

Outline of the Writings of St. John of the Cross.



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Preface.

This outline of the works of St. John of the Cross complements my similar outline of the writings of St. Teresa of Avila with same aim – a guide to the teaching on prayer and mystical life of this great Carmelite. He has been proclaimed a Doctor of the Church, with St. Teresa of Avila, precisely because of the value of his teaching on prayer. Teresa writes in a lively, conversational style; John writes in a more abstract, dry style, drawing on his knowledge of Scholastic philosophy and extensive familiarity with the Scriptures. In the following pages I provide summaries of his works as set out in 'The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross' translated by Kieran Kavanaugh ocd and Otilio Rodriguez ocd.

The saints are people who try to follow in the Lord's footsteps. They're happy to take up the cross and follow Christ. St. John of the Cross affords us a prime example of this, both in his life and his writings. For instance in about the year 1575, John was snatched away from his chaplain's house in Avila and locked up in a narrow cell by his brother Carmelites. It was a time of anguish and deprivation for John. He had nothing to sustain him but his own inner prayer and the word of God which he had always meditated on so profoundly. The friars subjected him to physical and psychological abuse in an effort to break his will. One day he heard one of them remark outside his cell door: 'Why do we bother about this man? Let us throw him into a well and no one will know what has become of him.' It strikes me how similar was the treatment John received to that of Joseph in the Genesis story or one of the prophets of Israel. And yet we know John was glad to suffer these things for Christ. The theme of darkness began to shape his teaching. John started to compose poems in his head and these poems, especially the beautiful 'Canticle' took shape in his dark dungeon, where it was hammered out on the anvil of his suffering.

Contents. ¹

1. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel. (Three Books)*
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¹ Here I follow the order and the titles of the individual works as in the ICS edition.:

The Ascent of Mount Carmel.
Book 1.

My first remark is that the idea of ‘ascent’ is not unique to John. St. Bonaventure wrote about the ‘Ascent of the Mind to God.’ ‘Ascent’ of course was a readymade idea for someone whose background was the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. So really the first thing to note is that John, for all his originality, fits seamlessly into the great tradition of Christian and Carmelite spirituality.

John was heir to a rich Carmelite tradition – for instance ‘The Institution of the First Monks.’ There we read:

The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire, with the help of divine grace, through our efforts and virtuous works. This is to offer God a holy heart, free from all stain of actual sin. We do this when we are perfect and in Cherith, that is hidden in that charity of which the Wise man says: ‘Charity covers all offences.’ (Prv. 10:12). God desired Elijah to advance thus far, when He said to him: ‘Hide yourself by the brook Cherith. The other part of the goal of this life is granted us as the free gift of God: namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the soul, not only after death but even in this mortal life, the intensity of the divine presence and the sweetness of the glory of heaven. This is to drink of the torrent of the love of God. God promised it to Elijah in the words: ‘You shall drink from the brook.’²

² The Ten books on the Way of Life and the Great Deeds of the Carmelites, edited and translated by Richard Copley, O.Carm, St. Albert’s Press, Kent, 2005.

Here we see clear distinction between active and passive prayer, and so in a real sense an anticipation of John's active and passive nights.

A more significant influence on John perhaps was the mentoring he received from Teresa herself. The result of this, as we know, is that we now have a near complete synthesis of Carmelite spirituality. This is all the more satisfying in that this synthesis has the benefit of male/female complementarity, an important consideration nowadays.

John tried his hand at fine arts, painting and sculpture for example. His sketch of the mount - although obviously not great art, a sketch which many Carmelites first encountered in the novitiate, is literally an illustration of his doctrine, especially of the famous Chap.13 which is programmatic for the entire book.

Go mourn with those who toil for souls, who weep
By Babylonian waters;
And on the steep
Ascent of Carmel pause
With those, now willingly bereft of light,
Who in the dark of night
With steadfast faith their sightless vigils keep.³

It goes without saying that John's spiritual teaching is a treasure Carmelites have inherited. We hold this gift in trust for the order and the church.

This *Ascent* and *The Dark Night* are commentaries on John's great poem the 'Noche Oscura' or 'The Dark Night.' 'Oscura' or 'dark here is a significant word not just a poetic one; this is because of the emphasis John puts on 'obscure contemplation' in the development of his teaching on prayer life.

³ M.M Grace OCD. *Envoi*, 'The Steep Ascent of Carmel.'

'Dark Night' as a phrase has passed into general usage - but can mean anything from trivial aches and pains to traumatic experiences...The book comes in the form of a commentary on the poem, but we need to understand 'commentary' in a fairly loose sense. It's really a book of spiritual instruction, a guide to the person seeking union with God. (We should note that John did not intend the book for Christians in general but for the members of the Carmelite Reform and indeed only for 'some of these' as he says.)

The stated aim of St. John of the Cross in this work is to lead people to perfect union with God in so far as is possible in this life. This union with God is achieved through love. We need to labour this point because it's so central to Carmelite spirituality.

St. Teresa puts it in a nutshell:

Let your desire be to see God,
your fear to lose him,
Your grief to be separated from him,
Your joy to be united to him,
Thus will you live in profound peace.

Prayer and love grow apace like twins; prayer is really the language of love. John's three great poems involve dialogues between lover and beloved. John's other poetry is also on the same theme - love poetry - or mystical love poetry, but based on the ballad tradition of the Spain of his time. His three great poems, on the other hand belong to the Spanish 'Lira' or lyric tradition. To scale the heights of Mount Carmel and reach the summit - that is the objective. John wants to make us successful spiritual mountaineers as he himself was.

We feel humbled when we allow ourselves to be exposed to this great symphony of heavenly doctrine - after all John refers to 'silent music,' - that comprises the legacy of John and

Teresa to us. For that reason we have in their writings a constant source of inspiration, in the same way as a Mozart symphony might inspire in us an appreciation of beautiful music. We have a dim awareness that what John and Teresa write about is indeed possible even in any situation in which we find ourselves. They assure us that the Lord is more than willing to communicate divine life to us.

John's books are marvellous guides to spiritual life. In times of doubt and confusion you can consult these luminous guides. Like venturing into an unfamiliar country, you would be well advised to pack away a good guide book in your equipment.

Stages of growth.

People who are sincere in their search for God nevertheless reach a point where further growth seems to be arrested for one reason or another. One such reason could be an unwillingness to accept the necessary purification in order to progress. Another reason could be lack of adequate counsel and spiritual direction and a consequent failure on the part of people to make sense of what's happening to them. It's also possible for us to unwittingly place obstacles in the way. That means we resist the divine initiative that seeks to lead us forward.

There are many pitfalls to be encountered on the spiritual journey. Some of the harm is done by clumsy spiritual directors who don't recognise authentic signs of spiritual progress and growth in prayer. Sometimes it may be necessary to change or modify exercises that the individual has superceded and needs to discard. All this shows the need for the kind of clear guidance that John of the Cross sets out to provide.

*I went out unseen,
My house being now at rest.*

The theme of the first section of the book then celebrates the escape or liberation of the person from the fetters of sense. We shall see in due course what is understood by this process. In our modern context this effort might entail trying to escape the web of consumerism, overload and such like.

John asks us to prioritise our values. It could happen that people might put their physical health before their spiritual health. And people now chase their dreams in a great variety of ways. They tend to neglect a visit to city churches, but are more than willing to spend time - and money - in the fitness palace next door, places that promise renewal and reinvigoration. Even a name like 'Fit for Life' suggests that spiritual exercise is relegated to second place or no place at all.

Again we might be more interested in physical food than spiritual nourishment. TV companies are aware of this and saturate the channels with 'foodie' programmes.

In approaching John's writings we ought realize that he starts with people who have been praying and meditating for a long time, and as a result are on the verge of contemplative prayer. That means his 'beginners' category concerns those who are on the border-line of what he calls 'initial contemplation.' It's obviously important to bear this in mind.

Setting out.

The first part of the process of purification with which John deals concerns the mortification of everything that can appeal to our corporeal nature. John usually gives a scriptural headline for everything he proposes. He does not do so here but there's a verse in St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians that sums up what he says: 'You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires.' John proposes a 'night' of mortification for both the senses and the spirit. He would entirely agree with what the metaphysical poet John Donne wrote in one of his Holy Sonnets.

‘I am a little world made cunningly of elements, and an angelike sprite,
But black sin hath betraid to endless night.
My world's both parts, and so both parts must die.’ (*Holy Sonnets*)

The apt metaphor John uses for his purpose is that of ‘night.’ It will be a night in a threefold sense, the ‘night’ of deprivation of sense life, the night of faith which is darkness to the mind, and even God himself who in this life is a dark night to our minds. ‘Now we see darkly as in a mirror (and a pretty clouded one at that) but then face to face.’ We read in John: ‘All the beauty of creation compared with the infinite beauty of God is supreme ugliness.’ The same thing holds, John says, for all other desirable qualities. Compared with God created things are completely lacking in grace and goodness and wisdom. But notice - compared with God - not as they are in themselves.

Admittedly this seems strange coming from someone who had such a profound appreciation of the beauty of nature and who could enjoy the warmth of human love and friendship as we see from his letters and anecdotes from Carmelite tradition.

John devotes several chapters of the *Ascent* to describing the various ways in which one’s energies are diverted from God by uncontrolled desire. He maintains that the damage done is twofold:

- Uncontrolled desire deprives us of the Spirit of God and
- it wearies, torments, darkens, defiles and weakens us.

[It’s interesting to notice what the Hindu author of the Bhagavad Gita has to say about desire. He thinks in exactly the same terms as John: ‘Wisdom is clouded by desire, the ever present enemy of the wise, desire in its innumerable forms which like a fire, cannot find satisfaction.’⁴

⁴ *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro (London: Penguin, 1980, p.59

Each chapter in this section of the *Ascent* then goes on to explain in detail how inordinate desire induces this weariness, torment, defilement and weakness in the human heart. We need to realise that there's a deep thirst within the human heart, that only God can satisfy. 'All you who thirst come to the waters,' the Prophet Isaiah cries.

John sees how human beings endlessly pursue a mirage that promises to deliver happiness - but it's just that - a mirage. Mercifully John realises we're only human. He's not an ogre and visualises people being prone to sins and imperfections that are not fully deliberate. But he's certainly insistent that unruly desire be controlled.

John points out that unless we concentrate our desire on God our situation resembles this: 'Hot water' he writes 'quickly loses its heat when left uncovered, and aromatic spices when unwrapped, eventually lose the strength and pungency of their scent.' So John's approach is quite devastating. He makes the famous remark: 'It makes little difference whether a bird is tied by a thin thread or by a cord' - they're both equally effective in holding it captive. (*Ascent*, p. 97)

There's a remorseless logic in everything John writes, 'Everyone knows that not to go forward on this road is to turn back, and not to gain ground is to lose.' (p. 97)

In Ch. 13 of the *Ascent*, John enumerates his famous principles for the following of Christ. Here he assumes that we ourselves take the initiative. Later on the Lord will take over. John tells us this will be the subject of the Book 4 of the *Ascent*. However, Book 4 was never in fact written and *The Dark Night* deals with that theme. (The *Ascent* itself finishes abruptly in Book 3.)

What Then Are The Principles?

- First, have an habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. This would then extend reading and mediating on the Gospels.
- Every satisfaction offered to the senses, which is not for God's honour and glory, must be renounced and rejected for the love of Jesus Christ.

