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# St. John of the Cross, Mystic of the Light

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There are so many mistaken notions about St. John of the Cross (1542-91) that we might do well to clarify some of them at the outset. He is, of course, most identified with the phrase dark night of the soul, but in fact he never uses the term. John does speak of the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit in his treatise titled simply *The Dark Night*. But he is centrally concerned not to identify those purifying processes with what we would call clinical depression (or what he would have called melancholy, which he does discuss and carefully distinguishes from the dark night) or world-weariness or monastic *acedia* (spiritual torpor). Nor is it true that John was a reclusive hermit with little experience of the world. His biographers have estimated that after his ordination, he traveled nearly 18,000 miles all over Spain, mainly on foot.

We also know that John was a man of practical abilities. We have his famous painting of the crucifixion, which most know through the painting by Salvador Dali, which was inspired by John's. Spain still has a functioning aqueduct that he designed and helped to build for a Carmelite monastery. Finally, he is not, despite the best efforts of some, to be classified with those mystics who are closer to Buddhism than to Christianity; in fact, his spiritual doctrine is both profoundly Christological and Trinitarian. It is merely a cliché to call him simply a mystic of the night, an apophatic mystic, since his final work ends in light, as is clear from its title, *The Living Flame of Love*.

In passing, it is also worthwhile to note that John would be unfamiliar with the term mystic or mysticism (words first used long after his death), but he does speak of mystical theology, a term that has behind it a

millenium of history in the Christian tradition. When John spoke of mystical theology, as he did more than a few times in his writings, he had in mind the traditional term deriving from the writings of the sixth-century Syrian monk known to us as the Pseudo-Dionysius. It was a phrase well known to every medieval doctor. Mystical theology meant that hidden state of experiencing God without images or concepts. Mysticism, by contrast, was a term coined after John's death to describe deep spiritual experience detached from formal practices of religion, as the late Michel de Certeau has shown in his classic work *The Mystic Fable*.

### **John's Age**

The 16th century was a time of great upheaval. Spain enjoyed the economic fruits of its exploration and colonization in the New World. John himself had been scheduled for the missions of Mexico in the years before his death. In the religious life of Spain itself the currents were varied and, at times, in mutual opposition. The church worried about an underground of crypto-Jews and Muslims in the decades after the Reconquista of 1492. These *conversos* were the object of concern for the Spanish Inquisition. So were the pseudo-mystics known as the *alumbrados*, as well as the small communities of women known as the *beatas*, both of which groups did not seem to be under proper ecclesiastical supervision. The peninsula had been penetrated by humanist learning both in its plain Erasmian form and in the kind of philological work that produced the famous polyglot Bible of Cardinal Ximenes at the beginning of the 16th century, as well as a steady stream of patristic and medieval texts translated into the Castilian language. Teresa of ávila writes in her autobiography of the profound influence Augustine's *Confessions* had on her life when she read it in the vernacular. Reformation ideas were abroad but in muted form. Teresa speaks of Los Luteranos, a serviceable term describing all of the reformers, but Reformation ideas are hard to identify in the works of John or Teresa, even by allusion.

In 1567, after studies at the University of Salamanca, which at the time flourished as a center for learning, John was ordained as a priest of the Carmelite order. His instinct was to retire to a Carthusian monastery, but a chance meeting with Teresa of ávila allowed him to be persuaded to work for the reform of the Carmelite order to bring it back to its primitive roots. John would learn that the task of reform was not easy. It would cost him a period in a monastic prison, where he wrote some of his most beautiful poetry. Until his death John served as a confessor, spiritual director, superior and administrator for Carmelite men and as a spiritual teacher and confessor for the reformed Carmels being established by St. Teresa. She and John were collaborators, and he was probably the only man she held in awe. It is a common misconception that the two were close friends. At the various friaries in which he lived, John taught catechism to local children, dispensed alms, heard confessions, led his friars out on picnics in the countryside on occasion, and generally did what was necessary for the good order of the house while observing the life of a Carmelite mendicant.

