



UNDERSTANDING THE SIX STAGES OF FAITH GROWTH

BASED ON JAMES FOWLER
AND
ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

MARCH 29, 2022



WELCOME

WHY THIS TEACHING ON THE STAGES OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT:

It will ...

- help us grow in appreciation and care for our faith.
- help us understand better how other members of the Mystical Body may be expressing their faith.
- help us see faith as the inner 'light' guiding us as we make our journey through life.

EARTHEN VESSELS

We hold a treasure, not made of gold,
in earthen vessels, wealth untold,
one treasure only,
the Lord, the Christ,
in earthen vessels.

Light has shown in our darkness:
God has shown in our heart,
with the light of the glory
of Jesus the Lord.



EARTHEN VESSELS

We hold a treasure, not made of gold,
in earthen vessels, wealth untold,
one treasure only,
the Lord, the Christ,
in earthen vessels.

He has chosen the lowly,
who are small in this world;
in His weakness is glory, in Jesus the Lord.





2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18

“But we have THIS TREASURE IN CLAY JARS, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

TWO PERSONS WHO STUDIED FAITH GROWTH

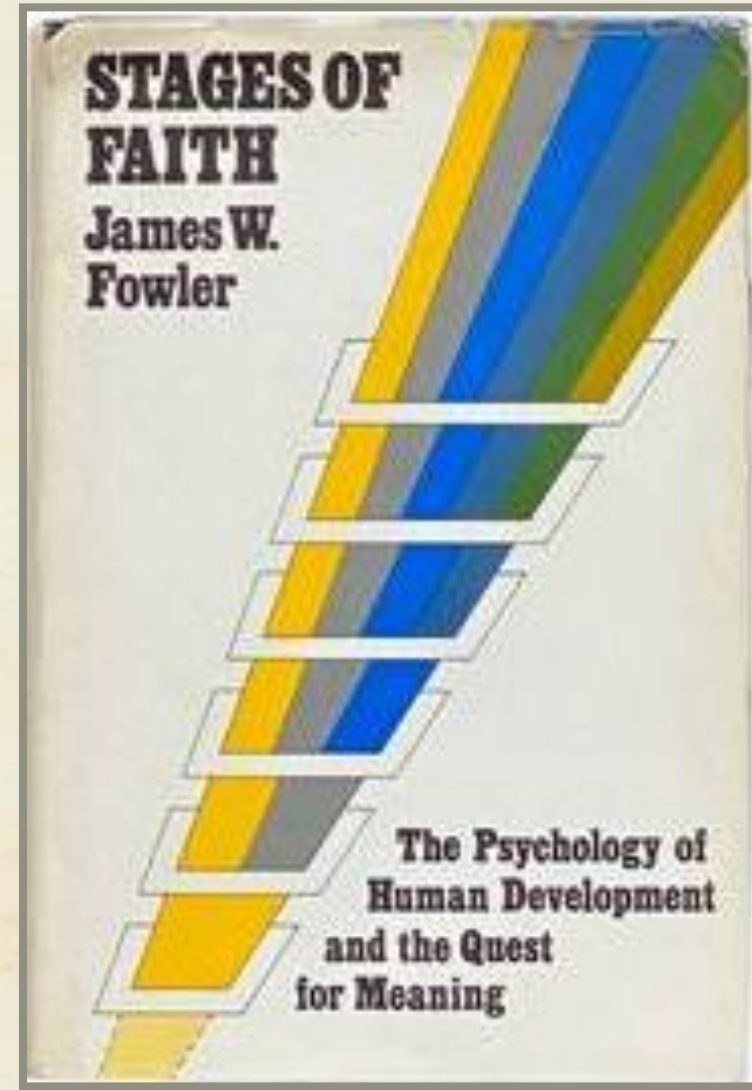
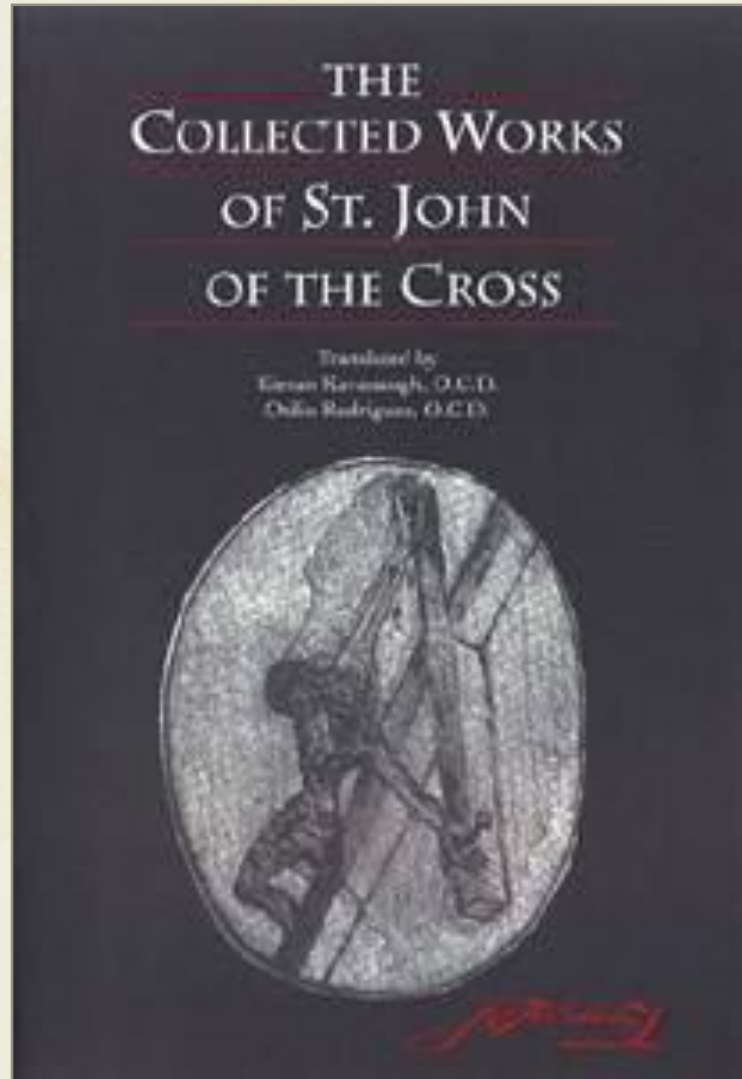


