



SILENT HOMILIES

The Saints Who Sat in the Dark

Hope for those who suffer in silence



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Little Treasures

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Before You Begin



This is not a medical book. It is not a diagnosis of the dead. The saints used older words for what they were living through: sadness, dryness, desolation, a night of the soul. Some of it looks, from where we stand, like grief. Some of it looks like what a doctor would now call depression. Some of it was a darkness that belonged to prayer itself. Those are not the same thing, and a little book cannot sort them out for you.

It helps to keep the three apart, even roughly. Grief is what love does when a person has gone. Depression is an illness of body and mind, and it deserves care, rest, and sometimes medicine. Desolation, as St Ignatius came to call it, is a heaviness in the life of prayer: God feels absent, and good resolutions begin to look foolish. A person can be living in more than one of these at the same time. A wise companion can begin to tell them apart. These pages cannot do that work for you.

The point of the book is simpler than a diagnosis. You are not the first person to sit in the dark. Holiness has never required a cheerful face. Feeling no consolation does not mean that you have lost your faith, and it does not mean that God has walked out of the room. Faith is not the same thing as feeling God. Christian hope is not the same thing as optimism.

If the darkness is heavy and does not lift, tell someone who can actually help: a priest, a doctor, a friend who will not tidy you away. Grace and medicine are not enemies. The Church has never asked a sick person to choose between them. These pages were written to sit beside you. They were not written to scold you into feeling better.

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Chapter 1

Faith Is Not a Feeling



We sometimes imagine that the saints floated a little above ordinary life. The statues help the mistake along. They smile. They look settled. Then we compare that smile with a morning on which we cannot pray, and we conclude that we have already failed. The Church has never taught that. The saints slept. They wept. They lost their appetite. Some mornings they wondered whether God had gone. None of that, by itself, makes a person less loved.

Faith is not the same as feeling God. That sentence is worth staying with, because a great deal of unnecessary fear hangs on the confusion of the two. Faith is a gift by which we hold to God, and to what He has revealed, even when the feelings will not come with us. A person can belong to Christ and feel nothing. A person can pray and feel abandoned. The feeling is real. It is just not the measure of whether God is there.

Christian hope is not optimism. Optimism says that tomorrow will probably feel better, and sometimes that is simply not true. Hope says something sturdier. Even here, I belong to Him. He has not stopped being faithful because I cannot feel it tonight. Hope can live in a person who is not expecting a cheerful morning. That is why the Church can speak of hope in a hospital, and at a grave, and in a room where prayer has gone dry.

The Gospel itself refuses the cheerful picture. In Gethsemane Jesus said that His soul was sorrowful, even unto death. He asked His friends to stay awake with Him. They slept. He prayed anyway, and He asked, if it were possible, that the cup might pass. On the Cross He prayed a psalm that begins, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. The Church

has never treated that cry as a lapse. She has kept it in the mouth of her Lord.

Easter does not mean that Christians never sit in the dark again. It means the dark is not the last word. The Resurrection did not cancel Gethsemane. It answered it. A believer can still be in the garden at two in the morning, asking for the cup to pass, and still be inside the story rather than outside it.

So when the morning is heavy, it helps to ask which heaviness it is, without pretending the question is easy. Clinical depression is an illness. It deserves a doctor, and sometimes medicine, and nobody should be told that a tablet is a failure of trust. Spiritual desolation is a heaviness in prayer, the kind St Ignatius tried to name: God feels far, and the good things you resolved yesterday look pointless today. Grief is another country again. A soul can be in more than one of these at once. A priest, a doctor, a friend who will stay — these are not rivals. This book can only point at the difference. It cannot make it for you.

Reflection

Many people look at a smiling statue and conclude that they have failed. If those saints could speak, some of them would say: sit down. We know this chair. The smile on the statue is not a report of how they felt every morning. It is the Church's way of saying that their story did not end in the dark, even when long stretches of the story were dark.

Psalm 88 is worth knowing for that reason. It is a prayer in the Bible, and the Church still sings it. It does not finish with a neat lift. The last line leaves the person who is praying with darkness as companion. Scripture itself allows a prayer that does not cheer you up. You are not being more biblical by forcing a happy ending onto a night that has not ended.

