

“Solid and Substantial Doctrine”: Groundwork for a Synthesis of Sanjuanist Spirituality*

MACARIO OFILADA MINA

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), together with St. Teresa of Jesus (1515-1582), represents the climax of not only of Carmelite Mysticism¹ nor of Spanish Mysticism but that of Christian mysticism

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Abbreviations: In citing the works of our mystic, I make use of the original Spanish version: J.V. Rodríguez & F. Ruiz Salvador (eds.), *San Juan de la Cruz. Obras Completas*, 5th ed. (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1993) and E. Pacho (ed.), *S. Juan de la Cruz. Obras Completas*, 8th ed. (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2003). In the numberings, I have followed Rodríguez and Ruiz. I have also consulted 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, I hardly made use of this translation preferring in most cases to provide my own translation of the texts. I will adopt the following abbreviations: A=Ascent of Mount Carmel; N=Dark Night; C=Spiritual Canticle (B or second redaction); F=Living Flame of Love (B or second redaction); Rom=Romances (Following the numbering of Rodríguez-Ruiz); Poem=Poems (Following the numbering of Rodríguez-Ruiz)

¹ Cfr. J. Welch, *The Carmelite Way: An Ancient Path for Today's Pilgrim* (New York-Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996); R.M. Valabek, "La spiritualità carmelitana" Several

in all hemispheres, embracing various traditions, religious orders and schools of thought.² Speaking exclusively from the perspective of the Christian tradition, incomparable is her description of mystical phenomena and their progressive stages and unequalled is his schematic doctrinal interpretation and explanation of the development of the mystical life. The present essay, admittedly quite repetitive, is an attempt to present as a consistent experiential and thematic circle, wherein various elements and themes are repeated to show how they fall into place, within the supreme perspective of union with God which characterizes the spirituality of this great Doctor of the Church and incomparable master of language.³

Both Reformed Carmelites developed their magisterium from the profound individual and ecclesiastic experience of the Christian Absolute, who is a living and relational God in Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as revealed by Jesus Christ. This same experience is undertaken or lived out by a rational person, intelligent (intellect) and free (will), with a deep experiential reservoir (memory), though finite and culpable. Therefore, man is in need of salvation, which is a gift from God above and which could be attained through his efforts as an individual, but always within and together with the community or the Church.

Authors, *Compendio di Teologia Spirituale in Onore di Jordan Aumann, O.P.* (Rome: PUST, 1992), 385-409; C. de Jesús Sacramentado, *La escuela mística carmelitana* (Avila: Ed. Mensajero de Santa Teresa, 1930); J. de Jesús María, "Escuela mística carmelitana" *Monte Carmelo* 62 (1954), 3-40; C. García, "La 'Cuestión Mística' y la escuela carmelitana" Several Authors, *La teologia spirituale. Atti del congresso internazionale OCD* (Rome: Teresianum, 2001), 141-167.

² In the background, I have taken into account the historical and cultural study of B. Bochert, *Mysticism: Its History and Challenge* (York Beach, Samuel Weiner Inc., 1994); J. Martín Velasco, *El fenómeno místico* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1999).

³ It is worth noting here the ambiguous attitude of the great Spanish philosopher J. Ortega y Gasset to mysticism, especially John of the Cross and Teresa of Jesús: "Si el misticismo es callar, el filosofar es decir, descubrir en la gran desnudez y transparencia de la palabra el ser de las cosas, decir el ser: ontología... los místicos han solido ser los más formidables técnicos de la palabra. Los más exactos escritores, los clásicos del idioma", "Defensa del teólogo frente al místico" *Obras Completas*, Vol. V (Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1987), 456-458.

The God revealed by Jesus Christ is the only Absolute in the mind of St. John of the Cross. All else are "nada" or nothing, and so must die before the Living and True God in the life of man.⁴ All his magisterium tends to union with this God within the world.⁵ In fact, it is the substantive most frequently used in the sanjuanist corpus.⁶ His magisterium is a proposal to enter into this union, making use of description and interpretation with demonstrations, solid logical arguments, even symbols and metaphors (especially in his poetry). But all these linguistic and pedagogical resources are secondary to the aim of leading men to union with God, which we will explore in its major lines and principles in the reflections that follow.

In this light, the spirituality and mysticism of our two mystics, Teresa and Juan, possess the following basic characteristics:

- ⇒ Christian in root and essentials: the Christian God is the center of their spirituality;
- ⇒ Mystical in grounding, development and in its aims (both teleological or within this life and eschatological or beyond this life): God as Transcendental and Immanent Mystery as the everything (todo);
- ⇒ Ecclesiological in context: The Church as the locus;
- ⇒ Carmelite in peculiarity: Carmel as the concrete and historical form of living;
- ⇒ Contemplative in vocation: As the specific experience of Carmel or contemplation as the existential hermeneutical key to live out Carmel.

⁴ Making use of K. Jung, B. Lonergan, J. Fowler, J. Welch interprets John of the Cross from the notion of adult faith, a spirituality with substance, advocating the death of gods, Cfr. *When Gods Die: An Introduction to John of the Cross* (New York-Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990).

⁵ Cfr. *Carmelite Charism: Journey into God, Following the World. St. John of the Cross. Memory Alive for Today. Documents of the XII Council of Provinces of the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mt. Carmel – the Carmelites – Salamanca, Spain, 1991* (Melbourne: Carmelite Publications, 1991).

⁶ Cfr. J.L. Astigarraga, A. Borrell et al., *Concordancias de los escritos de San Juan de la Cruz* (Rome: Teresianum, 1990).

Whenever, we hear of John of the Cross we immediately think of the *Noche Oscura* or Dark Night, with all its implications of crisis and impasse in the vital project of human life and development,⁷ and in relation to this we associate elements like God, contemplation, mysticism, theological virtues, Jesus Christ, transformation, union, etc. These are his classical themes and concerns, which have become the objects of study of researchers. John did not intend to be original in these matters, but he did present a rigorous and highly creative way of understand and living them out in an integrated existential and experiential manner which has established him not only as an authority within the confines of the Catholic and Christian tradition, but also in other traditions of spirituality, given the challenges of today.⁸ His doctrine has become universal while remaining distinctively Christian and Carmelite.

The expression "Doctrina sustancial y sólida" (Solid and substantial doctrine) comes from the works of John of the Cross himself. Despite what he calls his lowly style and little knowledge, our author knows that what he offers is good and necessary. The Mystic Doctor tells his readers, whom he calls "espirituales," not to expect sweet and delicious things, but "Solid and substantial doctrine" for he will speak of the nudity of the spirit, which must be experienced by those spirituals in order to attain union with God (A, *Prol*).

John knew what he was talking about. He was not born a saint. He became one in a long process, conquering sanctity which God gave Him.⁹

In making use of this poignant and powerful expression, John offers us a genuine and authentic way, rooted in the criteria of the cross of Christ, that efficiently and directly leads to God

⁷ From the Philippine scene, we could cite the monograph of Carmelite bishop J.X. Labayen, *Crisis and Impasse. The Dark Night in St. John of the Cross* (Manila: Socio-Pastoral Institute National Office, 1991).

⁸ Cfr. L. Doohan, *The Contemporary Challenge of John of the Cross: An Introduction to his Life and Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1995).

⁹ J.V. Rodríguez, "Carmelita en sandalias y escaso de figura": El gozoso viacrucis de San Juan de la Cruz", *Vida Religiosa* 68 (1990), 405.

with its hardships yes, but with the reward of brevity and true joy, rooted in God Himself and not with the passing pleasures of the human appetite.

Many would try to link him with certain schools of thought in philosophy and the history of thought, but we could only be certain that it was the evangelical school of the Christian gospels which truly has left an imprint in him. John in his spirituality proposes an original, rigorous, serious way of living out the Christian Gospel. This was his only intention. This was how he understood his being a Carmelite in the light of the intellectual formation he received in Medina del Campo and Salamanca.

We are not hesitant to label St. John of the Cross as a "spring roll" in Spirituality. In Filipino parlance, "spring rolls", of Chinese origin and inspiration (called "lumpia" in the vernacular) are considered a complete dish because of the numerous ingredients (meat, vegetables, dough, etc.) involved in its preparation. In John of the Cross' person practically all the ingredients for a great master in the spiritual life are present: incomparable lyric poet, deep thinker, master theologian, knowledgeable philosopher, exceptional mystic, unmatched master of spirituality.

Indeed, our Carmelite Mystic is complete, but his panorama is limited notwithstanding its inherent breadth and depth. He did not write everything about the spiritual life. He limited himself to the essentials of the life of the spirit in dialogue with human culture: philosophy, psychology, art, literature, history, cultural studies, etc.

