

Deborah Sutera

The God who does not save

Spiritual paths through illness and vulnerability
in John of the Cross and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT 

This article addresses the theme of vulnerability and physical and mental illness as a possible pathway to a spiritual journey. A pointed analysis of the concepts of ‘dark night’ in St John of the Cross and ‘powerlessness of God’ in Dietrich Bonhoeffer is proposed, noting a specific theological correlation between the two notions. The work bases its analysis on a theological-contemporary hermeneutic regarding the notion of ‘dark night’, which is here interpreted from the perspective of a ‘passive-permission’ of God. In this sense, pain, physical and psychic illness and the vulnerability of the human condition signify for man and woman the entry into a terrible ‘darkness’ not actively willed but inexplicably permitted by God. Through such a ‘nocturnal happening’ God reveals himself in all his passivity and impotence: he is not the saviour God one encounters on the road of pain and night, nor – as the Lutheran theologian Bonhoeffer would say – the ‘stop-gap-God’. In the night of psycho-physical pain, man and woman rather encounter ‘the God who does not save’. God’s passive-permission is a revelation of his own ‘weakness’: but in such passivity one can experience, miraculously, a divine activity ‘in extremis’. Through the terrible experience of vulnerability and physical and mental illness, men and women are given the opportunity to mysteriously perceive God’s dark nearness and, precisely through their helplessness, to feel comforted and saved by him.

DEUTSCH

Der Gott, der nicht rettet. Spirituelle Wege durch Krankheit und Vulnerabilität bei Johannes vom Kreuz und Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit dem Thema der Verletzlichkeit und der körperlichen und geistigen Krankheit als einem möglichen Weg zu einer spirituellen Reise. Es wird eine pointierte Analyse der Begriffe „dunkle Nacht“ bei Johannes vom Kreuz und „Ohnmacht Gottes“ bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer vorgeschlagen, wobei eine spezifisch theologische Korrelation zwischen den beiden Begriffen festgestellt wird. Gestützt auf eine theologisch-zeitgenössische Hermeneutik wird der Begriff der „dunklen Nacht“ aus der Perspektive eines „passiven Zulassens“ Gottes interpretiert. In diesem Sinne bedeuten Schmerz, physische und psychische Krankheit und die Verletzlichkeit des Menschen den Eintritt in

eine schreckliche „Dunkelheit“, die nicht aktiv gewollt, sondern unerklärlicherweise von Gott zugelassen wird. Durch ein solches „nächtliches Geschehen“ offenbart sich Gott dem Menschen in seiner ganzen Passivität und Ohnmacht: Er ist nicht der rettende Gott, dem man auf dem Weg des Schmerzes und der Nacht begegnet, und auch nicht – wie der lutherische Theologe Bonhoeffer sagen würde – der „Lückenbüßer“-Gott. In der Nacht des psycho-physischen Schmerzes begegnen Mann und Frau vielmehr „dem Gott, der nicht rettet“. Gottes passives Zulassen ist eine Offenbarung seiner eigenen „Schwäche“. Aber in dieser Passivität kann man auf wunderbare Weise eine göttliche Aktivität in extremis erleben. Durch die schreckliche Erfahrung der Verletzlichkeit und körperlicher und geistiger Krankheit erhalten Männer und Frauen die Möglichkeit, auf geheimnisvolle Weise die dunkle Nähe Gottes zu erfahren und sich gerade durch ihre Hilflosigkeit von ihm getröstet und gerettet zu fühlen.

BIOGRAPHY

Deborah Sutera was born in Salerno (Italy) in 1988. In 2007, she graduated in socio-psycho-pedagogy from the high school Alfano I in Salerno. From 2007 to 2008, she studied at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Salerno.

Shortly after starting her academic studies, she abandoned her philosophical studies to enter the Discalced Carmelite Monastery in Lucca (Tuscany, Italy) where she lived the dimension of fraternal life and prayer for almost seven years, deepening her study of Scripture and Theology according to the perspectives of the Discalced Carmelite charism. In 2016, the diagnosis of a musculoskeletal disorder made it necessary to leave cloistered life.

After leaving Carmel in 2017, she began academic studies in Theology at the Higher Institute of Religious Sciences in Salerno. In 2021, she graduated and submitted her theological thesis entitled *The Theandric Empathy, Road to Anthropological Fullness and God's Presence in the Underworld of the Human. Edith Stein, Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Her thesis pays special attention to the analysis of Dr Stein's doctoral work, *The Problem of Empathy*. In October 2021, she continued her theological studies in Rome, at the Pontifical Lateran University, and in 2023 she obtained her bachelor's degree in Theology with her thesis *For an Assault Theology, Non-Religious Christianity, God's Powerlessness in the World and Earthly Love in Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, dedicated to an analysis of the Lutheran pastor's work *Resistance and Surrender*.

She is currently enrolled in the Faculty of Fundamental Theology at the Pontifical Lateran University while awaiting the degree of Licentiate in Fundamental Theology.

KEY WORDS

dark night; powerlessness of God; sickness; hierophany

Dunkelheit; Ohnmacht Gottes; Krankheit; Hierophanie

1 Introduction

The highest summit of their theological doctrine is reached by both John of the Cross (Juan de Yepes) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer during a harrowing and purifying experience of imprisonment.

It is a night in early December 1577: Carmelites of the old observance break into the house adjacent to the Carmel of the Incarnation (Ávila, Spain). There, John is abducted, taken to Toledo and dragged into a gloomy and narrow closet, accused of provoking disorder and confusion in the Carmelite order.¹

Almost five hundred years later, on 5 April 1943, Gestapo Commissioner and Supreme Military Tribunal councillor Roeder broke into the home of the young Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and searched for him. Because of his open opposition to Nazism, Bonhoeffer was arrested and taken to the Tegel remand prison (Germany) (cf. Bethge/Gremmels 2005, 138).