Christ has already been where you are. That is not a slogan to put over a bad week. It is why the Church does not ask you to pretend. The Lord who said His soul was sorrowful unto death does not need you to arrange your face before you come to Him. Belonging does not wait for the feeling to return. If you cannot feel Him tonight, you can still be His.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, if I cannot feel You, let me still belong to You. Amen.

Chapter 2

The Widow Who Stayed



Jane Frances Frémyot was born in Dijon in 1572. At twenty she married Christophe, Baron de Chantal, and they lived at Bourbilly. By every account that has come down to us, the marriage was a happy one. In the autumn of 1601 he went out hunting with a friend. A gun went off by accident. He lived for some days after the shot — early lives say nine — and he used those days to forgive the man who had killed him, and to ask his wife to forgive him too. She was left with children, a title, and a grief that would not leave her alone.

This was not a picturesque sadness. A few months later she said that her whole being was so beset by distress that if God had not taken pity she would have perished in it. She could get almost no relief. Early accounts say she refused food and rest, and lost so much weight that people who knew her well hardly recognised her face. Faith had not cancelled the marriage. It did not cancel the missing of him either.

Then came a second trial, of a more ordinary kind, which is often the one that lasts. Her father-in-law required her to bring the children to his house at Monthelon. The house was not gentle. She was a widow with a household to keep, and children who still needed a mother to be present at the table. Cheerfulness was not a mood that arrived. It was an act of the will she practised for their sake, on days when she would rather have stayed in the dark.

That is worth pausing on, because we sometimes talk as if fidelity were a feeling of religious warmth. For Jane, in those years, fidelity looked like getting up, seeing to the children, and not letting the grief tell her that God had finished with her. She did not become a saint by enjoying grief.

She became a saint by remaining in it. The sorrow was not holy because it hurt. The staying was the holy thing.

She was not finished with ordinary life when the worst of the weeping eased. There were still years of household duty ahead of her, and later the long correspondence with Francis de Sales, and the founding of the Visitation. None of that erases the winter after the hunting accident. The Church canonised a widow who had been, for a time, almost unrecognisable to her own household.

Reflection

Grief is not a failure of faith. It is what love does when the person is gone. If belief in the resurrection meant that Christians could no longer mourn, the Gospel would have said so. It does not. Our Lady stood beneath the Cross, and the Church has never described her as unfeeling there. She believed, and she still stood in the place where her Son was dying. Faith and tears are not enemies.

Job sat in ashes and was still speaking to God. His friends wanted the conversation to become an explanation. Job wanted the person he had lost, and he wanted God not to be a stranger. The book that bears his name allows the argument to go on for a long time before any answer arrives. You are allowed to be in the middle of that book.

If your own sorrow has made you thinner, or sharper, or strange to the people who love you, Jane is already sitting at the end of the bench. She does not need you to be impressive. She needs you not to leave. Ordinary duties, done for the people who are still here, can be a way of staying when prayer itself feels like dust. That is not a small thing. It is sometimes the whole of fidelity for a season.

A Short Prayer

St Jane Frances, widow and mother, sit with those who are being worn thin.

Amen.

Chapter 3

A Letter in the Morning



Jane found a director in Francis de Sales, Bishop of Geneva. They met in 1604, when he came to Dijon to preach the Lenten sermons. He lived most of his working life in exile from his own see, in Annecy, because Geneva itself was not a city he could occupy. What they had, for years, was letters. She told the truth in them, which is rarer than it sounds. People often write the version of themselves they think a priest will be able to bear.

One morning in 1614, from Annecy, she wrote that she could not refrain from writing, because she was more wearisome to herself than usual. Her interior state, she said, was so gravely defective that she saw herself giving way on every side. That is her own sentence, in the *English Selected Letters*. We do not need to invent a scene around it. The woman who would later be called a saint began that day by telling her director that she was a burden to herself.

The letter goes on in the same key. The presence of God, which had once been a delight, now made her tremble. She had spent the night in bitterness, with almost no words except the cry from the psalm, *why have you forsaken me*. At daybreak a little light came, and then the trouble rushed back. She still said, in dryness, that the Lord could do with her as He pleased. The point is not that she felt better by the end of the page. The point is that she sent the page.

Francis answered the frightened as he usually did: gently, and without panic. He did not tell her to try harder at happiness. He told her to stay faithful in the small duties, and not to let anxiety become the whole of the road. That was his particular gift. He took a soul seriously without

turning the soul's fear into the last word about her.

