

Research Paper

## A Review on the Sainthood 3-Stage of Interior Journey – per Pope Saint John Paul II

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is about Roman Catholic teaching on the Sainthood 3-Stage of Interior Journey (Spiritual Life): Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Stages. Specifically, we summarize what Pope Saint John Paul II (JP2) wrote on his final book about "The Interior Journey Toward God". JP2 pointed out that all God's Holy Saints shared these common 3-Stage of their Interior Journey Toward God (i.e., Spiritual Life).

**KEYWORDS:** Purgative, Illuminative, Unitive, Interior Journey, Spiritual Life.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Who are Saints? A well-known Catholic Theologian, Dr. Christopher West, in one of his serials talks ('Fulfilled', the Promise of Christian Life) pointed out [1] the definition of Saints (per Pope Benedict XVI). A Saint is someone who has the courage to allow his/her heart to be pierced so deeply by God's Truth, Goodness, and Beauty that the person is transformed into a *Living Image* of God's Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. This is the *Journey to Fulfillment*. This is the *Journey of Christian Life*.

Historically, there is an important ascetical treatise for monasticism in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism [2–5], 'The Ladder of Divine Ascent' or 'Ladder of Paradise' (Scala or Climax Paradisi), written by Saint John Climacus in circa 600 AD. The 129-page handbook [3] was written for monks living the monastic life of the Raithu Monastery as a gateway from Earth to Heaven. It is a passageway for the readers to reach Jesus Christ and enter His Kingdom. This work has been read by Eastern Monastics and Roman Catholicism for centuries and it has much spiritual wisdom to impart to us today. Figure 1 depicts the 12-th century icon [5] of the 'Ladder of Divine Ascent'.



Fig 1. The 12th century 'Ladder of Divine Ascent' icon (Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai Peninsula, Egypt) showing monks, led by St. John Climacus, ascending the ladder to Jesus, at the top right.

Similarly, when we trace back reading numerous life stories of God's Holy Saints, all these Saints shared these common 3-Stage (a.k.a., 'Ladders') of their '*Interior Journey Toward God*' (i.e., Spiritual Life), as pointed out by Pope Saint John Paul II (JP2) in his final book. JP2 invites us to experience the fullness of the third and final stage [6].

West [1] reiterate that every Saints have gone through what JP2 summarized as the 3-Stage (*Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Stages*) of interior journey (i.e., spiritual life) to enter Heaven and become God's *Holy Saints*. No exceptions because without *holiness* [Hebrew: '*Kadesh*', which is outside the scope of this paper] no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). God commands Christians in the Bible, "Just as he who called you is *holy*, so *be holy* in all you do; for it is written: '*Be holy, because I am holy*' [1 Peter 1:15-16; Leviticus 11:44-45]." Christians are required to worship God by offering their "bodies as a living sacrifice, *holy* and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1)." The Bible stated that nothing that is *not holy* will ever go in [New Jerusalem/Heaven] (Revelation 21:27).

In this article, the sections are organized as follow. In Section 2, we present the material and method. Section 3 is the result. Section 4 is the discussion. Finally, Section 5 is the conclusion.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The material used is the final book of JP2 [6] and the famous Catholic Theologian, Christopher West's multiple talks, spreading and unpacking such message [1]. The method use is Catholic's teaching on faith and prayers as recap briefly in [7] and Bible references [8–10].

Next, an excerpt St. Paul described the *third heaven* [8–10], in the Bible (Corinthians 12:2-4) which is inadequate explanation based only on *sola scriptura* (scripture only); but *consistently* explained well by the apostolic Sacred Traditions of God's Great Holy Saints, such as St. Paul, St. John the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. JP2, etc. since all these Great Saints only experienced up to *second heaven* [11–13]. Note that the Catholic theology [14–17] is the understanding of Catholic doctrine or teachings, and results from the studies of theologians It is based on canonical scripture, and sacred tradition, as interpreted authoritatively by the magisterium of the Catholic Church, per CCC 74-95, 1953-1955 [14–16].