The next step is to bring the emotions under control by deliberately choosing what is distasteful on every occasion –

Endeavor to be inclined always:

- not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
 - not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;
 - not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
 - not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
 - not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
 - not to the most, but to the least;
 - not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and
 - not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing.
 - Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but
 - for the worst, and, for Christ, desire to enter into complete nakedness,
 - emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.
- (Pp.102-103) ⁵

John cheerfully tells us that we will get to like this way of behaving after a while. He would also advise a degree of self-depreciation and self-effacement which is meant to promote humility. Chap. 13 concludes by incorporating the verses John had previously composed and written on his 'sketch of the

⁵ There's a remarkable similarity between this and some lines from East Coker, one of the Four Quartets by T.S. Elliott:
 '... To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
 In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
 In order to possess what you do not possess
 You must go by the way of dispossession.'

mount.’ This sketch was originally done for the Carmelite nuns at Beas where he was confessor, and for them he also wrote his commentary on *The Spiritual Canticle*.

We read further: ‘To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing. To come to possess all, desire to possess nothing.....to come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way you know not.’ (Pp.104-105)

Great Escape.

Admittedly this programme of self-denial has all sounded somewhat negative, even forbidding. It’s the ‘agere contra’ the going against the grain favoured by the ascetics. John is very aware that he needs to inspire some spiritual enthusiasm to offset the starkness of these demands. In his next chapter he says that our spontaneous inclination to what is most pleasurable must be replaced by another and better love - that of Christ. Only Christ’s love can inspire the necessary generosity to embark on his programme of self-denial. This must be accompanied by an enkindling of longing for God to replace desire of an inferior kind. John will deal more at length with this loving yearning in the *Dark Night* and also at the beginning of the *Spiritual Canticle*. Here he just mentions this longing in passing and goes on to conclude Book I of *The Ascent*. The result of this generous *ascesis* whereby the individual takes the initiative in what is called the active night of sense, is that a true liberation is experienced and the person is prepared for further spiritual growth.

We would do well to remember as we reflect on this austere challenge of John that Teresa of Avila is no less exacting though in a more painless sort of way. This is simply the Carmelite understanding of the ‘cost of discipleship.’ For example we read at the beginning of *The Way of Perfection*: ‘... Our primitive rule states that we must pray without ceasing. If we do this with all love possible - for unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the rule - the fasts, the disciplines,

and the silence the order commands will not be wanting. For you already know that if prayer is to be genuine, it must be helped by these other things - prayer and comfortable living are incompatible.' ⁶

St. Thérèse imbibed this spirit well when she wrote: '...Jesus gave me to understand that it was through suffering that he wanted to give me souls, and my attraction for suffering grew in proportion to its increase.' ⁷ All the great Christian teachers have insisted on the need for a vigorous response to the challenge of the gospel of Christ.

So we see that what is asked is not something different or superfluous or optional. St. Luke for all his gentleness does not water down the words of his Master: 'Another said,' I will follow you, sir, but first let me go and say goodbye to my people at home.' 'Jesus said to him,' 'Once the hand is laid on the plough no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.' (Lk. 9:61) We have now come to the end of Bk. I of the *Ascent*. It has outlined for us a thorough and far-reaching system of mortification, in order to subdue the appetitive faculty. This John has called the Active Dark Night of the Senses. We should remember however that this complete mortification is not something you quickly achieve, then you're ready for the next stage. This total mortification of irregular, voluntary and often sinful appetite or desire isn't achieved until an individual reaches perfect union with God. Another point to remember is that John is looking at the work to be done from a different position to us. He's looking down the mount, having attained the heights, from where he had felt God's presence and tasted a profound joy in the possession of God. To reach this point, to arrive at this height, everything seemed well worthwhile.

There's no question, however, but that John of the Cross is calling for absolute generosity. The ideal is high, the highest possible and no compromise can be allowed. Nothing less than

⁶ Collected Works, p.56

⁷ Story of a Soul, p.149

a passionate commitment to the Lord will do. John couldn't abide half-measures and his earnestness and impatience, is the impetuosity of the lover. There's a story told that he was once seen standing over a very distressed Anne de Penelosa, of whom in fact he was very fond, and simply repeating 'Nada, nada, nada.' (Nothing..)

John is only asking us to do the same or even half as much as we would do for someone we love. To sum up, John wants us to restrain and impede an over-activity of the senses so as to give free scope to the interior world of the spirit.

The Ascent of Mount Carmel.
(Book Two)

The Mind Is Purified By Faith.

This second book of the *Ascent* deals with an inner or spiritual purification process that concentrates on our spiritual nature and its attendant tendencies. We're still in the 'Active Night' but now it's the active night of the spirit as opposed to that of the senses with which the first book dealt. We will remember that John had proposed to talk about an 'night of faith' which is dark night to the soul. The instrument of this second purification process is faith, which he poetically calls a 'secret stair.' For John, faith is always the sure guide to the desired goal of union with God. Faith is like the guide that will take us by the hand and lead us along the spiritual road, enabling us to walk without stumbling between the various obstacles strewn along our path.

John warns us that this second night will be more severe than the first. The reason is because our spiritual life is a higher form of life than our sense life, so it will be a stiffer proposition to introduce harmony and control into the spiritual side of our nature.

What Is Faith?

John starts off then by referring us to what theologians think faith is, namely, 'an obscure habit of the soul.' I admit that's not a very exciting definition. This means that faith is indirect knowledge, e.g faith gives us knowledge of God but it's information that cannot be tested empirically or scientifically. For instance faith tells us that in God there are

three Divine Persons. In itself this knowledge is supreme light, but obviously the human mind has to struggle with it. It's too big for the mind. This knowledge cannot be grasped, and for that reason it can be said to be night and darkness to the mind.

Lost In The Cloud.

Mystical writers are fond of using the biblical image of the 'cloud' to illustrate this point.⁸ A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night guided the Israelites in the great event of the Exodus as John points out. St. Gregory of Nyssa, who can be described as the Father of Mysticism, writing in the 4th century, has this to say in his 'Life of Moses' – 'This is the true knowledge of what is sought ; this is seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge , being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.'⁹

So John insists that we can only learn to know God by entering into darkness. And it's not enough just to embrace the darkness of sense activity, we must also draw the blinds across our minds. John tells us that we must distrust all our own purely natural insights in everything that applies to God, e.g, any understanding, feeling or imagining and so on. Our own knowledge or even experience, can't be relied on because these are inferior to faith which alone tells us what God is really like. John tells us that you cannot be united to God if you're attached to your own opinions, tastes and desires in regard to God. These simply fall short, infinitely short of what God is in God's own nature. John writes: 'Passing beyond all that is naturally and spiritually intelligible or comprehensible, a person ought to desire with all his might to attain to what in this life is unknowable and unimaginable.'¹⁰ There's a paradox here - the

⁸ The Vulgate which John used refers to a 'dark' cloud lighting up the night and he used this image to back up his argument. However a more exact translation is: 'A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.' Ex. 13:21

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, Paulist Press, p. 95.

¹⁰ Collected Works, p.114.

more we live in the darkness of faith, the more the divine light will shine in our hearts. The English mystical treatise, 'The Cloud of Unknowing' gives us exactly the same advice here as John of the Cross. In Ch.7 of the 'Cloud' we read: 'It is inevitable that ideas will arise in your mind and try to distract you in a thousand ways. They will question you saying, 'What are you looking for, what do you want?' To all of them you must reply, 'God alone I seek and desire, only him.' ¹¹

What does John understand by 'union with God' the goal to which he proposes to lead us? By union John understands a union of likeness which is brought about by love and friendship or grace. This is achieved by our will corresponding to that of God both in our activities here and now and also on a more permanent basis. This really means being transformed into God through participation in God's nature. John gives us a famous illustration here; if you clean and polish a window it presents no hindrance to the entry of a beam of sunlight. The two become indistinguishable. Whereas if you allow the mud from the wheels of the road traffic to keep splattering onto your window pane, it will not let in the light. We should be easily able to draw the moral from this illustration! We recall again that John is writing to guide people to union with God. The people he has in mind, 'beginners' for him are beginners in contemplative prayer, 'those whom God has favoured with the state of contemplation.' (Bk. 2, Ch.6) That means that the mind has already been introduced into contemplation of God. This prayer of contemplation will lead to transforming union with God through the practice of faith hope and love. John sees these three virtues as having a direct relationship to the three mental powers of intellect, memory and will.

Meditation.

Initially the individual prays or meditates with the help of many imaginative props and aids picturing Jesus for instance

¹¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Edited William Johnston, Image Books, New York, 1973, p.55.

in a scene from his passion. But as the person makes progress, a more austere or a less colourful form of prayer begins to take shape. For John this is a more pure form of prayer in which faith attaches itself to the mind and taking deep root there. This means that we are not so much juggling with ideas or meditating, but rather maintaining a simple loving gaze on God. In any case the individual concerned will find it impossible to meditate in the usual way or in the way to which she or he had been accustomed.

Similarly the virtue of hope purifies, cleanses and perfects the power of remembrance. The reason is that we cannot rest in what we don't already possess and so we're borne onwards to God. Memory revolves around the possessing of things, namely storing up memories, but we can have no memory or recollection of God before we arrive at the possession of God.

In the same way love for God must fill and dominate one's heart. The heart must be given to God more than to other people and things. St. John in proposing this second and deeper night to us, a night of the spirit, reminds us of the words of Jesus in the gospel: 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' (Mk.8:4.)

In the sketch of the mount, already mentioned, John indicates the way of the imperfect spirit. Here the person is sidetracked rather than proceeding directly up the mountain. Now the person is being counseled to reject temporal attractions such as possessions, joy, knowledge, consolation and so on. John is critical of people who spend all their time in search of sweetness in prayer and will run a mile, or as he puts it, 'run as if from death' from any kind of dryness, distaste or trial. With his characteristic keenness in regard to spirituality he tells us that to seek always for consolation is perhaps 'seeking self in God.' Remember again that John is talking about spiritual progress but admits that various other methods and experiences may be necessary for beginners. Still he

continues nevertheless to drive home his favourite theme, 'Christ is to a great extent unknown by those who consider themselves his friends.'

We may remember that when dealing with the dark night of sense John followed a philosophical principle, 'two contraries cannot co-exist in one subject.' Now when tackling the active night of spirit, another scholastic principle is adduced, namely, 'all means must be proportionate to their end.' Sticking rigidly to this principle, John asserts that nothing that falls within the realm of our experience can serve as a means of uniting us to God. This assertion then clears the ground for John to launch out into his theme that only faith is the proximate and proportionate means of union God. There is indeed a remote means to union with God which is necessary end indispensable at an earlier stage of spiritual progress and indeed at other times as well; this remote means is meditation on the things of God. But if we ask what can unite us directly and immediately to God having first used all the available means, then John would reply, 'it's faith.'

Faith Versus Vision.

The first thing John mentions from which a person needs to be detached is the phenomenon of a 'vision.' Of course you won't have the problem if you've never had a vision! For example Bernadette Soubirous saw Our Lady in the grotto at Lourdes. In spite of that Bernadette, like everyone else, had to (and did in fact live) by faith.

Another unusual experience would be a feeling of extreme delight that envelops the person. St. Teresa has quite a lot to say about these things. Putting one's faith and trust in such like however paves the way to self-deception by inducing a feeling of spiritual pride. John counsels us to reject all those feelings out of hand. John catalogues six different kinds of harm that result from an uncritical acceptance of these 'sense' experiences. The main point is that faith is diminished as a

result of such an attitude. John counsels us to reject all types of pleasant sensation or experience and rely on faith alone. I think we can readily see here that there's a need for instruction and direction of this kind, if people are not to leave themselves open to deception.

Spiritual experience of various kinds can be given to us to help and encourage us on the road to union with God. This necessarily starts in a more external, palpable way in accordance with the external sensual dimension of our nature. If we use these graces rightly and pick our way with moderation through them, the Lord will draw us further. In this context it's interesting to note that John mentions the seven mansions or seven degrees of love. We can compare this with St. Teresa's use of the illustration of seven mansions in her book called *The Interior Castle*.