Telling the truth did not end the heaviness. It meant she was no longer the only person in the room with it. That is often as much as a letter can do, and it is a great deal. Catholic spiritual direction, at its simplest, is this: one person who will hear the night without being shocked by it, and who will not let you resign from God on the strength of a bad morning.

Reflection

Holiness is not never needing paper. Holiness is using the paper. A direction that cannot survive a letter is not much of a direction. Jane did not wait until she had a tidy account of herself. She wrote because she could not refrain, and because the morning was already too heavy to carry alone.

If you have a letter you have not sent — to a priest, a sister, a friend who will not use your words against you — consider sending it. Dawn is easier to wait for when someone else knows you are waiting. You do not have to write well. You have to tell the truth you actually have.

There is a scene in Scripture that belongs beside that letter. Elijah, after the triumph on Carmel, sits under a broom tree and tells God that he has had enough. He asks to die. God does not begin with a lecture. Elijah sleeps. An angel wakes him. There is bread and water. He sleeps again. Only then is he told that the journey is too much for him, and given food for the road. The Bible understands that a human being sometimes needs sleep and food before another speech. That is an extraordinarily human detail, and it is in the book we call holy.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give me one person who can read the night with me. Amen.

Chapter 4

The Student Who Thought He Was Lost



Before he was a bishop, Francis de Sales was a young student in Paris. He was serious, and he was listening to the arguments of his century. This was the age of the great quarrel about predestination: whether God had already decided, from all eternity, who would be saved and who would not, and whether a soul could discover that it was among those He would not have. In a Catholic city, with Calvinist teaching pressing in from Geneva and from the pamphlets, that question was not an academic game. It could fasten on a conscience.

It fastened on him. He became afraid that he was already lost, and that every prayer was therefore a kind of theatre. If God had rejected him, what was the point of asking? The fear did not remain an idea. It became an obsession. He could not settle. Early accounts say the distress made him physically ill, and for a time bedridden. This was late in 1586 and the beginning of 1587. He was not yet twenty.

He went into the church of Saint-Étienne-des-Grès in Paris, to a statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance, the Black Madonna that people in that parish already trusted. He made a bargain that was really a surrender. He would love God in this life even if he could not be sure of the next. At least let him never curse the holy Name. He prayed the Memorare. Later accounts say the fear seemed to fall from him there, like scales. Jane is one of those who told the story of that church. We should not pretend that we have a doctor's note from the afternoon. We have a tradition the Church has trusted, reported by people who knew him.

Notice what did not heal him. It was not a better lecture about predestination. The argument that had terrified him was not answered,

that day, by a sharper argument. He was met by Our Lady, and by a willingness to love God even when the question of his own future looked hopeless. He handed over the sentence he could not stop repeating.

There is an irony here, and it is worth sitting with, because it is not a decoration. The frightened student who feared that he might be shut out of God's love would later be called a Doctor of the Church, and the doctor of divine love. The man who thought love was for other people spent his life teaching ordinary Christians that God wanted them. The fear did not disqualify him. In the strange mercy of things, it became part of the reason he could speak to the frightened without contempt.

Reflection

Despair can send the mind back to the same terrible conclusion again and again. The conclusion feels like thinking. Often it is the same sentence, wearing the clothes of a new argument. Prayer, at its most desperate, stops arguing and loves anyway. That is what Francis did in front of the statue. He did not win the debate. He stepped out of it for long enough to say the Memorare.

If your mind is running the same terrible sentence, do what he did. Stop the debate for a moment. Say a prayer you already know. Stand in front of Mary and give her the sentence. You do not have to win the argument. You have to get through the morning. Our Lady of Good Deliverance is not a theory about how God chooses. She is a mother to whom a terrified student was able to speak.

Hope here is not, I feel better. Hope is, I will not curse Your Name. The two are easy to confuse, because we would like the feeling to be the proof. Francis did not have the proof when he made the prayer. He had the prayer. The Church later trusted the life that came out of that church. You are allowed to begin where he began, with a sentence you cannot yet believe in a warm way, handed to someone who can hold it.

A Short Prayer

*Our Lady of Good Deliverance, take the sentence I cannot stop repeating
and hold it for me. Amen.*

Chapter 5

Twenty Years on a Stormy Sea



St Teresa of Ávila is remembered for raptures, for the Interior Castle, and for the convents she founded across Spain. That is the Teresa on the holy card. She is less often remembered for a sentence from her own Life. She spent nearly twenty years, she says, on a stormy sea. She can testify that this is one of the most grievous kinds of life she thinks can be imagined, because she had neither any joy in God nor any pleasure in the world.

