

St. John of the Cross: Through the Dark Night to the Union of Love

By

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INTRODUCTION

It is a little over midnight. The bell of the Carmelite Convent in Ubeda (Jaen) rings calling the friars to Matins. The dying priest says softly: "Glory be to God. I am going to pray Matins to heaven." Then, he kisses a crucifix and prays slowly: "In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum" - *Into Your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit*. And he dies calmly, peacefully. The man is John of the Cross. The day, December 14, 1591.

Four hundred years later, the death of John of the Cross represents a unique point of departure to recall, evoke and celebrate his singular life. Unparalleled poet, outstanding theologian, extraordinary mystic and Doctor of the Church, the 16th century Carmelite Reformer has something important to tell us today, as we journey through the last decade of the 20th century.

What could be relevant for us in the life and teachings of the author of *The Dark Night and The Living Flame of Love*? Let us try to answer first a moral radical question: *Who is John of the Cross*?

1. JOHN OF THE CROSS: LIFE AND WORKS

It took me some time before feeling attracted to John of the Cross. My lingering impressions were, for a time, rather negative: he seemed to be too demanding, too cold, and even a sad saint; somewhat irrelevant, from the perspective of liberation theology. My false impressions began to change when Teresa of Avila introduced John of the Cross to me.

From the moment she met him, then a newly ordained Carmelite priest, in Medina del Campo (Valladolid), on August 14, 1567, Mother Theresa was joyful: undoubtedly, he could be the helper she was looking for to introduce the Carmelite Reform also in the Carmelite Order of Men. One year later, Teresa met John in Valladolid (Castille) – and conversed with him, and prayed with him. Her assessment: “Although he is small, I think he is great in the eyes of God”; “he leads a life of great penance”; “he possesses a deep prayer life and good understanding.”¹

Later on, in 1571, Teresa and John met and lived in Avila for a while: she as the Prioress of *La Encarnacion* and he as confessor and spiritual director of the Carmelite community – and of Teresa. Seven years later she wrote: “After he left Avila, I have not found one like him in the whole of Castille.”² In 1577, she had written a letter to King Philip II, to intercede on behalf of John of the Cross now jailed in Toledo: “In Avila, they consider him a saint. In my opinion I think he is and has been all his life.”³

The author of “Las Moradas” (*The Mansions*) convinced me to approach the writer of “Cántico Espiritual” (*The Spiritual Canticle*). Thus I started to read the life of St. John of the Cross.⁴

Juan de Yepes and Juan de Santo Matía

Like every human life, John's has a beginning, in a particular place, at a concrete time in history. He was born in Fontiveros, Avila, Castille, Spain, in 1542. His life, then, developed through the Spanish 16th century, the Golden Century highlighted by the colonization of the New World, the Inquisition, the flowering of the arts, theology and mysticism; it is the century of Miguel de Cervantes, Francisco de Vitoria, Bartolomé de las Casas, Luis de Leon, Ignacio de Loyola, Teresa de Jesus and Juan de La Cruz.

Juan is the third son of Gonzalo Yepes and Catalina Alvarez. Juan Yepes lived the first six years of his life in Fontiveros. Here he lost his second brother Luis and his father. Looking for greener pastures, widowed Catalina goes with her two sons (Francisco and Juan) to Arévalo, an important city of Avila, and, after three years, to Medina del Campo, then a great and prosperous city in Valladolid – and, therefore the refuge of many poor people, including the Yepes family.

The Yepes family was poor. Catalina and Francisco (and his wife Ana Izquierdo) worked for the flourishing textile industry, but in menial jobs. Their

¹TERESA OF AVILA, *Letter*, September, 1568. See ANA MA. LOPEZ-OTAZU, *Aproximación a San Juan de la Cruz de la mano de Santa Teresa* (Madrid: Narcea, S.A. de Ediciones, 1990), pp. 19-20.

²*Letter*, November-December, 1578; cf. ANA MA. LOPEZ-OTAZU, *o. c.*, p. 37.

³*Letter*, December, 1577; cf. ANA MA. LOPEZ-OTAZU, *o. c.*, p. 63.

⁴The best life I have read so far in the one written by CRISOGONO DE JESUS, O.C.D., *Vida de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: BAC, 1991, Ed. 12).

income was not enough. Juan, then, knew poverty and become a friend of the poor: his brother Francisco often brought a very poor person home -one he met on the streets of Arevalo or Medina del Campo- to give him a roof, to share with him his bread and, at night, his blanket.⁵

In Medina del Campo, Juan Yepes is placed consecutively in two charitable institutions. As the son of an indigent widow, he is interned first in the Children's College of the Doctrine (1551-1559), where he learns the Christian Doctrine and, perhaps, some letters, acts as an acolyte and an alms collector (for the children of the college).

From 1559 to 1563, we see Juan Yepes working in another charitable institution of Castille, namely, a hospital for the poor. This is an important period in the life of John: he studies with the Jesuits, who initiate him in rhetoric, grammar and the arts. During this time, Juan feels called to the religious life and decides to enter the Carmelite Order in Medina del Campo in 1563. With the new habit, he takes a new name: Juan Yepes becomes Juan de Santo Matía.