John now turns his attention to the activity of the imagination in meditative prayer. He takes the example of a scene such as the scourging of Christ at the pillar. In the *Way of Perfection*, Teresa writes in the context of meditation: 'Or behold him bound to the column, filled with pain.' John is simply pointing out the inadequacy of meditative pictures no matter how vivid or free from distraction, to unite the person with God. We must of course move beyond such concepts of God as would represent him in an aura of light or in any similar fashion. If you stay on this rung you won't reach the top of the ladder. Some people try to hold on to such methods of meditation and so fail to make progress. As already stated, such meditation becomes impossible and only leads to feelings of frustration. What is now required is that the person abandons these methods and engages instead in a more general or pure act of prayer. It's useless and unnecessary to go back over ground already covered. The temptation of course is that the person who practices prayer will feel that by discontinuing meditation she or he is now simply idle and doing nothing. But again what is needed is a loving attentiveness to

God, because God is filling and engaging the person's faculties in faith and love. This is a very important section of the *Ascent*. It's a most valuable part of John's spiritual teaching and of the Carmelite approach to prayer. In the following chapters he will treat of three signs which must be in conjunction to mark the transition from meditation to contemplation. In this sense these chapters are parenthetical to the main theme of faith. The discussion in regard to the three signs will occur again in the book of the *Dark Night* under a slightly different form. There they will be directly applicable to the passive night of the senses.

Three Signs Of Initial Contemplation.

The three signs that suggest for John that the individual is being called to deeper contemplation are as follows:

- (1) The first sign is that there's an inability to carry on meditating in the usual way - this only leads to an experience of dryness.
- (2) The second sign is a disinclination to concentrate on secular affairs or to be drawn by them.
- (3) The third sign is a tendency to remain alone in a quiet awareness of the Lord in a general way, without resorting to any specific meditations.

These signs are complementary and the three must be present together. The presence of the first sign by itself could merely suggest that the person was losing interest in a spiritual life. The second sign could just indicate the person was unwell. The third sign is almost imperceptible to begin with, because it's an obscure general loving knowledge of God. It's sometimes stymied by the person trying hard to continue to acquire knowledge in the usual meditative way.

In Book 2, Chap.16 John proceeds to give instruction in regard to another type of spiritual insight. This is like an imaginative vision. Even though this may come from God, neither can it serve as a jumping off ground for union with God.

It's the same principle as before - a person should not wish to accept or hold on to these visions, but instead must be detached in regard to them; we don't need them and they only get in the way of our progress towards God. If they're good then they will automatically benefit the person who takes no notice of them.

Consequently it may be wondered why God should utilise such means as visions if they're at best unnecessary and at worst harmful? The answer, according to John is that the Lord is leading the person step by step towards union with himself, and these 'favours' constitute a kind of bridge between minor and major communications of God. Graces of this kind bridge the gap between the sense dimension and the completely spiritual dimension of our makeup. John is directing people to immediate union with God which is a completely 'faith experience' of a high order. Even visions for him would be no more than minor communications! Our Carmelite saints never tire of repeating that these extraordinary graces cease altogether in the state of union with God.

John tells us that the Lord works in the normal way and comes to us through the normal means, such as listening to sermons, reading spiritual books, taking part in the liturgy, etc. This is part of the divine pedagogy to help us progress from the life of the senses to the life of the spirit. John has some strong words for directors in regard to special divine manifestations. What it amounts to is that they're really wasting their time getting caught up in this kind of thing. He also says that there's no need for a laborious study of the rules for discernment of good and bad communications because there's one golden rule - avoid them!

The overall rule is that great care must be exercised in welcoming favours such as marvellous feelings and inspirations, because they can easily be misunderstood and misinterpreted by us. Furthermore we have no guarantee that

the Lord wants to be asked for this kind of help and guidance even if he is willing to grant such requests.

John writes with great clarity: 'There is no necessity for this kind of knowledge, since a person can get sufficient guidance from natural reason and the law and doctrine of the Gospel.' (Chap. 21) There's also the additional possibility that these extraordinary manifestations may proceed not from God but from an evil source or power.

The Word Of The Father.

By way of rounding off the foregoing discussion, in Chap. 22 you come across one of those great passages not untypical of John. Here he shows his sure touch in his appreciation of the place and role of Christ the Son of God in the Christian revelation. He is only illustrating St. Paul's cry, 'In him dwells all the fullness of the divinity bodily.' (Col:2.9) John writes: 'In giving us his Son, his only Word, (for he possesses no other) he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word — and he has no more to say.' (Ch.22)

Next, in Ch.23 John guides us through purely intellectual insights, what he calls intellectual visions, locutions, revelations and spiritual feelings.

A spiritual vision is admirable in its effects, according to John, producing 'quietude, illumination, gladness resembling that of glory, delight, purity, love, humility and an elevation and inclination towards God.' (Ch.26.) However all these too must be renounced so as to progress in faith towards union with God.

In regard to 'revelations,' John tells us that it's possible to have an ineffable experience of one of God's attributes such as his goodness. This is now a different kind of experience and for John it's the most sublime. Only a person who has reached union with God will be favoured with this special divine communication. Indeed John in very explicit language says, 'for it is itself that very union.' And here is how he describes

such graces: 'These touches engender such sweetness and delight in the soul that one of them would more than compensate for all the trials suffered in this life, even though innumerable'.(*Ascent*, Bk 2.Ch.26.7) And he tells us these touches can come when least expected or when hearing a word or passage from Scripture that suddenly comes alive. This is the only grace about which John does not ask one to be negative, because, as he says, again, 'it is an aspect of the union towards which we are directing the person.'

Insight.

In this connection John discusses another kind of gift which he would regard as a more inferior kind of infused knowledge, namely the gift of reading hearts. This gift however should always be used with extreme caution because one can so easily be deceived. There are other additional forms of information such as private revelations so called, or a kind of new and increased conviction and confirmation of truths already revealed, such as the Incarnation of the Word. The same principles apply in regard to all such insights. We may remember that St. Teresa sometimes found she understood some Latin phrase from the psalms she recited, such as 'ubi est Deus tuus,' Where is your God.'

What Are Locutions?

The next four Chaps. of *Ascent*, Bk 2. 28-31 are devoted to a discussion of what John calls supernatural sayings or 'locutions.' He divides these into three types, successive, formal and substantial. John explains: 'Successive locutions are the words and reasonings that the spirit of itself usually forms and deduces while recollected. Formal locutions are certain distinct and formal words that the spirit receives, whether or not recollected, not from itself but from another. Substantial locutions are other words that are also produced formally in the spirit, regardless of whether one is recollected or

not, and that cause in the substance of the soul the power and very substance they signify.’¹² John gives an example of what he means by a substantial locution when he writes: ‘....or if He should say to a soul in great fear: do not fear, it would without delay feel ample fortitude and tranquility.’ St Teresa says exactly the same thing when she writes: ‘Or, if it is afflicted....with one word alone (it is I, fear not) the fear is taken away completely, and the soul is most comforted, thinking that nothing would be sufficient to make it believe anything else.’¹³

The same need for detachment holds for any 'interior words' that may come to the individual.’ The remaining Ch. 32 directs us through the fourth intellectual impressions or overflowing feelings in the will. These will be dealt with at more length in Book 3.

¹² Collected Works of St John of the Cross, p.203.

¹³ Collected Works of St Teresa, p.372

Ascent of Mount Carmel.
Book Three.

The Memory Is Purified By Hope.

The third and final book of the Ascent is devoted to the purification of the memory and will, the two remaining faculties of the soul. The second book dealt, with the purifying process (active) as applied to the mind or intellect. This third book in fact remains in an incomplete state. We should note that we're still concerned with the active dark night of the spirit. Let's recall what John stated in Ch.1 of the *Ascent*, 'We shall deal with this second night in so far as it is active, in the second and third sections of the book.'

The purification of the memory then, in John's terminology the second faculty of the soul, is brought about memory coming under the influence of the theological virtue of hope, just as the mind has been purified by faith. John reminds his readers that the instructions he gave about intellect are also applicable to the purification of the other two faculties, memory and will.

In setting out his teaching on this subject, John is well aware that it may be misunderstood or taken merely in a negative way. So again he reminds us that he's not concerned with the needs of beginners in the spiritual life, but with those who have made considerable progress. If John suggests that the faculty of memory should be purified by a process of 'emptying out,' it's because, as he says, he wants to make room for the inflow of the supernatural in a deeper contemplation. The theme is the same as before: we must get

to know God through what he is not, rather than what God is. Just as in regard to the other faculties, John approaches this subject systematically - he will examine three categories of spiritual data, namely:

1.natural, 2. supernatural/imaginative, 3. spiritual.

Now in the first place in regard to 'natural' spiritual insights sourced through eyes, ears, etc., John insists that the memory must be purified from 'all forms' in order to be united with God. This he tells us 'is an absolute requirement'....In great forgetfulness, without the remembrance of anything, the memory is absorbed in a supreme good.' We might compare this position with the teaching of the Cloud of Unknowing. In Ch. 6 we read: 'But in the real contemplative work you must set all this aside and cover with a *cloud of forgetting*.'¹⁴ In the following chapter the author advises that we concentrate on a particular word such as 'God' or 'love' and he says: 'Use it to beat upon the cloud of darkness above you and to subdue all distractions, consigning them to the *cloud of forgetting*.'¹⁵ It may be helpful to recall William Johnston's elucidation here: 'The cloud of forgetting is nothing else but the abandonment of all images and concepts to allow the soul to love mystically.' The blind stirring of love has begun to burn in the breast of the contemplative; it leads to a higher knowledge (for God can be known by love) and therefore the person must be careful not to smother this love with meditations and conceptual thinking. Images are now a barrier between the individual and God. That's why they must be left aside.

The advice found here in the 'Cloud' betrays the influence of 'Mystica Theologia' or 'Hid Divinity' of Pseudo-Dionysius, who also obviously influenced John of the Cross. It's 'apophatic' knowledge or knowledge acquired by negation. God is not 'like' any of the things to which we instinctively liken God. In the kindred little work to the 'Cloud' known as the 'Privy

¹⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Image Books, New York, 1973, p.55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.56.

Counsel' we find the same emphasis on the 'naked will or intent.' It's interesting to notice that the same approach is found in a classic of Russian Orthodox spirituality, called 'The Way of a Pilgrim.' This book advocates focusing our minds on the repetition of the 'Jesus Prayer.' Repeating a word like 'love' in this context is similar to the more modern use of the 'mantra' in prayer.

'Where Your Treasure Is, There Will Your Heart Be Also.'

Coming back to the *Ascent*, John says that while the memory is in process of being purified, it will often appear that the person is abstracted or absent-minded. She/he will overlook ordinary matters of everyday life and 'forget whether he has seen something or said such and such.' This is because memory is absorbed in God. The Pilgrim found that his concentration became so intense that it reached the subconscious and he tells us 'early one morning I was, so to speak, woken by the prayer.' (*Treasury of Russian Spirituality*) G.K. Chesterton once remarked that 'absence of mind in one area means that it is present somewhere else'! John holds however that this condition will be remedied when perfect union with God is reached.' He realises that people will object that this advice would result in destroying the natural activity of memory. Yes, says John, that's true, but this is only a temporary thing and union with God will bring about a transformation of the memory onto the divine plane, whereby the person will be directly moved to action by the Holy Spirit. John tells us that he will explain this action of the Holy Spirit in the 'passive night of the soul,' or what is usually referred to as the 'dark night of the spirit.' In regard to what we can do ourselves in practice, John advises us not to store up the things we see and hear in the memory - just leave them arid and forget all about them. Again he refers us back to what he said about the purification of the intellect in Bk. 2, and he

points ahead to the teaching of the *Dark Night*. The scriptural foundation for this he finds in St. Paul to the Romans, 'The children of God are moved by the Spirit of God.' (Roms. 8:14)

John feels that an unwillingness to void the memory in regard to all things retards progress towards union with God and leaves the way open to deception, whether from oneself or from the devil. He holds that by giving in to ourselves in regard to that rich dimension of life concerned with memory, we often upset ourselves needlessly and worry about the wrong things. John's main preoccupation is to try to help preserve a deep peace of mind in all circumstances. He feels that there are many positive advantages to be gained from taking this approach. Such mortification will result in serenity and purity of conscience. Here's a typical quote: 'Thus if the whole world were to crumble and come to an end and all things were to go wrong, it would be useless to get disturbed, for this would do more harm than good.' This advice is repeated almost word for word in one of John's minor works, 'Counsels to a religious on how to reach perfection.' There we find the following:

In order to practice the first counsel concerning resignation, you should live in the monastery as though no one else were in it. And thus you should never by word or by thought meddle in things that happen in the community nor with individuals in it, desiring not to notice their good or bad qualities or their conduct. And in order to preserve your tranquility of soul, even if the whole world should crumble you should not desire to advert to this or interfere.¹⁶

John gives exactly the same advice also in another minor work, *The Precautions* - 'The third precaution is very necessary that you may know how to guard yourself in the

¹⁶ *Collected Works*, p.662.

community against all the harm that may arise in regard to the religious.