It helps to hear what she means by that, because it is easy to file her among the mystics and then feel scolded by the comparison. When she was among worldly pleasures, the thought of God made her sad. When she was with God, worldly affections pulled her. She does not know how she endured it for a month, let alone for so many years. For more than eighteen of the twenty-eight years since she had begun to pray, she says, she lived in that strife. She was often ill. This is not a hostile biographer. This is Teresa, writing about Teresa.

The contrast is the point. Many Catholics know her as a woman God visited in extraordinary prayer. Far fewer realise how long ordinary prayer was a struggle, and how honestly she failed at it. A Doctor of the Church spent the better part of two decades neither happy in God nor happy away from Him. If that is your life just now, you are not a freak of nature. You are in company you did not know you had.

She once gave up prayer for more than a year, thinking the refusal was humility. She told herself she was not worthy to be speaking to God. A holy friar who still believed she prayed came to see her. She could not bear his good opinion, and she told him the truth. That confession — I do not pray — was the beginning of getting up again. The year away did

not make the rest of her story false. It made the return necessary. What teaches us is not that she never left the chair. What teaches us is that she came back to it, and that the coming back began with an embarrassing sentence said out loud.

Teresa's gift to the divided and the dry is that honesty. She does not pretend that a convent solves the weather. Enclosure, a habit, a reputation for prayer: none of these kept the stormy sea from being a stormy sea. God could still work with a woman who had stopped, provided she would say that she had stopped.

Reflection

If that is your life just now, a Doctor of the Church has already written it down, so that you would not think yourself the only person prayer has disappointed. She wrote it in the book she did not much want to write. The Church kept it. You are allowed to borrow her sentence until you have one of your own.

Her advice, when she could give it, was stubborn and small. Do not abandon prayer because it tastes of nothing. Return. Even a little. God can work with a person who keeps sitting down. The sitting down is not a performance for Him. It is a way of not resigning. Ten minutes that feel like nothing are still ten minutes in the chair.

St Paul is useful here, and not as a lecture on cheerfulness. He was given a thorn, and he asked three times that it might leave him. The answer was, My grace is sufficient. Sufficient is not the same as pleasant. Paul does not say the thorn became a pleasure. He says the grace held. Teresa would have recognised the distinction. A dry hour of prayer can be a sufficient hour. It does not have to be a sweet one to be real.

A Short Prayer

Lord, I have no sweetness in prayer and no rest in the day. Keep me in the chair anyway. Amen.

Chapter 6

The Child Who Waited for a Smile



Thérèse Martin, before anyone called her the Little Flower, was a child who cried too easily and then could not stop. Her mother, Zélie, died in 1877, when Thérèse was four. She wrote later that her happy disposition changed from that day. The house at Les Buissonnets did not stop being a Christian house. It also did not stop being a house with a missing mother.

Later there was a second parting. Her sister Pauline, who had become a second mother to her, entered Carmel in 1882. The small world of the house seemed to break again. Thérèse fell into a strange illness: tremors, visions, a self she did not recognise. The family prayed. On 13 May 1883, Pentecost, she looked at a statue of Our Lady and — she always insisted on this — the Virgin smiled. The illness lifted. Thérèse never treated that smile as a trick of fever. She called her Our Lady of the Smile. We have her own account. We do not have to improve it.

Years later, dying of tuberculosis in the Carmel of Lisieux, another darkness came, and it is important not to fold the two into one story. She wrote of a fog so thick that the image of heaven, which had consoled her from childhood, disappeared. The darkness, she said, borrowed the voice of sinners and mocked her. You are dreaming of a fatherland. You will not walk out of this fog. Advance, and death will give you not what you hope for, but a night still deeper. She did not have the joy of faith in those months. She made more acts of faith then, she believed, than in the rest of her life put together.

That second darkness was not simply sadness, and it was not the childhood illness returned. She was losing the felt certainty and the

consolation connected with heaven, while her body was being taken by tuberculosis. The thing she had loved to think about had become the thing that tortured her. What she did with that is the witness. She did not pretend the fog was a mood. She turned her back on the argument, as she put it, and she ran toward Jesus with acts of faith, including the willingness to shed her blood for a heaven she could no longer picture.