From Medina del Campo, where he made his religious profession, he is sent to the famous university of Salamanca (Castille), where he studies (1564-1568) philosophy and theology. His biographers tell us that Juan de Santo Matía leads an exemplary life— an austere, prayerful and studious life.⁶

John of the Cross, the Reformer

The inauguration of the first Reformed Convent of Carmel (men's branch) took place on November 28, 1568, in Duruelo (Avila). On this day, Fray Juan de Santo Matía becomes Fray Juan de la Cruz and commits himself totally to the formation of novices, students and the consolidation and expansion of the Order of Descalzed Carmelites. As a consummate formator, he gives us this advice: "The most pernicious thing for those called is to pass by many hands."⁷

While the Descalzed Carmelites grow in number very rapidly, the Carmelites of the Observance (Calzed Carmelites) do not; both belong still to the same branch of the Carmelite Order. But their mutual relationships are not cordial; as a matter of fact, there are some major conflicts. One of them, with John of the Cross, the Reformer. We saw him earlier as confessor and spiritual director of Teresa and her nuns at La Encarnacion, in Avila. These are very happy with the young and saintly friar; but not the calzed Carmelites of Avila. Why? The friars of the Observance consider John of the Cross as too radical -a rebel! What to do? Punish him properly; that is, send him to prison. Some of his Carmelite brothers visit him and tell him: "Consider yourself a prisoner." John of the

⁵CF. JESUS BARRENA, *Juan de la Cruz, utopia deseable* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1991), pp. 33, 36, 40-41; TEOFANES EGIDO, "Aproximación a la biografía de San Juan de la Cruz," *Revista de Espiritualidad*, Nos. 196-197 (1990), p. 361.

⁶Cf. CRISOGONO DE JESUS, o. c., pp. 48-66.

⁷JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Letter*, November 9, 1588; cf. CRISOGONO DE JESUS, o. c., p. 164.

Cross answers them: "Congratulations! Let us go." They travel together to the prison in the convent of Toledo (Castille).

For nine months (1577-1578), John of the Cross suffers incredible things: he is scourged, disciplined, locked up in solitary confinement, defamed . . . They even try to bribe him, for they knew he would be a great asset for the Observance; they offer him positions -and a golden cross: He also looks for Christ naked has no need on golden jewels," John of the Cross tells his jailers. Later on, he will excuse them: "They did it because they thought they were doing the right thing."⁸ Mother Teresa of Avila explains the terrible sufferings of her confessor and adviser: "God treats his friends in a terrible manner; but without offense, because this is the manner He treated His Son."⁹

In August 1578, John of the Cross escapes from prison to become thereafter the indisputable spiritual director of the Reformed Carmelites of Mother Teresa of Avila, the single most import person -with Teresa- in the Reform of the Carmelite Men, superior of different convents in Andalucia (El Calvario, Baeza, Granada), the great writer of theological and mystical books.

After being prior in Segovia (Castille), 1588-1591, John of the Cross is persecuted again; this time by his own Descalzed Brothers, now separated completely from the Observance. The General Chapter of the Descalzed Carmelites left him, for the first time since the beginning of the Reform, without any position and wanted to send him to Mexico - in exile really! The campaign of defamation started by two brothers is truly unbelievable. But John of the Cross went through the final stage of his life with unusual serenity, patience, humility and joy.

Last year, on July 17, 1991, I made a pilgrimage to Segovia to pray before the tomb of St. John of the Cross and of the painting of Christ crowned with thorns and carrying the cross. This Christ talked to John of the Cross thus: "You have served me well. Ask me for anything you want, and I will give it to you." The Lord tells him the same thing three times. After the third time, the Carmelite friar, now tired and sick, answers the Lord carrying the cross: "I only want to suffer and be despised and considered as nothing because of you." John of the Cross narrated this story to his dear brother Francisco (his mother had died much earlier). And he told him the story because he foresaw the approaching persecutions and did not want his brother -a true saint also- to worry about him, but to rejoice with him.

According to his biographers, John of the Cross possessed permanent joy! If the nuns he directed appeared sad, he consoled them -with spoken or written words. Once, a witness tells us, John of the Cross shouted joyfully: "Oh qué buen Dios tenemos!" (*O what a great God we have!*) On one occasion, a nun, Sor Francisca, asked him: "Why are you so happy?" John of the Cross answered

⁸*Declaration of Pedro de la Purificacion; quoted by CRISOGONO DE JESUS, o. c., p. 164.*

⁹TERESA OF AVILA, *Letter*, March 10-11, 1578.

her: "Why should I not be after having worshiped and seen my Lord?" (He had just visited the Blessed Sacrament). *John of Cross, a sad saint?* (Can there truly be a sad saint?) Not at all. His poems, his works overflow with serenity, gentleness, love, joy.¹⁰

The Works of St. John of the Cross

Reading the life of the great mystic leads necessarily to his writings, that are, after all, an extension of his life. An expert on St. John of the Cross advised me thus: "The first norm to read him is this: try to be attuned spiritually. Experience shows that he is better understood by persons with the proper spirit but without much culture than by others with great culture but without spirit."¹¹ St. John of the Cross himself advises his readers of *The Spiritual Canticle* (Prol. 1) to read it with the simplicity of the spirit of love and knowledge.

