

St. John of the Cross: Beauty as Nothing, Beauty as Everything. Lessons from a Contemplative*

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St. John of the Cross was first and foremost a Christian, a believer.¹ We all have a high regard for him as poet, writer, formator, religious superior, theologian, philosopher, spiritual director, mystic, carpenter, mason, plumber, artist, mystic, etc. But before everything else he was a Christian. His life and his teaching are deeply contextualized in his membership in the community of faith, the Church, starting with his baptism.² John's membership in the

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¹ This condition is a "sine qua non" in all sanjuanist studies, though we have to acknowledge that there are excellent studies, though they may have missed the mark on something essential as St. John of the Cross's confession of faith. I am especially referring to J. Baruzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*. 2nd ed. reprint. Paris: Éditions Salvator, 1999. Baruzi's study is heuristically valid, but methodologically flawed given that it deliberately neglects its subject's (John of the Cross) condition as a believer in spite of its insistence on the theopatic states. For a comprehensive evaluation of Baruzi's monumental study, see: J.M. Martín Portales, "Jean Baruzi y el problema de la experiencia mística", in *San Juan de la Cruz* 9 (1993), 117-132.

² For a study on the growth in Christian living, starting with baptism, from the perspective of the teachings of St. John of the Cross, see the interesting monograph of A. Navarro, *Al paso de Dios, al paso del hombre*, Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2000.

Church can be understood as his honest to goodness efforts to follow Christ within the community setting. And together with these efforts, he was the protagonist of an intense experience, proper to all believers, of which he had a special consciousness and charism in order to express this same experience and consciousness in a pedagogical manner. This intense experience is nothing more than his experience as a Christian mystic within the Church.

As a member of the Church, he lived a particular charism incarnated in the reformed Carmelite Order: the charism of being a contemplative. Father John the Baptist Rossi (Rubeo) (1507-1578), the general of the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance, upon giving St. Teresa the license or the patent to establish a convent for the men called them "contemplative carmelites."³ Being a contemplative carmelite, according to the ideal of the Teresian reform,⁴ is perhaps the most striking aspect of John's multifaceted personality. His being a contemplative makes John of the Cross a class apart from other great Christians and mystics.⁵ In the same vein, his Carmelite

³ The patent is dated the tenth of August of 1567: "Por estos deseos que tenemos, estamos obligados [a] responder a algunas suplicasiones, en las cuales se pide que permitamos... hacer y tomar algunas casas de religiosos frailes de nuestra Orden... en manera que se llamen y sean casas y monasterios de los carmelitas contemplativos.", *Monumenta Historica Carmeli Teresiani I. Documenta primigenia*. Rome: Teresianum, 1973, 69.

⁴ In his timely historical and theological survey of the mystical tradition of Carmel from the Ancient Observance to the Teresian Reform, C. García labels the mysticism of the Carmelite Order as "contemplative." The contemplative mysticism of Teresa and John necessarily must be understood within this context. C. García, *La mística del carmelo*. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2000. For a critical and hermeneutical analysis, consult my bibliographical study: "De la mística carmelitana a la cuestión mística: Tres modelos evaluados desde la hermenéutica y la antropología", in: *Archivum Bibliographicum Carmeli Teresiani* 42 (2003), 615-657.

⁵ The noted "neo-thomist" philosopher J. Maritain calls St. John of the Cross "praticien de la contemplation." See his article: "Saint Jean de la Croix, praticien de la contemplation", in: *Etudes Carmélitaines* 16 (1931), 61-109. This notion of praxis has implications in the proper hermeneutical reading of the sanjuanist texts. Writes B. Jiménez Duque: "La lectura de San JUAN DE LA CRUZ exige una introducción. Se trata de un autor lejano a nosotros. La cultura de su tiempo no es la de la nueva modernidad que estamos estrenando. La temática de sus escritos es muy concreta, y no es fácil de captar e interesar más que a un grupo y muy limitado de lectores; espirituales o intelectuales... poco más. Su estilo no es tampoco muy sencillo: se ha dicho, exageradamente sin duda, que es un autor enigmático, hasta contradictorio. Salgamos enseguida al paso de esta última acusación, diciendo que JUAN DE LA CRUZ hace teoría más que fórmulas prácticas de vida

context of being a contemplative⁶ sets John of the Cross apart from other renowned Christian contemplatives, aside from his own historicity and the influences he received and assimilated.⁷ His being a Contemplative Carmelite Christian is the most important and most distinguishing aspect of his personality⁸ and of his doctrine. In fact,

espiritual. Y esto a pesar de que para J. MARITAIN, JUAN DE LA CRUZ es un *práctico de la contemplación*, que sus enseñanzas son ciencia práctica, no *especulativa*. Pienso que es al revés. Lo que ocurre es que pasar de la teoría a la praxis es problema difícil, que necesita delicadas matizaciones (que no todos saben hacerlas). Por eso no se da contradicción entre su teoría y las aplicaciones prácticas de la misma, que JUAN, parcamente nos ofrece o insinúa.”, “Pautas para la lectura de San Juan de la Cruz”, in: *Teología Espiritual* 35 (1991), 219. This study occupies pages 219 to 229.

⁶ It is worth noting, from a historical viewpoint, that the first apology on the works of John of the Cross, vis-à-vis the possible accusations of the Spanish inquisition, centers its focus on his teachings on contemplation especially in the light of the established Christian tradition by St. Dionysius, who was venerated, before the Age of Enlightenment, as such and as the disciple and convert of St. Paul in the Areopagus of Athens. Cf. José de Jesús María (Quiroga), “Apología Mística” in F. Antolín (ed.), *Primeras biografías y apologías de San Juan de la Cruz*. Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 1991, 123-319.