John of the Cross was quite aware of the broadness of spirituality and mysticism. He was quite selective of the material he would prepare and develop. He was above all interested in swift, practical and sure way of reaching the Absolute, who is the One and Triune God revealed by Jesus Christ. In this central theme, all of his resources (his formation as humanist, philosopher and theologian in Medina del Campo and Salamanca, his reading of Scripture, Tradition and experience), sources (other readings and influences) and strategies (description, interpretation, demonstration and pedagogy) are put together to present an organic whole: complete in itself, well-structured and logically developed of the itinerary of man towards the Divine Absolute. John was not

interested in speaking much about God or in theology, but to lead others to this very same God (spirituality) into the very root of the experience of this very same God (mysticism).¹⁰

The aforementioned expression, which is the title of this essay or attempt, suggests or gives us a sufficient panorama of the spirituality of this Doctor of the Church, the first Carmelite to be so honored.¹¹

The following presentation does not seek to exhaust the doctrine of this Carmelite Master but only to highlight its key points with the purpose of serving as an introduction to the reading of his works, rooted in personal and communitarian experience, developed within a Carmelite ambiance in 16th century Spain with all its imperial conquests, artistic and cultural developments and religious reforms.

I. SANJUANIST SPIRITUALITY: METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

John of the Cross, the man, the writer, the mystic, was primarily interested in the spiritual world: not that of angels or demons but of man, the human spirit, the human totality of both body and soul. Spirit for him was first and foremost God Almighty, Pure Spirit, Pure transcendence separated from what is not God, from what is not Divine, from what is created.

Spirit is a category of separation, indicating what is holy and what is in process for John speaks of a spiritual process culminating in God, who is Pure Spirit, who is transcendently different from the rest, from all creation no matter how spiritual they may be. God is Spirit in Himself. There are many spiritual feelings, matters, objects which may have links with God, because of their religious nature, but are

¹⁰ E. Pacho, "La lección espiritual de San Juan de la Cruz", in Idem., *Estudios Sanjuanistas Vol. II*, Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1997, 636. I have made this adaptation in order to point out the relationship between spirituality and mysticism applied to the sanjuanist project.

¹¹ St. Teresa of Jesus received the honor in 1970. St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus was declared Doctor in 1997. St. John of the Cross was proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 1926.

not God in Himself. Thus, the word "spirit" opens up a way indicating path and goal in a constant confrontation, in a constant antithesis and synthesis overcoming differences in terms of union, wherein there are no compromises, no dialectics, but pure communion in God in Jesus Christ, in the Way who is Jesus Christ Himself in whom the opposition between path and goal ceases.

All these are reflected in his works which present a proposal having their genesis in the most spontaneous expression of mystical experience which is the poetry. Then came the prose which presents a constant confrontation between content and commentary, between message and elaboration. The key is in a nostalgic look at the beginning, for John writes about the mystical life from the perspective of attainment with incomparable harmony, with order that suffers alterations and revisions because of the dynamic nature of the process, wherein the existential has to overcome the rigors and structures of what is written and textual.

In speaking of the spirit, John seeks to lay down foundations, with philosophical principles and tested and accepted theological considerations in order to trace a path or itinerary of the spirit.

"Spirit" does not primarily signify for our author what is immaterial, but what is transcendent, sublime, eternal, though he certainly took into account this traditional understanding inherited from the Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophical tradition and Augustinian-Thomistic theological school, with traces of Neo-Platonism, specifically that of the mysterious author whom we now call Pseudo-Dionisius, then thought to be convert and disciple of the Apostle St. Paul and thus held as a quasi-apostolic authority, and even called San Dionisio.

Man, in the eyes of the Carmelite Doctor, is a spirit, called to be a spirit, called "espiritual" in the path towards God not because of his soul or of his body in which, following Platonic terminology, was imprisoned in his body but because of man's existential tendency towards God. John of the Cross was interested above all in man as the spirit: the living being (*alma* or soul) called to be a spirit (*espíritu*) in transcendence and spouse (*esposa*) in intimate immanence with God.¹²

¹² Cfr. my study: "Síntesis de la antropología sanjuansita: De alma a esposa pasando por espíritu", *Teología Espiritual* 45 (2001), 43-69.

Spirituality as a term or a noun did not come into existence until the 17th century in French to designate that which related to the spirit, which John already labeled as “espiritual” meaning a person full of the spirit. Spiritual was already in vogue then as an adjective. Thus, “espiritual” was both a noun and an adjective with regards to a person.¹³

Though John of the Cross did not use the term “spirituality”¹⁴ and did not understand it as we do today, he did develop a spiritual program, with unity with God as the primary viewpoint and perspective in terms of its fulfillment, and above all as its aim.¹⁵ Every element, concept, dimension, schema was elaborated for this end, but it was also the starting point, the main presupposition. Union with God did not allow any conceptual confrontation between beginning, means and end in the work of our mystic, but was the unifying factor of John’s dynamic program which shows the growth, development of the “espiritual” along the way to union, especially with the most powerful symbol, concept and program called “noche oscura” or dark night.

John of the Cross did not touch on everything on the spiritual path but only focused on the essential. John did not offer detailed explanation of mystical phenomena but he did offer explanations of their spiritual value. His was a mysticism not of phenomena but of deep understanding and contemplation, even admitting that his explanations were inadequate and only those who underwent similar experiences could fully explain them (C prol., 2-3; 7, 9; 39, 3-4; F 3, 17).

Our mystic was conscious that he had “grave palabra y doctrina” (serious word and doctrine-1 N 13, 3) about the spiritual content of these phenomena. He was an experienced master who dialogued with the experience of others whom he met above all spiritual director, confessor,

¹³ See the interesting use of St. John of the Cross of the word “espiritual” both as a noun and an adjective as well as the verb “espiritualizar” and the adverb “espiritualmente”, *Concordancias*, 775ss.

¹⁴ I have taken into consideration, on this regard, many insights of J. V. Rodríguez, “Espiritualidad sanjuanista: Humanism y transcendencia” *San Juan de la Cruz* 12 (1993), 175-209.

¹⁵ Cfr. J. V. Rodríguez, “Experiencia colmante de Dios en San Juan de la Cruz”, *Revista de Espiritualidad* 54 (1995), 293-325.

mystagogue. He presents and proposes a way based on experience that was above all theoretical or doctrinal knowledge (2 A 13-14; 2, 18; F 3, 27-62). He was different from masters with no experience at all (A Prol) for the way¹⁶ which has the following principal characteristics:

- ⇒ It is a way for man on the way to fulfill himself as spirit in the fullness of his being image and likeness of God, Pure Spirit in Himself and with whom He has a loving relationship;
- ⇒ It is a way of change of conversion that demands the abandonment of all that is opposed, contrary or against the union with God, which is characterized by the aim of making man greater, thus as if man was God's equal "igualándonos consigo" (C 28, 1; F 2, 3);
- ⇒ It is a way of transformation into the divine making man, in his integrity, realize, fulfill the divinity in his own finite and culpable being in terms of participation (taking part) of the divine nature, by being "Dios por participación".¹⁷ For this reason, John affirms that God "has created us in His image and likeness in order for us to be so" (C 39, 4). God wants us to receive the same love which He gave to the Son (R, 2) and so to share the same banquet (R, 3).
- ⇒ It is a way of salvation in Jesus Christ, rooted in the Gospels, contextualized within the Church, expressed with the terminology of a specific tradition (Carmelite) and vocation (contemplative) of the same Church.

Status Quaestionis

As already stated, John of the Cross did not use the term "spirituality" but indeed has gifted us with a spiritual program, i.e., a program of union, relationship between God and man. This program takes concrete form in a journey, a way, a path, etc. Before entering

¹⁶ See the presentation of K.Waaijman, "The Way, Rootmetaphor for Spirituality-A Biblical Exploration" *Studies in Spirituality* 13 (2003), 63-79.

¹⁷ Cfr. "participación" in *Concordancias*, 1370-1371. Also my study: "Según su condición y propiedades o la gracia presupone la naturaleza: El hombre, experiencia de Dios en San Juan de la Cruz", *Carmelus* 47 (2000), 73-90.

into our *status quaestionis* or the use of the term spirituality applied to our author, I would like to call your attention to two terms in common use in the English language. They are: enthusiasm and inspiration.

The origins of the French word “spiritualité” can be traced to the Greek word “enthousiasmos” or to be filled or possessed (such as an oracle or priest) by a god, especially in intense artistic, athletic or cultural moments such as prophecy, passionate love, zeal for a socio-political cause, etc. In the same vein, the Latins borrowed the idea of *theos* and changed it to “spiritus” (from the Greek “Pneuma”). Instead of saying “theos” or God, the Latins opted for “spiritus”. God and spirit are identified in the sense of being that which is transcendent in itself. Therefore, to be enthusiastic and inspired is to be filled with a god or a spirit in undertaking any activity.

Spirituality is way of the spirit, way of man becoming a spirit being spirit, becoming more of the Spirit of God, by being much more than a mere living human being but being truly alive in the Transcendental Spirit.¹⁸ For a Christian, this is living out the Paschal Mystery which makes up the Church.¹⁹

Spirituality is the concrete and contextualized way within a specific school, tradition or community (Church), of living out within history the dynamic experiential life principles of this school, tradition or community with the aim of uniting oneself with the Absolute, in its transcendence, taken as a Personal God within the immanence of human existence transforming this same existence into real life.