I was further advised to start reading his minor works, including his poems and letters. These constitute the best introduction to his major works.¹² Thus, I read *Sayings of Light and Love*, *Counsels to a Religious on How to Reach Perfection*, *The Precautions* and others. The poems are moving and beautiful: one may begin reading his minor works with the *Romances*. I was fascinated by John of the Cross' *Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love*.

After reading some of the minor works of John of the Cross, I plunged myself into his major works. I entered first into *The Spiritual Canticle*; this led me to the others. As we all know, his major works are *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* ("Subida al Monte Carmelo"), *The Dark Night* ("Noche oscura"), *The Spiritual Canticle* ("Cántico espiritual") and *The Living Flame of Love* ("Llama de amor viva"). The first two are considered like one work -and an unfinished one: while *The Ascent* speaks mainly of active purgation, *The Night* talks of passive purgation. The other two are complete in themselves, but may be considered as another binomium: both develop the union of love between the soul and God, and its various stages. Moreover, *The Canticle* and *The Living Flame* have both two editions, prepared by St. John of the Cross (A and B); we use the second, that is B; hence CB and LB. *The Canticle* seems to be the work preferred by its author.

¹⁰Declaration of Francisca de la Madre de Dios; quoted by CRISOGONO DE JESUS, o. c., p. 287. *The Spiritual Canticle* (the most autobiographical work) reflects the continuing joy that permeates St. John of the Cross' life: its forty poems (*canciones*, songs, stanzas) were originally sung by the author and his many followers; they are songs of "praise, joy and glory" (CB, 39, 8-10). In *The Living Flame of Love*, John of the Cross tells us that in the state of union of love with God, "the soul always walks in festivity, inwardly and outwardly, and it frequently bears on its spiritual tongue a new song of great jubilation in God, a song always new, enfolded in a gladness and love arising from the knowledge the soul has of its happy state" (LB, 2, 36).

¹¹FEDERICO RUIZ SALVADOR, *Introducción General, Obras completas de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1988, Ed. 3), p. 37.

¹²BALDOMERO JIMENEZ DUQUE, "Pautas para la lectura de San Juan de la Cruz," *Teología Espiritual*, XXXV (1991), pp. 219-229.

In all his works, John of the Cross is a poet, a mystic and a theologian. He is an excellent lyrical poet. It is said that his most popular poem is *The Cantic* but, his best, *The Night*.¹³

2. THE DARK NIGHT

Throughout history, John of the Cross has helped many Christians as well as non-Christians in their journey of life to perfection. Today, the Carmelite Reformer continues to attract numberless persons, above all, religious, priests and lay faithful who are committed to follow Christ in a radical way. *Why do people continue approaching John of the Cross?*

Some go to the mystic of Fontiveros to learn more about faith; others, to deepen their life of prayer; still others, to be initiated into the mystical life and the ways that lead to it – the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive ways. In the Philippines, *Juan de la Cruz* is the representative name of the average Filipino, collectively named after John of the Cross, perhaps, because the ordinary Filipino is usually a deeply religious, trusting, poor in spirit (often, poor in fact, too) and suffering individual.

Many persons from the West as well as from the East follow John of the Cross' path in his relentless search for God's love. And many more are drawn to him by his dark night. In some countries, including Sweden, *The Dark Night* is a best-seller!

The Night of Detachment and Suffering

The *night* is one of the most powerful symbols of John of the cross. He explains thus:

We can offer three reasons for calling this journey towards union with God a night:

The first reason has to do with the point of departure, because the individual must deprive himself of his appetite for wordly possessions. This denial and privation is like a night for all his senses.

The second reason refers to the means or the road along which a person travels to this union. Now this road is faith, and for the intellect faith is also like a dark night.

¹³For our study, we are using the Spanish Edition of the original works of St. John of the Cross prepared by Editorial de Espiritualidad, with excellent notes and introductions by Jose Vicente Rodríguez and Federico Ruiz Salvador: SAN JUAN DE LA CRUZ, *Obras completas* Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1988, Ed. 3. For direct quotations in English, we are ordinarily using the translation entitled *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodríguez, O.C.D., Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979. In the text of the article, we place the corresponding references to the works of St. John of the Cross within parenthesis. The four major works are identified by the initial of the original title: *The Ascent to Mount Carmel*, or *Subida* (S); *The Dark Night*, or *Noche* (N); *The Spiritual Cantic*, or *Cántico* (C), and *The Living Flame of Love*, or *Llama* (L). Considering that we use the second edition of *Cántico* and *Llama*, we add the letter B: CB and LB, respectively.

The third reason pertains to the point of arrival, namely God. And God is also a dark night to man in this life (1 S, 2, 1).

