

# FREE TO LOVE: NEGATION IN THE DOCTRINE OF JOHN OF THE CROSS, Daniel Chowning, O.C.D.

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I would like to begin with a true love story: Sometime around the year 1529, a young, wealthy, silk merchant from Toledo, Spain by the name of Gonzalo de Yepes was making his customary business trip through Castile either on the way to or from the prosperous trading village of Medina del Campo. Gonzalo was the orphaned son of noble parents. After his parents' death, he went to live under the guardianship of some wealthy uncles who owned a silk industry. Gonzalo's uncles incorporated him into the prosperous family business and appointed him manager or representative of the enterprise. Because of his position, he made regular trips to Medina del Campo where the plaza, among many other things, was famous for its silk commerce.<sup>1</sup>

On one of Gonzalo's trips he passed through the small Castilian village of Fontiveros in the province of Avila to visit a rich widow who operated a silk weaving business out of her home. Employed and living with this widow as a silk weaver was a beautiful young woman by the name of Catalina Alvarez. Like Gonzalo, Catalina was orphaned and a native of Toledo, but unlike him, she was poor and came from an

entirely different social class. To use a twentieth century expression, she came from "the other side of the tracks." Her experience had been one of poverty, suffering, struggle, and abandonment. Gonzalo became enamored of Catalina's beauty, youthfulness, goodness and loveliness. Despite their disparate social and economic backgrounds, they fell in love and decided to marry.

But Gonzalo's love for Catalina presented serious problems. According to the conventions and customs of the sixteenth century, a person did not marry out of his or her social class. People entered marriage by contract, arranged by their parents. Love had little, or in many cases nothing, to do with the purpose of marriage. The primary end of marriage was pro creation and, at least for the noble classes, to keep their social class free of impure blood and their family heritage intact. To marry outside one's social milieu meant breaking the family lineage; it was simply not done.

The wealthy widow who had taken poor, orphaned Catalina into her home and business out of the sheer goodness of her heart, and who probably knew Gonzalo's relatives, warned him of the consequences of this marriage.<sup>2</sup> But Gonzalo loved Catalina passionately. She had stolen his heart. They must have shared a deep love because both were aware that their union could mean the loss of Gonzalo's secure position, inheritance, and family ties. This was no small matter in sixteenth century Spain, marked by widespread famine and poverty.<sup>3</sup> But the love they shared enabled Gonzalo to transcend himself and the economic and social considerations. Hadn't she stolen his heart? Wasn't his love so focused on her that nothing else really mattered? Thus, they married.

Of course, the widow's premonition came true. Gonzalo was thrown out on the street, disinherited and abandoned by his noble and rich family. A gifted accountant and writer, but unable to find work in his field of expertise, Gonzalo was forced to learn the trade of his young wife. He fell into poverty out of love. He must have been an extraordinarily free man to sacrifice all his material security and possessions out of love for his bride. His self-denial, his willingness to die to false securities for the sake of love, in itself was a supreme act of freedom and love that united him with Catalina. And her love for him empowered him to surrender all for the sake of their union. Within a few years, their love brought forth new life. They had three sons: Francisco, Luis (who later died of malnutrition), and Juan, who later became known as Juan de la Cruz, a canonized saint and Doctor of the Church, often referred to by

his devotees and students as "the doctor of divine love."

St. John of the Cross, this great lover of God, was a "child of love" in the truest sense of the word. Although John never reflects directly upon his childhood in his writings, his humble origins marked by the deep love his parents shared and his father's sacrificial act of love must have shaped his profound understanding of love and union between God and human beings. Definitely, it must have given him an insight into the cost of love, that love is a self-emptying process. From where else, other than from the example of Jesus Christ, would the inspiration for such ideas as these come? "Love does not consist in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved" (Maxims, 36).<sup>4</sup> Or again, "This is how we can recognize the person who truly loves God; if he or she is content with nothing less than God. Satisfaction of heart is not found in the possession of things, but in being stripped of them all and in poverty of spirit" (C, 1, 14).

I cannot help but think that Gonzalo and Catalina's love adventure must have formed in some way John's teaching on the theme of my lecture: Free To Love: Negation in the Doctrine of St. John of the Cross.

