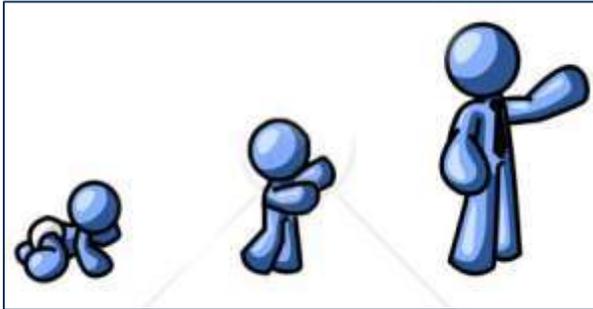


THE THREE STAGES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH



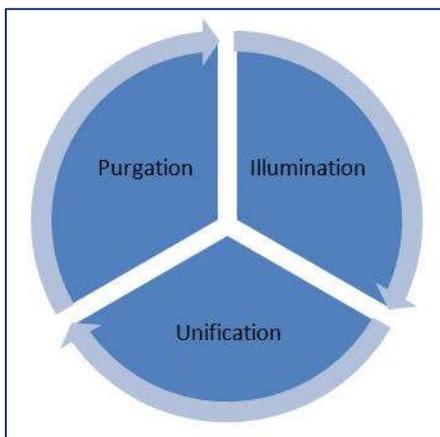
By Pastor Jerry Truex

Everything that lives goes through stages of growth and development. No growth, no life. All cells move through prophase, metaphase, anaphase, and telophase. Humans move from being children to adolescents to adults. Growth means life. Growth is life.

Spiritual life is no different. Growth is life. There are phases to spiritual growth. Christian tradition identifies three stages: purgation, illumination, and unification.

Purgation refers to the initial phase of Christian life. It includes conversion, turning from sin (harmful behaviors or “the works of the flesh”), learning to resist temptation (such as “the seven deadly sins”), developing practices that sustain spiritual life (like prayer, Bible study, and meditation), transcending the narcissistic ego (or “the false self”), and establishing stable relationships with other Christians (commitment to the church).

Illumination refers to the second phase of Christian life. Once stability has been established by purgation, one is able to better perceive the divine light that is always present. With illumination, a person is able to realize Christ-likeness (or “the true self”), move into deeper prayer (discursive and non-discursive), cultivate virtues (or “the fruit of the spirit”), sacrifice for others with less hesitation (service), and surrender more completely to God and detach from what is not of God.



Unification refers to the highest stage of spiritual life. The spiritual masters tell us that after years of purgation and illumination, one is able to experience a deep and abiding union with God, characterized by profound humility, freedom from fears of suffering or trials, great desire to serve God, and profound mystical states of consciousness. Some of the spiritual masters prefer to call this phase “communion,” emphasizing an intimate relationship with God, rather than “unitive,” which stresses oneness with God.

Each stage provides a stable basis for the next. However, the stages overlap and repeat as one grows. People in the purgative stage have moments of profound illumination and can experience oneness with God. People in the unitive stage continue to work at purgation and illumination, but from a higher perspective and experience.