Ordinarily, a soul must pass through two main nights, that is, the night of the senses (of the external and internal senses) and the night of the spirit (of the intellect, will and memory). In both nights, there are two stages, namely, the active and passive stage.

In a world that gives all kinds of things but not much happiness, the dark night of John of the Cross is mysteriously appealing to many of our contemporaries, who live in the darkness of suffering, injustice, meaninglessness, in the aridity of the desert. The dark night of John of the Cross, however, is not only emptiness, trials and disgrace. It is these, but as a way to feel God's presence in our lives, to experience Him in our wounded human condition. Suffering is night, then, "if there is a response of faith, love, and hope."¹⁴

The symbol of the night possesses particular appeal to people from the East. Ichiro Okumura, now a Carmelite priest, was converted to Catholic Christianity through the instrument of the contemplative Carmelite tradition, in particular of John of the Cross. Writes Okumura: "In the world of the 'dark night', I could find points of contact with oriental 'nothingness'".¹⁵

On the central path leading to Mount Carmel, or Mount of Perfection, John of the Cross writes "*nada*" -nothing (he is the doctor of the "*nadas*") six times; and on the mountain, once more, nothing.¹⁶ John of the Cross uses also other words similar to nothingness: self-denial, nakedness, detachment, poverty, emptiness. He tells Ana de Peñalosa, the lay woman for whom he wrote *The Living Flame of Love*: "Nothing, nothing; until leaving one skin and another for Christ."¹⁷ *Isn't he really too demanding?*

He would be truly demanding if he used those ascetical words as the principal ones, or as the end of his spirituality. But, John of the Cross uses them not as end but as means to the end; not as key words, but as subordinate

¹⁴FEDERICO RUIZ SALVADOR, *Introducción a Noche oscura, Obras completas*, 1. c., p. 435. In his great book of poems *Testamento del pájaro solitario*, dedicated to John of the Cross, the late Jose Luis Martín Descalzo dreams with reaching "the night-light after so many dark nights" (o. c., Estela, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1991, p. 101).

¹⁵ICHIRO OKUMURA, "Memories of My Conversion," *Dominican Ashram*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 1991), p. 129. See W. STINISSEN, O.C.D., "L'actualité de saint Jean de la Croix," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, Vol. 113, No. 4 (1991), pp. 481-497; JORDAN AUMANN, O.P., "Ascetic Teaching of St. John of the Cross," *Angelicum*, 3 (1991), pp. 339-350.

¹⁶Cf. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 1. c. pp. 66-67. In the Spanish Edition of *Obras completas*, 1. c., *El monte de perfección o Monte Carmelo* is placed under Minor Works (*Escritos breves*), pp. 127-136. In the center of the circle on top of the mountain of perfection, John of the Cross writes: "Only the honor and glory of God dwell on this mount." Surrounding the final line or arch of the mountain, he put these words: "Here there is no longer any way because for the just man there is no law, he is a law unto himself."

¹⁷Quoted by FEDERICO RUIZ SALVADOR, *Introducción a Llama de amor viva* (LB), *Obras completas*, 1. c., p. 760.

words. The key word is love and the end is the union of love with God. Now to attain that union, the mystic tells us, we have to go through the night, for to be possessed by God, we have to be dispossessed of everything else: "The heart is not satisfied with anything less than God" (CB, 35, 1); "What profit is there in anything that is not love of God, and what value has it in his sight?" (3 S, 30, 5).

God or/and Creatures?

Walking through the dark night, we ask: *God or creatures?* Only God: He is "*todo*" (everything). Compared with him, the creatures are "*nada*" (nothing). John of the Cross writes:

Since love of God and attachment to creatures are contraries, they cannot exist in the same will. What has creature to do with Creator, sensory with spiritual, visible with invisible, temporal with eternal, heavenly food that is pure and spiritual with food that is entirely sensory, the nakedness of Christ with attachment to something? (1 S, 6, 1).

All the wealth and glory of creation compared with the wealth that is God is utter poverty and misery in the Lord's sight (1 S, 4, 4-7).

It would seem -and some writers have accused him so- that John of the Cross is not in favor of *a spirituality of creation*: he seems to be opposed to considering the creatures as path to God. It is, we believe, a false accusation. It is true that John of the Cross teaches in *Ascent-Night* that to reach God one has to be totally detached from creatures; but, it is partly true only: it is the first stage of the journey through the dark night. In the second stage, that completes his teaching, God's creation is, so to speak, re-encountered.

At the beginning of the journey through the night, the soul has to leave "the flowers" while searching for the Beloved the Son of God. Once the soul is deeply united to God in love, then the creatures are seen in God's light -and the soul loves them: they are the creation of the Beloved; they are "graceful," "clothed in beauty"; their beauty is also "the beauty of the Son of God" (CB, 36,7). In a sense, the creatures "are" the Beloved, God: "Insomuch as the soul in *this case is united to God, she feels that all things are God*" (CB, 14-15, 5):

Mi Amado las montañas . . .
My Beloved is the mountains,
And lonely wooded valleys,
Strange islands,
And resounding rivers,
The whistling of love-stirring breezes,
The tranquil night
At the time of the rising dawn,
Silent music (*la música callada*),
Sounding solitude (*la soledad sonora*),

The supper that refreshes and deepens love
(La cena que recrea y enamora) (CB, 14-15).