Love is at the heart of the spirituality of St. John of the Cross. Oftentimes, however, people read his writings and become frightened by the absolute, stark, and radical language he uses, such as: all or nothing, self-denial, mortification, emptiness, renunciation, nakedness, contempt for self and creatures, and detachment. All these terms form a rich vocabulary to express the theme of negation and can appear repellent and inhuman if not understood correctly. They recur throughout John's works and are often the source of misinterpretation and fear that have distorted the beauty, depth, and humanness of his person and doctrine.

For instance, section 3 in chapter 13 of the first book of the Ascent of Mount Carmel contains a series of counsels that may seem disturbing and masochistic if not understood in the proper context:

Endeavor to be inclined always:

not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;

not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;

not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;

not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;

not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;

not to the most, but to the least;

not to the highest and most precious,

but to the lowest and most despised;

not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing.

Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and, for Christ, desire to enter into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.

For many of us in our North American culture whose experience of human love may have been broken and resulted in low self-esteem and self-hatred such statements may seem difficult to bear. In our culture we have a hard time distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate self-love. Therefore, it is difficult to teach the spirituality of John of the Cross without hearing some negative response such as: "What do you mean, I have to die to selfishness? I need to take care of myself and love myself! I spent too many years hating myself as it is!"

Nevertheless, negation is the pillar of the system of St. John of the Cross and to misunderstand it is to miss out on the richness of his doctrine.<sup>5</sup> It is helpful, therefore, to have some comprehension of such terms as self-denial, all-nothing, mortification, renunciation, and emptiness, all of which comprise the theme of negation in John's works.

Let me begin by explaining what negation is not. First of all, Sanjuanist terms of negation have nothing to do with neoplatonic dualism or a denial of creation. John of

the Cross is thoroughly Christian and incarnational. He exalts the beauty and dignity of creation and the purpose for which God created the world. For John, God is a mystery of self-emptying Love who created the world out of love to be "a palace for the bride" of Christ ("Roman ces," 4). In creating the world, God "looked at all things" with the image of his Son and thus communicated to them "their natural being and many natural graces and gifts" (C, 5, 4). Thus, creation reflects the presence, beauty, and excellence of God and increases love in the person who reflects upon it. "Since creatures gave the soul signs of her Beloved and showed within themselves traces of his beauty and excellence, love increased in her"(C, 6, 2). Images of creation abound in John's poetry.

O woods and thickets

planted by the hand of my Beloved!

O green meadow,

coated, bright, with flowers. (C, 4)

My Beloved, the mountains,

and lonely wooded valleys,

strange islands,

and resounding rivers,

the whistling of love-stirring breezes. (C, 13)

John would have us, therefore, love all of creation and regard it as the image of God's love and beauty, as the image of Jesus Christ.

Second, John's negation spirituality does not disparage the beauty and dignity of the human person. We were created in the image and likeness of God, created out of love to be the spouse of Christ, created for union with God through love (see "Romances," 3-4). Love is the reason we exist (C, 29). John writes: "the ultimate

reason for everything is love" (C, 38, 5). God lives in the depths of our being imparting to us life, dignity, and love.

Oh, then, soul, most beautiful among all creatures, so anxious to know the dwelling place of your Beloved that you may go in quest of him and be united to him, now we are telling you that you yourself are his dwelling and his secret chamber and hiding place. (C, 1, 7)

Furthermore, John's teaching on self-denial does not refer to a renunciation of material objects nor engagement in ascetical practices such as fasting, wearing tattered clothes, depriving oneself of all pleasures of life and performing extraordinary penances. John insists that what obstructs our relationship with God is not material reality as such, but the human heart when it craves, desires, and tries to possess material objects, people, and situations for selfish reasons.

For we are not discussing the mere lack of things; this lack will not divest the soul if it craves for all these objects. Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within that causes the damage. (A, 1, 3, 4)

The problem, therefore, lies not in material reality but in the human heart when it becomes attached and inordinately desires created things for selfish motives. Definitely, ascetical practices may have a role in our effort to grow in union with God, but people have often concentrated too much on ascetical practices and the denial of material objects rather than on love and the interior, spiritual attitude that undergirds John's thinking. 6

How, then, are we to understand the negation spirituality of John of the Cross without becoming discouraged or turned off by the absoluteness of his doctrine?