⁷ “Juan de la Cruz es místico de encuentro, de confluencias y de integración. Original más en el enfoque, en el equilibrio y en la síntesis, que en novedades parciales. A la vez completo, sencillo y simplificador. Punto de convergencia, confluyen en él corrientes que vienen de lejos y de geografías dispares. Visibles y perceptibles, unas; ocultas y soterradas otras; pocas, cercanas e inmediatas; abundantes, las generales y remotas... La formulación en clave de raíces es la única pertinente y correcta. Evita el espejismo derivado de los apuntes sobre cosabidas fuentes, dependencias, reminiscencias y semejanzas. Todo ello, acopio inorgánico de datos marginales sin referencia precisa a su colocación en el conjunto... Su misticismo se corresponde con el occidente europeo de finales del siglo XVI. Por ello, impregnado de neoplatonismo, pero moldeado conceptualmente por el aristotelismo escolástico renacido. La raíz cultural helenística o greco-romana le confiere coloración occidental mientras el núcleo bíblico y la veta patrística le hacen radicalmente cristiano.”, E. Pacho, “Juan de la Cruz, místico y confluencias y de síntesis”, in: *Vida Religiosa* 68 (1990), 456-457. Cf. also: L. Cilleruelo, “San Juan de la Cruz, místico de frontera”, in: *Estudio Agustiniiano* 13 (1978), 427-463; E. Pacho, “San Giovanni della Croce, místico e teólogo”, in: Several Authors, *Vita cristiana ed esperienza mistica*. Rome: Teresianum, 1982, 297-330; F. Ruiz Salvador, “San Giovanni della Croce”, in: Several Authors, *La mistica. Fenomenologie e riflessione teologica*. Vol. II. Rome: Città Nuova, 1984, 165-214; R. Koerner, *Mystik-Quell der Vernunft. Die Ratio auf dem Weg der Vereinigung mit Gott bei Johannes vom Kreuz*. Leipzig: St. Benno Verlag, 1990.

⁸ For a synthesis of St. John of the Cross’ notion of contemplation, see the article of M. Herráiz, “Contemplación”, in: E. Pacho (ed.), *Diccionario de San Juan*

if pressed to summarize the essence of St. John of the Cross, mystic and doctor, in a few words I would not hesitate to capture all his richness with these terse words: "Contemplative Carmelite Christian".

Before proceeding further, I wish to highlight the following biographical data: In the summer of 1567, while the Fr. General was in his apostolic visit to Spain and after having issued St. Teresa the license to commence her reform in the masculine branch of the Carmelite Order⁹, in Medina del Campo, Valladolid after singing his first mass as a Carmelite priest of the Ancient Observance, John revealed that he had a vocational crisis. John had been previously ordained most probably at the Old Cathedral (Catedral Vieja) of Salamanca. At that point in his life, he wanted to be a Carthusian. Fortunately, Teresa of Avila was in Medina del Campo

de la Cruz, Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2000, 324-340. M. Herráiz erroneously tends to identify contemplation with prayer in the case of John of the Cross. Also by the same author: *Espiritualidad y contemplación*. Madrid: Ediciones SM, 1994. F. Ruiz's important articles on the charism of Carmel as lived by John of the Cross shed light on the sanjuanist concept of contemplation. See: "Vida y experiencia carmelitana en los escritos de San Juan de la Cruz", in: O. Steggink (ed.), *Juan de la Cruz. Espíritu de llama*, Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1991, 673-686; Idem., "El carisma del carmelo vivido e interpretado por San Juan de la Cruz", in: S. Ros (ed.), *La recepción de los místicos. Teresa de Jesús y Juan de la Cruz*, Salamanca-Avila: Centro Internacional Teresiano-Sanjuanista, 1997, 573-604. Ruiz writes in his article: "Contemplación', para él [Juan de la Cruz], no es solamente una forma de oración. Es sobre todo una forma de vivir la existencia entera, con sus tareas y mediaciones, en referencia directa y absoluta a Dios.", "Vida y experiencia carmelitana", 683. See also the discussion of the prestigious specialist F. Ruiz on "Oración Contemplativa" shifting towards "Contemplación de Vida" in his book *Místico y Maestro. San Juan de la Cruz*, Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1986, 207-221.

⁹ The first meeting between the General and St. Teresa took place most probably on February, 1567. For a more detailed study, see: O. Steggink, *La reforma del carmelo español. La visita canónica del general Rubeo y su encuentro con Santa Teresa (1566-1567)* 2nd ed., Avila: Institución Gran Duque de Alba, 1993, 237 ss. See the testimony of St. Teresa herself in the second chapter of her "Las Fundaciones". Likewise on the contemplative vocation of John of the Cross within the Carmelite Order, see: O. Steggink, "El proceso de arraigo de Fray Juan de la Cruz en la Orden del Carmen", in: Several Authors, *Actualidad de un carisma. Congreso carmelita. IVº centenario de la muerte de San Juan de la Cruz*. Madrid: Ediciones Carmelitanas, 1993, 59-75; Idem., "Fray Juan de la Cruz, carmelita contemplativo: Vida y magisterio", in: Several Authors, *Actas del Congreso Internacional Sanjuanista*. Vol. II. Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 1993, 251-269.

at that time. This great woman dissuaded John from entering the Carthusian Order. With her convincing ways, she won for the Carmelite Reform, that she was undertaking, Juan de Santo Matía. This Fray Juan de Santo Matía was apparently dissatisfied with the contemplative lifestyle in the Carmelite Order. He definitely wanted not just a more rigorous contemplative life – which the Carthusian order apparently promised – , but a thoroughly contemplative life. This same Fray Juan de Santo Matía embraced the Tere-sian Carmelite reform and assumed the name that summarized the nature of his contemplative carmelite and mystical vocation: Fray Juan de la Cruz. The cross of Christ was to be his personal standard.

Commonly, we associate contemplatives with people who enclose themselves in monasteries and apart themselves from the affairs of the world. Walls, enclosures and a prayerful lifestyle of two hours a day dedicated to silent or mental prayer do not a contemplative make. These do not constitute the essence of contemplation. Contemplation comes from the Greek verb “θεορεῖν” (from which the word theory is derived from). Θεορεῖν means “to look,” “to observe,” “to consider.”¹⁰ Later on, this Greek word was translated into Latin as “contemplare.” To contemplate does not mean to stare and do nothing. It means to experience directly, to consider directly, to know directly. We can infer from a text of St. Thomas Aquinas that the object of contemplation is truth itself.¹¹ Thus, vision is not just an act of a particular sense. It is a spiritual

¹⁰ In Greek, there are words such as θεωροζ (observer or delegate to the oracles), θεωρία or the act of looking. The plural of θεωροζ is θεωροποι or observers who formed a procession. Plato spoke of a theoretical life or βιοζ θεωρητικος. Cf. *Symposium* 210b-212a; *The Republic* 540 a-c; *Theaetetus* 1173c-175d. Aristotle, on the other hand, spoke of θεωρία as the activity of the first cause, because theory in its highest instance is contemplation of contemplation or thought of thought. Likewise, the Peripatetic, especially in his *Metaphysics*, spoke of θεωρητη επιστημη or the science of contemplation, theoretical science.