For John of the Cross, his time in captivity in Toledo was characterised by extreme malnutrition, heavy flogging (which caused the young friar sores that would never heal), loneliness, lice, worn-out and foul-smelling clothes. Nine months of interminable physical darkness: there, in the loft where John is confined, daylight only shines in around noon, penetrating through a crack in the wall. A ray of light illuminates his eyes for only one hour a day; then it disappears and gives way to twenty-three hours of thick darkness.

At Tegel, Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer spends his imprisonment within the walls of a cramped room called ‘cell 92’, where he faces painful moments. The prisoner has no soap or clean underwear, he is subjected to strict isolation and his correspondence is strictly controlled. During the gruelling interrogations Bonhoeffer is concerned that he will not resist the strategies and tricks employed by the Nazi investigators. He fears he might betray many comrades who continue conspiring against Hitler outside Tegel Prison. In the first weeks of his incarceration, probably thinking that his death would save his friends, he wrote on a piece of paper: “Suicide, not because I am conscious of guilt, but because I am basically already dead. A full stop. The end.” (Bethge/Gremmels 2006, 138). Thereafter, he never again expressed such intentions.

In the gloomy perimeter of the Toledo prison, cramped by the winter frost or the suffocating heat of summer, squeezed by darkness and loneliness, under the pressure of real physical and psychological violence, John of the cross experiences the absence of God as never before:

¹ The renewal of the Carmelite order inaugurated by Teresa of Ávila encountered many asperities. The hostility suppressed over the years fell upon John of the Cross, who was imprisoned at the convent of Toledo in 1577 due to internal conflicts within the Carmelite order. Cf. Della Croce 2020, 15–17.

“Here John was a child. He had been hauled beyond the threshold of his own resources, taken to those outer limits where the only alternatives are a Spirit who fills, or chaos. It was as if the anaesthetic which normal life provides had worn off, his inner self had been scarpd bare, and he now ached in a way he never had before for a God who was utterly beyond him.” (Matthew 1995, 11)

Enveloped in a chaotic and meaningless darkness, John of the Cross touches the bottom of his spiritual life. Perhaps in order not to be overwhelmed by mortal anguish but to feel alive, he begins to compose poetry and this act unknowingly lays the groundwork for one of the milestones in the history of theology: the *Dark Night*.

From Tegel Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has the opportunity to start an extensive correspondence (clandestine and otherwise). The dominant notes in his writings were extreme hope in the deepest despair, dignity in pain, and acceptance of human reluctance in the face of an absurd death. The collection of a large part of the Bonhoefferian epistolary will later be published and entitled *Resistance and Surrender (Widerstand und Ergebung)*: this theological work was also born unconsciously. From this collection will emerge some of the most eminent perspectives of 20th century theology, including the concept of non-religious Christianity, the powerlessness of God in the world and the centrality of worldly life and earthly love.

Two men, two eras, two Christian denominations, two imprisonments, two founding theological notions

John of the Cross' imprisonment ended with his escape on the night of 15–16 August 1578. Nine months after his capture, the barefoot Carmelite had reached an extreme physical prostration. He managed, however, to find strength to escape from his prison; he climbed down from a window of the Toledo convent with the help of knotted blankets. Those who saw his physical condition would be shocked.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's imprisonment ends with his death. It is 1945 and the Lutheran theologian disappears from Berlin on 7 February: he is deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp. On 5 April, Hitler makes the decision to annihilate all conspirators. The Lutheran pastor is taken to the south of the country with the other prisoners. After a short trial, the court martial sentences him to death for high treason: Bonhoeffer is hanged at dawn on 9 April.

John of the Cross and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: two men, two eras, two Christian denominations, two imprisonments, two founding theological notions, the *Dark Night* and the *Powerlessness of God in the World*. Both Bonhoeffer and St John collided with God's absence and his powerlessness. How can the experience of human vulnerability become a place of encounter with God? Both John of the Cross and Dietrich Bonhoeffer will discover that God reveals himself and his real closeness to the human condition through his ostensible distance.

This paper proposes to address the problem of vulnerability and physical and mental illness as a possible pathway to a spiritual journey through the analysis of the *Dark Night* by St John of the Cross and *God's Powerlessness in the World* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, highlighting similarities and theological correlations between them.

2 John of the Cross and the *Dark Night*: an 'impotent hierophany'. The need for a contemporary hermeneutics

One of the greatest merits of John of the Cross is his theological perspective and systematisation of the dynamics of the spiritual journey, purification, and the absence-presence of God through an evocative symbol: the night. "Others speak of growth, suffering, purification, but 'we are calling' it 'night'; 'calling it "dark night", very appropriately.'" (Matthew 1995, 160)

The night darkness is never an end in itself.

The night darkness of which John speaks is never an end in itself: within his theological system, pain is never the goal, nor does deprivation have meaning in itself. According to John, the man or woman passes through the dark night and, at the same time, God himself *places them* in this night so that, at the end of it, a bright dawn may come. From twilight to night darkness, to a new dawn: in these spaces between light and darkness, the painful and loving relationship between man and God plays out.