Advice On Detachment.

Both of these short works were probably first given to the Carmelite nuns at Beas where John was spiritual director. They're interesting in this that they show that this particular advice on detachment appears as a practical application of what seems to be a rather abstruse and even controversial section of the *Ascent*. John is telling us in practice how we ought to behave towards others whereas in the *Ascent* he was setting out a theoretical exposition on stripping the faculty of memory. It would certainly be wrong to interpret this advice as a selfish cutting off of oneself from the interests and wellbeing of the community. Neither John nor Teresa could be accused of this kind of conduct in their lives: they always showed themselves aware of and concerned about the needs of their brothers and sisters. John is rather thinking of the people who cannot mind their own business and also of those who are scandalised by the behaviour of other members of the community, thinking that they themselves are the only ones who keep the Rule.

The next point John makes is that people ought not reflect on or preserve within themselves 'supernatural impressions' in the memory.' If they do they are likely to be deceived.. And here we meet a typically Johannine memorable gem: 'In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God; for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains.'¹⁷ The danger with cultivating special favours lies in this; there is the ever-present possibility of presumption and pride in being the recipients of something special from God. John is here as always very anxious that we steer clear of that hallmark of the Pharisee -

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

pride. Here again what John is driving at in these chapters of the *Ascent*, is that there is the danger, as in other contexts, of allowing some limited concept of God to take the place of the God who cannot be imaged. John repeats the advice he gave in Chaps. 16 and 17 of Book 2 of the *Ascent*. This means that in being detached from spiritual 'apprehensions' an individual is allowing God to work passively within. Anything we ourselves can do or conceptualise in this situation would only amount to a purely natural activity, whereas the Lord is trying to accomplish something more, something that is beyond the capacity of the natural. We have seen that hope is a virtue that tends directly to the possession of God - a theological virtue. In this sense it's the virtue of progress in the spiritual life. It's a dynamic force that urges us forwards and draws us on towards God. Hope is evocative of Springtime with its upsurge of new life and new growth. In the *Dark Night* John more poetically refers to the 'green livery of Hope.' He has shown us how hope works within to cleanse and purify the faculty of memory. Memory is something like a deposit of archives, and as a Carmelite commentator Fr. Marie-Eugene writes, 'St. John would have us burn every entry in the archives.'

The Greatest Of These Is Love.

In Chap. 16 John begins to write about the purification of the will, for him the third of the person's faculties. According to the outline set before us by John, we're still involved in the active dark night of the human spirit. The faculty of will is purified through the power of love - that is, love for God understood as a theological virtue.

John's scriptural jumping-off ground for this section is the famous 'Shema' of Israel as we find in in Chap. 6 of the book of Deut.: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and your neighbour as yourself.' This scriptural passage is incorporated in the

Carmelite Rule. We may remember how in the gospel Jesus commended the scribe who admitted this was the primary requirement of the law.

John is anxious that a person's full and rich emotional life be disciplined and harnessed to serve the great goal of union with God. He wants us to direct the major feelings of the heart to God and love God with all the energy of our being.

Riches I need not, nor man's empty praise.

Thou mine inheritance through all my days.

Thou and thou only the first in my heart,

High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

(Celtic Hymn 'Be Thou My Vision.')

This means that we must find our joy in God, hope for nothing else but God, and fear only God.

John's principles are very clear; they're exactly the same as those in the first book of the *Ascent* which concentrated on the purification of the external side of human nature. Now his starting-off point is this: 'The will should rejoice only in what is for the honour and glory of God, and the greatest honour we can give Him is to serve Him according to evangelical perfection; anything unincorporated in such service is without value to man.'¹⁸

John warns us that it's idle to concentrate our joy on the things of this world, such as affluence and fame, because they can cause us to withdraw from God. The person's response to God is blunted and clouded over. The net result of all this is that the individual becomes less earnest about prayer and instead more concerned about recreational pursuits. Mediocrity in the performance of spiritual exercises becomes the norm. In an extreme form this will lead to complete carelessness and indifference even in regard to the law of God. This state has been described by Jeremiah: 'They have abandoned me the fount of living water and have dug for themselves leaking cisterns that can hold no water.' (Jer. 2:13.) Ultimately this

¹⁸ Ibid., p.239.

leads to thinking of riches as the end and goal of life and allowing them to become a substitute for God. If only one can become detached from the tyranny exercised by the bank balance, then the result is a great inner freedom and expansiveness in the heart. Even in the normal course of life, you will enjoy things much more if you are not possessive of them. St Paul spoke about 'having nothing, yet possessing all things.' (2 Cor.) John states: 'He then whose joy is unpossessive of all things rejoices in them as though he possessed them all.' ¹⁹ It's this attitude of mind and status in reality that the religious vow of poverty sets out to procure for the individual who takes it. This is in imitation of Jesus himself who lived in poverty and free from earthly concerns. This living out of poverty is perhaps best exemplified in the life of St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan spirit: 'It is in giving to all people that we receive.' John himself underlines the real benefit that flows from this detachment, 'It is the freedom of the heart for God.'

Exulting In Joy.

John himself was able to cry out in his 'Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love.': 'Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine and mine are 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.' ²⁰

John also warns against attachment to the attractive qualities either in oneself or in others. Abuse in this direction also distracts the energies of the heart from God. Somewhere in our subconscious we must recall the remark for the Book of Proverbs quoted by John, 'Grace is deceitful and beauty vain; but she who fears the Lord shall be praised.' (Prov. 31:30)

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 247.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 669.

John views realistically from a scriptural angle what the poet Keats describes in despairing fashion:

‘Here where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes
Nor new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.’

John sees similar spiritual disadvantages flowing from the wrong attitude in regard to gifts and graces as in the case of wealth - namely pride and presumption. There’s a lack of proportion in interpersonal relationships that may sometimes lead to sinful expression. The result of all this is that it fosters lukewarmness and impatience with the things of God.

John is a great realist and his century was no different to ours or any other. He draws our attention to the numerous crimes of murder, adultery and rape that occur when sinful tendencies are left unchecked. No area of life and no group of people or no individual is immune from trouble in this respect. John refers us to the advice of the Roman poet Ovid – ‘Apply the remedy in the beginning.’ (*Remedia Amoris*)

If this powerful emotion of love is rightly regulated however, then innumerable benefits follow. We are again as in the case of the mortification of mind and memory, made ready for God’s love, we have a right regard for ourselves and a proper perspective on others – we’re free to love them in a more objective way. I think we find here a very contemporary note in St. John of the Cross on the level of relationships, but he does insist on the ideal. He encourages attachment to someone, yes, but he demands a greater attachment to God. That means that the more we love our friend the more our love for God grows and vice versa. Due proportion here also promotes tranquility of spirit and moreover the saying is verified: ‘To the pure all things are pure.’

St John also encourages us to allow the beautiful things in life to nourish and deepen our relationship with God in prayer. So when listening to a Mozart concerto or when looking at a beautiful landscape, he would have us direct our joy to God. Still he very shrewdly asks us to always try to assess our

motives, because as he points out, some people will simply be enjoying a performance and try to make out that it is prayer. The test is whether we immediately rise to God when listening to the music or whatever. If we confine ourselves to the immediate source of the enjoyment and pleasure and we are forgetful of God, then it's an indication that we ought to curb it. John details a long catalogue of undesirable effects from a spiritual point of view, which result when the tendency to sensual pleasure is given free rein. These all produce a kind of grossness which proceeds from an extravagant lifestyle, in which every whim is pandered to and every desire indulged. This is an outlook on life which is not at all untypical of the age in which we live, in those circles which have the wealth to back up such decadence. The bad effects accruing from this lifestyle are disastrous for spiritual life: a feeling of emptiness results merely from the unrestricted indulgence in seeing things. When our ears are itching for every shred of gossip, the consequence is widespread dissipation. The same thing happens through an over-indulgence of the other senses, e.g. delightful fragrances and the gourmet mentality. Special care must be exercised in what we allow the sense of touch, for a lack of moderation here can be particularly debilitating for the life of the spirit.

John very wisely reminds us however that these things can be relative to the individual, and so we must be careful not to judge others by what we find a source of trouble for ourselves. Some people are more susceptible to temptation here than others in all of these areas.

The positive benefits that result from restraining the senses are many. The main plus is a deepened recollection or concentration of the energies on God. John is perhaps too severe in his approach here in some respects. The objective he has in view is necessary and desirable but the language is somewhat out of date. For example he feels that we ought to

move from being sensual to being spiritual, from being animal to being rational.

The Golden Mean.

What is needed rather is that these two sides of human nature be kept in harmonious balance. Neither side should be suppressed or obliterated. Psychology has come a long way since the 16th century and human nature is seen today as more of a unity than in John's day.

On the next and higher level John proposes the mortification of what he calls 'moral good' in ourselves or others. These qualities are desirable even on the natural plane. For the Christian moreover they lead to eternal life. John adverts to the pursuit of virtue and justice that we find in Roman times, (at least at their best). We have only to think of the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. He was however no friend of the Christian Church. John's concern is that any feeling of satisfaction we derive from being morally good, should redound to the glory of God and not reflect on ourselves. If good qualities are referenced to oneself only, the result is inevitably a pharisaical pride condemned by Jesus in the Gospel (Lk.:18.11-12)

St. John of the Cross in his writings and spiritual teaching mercilessly uncovers human pride and creeping self-seeking. As he looked at the monuments and beautiful works of art in Toledo Cathedral or in Salamanca where he attended the University, he must have wondered how much of it was commissioned solely for the glory of God and how much was due to human pride and vanity. He observes: 'They perpetuate

in the memorials their name, lineage and nobility.’²¹ It’s rare, he thinks, to find people motivated in their works and spiritual exercises by God alone rather than personal self-satisfaction.

Furthermore we should try to lessen our dependance on what we can ‘get out of it’ and this will make us less prone to deception, as well as more consistent and resolute in what we do. In other words we will aim at an evangelical poverty of spirit. There are two more categories of ‘commendable things’ left in regard to which John will teach detachment. These he deals with in the remaining chapters of *Ascent* 3, namely 30 - 45. The division he suggests is as follows:

1. Supernatural goods.

2. Spiritual goods.

What does he mean by supernatural goods? We’re really dealing here with what are known as ‘*gratiae gratis datae*’ that is, gifts which are known in theology as being bestowed for the benefit of others. So he is saying that one ought to be spiritually indifferent to unusual charisms which may be given by God; these are gifts of the Spirit - wisdom and knowledge, faith, the healing ministry, prophecy and the discernment of spirits, the gift of tongues and interpretation of them. Again, these special charisms are given for the benefit of others not of oneself. If these charisms are used indiscriminately or incorrectly, then the door is opened to self-deception. A more serious disadvantage is that these graces could be detrimental to and destructive of faith itself, if they are not properly integrated into God’s purposes. Furthermore we should be on our guard against occult practices which have always been a temptation to human nature. On the other hand however, if unusual charisms are properly utilised, then the Lord can indeed be praised and glorified. Although it cannot be denied that these extraordinary manifestations can be marvellously effective in turning people’s hearts to God, yet John’s central theme stands; namely that the primary consideration should be

²¹ Ibid., p. 269.

the deepening of one's faith, because only faith can unite us with God.