For a Christian, Carmelite and Contemplative like John of the Cross, his spirituality is a concrete glimpse and experience

¹⁸ Cfr. Several Authors, *Teologia Spirituale. Atti del Congresso Internazionale*.

¹⁹ “Caminar en el Espíritu es llevar un género de vida que brota efectivamente del misterio pascual y que retorna a él. Se comprende de inmediato que semejante caminar compete, ante todo, a la Iglesia misma, en cuanto comunidad pascual, porque ningún cristiano tiene garantía de perseverar, él individualmente, en la caridad o santidad mediante la cual el Espíritu Santo mora en los corazones. Así, pues, el Espíritu Santo tiene su morada propia y la más adecuada en la Iglesia misma. Podríamos decir que, por ser Espíritu pascual, es Espíritu eclesial, como se podría hacer también el enunciado inverso: por eclesial es pascual”, A. Bandera, *El Espíritu que ungió a Jesús* (Madrid: Edibelsa, 1995), 75.

of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in as much as it is the way of living out the human search for God and the development of a personal, intimate and genuine relationship with this same God.

St. John of the Cross in presenting his "spirituality" methodologically formulates a philosophy of life, an existential love of wisdom which does not rely purely on human rationalization or efforts but in a superior form of knowledge, lived out by faith, which is "toda ciencia trascendiendo".

In the writings and teachings of John of the Cross there is a constant play between "sabiduría" (wisdom) and "amor" (love). These two poles converge in the "amor de Dios" (love of God-C, Prologue, 1). Love is the underlying metaphysical and spiritual force that mystically makes the spirit fecund, that makes man fruitful in the movement from one extreme (that of his lowliness) to the other (that of the heights of the union with God).

Love makes possible this union. Love qualifies all human wisdom as "mystical intelligence" or truly wisdom and not just any kind of knowledge, thus going beyond the merits of human efforts and openness to the Spirit of the Lord who aids all in attaining and explaining this experience. This becomes clearer in the discussion on the virtues of faith, hope and love in *Ascent-Night* and how they correspond to the three potencies of man. They are the keys or experiential modalities by which man becomes transformed in spirit, participating beyond the ontological totality of the cosmos or the created sphere into the metaphysical heights of God, mystically experienced by the integral man transformed into spirit open to infinity.

Wisdom is not wisdom because it is knowledgeable, but because it is loving and therefore open to the mystical act of God One and Three in a spiritual process of metaphysical import. Wisdom without love would be mere knowledge or human science. Wisdom is supernatural, spiritual, gratuitous, purified, communicated by means of divine illumination, within contemplation and beyond the active and articulate efforts of human meditation. Wisdom transcends all human science and this presentation is developed in three fundamental moments:

First: He parts from the narrative of faith, within his own Church and the concrete Carmelite tradition and Contemplative vocation. Within this context, he encounters, he experiences in a

concrete way the Mystery: which is the transcendental Absolute revealing itself in the immanence of human history, constructing the narrative which we call History of Salvation (see: C 35, 4).

Second: From here, John of the Cross takes this revelation of the Absolute as the revelation of a Personal God in Three Persons. This is the foundation of his theology, his God-Talks and not just God-Talk or taking about God. This God reveals Himself, talks about Himself (hence, God-Talks) lets Himself be experienced and this becomes the narrative in the works of our Mystic.

Third: This God-Talks becomes concrete in a spiritual itinerary, in a spirituality, captured mystagogically, pedagogically in powerful, concrete and direct symbols such as the Night, the Mount, the Flame, etc. These symbols go to the essentials of man's experience of God in concrete and historical circumstances.²⁰ All of these have the purpose of expounding on the parable of the union of man with the Absolute, with the Christian God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God has been revealed by Jesus Christ, the fullness of God's revelation (2 A, 27), the fullness of God-Talks, the fullness of the Absolute allowing Himself to be experienced as a Personal God in Three Persons.

For all these, John does not only rely on his own personal experience in dialogue with others nor of science or the knowledge and culture acquired through study, but also names Scripture, which is the text of the history of salvation of the Christian People of God. He always submits himself to the Church, which is the Communion of the same People called to Redemption (A Prol 2).

Christian and Carmelite Roots and Identity

Based on the foregoing working definition of spirituality which we have proposed, it is facile to just define or understand

²⁰ "Juan de la Cruz es teólogo, un gran teólogo de la vida cristiana. Piensa y escribe de manera esencialista y concentrada. Va al corazón de las realidades primordiales: Dios, Cristo, hombre, fe, amor, esperanza, pecado y sus raíces, degradación, transformación, etc. Y es sobre todo teólogo de la mística, que ha observado, vivido, analizado, organizado, esa expresión eminente de la vida cristiana", F. Ruiz, "San Juan de la Cruz: Visión mística y estética de un pensador original" Several Authors, *Introducción a San Juan de la Cruz* (Avila: Diputación Provincial de Avila-Institución Gran Duque de Alba, 1987), 58.

mysticism as the goal of spirituality while all the steps leading to it are called ascetics or spirituality in process and efforts. I do not subscribe to this vision which seems to be dualistic.

I prefer to understand mysticism (from *mystes* = to close one's eyes or mouth upon initiation in the secret life of the mystic) as the rootedness of a spirituality in the Absolute Transcendence in as much as it is a Mystery. What is a mystery? It is not that which is that is beyond our human mode of comprehending nor that which is intriguing for superficial reasons.²¹ Mystery is the great paradox involving all of our existence as humans. It is the paradox of how that which is transcendental in itself (the Absolute) becomes immanent.

For a Christian this great transcendental is a Person and He becomes immanent in terms of intimacy, in familiar intimacy: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in terms of infinite love, which is never "ocioso" or inactive (F 1, 8) offered with no conditions, in terms of a love that creates, saves and sanctifies. For this reason, John says, that man has the vocation to love: "Para este fin de amor fuimos creados (C 29, 3; 38, 3; 11, 11)."

St. John of the Cross is the synthesis of many influences and currents: neoplatonism, aristotelianism, scriptural and patristic thought, Thomism, classical writers, other Christian mystical traditions (such as Northern Mystics).²² But he is first and foremost, a Christian. His is a Christian identity. His spirituality and mysticism is Christian, especially rooted in the Cross (C 36, 12-13).

John changed his religious name from Juan de Santo Matía to Juan de la Cruz, when he embraced the Theresian reform of Carmel, to emphasize that he follows the spirituality that takes "the path of the cross of Christ the Spouse" (C 3, 5; also "la cruz pura espiritual y desnudez de espíritu pobre de Cristo" 2 A 7, 5).

²¹ Cfr. R. Körner, *Mystik. Quell der Vernunft. Die Ratio auf dem weg der vereinigung Mit Gott bei Johannes Vom Kreuz* (Leipzig: St. Benno Verlag, 1990); R. Flórez, "Razón filosófica y razón mística en San Juan de la Cruz" Several Authors, *¿Existe una filosofía española?* (Sevilla: Fundación Fernando Rielo, 1988); A. Ortega, *Razón teológica y experiencia mística. En torno a San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Apostolado de la Prensa, 1944).

²² Cfr. E. Pacho, "Juan de la Cruz:, Místico de confluencias y de síntesis" in E. Pacho, *Estudios Sanjuanistas*, Vol. II, 649-664.

Christian is the man in love who searches for and finds the Absolute who is the Personal God revealed by Jesus Christ²³ and allows Himself to be loved by God in His own way, to be filled by the power of the Spirit of this God in living out a life with the example and teaching of Jesus Christ as model, criterion and vital space for one's eschatological opening to the Mystery in its definitive historical and salvific fulfillment beyond time. The Christian should be a "simple spirit, pure and true, and very pleasing to God" (1 N 2, 7).

What characterizes Christian spirituality and mysticism? It is above all Trinitarian: not only having union with the One and Triune God as criteria and goal, but the consciousness that it is God who takes the loving initiative to lovingly search for man in Christ (C 37, 6). The dramatic development of John's masterpiece *The Spiritual Cantic* reveals that man takes the initiative is only illusory and shakes us from our foundations and reveals a God who from all eternity searches for man in love. This God is omniscient, omnipotent, merciful (F. 3, 6), but is most respectful of man's liberty, autonomy and individuality.

His was a Carmelite vocation. As a member of the Old Observance, he wanted a more profound contemplative vocation. He interpreted his Carmelite identity in terms of contemplation. Clearly he felt that the Carmel of that time had lost its contact with this most profound center. This is why he had intentions of being a Carthusian. He was in search of the profound communion and experience with God. Teresa came at the most appropriate time. She invited him to join her reform, the quest to rediscover this contemplative spirit in Carmel with no intentions of breaking away from the old observance, but to initiate within it a reform, a quest for spiritual rediscovery. In St. Teresa's lifetime, juridical questions obliged the forming of a separate province (1581, in the Provincial Capital of Alcalá de Henares where John is elected third councilor) for the Discalced Carmelites. And a year after John's death, the rupture was consummated with the separation of the Discalced as a separate Order.

