The Biblical Journey:  
From Darkness to Light

by Virginia Smith

"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness" (Gn 1:1-4).

And so it began. With the Bible's first recorded words, that great biblical dichotomy between light and darkness, that study in contrasts which would form a recurring theme throughout Scripture started weaving its way all the way through to the last chapter of the last book, "Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever" (Rv 22:5). In between, there are over 260 biblical references to light and some 200 more to dark or darkness.

Of course, the Bible is far from the only literary work to make good use of this motif. It is found across a broad spectrum of religious traditions, in a wide variety of secular literature and in everyday conversation ("Don't keep me in the dark" or "I'm beginning to see the light"). But, like a lot of other terminology that trips off the tongue blithely, do we really know what it means?

Plain Words; Complex Meanings

Light may refer to exterior luminosity or interior illumination. The same word may indicate that a person or object is aglow or that it is weightless. It may be intended literally, metaphorically, allegorically, or symbolically.

All of those usages find their way onto biblical pages in one book or another. It can even, or perhaps especially, be seen as a divine attribute, "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5b).

Humankind has historically nursed a deep fear of darkness, and its traits are, quite naturally, diametrically opposed to those of light. They may describe exterior gloom or interior oblivion. They may point to a person's lack of knowledge or nefarious intent. If, as John writes, God is light, the personification of evil more than merits the title Prince of Darkness bestowed early in the Christian era.

Light may be vision; darkness, blindness. Light may be virtue; darkness, sin. Light may be wisdom; darkness, ignorance. Light may be comprehension; darkness, delusion. Light may be truth; darkness, fallacy. Light may be the personification of Goodness; darkness, the personification of Evil. Light may quite simply be day; darkness, nothing more than night.

Lumen Christi (Christ, Our Light)
There may be no better time to see this theme visually played out in Catholic liturgy than during the Easter Vigil. Restored to its ancient prominence by Vatican II, this imposing rite opens in unrelieved darkness. Congregants wait quietly, expectantly. Then, from the back of the church, a voice intones, "Lumen Christi" or "Christ, Our Light." Turning, worshippers see a single candle flaring over the church's central aisle. Lit from the new Easter fire kindled earlier outside, this single flame represents the astounding news of the resurrected Jesus being announced to a weary and darkened world so badly in need of it. As the Easter candle moves in stately procession toward the sanctuary, the proclamation "Lumen Christi" is repeated two more times, each time with greater volume.

Meanwhile, small candles distributed to parishioners upon their arrival are flickering to life as the light of Christ is drawn from the Easter candle and shared from person to person the length of every row. Soon the church is bathed in light, all of it emanating from the Christ candle. As the liturgy unfolds, seven (the biblical perfect number) readings from the First Testament chronicle humanity's long journey out of darkness. These are followed by readings from the Second Testament, joyously proclaiming that Jesus Christ, through his resurrection, has brought the people of God into his magnificent light, a light that will never be extinguished. There will be no more darkness.

During a later portion of the Easter Vigil, the parish's catechumens and candidates come forward to be received into full communion with Catholic belief and practice. Those being baptized are also given a candle to keep as a remembrance of their immersion into the light of Christ, their unique reception into the family of God.

Candles appear on or near the altar at every Catholic eucharistic celebration. Traditionally, banks of them have found a place in Catholic churches where they are lit to symbolize the prayers offered by individuals and by the parish community. The significance of light is so deeply ingrained in our tradition that it should need no further elaboration. Unfortunately, the significance of even our most profound symbols can sometimes be diminished, even lost, through over-familiarity. We may find it helpful to revisit some of those biblical allusions to light and its counterpart that started it all.

God Is Light

John's notion that God is light, committed to writing in the late first century C.E., was no newfangled idea. It had been around as far back as the Exodus over 1,200 years earlier. As John's Israelite ancestors set out from Egypt on what would prove to be a lengthy plod through the desert, "The Lord preceded them, in the daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way, and at night by means of a column of fire to give them light. Thus they could travel both day and night. Neither the column of cloud by day nor the column of fire by night ever left its place in front of the people" (Ex 13:21-22). Manifestations of this sort are called theophanies, means of demonstrating God's presence although God is not seen. The sense of the passage is that God stood at the head of his people, providing both direction and light. Certainly, actual illumination is meant, but equally important is light in the sense of understanding. As a later psalmist would write, "A lamp to my feet is your word, a light to my path" (Ps 119:105).