John of the Cross contemplates the beauty of creation with gratitude and joy. He praises God for the flowers and the rivers and the birds and the light of the sun. God or creatures? God and creatures. But the creatures -all things- loved in God. John of the Cross advises us to be totally detached from creatures so that we can be uniquely attached to God. And attached to God through the union of love, "we reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things" (2 N, 9, 1). The soul bound to God with love exclaims:

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 all things are mine; and God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me (*Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love*).

The purgation of the senses and of the spirit through the dark night implies detachment, self-denial, ascetism, acceptance of trials and suffering. The trials of life are often an obstacle to reaching the dawn of transforming love. "God would want all to be perfect," John of the Cross tells us, but He finds many of us unwilling to bear suffering and accept trials – to purify our love (L, 2, 27), to be patient, to trust in God, the main agent through the active night, and the agent of the passive night, infused contemplation and the transforming union of love between Him and the soul: God "does not fail those who seek Him with a simple and righteous heart; nor does He fail to impart what is needful for the way until getting them to the clear and pure light of love" (1 N, 10, 4).

As we walk through the night, the dark night becomes later a "glad" (N, 3) and "tranquil" (CB, 14-15, 22) and "serene" night (CB, 39):

Oh noche que guiaste!
Oh noche amable más que la alborada!
Oh noche que juntaste
Amado con amada,
Amada en el Amado transformada!
 O guiding night!
 O night more lovely than the dawn!
 O night that has united
 the Lover with His beloved,
 transforming the beloved in her Lover!
(The Dark Night, 5)

Following Jesus Christ

Why the heavy stress on detachment, mortifications and trials? Because we have to follow Christ: "If it is not to imitate Him, this life is not good"

(*Letter*, July 6, 1591); "A man makes progress only through imitation of Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life" (2 S, 7, 8). Therefore, "Imitate Christ who is supremely perfect and supremely holy and you will never err" (*Maxims on Love*), 78).

The following of Jesus Christ, the Spouse, the Beloved, the Son of God demands Gospel radicalism: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me" (Mk. 8:34-35; cf. Mt. 6:19-24). John of the Cross advises us: "Let Christ crucified be enough for you, and with Him suffer and take your rest, and hence annihilate yourself in all inward and outward things" (*Maxims on Love*, 13).

Only one thing is necessary: following the crucified Lord. Teresa of Avila said: "God alone suffices." John of the Cross tells us: *Jesus Christ alone suffices!* "In giving us His Son, His only Word, God spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word – and He has no more to say" (2 S, 22, 3). We do not need, then, new revelations, or visions, or locutions, because – God says – "He is my entire locution and response and vision and revelation, which I have already spoken, answered, manifested, and revealed to you, by giving Him to you as a brother, companion, master, ransom and reward" (2 S, 22, 5). Indeed, John of the Cross tells God, in Jesus Christ "You gave me all I desire" (*Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love*).

Through the dark night of the senses and of the spirit, we are asked to follow Christ carrying the cross, for the cross is the staff of the journey of life: "Do not seek Christ without the cross" (*Letter to Fr. Luis de San Angelo*, not dated); "He who seeks not the cross of Christ seeks not the glory of Christ" (*Maxims on Love*, 23).

Some of our contemporaries are turned off by the cross of St. John of the Cross. Influenced by our secular and materialistic world, that overvalues comfort, they flee from the cross. Even among Christians, some prefer to speak almost exclusively of the Risen Lord, not of the crucified Lord. John of the Cross is reminding us powerfully that there can be no resurrection without crucifixion; no crucifixion without the cross. And without the cross -suffering, trials, mortification-, there can be no genuine liberation.

Liberating Spirituality

Some socially committed writers have criticized John of the Cross for being, apparently, personally individualistic and socially unconcerned. They have labeled his spirituality as *evasive*, that is, as not liberating. *Is it really not liberating?*

We answer these charges, in general, by stating the obvious: when John of the Cross speaks of the soul's union of love with God, he is not talking of an isolated soul; rather, he is speaking of a mutual union of love which is union-

communion. Commenting *We shall weave garlands*, a verse from stanza 30 of *The Canticle*, the author writes:

This verse most appropriately refers to Christ and the Church, for in it, the Church, the Bride of Christ, addresses Him saying: let us weave garlands (understanding by garlands, all the holy souls engendered by Christ in the Church). Each holy soul is like a garland adorned with the flowers of virtues and gifts, and all of them together form a garland for the head of Christ, the Bridegroom (CB, 30, 7).¹⁸

The spirituality of John of the Cross that hinges on the dark night, including the darkness of injustice, and the flame of love in solidarity, is not -cannot be- evasive, but a truly liberating spirituality, which is a dynamic process of conversion from sin (blind darkness) to grace (light) and love (incandescent flame) – and more grace and love (cf. LB, 3, 70-71).