St. John of the Cross, Carmelite monk
1542-1591



James Fowler, Married, Theologian, Professor,
Methodist Minister 1940 - 2015

SPIRITUAL AUTHORS





'KNOWING' BY FAITH

- Both men grasped that **FAITH** was a central dynamic of life and gave a sense of vision to the whole.
- **FAITH** is a way of knowing, a way of constructing reality as related to God.
- The kind of knowing in **FAITH** is a different kind of knowing. It has no empirical verification.



GROWING IN FAITH

JAMES FOWLER was concerned with the way this growing in faith process takes place.

One believes because one trusts.

One believes, one commits oneself to another.

God co-operates with our natural ways of 'knowing' and brings us to a supernatural way of 'knowing'.

The stages we pass through in faith development wean us off the first **empirical knowledge of facts about God** ...

to bring us to the capacity to entrust ourselves to all that is mystery in the person of God ... **to a loving knowledge of God.**

FOR EXAMPLE ...



Can you identify the different kinds of 'knowing' God in your life?

1. Who was God for you when you made your first communion?
Most likely at 6 or 7 years old?
2. Who was God for you when you got married or made your life commitment in religious life or priesthood?
3. Who is God for you today?



STAGES OF FAITH

- James Fowler witnessed **the activity of God** at deeper and deeper levels of the human person as the dynamic process at work in all this faith development.
- **God within** kept prodding the person on to deeper levels of faith response.
- The faith manifested itself in different gestures and behaviours according to the stage one was living out of.
- The significant “turning point” in one’s faith development was the movement out of Stage #3 to Stage #4. This was always a crisis period.