²³ See my study from the sanjuanist perspective: "El Dios de Jesús en San Juan de la Cruz: La apropiación vivencial de un místico cristiano" *Estudios Trinitarios* 29 (1995), 287-323. Also: J.V. Rodríguez, "San Juan de la Cruz" Several Authors, *Diccionario teológico. El Dios Cristiano* (Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 1992), 770-774; S. Castro, "El rostro de Dios en San Juan de la Cruz" *Revista de Espiritualidad* 58 (1999), 187-223.

John primarily wrote his works for Carmelites, using Carmelite terms, symbols and contexts (A, Prol 8). But the power of his message is for all. His spirituality is for all who are serious in their intent. The Carmelites are the immediate audience given the contemplative nature of their vocation, but as to the real audience is a question which goes beyond immediateness in culture or sensibilities, time, and space.

Later on, we will touch more on these questions of Carmelite and Contemplative.

Project and Way

St. John of the Cross presents us with an itinerary of love towards God, who is the "amante principal" or principal lover (C, 31, 2). It is love that gives meaning to man's existence and the itinerary that takes place within this existence. "Man's health or salvation is the love of God" (C, 11, 11) for everything is moved for love and in love (C, 28, 3). "The heart is not satisfied with nothing else than God" (C, 35,1) for only love is the end of everything (C, 35, 8).

The directionality of the itinerary is ascending (indicating man's activity) in *Ascent*, an experience of the supernatural transcending the light of our natural faculties (highlighting man's passivity or letting God lovingly take over) in *Night*, it is an adventure of searching, encountering and consummating in *Canticle*, and it is the burning and consuming union of love in *Flame*. Each major work of his presents us a dimension of a project that is in its whole a union of love. John of the Cross reveals that love is the being and salvation of man, going beyond the moral imperatives, rational discourses and scientific technicalities which have shaped our ethical and moral approaches.²⁴

This project is nothing more than the quest for holiness in a realist, existentialist and historical way within the Church. Everything else is subordinated to this goal. Holiness consists in a life of loving union with the transcendental God in His transcendence but within the

²⁴ X. Pikaza, *Amor de hombre, Dios enamorado. San Juan de la Cruz, una alternativa* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002), 272.

intimate immanence of human existence transformed into life of the spirit. This man, called to be spirit, is both child (C 36, 5) and spouse (C 23, 3, 6) of God.²⁵

Holiness is identifiable with perfection,²⁶ which is union of the soul (alma) or man with God, which is the basic presupposition of the descriptive and pedagogical dimensions of the experience.²⁷ This union gives man his existential dignity. "An outstanding cause of human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin, man is already invited to converse with God."²⁸

There are however some constant elements in such a project:

- ⇒ The itinerary is undertaken parting from the ontological lowliness of man's immanence and is metaphysically (in terms of transcendent directionality) and mystically (in terms of rootedness in the Mystery) directed towards the Absolute in its transcendence and intimately known as God, who reveals Himself lovingly and salvifically calling man to be Holy, to be like Him, in a process of purificative searching based on God's infinite initiative and man's loving response. In this itinerary, both man and God intervene (Activity and Passivity)
- ⇒ The progress consists of graces which in themselves are only means for the union.
- ⇒ Contemplation is the deep root of this itinerary. It is the preparation of self and one's activities for an even greater

²⁵ Cfr. on this regard the pioneering study of L.M.de Saint-Joseph, "Grace d'union filiale ou nuptiale?" in Idem., *L'expérience de Dieu. Actualité du message de Saint Jean de la Croix*. (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 59-76.

²⁶ Cfr. A. Royo Marín, *Teología de la perfección cristiana*, 5th ed. (Madrid: BAC, 1968); D. de Pablo Maroto, *El camino cristiano. Manual de teología espiritual* (Salamanca: UPSA, 1995); A. Queralt, "La 'espiritualidad' como disciplina teológica" *Gregorianum* 60 (1979), 321-376; A. Guerra, "Proceso histórico en la formación de la teología espiritual" *Teresianum* 52 (2001), 39-42.

²⁷ E. Pacho, *San Juan de la Cruz. Temas fundamentales*, Vol. I (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1984), 102.

²⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 19.

activity: that of God, that of letting God act in an act of surrender, bringing together pain and joy in love. Man prepares himself for contemplation or letting God be God and letting himself be loved by God directly in the communication of Himself, by the authentic God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as He is, beyond our expectations and limitations, and not in accordance with the images made of him.

Holiness is the call to the "fullness of the Christian life and the perfection of charity."²⁹ John of the Cross, in this light and in the light of the Gospel call to perfection, conceives union with God or the goal of all his spiritual endeavors in terms of perfection, for God alone is perfect. The wisdom of the saints, according to him, consists in following the will of God, following with perfection His law and Holy Counsels (2A 29, 12).

The call to holiness is a call to God who loves and gives grace because of this love with the power of holiness itself (F 3, 6). This call to holiness is serious in nature and it involves man's existence and his choices which may entail having to give up everything, to reduce them to nothing or to their real value vis-à-vis God Himself:

"Para venir a gustarlo todo, no quieras tener gusto en nada;
para venir a poseerlo todo, no quieras poseer algo en nada;
para venir a serlo todo, no quieras ser algo en nada;
para venir a lo que no eres, has de ir por donde no eres." (1A 13, 11)

John of the Cross has captured all these, together with the paradox in the face of worldly values just like the paradox of the Beatitudes in the Gospels, with the principal symbols of his major works. John pours out his experience, always in dialogue with others, within the Church and assimilated within his Christian, Carmelite and Contemplative vocation, in symbols for the purpose of initiating others into the same experience. This initiation is what we call "mystagogy".³⁰

²⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 40.

³⁰ For a synthesis of sanjuanist mystagogy from experience, see my article: "«Lo que supiere»: la experiencia como fuente y/o estado cognoscitivo en la mistagogía de San Juan de la Cruz." *Revista de Espiritualidad* 60 (2001), 416-446.

- ⇒ The Dark Night is a transit, a passionate adventure animated by God Himself towards perfection, wherein the soul will be radically and totally empty of all its appetites, appetites which are not of God (1A 5, 6) in order to love God perfectly and not oneself in selfishness (2N 20, 4). The way to perfection is the way of negation of one's own wills for the delight of God (1N 7, 2). It is like the narrow door (2A 7, 3) of the gospels. It is a way of love, for if the soul loves the more, the more it is perfect (C 27, 8). The dark night for John is an experience of traveling, journeying from what is human to what is divine, which is the fulfillment of the highest aspirations of what is human.
- ⇒ The Mountain is the symbol of man trying to transcend himself and his desires in order to reach God alone. The heights symbolize the transcendence of the theological option which is the only way for man. Within man there are ways, various ways. But only one way will lead to the summit of man where God alone dwells.
- ⇒ Canticle presents us with the rhythmic journey of matrimonial love in its drama of searching and encountering, playing with absences and presences, with deprivations and gifts to culminate in the self-surrendering of both God and man to one another in love. It shows us how to live life according to the rhythm and melody of love that finds its meaning in a definitive encounter of love.
- ⇒ In the Flame we see the wood converted in the Flame of Love that consumes it, that gives it new identity, that transforms it into the Absolute, purifying everything that proves to be an obstacle. This transformation is the glorification of man in God glorified.

Our mystic then describes perfection, in the light of these powerful symbols, as an encounter on the mountain summit, spiritual matrimony, state of perfection, the feast of the Holy Spirit, Transformative union of the soul with God, Peace and Serenity with God, etc.

Perfection, in the mind of the Carmelite Doctor of the Church, is in accordance with the existential capacity of each person (2A 5, 10; C 7, 9). It is man's destiny to be empty of himself in order to be full of God, a

being for God or *Homo Capax Dei* in a supernatural act.³¹ Perfection is true peace and satisfaction after having stripped the human faculties of intellect, memory and will of all their ungodly desires (2A 5, 11). Perfection is patterned after the cross which is the door, the narrow door, demanding and somehow for the few, not because of exclusivism but because of the seriousness of the exigencies (C 36, 11). These exigencies are openings towards grace, such that the union with God, which for St. John is perfection, is a union by grace.³²

II. ACTUALITY: QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Crisis means both problem and opportunity. It is a problem because it questions us, it shakes us from our securities. It is an opportunity because such a questioning helps us to rediscover our roots in the face of new situations.

Questions: The Interrogative of Religiosity

More than four centuries keep us apart from John of the Cross and yet these four centuries offer us a rich experiential panorama in order to understand our situation, specifically our religious situation.