Through the dark night of purgations, the human being is progressively liberated from the slavery of the senses and the pride of the spirit, from attachment to things: "Oh what a sheer grace it is for the soul to be freed from the house of its senses"; "the life of the spirit is true freedom and wealth and embodies inestimable goods" (2 N, 14, 3). Personal liberation from sin is necessary to being united with God in love and to being effectively committed to social liberation. John of the Cross is a great contemplative; this is his unique charism in Christ's Church. And, as a true contemplative, he is in solidarity with humanity: "John of the Cross does not teach a closed up and selfish contemplative life. His contemplation is not aimed at enjoying love, but at possessing much love and sharing it with others, with the Church."¹⁹

Pointing out the twelve starts of perfection, the Spanish mystic puts first love of God and second love of neighbor.²⁰ As a radical follower of Christ, John of the Cross writes on, and practiced coherently, the double commandment of love and their undivided unity: "Anyone who does not love the neighbor, abhors God" (*Maxims and Counsels: Other Counsels*, 9).

A liberating spirituality, moreover, centers on this so-called *preferential option for the poor*: the love of neighbor is addressed primarily to the love of the poor neighbor. Does John of the Cross make this option? We cannot ask him to understand and witness the preferential option for the poor in the same manner we are asked to by our humanity and faith, for the obvious reason: we belong to the 20th century; John of the Cross is a man of the 16th century. As

¹⁸Cf. JOSE VICENTE RODRIGUEZ, "Evangelió eclesial de San Juan de la Cruz," *Revista de Espiritualidad*, Nos. 196-197 (1990), pp. 475-500.

¹⁹BALDOMERO JIMENEZ DUQUE, "Juan de la Cruz y la nueva modernidad," *Revista de Espiritualidad*, Nos. 196-197 (1990), p. 348.

²⁰JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Maxims on Love*, 77. The complete text of *Maxim 77*: "Twelve starts for reaching the highest perfection: love of God, love of neighbor, obedience, chastity, poverty, attendance at choir, penance, humility, mortification, prayer, silence, peace."

a Carmelite living in the Spanish Golden Century, he loved the poor neighbor deeply: he was poor, he loved the poor very much, and he keeps telling us to love the poor, for not to love them is contrary to Christ's doctrine (3 S, 25, 4). "The poor man who is naked will be clothed, and the soul that is naked of desires and whims will be clothed by God with His purity, satisfaction, and will" (*Maxims on Love*), 19). He further says that those who are attached to sensual pleasures and riches cannot love the poor (3 S, 25, 4-5).

A truly liberating spirituality centers on God, on the presence of the Spirit of God in the depth of the soul: "All the sovereignty and freedom of the world compared with the freedom and sovereignty of the Spirit of God is utter slavery, anguish and captivity" (1 S, 4, 6).

3. THE UNION OF LOVE

John of the Cross has been a favorite subject for painters, particularly in Spain. Some of them have apparently given us a cold John of the Cross -too serious, distant, always with or near a cross. Is the author of *The Dark Night* a cold saint?

With *night*, the other two important symbols in the writings of John of the Cross are *spiritual espousal or marriage*, and *flame*. More than anything else, love, the flame of love permeates all the works of the mystic from Avila. The dominant word is not darkness but love, not night but flame. Thus, we find love in the different stages of the journey to God: "Love is the motor and guide through the adventure of the night; without love, the night becomes sterile and loses its beauty and passion."²¹

To understand and feel the beauty and power -and need- of love, we go to *The Canticle* and *The Flame*. In *The Canticle*, in particular, love assumes "the power of a vocation, of a passion."²²

While the dark night of purgations underlines the *negative aspect* of Christian life, the flame of love with the other virtues (and the sacraments and prayer) stresses its *positive aspect*.

In the dark night, the soul is united to God through the theological virtues. It goes forward to a deeper union with God clothed -"disguised"- with the white vestment of faith (to fight the devil), the green of hope (to struggle against the world), and the red of charity (against the flesh). The main task of the theological virtues is to unite the spiritual faculties with God, including the purification of their natural functions. Thus, faith empties the intellect of its

²¹JOSE DAMIAN GAITAN, "Teología poética de San Juan de la Cruz," *Revista de Espiritualidad*, Nos. 196-197 (1990), p. 430. See CARMELITE MONASTERY OF ST. THERESE (Ed.), *In Tranquil Solitary Grandeur. Poetry and St. John of the Cross* (Quezon City: Kayumanggi Press, 1991), pp. 1-148.

²²FEDERICO RUIZ SALVADOR, *Introducción al Cántico espiritual, Obras completas*, 1. c., p. 551.

natural understanding and prepares it for union with the divine wisdom, hope empties the memory from all creature possessions and fixes it on the possession of eternal life, and charity “empties and annihilates the affections and appetites of the will of whatever is not God and centers them on Him alone” (2 N, 21, 11).