¹¹ “Unde sub cogitatione comprehendi possunt et perceptiones sensuum, ad cognoscendum aliquos effectus; et imaginationes; et discursus rationis circa diversa signa, vel quaecumque, perducentia in cognitionem veritatis intentae.... Sed *contemplatio* pertinet ad ipsum simplicem intuitum veritatis”, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q.180 a.3, ad I. Also: *Sententiae* III d. 35, q. 1, a. 2, a. q^a 2; Idem., IV d. 15, q. 4, a. 12, a. q^a 2 ad 1; a. 2 q^a 1 ad. 2.

act thus bringing about a total vision¹² involving the whole or totality of man with regards to reality (*weltanschauung*) open to infinity (which given its supernatural character goes beyond the rational limits of the *weltanschauung*)¹³ that defines our stands and attitudes with regards to life.

Neither is contemplation just a mode of prayer or to be identified with prayer in the strict sense of the word given Carmel's rich heritage of contemplative prayer.¹⁴ This is especially true of St. John of the Cross. Unlike, St. Teresa of Avila who tended to speak of contemplation almost exclusively in terms of prayer,¹⁵

¹² F. Heiler, "Contemplation in Christian Mysticism", in Several Authors, *Spiritual Disciplines. Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks. Vol. IV.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 187.

¹³ From a strictly theological point of view, mysticism is a supernatural act involving a free gift from God and can only be accepted through faith. However, from a philosophical viewpoint, mysticism, and the vision it affords through contemplation, is taken to be a superior or sublime form of human intelligence or rationality. I acknowledge here the influence of J.L. Vielliard-Baron's assessment of J. Baruzi's study of mysticism, in particular sanjuanist mysticism, J. Baruzi, *L'intelligence mystique*. J.L. Vielliard-Baron (ed.) Paris: Berg International Éditeurs, 1985, 30.

¹⁴ Cf. Several Authors, *La oración en el carmel. Pasado, presente y futuro. Actas del Congreso O.C.D.*, México: Ediciones Cevhac, 2002. In this collective volume, several specialists on prayer and spirituality from the Discalced Carmelite Order discuss the Carmelite heritage of prayer from diverse disciplines and perspectives (historical, theological, sociological, psychological and spiritual).

¹⁵ The renowned specialist T. Alvarez summarizes Teresa's teaching on contemplation with the following words: "T.[Teresa] entiende por 'contemplación' una forma de oración superior a la meditación y estructuralmente diversa de ésta. La meditación es discursiva. La contemplación no, es más bien intuitiva. Aquella es racional, fundamentalmente obra del entendimiento orientado hacia la voluntad y la acción. La contemplación afecta directamente a la voluntad y envuelve a toda la persona del orante, a toda su actividad anímica, en un sencillo flujo de actividad y pasividad. Realiza una especial relación del hombre con Dios, prepara a la unión mística y perdura en los altos grados de la misma. T. distinguirá los actos o momentos pasajeros de contemplación, y el 'estado de contemplación', que coincidirá en los escritos teresianos con los altos grados de experiencia mística, cuando el sujeto se ha sensibilizado y connaturalizado con la presencia y la acción de Dios en él.", "Contemplación" in: T. Alvarez (ed.), *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2000, 410-411. See also the important reprint of the studies of T. Alvarez and J. Castellano on Teresian prayer and contemplation, *Teresa de Jesús, enséñanos a orar*. 3rd ed. Burgos:

John used the word “contemplation” in a wider sense. Contemplation is a lifestyle, a way of living. For St. John of the Cross, it was a mode of living directly in contact with the object of contemplation. The object of his living or knowing or experiencing directly was God Himself, of God’s personal presence within the realm of loving union.¹⁶ This mode of living directly in contact with God includes prayer, but is not consumed in or reduced to prayer.

The Union and Communion Between God and Man: The Aim of Sanjuanist Contemplation.

John of the Cross was probably the greatest lyric poet in the Spanish language. He is also one of the most well known Doctors of the Church, together with two other Carmelites (Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Liseux). People read John of the Cross not only to be enthralled by the beauty of his language, but to learn something applicable in life from what he shares to us about God, mysticism, the dark night of life, negation, Jesus Christ, union with God, etc. John of the Cross indeed has a lot to share with us on these concerns.

John’s greatest obsession, so to speak, or object was the loving union and communion of God and man. For St. John of the Cross, this God is the greatest Mystery of all. God is a loving Mystery who possesses a trinitarian reality who was revealed to us by the great Mediator Jesus Christ. In order to attain this union, Fray John proposed the three theologal or theological virtues (faith, hope

Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1982. Like see the classical syntheses of G. de Saint Marie Magdalene, “L’école d’oraison carmelitaine”, in: *Etudes Carmelitaine* 17 (1932/II), 1-38; Idem., “École mystique thésien [Carmes Déchaussés]”, in: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*. Vol. 2/I. Paris: Beauchesne, 1953, cols., 171-209.

¹⁶ “La vita contemplativa, nel senso vero e proprio, è esperienza diretta della presenza personale di Dio in una unione amorosa. Questo è il fondo di chi fa l’esperienza mistica. E’l’aspetto primario descritto, poi, con tanti effetti secondari. In ciò non c’è nulla di esoterico. Ciò di cui parlano sempre i mistici non comporta nessuna diversità da ciò che tutti i cristiani hanno ricevuto col battesimo: partecipano alla vita divina e sono dimora della Trinità.”, E. de Cea & A. Cacciotti, “Osservazioni conclusive e Prospettive Aperte”, in: Several Authors, *Esperienza Mistica e Pensiero Filosofico. Atti del Colloquio ‘Filosofia e Mistica’*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003, 157.

and charity) as modes of living. The dark night¹⁷ is an experience of transition from the natural limits of knowing and experiencing which characterize this sinful and natural life to a supernatural life. The dark night has to be viewed as a transit point with its inherent difficulties and willed acts of negation and mortification wherein man changes his way into relating with God into a direct one, which is characteristic of how true contemplatives relate with God.¹⁸ The dark night is the lifestyle of the contemplative because contemplation is the loving infusion of God in man.¹⁹ It is a science of love wherein God teaches man initiating him in the supernatural life.²⁰ In the process of the dark night, man, who finally accedes to the contemplative lifestyle of living according to the infusion or influence of God, man rediscovers his profound essence. Man is called to be a spirit or a being open to God and to be above all God's spouse, worthy of the mystical and loving secret of God's self-giving which at the same times illumines and purifies man towards the experience of the union.²¹ John uses the scriptural metaphor of matrimony to illustrate in a powerful way the loving relationship that should exist between God and man and that the destiny of man consists in loving communion with God. Man was created to love, praise and experience God in a loving way together with his brethren, within the loving fold of God's family (the Church).