Two darknesses, one saint. The first was the darkness of a wounded child, met, as she told it, by a smile. The second was the darkness of a woman who kept believing without the comfort of believing. Neither is a failure of the Little Way. The Little Way was built for the second as much as for the first: not grand feelings, but the next small act, done for love, when the feelings have gone home.

Reflection

The Little Way is sometimes presented as a softness. Read against these two darknesses, it is closer to a rope. Thérèse did not ask a dying person to feel heaven. She asked herself to do one thing that belonged to heaven, and then another. A kind word. A prayer said with no taste in it. An act of faith made on purpose, because the feeling of faith had left the room.

If you need a statue to look at, look at one long enough to let it look back. She did. She spent her life saying that Our Lady had smiled, and the Church has not corrected her. If you cannot feel faith, do one thing faith would do — a kind word, a decade of the Rosary, a glass of water given to someone else. The act is not a substitute for faith. It is faith finding something to do with its hands.

Thérèse would recognise you at once. She has been in the fog. She knows the way a person walks when they cannot see the country they still love. The childhood illness and the final trial are not the same night, and it helps no one to diagnose them as if they were. What they share is a saint who did not resign. You are allowed to borrow her stubbornness without borrowing her tuberculosis, and without pretending that a smile will come on a timetable.

A Short Prayer

*Virgin of the Smile, if I cannot see heaven, let me still do one small thing
that belongs to heaven. Amen.*

Chapter 7

Do Not Decide in the Dark



Íñigo of Loyola was a soldier before he was a saint. After the wound at Pamplona, and the long convalescence in which his conversion began, he became afraid of his own soul. Every tiny fault looked like a grave sin. He confessed, and then he confessed the same things again. The fear did not settle. A mind that wants certainty can make a prison of the confessional. The priest's absolution is real. The anxious mind can refuse to live in it, and come back an hour later with the same list.

He later taught the Church to call this kind of weather desolation. The word is simpler than it sounds. Desolation, for Ignatius, is unrest, grey doubt, the feeling that every good resolution was a mistake, a pulling downward and away from God. Consolation is the opposite movement: peace, courage, a drawing toward God, even when the circumstances have not changed. He was not inventing a mood. He was giving names to two states he had lived in, so that other people could notice which one they were in.

Out of that season he drew a few rules that have saved more people than they know. In desolation, do not change a good decision you made when the weather was clearer. Do not add fuel to the heaviness by turning it over and over. Remember that consolation will return, because it has returned before. And go on with the small practices you already had — prayer, work, kindness — even when they feel like theatre. These are not slogans. They are a man talking to his own younger self. Faith is not the same as feeling God.

The reason for the rule is practical, and it is kind. A person in desolation can temporarily interpret everything through the darkness they are

feeling. A vocation that was solid in daylight looks like a mistake at two in the morning. A marriage looks like a prison. The Church looks like a fraud. Ignatius is not saying that feelings are meaningless. When we are in desolation, everything can look different. That is why Ignatius tells us not to let one dark night overturn decisions we made when we could see more clearly. Do not let tonight rewrite what you knew in daylight. Wait for daylight, and decide again then.

If you are about to undo a good choice at two in the morning — leave a marriage, leave a vocation, leave the Church — Ignatius would stand in the doorway and send you back to bed. The night is a poor counsellor. It always sounds so final. That rule is not a command to remain in danger. If you are unsafe, or someone else is unsafe, seek help now. Do not use a saint to stay in a room that is harming you. Abuse, violence, and real danger are not desolation. They are reasons to leave, and to leave in daylight with help, not reasons to wait for a warmer feeling about God.

Reflection

Ignatius is not asking you to enjoy desolation. He is asking you not to let desolation become the only advisor in the house. A feeling can be true as a feeling and still be a bad guide to a decision. That is not an insult to the feeling. It is a mercy to the person who has to live with the decision in the morning.

A priest can hear a confession. A doctor can hear an illness. Both may belong in the same week. Scrupulosity can sit on top of a depression, or beside a grief, and the three will not sort themselves out to spare you. Taking the body and the soul seriously at the same time is not weak faith. It is Catholic. We are not angels. The sacrament does not despise the physician, and the physician does not replace the sacrament.