Stages of Faith Development

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith
Transforming process

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith
Awareness of perspective

Stage 4: Individual/Reflective Faith
Focus upon personal faith

Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith
Commitment to church & leaders

Stage 2: Mythic/Literal Faith: Childhood
Limited to concrete thinking

Stage 1: Intuitive/Projective Faith: Early Childhood
Images & Stories

INFANCY AND UNDIFFERENTIATED FAITH

AGE 0-3 YEARS



From birth through early infancy, the care and attention of devoted parents is a solid experience of trust for the infant and young child.

FAITH is about this capacity to **trust a relationship** to be kind and supportive of one's life.

Baptism introduces a child to the community of faith.

Parents witness to their own faith is important.

STAGE 1: INTUITIVE/PROJECTIVE FAITH

AGE 3-7 YEARS



Faith is projective, fantasy-like, using imagination, influenced and imitated by the parent's faith.

These images play an important part in the child's understanding of faith.

The child's understanding of God will essentially be learned from parents. e.g. saying grace, bedtime prayers, bless oneself etc.

STAGE 2: MYTHIC/LITERAL FAITH

AGE 6-7 and lasts until about AGE 11 or 12.



The child begins to appropriate stories and beliefs of the faith community. The child deals with the stories in a literal, matter-of-fact way, like mathematics. **STORY** is the major way of giving unity and value to experience. They love to read and tell the Bible stories.

The symbols he/she learns have a rigidity that they will later have to lose. Children are content to trust the judgment of their parents, teachers and faith community.

There is a simplicity and a security in Stage 2 faith.



STAGE 3: SYNTHETIC/CONVENTIONAL FAITH

AGE: 13-20 years

The youth's faith starts to take on a **synthesis** (parish, parents, school). There is a positive aspect to this stage - one's faith life can be very enriching and full – using devotions, Scripture, the parish worship. This pulling together of one's valued images and values gives a sense of self and identity. One's image of God is my Friend, my Companion; I am in a relationship where I am known and valued.

Conventional - implies that one's faith is that of the norm - everybody goes to Mass on Sunday; everybody's doing this faith expression for Lent. I fit into the conventional, mainstream faith mode.

SYNTHETIC-CONVENTIONAL FAITH





STAGE 3: SYNTHETIC/CONVENTIONAL FAITH

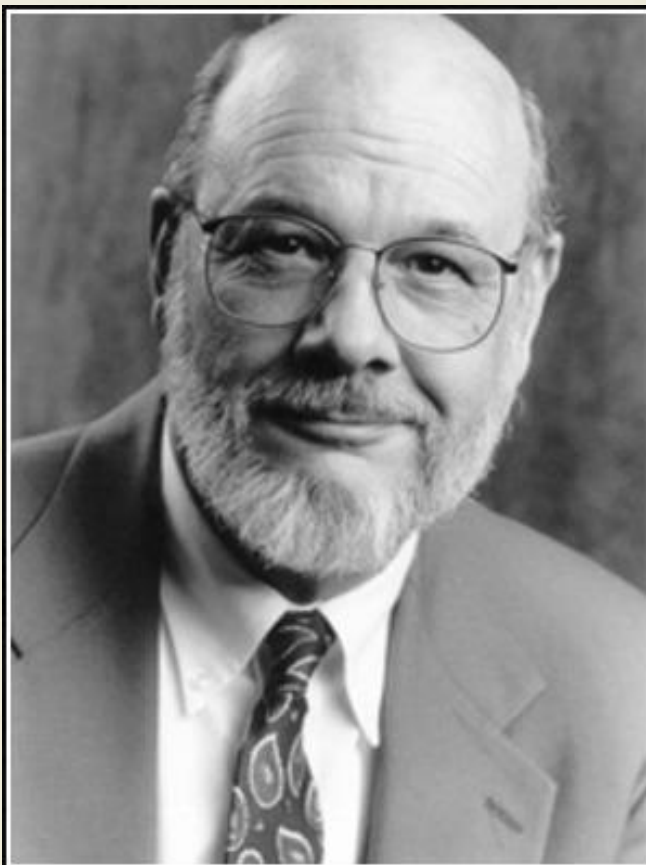
For many adults too it is a permanent place of equilibrium.

It is a conformist stage – tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others. Agreement and conformity are paramount.

What is important in matters of faith, is the approval of peers. We are a community of like-minded believers!