To begin with, the starting point for approaching John's negation spirituality is the experience of being loved by God a God who desires to enter into a personal relationship of love with human beings and our response to that love. Any notion of self-denial, detachment, renunciation, or emptiness that is not born of an experience of God's personal love makes no sense to John of the Cross. God always takes the initiative. "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). In the beginning

of the Spiritual Canticle , which sings of and recounts the Christian journey toward union with God in terms of love, John writes that the soul is only able to begin the journey of love in search for union with God because she first had an experience of God's love, and as a fruit of that experience, came to an awareness that love is the purpose of existence (C, 1, 1). It is this experience of God's love that ignites the fire of love within a person so that one can begin the journey towards union with God through love.

Where have you hidden,

Beloved, and left me moaning?

You fled like the stag

after wounding me;

I went out calling you, but you were gone. (C, 1)

For John, this experience of the transcendent but intimate loving nature of God, who takes the initiative and touches us with love, has a profound effect upon us; it begins a transformation process that frees us to love God, ourselves, creation, and all of life in the way God created us to.

This experience of God's love is pivotal for understanding some of the radical statements John makes about the "nothingness" of creation and all things in comparison to God who is All. For instance:

All the creatures of heaven and earth are nothing when compared to God. All the beauty of creatures compared with the infinite beauty of God is supreme ugliness. All the grace and elegance of creatures compared with God's grace is utter coarseness and crudity. (A, 1, 4, 3-7)

To possess God in all, you should not possess anything in all. For how can the heart that belongs to one belong completely to the other? (Letter 17 to Magdalena del Espiritu Santo, July 28, 1589)

A first reading of these comparisons without an understanding of the experience of God they reflect would lead us to believe that John is setting up an opposition between God and creatures, that he is denigrating created reality in writing that, compared to God, creation is "nothing," "ugly," and "crude." But this is far from his intention. God is not in competition with creation and human beings, for God is the source of all that exists. These statements reflect the experience of a person who has glimpsed the infinite goodness and beauty of God. John wishes to communicate a message about God. God is the Source of all life, goodness, and beauty. God is All; God is Everything. And no matter how good, wise, and beautiful creatures of this world may be, nothing can be compared to the goodness, wisdom, beauty, and love of God who is the author of all that exists and upon whom everything depends. In the light of God's tremendous love and goodness, all other things pale into insignificance without losing their value and worth. But isn't this the same when two people fall in love? A man and woman fall in love, and as a result, other men and women no longer attract their hearts as before. Their hearts have been stolen. Yes, others are beautiful and good, but all other loves and attractions are relative to their beloved. St. Paul expresses the same insight in his Letter to the Philippians: "I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. For his sake I have forfeited everything; I have accounted all else rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth" (Phil 3:8). To have such an insight into the "Allness" of God is the fruit of a profound experience of being loved by God.

But John has another reason for making such radical statements: ultimately, only God can satisfy the human heart because God created us for a communion of life with God, created us for happiness and wholeness. And although the world and creatures are beautiful, made in the image and likeness of God, they cannot slake the deepest thirsts of the human spirit. Anything less than the infinite fails to satisfy us (F, 3, 18). This is a message that resounds throughout John's works. It is a truth he learned early in life. He grew up in misery and poverty; he knew hunger and abandonment. And like all the mystics of the great world religions, he was convinced that so much of human suffering comes from not realizing the truth that, ultimately, only God can satisfy the human heart.

The experience, therefore, of being deeply loved by God, God who takes the initiative and invites us to enter into a personal relationship of love, is the foundation for understanding John's negation spirituality. This is important because

not only does it emphasize that it is God who takes the initiative but, in terms of any form of self-denial or renunciation or dying to self, we must view it in the context of a personal relationship of love with God.