More than ever, John of the Cross is relevant especially with regards to this religious situation in its historical conditioning, in the circumstances it takes its forms and the crossroads we find ourselves given such circumstances.

Possible Responses from John of the Cross

From the backdrop of his religious, cultural, historical milieu, we can derive from John of the Cross important lessons. Here are some areas wherein he could be of help to us:

- ⇒ Theology, Philosophy, Spirituality and Religious Studies;
- ⇒ The Area of Lived Religiosity and Spirituality (beyond the academic parameters);

³¹ F. Urbina, *La persona humana*, 195-197.

³² J.V. Rodríguez, *San Juan de la Cruz. Profeta enamorado de Dios y Maestro* (Madrid: Instituto de Espiritualidad a Distancia, 1987), 241-243.

- ⇒ Sociology and Psychology of Religion in concrete and empirical forms;
- ⇒ New Religious Movements, Organizations and Reforms;
- ⇒ Literary Criticism, Production and Aesthetics;
- ⇒ Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue;
- ⇒ Deeper studies of man's personal faculties (psychology) and structures both individual and social (anthropology);
- ⇒ Historical Studies towards a greater comprehension of human culture in its manifest forms.

John of the Cross, theologian, mystic, poet, reformer, has something to offer us in our present day crisis of the search for God. He offers us “doctrina sustancial y sólida” on this search given his mastery of lived religion (Spirituality) rooted in the Mystery with the aim of “religare” or relinking, rebinding, relating with the Absolute. With his classical topics of union with the One and Triune God, the theological virtues as the way to union in Jesus Christ, contemplation, nudity and negation of the spirit (which is the center of St. John's discourse on the experiential process – Cfr. 3A 45, 2), transition from the natural to supernatural, the transformation of man into spirit, prayer, etc. All of these in the light of an intense and radical (rooted in the immanence of human experience) but transcendental projection of relinking (*religere* = to relink) thus giving religion its true spiritual value in mysticism.

Tentative Responses and Contextualizations

In this world of increasing consumerism and secularization, wherein we have lost our touch with the transcendental, the Mystic Doctor offers us a realistic (because of its radicality or *radix* = roots) way of authenticity to the God whom he holds to be authentic: a personal God in Three Persons united with love and who wishes to unite with man lovingly. This Absolute is not impersonal nor is just a mere theoretical or abstract value, but a loving, free and caring Person, who always takes the initiative, from all Eternity, through grace.

The West presents us with this challenge given the new alternatives to this true God such as drugs, sex, pornography, power, etc. God has been reduced to the world or to what is worldly. This is the gist of secularization. Transcendence is only a thing of the past, a fairy tale or rumor. John of the Cross could help bring back the notion of transcendence in the midst of the worldliness of our absolute values, whom we call Gods. Our Carmelite Doctor helps us uncover such values as idols, as false Gods.

The East presents us with a diversity of religious traditions. Asia and even Africa are the home of great, ancient and venerable religious traditions. A dialogue with John of the Cross must not help eliminate or annul the values of such religious traditions, but rather could even prove to be an enriching factor. John of the Cross always presents a challenge to authentic spirituality, to genuine lived religion, to profound mystical experience and comprehension of such experience (without giving the final word to phenomena) to any of these religious traditions. A comparative study may reveal the common search for the Absolute transcending differences in culture and sensibilities. This is only superficiality. For me, what matters is authenticity, genuineness, profundity. These are perennial lessons of John of the Cross himself whether you are a Jew, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.

Even the atheist can be aided in redefining his atheism. It is not that John of the Cross advocates atheism. He is a believer, a Christian, a Contemplative Carmelite. But he can be of help in order to judge our values, to distinguish false gods or idols from the real thing. The atheist may not believe in a personal God, but believes in a Supreme Value of Truth, Honest, even sacredness. John of the Cross upholds sacredness in life, human dignity, creation. He helps us authenticate the values we hold dearest. Even atheists have supreme values. And an atheist would respect John of the Cross for his realism in values. John speaks of the absolute values such as God and man and other related values such as sin, salvation, conversion, mortification, negation, joy, love with realism. No sentimentalism just profound humanism, direct contact with reality which is characteristic of the contemplative.³³ No falsehoods. No compromises with self-deception. Just plain honesty

³³ J.M. Le Blond, "Mystique et Théologie chez saint Jean de la Croix" *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 51 (1963), 196-239.

and fidelity to reality. For the mystic, "experience is a conquest of the most hidden zones of the real."³⁴ The atheist would respect John for his "doctrina sustancial y sólida" on reality, regardless of whether he and John of the Cross would share the same faith. John has so much to offer even to the atheist and agnostic at least in the level of existential thought, anthropology and metaphysics.³⁵

In our country, which is the crossroad of East and West, a combination of the above phenomena can be observed. We are living in a society of many gods and yet we keep close to our traditional religious practices. But is our religiosity authentic, internal, genuine and not merely occasional or external or just festive? Do we reflect on our religiosity as we live it or do we continue to live it as mere show with ambivalence in our everyday ethical values? Have we effectively reduced the God of our religion as a showbiz God, meant for show or special occasions? Is He our escape goat and not our Creator, Redeemer and Spouse, our Friend, our Lord? John of the Cross challenges us to have an intimate relationship with the transcendent God. His criticism of religious objects and practices helps us realize the relative value of all our practices and that our images, statues, paintings are only images or reflections that should help us go to the real God. Santo Niño and the Nazareno are only images. They should not be the end goal of our devotion. They should only facilitate our existential dialogue with the true God revealed by Jesus Christ. In the same vein, we should not let superstition deform our conception of the true God. John of the Cross is a constant call to battle superstition with sound practices of mortification, penance, austerity.

Our mystic's most powerful experiential symbol *Dark Night* speaks of contemporary man's experience.³⁶ We could all relate to its implications, to its directions, to its exigencies especially with all our problems.

³⁴ V. Capánaga, *San Juan de la Cruz. Valor psicológico de su doctrina* (Madrid: Difusora del Libro, 1959), 115.

³⁵ Cfr. G. Morel, *Le sens de l'existence selon saint Jean de la Croix*, 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1960-1961).

³⁶ Cfr. N. Tepedino, *Dunkle Nacht. Mystik, Negative Theologie und Philosophie. Eine Philosophische Lektüre von San Juan de la Cruz* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1998).

Lived religion or spirituality provides an answer to our contemporary individual and social problems which have their roots in addiction, in insatisfaction, in cravings. We find that the world cannot satisfy us. We are thus led into a dark night. We realize the lack of value of all what the world offers. We only seek the Absolute value.

John of the Cross offers us a way out, a way beyond to discover what is truly essential, in the authentic and true God who is not subject to our caprice, to our dictates, but is Himself (YAHWEH) beyond our categories. This true God accompanies us just as He accompanied the Israelites in their exodus or journey to freedom. The Dark Night is a journey to freedom with Yaweh, the Faithful God of Freedom.

Briefly we affirm that John's *Dark Night* is based on his own experience and that of others. It is an integrated experience, which demands an integrated approach to one's self: an approach of total commitment to the diminishing of our selfish and false ambitions of grandeur. It is a challenge for us to transcend our petty selves, our fears, our suspicions, our thoughts, our unreasonable cravings and come to the core of our finitude and culpability. Thus can we only acknowledge our need for grace. This is our supreme effort: to open up ourselves to grace, realizing our limitations and our capabilities to open ourselves to the Infinite God. It is an occasion for an authentic and genuine lived life in union with the true God, whom we should never manipulate. It calls for a profound response involving faith, hope and love, emptying ourselves of our selfishness and pettiness and put ourselves in God's hands. It is more than our response of faith, hope and love. It is allowing God to have faith in us, to hope in us and above all to love us as He wills and not according to our dictates. This gives us light to travel by as we face problems, crisis, illness, sufferings and pain. God does not spare us from the pain, but journeys with us in faith, hope and love. This is the dark night.

It is an adventure with God, who is in Himself the Dark Night, who reveals Himself as He is in faith, hope and love. It is a time for questioning our motives and images of Him. It is an opportunity for Him to love us as only He could. It is a moment for us to authenticate our religion, our lived spirituality rooted in the Mystery of the God who is there and whom we cannot manipulate or control.

Doubtless, it is to the believer or the one struggling to believe that John has the greatest relevance. He is a mystagogue, master,

teacher, companion, guide in the way towards the rootedness of the transcendent Mystery within the immanence of our human lives. He instructs us, communicates the joy of the union with God as individual mysteries or episodes of our history of salvation. To the believer he offers paths to profundity like spiritual direction, material for retreats, pastoral suggestions.

John's magisterium, which promises substantial and solid doctrine in its triple infolding as experiential (descriptive of the lived experience), doctrinal (analysis of the lived experience) and scientific (stress on subjectivity as the author of the doctrine)³⁷ calls us to do our part in order to find God (C 3, 2). The search for God, paraphrasing St. Augustine, is a task that is both ancient and yet ever new.³⁸ John of the Cross presents us with material for talks, retreats, classes, meditations, personal formation, spiritual direction, spiritual exercises, prayer groups, eucharistic adoration, etc.