"A self-lavishing God: that was the fact. From there came a word on our response: make space for the gift. Now comes the discovery: God undertakes to create that space. It is God who makes the 'space' – this for John is the real drama of our journey. He calls it 'night'. Night: we cannot stop it, or hasten it; it just comes, and it teaches us every twenty-four hours that we are not in complete control." (Matthew 1995, 51)

For the purposes of this reflection, it is necessary to delineate the meaning of the symbolic notion of night by applying – with respect to the classical view – a hermeneutics based on contemporary theological perspectives. We will therefore clarify the concept of dark night as the *active* action of God (classical perspective) and dark night as the passive-active permissiveness of God according to a contemporary hermeneutic. Only after this clarification will it be possible to ask questions and reflect on the concept of vulnerability and physical and psychic illness as the path of a spiritual journey for man.

Let us first ask ourselves: what is the dark night of the soul according to John of the Cross? Immersed in the darkness of his cell, the Carmelite friar composes verses of unprecedented beauty:

*“In a dark night
with anxieties in loves inflamed
happy fate, I went out nor was I noticed
being my home quieted.*

*In the happy night
secretly, without being seen
without anything to look at, without any other guide or light
other than what shines in my heart.”²*

When the young Carmelite found himself having to reflect on the theological meaning of these verses, he systematised the concept of the dark night by starting with the idea of *God’s active action*: according to John, God himself introduces the believer into the night of the senses and the spirit so that he can reach the heights of faith and love.

“God introduces the soul into the night of the senses. Then, to purify the spirit and unite it with Himself, God introduces it into the spiritual night. It is necessary to emphasise the advantages that the soul obtains in this night and because of which it esteems it fortunate to have passed through it.”³

Worthy of note in the doctrine of the Carmelite doctor is the distinction between the night of the senses and the night of the spirit: the first night is that which is given at the beginning of the journey of faith; the second which is given at its apex. According to John, night is always the place of the encounter with God, even when privation and darkness suggest the opposite, that is, his extreme distance and complete absence.

² “In una notte oscura/ con ansie in amori infiammata/ o felice sorte, uscii né fui notata/ essendo la mia casa acquietata.// Nella felice notte/ segretamente, senza esser vista/ senza nulla guardare, senza altra guida o luce/ se non quella che in cuore rifulge.” (Matthew 2020, 95) – All translations from Italian by the author.

³ “Dio introduce l’anima nella notte dei sensi. Successivamente, poi, per purificare lo spirito e unirlo a sé, Dio lo introduce nella notte spirituale. Occorre sottolineare i vantaggi che l’anima ottiene in questa notte e a causa dei quali stima sorte fortunata l’averla attraversata.” (Della Croce 2020, 386)

“Night, that which comes and curtails control, is greeted as a ‘sheer grace!’ – ¡Oh dichosa ventura! – a night of beatitude. Its darkness allowed a quest which responded at last to the demands of loving, ‘my eager heart with love aflame and glowing’ (stanza 1). It is the place for what is truest, deepest, most expectant: where the light is within, surer than the noonday, fairer than the dawn (stanzas 4 and 5). Most of all, John sees night as the place for encounter – here, in the night; not after the night.” (Matthew 1995, 54)

It is God himself who thrusts man into the painful nocturnal phase of the spiritual journey.

According to John of the Cross, it is God himself who thrusts man into the painful nocturnal phase of the spiritual journey so that, like a child breaking away from its mother’s breast, he grows in faith. According to the classical interpretation, the entry into the dark night is both a consequence of the journey of faith actively faced by man, and an active offer of God to the believer so that his love – through nocturnal purification – may be strengthened and his faith become “adult”.

“Seeing that such souls have already grown up a little, in order that they may be strengthened and develop, he removes them from his sweet bosom and, taking them from his arms, accustoms them to walk with their own legs. In such a situation they experience a great novelty in that everything is completely reversed.”⁴

Having to deal here with the dramatic reality of physical and psychic pain as a possibility for a spiritual path, and understanding these two kinds of pain as human roads of a ‘difficult night journey’ – thus, possible wide-ranging ‘existential nights’ – it is necessary to ask a fundamental question: how is the concept of the dark night as ‘God’s action’ towards man to be understood and interpreted in this case?

Let us immediately draw attention to an irrefutable fact: in reference to the physical and psychic pain of human beings, the idea of a direct activity of God cannot be theologically tenable today in any way. On the contrary, affirming a direct action of God on man in reference to physical and psychic pain would lead to endorse a theological fallacy of significant relevance and, ultimately, to base the argument on a ‘theodicy of the impossible’. That said, it is necessary to realise that the evocative symbol of the dark night proposed by John of the Cross is far too full of theological significance for it not to be taken into serious consideration, even today. The existential

⁴ “Vedendo Dio che tali anime sono già un po’ cresciute, affinché si fortifichino e si sviluppino le allontana dal dolce seno e, deponendole dalle sue braccia, le abitua a camminare con le proprie gambe. In tale situazione esse sperimentano una grande novità in quanto tutto è completamente rovesciato.” (Della Croce 2020, 577)

journey of men and women is a ‘day and night journey’. In every human experience, from joy to tenderness, to anger, to earthly love, to sexuality, to sorrow, a mysterious *possibility* of an encounter with God can be hidden: in every human experience is hidden the opportunity to secretly encounter the divine.

Yet, physical or psychic pain is experienced by men and women as a ‘deep existential wound’ that dramatically tests life on this earth. Just as with Job, the man and woman in pain is permitted to argue with God, permitted is the cry of passion and imprecation:

“Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man is conceived.’ Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night – let thick darkness seize it! Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. Behold, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry enter it. [...] Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, because it did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?” (Job 3:3–7.9–11)

If, on a theological–anthropological level, we affirm that even psychic pain or physical pain opens up the possibility for entering into the *dark night of existence*, it is inevitable to ask: what role does man play in this dark night? And what role does God play? In this regard, it is possible to speak of *God’s passive–active permission*.