The second foundation upon which John's negation spirituality is based is the human condition. Now when God's love begins to touch us deeply and we respond by entering into a personal relationship with God, pain is involved. It is the same in any love relationship. To enter into relationship with another is to allow ourselves to be wounded. When two people fall in love, there is a passionate, romantic period which is like a spark that sets off the fire of love. However, the more they grow in their relationship, the more they begin to experience all that is vulnerable and wounded within them, all that is contrary to mature love: fears, insecurities, hurts from the past, desire to control and dominate the other, and selfishness. In short, they begin to experience how unfree they are to respond fully to the demands of love, as they truly desire. In an analogous way, the same happens in our relationship with God. When God begins to communicate love to us on deeper levels, the light of God's love reveals the depths of our sinfulness, woundedness and selfishness; it brings to light all that prevents us from loving God and others according to the Gospel. It exposes our lack of freedom to love. As a result, we become painfully aware that we stand in need of a profound healing and liberation from all that blocks our capacity to love. John expresses this well in the Living Flame of Love :

All the soul's infirmities are brought to light; they are set before its eyes to be felt and healed. Now with the light and heat of the divine fire, it sees and feels those weaknesses and miseries which previously resided within it, hidden and unfelt, just as the dampness of the log of wood was unknown until the fire being applied to it made it sweat and smoke and sputter. And this is what the flame does to the imperfect soul. (F, 1, 21-22)

John of the Cross has a profound insight into human nature and its ills. Although we were created for a love relationship with God, ourselves, others, and creation, all is not well. Like all the mystics of the great world religions, he recognizes that human nature is wounded and stands in need of transformation and healing. Due to original sin, as well as our own personal sin and fragmented personal history with all the factors that make up our character and life stories, there is a profound disorder or conflict within the human heart that makes it difficult to relate to God, ourselves,

others, and life in the way God intended at our creation, and in the way we also desire in the depths of our being. Although we have been redeemed by Christ, the roots of original sin lie deep within us and we find it hard to love. John says we love in a "base manner" (N, 1, 8, 3). Therefore, the human he art stands in need of radical transformation and liberation.

How does the disordered heart or "base manner of loving" manifest itself for John? He analyzes this in the first book of the Ascent of Mount Carmel and in the Dark Night. At the risk of over-simplification, I'll try to synthesize his analysis.

First of all, the disorder or conflict within the human heart manifests itself by our becoming enslaved or attached to things that ultimately cannot satisfy us. At times, whether consciously or unconsciously, despite our best desires and intentions we humans have this tendency to seek satisfaction, peace, fulfillment, and love in something that can never provide it for us, whether it be material possessions, riches, power, prestige, unhealthy relationships, and even spiritual experiences and consolations. We can see this not only in our personal lives but in society at large, with all the addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex, food, co-dependent relationships, and material possessions. According to John, our deepest desire is really for God, who alone can satisfy us, but not being conscious of this (or for some other reason such as fear or insecurity), we may give our time and energy in an inordinate manner to other things that enslave us and prevent us from responding freely to that loving relationship with God and neighbor for which we were created and which alone can fulfill us. Now an attachment for John of the Cross is a disordered relationship, whether it be with a person, a material thing, an idea or feeling, or even a religious image or experience, making it the source of our love and happiness. It's when we say, "if only I had this car, I'd be happy. If only I had this person living with me, I'd be happy. If only I had nice clothes, I'd be happy." Instead of placing our relationship with God as the source and object of our true longing, we become dependent on something else.

Another way this disorder within us manifests itself is through what John sees as an egoism rooted deeply in our hearts. He calls it "a base manner of loving" (N, 1, 8, 3). It is when we are motivated in our relationships with God, others, and objects by self-gratification, or what John calls "sensory satisfaction" (N, 1, 6, 6). Freud would call this living by the pleasure principle; other contemporary schools of thought

might classify it as narcissistic behavior. It is when our motivation for doing things and relating to God and others is solely to get pleasure for ourselves, thus making our ego the center of attention. John gives a lot of attention to analyzing this type of behavior in the Dark Night. He maintains that this disordered way of loving is "childishness" (N, 1, 6, 6), contrary to true love, and is like a "stain" embedded in the depths of our being that prevents us from relating to and loving God and others in the way God created us to do, and from reaching our full potential as human beings (N, 2, 1, 1). It manifests itself in behavior such as condemning and judging others, wanting to be praised and esteemed as holy, the need to control and manipulate others in order to be liked, becoming angry when we don't receive sensory satisfaction in prayer and ministry, and impatience over the imperfections of others as well as our own.<sup>7</sup> Only God can heal this wound through the purification of the dark night.