The final type of benefits treated by John in *Ascent 3* comes under the heading of what he calls 'spiritual goods.' He will not in fact be covering every variety here as some of these have been treated in previous teaching, for instance the need for detachment from knowledge and feeling. He will now confine himself to those things which incite the will to prayer and love of God. The first of these concerns the use of holy images and places of prayer and pilgrimage. The second are inspirational in character such as listening to conferences and sermons and performing exercises of devotion. John had also intended to discuss two additional types of spiritual good, which he calls 'directive and perfective.' We don't know what he meant by these as the book breaks off abruptly in the middle of a sentence in a section on sermons! We may note that at the beginning of Chap. 16 John had proposed to give instruction on the purification of the four chief feelings or emotions of the soul, namely joy, hope, sorrow and fear. In reality he only deals with the first of these and the remaining three are not tackled at all.

Devotional Images.

Images had in fact a significant place in the lives of both John and Teresa. In Segovia there is preserved a painting known as the 'Christ who spoke to St. John of the Cross.' This refers to the incident when he is reputed to have heard the words, 'John, what do you wish as a reward for your labours' and John's reply is said to have been, 'Domine pati et contemni pro te.', 'Lord to suffer and be despised for you.' Similarly in Teresa's case, a painting of Christ's scourging at the pillar had a profound effect on her one particular day, and sparked off a deeper conversion to the love of God. The sight of the suffering Christ caused her heart to break. (*Life*, Chap.9).

In Ch.39 of her *Life* she recounts how a painting of Christ at the pillar in the convent hermitage spoke very gently to her.²²

St. John is in favour of devotion to holy images approved by the Church, but he has harsh words for the prevailing fashion in the Spain of his day in carrying such devotion to excess. However he has explicitly rejected the stand of the Reformers on this question, especially the position of John Calvin who attacked the cult of images in the Church. In Chap.15 of *Ascent* 3 (in connection with the purification of the memory) he wrote: 'Yet it must be noted here that by our doctrine we are not in agreement nor do we desire to be, with that of those pestiferous men, who, persuaded by the pride and envy of Satan, have sought to remove from the eyes of the faithful the holy and necessary use and the renowned cult of the images of God and his saints.'²³

John is not enthusiastic about going off with a crowd on a package pilgrimage; he would prefer people to do like Jesus and go to a lonely place by themselves away from noise and distraction. He has no time for the commercialism that exploits holy places such as the Holy Land or Lourdes. John is here waging war against the restless gadabout mentality of people who never want to stay in the same place,(or the same Order), but flit around like a bee from one flower to another. John however admits that a beautifully landscaped solitary area can be very conducive to prayer. He himself was very fond of the solitude at a place called El Calvario, and he sometimes took the students out into the hills to pray.

John touches on devotional exercises and strongly condemns all kinds of superstitious practices, such as saying a fixed number of prayers which must be said on a certain day and at a certain time and so on. All we need to do, he says, is say the 'Pater Noster' well; everything is included in that. His remarks on the liturgy may be a bit antiquated but they're

²² See Collected Works of St. Teresa, p.343.

²³ Collected Works of St. John of the Cross,p.236.

interesting: 'The manner of saying Mass should be left to the priest who represents the Church at the altar, for he has received direction from the Church as to how Mass should be said'!

The final chapter of the *Ascent* as we have it is on preaching the word of God and his observation here are of perennial value: 'For although (preaching) is practiced through exterior words, it has no force or efficacy save from the interior spirit.' He's all in favour of a good sermon well delivered, but his considered opinion is this, 'the better the life of the preacher, the more abundant the fruit.'

Dark Night of the Soul.
Book One

Active Purification Of The Spirit.

We know from internal evidence that this book of *The Dark Night* is a continuation of the themes of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. For example in the Prologue to the *Ascent* John wrote: 'We shall discuss all this with the divine help....the signs for the recognition of this purification of the soul (which we call the Dark Night) whether it is the purification of the sense or of the spirit.'

The most obvious link is that both books are by way of commentary on the same poem, and indeed on the same stanzas of the same poem. In fact in his commentary on Stanza One of the *Living Flame*, John refers to the *Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel*. In the present work, just as in the *Ascent*, John only completes his commentary on two of the stanzas of the poem and ends abruptly after he has started to comment on the third. These stanzas are now to be understood in a passive sense, as the direct work of God in the soul. The stanzas are as follows:

One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
- Ah the sheer grace I -
I went out unseen

My house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure
By the secret ladder disguised
-Ah the sheer grace,
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now at rest.

In the *Dark Night* then John is addresses people who have taken his instruction in the *Ascent* very seriously and have been assiduous in divesting themselves of all that could impede union with God. The individual is now able to sing a new song in regard to its 'escape' from the house of the senses. It has died to itself and begun to live the 'sweet and delightful life of union with God.' We're now at that important transition period of spiritual life, namely the change from meditation to contemplation. For St. Teresa this is the transition from the Third to the Fourth Mansion or in the terminology of her *Life*, the prayer of the Third Water! So John is here thinking of people who have been led along the ways of contemplative prayer and are in a state of union with God. He points out what God is doing within them because God has taken the initiative. This is what we understand as 'the passive purification of the soul during the dark night of the senses and the spirit.'

Book 1 deals with the passive dark night of senses. The people he has in mind have been praying and meditating for a long time - earnestly engaged in preparing for this loving encounter with the Lord. This work has taken them as far as humanly possible. The Lord himself now takes over and begins to expose them to the burning and purifying rays of his love. This process reveals some glaring faults and defects which need the divine correcting hand. In order to appreciate the need for this purification we ought to understand the pattern of development that has taken place.

When an individual gives himself or herself to God there is usually a period of 'first fervor.' This is an intense experience of divine love along the lines of a romantic attachment. Everything is beautiful and there can be a passionate dedication to prayer and acts of love for God. As John says the Lord here is acting like a loving mother who nourishes and caresses her child. The devout person will be intensely drawn to silence spending long periods perhaps in the dim light of the chapel where all the senses are bathed in a feeling of well-being. This is the initial phase of what we understand as falling in love with God. But there's a long spiritual road ahead, and if this new-found love is to deepen and develop, it must become increasingly independent of feelings of sweetness and sensual inebriation. The golden moon is fading from the sky and the individual must wake to the cold light of dawn. So here in the first book of the *Dark Night*, John examines the defects of these people so as to highlight the need for the kind of purification he will describe.

Do Not Act As The Hypocrites Do.

First of all we find a tendency in people who are serious in their search for God to parade their virtue before others. They will indulge in numerous stratagems to impress people. They will pontificate on spiritual things and will be very critical of others who do not seem to be as devout as themselves. People like this will be anxious that they alone should appear holy, and so they will be jealous of others. If their spiritual director is less than enthusiastic about them they will shop around and switch to someone else who will be more approving. They will be so anxious to appear holy in the eyes of their spiritual director or confessor that they may withhold anything that shows them up in a poor light. Sometimes they will be disconsolate when they realise the extent of their faults as they had imagined themselves to be saints already. They plead with God to remove their faults, not realising that if he did

so they would become even more proud. What is really needed however is that these people consider everyone else as better than themselves. A truly humble approach to God realises that there's really nothing we can do for God and what is done amounts to nothing. People like this won't court praise or flattery and will be embarrassed if it should come their way. Unlike the self-important person, the humble will be glad to hear others praised and will highlight their own faults instead of disguising them. John would seem to be here giving an exact description of Teresa from what we know of her life: she was always self-effacing and tried to put herself in the lowest place. He writes: 'These souls would give their life's blood to anyone who serves God, and they will do whatever they can to help others serve Him.'

Another remark John makes concerns what he calls 'spiritual gluttony.' People who are imperfect can also be grasping in a spiritual sense. They will have an obsession with reading spiritual books and engaging in spiritual conversations. They may also be over attached to religious objects as we saw in Book 3 of the *Ascent*. All this and similar defects are material for the passive purification that God will work within.

John also mentions difficulties that can arise that are of a sexual nature and which can be occasioned by the very feeling of delight and satisfaction felt in regard to God's love. This may occur at the very moment when the person is immersed in prayer, or receiving Holy Communion. The reason for this is that when the person feels joy deep inside this feeling tends to overflow to the body. Some people need reassurance in this area because of the anxiety caused by this experience. The main thing is to try to alleviate this fear and put their minds at rest. In this connection John also deals with an unbalanced attachment to someone; such a relationship will tend to diminish one's love for God. John gives us a criterion for discerning the proper from the improper: 'The affection is

purely spiritual if the love of God grows when it grows, or if the love of God is remembered as often as the affection is remembered or if the affection gives the soul a desire for God - if by growing in one the soul grows in the other.'²⁴

Striking The Right Balance.

If the relationship is improper, the process will work in reverse and the love of God will evaporate. The remedy is to grow in the love of God and the improper relationship will be corrected. There are other areas too of course where unredeemed human nature makes its appearance. There could for instance be a great lack of moderation in the whole approach to spiritual exercises and a lack of discretion in doing penance because of the latent satisfaction derived thereby. Such people may also have a serious limitation in regard to prayer which will impede their progress and growth in faith. Because these people have been attracted to prayer in the first place by pleasurable sensation they will find it very difficult to let go of these feelings and base their prayer on something less frothy. The individual is tempted to try and induce delightful and fervent feelings which however only result in tense headache. When consolation is absent, the person will feel discouraged and think that everything has come to a standstill. Anything that doesn't yield satisfaction is avoided. Now obviously a person who is motivated in this way is overlooking the place of the cross in Christianity.

This serious defect will be remedied by the sufferings and frustrations of the dark night of the spirit. It's obvious that the Lord will need to intervene gently and lovingly so as to adjust such behaviour in order to lead the person closer to himself. If the individual perseveres in prayer for many years irrespective of whether there's any satisfaction or not, considerable progress is made and the person is being adjusted to a new and purely contemplative way of praying. Trying to meditate is

²⁴ Ibid., p.305.

like hitting one's head against a stone wall, and there's an inevitable feeling of frustration. All around is dry and arid and the individual feels like a parched and waterless desert. One needs to take the best line of approach when overtaken by this kind of situation. There may even be a sense of desolation and abandonment on the part of God. However any anxiety to pray and meditate in the normal way only hinders God's effort to lead the person forward.

In *Dark Night*, Bk.1 Chap.9 John again treats of the three signs of initial contemplation which he has already covered in Bk. 2.of the *Ascent*. In the present context he's thinking of the more passive and infused forms of prayer which are now imminent. The transition may not occur abruptly but instead there may be period of normal meditation alternating with the beginnings of what is sometimes called obscure contemplation.

Reaching For The Stars.

John here however introduces a major distinction in regard to the kind of prayer that now begins to develop. One category of people will continue all their lives in this pattern of prayer. Another group, a minority of those who practice prayer, will be led into deeper detachment from 'lower' forms of prayer and so they will enter the highest contemplation.