Fowler found that most people's faith was Stage 3. It was adequate and gave full meaning to their whole spiritual lives. Faith growth stops here for many!

A person in Stage 3 places a strong emphasis on creeds, doctrines, traditions, and needs a strong sense of community.



Faith is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions.

— *James W. Fowler* —

AZ QUOTES



STAGE 4: INDIVIDUAL/REFLECTIVE FAITH

AGE: 21-30-40 years

This is often a time of tension between the individual and the community/parents. This is the dawning of philosophical questions at a deeper level. One's faith is becoming personal - growing out of one's personal relationship with Christ and one is searching for a suitable personal response to the new 'knowing' of Christ for them personally.

There is much reflection, struggle and wrestling with the faith of one's childhood.

STAGE 3 TO STAGE 4 FAITH



One often thinks one is losing one's faith. In fact, one is deepening one's faith. One is moving from Stage 3 to Stage 4 faith.

FAITH is the guide through the night. We would never make it through this period without faith, a deeper faith.

We need this total blindness of the intellect to perfect and purify us and lead us to our goal of union with God.

FAITH guides us more surely than all the clarity and surety we have been used to.

FAITH transcends all sense, all natural understanding and reason.



STAGE 4: INDIVIDUAL/REFLECTIVE FAITH

This is not a comfortable stage.

- For some persons, it leads, in time, to Stage 5. In other cases, the struggles lead to a return to the relative security of Stage 3 or even Stage 2. For others the unresolved questioning during Stage 4 can lead to a complete opting out of any conscious or direct dealing with faith issues.
- **Searching faith – growing in faith** - includes some dissonance, facing hard questions, moving against popular belief and not being understood by others.
- Hence the need for solid teaching and guidance and direction during these critical years of searching. It's the time of the dark night of the soul!



STAGE 4: INDIVIDUAL/REFLECTIVE FAITH

The Dark Night of the Soul names these characteristics that are essential for faith growth.

- ✓ Expect **restlessness** with self-images and God images and life outlook.
- ✓ Expect a deeper Self calling you to “the more.” Seek out more **solitude**.
- ✓ Expect an inner **aridity**, an emptiness, a yearning for “something more”.

The soul is pressed forward into a dialogue and reasoned argumentation to search for the truth. A multi-level approach to life and truth.



In the light of **faith**
you see things quite differently.

John Baptist de la Salle

STAGE 5: CONJUNCTIVE FAITH

AGE: 40-65 years



The person has come to accept institutional relationships and other relationships that are in tension with him/her. One is capable of recognizing integrity and truth in others rather than only in one's own... and he/she can respect tensions, see the good in both.

Such a time of faith is living on a tight-rope. One lives one's own commitments enthusiastically, values others' way as valid and good for them. There is a quality of genuine person operative here. One is willing to pay the price of such a risk ... lay one's life on the line.



STAGE 5: CONJUNCTIVE FAITH

A Stage 5 person builds on his/her previous faith journey, integrating elements of each into an understanding of faith that is uniquely his or hers. It is now 'my faith'. It is 'owned faith'. It is pure gift and blessing.

There is a deepened readiness for a relationship with God that includes mystery and strangeness as well as God's closeness and clarity.

Stage 5 persons are ready for a new kind of intimacy with persons and groups that are different from themselves. We are ready for **ecumenical** explorations.

These persons are alive to paradox and the truth in apparent contradictions, this stage strives to unify opposites in mind and experience.

STAGE 6: UNIVERSALIZING FAITH

AGE: 65 + years



Here we have the same behaviour as in stage #5, but the tension is diminished. There is a difference of less self-consciousness.

One is not worrying about what others think, one can trust one's own processes.

This is a time of being oneself and the prayer of quiet, the prayer of union, is found in persons of stage #6 faith.



STAGE 6: UNIVERSALIZING FAITH

Some few persons reach this stage 6. Those who do live as though 'the kingdom of God' were already a fact. Now their center becomes a participation in God or Ultimate Reality.