Some authors have pointed out that the best contribution of our saint to Christian spirituality is his teaching on the theological virtues. For Pope John Paul II, John of the Cross is, above all, a master in faith; his central message is “the theological life of faith, hope and love.”²³

Through hoping and loving faith, the soul moves forward to the perfect union of love with God possible in this life (towards spiritual marriage), when the soul becomes “somehow God through participation” – “like the shadow of God” (LB, 3, 78). With the light of faith, remembering eternal life only, and wounded with God’s love, the soul calls out and seeks the Beloved: *Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?* (CB, 1).

A Canticle of Love

In poetic, theological and mystical terms, John of the Cross narrates the absorbing story of the soul searching for the Beloved and encountering Him and marrying Him. It is a unique love story. Love, love love . . . Everybody is talking about love! *What does John of the Cross tell us of love?*

Love consists “not in feeling great things, but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved” (*Maxims on Love*, 36; cf. CB, 36, 13).

Love is charity, the form of all virtues (St. Thomas Aquinas): All the virtues are present in charity “as though hung with love of God, as in a subject in which they are well preserved” (CB, 24, 7). Charity, moreover, “makes the other virtues genuine, strengthens and invigorates them, and bestows on them loveliness and charm” (2 N, 21, 10). The soul in love, John of the Cross says, practices all virtues, the flowers of the soul (CB, 29, 9).

Charity, the love of God, is the animator of life and activities: the soul in love loves God in all things, and “her pleasure in all things and in all transactions is always the delight of loving God” (CB, 27, 8).

The soul’s love of God is *prayerful*: “Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation” (*Maxims on Love*, 79; cf. Ib, 3, 32-67). Prayer is “a loving encounter with God,”

²³JOHN PAUL II, *San Juan de la Cruz, Maestro en la fe* (Carta Apostólica), (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1991, pp. 3, 4-7. See the English translation of the papal Apostolic Letter in *Leaping Beyond to* (“I-don’t-know-what”), Edited by Carmelite Monastery of St. Therese (Quezon City: 1991), pp. 2-17).

that we should never leave: "Whoever flees prayer flees all that is good" (other *Counsels*, 11). John of the Cross favors silent, contemplative prayer; and the Our Father, as the great vocal prayer and a permanent form of love (cf. S 3, 44, 4). In this context, the great mystic counsels us strongly against overactivism:

Let those who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer . . . They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm (CB, 29, 3).

Love is not something, but Someone: God is Love, and Love is *love of God*: "God loves us that we might love by means of the very love He bears toward us" (*Letter*, October-November, 1591); "This love is the end for which we were created" (CB, 29, 3); "The health of the soul is the love of God" (CB, 11, 11). Who loves God truly? He who is content "with nothing less than God" (CB, 1, 14).

Love of God is filial and nuptial love. It is *filial love*: one loves God as Father. While Jesus Christ is the natural Son, by essence, we are adopted children of God (cf. CB, 36, 5). It is *nuptial love*: the soul (the Spouse) is in love with the Son of God (the Beloved) (CB, 36, 6).

Love of God is *love of Jesus Christ*, the Beloved Son of God -the center of *The Canticle*. Through Jesus Christ, it is *Trinitarian love* (cf. Jn. 14:23): "The Blessed Trinity inhabits the soul by divinely illuminating its intellect with the wisdom of the Son, delighting its will in the Holy Spirit, and by absorbing it powerfully and mightily in the delightful embrace of the Father's sweetness" (LB, 1, 15).

Love is *love of the Holy Spirit*: the flame of love in *The Living Flame of Love* is the Holy Spirit. In the soul transformed in love, one of the interior acts of love of the Holy Spirit is "more meritorious and valuable than all the deeds a person may have performed in his whole life without this transformation" (L, 1, 3). This transforming love (or perfect union with an inflaming love) is the highest degree of love -and grace- possible in this life (cf. L, 1, 16).²⁴

²⁴St. John of the Cross speaks also of the possession of God through grace and the possession of God through union: the light of grace leads to the greater light of the divine transformation of the soul in God (cf. LB, 3, 71). He adds that while grace (and loving faith) is light, sin is darkness -blind darkness: "To be in darkness is to be blind in sin; yet one can be in obscurity without being in sin" (LB, 3, 71). Concerning sin, the great mystic says that although God the Beloved forgives and forgets our sins, we should not forget them: to be humble and not proud; to be grateful to God, and to trust more in Him (cf. CB, 33, 1).

John of the Cross, a Constant Invitation to Love

On our way to a deeper love, to the transforming union of love, we are asked to practice love in the active as well as in the contemplative life: "There is no greater nor more necessary work than love" (CB, 29, 1); "Nothing is obtained from God except by love" (CB, 1, 13) The practice of love includes interior affective acts of the will and exterior works in service of the Beloved (CB, 29, 2): "Everything I do, I do with love and everything I suffer, I suffer with the delight of love" (CB, 28, 8); "Love is never idle, but in continual motion; it is emitting flames everywhere like a blazing fire" (L, 1, 8).

Delightful pain, sweet wounds, delicious burnings, the glory of suffering . . . -the paradoxical language of deep love. A love that cannot be but warm, hot like fire: "O love that is my God, set me afire" (St. Augustine). *John of the Cross, a cold saint?* Impossible: he is in love with God, in deep love with the Beloved. United in transforming union of love with the Holy Spirit, the saint from Fontiveros exclaims:

O souls created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing?
How are you spending your time? Your aims are base and your possessions
misery! (CB, 39, 7).