Catholics seeking to pray before the real presence of the eucharistic Jesus instinctively look for the sanctuary light burning near the tabernacle. Few may realize just how long God's "light" has been around. During the Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant, the original tabernacle, was housed in a tent. Aaron, the first high priest, was ordered to "keep lamps burning regularly.... Thus, by a perpetual statute for you and your descendants, the lamps shall be set up on the pure gold lampstand to burn regularly before the Lord" (Lv 24:2b-4). The practice continued when a more permanent shrine was made part of Solomon's temple and still later when the second temple was constructed.

Less than two centuries before Jesus, that temple was desecrated by a Hellenistic despot. Down from the hills rode Judas Maccabeus and his brothers who threw the rascals out, cleansed and purified the temple, and rededicated it. In the process, they relit the ancient flame. God had returned! Each year, usually in December, that wondrous event is commemorated by Jews worldwide at Hanukkah, the Festival of Light.

Moving in and out of the Light

But it is Jesus himself, especially as he is portrayed in John's Gospel, who is the ultimate personification of God's light to us mortals, who so often grope blindly for enlightenment.
"What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:3b-5).

Not for John a Christmas story of shepherds and mangers, stars and magi. Instead, John drops his readers' jaws by describing the majestic human incarnation of God in Jesus, "...the true light which enlightens everyone..." (Jn 1:9a). When he is grown and ministering to the multitudes, Jesus will say much the same thing about himself, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12b).

If Jesus is the light in the Fourth Gospel, John's fascinating cast of characters spend much of their time positioning themselves in relation to that light, i.e., to Jesus. Times of day are mentioned often, and, while they may have some literal significance, they usually carry a symbolic or metaphorical one as well. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well "about noon" (Jn 4:6b). That may well be, but this foreigner, with whom Jesus is about to enter into a deeply theological dialogue, stands in the presence of God's own light and will soon be enlightened by "the light of the world." Judas, on the other hand, having spent many months bathed in that light on a daily basis, plunges back into the darkness. As he leaves the Last Supper to carry out his betrayal, John cryptically (and unnecessarily) adds, "It was night" (Jn 13:30b).

Two Johannine characters in particular have interesting relationships to "the light"—Nicodemus and the man born blind. In each case, their coming fully into the light will be a gradual process. What a consoling message that is for us who struggle throughout our lifetimes to find our way totally into the light and remain there.

Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and probable member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, "came to Jesus at night" (Jn 3:2a). This educated religious leader, thought to be enlightened, approaches Jesus from the shadows, curious to know more about him. The ensuing dialogue ends inconclusively. Nicodemus appears interested, but uncommitted. A later episode tells of the chief priest and Pharisees arguing over whether or not Jesus' teaching should be condemned. It is Nicodemus who argues, "Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" (Jn 7:51). It would seem that the darkness has receded to some extent.

But it is at Jesus' crucifixion that Nicodemus finally places himself fully in the light. As Joseph of Arimathea removes Jesus' body from the cross, "Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds" (Jn 19:39). Such an wealth of burial spices was fit for a king. Nicodemus was planted firmly in the light.

Chapter 9 of John brings the wonderful story of the man born blind. Here is someone who has always lived in total darkness physically, and probably spiritually as well. Jesus easily brings the man's dead eyes to life. Bringing him fully into the light of God takes longer. The process is recorded in the various titles the man has for Jesus: "the man called Jesus" (Jn 9:11a); "he is a prophet" (9:17b); "the Son of Man" (9:35b); "I do believe, Lord" (9:38a).

In a clever literary twist, all the time the man born blind is moving steadily toward full vision, some Pharisees who thought themselves thoroughly enlightened were moving just as steadily toward darkness. To them, Jesus addressed these words, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind." Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not also blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin, but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains' (9:39-41).

What is the message to us? We may perhaps need to look at ourselves, our parishes, our institutions, our Church, our nation, our world with new eyes. Are there blinders we need to remove? Rose-colored glasses? Do we sometimes take shelter in the darkness, comforting ourselves that there we cannot be expected to see? How do we "see" God? Do we allow Jesus' light to shine in us and through us? The questions aren't that much different from those posed to the many generations before us. The answers, however, may be totally unique.

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