With this perception of our broken human condition and our need for liberation and healing, we can better understand the fundamental and necessary role negation plays in John's doctrine. Renunciation, self-denial, detachment, and poverty are directed toward the process of healing and liberating the human heart in order to love God, others, and creation in the way we were created to love. It is the necessary process toward maturation and growth in love. For John of the Cross, negation is the Christian path towards freedom to love.

Now that we have looked at the foundation of negation, let us reflect on the various elements of this path as taught by John of the Cross.

The first aspect of John's teaching on dying to self and becoming empty for God is that it is modeled on Jesus Christ as the supreme example of self-emptying love. John's negation spirituality is thoroughly centered on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. He writes:

A person makes progress only by imitating Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one goes to the Father but through him, as he states himself in St. John [Jn 14:6].

Accordingly, I would not consider any spirituality worthwhile that wants to walk in sweetness and ease and run from the imitation of Christ. He is our model and

light. (A, 2, 7, 8- 9)

His first counsel to beginners in the spiritual life is to have a habitual desire to imitate Jesus Christ and to make love for Jesus the motivation for one's self-denial. He writes in the Ascent of Mount Carmel:

First, have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and behave in all events as he would. Second, in order to be successful in this imitation, renounce and remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God. Do this out of love for Jesus Christ. (A, 1, 13, 3-4)

John's preferred image of Jesus is that of Jesus crucified (A, 2, 7, 7-11). Jesus crucified is his model of the Christian path. Now we must not view this symbol as something morbid, reflecting only the spirituality of the Spanish Baroque period. For John, Jesus crucified symbolizes a life of radical dependence upon God, of service, compassion, and self-giving love. Jesus is the one who reflected God's love perfectly in our broken world. His life was one of a continual death in order that others may live more fully (A, 2, 7, 9). He was totally committed to pleasing God in all things, the God whom he experienced as Father and who was the passion of his life (A, 1, 13, 4; 2, 7, 2). Jesus lived a life of mercy, compassion, and self-giving love that demanded a total surrender of false securities and self-gratification and resulted in death on the cross that concretized in a radical way his life of compassion and love for the reconciliation of humanity with God and with each other. According to John, in the love and poverty of Jesus crucified, God revealed his power, mercy, and goodness, and at the same time, revealed to us where we will experience the deepest communion with God, that is, in a life of compassion and self-emptying love for the love of God and in the service of others.<sup>8</sup> Jesus accomplished "the most marvelous work of his whole life," at the moment when he was poorest, weakest, and most empty of self-love and false securities (A, 2, 7, 11).

Jesus, therefore, is the model of the path of negation according to John of the Cross. To follow Jesus, to live according to the Gospel, implies by its very nature a life of loving dedication to pleasing God and a surrender of false securities and selfishness. It means treading the path of the cross, the way of service, compassion,

and self-giving love. It means dying to self in order that others may live.

The second element of this path of negation is that negation for John of the Cross does not simply refer to some ascetical practice or form of renunciation that precedes love (in the sense of something I must do before I can love God, or some practice that prepares me to love); rather, negation is itself a form of love and union with God.<sup>9</sup> Now this is an important aspect of John's teaching, because if negation is directed toward freeing us to love, then love is the very essence of negation, since it is only love that liberates us. It is both the fruit of a love relationship with the Lord and also the way love manifests itself concretely.