## III. RESULT

The result is the *message* on such *3-stage of spiritual life* to be spread, especially those who want to be God's Holy Saints (i.e., to enter heaven). Note that the alternative [of not becoming saints and hence not going to heaven], is going to hell [i.e., blazing furnace, Matthew 13:42; 13:50] where there will be *weeping-and-gnashing of teeth*. The phrase '*weeping-and-gnashing of teeth*' (in the original Greek) appears seven times in the New Testament as a description of the fate of the unrighteous ones at the conclusion of the age (Matthew 8:12 and Luke 13:28). The other five occurrences (Matthew 13:42, Matthew 13:50, Matthew 22:13, Matthew 24:51, and Matthew 25:30) are all within the context of parables by St. Matthew.

JP2 summarized such *3-stage of spiritual life* as follows. First, the "*PURGATIVE Stage*." At this first stage, we see everything from our own perspectives (angles). When purification/sanctification of our characters begins, certainly it hurts, as Jesus warned us that everyone who wants to follow Him, must deny themselves and carry their cross. Denying our flesh will and carrying our daily cross required *disciplines* are certainly *uneasy* and *hurts*. When it hurts (bitter), this is when a lot of people *quit* and *leave* their beliefs/faith. But when we *continue* (keep going) to follow the Lord (via the '*Small Gate and Narrow Road*' per Matthew 7:13-14), we will begin to see the second stage.

The second stage is the "*ILLUMINATIVE Stage*." This is when we see things from God's Perspective. This is the *Way* the Lord see others and you open yourselves to new depth to His Mercy. This is when you discover *Values of Purity (Holiness)* which God sees. As you see the '*Light*', we discover and encounter Jesus everywhere. Then you start encountering Him everywhere and experiencing Jesus in the real world, your own memory and sufferings; as we allow deeper conversions of our own hearts, to be free to love, like Jesus.

The third and final stage of spiritual life (interior journey to God) is the "*UNITIVE Stage*." In this third stage, you experience deep evangelization and conversion of our own hearts, experience deep abiding '*Nuptial Union*' with the Heart of Lord Jesus.

## IV. DISCUSSION

Mother Teresa spent 50 years in the Unitive Stage; only few years in Purgative and Illuminative Stages. Likewise, JP2 discover early in his live and spent most of his life in the Unitive Stage. Notice that these 3-Stage are not permanent stage here, while journeying (pilgrimaging) on Earth – but in Heaven, all the Saints spent eternity (permanent) Unitive Stage (Nuptial Union) with the Lord.

Indeed, while journeying on this Earthly Life, the *Non-Permanency* of the 3-Stage is evidenced with examples of St. Peter who (at one moment) experience a Second Stage (Illuminative Stage) as Jesus said (Matthew 16:16-17) – while shortly thereafter, Peter immediately fall-back into his First Stage (Purgative Stage)

when Jesus rebuked him (Matthew 16:22-24). Notice the disciples are with Jesus all those 3-year times, on earth. Yet, these 3-Stage are not permanent stage. How much more, we need to pray [18] harder to the Lord, with the intercessions of all His Holy Saints, to be in the Unitive Stage (Nuptial Union), as much as possible of our lifetime (Interior Journey) on Earth!

In his Apostolic Letter, "*NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE*" [19], published 6 January 2001, about Pastoral Plan/Work (for the Church) of the New Millennium, JP2 said that if we are not on the 3-Stage Journey, not really praying, not praying as community, not praying as individuals, not enriching interior/spiritual life, not contemplating prayer life, then we fish all nights and catch nothing. Only possible to the fruits, those kinds of fervent prayers.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have reviewed and summarized '*The 3-Stage of Interior Journey to God*' message. Particularly, what JP2 summarized beautifully of all those Saints' 3-Stage of Spiritual Life. The message is important for all those who want to go to heaven (i.e., become Saints). Remarkably, we conclude that such message is very important to be spread around the world and therefore is highly recommended for the benefits of many souls.

## DISCLAIMER STATEMENT

This research represents the author's own work and opinion. It does not reflect any policy nor represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Defense nor any other federal agency.

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