May the most sweet Jesus, Bridegroom of faithful souls, be pleased to bring
all who invoke His name to this glorious marriage. To Him be honor and
glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, *in saecula saeculorum*.
Amen (CB, 40, 7).

4. CONCLUSION

John of the Cross is, but of course, situated in a concrete time and place and, therefore, conditioned by the social, cultural and religious aspects of 16th century life. And yet, he is still relevant to us, four hundred years later, because he can help us understand basic evangelical values and continues inspiring us with his radical witnessing of these values. As Segundo Galilea has written: "The more we want to renew our spirituality and live our Christian commitment more radically, the more John of the Cross' doctrine seems indispensable."²⁵ He lived a deeply authentic life: he practiced what he taught to others. This strict coherence of life makes our mystic and poet seductive to many of our contemporaries, tired of words without deeds, of faith without love, of preaching the truth without doing it – of plastic Christians!

²⁵SEGUNDO GALILEA, *The Future of Our Past. The Message of the Hispanic Mystics to Contemporary Spirituality* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1986, Ed. 2), p. 29. Galilea adds: "We discover the purity of his biblical categories, the genial character of his mystical synthesis, and the contemporary relevance of his symbols and his message" (Ib.). B. JIMENEZ DUQUE writes: "I advise you again: read him very slowly, little by little. First his poems, his minor works, his letters. Meditate selected paragraphs of the major works. Then, one begin to like them -they are enchanting. And, above all, the reading will serve as spiritual food. The author will become for us 'a presence': someone who is alive, close

Through these pages, we have tried to give you, dear readers, an appetizer on John of the Cross. We invite you fraternally to partake of the main course, plunging yourselves faithfully and perseveringly into his works. As a great Doctor of the Church, he belongs to the Church, to the People of God, to us all. Let us read him, then, and we will be helped on our pilgrimage, like Therese of the Child Jesus, Elizabeth of the Trinity, Charles de Foucauld, Edith Stein (Blessed Teresa Benedict of the Cross), Simone Weil -and many others.

In our age, there is a monumental inflation of words (we are also contributing to it!). John of the Cross did not write much and only to help others:

What is wanting, if anything is wanting, is not writing or speaking -rather these usually super-abound- but silence and work. Furthermore, speaking distracts one, while silence and work recollects and strengthens the spirit. Once a person knows what has been told him for his benefit, he no longer needs to hear or speak, but to put it into practice, silently and carefully and in humility and charity and contempt of self (*Letter*, November 22, 1587).

Let us, then, read St. John of the Cross and, above all, let us accompany him by following Jesus Christ. Following Him by witnessing love. Following Him by preaching principally with our lives: "The better the life of the preacher the more abundant the fruit, no matter how lowly his style, poor his rhetoric, and plain the doctrine. For the living spirit enkindles fire. But when this spirit is wanting, the gain is small, however sublime the style and doctrine" (3 S, 45, 4).

What matters most really is to do good -to practice love. Love, at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the journey of life. Always love: "A la tarde te examinarán en el amor" – *In the evening, you will be examined in love* (*Sayings of Light and Love*), 57). In the evening: not only at the end of life, but also "at the end of every day, of every activity, of every act or omission, you will be judged by the quality of your love of God."²⁶

At the end of this reflection, John of the Cross asks you and me to be always in God's love:

to us, with whom we talk, who sees us and we see him, who hears us and we hear him, and we feel him . . . Between him and us, a new interpersonal relationship will emerge. JOHN OF THE CROSS, 'Spirit of flame', 'lily in the shadow', 'sublime soul', 'a heavenly and divine man' . . . Admirable witness of God" ("Pautas para la lectura de San Juan de la Cruz," a. c. p. 229).

²⁶JOSE VICENTE RODRIGUEZ, *Introducciones y notas al texto, Obras completas*, 1. c., *Dichos de luz y amor*, 59, footnote 14, p. 94. He affirms that the text of John of the Cross is "A la tarde te examinarán en el amor." To say, then, "A la tarde de la vida" in the evening of life is not authentic nor opportune: it takes away the beauty and amplitude to the action, limiting it to the final judgment (*Ib.*).

The soul that walks in love neither tires nor is tired.²⁷

Put love where there is none, and you will reap love.²⁸

The only language God hears is the silent language of love.²⁹

In the evening, you will be examined in love.³⁰

²⁷John of the Cross writes: "El alma que anda en amor, ni cansa ni se cansa" (*Dichos de luz y amor*, 96). Kavanaugh-Rodriguez translate this saying thus: "The soul that walks in love neither rests nor grows tired" (*Maxims on Love*), 18, o. c., p. 675).

²⁸*Letter*, July 6, 1591. Kavanaugh-Rodriguez: "Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love," (*Minor Works: Letters*, o. c., p. 703).

²⁹*Letter*, November 22, 1587.

³⁰*Sayings of Light and Love*, 57.