### **John on Prayer**

John's desire to help those whom he met in his duties as a confessor to advance in the life of prayer is the key to understanding his writings. He wrote not for beginners in prayer but for those who were ready to enter into the life of contemplation. His writings always had a pastoral purpose; he was not by instinct or vocation a theologian in the academic sense of the term. His one attempt at a systematic treatise, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, became so complicated and prolix that he finally abandoned it. He was a sympathetic confessor and spiritual director, although he did not use the word director, preferring to speak of a spiritual teacher (*maestro espiritual*) or guide (*guia*). John had a horror of bad spiritual directors, because they could cause such harm to people of prayer either by encouraging people to seek out excessive spiritual experiences or, by contrast, holding people back from following the promptings of grace when they were ready for a deeper and richer contemplative life. He famously observed that three sources could lead a person down the road to damnation: the wiles of the devil, one's own acquiescence to sinful suggestions and the advice of bad spiritual guides.

Nor was John sympathetic to the epiphenomena of advanced spiritual experience. He was not a person given to sympathy for locutions, visions, stigmatizations and the like. John saw these as traps that could ensnare a person on the path to God. Such experiences, in his judgment, could easily become snares to feed the spiritual emotions of people. They were too often experiences to satisfy personal needs and not for God; one had to let go of them. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (11:22.19), he urges confessors and spiritual guides to tell people that one act done in charity is more precious in God's sight than all the visions and communications possible... and how it is that many individuals who have never received these experiences are incomparably more advanced than others who have received many. He reportedly said he would not even walk across the street to see a stigmatic.

### **Poetry and Prose**

John did not consider himself an academic or a professional writer. The body of writing that has come down to us shows rather clearly that John wrote either out of instinct (the poems) or to meet needs or in response to requests for spiritual elucidation. The wonderful collection of aphorisms now published under the title *Sayings of Light and Love* were short sentences written out on scraps of paper to give to people as a starting point for prayer and reflection. In that sense, they were not unlike those good words visitors would request of the desert solitaries of the fourth century. Some of these sayings are stunning in their brevity and depth. Centuries later, under the acknowledged influence of John, Thomas Merton composed such sayings for his Cistercian novices. Merton then expanded them into meditations, which, in turn, developed into some of his best and enduring works, like *Seeds of Contemplation* and *Thoughts in Solitude*.

John, in addition to his estimable body of poetry, composed four substantive prose works: the unfinished *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*. John's method was to comment on his poetry in prose, stanza by stanza and line by line. His works, then, are a combination of wonderful lyric poems, which he composed heavily influenced by both the poetry of the day and

his love for the biblical Song of Songs, and a commentary that reveals his debt to his university training as a scholastic theologian reflected in his natural Augustinian bent, his understanding of Thomas Aquinas and his profound knowledge of the Scriptures. It is also worth noting that John does not frequently describe his sacramental life, his devotions or his liturgical prayer. He presumes them, but if we are not aware of that formation in the background as we read his work, much can be missed. His writings echo his knowledge of the psalter, his participation at Mass and the ordinary devotional life of a 16th-century Spanish friar (who loved to dance with an image of the infant Christ in his arms).

Why did John combine these two disparate genres of poetry and prose? More pointedly, why did John write poetry at all? In his prologue to *The Spiritual Canticle*, he opens a precious window into the mind of this gifted poet, theologian and mystic. Writing to the prioress Mother Ana de Jesús, he says that his long poem *The Spiritual Canticle* was an expression of love arising from mystical understanding. He explains that when certain persons have such experiences in prayer they let something of their experience overflow in figures, comparisons, and similitudes and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations. When such compositions are read, they seem to the reader absurdities rather than rational utterances. But, John adds, so does the Song of Songs and other places in Scripture where the Holy Spirit is unable to express the fullness of his meaning in ordinary words. He goes on to say that the holy doctors have never fully explicated what the words of Scripture mean and concludes that the explanations of these biblical expressions usually contain less than what they embody in themselves.

### **The Song of Songs**

We might linger for a moment over John's reference to the Song of Songs, since it gives us a clue to how we might place John in the tradition within which he lived. The Song of Songs is not widely read today nor commented on. It was not until a couple of years ago that I heard a sermon with references to the Song of Songs. Characteristically enough, it was by a Benedictine monk who was preaching at an infant's funeral.