Our mystic does not aim to substitute the Bible, but to lead us to a more profound reading of the Christian faith, from the perspective of a Carmelite Contemplative, with evangelical symbols, used theologically,³⁹ such as the Mount, the Dark Night, the Canticle of Love, the Flame of the Spirit, starting with the text of our salvation as proclaimed within the ambit of our Church, starting with the liturgy and culminating in a singular and powerful discourse called theology⁴⁰ with a spiritual (path) – mystical (link to the Mystery and the profundity of man) orientation and metaphysical (transcendental) direction.

His is an example of an assimilated evangelical Christian faith with a particular flavor, i.e., Carmelite and Contemplative.

³⁷ These categories are of Fr. C. de Jesús Sacramentado, *San Juan de la Cruz: El hombre, el doctor, el poeta* (Barcelona: Labor, 1935), 56 ff.

³⁸ St. Augustine, *Confessiones*, X, 27.

³⁹ In the background, I have taken into consideration, Ch..A. Bernard, *Théologie Symbolique* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1976).

⁴⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.I, a. 3. Aquinas uses the term "Sacra Doctrina". Cfr. M.-D. Chenu, *Aquinas and His Role in Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2002); C. García, *Teología espiritual contemporánea. Corrientes y perspectivas* (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2002).

It is a path of self-denial (Mt.7:14; 10:39; Mk. 8:34-35; Jn.12:25-2A 7).⁴¹

III. LIFE, WORKS AND TIMES

It is not my intention to trace here a complete biography of our Mystical Doctor. However, let us take note of some significant details so as to contextualize his work and their spiritual doctrine.

*Biography: Sketch of a Life*⁴²

Juan de la Cruz was born Juan de Yepes in Fontiveros, Avila sometime in 1542. He was the son of weavers and merchants. He entered Carmel at 20, adopting the name Juan de Santo Matía. He studied arts or philosophy for three years in the University of Salamanca. He was ordained a priest in the old cathedral of the same city. Afterwards he studied one year of theology (1567-1568). He studied theology for only one year. Imagine, a future doctor of the church was not even a bachelor of theology, but most probably of philosophy since three years was sufficient for the title of "bachiller". But in the summer after being ordained, while on vacation in Medina del Campo and before studying theology, he met St. Teresa of Jesus who convinced him to join his reform. He had been the victim of religious persecutions first by the friars of the Ancient Observance and later by his fellow discalced. He occupied various posts such as prior and even Vicar Provincial and Definitor. He was famous as a spiritual director. He was not fond of parroquial work. As a contemplative, he preferred solitude or being the spiritual director or mystagogue of people of various backgrounds: priests, religious, lay, rich or poor. He wrote his famous works during his free time and in request to a petition. He did not attempt any systematic thought. He just wanted to share, to communicate the experience of the Mystery. This is

⁴¹ Cfr. J.D. Gaitán, "El camino de la Cruz. Transfiguración del hombre sanjuanista" *Revista de Espiritualidad* 53 91994), 43-118.

⁴² The best sanjuanist biography is still C. de Jesús Sacramentado, *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz*, 12th ed. (Madrid: BAC, 1991). See also: E. de la M. de Dios-O. Steggink, *Tiempo y vida de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: BAC, 1992).

mystagogy. It is magisterium of the Mystery, letting the Mystery be the teacher, facilitator, guide and over all experience with the human guide being a companion who disappears in the background out of love and adoration of the same Mystery.

Mystagogical Magisterium: The Communication of Substantial and Solid Doctrine

This communication of St. John's thought, which "proceeds from a potent experience of reality, which is descriptive in its metaphysical reach, of the vital movement of man seen in the clear mystical experience as a mystical journeying"⁴³ has the following central focal points:

- a) God in His transcendence who condescendingly reveals Himself in love to man, remaining a hidden mystery in His Transcendence as being present in the immanence of human history. This is the meaning of Mystery: the paradox of God transcendent and immanent in the realm of human experience.
- b) Jesus Christ is the Divine Word, the fullness of the revelation of God of Himself. He becomes God as "Amado" or Spouse or Beloved. He becomes the accessible God in love. Christ is God's revelation in person. He is the Mystical Theology in person since theology means God-talks not just God-talk (or talk about God).⁴⁴ It is God who Talks as the Mystery in its transcendence present in immanence, personally present as a human person in Jesus Christ.
- c) Man is both flesh and spirit, material and immaterial. He is to undergo the dynamic experience of transformation from the natural to the supernatural.
- d) This transformation is the Dark Night, the transit point wherein God is pure light. God reveals Himself, talks

⁴³ F. Urbina, *La persona humana en san Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Instituto Social León XIII, 1956), 282.

⁴⁴ Cfr. J. Macquarrie, *God-Talk* (New York: SCM Press Ltd., 1967). From a historical viewpoint, see the excellent synthesis of Y. M.-J. Congar, "Théologie" *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, 341-502.

about Himself. This is Mystical Theology.⁴⁵ The Dark Night is its context, ambiance and historical realization. It becomes concrete in the theological life wherein man puts on the three theological virtues: Faith, Hope and Love as existential attitudes directed towards God in Himself in contemplation. The three theological virtues underly the sacramental nature of John's mysticism. It is sacramental because there is presence of transcendence in immanence and mediation of the Absolute in order to be experienced by man and be reachable in the state of union.

- e) Love is the key to such a transformation. It is not only the end, but the principle, the living force. Love is realized in communion, in the sharing of God and man. In equality defined by participation, without loss of identity but intimacy and sharing of the divine life of love.
- f) The demand of love is the knowledge of the relative value of the cosmos, of the whole of creation with God, the Absolute All, as the criteria. There is an infinite distance between God and the value of the creatures (2A 8, 3) The meaning of this determination is Christ's cross, wherein God became nothing so that man could be everything in Him.
- g) Contemplation is not just an elevated mode of prayer, but a lifestyle characterized by understanding the beauty of everything else in the light of God who bestowed their beauty (C 6, 1). Beauty must be loved in its invisible source, echoing St. Paul (C 4,1; Rom. 1:20). Contemplation is looking through created beauty to the Uncreated beauty which is God in love. To attain this contemplative attitude some elements may be needed: solitude, silence, simplicity, discipline, focus and above all, genuine love that is willing to sacrifice, to give oneself totally and that goes straight to the essence and not giving premium to sentimental accidentals and feelings.

⁴⁵ Cfr. E. Pacho, "San Giovanni della Croce, mistico e teologo" Several Authors, *Vita cristiana ed esperienza mistica* (Rome: Teresianum, 1982), 297-330; H. Hapig, "Die Theologie der Mystik nach dem hl. Johannes vom Kreuz" *Scholastik* 12 (1938), 481-497; L. Cilleruelo, "San Juan de la Cruz, místico de frontera" *Estudio Agustiniano* 13 (1978), 427-463; F. Ruiz, "Giovanni della Croce" Several Authors, *La mistica. Fenomenologia e riflessione teologica* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1984), 547-597.

- h) Beauty is the key ontological element. It reveals how everything created participates in God. Beauty is the motive for contemplation. Beauty is the very essence of God which He shares in love with creation and is the very motive of the itinerary through a Dark Night, wherein we learn, through Mystical Theology, what real beauty is by emptying our limited capacity to appreciate beauty.
- i) All this signifies transcendent knowledge, beyond the limitations of human science and language going back to the ineffability, which is not just the limitation of the word, but its plenitude in the origin which "we do not know... although it is the night" (Poem IV, 1).

Bibliographical Description of Substantial and Solid Doctrine in the Major Works

In the light of all these, we could have a general understanding of the fundamental pretensions of at least John's major works, whose principal and directing idea is the final cause of the mystical movement: the union of love.⁴⁶ This, in a nutshell, is his substantial and solid doctrine.

John did not write much, but he did say much. His poems such as the *Spiritual Canticle* of 200 verses, *Dark Night* of 40 verses, *Living Flame* of 24 verses, *Fountain* of 35 verses, *Pastor* of 20 verses, *Romances* of 310 verses and others. He also left behind some 200 *Sayings of Light and Love*, 33 *letters* and some 9 *Warnings for Religious*.

The *Spiritual Canticle*, which John finished in Granada in 1584 and which started as a poem in the prison cell of Toledo in 1577/1578, offers a broad, long and adventurous path of 40 chapters, with an existential crescendo, on the tensions and adventures of a path of

⁴⁶ F. Urbina, *La persona humana*, 272. In the same work, this author contends: "Ya desde el comienzo de la *Subida* afirma que el principio mismo del movimiento místico de trascendencia, la fuerza misma que mueve al alma a emprender el camino de las noches, es el amor... En el libro de la *Noche*, la finalidad de la purificación más absoluta de la noche del espíritu es el estado de unión del alma con Dios... El movimiento profundo de la noche lo volvemos a encontrar en el *Cántico* y en la *Llama*, una formidable tensión de maor, pero allí el acento cambia.", *Ibid.*, 194-195.

mystical love, inspired in the *Song of Songs* wherein God is revealed as the Beloved or Spouse in Jesus Christ. It is the same God who offers graces so that the experiential transformation into equality would be consumed (*matrimonio espiritual*). This work is a narrative of the life of love. Love defines living, being and acting. Love is everything (C 27, 8).