What role does man play in this dark night? And what role does God play?

In his work *Night is My Light*, Wilfrid Stinissen explores the theme of the dark night by reading it from the perspective of psycho–physical pain.

⁵ “[...] Dio ci viene incontro ovunque siamo, entro i limiti del nostro spazio vitale. [...] Nella maggior parte dei casi la notte [oscura] è determinata dalle circostanze esteriori e dalle varie difficoltà che incontriamo nella vita, tanto che stentiamo a distinguerla. [...] Nulla accade senza che Dio vi partecipi.” (Stinissen 2004, 53–54)

“God comes to meet us wherever we are, within the limits of our living space. [...] In most cases the Dark Night is determined by external circumstances and the various difficulties we encounter in life, so much so that we find it hard to distinguish it. [...] Nothing happens without God’s participation in it.”⁵

Reading Wilfrid Stinissen’s words, one can almost hear an echo of Bonhoefferian theology. This is what the Lutheran theologian writes in one of

6 “[E]s gibt durch jedes Ereignis, und sei es noch so ungöttlich, hindurch einen Zugang zu Gott.” (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 242)

7 Paul Ricoeur writes: “Theodicy, strictly speaking, is the main frieze to onto-theology. The strongest blow, though not a fatal one, was to be delivered by Kant against the very basis of onto-theological discourse on which theodicy had been built from Augustine to Leibniz. One recognises the relentless dismantling of traditional theology by the *Critique of Pure Reason* in its dialectical part. Deprived of its ontological support, theodicy falls under the heading of transcendental illusion. Thought thus finds itself in a situation comparable to that to which Augustine had led it: one can no longer ask whence evil comes, but whence it is that we do it.”

(Ital.: “La teodicea, in senso stretto, è il principale fregio all’onto-teologia. Il colpo più forte, benché non fatale, doveva essere portato da Kant contro la base stessa del discorso onto-teologico sulla quale la teodicea si era edificata da Agostino a Leibniz. Si riconosce l’implacabile smantellamento della Teologia tradizionale operato dalla Critica della ragion pura nella sua parte dialettica. Privata del suo supporto ontologico, la teodicea cade sotto la voce di illusione trascendentale. Il pensiero si ritrova così in una situazione comparabile a quella dove Agostino l’aveva condotto: non si può più domandare donde viene il male, ma donde viene che noi lo facciamo.” [Ricoeur 2024, 29])

his letters from Tegel Prison: “[i]n every event, even the most ungodly, there is a way through to God” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 227).⁶ The distinction between the category of God’s *will* and the category of *God’s participation* turns out to be of central importance: theological reflection on the evil present in the world and the pain that afflicts the lives of men and women identifies a fundamental argumentative pillar in this distinction between *will* and *participation*.

On a theological level, the evil that happens in history and disrupts the world cannot be ascribed to a *direct* will of God; likewise, much of what concerns the historical or biological causes of men’s and women’s pain seems to bear a non-divine character. Yet, what happens is permitted by God. If one still dwells today on the question: ‘Why does God allow evil, why does he allow pain?’ one runs the risk of inevitably bumping up against the non-conceivable, the non-admissible, which is incompatible with reason. Centuries of theological reflection have not produced a clear and definitive answer to the problem of evil posed by theodicy: and it is good that reflection on human evil and pain remains open, not fully systematisable and insoluble.⁷ We are on theologically arcane ground and at the limits of human understanding. And yet, if it is not given to us to unveil the *why of the dark night* of evil in the world or, more specifically, the *why of the dark night* of physical and psychic pain, it is possible to investigate the *how of God* and man *in the dark night*: how God and man pass through, live and act in the darkness that falls upon human existence. If there is a passive permissiveness of God with respect to the psycho-physical pain of man and woman, it is also possible to grasp, in this passivity, a *divine activity* that manifests itself ‘*in extremis*’: this activity can be identified in God’s co-participation in the troubled human history. In the incomprehensible and bewildering dark night of psycho-physical pain, God goes prodigal towards the man and woman pierced by pain, he opens up to them the ineffable possibility of a road that leads to him. The dark night of pain, for the most part unacceptable to human reason, can find an unsettling theological meaning, at times disarming, when viewed from the perspective of God’s passive-active permissiveness. The hypothesis of this passive-active permissiveness leads directly to the supposition of a radical participation of God in the sheol of human pain. Not the *why of suffering* but the *how of God and man in suffering*. God sympathises with man and woman as they go through physical and psychic pain and *shares* in it: enveloped in night darkness, God himself experiences night darkness.

“Nor should we believe that the Dark Night is suspended on distant and unreachable slopes: it is embodied in concrete events and painful situations, which with their haze seem to obscure even the presence of God.”⁸

The hypothesis of a ‘night-sharing’ by God in man’s pain can only be assumed Christologically.

How does God inhabit the night of the man and woman struck by their own human vulnerability? How is God’s *hierophany* realised in the midst of physical and psychic suffering? What role does the divine presence play when man and woman are overwhelmed by pain that burrows into the flesh and shatters the psyche? The hypothesis of a ‘night-sharing’ by God in man’s pain can only be assumed Christologically. In one of his lectures at the Berlin Athenaeum in 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer states:

⁸ “Non dobbiamo neppure credere che la Notte oscura sia sospesa su clivi lontani e irraggiungibili: è *incarnata* in avvenimenti concreti in situazioni dolorose, che con la loro caligine sembrano a volte oscurare persino la presenza di Dio.” (Stinissen 2004, 54)

⁹ “Soll von dem Menschen Jesus Christus als von Gott geredet werden, so darf man nicht von ihm als dem Repräsentanten einer Gottesidee reden, d. h. in seiner Allwissenheit, Allmacht, sondern von seiner Schwachheit und Krippe.”