Those people then whom the Lord in his providence intends to lead along the highest path, must undergo a more thorough 'night of contemplation.' They will believe that everything is lost and that they have been forgotten and abandoned by God. No matter how hard they try they cannot pray. Have patience and trust in God, John advises. The temptation is that people at this point feel they are doing nothing and only wasting time, but John counsels them not to worry. His point is that God is communicating himself to the person through this obscure, indefinable and 'thoughtless' contemplation. John brings Chap.10 to a close with this

definition: 'For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love....'²⁵

St. John of the Cross maintains that initially contemplation is imperceptible, although occasionally a 'certain longing for God' is experienced. The origin of this love and thirst for God is not immediately evident, but hidden in the 'cloud of unknowing' we met earlier.' It can be compared to an image emerging from an obscure background; at first it's completely covered over, but little by little the picture begins to take shape. First the outline appears, then the colours and other details, until finally a clear and striking image comes into focus and stands out in bold relief.

This passive night of the senses is very painful and severe but brings with it innumerable advantages. When the heart is no longer orientated towards sensual satisfaction the deep roots of evil are cut off and wither away.

Know Thyself.

John notes 'that self-knowledge and an awareness of one's limitations are directly attributable to this dark and painful contemplation.' When things were going well there was a tendency for the individual to live in cloud-cuckoo land, thinking that she/he was giving adequate service to God. Moreover the tone of a person's prayer will change somewhat and a more sober and reverential approach to God is adopted. John is really saying that the person is learning good spiritual manners. This self-knowledge opens the way to a salutary knowledge of God – 'noverim me, noverim te.' This purgative fire has brought about a kind of chastening in outlook - the fact that you may be further along the spiritual road than others does not even enter your head. You will be so painfully aware of your own misery that you will have very little time to observe the defects of others. And so the former attitudes born of pride

²⁵ Ibid., p. 318

are completely reversed. One is now more liable to err by default by not piling up spiritual exercises as was done previously. The delightful feelings that fed the sensual side of nature no longer bubble up as formerly and the exercise of love is more restrained and subdued. The person is no longer spiritually grasping, and the previously unchecked impulses die down through lack of nutriment. It's now possible to enjoy a more peaceful and tranquil communion with God. The Lord is always in one's thoughts. There's a remarkable growth in virtue and good qualities which are nourished by this purification. Sometimes an oasis appears in this broad and arid desert; the Lord lovingly visits the praying persons to encourage them and this when least expected. There remains a great anxiety and solicitude about serving God and a longing to be close to God. If only the person realised it, the grace of God working within is allowing it to escape into a land of freedom. In John's poetic language, the house of the soul is now 'all stilled.' In the final chapter of Book 1 of the *Dark Night*, the mystical teacher is looking ahead to the complete purification that will be effected in the 'passive night of the spirit.' The affliction that the individual experienced in the first night is a good preparation for this. John mentions that not everyone undergoes the more thoroughgoing purification of the second night. We might make an observation here which should go a long way towards removing the stern and forbidding image many people have of this master of the spiritual life. John here depicts God in a most loving and delicate way adapting and accommodating himself to the needs and capabilities of each individual. The whole work of purification is a long drawn out process spanning one's whole life. It's fitted to the circumstances, spiritual needs and potential of each one, and everyone is different. The Lord's hand works gently, sometimes chastening, at other times elevating and caressing. John tells us that if a person is strong God will purify it intensely in order to draw it quickly and intimately to himself. But if it's weak then like an understanding

and loving mother, he will lead it onwards gently with only the bare minimum of suffering. We may think here of Jesus the Good Shepherd in these prophetic words of Ezechiel: 'I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will show -them where to rest - it is the Lord who speaks. I shall look for the lost one bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong. I shall be a true shepherd to them.'(Exech.34:15)

Dark Night of the Soul.
Book Two.

Passive purification.

In the second book of the *Dark Night* St. John of the Cross tackles the more radical purification needed so as to further cleanse the human spirit. John wishes us to understand first of all that this second and deeper purification doesn't follow immediately on the first. There can be, he says, an interval of 'many years' between these two stages. During this intervening period, prayer has become more simplified and the individual takes a more relaxed and mature approach to spiritual things. There are however isolated times of turmoil which presage trouble to come. At these times the deeper spiritual needs and failings of prayerful people are being uncovered. As John has already stated in the first book, this may continue to be the normal pattern of spiritual life for those not called to the highest contemplation.

Scaling The Heights.

Those who are advancing to the 'heights' however have to endure a more continuous and prolonged purification. Due to the progress already made there can be deep feelings of delight in God. We will meet with descriptions of these in the early stanzas of the *Spiritual Canticle*. John tells us that these vigorous spiritual communications are too much for the personality which is not yet fully purified, and so may lead to

raptures and ecstasy which sometimes result in corporal suffering such as dislocation of the bones. St. Teresa deals fully with these phenomena in her *Life* and in the *Interior Castle*. But as stated already these physical manifestations cease altogether in the state of perfection.

The reason why this second night of the spirit is needed is because there are still roots and stains of evil left within and to remove these a pretty strong detergent must be employed. For a start there may be feelings of complacency and pride at the thought of being favoured by intimacy with God. Indeed the pitfalls to which people at this stage are exposed are dangerous and subtle. Over confidence mixed with pride are the most common snares. People advanced in prayer will be tempted to entertain special revelations and spiritual experiences of the kind John has warned us about in Bks. 2 and 3 of the *Ascent*. To give in to this temptation would lessen the power of faith in the soul, and faith as we saw is the means of union with God.

So it's obvious that further refinement is needed if the person is to become pure and completely receptive to God. Not alone that, but John tells us that the sensual side of human nature is not completely purified until the spirit has been purged as well. So in the night of the spirit a dark cloud descends, paralysing every aspect of the personality. 'He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity the memory in emptiness, the affections supreme affliction, bitterness and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings.'²⁶ This strong statement we find in Chap. 3.

The fire of dark contemplation is now applied to the soul and John sees the individual, transformed by this work of God's grace within it. The mind now understands by means of divine wisdom, the will loves with the strength and purity of the Holy Spirit and the memory enjoys intimations of glory.

²⁶ Ibid., p.333.

John now observes a twofold effect of what he refers to as 'infused contemplation.' It disposes the person for union with God by both purging and enlightening it. At first however all is darkness. The brightness of the divine light shining within causes spiritual darkness, a 'ray of darkness' in the words of Pseudo-Dionysius. The clash of opposites here - the brightness and goodness of God and the darkness and misery of the praying person is intense in the extreme. The person suffers greatly through a feeling of total and final rejection by God. This feeling is compounded by an awareness of one's own misery and helplessness. One feels empty and unlovable: this is really a state of spiritual depression because there's no end in sight. There seems to be no escape from this dark dungeon, no light at the end of the tunnel. The individual suffers the pain of rejection from the one it most loves. And so the heart is torn up by the roots. John gives us a very vivid picture of the stress endured at this time. 'The soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death.'

Emily Bronte gives us a similar description of Jane Eyre's desolation:

I heard a flood loosened in remote mountains and I felt the torrent come: to rise I had no strength. I lay faint longing to be dead. One idea only stilled throbbed lifelike within me - a remembrance of God: it begot an unuttered prayer: these words went wandering up and down in my rayless mind, as something that should be whispered, but no energy was found to express them, Be not far from me for trouble is near, there is none to help. (*Jane Eyre*, Chap. 26)

John cites all the great scriptural texts that speak of abandonment, including that text from *Jane Eyre* quoted by Emily Bronte and taken from Psalm 68: 'The waters came into

my soul; I sank in deep mire, I felt no standing, I came into deep waters, the floods overflowed me.'

The person undergoing this purification is in fact inconsolable, finding no help either in any advice, counsel or spiritual direction. John Henry Newman, now beatified, gives a good description of the suffering involved in his poem 'The Dream of Gerontius' in which he pictures the soul in purgatory. John also compares the fate of the soul to someone imprisoned in a dark dungeon, and he should know because of the intense suffering he endured in his prison cell in Toledo. Any remission of this suffering is like a reprieve from one's prison when one can enjoy the freedom of the open spaces - such as John also enjoyed when he managed to escape in a remarkable way from his tiny cell. So each little degree of illumination coming intermittently with this purgation is still sufficient to give the person a foretaste of the future. However the return of darkness is enough to obliterate these sunny periods and the person is again plunged in gloom as before.

The Darkness Deepens.

One of the heaviest crosses the person has to bear is that it finds it impossible to pray. There seems to be an impenetrable cloud between itself and God. Vocal prayer is difficult as is concentration on spiritual things let alone on temporal affairs. The memory is now being purified and as we saw there are lapses in its normal functioning. Again John reminds us that the divine light is too bright for the defiled and darkened soul.

'O light invisible we praise thee too bright for mortal vision.' So wrote T.S. Eliot in his 'Choruses from the Rock.'

John's thesis is that this dark contemplation must purge and replace all natural ways of knowing and understanding. It's a transference from a human to a divine way of living. John illustrates the painful impact of divine contemplation within by the famous comparison of flame penetrating a log of wood. He

will use this example again in the *Living Flame*. Before the fire can transform the wood into something incandescent and similar to itself, the wood must pass through various stages when it appears less attractive than in its original condition. 'O must thou char the wood ere thou canst limn with it' Francis Thompson the English poet from Preston, UK, wrote in his poem the 'Hound of Heaven.'

As soon as these imperfections have been burnt away there's an intense enkindling of love produced in the spirit. All the energies of the individual are now employed in a single-minded love for God. And then as the work of purification increases there's an incipient growth of new love for God. It's a love that gropes in the darkness feeling itself smitten by the divine lover. A strong passionate love now attaches itself to the purified spirit. This development will be the theme of the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*. We see it taking shape here in the *Dark Night*. Every fibre of one's being is united in one single yearning focused on and directed to God. The Lord himself has taken the initiative here so it's really the divine love answering to human longing. God continues to pour out his love into the empty receptacle of the human heart. There is consequently an awakening to new life in this new world of God's love. The whole personality begins to expand and the heart to dilate in the radiance of God's presence. But this is a love that is still painful and hemmed in on all sides because the fire of love has not yet accomplished its work. In the midst of these purgative fires the bond that ties the heart to God is growing stronger. Sometimes the mind and will may be strongly 'caught' or rapt by God who bestows knowledge and love. This John calls 'a certain touch of the divinity' which is the vehicle of direct union with God. He has already mentioned this special touch or grace in Book 2 of the *Ascent*. This is in fact as was stated there the union towards which he is directing us..

Loving Union.

According as the 'dark contemplation' begins to take tighter hold on the individual it then begins to produce marvellous results. The mind is frequently touched with loving knowledge and the heart tenderly stimulated with love for its spouse. John tells us that these divine movements become a veritable passion of love, making the lover reach out with blind love for God. The person has now developed a spiritual thirst and longing for God and agonises for God. The fire of God's love has reached the deepest centre of the person, to use a phrase from the *Living Flame*. The individual has now such a reverent and loving regard for God that its greatest suffering is the fear of having been abandoned by him. She or he has become bold and daring like Mary Magdalen, and John says that the person would do strange things in whatever way necessary, in order to encounter the Lord whom it loves. One of the characteristics of this kind of absorption in God is that you cannot imagine anyone being interested in anything else but God. John was obviously deeply taken by the example of the Magdalen in the resurrection narratives. Again he remarks, 'Mary's love was so ardent that she thought she would go and take Him away, however great the impediments, if the gardener would tell where he was hidden.'²⁷

The opening lines of the *Spiritual Canticle* read:
'Where have you hidden,
Beloved and left me moaning?'

John is somewhat anticipating here in these final chapters of the *Dark Night*, the new song that the lover will sing when united with its Beloved.

In Chap. 4 John returns to the theme of his poem where in the first stanza he says:

'I went out unseen,
my house being now at rest.'

²⁷ Ibid., p. 359.

We note the indelible impression left on him by his escape from his Toledan captors when he writes, 'One who to execute his plan better, and without hindrance, goes out at night, in darkness, when everybody in the house is sleeping.' He goes out from the house of sin and imperfection in order to encounter the Beloved in freedom and joy and engage in 'in an exchange of love. His escape was 'sheer luck' as his brother jailer had perhaps forgotten to lock his prison door.