Romans 8 does not say you will feel the Spirit every hour. It says that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The list Paul gives is deliberately large: death, life, things present, things to come. Feeling is not on the list of proofs, and the absence of feeling is not on the list of separations. You can be unable to feel the love and still be held by it. That is the doctrine. It is also the reason you do not have to resign at two in the morning.

A Short Prayer

St Ignatius, soldier of a quieter war, keep me from deciding in the dark.

Amen.

Chapter 8

A Cell and a Teaching



In December 1577, friars of his own order took John of the Cross from a house in Ávila and locked him in the priory at Toledo. He was a reformer, and reforms make enemies. The cell was narrow. The window was high. He was given little food. He was beaten. He remained there for months, until he escaped in August 1578. Out of that room came some of the poems the Church still sings when she wants to speak of love and of night. The prison was an injustice done to him. It should be named as an injustice. Holiness did not require the beating.

His teaching about the dark night of the soul is not simply another name for that cell. This distinction matters, and it is easy to lose. The dark night, as he wrote of it, is a way God sometimes leads a person who is already seeking Him in prayer. The usual comforts of prayer grow less, and the soul is drawn to cling to God rather than to the sweetness of God. That is a description of a particular path in prayer. It is not a claim that God sends depression in order to teach a lesson. A person can have loved the feeling of prayer, the peace of it, the sense of being near. When that sense goes, the question quietly changes. Did I want God, or did I want the gifts that came with the feeling of God?

That is a real teaching, and it has consoled people whose prayer has gone dry after years of sweetness. It is not a diagnosis, and it is not a verdict on every person who cannot feel God. Depression is an illness. Grief is grief. Exhaustion is exhaustion. A cruel room in Toledo is a cruel room. John did not baptise the beating as a mystical favour. He wrote poems in spite of it, and he wrote a theology that is about something else: the slow work by which God weans a soul from needing pleasant prayer in order to stay.

There is no simple test that separates that night from depression. They can overlap in one person's experience, and an overlap is not an identity. A person may need both wise spiritual guidance and professional care. Do not baptise an illness as a mystical gift in order to avoid getting help. Do not medicate away every dryness as if God were never allowed to teach in silence. The two mistakes are cousins. One romanticises suffering. The other is frightened of any silence that a tablet has not removed.

Tell the truth to someone trained to hear both languages. A director who has read John, and a doctor who has read a chart, can both be necessary in the same month. John himself would not thank us for using his night as a reason to leave a sick person alone.

Reflection

John did not call the cruelty holy. He called the love that survived it holy. That is a different sentence, and the difference is the whole of Christian sense about suffering. The Church does not worship pain. She worships the Lord who went into pain and came through it, and she honours the people who did not let pain have the last word about God.

The absence of consolation is not, by itself, proof that you have taken a wrong turning. Dry prayer can mean several things. It can mean tiredness. It can mean an illness that needs a doctor. It can mean a sin that needs confession. It can, sometimes, mean that God is teaching a soul to want Him rather than the feeling of Him. You will not know which, alone, at midnight. Suffering does not have to be carried alone, and it should not be.

Either way, Christ has already been in the dark. Gethsemane is not a metaphor. He asked for the cup to pass, and He stayed. He does not lose the people who cannot see Him. If this night is a teaching, He is in it. If this night is an illness, He is in it still, and He is not offended by the doctor. You do not have to decide the name of the night before you ask Him to stay.

A Short Prayer

Jesus of Gethsemane, if this night is Yours, stay. If it is an illness, send me help. Teach me not to lie about which it is. Amen.

Chapter 9

A Prayer That Does Not Resolve



By now the pattern should be clear, and it should be a relief rather than a lesson. Jane's grief, Francis's fear, Teresa's twenty years, Thérèse's fog, Ignatius's scruples, John's cell — none of these people were removed from the household of God for failing to feel better. The Church later put them on altars. That is a fact worth sitting with when the mind says you have been disqualified. A troubled mind can be stricter than the Church. It can decide you have been disqualified. The Church has not agreed.

A night is not a failure. A night is a time of day. Some nights last an hour. Some last a winter. The saints do not promise that yours will be short. They promise that it is not a verdict on your soul. Length is not the same thing as rejection. A long darkness can still be a place where a person belongs to Christ, prays badly, and is not dismissed.