There are three aspects of negation as a form of love and union with God we need to reflect upon. The first is that the whole process of maturation in love is born, as I said before, from a personal experience of God's love who takes the initiative and wounds us with love. Love is a response to a gift. In the first book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John analyzes the condition of the person enslaved by attachments and inordinate desires, and he tells us that the journey toward union with God entails a complete mortification of our inordinate desires and attachments (A, 1, 11, 6). We can easily become discouraged in reading that union with God and others requires a total renunciation of all our addictions, attachments and inordinate desires. However, John is very realistic and human. He is fully aware that this transformation process can only begin with a conscious experience of God's love that fires our will so we can do our part in liberating the heart from the obstacles to love. After having explained fully the extent of interior freedom from attachments God asks of us, John writes these consoling words:

A more intense enkindling of another, better love (love of the soul's Bridegroom) is necessary for the vanquishing of the appetites and the denial of this pleasure. By finding satisfaction and strength in this love, it will have the courage and constancy to readily deny all other appetites. The love of its Bridegroom is not the only requisite for conquering the strength of the sensitive appetites; an enkindling with urgent longings love is also necessary. (A, 1, 14, 2)

John knows that the only way we can begin to do our part in letting go of the false gods, attachments, and selfish patterns that keep us from loving according to the Gospel demands is the love of Jesus Christ and an ardent desire to respond to his

love. God works with us according to the natural mode of human nature (A, 2, 17, 3-4). God knows that we would never undertake this path without a sense of God's love. It takes a greater love to conquer the obstacles to love. It takes, as John writes, "an enkindling of love for the Beloved." The same principle is at work in human love. When we love another person and then become aware of our need to control or dominate, or the selfish ways in which we relate to that person, what empowers us to begin to surrender these destructive tendencies is the love we feel for that person. When I love another I have the strength to let go of those things within me that harm our relationship. How else could a young married couple begin the renunciation process demanded by the intimate relationship of marriage without the eros of love? It is the same with God.

However, John's teaching may leave some of us perplexed. Perhaps we have never felt an "enkindling of love" for Christ the Bridegroom in any sensible manner. Yes, we love Christ; we seek God through prayer, but we have never felt that wound of love in any deep, vivid way. Quite the contrary, we experience the darkness of faith, struggle, and poverty.

Well, God wounds us in many ways. Some people begin their spiritual journey with a profound sense of God's love accompanied by ardent desires to love God in return. For others, God wounds them in other ways. For instance, through the love of another a person may enter into relationship with God. Still others, experience it through some illness or hardship that wakes them up and they begin to take their relationship with God seriously. This happened to a friend of mine who contracted viral encephalitis. He came out of the illness with a deep sense of God's presence in his life that initiated an intense search for God. Therefore, God wounds us in many ways. But the important element John teaches is that self-denial is born from an experience of being wounded by God's love.

The second aspect of negation as a form of love and union with God concerns an essential element of John's understanding of love. For John of the Cross, love is not some romantic, self-gratifying experience which leaves us in the clouds, nor is it an ephemeral feeling. Rather, love involves a process of conversion, of transcending one's own ego, of giving one's life for the Beloved. Love is a self-emptying process. "To love is to labor to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God" (A, 2, 5, 6). As M. Scott Peck writes in *The Road Less Traveled*, love is self-disciplined. "If I

truly love another, I will obviously order my behavior in a such a way as to contribute the utmost to his or her spiritual growth."10 As a sign of my love, I will try to make those changes in my life that deepen and further the other's good as well as my own. In his own unique way, John teaches the same truth.

Stanza 3 of the Spiritual Canticle contains important teaching on John's notion of self-denial as a form of love. John says that many desire God. They say they long to love and serve God, but they don't want their desire for God to cost them anything (C, 3, 2). They won't even rise from a place of their liking, if they were not to receive some delight from God in their mouth and heart. They will not take one step to mortify their selfishness and to surrender some their useless desires and false securities. "But unless they rise up from the bed of their own satisfaction, and go in search of God, they will not find God, no matter how much they cry out" (ibid.).