'In darkness and secure,
By the secret stair, disguised.'

We don't know how John actually escaped, but most probably he disguised himself and let himself down from his room by a rope twisted from his bedding.

John assures us that there's really nothing to fear from the night or from the darkness because in fact it was his ally in making good his escape from his enemies. The ladder he tells us is the living faith which guides him on his journey. So the person is secure even though it walks in darkness, or precisely because it walks in darkness. It's also a good thing that the individual advances along the path of suffering rather than take the primrose path. Moreover in taking this course the conscience is rendered delicate and pure. John calls dark contemplation secret for this reason that it's a hidden wisdom and truly ineffable. This means that it's impossible to write about it, and the recipient of such a favour is unable to describe it to a spiritual director. This secret wisdom of contemplation is also aptly called a ladder because it enables us to ascend to God and to descend into our own nothingness. It's also a ladder because it's the science of love which carries us upwards to the Lord.

Love In Ten Degrees.

This latter idea prompts John to devote the two following chapters (19 and 20) to the ten degrees of love or the ten stops on love's mystical ladder. Here we are definitely reading the

language of the *Canticle*. It constitutes a beautiful meditation on this theme of the divine exchange of love which is the subject of that book. In this sense it's a digression from the main subject of the *Dark Night* and may be looked at on its own. The main themes of these two chapters are fully elaborated in the *Spiritual Canticle*.

In Chap. 21 John refers to the threefold disguise adopted by the praying person which affords protection against its enemies - the world, the flesh and the devil. The disguise consists of garments of three colours, denoting faith hope and charity. These are both its badge and its means of defence.

(1) Faith is a garment of blinding whiteness which no mind can penetrate and it's the best means of defence especially against the devil. 'I will espouse you to me in faith,' says the prophet Osee.(Chap.2:20)This is the tunic that finds favour with the Beloved.

(2) The second disguise is a green coat of mail. Green is the colour associated with Spring. The reason for this is that hope nurtures the longing for eternal life which rises above the things of the world.

(3) Over these two garments there is placed a third whose colour is red and this garment signifies divine charity: this is what constitutes a defence against the flesh.

John goes on to elaborate somewhat on the first symbol, that is faith as a means of protection against the devil. He's very conscious of the possibility of the devil's interference in the deep communion between the individual and God. If the communications from God are confined to pure faith then the devil is powerless to intervene.

'My House Being Now All Stilled.'

This verse is now repeated because in this context it refers to the purification accomplished in the superior part of the soul – ie, in the passive night of the spirit. What John calls the 'substantial touches of divine union' increase in frequency and

introduce great peace and tranquility into the person. This is part of the preparation for the espousal between the lover and the Son of God. Everything is moving towards a happy climax. When the state of readiness has come about divine wisdom unites himself with the lover in a new bond of love.

Chap. 25 is the final one in *Dark Night* and it begins a section that remains unfinished. In that joyful night of contemplation the Lord led the person along a secret path untouched by anything that could impede its desired union with him. On this journey the lover refused to be drawn aside or detained by any consideration or any alternative attraction. Finally the lover seemed bereft of external illumination and guidance, but nevertheless an ardent love in its heart guided it unerringly to the heart of the Beloved.

So ends *Dark Night* of St. John of the Cross, a classic on the spiritual life and one which offers us expert guidance on our spiritual pilgrimage. We can take it that although there are five remaining stanzas in the poem, the consummation of divine love of which they speak has been beautifully commented on in the parallel writings of the *Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*.

The Spiritual Canticle.

The *Spiritual Canticle* inspired by the Canticle of Canticles or Song of Songs in Scripture, is a loving prayer dialogue between Christ and the individual human person. The Song of Songs is used by St. John of the Cross in the great mystical tradition of the Church as exemplified by such writers as St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Bernard of Clairvaux and also, of course, by St. Teresa herself in her short work *Meditations on the Song of Songs*.

I will say nothing about the marvellous heights of lyrical Spanish poetry to which John attains in this poem; his art in this respect is well-known and widely acclaimed.

In his prose commentary on the poem John tries to give expression to the ineffable, although he doesn't think that such an effort can be in any way successful. The poem then tries to express his love for Christ through the medium of highly symbolic language. This is the only way he knows that can hint at the glories of communion with Christ in prayer. The poem flows from 'abundant mystical understanding,' in other words from an overflowing love for God. This love was tempered and forged in the darkness of his Toledan dungeon during his nine long months of imprisonment there.

The commentary on the *Canticle* was dedicated by John to Mother Ann of Jesus, prioress in the convent of St. Joseph in Granada. It's important to realise that although John

suggests he's following the classical pattern of Beginners, Proficients and the Perfect, this needs to be nuanced. As he explains to Ann of Jesus there's plenty of material available for outright beginners, ie, people who may have turned to the Lord after a conversion experience, whereas Ann in his opinion had made considerable progress in prayer.

Starting Point.

The introduction to the commentary points to some basic tenets of Christian faith and spirituality - the brevity of life, the need for vigilance, the emptiness and vanity of so much of secular pursuits. And so there's engendered in the heart a resolution on the part of seekers to amend their ways and turn to God with greater sincerity than before.

We are immediately introduced to the 'Deus Absconditus,' the God who hides from his creature:

Whither hast vanished,
Beloved, and hast left me full of woe,
And like the hart hast sped,
Wounding, ere thou didst go,
Thy love, who followed, crying high and low?

Here we have echoes of medieval love tales, of initial falling in love between two people, followed by numerous tribulations and separations. A good example is the 12th century 'Romance of Horn.' At the beginning of the Romance the beautiful Rigmel falls in love with Lord Horn, but they are not finally united until the last page of a story running to 120 pages.²⁸

In the same way, John tells us, the person becomes enamoured of the Word, the Son of God, her Spouse. But there's a long journey ahead before there can be a sense of fulfilment. John's point is that God is necessarily hidden from

²⁸ *The Birth of Romance, An Anthology*, J.M Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1992, translated by Judith Weiss.

us, we can't reach God because of the limitations of our human condition. Consequently we should be suspicious of any apparently deep communication that God makes of himself. Neither should we be unduly upset by the absence of any such 'special awareness' and the consequent feeling of darkness. John alludes to the beginning of the Fourth Gospel where we are told that the Word is hidden in the bosom of the Father (John: 1:18) It's there that God is to be sought. Here John is very close to the Evangelist who maintains that God the Father is known in the Son, can only be known through the revelation of the Son: 'The only-begotten son, He has made Him known.' St. John of the Cross goes on to treat of the divine indwelling quoting St. Paul, 'You are the temple of God' (2 Cor: 6:16) He writes, 'It gives special happiness to understand that God is never absent.'

If one wonders why we're not more aware of the presence of the Lord within us John is quick to reply: 'The reason is that He remains concealed and you do not conceal yourself in order to encounter and experience Him.' Again John counsels us as he did in the *Ascent* to seek God in faith and love. These are the blind person's guides. Also as in the *Ascent*, he insists that we concentrate more on what we don't understand about God than on what we do. John is being true to the mystical tradition here such as we find it in Pseudo-Dionysius and the Greek Fathers with which he was familiar.

John is above all rigidly sincere. We can't expect to get everything we want from God unless we belong to wholly to him. For John the litmus test is this - is the whole orientation of our heart towards God or not? An additional form of the test is posed by John, 'Is the person content with nothing less than God?' So straightaway we are given an appropriate warning to prick our consciences. John goes on to talk about the presence/absence theme that figures so largely in spiritual and mystical literature. We're dealing as we know, with an exchange of love, a love that has its seasons, its winter and

summer, its high noon and dark night. Shakespeare's sonnet speaking of human love has felt this too:

'How like a winter hath my absence been from thee,
What old December's bareness everywhere.'

The Lord often visits the lover but then as quickly withdraws leaving it desolate. Remember the 'Imitation' - 'When Jesus is with us, all is well and nothing is hard, but when Jesus is absent, everything is difficult.' This whole first chapter of the *Canticle* is a cry from the heart, a cry in the desert for God. God is seen as the only object of one's searching, the only love that satisfies. John is obviously talking here about a very exalted condition of spiritual progress. The lover has been smitten by God's love and is incurable. She is like the starving person peering through the doors of a banqueting hall where the guests are dining lavishly. She has come to the gates of the palace but is not allowed to set foot inside.

You have often heard the phrase 'love will find a way.' Love is ingenious at finding ways and means of communication when such is barred or prohibited. To quote the bard again when the lover overcame all obstacles,
'With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,
For stony limits cannot keep love out.'

John is almost as explicit, 'This is the trait of a lover. When she herself cannot converse with her loved one, she does so through the best means possible.'²⁹ And so he turns to intermediaries to convey to God the heart's love and needs. It's just a way of saying as we do when writing to a friend, we might mention other people at the end, 'give them my love.' It's indirect but the best that can be done in the circumstances. This absence is felt in a threefold way, and so John refers us to his customary theme that the mind knows God by faith, the will possesses him by love, and the memory rests in him through hope, the third theological virtue. This need for God is merely

²⁹ Ibid., p. 425.

indicated by the person just as Our Lady did at the marriage feast at Cana. This is the best way to pray, for God knows our needs and if we love him he will grant our requests.

Faith And Good Works Go Together.

John realises of course that it's not enough just to pine for God - we must do something about it. So what he suggests now is eminently practical. Good works are needed. There's a hint of St. James here. Yes, we must seek God in real earnest. 'Seek the Lord while he is still to be found,' a Lenten text in Isaiah states. People must apply themselves to the practice of virtue and engage in the spiritual exercises of both the active and the contemplative life.

We see here that John insists that we be faithful to our meditation and the prayer of the Church and also to the apostolate of service to others. We recall the woman in the gospel who searches her house and sweeps diligently until she finds the lost coin. This is simply the 'cost of discipleship' that we must fully accept. We're really told to get moving, it's not a time for rest. We remember how St. Teresa in the *Way of Perfection* tells us to work hard at cultivating the virtues, especially charity, detachment and humility. John is only repeating here the advice he gave in the *Ascent* - to deny ourselves as Jesus has asked us to do. This is what following Christ means, John is being true to his religious title 'of the cross.' Our inveterate enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil will conspire to try and divert us from the true course. Great determination will be needed to embark upon and stay the course. Teresa, writing in her *Life* about setting out on the ways of prayer underlines the need for courage also. She writes: 'I say courage because there are so many things that the devil puts in the minds of beginners to prevent them in fact from setting out on this path.'

The secret in resisting the enemy lies in prayer and the cross of Jesus. John quotes St. Paul's words to the Ephesians:

‘Put on the armour of God that you may be able to resist the wiles of the devil.’ This quotation is also found in the Rule of St. Albert for Carmelites.

We can take the next two stanzas of the poem together, i.e. 4 and 5. They’re a lovely meditation on God's creative activity. Here we have examples of the lyrical nature-poetry of St. John. Having looked inwards on our own selves we now turn to view God’s handiwork in the beauties of creation. This exercise should lead us onwards to contemplate the creator of it all. This is John’s natural theology, taking his cue from St. Paul to the Romans: ‘Ever since the world was created by God, His everlasting power and deity - however invisible - have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made.’ (Rom. 1:20) God has created all things by his word of wisdom, as Scripture, especially St. John the Evangelist describes for us, ‘In Him all things were made.’