¹⁷ Cf. A. Amunarriz, *Dios en la Noche. Lectura de la noche oscura de san Juan de la Cruz*. Rome: Ed. Collegio s. Lorenzo da Brindisi, 1991; E. del S. Corazón, *La noche pasiva del espíritu de San Juan de la Cruz*. Vitoria, 1959; E. Inciarte, "La noche oscura de la contemplación mística", in: *Teología Espiritual* 4 (1960), 413-441; J. Peters, "Dark Nights as a Way to Authentic Life", in: *Carmelus* 22 (1975), 331-351; E. Pachó, *San Juan de la Cruz. Temas fundamentales*. Vol. II. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1984, 37-156; F. Ruiz, "Revisión de las purificaciones sanjuanistas", in: *Revista de Espiritualidad* 31 (1972), 218-230; Idem., "Horizontes de la Noche Oscura", in: *Monte Carmelo* 88 (1980), 389-409; G. Castro, "Noche oscura del alma", in: Several Authors, *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz*, 1033-1062.

¹⁸ II Night 5-6.

¹⁹ I Night 10,6.

²⁰ II Night 18, 5.

²¹ II Night 5,1.

The Contemplative Mystic vis-à-vis God and the World

For John of the Cross, there was definitely no question, no doubt at all. God was the absolute and central referent of his life as incarnated in his Carmelite vocation. He spoke of theological realities such as man's process of transformation towards the union with God by following Christ Crucified radically, accepting and assimilating the process of purification within the tension of this mortal life with the life to come. He made use of philosophical elements, literary instruments and allusions, concrete examples to illustrate said realities. He taught all these in his works. But his teaching has a great difference, a great contemplative difference and touch. As a contemplative, John aspired to reach the root of all things: God. God should be the true object and love of our lives.²²

However, there is another object that presents itself to us: the cosmos, the world. The world is not just a geographical referent nor is the cosmos just an astronomical or astrological fancy. It is above all an ontological totality: the totality of our conditions as human beings, the totality of our existence and above, all the totality of our values.

My insistence on John's contemplative vocation precisely touches the notion of values or the cosmos or world as the totality of human values. The notion of values in turn necessarily implies evaluation or how we put value on certain objects, whether material or spiritual. As a contemplative Christian, John of the Cross firmly: a) taught detachment from said objects; b) advocated *ascesis* or the exercise of Christian living (particularly in evaluating objects); c) and lived in openness to the grace that comes through Christ.²³ In this article, I will limit myself to only one side of John

²² When I speak of object here I do not mean "object" in the sense of a thing, but as that which complements the subject or subjectivity of man as a knowing and willing being. Thus, I am using the term in a gnoseological, ethical and eventually ontological sense. From these senses, we derive the so-called axiological sense.

²³ I have adapted here to suit my exposition the notions of Christian contemplative life formulated by the Trappist monk T. Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, London: Burns & Oates, 1994 (reprint), 10-11.

of the Cross's notion of contemplation with regards to beauty, i.e., *how the contemplative learns to admire and adore the true source of Beauty*.

We are not interested in this article on John of the Cross's notion of contemplation *per se*, but on the viewpoint, which implies admiration, choice and adoration, his being a contemplative affords him. In other words, we are interested in his somewhat ambivalent evaluation of beauty as nothing, beauty as everything – starting with the beauty of all creation – is the result of his contemplative Carmelite and mystical vocation.²⁴ As a contemplative, John of the Cross has his set of values hinged firmly on God. Thus, everything else is viewed, evaluated or valued from the standard who is God Himself. For John of the Cross, God is the genuine “Todo” or everything. God alone must be admired, chosen and adored. Everything else, which are existential options that could be placed side-by-side the option for God, is “Nothing” or *nada* compared to God.²⁵ Thus these other options, truly, in no way can be placed side-by-side by God as if they were equals. They are “nothing” compared to God. Our mystic writes:

²⁴ As far as I know only the suggestive essay of Fr. Lucien-Marie has explicitly correlated, in the light of the sanjuanist texts, the notion of contemplation with the question of beauty. See: “La beauté de Dieu”, in: Idem., *L'expérience de Dieu. Actualité du message de Saint Jean de la Croix*, Paris: Cerf, 1968, 129-142.

²⁵ See my study: “Recuperación del sentido auténtico de ‘nada’ como valoración en San Juan de la Cruz mediante el concepto de ‘Mundo’ hacia la relación ‘Dios’ y ‘Hombre’”, in *Studium* 38 (1998), 445-462; Also: I. Aisa, “La nada en San Juan de la Cruz”, in: *Pensamiento* 45 (1989), 257-277; O. Clark, “The Optics of Nothingness”, in: *Philosophy Today* 16 (1972), 243-253; F. Ruiz, “Ruptura y comunión” in: *Teresianum* 41 (1990), 323-347; D. Chowning, “Free to Love: Negation in the Doctrine of John of the Cross”, in: *Carmelite Studies* 6 (1992), 29-47; J.D. Gaitán, *Negación y Plenitud en San Juan de la Cruz*, Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1995; A. López, “Vacío y plenitud en San Juan de la Cruz”, in: *Revista de Espiritualidad* 56 (1997), 605-620; A. Haas, “La nada de Dios y sus imágenes explosivas”, in: *ER* 24-25 (1998), 13-34; K. Perumpallinkunnel, *Nada: The ‘Kenotic Path’ to God According to John of the Cross*. Doctoral dissertation in Theology with specialization in Spirituality, Rome: Teresianum, 1999; J. L. Meis, *The Experience of Nothingness in the Mystical Theology of John of the Cross*, Michigan: Ann Arbor Press, 1980; C. Pérez Milla, “Todo-Nada”, in: Several Authors, *Simboli e Mistero in San Giovanni della Croce*, Rome: Teresianum, 1991, 51-71; M. Martín del Blanco, “Todo/Nada”, in E. Pacho (ed.), *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz*, 1453-1464.

Thus all the being of creatures compared with the infinite being of God is nothing, and that, therefore, a man attached to creatures is nothing in the sight of God, and even less than nothing, because love causes equality and likeness and even brings the lover lower than object of his love. In no way, then, is such a man capable of union with the infinite being of God. There is no likeness between what is not and what is...