The mystical tradition, however, knew the Song of Songs well. The great Origen of Alexandria, at the end of the third century, noted that the three wisdom books written by Solomon are steps on the road to deep prayer. Proverbs teaches us how to distinguish good from bad behavior; it is the book of ethics. Ecclesiastes teaches us how to intuit the hand of God in the created order; it is the book of *theoria*. Finally, the Song of Songs teaches us *theologia* speech to and about God. That tripartite distinction would, in time, take concretely canonical form as the three stages of the contemplative life: the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive.

From Origen on, there is a vast tradition of commentary on the text of the Songs that runs like a thread from the patristic commentators through the medieval Cistercians and Carthusians down to the day of John and Teresa of Ávila. John's poetry is suffused with the language and sentiments of the Song of Songs, an influence especially notable if one is familiar with the Latin Vulgate version of the Song and with John's Spanish poetry.

John's basic road map is the passage through the night of senses into the night of faith (which sounds rather like the dark night of serious atheism) to that dawn whose light comes after the deepest darkness of night. John's darkness, however, is not the void of Eastern thought nor the Great Doubt of the Buddha. John's night is always to be understood in dialectical relationship to the deep mystery of God. That is why John combines everything and nothing in his understanding of God: *todo y nada*. In fact, John frequently reaches, especially in his poetry, for the paradoxical formulation to speak of God perhaps most beautifully when he speaks in *The Spiritual Canticle* of that experience as silent music/sounding solitude (*la musica callada la soledad sonora*).

### **Hearing God's Silence**

John's understanding of God is never domesticated. God is not some object out there but an inexpressible mystery who is both near to us and beyond us and our imaginings and thought. However, John's God is not some abstract divinity but rather a Trinitarian God: the One who from all eternity pours forth the Word both in eternity and in history. In one of

his most striking sayings John says that the Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul. There is an immense theology in that brief, almost aphoristic, observation. God's silence is broken by the Word (in the inner life of the Trinity, in creation and in the incarnation), but we must live in such a way as to hear that silence. The contemporary British Carmelite Ruth Burrows put it nicely in her book *Living in Mystery*: God gave all God had to give in giving us Jesus. God kept nothing back from us, not even God's only Son, and in this gift of Jesus is the gift of the divine Self.

That hearing of the silence that is the Word is, in the deepest sense, prayer. Iain Matthew, one of the most astute commentators on John of the Cross, has written that beyond praise, petition and begging for pardon, the impulse in prayer is toward presence. Echoing St. Thomas Aquinas, John insists that God sustains every soul and dwells in every soul substantially, even though it may be the greatest sinner in the world (*Ascent* 11.5.3). When we become aware of that presence, it is not some generic God but the indwelling Trinity that we discover made present to us by Christ and the gift of Christ that is the Spirit. Behind that vision, of course, is the conviction of Augustine that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

St. John of the Cross is not easy to read; but when we read the poetry, the sayings and the few letters we possess, we sense almost intuitively that we are hearing someone who transmits to us profound spiritual experienceexperience that is shaped by the Word made flesh, the self-emptying of Christ on the cross and his exaltation in resurrection. John's experience is not the experience of the Void, much less the opening up of Nirvana. As he himself noted, the dawn emerges out of the greatest period of the night's darkness; and when it emerges, it draws us to the presence of God not in terror but in love, for, as he wrote, when evening comes, you will be examined in love.

### **A Note of Caution**

John can be wildly misread as a spiritual guide who demands only robust effort on the part of the aspiring Christian. It is true that he holds up the cross, demands a certain asceticism and possesses a natural sympathy for the life of withdrawal and penance. In the final analysis, however, John is no Pelagian. He believes that God draws us to God's own self by the utterance of God's Word in eternity, creation and history. He summed up that belief in a little quatrain he wrote for Christmas, which in a few lines captures simple devotion, profound theology and the constant allure of grace:

*The Virgin, weighed  
With the Word of God,  
Comes down the road:  
if only you will shelter her!*

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