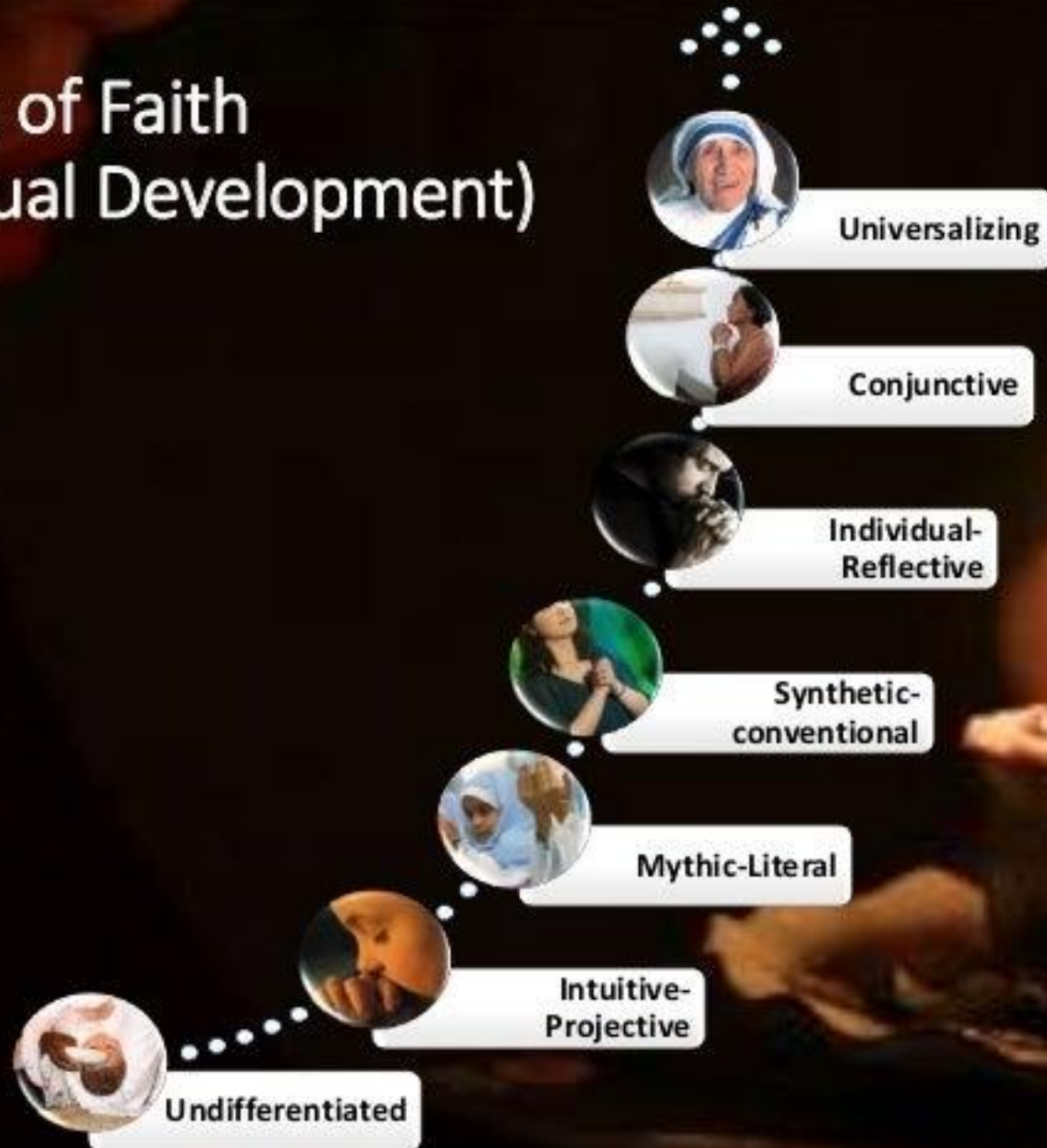
These persons are experienced as being more lucid and simple than we are; and on the other hand as being intensely liberating people.

Stage 6 faith is more than beliefs or even a way of life, but it is one of **total commitment to the on-going guiding presence of God.**

Stage 6 represents the ultimate fulfillment of one's faith journey.

Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the stages and from other faith traditions.

Stages of Faith (Spiritual Development)





Q AND A

**What questions arise about your faith life
at this stage of your journey?**

Can you name the stage of faith you are at now?