All the beauty of creatures compared with the infinite beauty of God is supreme ugliness... So a person attached to the beauty of any creature is extremely ugly in God's sight. A soul so unsightly is incapable of transformation into the beauty which is God, because ugliness does not attain to beauty.

And all the grace and elegance of creatures compared with God's grace is utter coarseness and crudity. That is why a person captivated by this grace and elegance of creatures becomes quite coarse and crude in God's sight. And accordingly, he is incapable of the infinite grace and beauty of God because of the extreme difference between the coarse and the infinitely elegant.

And all the goodness of creatures in the world compared with the infinite goodness of God can be called evil, since nothing is good, save God only. [Lk. 18:19]²⁶

Indeed, John of the Cross is radical in his insistence that only God is everything, wherein all of creation, its goodness and beauty is ugly or nothing. Doubtless, John of the Cross, contemplative and mystic, presents us with a powerful comprehension and evaluation of all of reality compared to God. This has brought about a basic misunderstanding of the doctrine of the great Carmelite mystic in its most radical formulation as already cited. People tend to remember him for his rather negative or pessimistic vision of the world, of all creation, including man. In his famous drawing of Mt. Carmel, we can see that on the path that leads to the top of the mountain John of the Cross wrote: "*Nada, nada, nada, nada... y en el monte nada.*"

²⁶ I *Ascent* 4,4. See also: I *Ascent* 4, 5-7; II *Ascent* 8, 1-3. For the Spanish original of John of the Cross's works, I make use of this edition: J.V. Rodríguez & F. Ruiz Salvador (eds.), *San Juan de la Cruz. Obras Completas*, 5th ed. Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1993. I have generally made use of the translation of K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodríguez (trans.), *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979. However, there are times that I modify the translation.

Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing... and on the mountain, nothing..." On the top of the mountain, the honor and glory of God alone dwells.²⁷ Nothing else should be on top of this mountain, which is the summit of man's values. It seems that self-denial and self-negation, made concrete in the *nada* or "nothingness" (*nada*) of everything vis-à-vis the reality of God, who must be "everything" (*Todo*) for man.²⁸ Because of this, many have called St. John of the Cross, in a sweeping manner, as the Doctor of the "Nada", or the Doctor of "Nothingness" for the stark and dark vision of this great mystic on reality. John of the Cross, indeed, provides a powerful message on this regard. From his viewpoint, everything, that is all of creation, is nothing compared to God and man should have nothing, no attachments to this cosmic whole if he is to attain union or communion with God, who is the genuine "Todo" or Everything. This union or communion is his aim as a contemplative and Carmelite mystic. More than being the Doctor of the "Nada", John of the Cross is the Doctor of the "Todo". John of the Cross was after the "Todo". The "Nada" is subservient to the greater goal of the "Todo".²⁹

²⁷ I am basing my transcription on the Notarial Copy of the Autograph of John of the Cross dedicated to Magdalena del Espíritu Santo, BN-Madrid, ms. 6296, fol.7r.

²⁸ John of the Cross has mistakenly been called the Doctor of the "Nada" or nothingness. In fact, before 1990 this perception was common. In the old concordances of L. de San José, *Concordancias de las obras y escritos del doctor místico San Juan de la Cruz*. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1948, the word "todo" is absent, whereas the word "nada" is present. The 1990 Concordances, using computer technology, reveal that St. John of the Cross used the word "todo" 2, 774 times, whereas "nada" only appears in his works 373 times. J.L. Astigarraga et al., *Concordancias de los escritos de San Juan de la Cruz*. Rome: Teresianum, 1990. However, a detailed study is needed in order to fully comprehend the range of the sanjuanist use of the word "todo", especially when applied to God. All naïve simplifications should be avoided at all costs.

²⁹ The following reflections may be of help in clarifying this question: "La Nada es al mismo tiempo Todo. La misma estructura del diseño del Monte de la perfección nos lleva a esta interpretación. Al término del camino de las nadas se dice: 'Y en el monte nada'. Al tiempo que se precisa: 'Desde que me he puesto en nada, hallo que nada me falta'. La Nada como tal se convierte en la plenitud. En la cima, donde solo mora 'la honra y gloria de Dios', se lee: 'Ya por aquí no hay camino, que para el justo no hay ley'. Es la liberación radical del individuo, vivida en la plenitud del Todo y de la Nada.", C. García, *San Juan de la Cruz y el misterio del hombre*, Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1990, 168.

In other words, man must renounce or give up everything, that is all of creation, if he is to be united with God,³⁰ who aside from being the true Everything (theological level), is above all things or above everything (cosmological level).³¹ It is a question of choosing the real "Todo" who is God and not the creatures. The "nada" of St. John of the Cross is, in effect, an option for the "Todo" of God. It is freedom from the bonds of attachment to the "todo" of the creatures who are "nada" compared to God in spite of all their beauty.

Nothing and Everything in the Beauty of all Creation

However, this ontological vision though somehow correct, taken in itself, would result into a narrow and misleading interpretation. John of the Cross with the use of the term "nada" or nothing did not deny totally the value or more so the existence of the world even in the eyes of God or in the viewpoint of one who experiences God.

Beauty is an important element in the thought of St. John of the Cross. In most cases, John of the Cross identifies beauty (*belleza-hermosura*) with the natural goods (*bienes naturales*) or the good of creation in as much as it was created by God.³²

The beauty of all creation is nothing, i.e., nothing compared to God. The word "nothing" is an axiological term, i.e., it is a term

³⁰ See: I Ascent 5 and 6; II Ascent 6, 6; 7,5; 14, 11; III Ascent 2, 4; 7,2; 15,1; 17,2; 32, 1; Canticle B 3, 5; 14, 24...

³¹ The Pauline text of Philippians 4,7 is repeated constantly by John of the Cross upon referring to the experience of God that goes beyond man's senses or limited means of knowing and experiencing. Cf. for example: II Night 9,6; Canticle B 20, 15 and 15 and 36, 11. Likewise the variant "above all intelligence". Cf. II Ascent 4, 2-4; 4, 5; 5,5; 9, 1-2; 11, 7; 17, 5; III Ascent 2,3; I Night 11, 4; II Night 17,5; Canticle B 1, 9, Flame B 3, 75; 4, 17. I acknowledge that this has been especially pointed out by J.D. Gaitán, *Negación y Plenitud*, 78ss.