The *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, not Ascent to Mount Carmel, but "of". The title manifests that the author speaks of the ascent of man to himself. Man is Carmel. Carmel is not a distant, objectified ideal. It is man as subject of the mystical experience. The mountain is man whose summit is God, which John started in *El Calvario*, Jaén in 1578 but did not finish, is a treatise, the most structured of all of John's works, which has for its initial theme the poem *Night* but did not comment on this poem. Here John speaks of the active dimension of the theological life, emphasizing man's efforts (who is both flesh and spirit), man's choice given that everything else is "nada" (nothing) compared to the real "Todo" (Everything) which is God. The demands are clear for they spring from anthropological and psychological structures and dynamics focused on an active asceticism based on the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Love. These demands have the aim of facilitating union with God and only God (1A 4-5) in Jesus Christ (2A 22 and 7), whom we must follow and the response is in Faith, Hope and Love made concrete in opting for God and self-negation in accord with the Evangelical spirit.⁴⁷

John commenced the work which has the title of *Noche Oscura* in 1582 but like *Ascent* did not finish it. Here passivity is emphasized, always emphasizing that Faith, Hope and Love are also offered by God and not just man's response to God. It has the same thematic and structure as with *Ascent*, but with emphasis on passivity. It is as if *Ascent* and *Noche* form part of a diptych, but clearly the climax is in the *Passive Night of the Spirit*. The theme of this work is letting God do it or passive purification by means of "contemplación infusa" or letting God love us, enter into our lives, communicate Himself as Himself with no holds barred, with no obstacles on our part. This implies man's passivity and God's activity, who moves with passion and love towards man. This passion becomes a presence in an ambiance of love and mercy which is the night itself.

⁴⁷ Cfr. J. D. Gaitán, "San Juan de la Cruz y su 'dichosa ventura'. Opción por Dios y purificación de los sentidos" *Revista de Espiritualidad* 45 (1986), 489-520.

Living Flame of Love is a discourse on the climax of mystical life and its eschatological opening into eternal life. John began writing this work in Granada in 1582 and was concluded in La Peñuela, Jaén in 1591 shortly before his death in Ubeda. This speaks of man's glorification, continuing and deepening the notion of matrimonial encounter of the Spiritual Canticle. The flame is the Holy Spirit who transforms man, the piece of wood, into the same flame, the same heat and light, making man "Dios por participación" in glory, in a new life characterized by the presence of the Trinity in glory (F 1, 1). It does not deny the negation, darkness, mortification of the Dark Night but rather reinforces it (F 1, 18), but the emphasis is the state of full communion with glimpses into eschatological glory.

All these bring us back to the sense of his poetry. His poetry is diverse in thematic. It is not for us to discuss them all here. But assuredly they are all religious-spiritual-mystical in nature with the union of God as thematic.

On this regard, the point I want to stress here is that the poetry is the immediate expression and link to the original mystical experience. "Mysticism lacks language, properly speaking. The expression of mysticism is intimate mystical experience. Poetry does not do anything except translate into words, in as much as it can, that experience. The attitude of John of the Cross with regards to poetic language is balanced: he perceives their insufficiency and, at the same time, acknowledges their power, and makes full use of it."⁴⁸ Its very nature leads us to the notion of grace, the gift of God. Everything is gratuitous; everything is grace. John's poetry speaks of the gracious love of God to man and is in itself a response by being of service to the Beloved (C 36, 4). In the *Romances about the Trinity and the Incarnation*, we see his first schema or sketch of the History of Salvation as a narrative that commences with the Trinitarian God and culminates in God's gift of Jesus Christ in the Incarnation. The poem *The Fountain* speaks of the Mysterious origin of grace which is the One and Triune God who offers Himself as nourishment in the Eucharist. In the poem about the *Pastor*, God searches for His beloved like a Pastor

⁴⁸ J.L. L. Aranguren, *San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Ediciones Júcar, 1973), 41.

for he suffers and dies out of love, which has its full meaning in the death of Christ out of love on the Cross. We can also mention the *Sayings of Light and Love*, especially the *Prayer of the Enamored Soul*, wherein man sings of the generosity of God who gave Him everything, giving Him the right to possess everything even God Himself because of negation in Christ Jesus.

IV. THEMES AND PERSPECTIVE: PATHS, GOALS AND FULFILLMENT

John of the Cross did not know to speak of anything else except of man's union with God. He says: "perfection is the union of the soul with God (2N 3, 3)." Union is mutual and not just the sticking of man to God, but is the absorption of man into God and God giving Himself to man (F 3, 82). "The union of love means: the passion of God for man and the passion of man for God."⁴⁹ This is the leitmotiv of his work, its principal theme, his greatest obsession, so to speak.⁵⁰

The Path Traced from the Attainment of Union: Schemas and Purpose

In his major works, John speaks from the viewpoint of the fulfillment of the journey of the union.⁵¹ Thus, in every work he only retraces the path of the union already attained, which he

⁴⁹ F. Ruiz, *Místico y Maestro. San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1986), 69.

⁵⁰ "En san Juan de la Cruz, el concepto de unión con Dios es una grandiosa síntesis que lo abarca todo... La unión de amor ha sido la fuerza interior de la vida del Santo, y en su pensamiento, que es sistematización de su experiencia vital, la idea orientadora y básica de la edificación de su sistema", F. Urbina, *La persona humana*, 267 & 272. Personally, I do not accept this use of the word "system" which F. Ruiz has assimilated and made into a global model of interpreting St. John of the Cross. Cfr. J. Sánchez de Murillo, "Estructura del pensamiento de S. Juan de la Cruz. Ensayo de interpretación fenomenológica" Several Authors, *Experiencia y Pensamiento en San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1990), 297-334.

⁵¹ Cfr. J. V. Rodríguez, "Experiencia colmante de Dios en Juan de la Cruz" *Revista de Espiritualidad* 54 (1995), 293-325.

and others, most significant among them, St. Teresa of Jesus,⁵² have already reached. He speaks of a road already travelled and invites others to take the adventure. This is the basis of what he calls "doctrina sustancial y sólida".

John writes:

- ⇒ "The doctrine I wish to treat... contains the mode of ascending towards the summit of the mount, which is the high state of perfection, which we call union of the soul with God" (A, Arg.1).
- ⇒ "The soul sings in the strophes of the dark night that it is already in perfection, which is the union of love with God" (N, Anot.)
- ⇒ "As the Apostle says, love is the link of perfection, which is the union of God with the soul" (C 31, 1)

We see in John's works schemas such as Beginner, Proficient and Advanced (focusing on man) or Purgative, Illuminative and Unitive ways (focusing on the process following the Pseudo-Dionisius) and, following the Apostle St. Paul, Faith, Hope and Love to characterize the direct way to God. We also see anthropological considerations: Flesh, Spirit, Potencies, Appetites, Apprehensions, etc. All of them are geared towards existential and experiential union with God: metaphysical in character given the transcendental directionality and mystical for its rootedness in the Mystery in its immanent presence or sacramentality and always in loving, endearing and intimate terms.

Some Fundamental Notions on Sanjuanist Union: The Goal of Christian Life

Union⁵³ is, first and foremost, presence. It is *essential or ontological* for it is God who preserves the being of man or just natural

⁵² On the relationship of these twin souls, cfr. E. Pacho, "Santa Teresa y San Juan de la Cruz: convergencias y diferencias" *Monte Carmelo* 107 (1999), 3-37; E. de la M. de Dios, *El Monte y el Castillo* (Ávila: Ediciones TAU, 1987).

⁵³ I am following here the schema of St. John of the Cross himself in C 11, 3. See the study of E. Pacho, "«Descubre tu Presencia» La estrofa once del segundo

in terms of preservation of being (2A, 5-2-3; C 8,3; F 2, 5; 3, 18; 4, 7); it is by *grace or theological* in which sin is forgiven and that there is union in the supernatural order or it is salvific (2A 5, 4; C 22, 28, F, 4, 16); and by *spiritual affection or mystical* which is supernatural, sanctifying and not just salvific or redemptive; in the same vein, intimate, special and truly extraordinary such that it gives joy (C 11, 3; 2A 5, 2) such that we enter into the very core of God's gratuitousness who gives to whom He wishes (2A 32, 2). The love of God is always in movement (F 1, 8).