St Dymphna belongs in this company, and she has to be spoken of honestly. She is invoked for those whose minds are unwell. She is remembered as a young woman of the early Middle Ages, and much of her story comes to us through later legend. We should not pretend that every detail can be proved. What we can say is that, over many centuries, Catholics have turned to St Dymphna as a friend and intercessor in mental suffering. In Geel, in Belgium, a long local practice of welcoming people with troubled minds grew up around her shrine. That welcome is historical. The early story of her life is not something we can prove in the same way.

You may ask her. You may also ask the others in these pages. The Communion of Saints is not a museum of successful personalities. It is a

company that still answers, because baptism does not end at death, and the people who have gone ahead of us in Christ have not lost interest in the people still on the road. Asking a saint for company is not a technique. It is an act of belonging to the same Church.

Psalm 88 is the psalm that does not climb back into the light before it ends. My companion is darkness. The Church still sings it, in the Office, on days when other psalms would have been easier. That means a Christian is allowed to finish a prayer without a cheerful last line. The Bible did not tidy this psalm. We do not have to tidy ours.

Reflection

If all you can do tonight is stay, stay. That matters. God is not grading your mood. He is keeping faith with a person who is having trouble keeping faith with Him. Staying is not a small achievement when leaving has begun to look like sense. The saints in this book stayed. Some of them stayed badly. They were not sent out of the house for the manner of the staying.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus are the scene to keep beside that. They are walking away from Jerusalem. They are disappointed. They think the story has failed, and they say so, out loud, to a stranger. Jesus is already walking beside them before they recognise Him. He lets them talk. He does not begin by scolding them for the direction of the road. Recognition comes later, at a table, in the breaking of bread.

You may be on the road, not yet at the table. That is still the Gospel. The Mass is that table, whether you can feel the Stranger or not. If you can get there, go. If you cannot, the Church has ways of bringing Holy Communion to a person who is not able to walk to the church. Recognition is His work. Walking beside you before you recognise Him is also His work. You do not have to produce the moment of recognition in order to be on the road with Him.

A Short Prayer

*St Dymphna, friend of the unwell, and all you saints who sat in the dark,
do not leave this room. Amen.*

Chapter 10

Stay Until Morning



The saints do not hand us a technique that ends sadness. If they did, this would be a different book, and a less honest one. They hand us company, and a few small lamps. The lamps are ordinary. That is why they can be used on a night when nothing impressive is possible.

Tell one safe person the truth. Jane waited until she could name the storm, and she still named it, in a letter she did not much want to write. Teresa told the friar she had stopped praying, and the telling was the turn. Silence grows things that do not love you. A secret kept from everyone who could help is not humility. It is a room with the door shut.

Do not make a life decision at midnight. Ignatius would stand in the doorway and send you back to bed. Keep a small rule you can keep on a bad day: a decade of the Rosary, a psalm, a walk to the window, Mass if you can bear the people. God is not grading the performance. He is keeping the appointment you almost cancelled. The small rule is not there to impress Him. It is there so that the night does not get to unmake the whole of your practice.

Accept ordinary help — sleep, food, daylight, a physician. The scene with Elijah is still the pattern. God let him sleep, and fed him, before He spoke. Francis de Sales loved gentleness too much to call medicine a lack of faith. A tablet, a proper night's rest, a walk in the morning, a conversation with a doctor: these are not rivals to grace. They are often the way grace looks after a body.

If you are thinking about ending your life, or you are not sure you can keep yourself safe, tell someone now and seek urgent help. Do not keep that thought as a secret companion. In the United Kingdom you can call

Samaritans on 116 123, day or night, free from any phone. If you are elsewhere, contact your local emergency number or crisis service. A priest and a doctor can share the weight. Neither is a substitute for the other, and neither will be shocked that you said the sentence out loud.

The Church wants you alive. There will be another First Friday, and she would like you there for it. Put a candle where you can see it, not as magic, but as a reminder that the saints sat in rooms like yours and did not become unsaintly by being sad. You are not a disappointment to heaven. You are in a long company. Stay until morning.

Reflection

Hope was never meant to stay in one pair of hands. That is part of what the Communion of Saints means, and part of what a parish means, and part of what a doctor's surgery means. If the night has convinced you that you are the only person who can carry this, the night is lying. Jane had Francis. Teresa had the friar. Elijah had an angel with bread. You are allowed a human being and a sacrament in the same week.