³² E. Pacho, "Belleza, deleite y ascesis en Juan de la Cruz", in Idem., *Estudios Sanjuanistas*. Vol. II. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1997, 390. The principal sanjuanist text on this regard is III Ascent 21, 1ss. However, we must not limit ourselves to the perceptions or apprehensions of the will (as the *bien natural* is). We must also take into account the aesthetic elements, especially in the apprehensions of the intellect.

that determines value and for our contemplative mystic this value always has God for its referent and criterion. All creatures are nothing³³ and man must go on to aspire to union without having anything or having nothing to do,³⁴ in terms of attachment and values, to the beauty of what is created.

And yet creation, in all its beauty, is everything, i.e., everything that has been created in as much as it has been created. This level of ontological everythingness is a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the cosmos as the totality of that which exists and which is perceived in their order and harmony, following the cosmic and natural laws. This order and harmony, in effect, are the keys in understanding man's appreciation of the cosmos. Order and harmony point out to the status of being created and at the same time indicates the attractive element to man. Thus, order and harmony, constitute the attractiveness, the beauty of the cosmos. We can even say, using the terms of the scholastic philosophers, that beauty (*pulchrum*) is the primary transcendental property of being, of all that exists for John of the Cross for it points out that everything is created, and in conformity to the mind of the Creator, is orderly and harmonious, that is, beautiful. Beauty (*pulchrum*) is not just simply decorum or something aesthetically pleasing to the senses, but it is something objective, i.e., it is found in creation itself and as such points out to the creative act in itself in as much as this act brings about being.³⁵

Beauty is order and harmony. It necessarily denotes conformity with the plan of the Creator. Superficially, we equate beauty

³³ I Ascent 4.

³⁴ I Ascent 13.

³⁵ I find this reflection helpful on this regard: "Por último, conviene decir una palabra sobre la autenticidad del Arte. Ya la Antigüedad clásica intuía esta problemática: los griegos distinguían entre el *To Kalon* y el *To Prepon*, y los latinos entre el *Pulchrum* y el *Decorum*. Lo bello es siempre algo objetivo, está ahí independiente de nosotros; el decoro es algo subjetivo, una disposición de ánimo; a fin de cuentas, decorar es como sacar a la superficie lo que está en la entraña de las cosas. El decoro es muy importante y es obvio que lo bello, además de bello, debe ser decoroso.", A. Villaplana, "Arte y Fe. Discurso de Clausura", in: A. González Montes (ed.), *Arte y Fe. Actas del Congreso de 'Las Edades del Hombre'*. Salamanca, del 25 al 29 de abril de 1994. Salamanca: Departamento de Ediciones y Publicaciones Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 1995, 386.

with what attracts us or what presents itself as a good or that which projects itself as a pleasure-producing object or thing. John of the Cross does not deny that the whole of creation, the whole of the cosmos can project this and in fact, man enjoys this. However, as a contemplative mystic and Carmelite, John insists that beauty must be seen from the viewpoint of the Creator who created them. Thus, all the pleasures and joys produced and evoked by the whole of creation comes from God. "As a result the soul [or man] tastes here all the things of God, since God communicates to it fortitude, wisdom, love, beauty, grace, and goodness, etc. Because God is all these things, a person enjoys them in only one touch of God, and the soul rejoices within its faculties and within its substance."³⁶ To create means to give being out of nothing or to make out of nothing.³⁷ In fact, John, the Carmelite contemplative and mystic, places man within the context of this cosmic beauty by affirming that man was created according to most beautiful and accomplished image of God.³⁸

Man, with all his beauty, is a creature of God. However, man is privileged to choose the object of his union. Man has to choose between God, the Creator or Beauty in Himself (Uncreated Beauty) or the beauty of the creatures or of the cosmos or whole of creation (Created Beauty). The term "nada" or nothing, applied to the whole of creation, is a pedagogical term, full of axiological meanings, used by St. John of the Cross to incite man to choose God, who is the real "Todo" or everything, over the creatures or the beauty of creation that pretend to be everything for man. "Nada" within the contemplative adventure of the dark night is made concrete by negation, by renunciation with the aim of attaining the true "everything", who is God Himself. Truly, as somebody wrote, "there is no mysticism without renunciation: no mysticism without the cross."³⁹

In this light, John of the Cross gives us the following powerful testimony:

³⁶ Flame B 2, 21.

³⁷ I Ascent 6, 4 and Canticle B 6, 3.

³⁸ I Ascent 9, 1.

³⁹ W. Johnston, *Letters to Contemplatives*. London: Harper Collins, 1991, 3.

*Por toda la hermosura
Nunca yo me perderé...
Not for all the beauty
Will I ever lose myself,
But for I-don't-know-what
Which is attained so gladly.⁴⁰*

Renunciation to Plenitude: The Price of Contemplative Mysticism

Man, so to speak, must somehow wager. Man must make a choice. He must opt for God, who is a dark night for man in this life, because God is beyond the immediate and superficial allurements of the beauty of creation. God, the cause of all Beauty, cannot be known naturally or according to the natural light of human reason. In order to fully appreciate the source of all beauty, who is God, who is the "I-don't-know-what" (in Spanish: *no sé qué*) in the verse just cited. We don't know Him, because His beauty and brilliance is beyond our natural cognitive capacities. Thus, God is a dark night. The experience of God is a dark night, which demands:

*Olvido de lo criado,
Memoria del Criador...
Forgetfulness of creation,
Remembrance of the Creator,
Attention to what is within
And to be loving the Beloved.⁴¹*

This remembrance of the Creator is the price of mysticism. It is as John of the Cross says the "suma de perfección" or the sum of perfection. This forgetfulness of creation means that the beauty of the cosmos is nothing in the remembrance of the Creator who is the genuine "Todo" (everything or all).

This is the price of contemplative mysticism. Man must renounce the beauty of all creation. God is a jealous God. He wants

⁴⁰ Commentary Applied to Spiritual Things, Refrain.

⁴¹ The Sum of Perfection.

to be number one, *número uno*, the only one, the only God, the only One to be adored.