[...]

“Nichts macht Jesus im Tode von den göttlichen Eigenschaften offenbar. Im Gegenteil, er ist an Gott verzweifelnder, sterbender Mensch. Und von dem sagen wir, dieser ist Gott. Gott verhüllt sich nicht im Menschen, sondern er offenbart sich als Gott-Mensch. Aber dieser Gott-Mensch verhüllt sich in der Existenzweise der Erniedrigung.”

[...]

“Inwiefern unterscheidet er sich dann von uns? Zunächst gar nicht. Er ist Mensch wie wir und wird versucht wie wir. [...] Er hat Angst wie wir, ist versucht gleich wie wir, also ist er in derselben Verdammnis. Aber weil ER in derselben Verdammnis ist wie wir, darum sind wir gerettet.” (Bonhoeffer 1998b, 66–69)

“If Jesus Christ should be described as God, one may not speak of his omnipotence or omniscience, but rather of his manger and his cross.”

[...]

“Jesus in his death makes nothing of the divine properties visible. To the contrary, he is a dying human being who doubts God. And we say about him, that this one is God. God is not concealed in the human being but rather God is revealed as the God-human. However, this God-human is concealed in the way of existence that is the humiliation.”

[...]

“To what degree then is he distinct from us? In the first place, not at all. He is a human being like us and is tempted as we are. [...] He had fear like us, was tempted exactly like us, and therefore stands under the same condemnation. But because he stands under the same condemnation as us, thereby are we saved.” (Bonhoeffer 2002, 66–70)⁹

In Christ, God has entered the ‘dark night’ of human existence once and for all: in Christ, God has reached every human ego touched by pain. In Christ, God enters the night in a hidden and arcane manner, he precedes man incognito, he reveals himself according to a *powerless hierophany*. Pain, physical and psychic illness, the vulnerability of the human condition mean for man and woman entering into a ‘terrible darkness’ inexplicably passively-permitted by God. This pain, however, is not foreign to God: for in the man Jesus, God has taken on the extreme consequences of the dark night of human suffering, and in this night he acts, in extremis (permission-active).

Physical pain shocks man in his body and spirit, and so does psychic pain. The darkness of this condition is frightening and atrocious: no theological

assertion can relativise the ‘night terror’ that man feels through the experience of his own vulnerability. Suffering of the body or psyche can, with good reason, devastate the equilibrium of an entire human life. The man or woman who finds himself or herself entering the night of physical and psychic suffering may experience an unbearable spasm, a very strong reluctance, an upheaval that may not even be resolved during the timespan of an entire earthly existence. Night is like that: it swoops in without warning and obliterates every feeling that holds one bound to life. Profound loneliness can be experienced in the dark night of grief: even the relationships of love and friendship, hitherto perceived as safe places of existence, can be disrupted by the psycho-physical affliction that takes over the life of the person who enters the night.

Night is like that: it swoops in without warning and obliterates every feeling that holds one bound to life.

“All infirmities have their own meaning even if they are not willed directly by God, who only wishes us good health: ‘I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10)’.”¹⁰

“Even psychic frailties can enter the service of God and be associated with his work. [...] Grace does not present itself in an abstract form but acts on nature. There is a secret complicity between nature and grace so that they often unite. Everything that has a natural origin can be transformed by grace, hence also a psychic or physical infirmity.”¹¹

¹⁰ “Tutte le infermità hanno un loro significato anche se non sono direttamente volute da Dio che solo buona salute ci augura: ‘Io sono venuto perché abbiano la vita e l’abbiano in abbondanza (Giovanni 10,10)’.” (Stinissen 2004, 71)

¹¹ “Anche le fragilità psichiche possono quindi entrare al servizio di Dio ed essere associate alla sua opera. [...] La grazia non si presenta in forma astratta, ma agisce sulla natura. Esiste una complicità segreta tra la natura e la grazia sicché esse spesso si unificano. Tutto quello che ha origini naturali può essere trasformato dalla grazia, quindi anche un’infermità psichica o [...] fisica.” (Stinissen 2004, 81–82)

Between struggle and surrender, between resistance and surrender: it is in the tension between these two opposites that human pain can secretly open up the possibility of an intimate encounter with God. The dark night of suffering that impinges on man in his psyche and flesh can open up the possibility of a spiritual journey *precisely* in the permissible contestation, in the human reluctance to pain, *precisely* in the dispute with God ‘to the last blood’. Not after the *struggle with God* but *through the struggle with God*, not after the rejection of pain but *precisely* in the rejection of pain the man or woman may suddenly find themselves embraced by God ‘body to body’, and find themselves obstinately clinging to him. The biblical image of Jacob’s struggle at the stream of Iabbòq comes to our aid.