FAITH STAGES OF JOHN OF THE CROSS

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS was intensely interested in the life of faith. He saw it as absolutely essential - as the only means to union with God in this life. **FAITH** was the good and sure guide for the entirety of one's spiritual journey. All of one's life of faith is one dark night according to St. John of the Cross. He divided the night into three stages corresponding to the natural night.

STAGE #1

TWILIGHT

STAGE #2

MIDNIGHT

STAGE #3

EARLY DAWN



TWILIGHT STAGE

At this stage of faith, the person comes to know God through natural knowledge, through the use of the senses and the imagination.

The person comes to a particular knowledge of God - through images of God, sensible consolations, through listening to parents, teachers, professors; pastors speak of God, through personal meditative periods.

One comes to form some conceptualizations of who God is for me. However, as time goes on, one becomes intuitively conscious of the "mystery" of God - God is more than what I know of God.

This stage of TWILIGHT corresponds to the **first three stages of Fowler.**



MIDNIGHT STAGE

Just as midnight is the darkest period of the night, so is this midnight period of the night of faith. Our person enters into a substantial darkness, a void of understanding which is necessary to prepare for divine union with God.

This is the period of 'crisis of faith' - of tension, conflict, interior struggle - with one's individual faith and with communal faith.

It is important to remember that it is GOD bringing us to a supernatural knowledge of Himself - to a divine wisdom - that is beyond the senses!

MIDNIGHT stage corresponds to **Stage 4 and 5 in Fowler's** stages.



MIDNIGHT STAGE

As faith deepens and matures - **it darkens and nullifies the light of the intellect** and blinds the person to all natural knowledge about God. God is beyond all knowing. God is “I-don’t-know-what” John of the Cross came to realize.

God must bring us into this “unknowing”, this obscurity of faith for as long as it takes for the intellect to release its habitual way of understanding... then the divine light and illumination takes its place.


Needless to say, this stage is painful, fraught with deep anxiety and tears.

“A night that darkens the spirit it does so to give light.” (J. of Cross)



THE
ENDURANCE OF
DARKNESS IS
PREPARATION
FOR GREAT
LIGHT.

- St. John of the Cross





PASSING THROUGH THE MIDNIGHT STAGE

The more one desires darkness and letting go of all visions, ideas, consolations of sensible or spiritual things, the greater will be the infusion of faith.

Lean on this dark faith. Take it as your good and sure guide. Rest on nothing else that one sees, hears, imagines. DARKNESS is the necessary condition for God to increase our faith!

Long to acquire the unknowable, the unimaginable and the inconceivable – the real God. ... who is all Love, Mystery.

We advance towards God by FAITH ... not by understanding, not by ideas of God, not by feelings, not by imagination ...



EARLY DAWN STAGE

“I will espouse you to me in faith.”

Just as in the very early hours of the dawn, there starts to appear glimmers of the coming light of day, so, in this period of the night of faith, **a serene night**, the person becomes more at-home in the darkness, more comfortable with the unknowing, even prefers this darkness, this emptiness, this poverty. One trusts this more - enters into the experience of faith as a divine light.



EARLY DAWN STAGE

Faith as divine light is so powerful it cannot be contained in anything created.

*“We see God now in a “dim manner,
but then we shall see clearly.*

In this life, union with God is a being united with the darkness - a darkness in which God promised to dwell.

The EARLY DAWN period of the night corresponds to **Fowler's #6**



THE DAY

In the moment of our personal death, faith reaches its end and the glory, light of the divinity at once begins to shine.

Faith is wiped away in vision of God! Our relationship is actualized!

No longer need faith - a means to this glorious end.

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard things beyond the mind of man/woman, all that God has prepared for those who love him.”

1 Cor. 2:9



Q AND A

What did I learn tonight?

What am I going to do to foster growing in my faith?

Let us all take good care of our earthen vessels!



EARTHEN VESSELS

*But we have this treasure
in earthen vessels, that the
excellence of the power may be
of God and not of us.*

2 Corinthians 4:7

Let us go now living in the peace of Christ.



Prepared by
Rosemary O'Toole, CSJ
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