can more easily overcome temptations and preserve and exercise the virtue of charity. There is a focus, too, in this stage of uprooting the remnants and bad habits of former sins, perhaps through mortifications, the practice of austerity and simplicity, and the submitting of our will to be in conformity with the will of God. We seek to diminish and "purge" the attraction of wrongful or excessive pleasures. We also seek to diminish our natural shrinking from pain and to develop a repugnance to whatever is contrary to the will of God. The main virtue to be cultivated within this purgative stage is humility, which helps us be aware of our own weakness and our dependence on the grace of God.

2. **The Illuminative Way (Fr. John Hardon, S.J.)** – The Illuminative Way is the intermediary stage between "purification" and "union" on the path to Christian perfection. Also called the "Way of

the Proficients,” the main feature of the Illuminative Way is enlightenment of the mind in the ways of God and a clear understanding of His will in one’s own state of life.

- **The Illuminative Stage (Msgr. Charles Pope)** – Those in this stage have made progress and have their passions better under control of the will, so that they more easily keep themselves from mortal sin, but they still do not easily avoid venial sins since they still take pleasure in earthly things and are distracted by various imaginations and desires, not all of which are necessarily unlawful, but which may get in the way of a deeper union with God. In this stage, the mind becomes more and more enlightened (“illuminated”) to spiritual things and the practice of virtue. Love is stronger and the soul seeks progress in the spiritual life and in all the virtues. But purgation is still somewhat incomplete, and the purification of the senses is not yet completed. There are also aridities, difficulties, and trials, sometimes more severe than in the past, and the need to endure suffering from temptations.
3. **The Unitive Way (Fr. John Hardon, S.J.)** – The Unitive Way is the third and final stage of Christian perfection, beyond the Purgative and Illuminative. Its principal feature is a more or less constant awareness of God’s presence, and a habitual disposition of conformity to the will of God. Although commonly regarded as the last stage in the spiritual life, it is recognized that the three traditional levels of progress in holiness are not necessarily chronological. They may be present, in greater or lesser degree, at any point during a person’s growth in holiness and sanctity. This is an important point to remember.
- **The Unitive Stage (Msgr. Charles Pope)** – This is the way of those who have their minds detached from temporal things, such that they enjoy great peace, and are not agitated by various desires, nor are they moved to any great extent by sinful passion. Having been largely purged of these things, they have their minds fixed chiefly on God. It is called “unitive” since, at this stage, there is a “union” with God by love and the actual experience and exercise of that love.

Adapted from the *Modern Catholic Dictionary* by Fr. John Hardon, S.J., ©1999 Inter Mirifica. Reprinted and Published by Eternal Life, Bardstown, Kentucky, Second Printing, 2001, p. 265, 452, 553; and from the article *On the Purgative, Illuminative and Unitive Stages of the Spiritual Life*, by Msgr. Charles Pope, November 8, 2013, blog.adw.org.