“The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He

took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day has broken.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then he said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh." (Gen 32:22–32)

Psycho-physical suffering strikes men and women deep in the bowels of existence and takes their breath away until they feel annihilated, lost, exhausted. The body and psyche bear the marks of a vulnerability that struggles to find meaning. From reluctance to protest, to blasphemy, to the struggle against God “body to body – spirit to spirit”, and finally to a moved – Christological – abandonment that is substantiated in an intimate, shattering embrace: this is the night journey. Jacob wrestles with God at the stream of Jabbok and seizes his blessing: “I will not let you go, until you have blessed me!” (Gen 32:27). Thus, the man and woman who experience psycho-physical pain pass through a dark night of unprecedented magnitude: if they allow themselves to pass through that pain by walking the lacerating path that leads them from blasphemy to unspeakable surrender, they understand that they have met someone in the dungeon of that pain: the Incarnate One was at the threshold of the night, *he was waiting for them.*

The possibility of a dark, secretly illuminated night

He whom we call Jesus of Nazareth we believe is God. God is the Incarnate One: God has tasted psycho-physical pain to the extreme consequences of death, has reached out and anticipated humanity in the dark night of existence. In Christ, God has revealed His presence in extremis: thus, man and woman can, in the midst of the nocturnal journey of physical and psychic pain, *cling to the body of God through Christ.* Psycho-physical pain can be the

possibility of a spiritual journey if it is founded on a relational-filial dynamic. It is filiation in Christ that opens up the possibility of a dark, secretly *illuminated night*. Even psycho-physical suffering can be a road to the encounter with Abba: then the last word is not left to death but to the Father, through Christ.

In the flow of the whole dark night, “two words” are spoken. The *penultimate word* is the *last word*. The penultimate word is proclaimed by the man or the woman: it is the screamed word, choked, full of pain and life; it is the scream of contestation sparked by God, it is the word of distraught abandonment; the panting word, expressed in spasm. The ultimate word is that spoken by the Father and which the Father addresses to man. It is an apophatic word, visceral, glorious and dark, full of silence. It is a word that is substantiated in action: it is the same *prodigal going of God towards the man and woman immersed in the night of psycho-physical pain*. The Father’s silent approach in the secret of the dark darkness of the night, through Christ: it is this Christological approach of God, *the last word* on the pain of man and woman.

God is the God of human life: both when it is in the fullness of day – that is, in joy, in the fulfilment of the call of earthly living – and when this human life is surrounded by night, in the upheaval of pain. God is the God of life both when he radiates the light of full meaning and *also* when absolute nonmeaning, the pain that finds no reason, the night, takes over. God is the God of human life but he is so in weakness. God is a weak God. His presence in the nocturnal vicissitude of human beings is an *impotent hierophany*.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer: being Samaritans of the powerless God

The question of God’s powerlessness in the world posed by the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer can be extremely uncomfortable, if not unacceptable. Speaking of God’s impotence can still shock many pious beliefs today, shatter the certainties of one’s own religious system, undermine that image of God that is worshipped through religious forms, so far removed from the real God. The paradox becomes stronger if one places oneself in the New Testament sphere in search of a refuge. The same earthly story of the master Jesus revealed the dramatic dynamic of God’s powerlessness in the world: that one arrives at the resurrection – at dawn after the night – is a fact of faith. Before we reach Easter, however, there is the whole flow of the earthly existence of Jesus of Nazareth, a man stunned by the impact on

men, in pain and in love. So it was for the teacher of Galilee, so it is for every man or woman before and after him. Bonhoeffer writes:

“The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34!). The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us.” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 478–479)¹²

Within the Bonhoefferian theological system, the powerless God reveals himself to be the *real God*. It is possible to detect a correlation between the symbol of the dark night in John of the Cross and the image of the contemporary world announced by Bonhoeffer, without one being dissolved in the other. The symbol of the night and the image of the world without God, although dissimilar, are related to each other by the fact that both the dark night of faith and life in the world without God address the bewildering, disconcerting invitation to an *adult Christianity for men and women*.

The weak God at the centre of earthly life

The God who is with us and who makes us live in the world without the hypothesis-of-work-God is the same God who makes us go through the dark night of pain without the hypothesis of his immediate presence. In this dramatic void of meaning that opens up, God mysteriously becomes close. The dark night of which John of the Cross speaks opens up painful passages, through which it is possible to encounter what Bonhoeffer calls the *real God*: it is precisely the real God who reaches out to man and woman in his powerlessness. It is the weak God at the centre of earthly life, the God who entered the history of men and placed himself in the position of *not being able to shorten* the night journey for those same men: a disconcerting and paradoxical hypothesis if investigated from a soteriological perspective. However, this same God, even in his complete powerlessness, can cross the darkness side by side with the man and woman immersed in the night, *acting in extremis*. Christ is the ‘action in extremis’ of the Father. Through Christ, God comes to meet the man and woman *incognito*:

“The humiliated God-human is the scandal of the pious and really of human beings in general. The most inconceivable idea for the pious is

¹² “Der Gott, der mit uns ist, ist der Gott, der uns verläßt (Markus 15,34)! Der Gott, der uns in der Welt leben läßt ohne die Arbeitshypothese Gott, ist der Gott, vor dem wir dauernd stehen. Vor und mit Gott leben wir ohne Gott. Gott läßt sich aus der Welt herausdrängen ans Kreuz, Gott ist ohnmächtig und schwach in der Welt und gerade und nur so ist er bei uns und hilft uns.” (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 533–534)

the claim that this human being advanced, that he was not only a pious one but God's Son. Thereby he asserted his authority, 'But I say to you ...' and, 'Your sins are forgiven.' If Jesus' nature were divinized, one would need to take this claim for granted. If he had done signs as they were demanded of him, one would have had to believe him. But exactly at the crucial point, he backs off. And that creates the scandal. But everything depends on this fact. If he had answered the question that was directed at him about his being the Christ by working a miracle, then the assertion would no longer be valid that he has become a human being like us, for then there would be an exception on the decisive point. Therefore the more impenetrable his incognito [i. e. the incarnate], the more persistent the question about his being the Christ.