Those who seek God and yet want to find their own satisfaction and rest seek him at night and thus will not find him. Those who look for him through the practice and works of the virtues and get up from the bed of their own satisfaction and delight seek him by day and thus will find him. (C, 3, 3)

Love, therefore, is more a verb for John than a noun. It expresses itself by the self-discipline of actively seeking God through a life of prayer, service, growth in patience, generosity and the other virtues, and dying to selfishness. John gives concrete examples of the type of death to self that incarnates love: surrendering the need for selfish gratification and consolations in prayer and ministry, overcoming one's fears of what others may think of us if we earnestly follow the spiritual path, courageously facing the struggle of temptation and of integrating the dark side of our lives. For John, these are not simply the means that prepare us for love, but rather the concrete signs of maturing love. As the saying goes, "Love is as love does."11

The final element of negation as a form of love and union with God is that the more one's love grows the more one's heart becomes concentrated on the Beloved, and as a natural corollary, whatever impedes the growth of love or attention to the Beloved, or whatever is superfluous to this love, simply falls away. In this sense, detachment in St. John of the Cross is a natural outcome of an ever deepening and concentrated love of God. Negation has nothing to do with a depreciation of material or spiritual goods, other relationships, having fun, or created reality. It is about a

relationship of love, of making an option for Jesus Christ the Beloved. John of the Cross was an ardent lover of God and his whole message is to make God the love and the center of our lives because we exist for Love, for God, who is the fulfillment of all human existence and who offers us the fullness of life, love, and happiness. He maintains that the more we are "won over to love," the more we concentrate our love and attention on God and God's reign, the more our attachments, selfishness, useless desires, and even very good but superfluous things, will fall away as a result. This is the mystery of Love that by its very nature transforms and frees us. He expresses this beautifully in stanza 29 of the Spiritual Canticle:

The soul, indeed, lost to all things and won over to love, no longer occupies her spirit in anything else. She even withdraws in matters pertinent to the active life and other exterior exercises for the sake of fulfilling of the one thing the Bridegroom said was necessary [Lk 10:42], and that is: attentiveness to God and the continual exercise of love in him. (C, 29, 1)

We find this in everyday life and relationships. Psychologists such as Rollo May, Erich Fromm, and M. Scott Peck tell us that the principle work of love is attention or concentration on the one we love. When we love another, we give that person our full attention. This implies a setting aside of other preoccupations and concerns without in anyway disparaging them.<sup>12</sup> Individuals marry and things within their lives change that people think would never change. Other relationships and pastimes no longer take precedence. Their attention is on their beloved. Someone studies for a degree or sets out on the path for some spiritual quest or truth, and other material concerns, distractions, relationships pale into insignificance because one is lovingly attentive to the object of one's search.

An important element of this loving attention to God concerns our relationship to supernatural communications, consolations, and ideas about God. John reminds us over and over again in his writings that we must be very careful about such spiritual phenomena because God cannot be captured by spiritual consolations, ideas, images, or spiritual communications. Not only does God live in the depths of our being but God is also transcendent and far exceeds anything we can feel, think of, or imagine. John counsels us to renounce such phenomena. In the Ascent of Mount Carmel he writes:

To reach this essential union of love of God, a person must be careful not to lean upon imaginative visions, forms, figures, or particular ideas, since they cannot serve as a proper tione and proximate means for such an effect; they would be a hindrance instead. As a result a person should renounce them and endeavor to avoid them. The only reason to admit and value them would be the profit and good effect the genuine ones bring to the soul.

The eyes of the soul, then, should be ever withdrawn from distinct, visible, and intelligible apprehensions. Such elements are pertinent to sense and provide no security or foundation for faith. Its eyes should be fixed on the invisible, on what belongs not to sense but to spirit, and on what, as it is not contained in a sensible figure, brings the soul to union with God in faith . (A, 2, 16, 10 & 12)

When John instructs us to renounce visions, ideas, spiritual consolations, and images concerning God he is not undermining or discrediting these phenomena, but he is telling us to love God for God, not for God's gifts. We may have beautiful thoughts about God, or God may give us consolations and spiritual delight. To cling to these or to go to prayer for this type of experience is self-seeking and manifests a lack of faith and respect for God as a person. We must receive consolation with gratitude but without clinging. John would have us respect God as a Person and not use God for the ideas and delights we may get from God. If we love a person just because the person gives us gifts, what type of relationship is that? It remains superficial. It is the same with God.<sup>13</sup> Self-denial, therefore, as a form of loving attention to God means loving God for who God is, not for God's gifts. This applies not only to God but to our relationship with creation, material goods, other people. Negation, therefore, implies a deeper respect for God which leads to "deeper communion" with God, other people and the world. When we love people for who they are there is a deeper relationship.<sup>14</sup> We love freely, with respect, without the desire to possess, control, or dominate. As a result, our union and appreciation grows. To do otherwise is against that loving attentiveness to God as Person that love requires.