By opting for God, the contemplative mystic receives via an experiential infusion, which John of the Cross calls dark night (because it exceeds the natural limits of man's knowing and experiencing) or mystical theology (because it implies communion with the very Mystery or God as Mystery)⁴², a new way of experiencing and knowing reality. We can call it a contemplative viewpoint by which "the soul [man] knows creatures through God and not God through creatures. This amounts to knowing the effects through their cause and not the cause through its effects. The latter is knowledge *a posteriori* (*conocimiento trasero*) and the former is essential (*esencial*) knowledge."⁴³

This essential knowledge is the viewpoint of the contemplative by which man reality and its caused or created from the fullness of the experience of God in all His uncaused beauty. The

⁴² II Night 5, 1. See my study: "Dios desde la noche, la hermosura y el sentir: El paradigma teológico de San Juan de la Cruz", in: *San Juan de la Cruz* 17 (2001), 169-187. Also: J.M. Le Blond, "La 'sagesse mystique' selon saint Jean de la Croix", in: *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses* 50 (1962), 481-529; Idem., "Mystique, Métaphysique et Foi Chrétienne", in: *Ibid.*, 51 (1963), 30-82; Idem., "Mystique et Théologie chez saint Jean de la Croix", in: *Ibid.*, 51 (1963), 196-239; G. Morel, *Le sens de l'existence selon saint Jean de la Croix*. 3 Vols. Paris: Auber, 1960-1961; F. Ruiz Salvador, *Introducción a San Juan de la Cruz. El hombre, los escritos, el sistema*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1968, 282-292; C. García, "San Juan de la Cruz entre la 'escolástica' y la nueva teología", in: Several Authors: *Dottore mistico; San Giovanni della Croce*. Roma: Teresianum, 1992, 91-129; Idem., "Teología mística" in E. Pachó (ed.), *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz*, 1377-1395; Idem., *Adónde te escondiste. La búsqueda de San Juan de la Cruz*. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1999; J.D. Gaitán, "Conocimiento de Dios y sabiduría de la fe en San Juan de la Cruz", in: F. Ruiz (dir.), *Experiencia y pensamiento en San Juan de la Cruz*. Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1990, 251-269; S. Castro, "Nueva palabra teológica de San Juan de la Cruz", in: S. Ros (ed.), *La recepción de los místicos*, 459-476; D. Barsotti, *La teologia spirituale di San Giovanni della Croce*. Milan, 1990; I. de Andía, "San Juan de la Cruz y la 'Teología mística'. De San Dionisio", in: Several Authors: *Actas del Congreso internacional sanjuanista. Vol. III: Pensamiento*. Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 1993; S. Guerra, "San Juan de la Cruz y la teología mística del siglo XX", in: *Ibid.*, 177-193; B. Jiménez Duque, "Experiencia y Teología", in: *Ibid.*, 155-176.

⁴³ Flame B 4, 5. Also: Canticle B 14-15, 5.

creatures, in spite of all their beauty, cannot be God.⁴⁴ They can never be identified with God. Hence, they are nothing, in spite of their everythingness, compared with God, who is the real "Everything." God, in this light is the true beauty. He is uncreated beauty, the source of all created beauty. Beauty is in fact the very essence of God.⁴⁵

Despite being "nothing", the creatures are "something" in being "everything" in the ontological and axiological sense. Where then is the true value of the cosmos? Definitely it is not valuable in itself. The cosmos is important in as much, in all its beauty, it is the "locus" or place or context of the relationship between God and man.⁴⁶ This relationship is only possible within the context of the creatures in their ontological totality and beauty, wherein the Creator condescendingly reaches out to His preferred creature and wherein man reaches out to his Creator in terms of beauty and evaluating this same beauty from the viewpoint of "everything" and "nothing".

Earlier, we mentioned that for John of the Cross, God is above everything. Here lies the key to understanding the true value of the cosmos. Since God transcends the value of everything, man must adopt what we may label as the transcendental point of view, the transcendental mode of experiencing which John of the Cross himself called "essential knowledge."

In adopting such a transcendental viewpoint, man himself, in effect, transcends. He undertakes a transcendental experience going beyond the aesthetic attraction of created beauty (which is the false "todo" and is actually "nada") and enters into the art of parti-

⁴⁴ J.D. Gaitán, "'Mil gracias derramando'. La hermosura de Dios en la naturaleza", in: *Vida Religiosa* 68 (1990), 453.

⁴⁵ Writes the noted specialist F. Ruiz Salvador: "La hermosura es el mismísimo ser de Dios, Dios Trinidad. Y es hermosura por el hecho mismo de ser Dios y de haber intervenido como tal en la creación y en la historia laboriosa de la humanidad.", *Introducción a San Juan de la Cruz. El hombre, los escritos, el sistema*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1968, 346.

⁴⁶ This interesting essay is recommended for further reflection especially with regards to the role of the world or the creatures in the spiritual path as taught by St. John of the Cross: F. Bocos, "Las criaturas en el proceso espiritual de San Juan de la Cruz", in: Several Authors, *Juan de la Cruz, espíritu de llama*, 581-596.

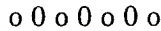
cipation in the Creator's beauty, the real "Todo". This transcendental experience has metaphysical consequences given that there is a great distance between God and the creatures, and even between God and man, who is a creature.⁴⁷ This transcendental experience is the means offered by John of the Cross, in terms of beauty, using the extremes of "Everything" and "Nothing" to bridge the gap between God and man amidst the world of creatures. John of the Cross, in view of this, called man, "Dios por participación" or God by participation.⁴⁸

As God by participation, man is called to a sublime and loving union with God which John of the Cross captured with the incomparable metaphor, inspired mainly in the predominant metaphor of the Bible's *Song of Songs*, of "spiritual espousal and marriage": "This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul [or man] thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life. And thus I think that this state never occurs without the soul's being confirmed in grace, for the faith of both is confirmed when God's faith in the soul is here confirmed. It is accordingly the highest state attainable in this life."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Quoting Pseudo-Augustine, John of the Cross states: "We have some idea, from what was said, of the distance which lies between what creatures are in themselves, and what God is in Himself, and, since love produces equality and likeness, of how souls attached to any of these creatures are just as distant from God. With a clear realization of this distance, St. Augustine addressed God in the *Soliloquies*: *Miserable man that I am, when will my pusillanimity and imperfection be able to conform with your righteousness? You indeed are good, and I evil; You merciful, and I, wicked; You are holy, and I, miserable; You are just, and I am unjust; You are light, and I, blindness; You are life, and I am death; You are medicine, I am sickness; You are supreme truth, and I utter vanity.*", I Ascent 5, 1.