This means that the form of the stumbling block is the only form in which Christ makes faith possible. That means that the form of the scandal of Christ is the form of Christ pro nobis." (Bonhoeffer 2002, 72–73)¹³

13 "Der erniedrigte Gott-Mensch ist das Ärgernis des frommen Menschen und des Menschen überhaupt. Das Unbegreiflichste für den Frommen ist der Anspruch, den dieser Mensch erhebt, er sei nicht nur ein Frommer, sondern Gottes Sohn. Daher seine Vollmacht 'Ich aber sage euch' und 'Deine Sünden sind Dir vergeben'. Wäre Jesu Natur vergöttlicht gewesen, so hätte man sich diesen Anspruch gefallen lassen. Hätte er Zeichen getan, wie man sie forderte, so hätte man ihm geglaubt. Aber dort, wo es darauf ankommt, zieht er sich zurück. Und das schafft das Ärgernis. Aber an dieser Tatsache hängt alles. Hätte er die an ihn gerichtete Christusfrage durch ein Wunder beantwortet, so gälte der Satz nicht mehr, daß er Mensch geworden ist wie wir, denn dann wäre an dem entscheidenden [sic] Punkt die Ausnahme gewesen. Darum mußte das incognito immer undurchsichtiger werden, je dringlicher die Christusfrage wurde. Das besagt, daß die Gestalt der Ärgerlichkeit die Gestalt ist, in der Christus allein Glauben ermöglicht. D. h. daß die Gestalt der Ärgerlichkeit des Christus die Gestalt des Christus pro nobis ist." (Bonhoeffer 1998b, 72)

Jesus is the manifestation par excellence of the *God in disguise*: torn in body and spirit he uttered from the cross his cry of abandonment to the Father (cf. Mk 15:34). Thus the Christian can and must, on behalf of all mankind, *ask God in a rush* – where God is, where is his light in the dark night of pain, where is his omnipotence. Through this poignant contention, the man and woman immersed in the night of psycho-physical pain can become unconscious mediators for other men and women and may perhaps realise, at a certain point in their dispute with God, a surprising and unexpected fact: while they perceive themselves in the world without God, they are before God; while they perceive themselves in the dark night of pain deprived of God, God is with them and lives with them and passes through the night.

Of particular importance in the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's doctrine is the distinction between the category of non-religious Christianity and religious Christianity. Religious Christianity is based on the certain belief in a strong God, a stop-gap-God, recognised (and often greedily desired) precisely in view of his 'all-solving' power. Non-religious Christianity, on the contrary, lets man make the shocking discovery: his God is an impotent God. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian is called upon to become autonomous by letting the image of an all-powerful and resolving God collapse: it is precisely through his powerlessness that this God comes to place himself within human history and at the centre of earthly life. A fragile God, this one encountered through non-religious Christianity, a shattered God: yet a braver God, it seems. When one does not shy away from the decisive passage between religious Christianity and non-religious

Christianity, one enters into the adult life of faith: thus one recognises the weak God at the centre of history. It is precisely then – according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer – that a dazzling light shines on man’s conscience. One thus discovers that the powerless God mysteriously guides human affairs, *inhabiting them*. God is no longer known as the ‘originator’ of everything that happens, but rather as the *lover-inhabitant* of human affairs, the faithful companion of the man and woman who experience the tumultuous events of history. It is precisely through his weakness that God is planted in the centre of *earthly* life (cf. Bonhoeffer 2010, 367 resp. Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 408): and it is thus that he reveals himself as the stable proximity, the dominant note above which every counterpoint of human existence can be based (cf. Bonhoeffer 2010, 393–394 resp. Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 440–441). Thus opens up before man and woman the possibility of taking the high road that leads them directly to the heart of Holy Scripture. “The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help.” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 479)¹⁴

A Copernican revolution with regard to the theology of the cross

Through the correspondence transmitted from cell 92 in Tegel Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer lays the foundation for what can be described as a new pillar of the *Scientia Crucis* (*Science of the Cross*). The relationship between man and God – analysed from both a historical and an inter-religious perspective – has always been characterised by the religious temptation to be based on a *quid pro quo*: to the God (pagan or Christian) man would give sacrifices, merits, holocausts, in order to receive in return propitiation, health, eternal salvation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s doctrine radically disrupts the dynamics of religious worship and brings about a Copernican revolution with regard to the theology of the cross. The unveiling of the suffering God in the world invites the adult Christian to experience a radical reversal of religious observance. If God is the useless God, the weak God in the world – powerful only in view of his powerlessness – then one must turn to this God no longer (not only) to ask for direct help, but also (above all) to offer God himself help. *Turning to God to succour God*. How can the powerless God in the world be rescued? Through extreme solidarity: a visceral sharing and a radical closeness. “‘Christians stand by God in God’s own pain’ – that distinguishes Christians from heathens. ‘Could you not stay awake with me one hour?’ [Mt 26:40]” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 480)¹⁵ Here is the peak to which

¹⁴ „Die Bibel weist den Menschen an die Ohnmacht und das Leiden Gottes; nur der leidende Gott kann helfen.“ (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 534)

¹⁵ “‘Christen stehen bei Gott in seinen Leiden’, das unterscheidet Christen von Heiden. ‘Könnt ihr nicht eine Stunde mit mir wachen?’ [Mt 26,40]” (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 535)

the nocturnal spiritual journey leads: here is the peak to which even the dark night of psycho-physical pain can lead.