This loving attention to God that grows ever deeper brings about an emptiness of self that leads to a fullness of life in Christ and freedom for the Kingdom of God. It leads us to lose ourselves in order to be found. John writes in stanza 29 of the Canticle:

If, then, I am no longer

seen or found on the common,

you will say that I am lost;

that, stricken by love,

I lost myself, and was found.

John explains what it means to lose oneself and be found. To be lost is to be so much in love with Christ that we proclaim his Gospel without fear of what others might think (C, 29, 7). To be lost is to be so "stricken by love" that we forget ourselves and our own security and concentrate only on the Beloved and his affairs. To be lost is to be so taken up with the love of God and neighbor that we no longer seek our own selfish gain but live for love alone. To be lost is to live in the Beloved. In being lost this way, we find our true self in Christ. This is freedom to love.

Isn't this what happened to Gonzalo, John's father? For the love of Catalina he lost all things, all false security, his reputation, honor, wealth, comfort, and family. As a result of his loving attention on his beautiful bride, all things fell away, but in that he found his true self; and we for our part, reap the fruit of his loving negation, that is, we have John of the Cross, the "doctor of divine love," who teaches how to love freely by giving ourselves over to Love. All the rest will fall into place with God's grace and good time.

The one who walks in the love of God seeks neither gain nor reward, but seeks only to lose with the will all things and self for God; and this loss the lover judges to be a gain. The soul that does not know how to lose herself does not find herself but rather loses her self, as Our Lord teaches in the Gospel: Those who desire to gain their soul shall lose it, and those who lose it for my sake shall gain it [Mt 16:25]. (C, 29, 11)

Negation in the works of St. John of the Cross, therefore, is essentially a gospel path of love. It is born out of an experience of being loved by God and is a response to God's invitation to live in union with God, others, and all creation. In this sense, it is

a loving attentiveness to God as the source and center of our lives without in any way disparaging or denying anything created. It is dynamic self-giving love, exemplified in the life of Jesus, leading to self-transcendence and freedom. Negation is growing free to love.

Take God for your bridegroom and friend, and walk with him continually; and you will not sin and will learn to love, and the things you must do will work out prosperously for you. (Sayings of Light and Love, 68)

Sum of Perfection

Olivido de lo criado,

memoria del Criador,

atencion a lo interior,

y estarse amando al Amado.

## NOTES

1. Crisogono de Jesús, *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Auto res Cristianos, 1982), 14-16. See also Federico Ruiz, et al., *God Speaks in the Night*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 3-10.

2. Crisogono de Jesús, *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz*, 15.

3. *God Speaks in the Night*, 26-28.

4. In the 1991 revised Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translation, the Maxims are included with the Sayings of Light and Love and renumbered accordingly. This particular maxim now appears as 115, on p. 93. Also, in this article, "Romances" refers to John's series of poems sometimes known as the "Romances on the Gospel text: *In principio erat Verbum*," the heading of the first section.

5. See Federico Ruiz (Salvador), *Introduccion a San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid:

Biblio teca de Autores Cristianos, 1968), 415.

6. See Frederico Ruiz (Salvador), *Mistico y maestro: San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Edito rial de Espiritualidad, 1986), 87.

7. Examples of this "childishness" or "base manner of loving" can be found in the chapters where John describes the imperfections of beginners in the first book of the *Dark Night*, chapters 1-7.

8. See Frederico Ruiz, *Mistico y maestro*, 90-91.

9. *Ibid.*, 89.

10. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 155.

11. *Ibid.*, 120.

12. *Ibid.*, 120-121. See also Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 108-109.

13. See Frederico Ruiz, *Mistico y maestro*, 94.

14. *Ibid.*, 87, 94.

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1. [http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6\\_4.html](http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_4.html)

2. <http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6.html>

3. [http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6\\_6.html](http://www.icspublications.org/archives/others/cs6_6.html)

4. <http://www.icspublications.org/copy.html>