⁴⁸ See the sanjuanist use of the words "participación" (noun), "participado" (past participle) and "participar" (verb), *Concordancias*, 1370-1371. A detailed analysis goes beyond the scope of this essay. The notion of "Dios por participación" could be expounded on in the light of philosopher Xabier Zubiri's thesis that man is an experiential mode of being God, *El hombre y Dios*. Madrid: Fundación Xabier Zubiri-Alianza Editorial, 1984, 327. See my article: "Según su condición y propiedades" o la gracia presupone la naturaleza: El hombre, experiencia de Dios en San Juan de la Cruz", in: *Carmelus* 47 (2000), 73-90.

⁴⁹ Canticle B, 22, 3.



The points mentioned in this article deserve further and deeper reflection. However, time and space restraints do not allow such as an opportunity.

As we wrap up our exposition, the following points are in order. The contemplative has for his object beauty, in its immediateness or superficiality (as found in the creatures) and in its metaphysical depth (as found in God Himself). The contemplative experiences and enjoys the wisdom of God in the harmony or beauty of the creatures.⁵⁰ John of the Cross, Contemplative Carmelite and Christian, goes beyond and shows us the way that surpasses the mere attraction of *aesthetics* (or sensorial attraction) and goes into the very *art* (or the very principle of creativity), into the very act and viewpoint of the Creator, the source of all beauty.⁵¹ John of the Cross provides us with the axiological coordinates that would help us veer towards the preferred direction towards communion with God, the source of all beauty, within the ontological cosmos with its ontological order and the values that this same order necessarily implies.

The contemplative does not just stare at beauty as if it were a blank wall. The contemplative knows how to and what to value. The contemplative must make a choice. The contemplative must make a choice of freedom, of freeing the heart for God⁵², in order to enjoy with God the beauty of the creatures.⁵³ “John’s spirituality – writes Carmelite Ross Collings – may therefore be seen as an ever deeper realization in himself of the mystery of universal gravitation of all meaning into God. If all created things and his own life are bestowed upon him, it is so that they should be ‘left behind’ in the sense of becoming transparent to the presence of the Giver; or,

⁵⁰ Canticle B, 14-15, 4.

⁵¹ This is the direction that I have attempted to trace in my recent book: *Experience, Reality and Beauty. From the Aesthetics of Ontology to the Mystagogy of Art in Metaphysics*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2002.

⁵² III Ascent 20, 4.

⁵³ III Ascent 39, 3.

better, that they should impel him with their own powerful stream of self-displacement towards the divine center.”⁵⁴

The contemplative's struggle for freedom is the dark night wherein man departs (and becomes free) from the affection and operation of the finitude of the creatures in order to embrace “eternal things”, that is, eternal life in happiness and grace in the height of union with God.⁵⁵ The contemplative must necessarily transcend the limitations of ontology and its cosmological aesthetics and enter in the realm of metaphysical participation in the life of the Creator in terms of beauty. God, the Creator, is not simply the principle of all creativity. God Himself is invitation to participate in His own divine life, in His very creativity. Man, who was created in God's very own image and likeness, must not only value His Creator above all, but must participate in the creative task of His Creator.⁵⁶

Our present reflections do not aim to present a profound or novel interpretation of St. John's texts, but only to correlate convincingly the contemplative vocation, as lived and taught by St. John of the Cross, and the question of beauty in the light of the famous categories or coordinates of “Todo” (Everything) and “Nada” (Nothing).

⁵⁴ R. Collings, *John of the Cross. The Way of Christian Mystics. Vol. 10.* Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 60.

⁵⁵ I Night 11, 4. This aspect of freedom from the hold of created beauty has greatly inspired liberation theology. Cf. for example: S. Galilea, “Espiritualidad liberadora de San Juan de la Cruz”, in: *Vida Espiritual* 54 (1977), 82-87; D. Cetner, “Christian Freedom and the Nights of St. John of the Cross”, in: *Carmelite Studies* 2 (1982), 3-80; J.V. Rodríguez, “La liberación en San Juan de la Cruz”, in: *Teresianum* 36 (1985), 421-454; G. Stinissen, “Saint Jean de la Croix: une mystique de libération”, in: *La Foi et les Temps* 18 (1988), 571-584; R. Hardy, “Liberation Theology and Saint John of the Cross: A Meeting”, in: *Eglise et Théologie* 20 (1989), 259-282; G. Gutiérrez, “Relectura de San Juan de la Cruz desde América Latina”, in: Several Authors, *Actas del Congreso Internacional Sanjuanista. Vol. III*, 325-335; C.J. Pinto de Oliveira, *Contemplation et libération. Thomas d'Aquin-Jean de la Croix-Barthélemy de las Casas*. Fribourg-Paris: Edit. Universitaires-Cerf, 1993, 69-96.

⁵⁶ Doubtless the task would be poetic, not in the literary sense, but in the primordial sense of ποιησις as creativity in contrast to mere μιμησις or imitation. The renowned Spanish critic, D. Alonso, speaking of literary poetry provides us a point of departure for a poetic (in terms of ποιησις) understanding of creativity: “Toda poesía es religiosa. Buscará unas veces a Dios en la Belleza. Llegará a lo

So far, we have tried to show in this article that as a contemplative John of the Cross was an admirer of real beauty in His adoration of the Creator. But more than just being a mere admirer of beauty or aesthete, as a religious man, he was a participant in God's Creative Act. John's poetry and prose are proofs of this and his challenge for us, in learning how to contemplate, consists in being admirers and adorers of the Source of all Beauty and participants in the Creative task given our own circumstances and labors. *This matter (participation), which in effect is the second side of John's notion of contemplation with regards to beauty, truly deserves a separate study.*

Allow me then to conclude this reflection with an excerpt of the famous *Prayer of an Enamored Soul*, wherein John of the Cross expresses how we can own the everythingness of the cosmos from the Everythingness of God, with its demands to view the everythingness of the cosmos as nothing, in terms of beauty. The tone, the words and the attitude of this prayer somehow give us a glimpse as to how it is to participate in God's creative task:

Míos son los cielos y mía es la tierra... Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and everything is mine; and God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me.⁵⁷ □

mínimo, a las bellezas más sutiles, hasta el juego acaso. Se volverá otras veces, con íntimo desgarrón, hacia el centro humeante del misterio, llegará quizá a la blasfemia. No importa. Si trata de reflejar el mundo, imita la creadora actividad... Así va la poesía de todos los tiempos a la busca de Dios.", *Poetas españoles contemporáneos*. Madrid: Gredos, 1978. Perhaps, in this light, the sanjuanist notion of "Dios por participación" could be taken as a "necessary" blasphemy in order to reach the center of the mystery. This deserves further reflection in a separate study.

⁵⁷ Sayings of Light and Love, 25.