The God with us is the God who abandons us and who in this abandonment is viscerally close: he is the God who suffers at the centre of human history. To this God the Christian is called to turn, *remaining close to him in his suffering*. This call to closeness to God is a universal call. Every man and woman who crosses the night path of pain is secretly invited to remain close to the powerless God in the world.

To embrace God in his powerlessness

This is the disconcerting invitation made to those who traverse the dark night of psycho-physical pain: to embrace God in his powerlessness. The religious man collapses before such a shocking invitation; the adult Christian, on the other hand, despite his pain and contention with God, is able to withstand this incredible shock: and thus becomes a Samaritan of God in the world without God. The adult Christian becomes close to the suffering God: he somehow mixes his tears with those of his God, he weeps his own pain and he weeps God's pain.

*“People go to God when God's in need,
find God poor, reviled, without shelter or bread,
see God devoured by sin, weakness, and death.
Christians stand by God in God's own pain.*

*God goes to all people in their need,
fills body and soul with God's own bread,
goes for Christians and heathens to Calvary's death
and forgives them both.” (Bonhoeffer 2010, 461)¹⁶*

¹⁶ „Menschen gehen zu Gott in Seiner Not,/ finden ihn arm, geschmäht, ohne Obdach und Brot,/ sehnen ihn verschlungen von Sünde, Schwachheit und Tod./ Christen stehen bei Gott in Seinen Leiden.// Gott geht zu allen Menschen in ihrer Not,/ sättigt den Leib und die Seele mit Seinem Brot,/ stirbt für Christen und Heiden den Kreuzestod,/ und vergibt ihnen beiden.“ (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 515–516)

When the man and woman, immersed in psycho-physical pain, come – after the struggle with God, after the exhausting contention – to ask God “how he is”, to take charge of God's sufferings in the world, they arrive at the pinnacle of the spiritual journey that the dark night proposes to them. This is certainly the pinnacle of the whole Christian life: taking *care of God in the world*. To live the fullness of limitation and psycho-physical vulnerability is to live the fullness of the life of grace. Grace and limitation show themselves to the Christian as interpenetrating realities. When one watches over the suffering God in the world, powerless, overwhelmed, when one remains beside this God, only then can one glimpse in the terrible dark night

of psycho-physical pain the only light that shines in the heart (cf. Della Croce 2020, 355–356). From the perimeters of his prison cubicle – in the very last months of his imprisonment, while the daily treatment meted out by the Nazi police became more and more ferocious – the young Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives theological reflection another maxim of high poignancy:

*“When now the quiet deepens all around us,
O, let our ears that fullest sound amaze
of this, your world, invisibly expanding
as all your children sing high hymns of praise.*

*By powers of good so wondrously protected,
we wait with confidence, befall what may.
God is with us at night and in the morning
and oh, most certainly on each new day.”* (Bonhoeffer 1988, 550)¹⁷

4 Conclusion

Through the present reflection, an attempt has been made to precisely delineate the specular correlation between the notion of the dark night in St John of the Cross and the notion of God’s powerlessness in the world in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This interdependence emerges as an inescapable and disconcerting theological connection: man and woman enter the dark night of psycho-physical pain in which they experience all the powerlessness of a God who does not save.

God’s *passive permission* of the dark night is, in a sense, a manifestation of his own weakness and a revelation of a vulnerable creation: a creation, however, not left to its own fate. Through Christ, in fact, God’s passive permissiveness manifests a *soteriological activity in extremis*, so that it is possible to speak of an active powerlessness of God in relation to human pain. Those who experience physical pain, psychic discomfort and their own human frailty often perceive God as powerless-absent. But it is precisely through this passivity and radical powerlessness that God makes himself unspeakably close to the man and woman walking in the dark night of pain. Spiritual endurance is, from this perspective, man’s struggle with God: imprecation, filial contention, deep surrender, suffered and moved acceptance of one’s own psycho-physical vulnerability, up to the radical acceptance of God’s very weakness. Through the terrible experience of physical

¹⁷ “Wenn sich die Stille nun tief um uns breitet/ so laß uns hören jenen vollen Klang/ der Welt, die unsichtbar sich um uns weitet,/ all Deiner Kinder hohen Lobgesang.// Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen/ erwarten wir getrost, was kommen mag./ Gott ist bei uns am Abend und am Morgen,/ und ganz gewiß an jedem neuen Tag.” (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 608)

and mental illness, the possibility of understanding God's obscure proximity precisely through his weakness is revealed. In God's helplessness one is rescued and saved by God *in the extreme*. The entry into the dark night and the discovery of God's weakness in the world therefore represent, for men and women, the inestimable invitation to a *spiritual journey in power which*, put into *action*, can lead them to the summit of the mountain: adult Christianity. Being in the world and in the dark night of pain without the hypothesis-of-work-God, can lead man and woman themselves to be Samaritans of the powerless God in the world. The deeper man and woman delve into the dark night, the more they immerse themselves in the mystery of the powerless God, the more they can secretly glimpse the light of life that overcomes death: but this light shines unseen, it is a glow that obscures, yet stands as a banner in the darkness of human pain and vulnerability.

¹⁸ "Gott ist mitten in unserem Leben jenseitig." (Bonhoeffer 1998a [1951], 408)

¹⁹ "O Notte che unisti l'Amato con l'amata, l'amata nell'Amato trasformata!" (Della Croce 2020, 556)

"God is the beyond in the midst of our lives." (Bonhoeffer 2010, 367)¹⁸

"O Night who united the Beloved with the Beloved, the Beloved in the Beloved transformed!"¹⁹

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