If this page finds you at two in the morning, you have already done one hard thing: you are still here. That is not nothing. Sometimes it is the whole of holiness for a season. You do not have to turn the staying into a feeling of courage. Staying is enough to be going on with.

Christ will be at Mass whether you feel Him or not. Come if you can. If you cannot, let someone bring you Holy Communion. The night is not the last word. You do not have to feel that yet. You only have to stay. The First Friday will come round again. The Church would like you there for it, in whatever state you are able to arrive.

A Short Prayer

Sacred Heart of Jesus, I cannot lift this. Hold it. Hold me. Amen.

A Last Word



If this little book has done its work, you will not feel diagnosed. You will feel less alone. Jane, Teresa, Thérèse, Francis, Ignatius, John of the Cross and Dymphna all knew something of darkness, and were not dismissed from the household of God. They are not a theory. They are company.

Keep the book if it helps. Give it away if it helps someone else more. If the darkness is an illness, see a doctor. If it is a grief, let someone sit with it. If it is a dryness in prayer, do not resign from the chair. If you are not safe, ask for help tonight, not tomorrow.

May the night be shorter than it feels. May one safe person find you. May you stay until morning.

Sources and Further Reading



Scripture is used in the Church's own translations and, where noted, in paraphrase. Paraphrases are not marked as quotations. The scenes are: Elijah under the broom tree, 1 Kings 19; Job in ashes; Psalms 42, 43 and 88, including the ending in which darkness is the companion who remains; Gethsemane, Matthew 26:38; the cry from the Cross, Mark 15:34, praying Psalm 22; the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:13–35; the thorn and the sufficient grace, 2 Corinthians 12; nothing able to separate us from the love of God, Romans 8.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, on hope, on prayer, and on the Communion of Saints. St Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, rules for the discernment of spirits, and the *Autobiography*, on scrupulosity and on not changing a good decision in desolation. St Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, especially chapter 8, on the stormy sea, the years without joy in God or pleasure in the world, and the year in which she gave up prayer.

St Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, on her mother's death, the illness of 1883, and *Our Lady of the Smile*; Manuscript C and the *Last Conversations*, on the final trial of faith, the fog, and the acts of faith made without the joy of faith. The two darknesses are kept distinct on purpose.

St John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, distinguished here from the Toledo imprisonment of December 1577 to August 1578. The cell was an injustice. The teaching about the night of the soul is not another name for the cell.

St Jane Frances de Chantal, letter to Francis de Sales, Annecy, 1614, beginning "I write because I cannot refrain from doing so," in the *English Selected Letters of the Visitation*. Her widowhood after the

hunting accident of 1601, the days her husband lived, and the household at Monthelon, are taken from the early lives. St Francis de Sales's crisis of late 1586 and early 1587, before the statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance at Saint-Étienne-des-Grès, is reported in the early lives and in Jane's testimony about him. The image of the fear falling like scales belongs to that tradition. It should not be treated as a word-for-word quotation from Jane.

For St Dymphna, later medieval lives must be read as hagiography, not as a modern biography. Her patronage of those in mental distress is a long Catholic practice. The welcome of people with troubled minds at Geel is a historical local practice around her shrine, not a proof of the legendary vita, and not a medical case history.

Crisis support, verified for this edition: in the United Kingdom, Samaritans, 116 123, free, day and night. Elsewhere, the local emergency number or crisis service.

Keep a Small Lamp Burning



The saints in these pages sat through long nights and left us small lights. A letter written because a morning was already too heavy. A rule not to decide at two in the morning. A statue that a child insisted had smiled. A psalm that is allowed to end in the dark. None of these is a technique. They are company, left where we can find them.

These Little Treasures remain free. No one should reach the next page and be told it is only for those who can pay.

Keeping a small lamp burning still takes work. It means finding a reliable edition, checking a sentence against a weak copy of it, and separating what Jane actually wrote from what a later preacher wished she had said. It means noticing that Elijah was fed before he was lectured, and checking Catholic teaching so that a dryness in prayer is not confused with an illness. Then comes the writing, and the cutting. A short book can take a long time to become quiet enough to sit beside someone who cannot sleep.

If this one has helped you, and if you are able to support the work through the Silent Homilies website, I would be truly grateful. A gift is not payment for these pages. They are already yours. It simply helps me light the next lamp.

If you cannot give financially, nothing is owed. Send this booklet to someone who may be awake in the dark tonight. That keeps the lamp in another room. www.silenthomilies.com

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