Because union is perfection, it could be identifiable with holiness or sanctity. The key to understanding holiness in St. John of the Cross is love which "makes equal the lover with the beloved" (1A 4, 3-4; 1, 5; 2N 13, 9) and God is always the principal lover (C 31, 2), the "principal agent" (F 3, 29), "guide and mover" (F 3, 46), the "Good Pastor" (C 22, 1) who loves man from eternity and in the Passive Night calls us to allow ourselves to be loved by Him the way only He can. This is the essence of contemplation. This is the true secret of Christian contemplation: it is not loving God and neighbor, but allowing ourselves to be loved by who loved us first and from all eternity and whose love is matchless. Only in fully understanding this secret can there be the plenitude of union with God. Only then could we realize that God is the Supreme Teacher, who is like a loving mother who gives us sweet and tasteful spiritual milk without any merit on our part (1N 1, 2). It is God who moves us from the extremity of our lowness towards Divine Union (2A 17, 2-3). It is God who takes the initiative for this restless journey wherein the soul does not rest until it reaches God (C 22, 6). "If the soul searches for God, the Beloved searches all the more for her" (F 3, 28).

In letting ourselves be loved by God, which presupposes love among men, love for God, and the fullness of love in Jesus Christ as God's response since eternity but fulfilled in time to man, there is a similarity in the kind of love shared by God and man. Man finally learns how to love: by totally assimilating himself to God (2N 20, 5). God teaches man how to love. Man's love is always imperfect. His reciprocity to God's love is imperfect, but is made suitable, acceptable, holy in Jesus Christ. God is the great mystagogue in Jesus Christ and empowering through His Spirit of Love. We learn how to love by letting ourselves be

Cántico" *Estudios Sanjuanistas*, Vol. II, 219-242; F. Ruiz, *Introducción a San Juan de la Cruz. El hombre, los escritos, el sistema* (Madrid: BAC, 1968), 389-395.

loved directly by God. Only then do we conform to the will of God (2A 5, 3). This gives meaning to the negation in the Dark Night. Negation is an act of freedom. "Only the free spirit could adhere itself to God and to God alone. To renounce things is an expansion (dilation) not a limitation of being."⁵⁴

Thus, there is a mutual self-giving between God and man, symbolized by matrimony,⁵⁵ who is now "God by participation" (C 22, 3), in perfection: because there is total harmony and mutual giving, without sacrificing identity, with no absorption, with respect for one's individuality, unlike in some oriental traditions such as Hinduism (Atman-Brahman) or Taoism (Dao-De), etc. John writes: "each one is one and the other, but both are one" (C 12, 7). There is freedom of being, autonomy of otherness so that there is a space of exchange, which gives way to equality because of the transformative union. Man loves God with the very will of God and is loved by God as such by His own will which is the Holy Spirit (C 39, 4-6; F, 3,6).

This is the very constitution of the mystical experience⁵⁶ which is *dark* because it goes beyond unaided human rationality and needs a superior light starting with faith; *permanent* because it is not limited to phenomena but is continuous; *immediate* because God is felt or experienced; and *Trinitarian* or Christian wherein participation is given its true meaning: initiation into the Community of God Himself, who is love (Ο Θεοζαγαπη εστιν), as the First Letter of John (1 John 4:8) tells us and as Benedict XVI⁵⁷ recently has reminded us.

⁵⁴ J. Baruzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de la expérience mystique* (Paris: Ed. Salvator, 1999), 470.

⁵⁵ See the conceptual and textual link from John of the Cross of "unión", "perfección", "matrimonio", J.V. Rodríguez, *San Juan de la Cruz. Profeta enamorado*, 243-245. A more detailed lexical presentation can be found in J. L. Astigarraga, A. Borell et al., *Concordancias*.

⁵⁶ I have followed the exposition of J.V. Rodríguez, *Ibid.*, 246-247.

⁵⁷ Cfr. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican City: Editrice Libreria Vaticana, 2005).

*The Theological Life in Union*⁵⁸

The three theological virtues are the essence, the summary, the core of the Christian Contemplative life which John symbolized following the Carmelite tradition in terms of Mountain, Flame, Night, Journey through the Cosmos. The three theological virtues are common to all Christian traditions for they form the very core of Christian living and are the keys to a profound spirituality with a metaphysical directionality and mystical rootedness. They are the historical realizations of the Christian life.

John offered us a spirituality, but his spirituality is a spiritual theology because in it God-Talks. And God communicates to us, his Theology takes place in his offering of Jesus Christ and the way which is Jesus Christ is to be lived in Faith, Hope and Love.

Better said, John himself calls his spirituality a Mystical Theology which is not learned or acquired like what he called "Scholastic Theology" (C Prol. 3), but is infused in love, in contemplation, in letting God speak in us, communicate His very life in us in love.⁵⁹ All of the theological virtues culminate in Love or Charity: in letting us be loved by God, who is a Person and not a program or just Absolute value or principle.⁶⁰

The *Christian Contemplative Life* is summed up by the Theological Life and it is in this living that the great dogmatic themes such as

⁵⁸ I have taken into account the reflections of F. Ruiz, "Estructuras de la vida teologal" *Monte Carmelo* 88 (1980), 367-387.

⁵⁹ Cfr. the masterful survey of C. García, "Teología mística" E. Pacho (ed.), *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz* (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 2000), 1379-1395.

⁶⁰ "Dios nuestro Señor es algo muy distinto de un «programa» que hayamos de realizar o una causa noble que defender. Es un Ser Personal, que habla y ama como persona y pide respuesta en el mismo plano. Si se tratara de un dial, social o religioso, encargado a nuestro empeño y buena voluntad, bastaba con que hubiera dado al hombre fuerza física y moral, capacidades técnicas con que llevarlo a cabo. Sabemos, sin embargo, que el hombre ha recibido mucho más. Dios ha venido, se ha dado en su Trinidad personal al hombre, para vivir de manera permanente en él. Esto significa que quiere amor directo, relaciones personales, intimidad. Para actuar sobre la creación externa no era necesario un don tan exorbitante como es la inhabitación de la Santísima Trinidad", F. Ruiz, *Introducción a San Juan de la Cruz*, 385.

Trinity, Christ, Redemption, Sin, Virtues, Mediation, Inspiration of the Spirit, Fraternal Love, Revelation, Church, etc. should be viewed. John did not want to expound on dogma, but to teach how to live a concrete way of life which is Christian, Carmelite and Contemplative.

Our Mystical Doctor offers us "substantial and solid doctrine" hinged upon Union of man with God, but made concrete in theological life, in true wisdom: which is knowing how to live in conformity with the model of Christ amidst the realities of transformation, negation, mortification, crosses, guilt, resurrection, sanctification, etc.

The theological life is Christian. It becomes mystical in John of the Cross because he presents us with a potent, radical and intense version of Faith, Hope and Love in order to allow us to reach the real God and to be loved by Him in an experience of transition which he called "Dark Night", underlying its transcendence and immanence within man with the symbol of the "Mountain" and its intensity as a transforming force with the symbol of the "Living Flame". All of which have love as their culmination, criteria. Love moves first and foremost from the infinite initiative of God offering total and personal communion with man, and man's response from his finitude thus opening a path of transformation, of intensification of presence from essential to special affection, from the natural to the supernatural.

This mysticism is contemplative not because it flees from the cosmos or world (or *fuga mundi* in the old monastic traditions)⁶¹ but because it is immediate in effect, total in its scope or dimension, infinite or transcendental in its projection, intimate in its growth and expansion within the subject, ecclesial in its context, passive in its attitude, and identifiable with the union itself as means, disposition and the very goal itself of union (2A 6, 6). The contemplative sees the beauty of the

⁶¹ "Jean de la Croix est au premier rang de ces Mystiques qui, en définitive, ont adhéré à l'univers. Ce n'est pas assez de dire qu'il a chanté et analysé, la rencontre de Dieu et de l'Âme seuls. Ce sont les choses elles-mêmes, d'abord rejetées par la négation de la nuit, qui se réabsorbent dans l'âme, sont découvertes en Dieu et sont aimées passionnément en leur grandeur. De là ces extases lyriques qu'entrevoient les témoignages et que les poèmes ressuscitent. Mais ce Dieu, en qui Jean de la Croix retrouve le monde, est atteint par delà les choses et par delà les images, en un centre intérieur où il demeure.", J. Baruzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de la expérience mystique*, 740.

Cosmos from the Source: who is the Fountain that flows even though it is night, within the Mystery of transcendence. Contemplation, John of the Cross, does not focus on phenomena and other accidentals, but focuses on the essentials of Christian life viewed from the cross, viewed from serious commitment, viewed from radical realism, respecting the individuality and sensibility of each reader: not imposing the Carmelite charisma in its specifics to everyone, but in its universal gift which is contemplation, which is nothing more than intimate and direct relationship with God as Himself by allowing ourselves to be loved by Him. This is the initiative that is repeated till the end in the works of John of the Cross, who constantly challenges us with the "substantial and solid doctrine" he offers us. □