‘Through these woods and groves he passed,
clothing every place with loveliest reflection of his face.’
And John comments, ‘All of these He did through His own Wisdom, the Word, by whom He created them.’ This theme has been developed by early Christian theology, and John would seem to be indebted to St. Augustine. In his Confessions, referring to his last conversation with his mother St. Monica at Ostia on the Tiber, Augustine wrote, ‘And so we came to our own souls and went beyond them to come at last to that region of richness unending where you feed Israel forever with the food of truth: and there life is that wisdom by which all things are made.’³⁰

Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin was something of a latter-day John who can sing his *Hymn of the Universe* to Christ who is the luminous point of the world. The poetic heart of John glories in the woods and thickets, the groves and meadows decked with flowers and all displaying a thousand graces. We

³⁰ Confessions of St. Augustine, Book 9.

might compare favourably with this, these lines from the well loved English poet Keats:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon these boughs,
But in embalmed darkness guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows,
The grass, the thicket and the fruit-tree wild.

Having contemplated the glories of Creation, John now takes up his theme again. Now he would ask us to go beyond and transcend these works of creation, beautiful though they be, and reach out to the author of such splendours. This is exactly what St. Augustine did also. There follows a very daring prayer to the Lord begging him for his very presence and the vision of himself. In utter abandon John cries out to God, 'Now wholly surrender Yourself.' He's not satisfied with the mere tokens of God's presence in creation in spite of their attractiveness. He accuses the Lord of merely 'having him on.' 'You have communicated by means of others' he says, 'as if joking with me.' Isn't he really saying here that the Lord is the ultimate tease. Apart from anything else these exchanges show us the intimacy of John's dialogue with the Lord.

There is however an additional and higher source or stimulus for knowing God accorded us by our fellow human beings. With these John would also include angelic natures. For John then, God reveals himself to us in various ways and in different degrees of intensity. Creation reveals the face of God and spurs us on to love him. But John has obviously a deep appreciation of how God uses other people to instruct and teach us about himself. That's why he would want us to remember how grateful we should be to our parents and our first teachers in the ways of God, as well as to our current teachers, the Pope, bishops, priests and theologians. We're reminded here of St. Paul's words, 'Faith comes through

hearing.’(Roms. 10:17) The knowledge of God imparted to him by others strikes him keenly, especially what he learned about his favourite truth, the Incarnation of the Word.

I Die Because I Do Not Die.

This awareness of God sparks off something deeper which he calls ‘A touch of supreme knowledge of the divinity’ which is inexpressible and reduces one to stammering like a child. This is the famous ‘un no se que balbuciendo.’ Here again we have the elusive, indefinable, unknowing aspect of God's love. We understand clearly that everything yet remains to be understood.

It's difficult for us in our sinful and imperfect state to follow the ardour of a Teresa or a John in the intensity of their faith and love. At this point John expresses his keen desire for the dissolution of natural life in order to taste eternal life. He's merely echoing St. Paul to the Philippians: ‘I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ which is much better.’(Phil. 1:23) Teresa also talks a lot on this theme. For instance in Mansion 5 she says, ‘From the very unhappiness caused by worldly things arises the ever so painful desire to leave the world.’ The refrain of one of her poems runs, ‘I die because I do not die.’ John's language is extremely strong and bold. ‘These touches of God, he says, ‘so impregnate the soul with the knowledge and love of God that she can truthfully say she conceives.’

Here we're dealing with the pain and anxiety of unfulfilled longings. This is of course also part of the purification process with which *Ascent* and *Dark Night* are concerned.

We're now coming to the end of this first section of the *Canticle* which records the longings of the lover for God's love. Psalm 62 expresses this kind of yearning very beautifully: ‘O God my God, for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water.’

This longing for God is typical of all those who have sought God sincerely in the Church down the ages. St. Thérèse of Lisieux is of course a shining example of this and of the whole Carmelite spirit. We only have to read that burning letter to her sister Marie. But let me give you a far older example in these words from the Sermons of St. Columbanus: 'I beseech you most loving Saviour, show Yourself to us who seek You, so that knowing You we may love You as warmly in return; may I love You alone, desire You alone, contemplate You alone by day and night and keep You always in our thoughts.' (Ser. 12).

Light Of My Eyes.

John now refers to the Beloved as the 'light of his eyes' indicating the progressive growth in intimacy. We're reminded of the words of Scripture - 'Learn O Israel where knowledge is, where strength, where understanding, where life ... where is light of the eyes and peace.' The longing is intense as we go on to see in the next section. John tells us that God gives a 'certain spiritual feeling of His presence to this loving soul.' She seeks him more covetously than the adventurers who in John's day sailed off from Spain to find gold in the new world. And in a way isn't this exactly what John himself is doing and what he asks of us. He has set out like an adventurer to find the treasure of God's love, something he has told us many times is worth more than all the gold in the world. This is really what it's all about. This is the beginning and end of the spiritual journey. Our Carmelite saints want us to set out in search of the Holy Grail, but unlike any of these mythical objects, vague and indefinable, they know what it is they're seeking - it is Godself revealed in the face of Jesus. We have an illustration, a metaphor or analogy for this quest in human experience itself, and that is why John describes the spiritual life as a love affair with the Lord.

Perhaps nowhere in all literature has this pilgrimage been described so well as in Dante's 'Divine Comedy' and Dante was also a great Christian poet. The story unfolds from the first meeting with Beatrice in Florence along the River Arno, until he is led by her into the very presence of God. He has gone through purgation and hell, and with her as guide he meets Mary the mother of the Lord. And in the eyes of Beatrice he sees reflected the face of Christ who leads him to the Trinity. It's a wonderful story of human and divine love.

In modern spiritual writers we often find moving and inspiring accounts of breakthrough to vision and salvation. The once popular writer Carlo Carretto, follower of Charles De Foulcauld, in his book 'In search of the Beyond' tells us that at one time when he was in doubt about his salvation, Christ appeared to him one Friday at midday and washed him in his blood for the three hours he hung on the cross until he expired. And then he understood that he was to stop worrying about questions of justice, and instead believe deeply that the scales had come down overwhelmingly on the side of love.

John of the Cross has committed himself completely to this same pilgrimage in order to encounter the living God and see the vision of his glory. In the lover's entreaty to behold the beauty of God's face, he's reminded of the story of Moses, who was told, 'You shall not see Me and live.' John sees an apt illustration of this text in the mythical basilisk whose look alone was sufficient to kill. Of course it's highly unlikely that you will ever come across a basilisk, even if you had any desire to see one. The nearest you can get to it is one of those fire-breathing monsters on childrens' programmes on television. John has now described for us the first part of the person's journey to God. He now turns our attention to the need for Faith as he ends this section. Faith will also, like Beatrice, guide us along the next part of the journey. Desire for God increases in intensity and the individual is drawn to God like a piece of steel to a magnet. John addresses faith in the beautiful words, 'O

crystalline fount' and here we have a play on the name of Christ himself, and yes, you've guessed it, the power of faith is sketched on the understanding, just as the gift of love is sketched on the will of the soul. What faith reveals to us of God, even though true and certain remains incomplete in this life. For the perfection of faith we need the 'light of glory' which is given us in the vision of God..

The Spiritual Canticle, 13 – 22.

Spiritual Espousal

The beginning of Stanza 13 marks a new section of the book and a new stage of progress in the life of union with God. John stated in his introduction; 'The subsequent ones (13-21) deal with the state of proficients in which the spiritual espousal is effected, that is of the illuminative way.'

We're now touching on what Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdelene calls 'The Feasts of Love' and this is indeed what is indicated - a celebration of divine love after the suffering, pressures and desires that have proceeded them.³¹

The opening note of this new celebration is that the Lord³² comes to visit the loving person who longs for him.

We might recall here the words of St. Paul: 'I have espoused you to one husband that I might present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.' Our Carmelite Saints never tire of pointing out to us the amazing delicacy of the Lord's love for his creature. For instance, St. Thérèse in talking about her 'betrothal' mentions her predilection for snow. Against all the odds and despite weather forecasts, she was delighted to find there was a heavy fall of snow, 'No mortal lover would be in a

³¹ Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, Father. *St. John of the Cross: Doctor of Divine Love and Contemplation*. Translated by a Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey. Cork: Mercier Press, 1947.

position to humour his bride in such a way' she writes in her autobiography.

The early part of the *Spiritual Canticle* was concerned with the person's preparations for the coming of the Lord. Up to now the 'bride' has been the only speaker in the poem, telling of her longings and fears and trials. There are only two more lines in the Bride's dialogue and these are the opening verses of Stanza 13:

'Withdraw then Beloved, I am taking flight.'

This is now a very advanced stage of the spiritual life. For John it's the time of illumination. Preparations are in hand for what John describes as the Spiritual Betrothal. We now understand, I think, what Teresa means when she says: 'For mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.'³³ The lover feels the Lord's intimate presence to such an extent that it verges on ecstasy. We should remember here that not everyone has the same kind of experience. Not everyone will have unusual graces such as are described here. Perhaps it will depend on the particular temperament and make-up of each individual. In any case, John will insist (as does Teresa) that extraordinary graces are not strictly necessary for us to reach union with God. Thérèse of Lisieux, for example, doesn't discuss these kinds of unusual graces. As in her case, the alternative may be a deep peace within one's heart in spite of and in the midst of darkness and suffering. Teresa herself also reminds us that these favours are no indication true holiness. In any case, let us not forget extraordinary graces are only a stage of progress and they cease when a more complete union with God is achieved. The first words of the spouse in the *Spiritual Canticle* are words of restraint to the soul. He tells her that this particular type of contemplation is not in fact the kind by which it can grasp or lay hold of God. It's a lower type of knowledge which is trying to

³³ Collected Works of St. Teresa, p.96.

anticipate the 'high knowledge' of the possession of God. John of the Cross is very careful to point out something which has a central part in the Carmelite understanding of prayer and that is that love must flow from knowledge. Knowledge of God by itself is sterile, it must be vivified by the breath of the Holy Spirit, the bond of love between Father and Son. Teresa would put it like this: 'It is not important to think much but to love much.'

If You Knew The Gift Of God.

Infused contemplation really means what St. Paul talks about in Romans 5 - 'The love of God has been poured out (infused) into your hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' This is the only kind of contemplation that can attain to God and unite us with him. There's another very characteristic Johannine trait in the words: 'God does not give grace and love except in accordance with the person's desire and love.' And if this seems rarified and out of touch with ordinary life, he tells us that this kind of love has to be worked out according to St. Paul's famous passage, 'Love is patient and kind, is not envious, does no evil' in a word, it is acquired through love of neighbour.

'My beloved is the mountains
And lonely wooded valleys
Strange islands
And resounding rivers,
The whistling of love-stirring breezes.'

If you didn't know a lot about St. John of the Cross, you might think he was a pantheist like Wordsworth to write like that. Wordsworth wrote:

'Therefore am I still,
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains and of all that we behold
From this green earth. Of all the mighty world of

eye and ear.'

Then he refers to these as:

'The guide, the guardian of my heart and soul,
of all my inner being'. (*Intimations of Immortality*.)

But John of the Cross didn't see things that way. Creation didn't speak to him about itself, it spoke to him about its creator. John himself explains what these lines describe. 'She does no more than tells in song her Beloved's grandeurs.' This is a really marvellous section of the book, wonderfully describing for us the infinite riches of God. It's well worth meditating on. God is everything that can be desired in this world. In the old scholastic theological jargon we said that God possessed all these qualities 'eminenter' or in an eminent way. Not alone that, but John tells us that God communicates all these graces to the devout person also, making her beautiful. She feels that he is allowing her to share God's kingdom and riches. It's just as if we had a multi-millionaire friend who told us to feel free to wander in and out of his mansion, go for a cruise on his yacht or take a spin in his Rolls-Royce whenever we felt like it.

Here the descriptions of super-abundance tumble over one another like the 'resounding rivers' of peace of which he speaks. The language is beautiful and delicate, 'The whisper of love-stirring breezes.' Karl Wojtyla (as he was at the time) makes a lot of this image in his thesis on John. He comments: 'When St. John of the Cross distinguishes between 'breezes' and 'whistling,' he describes the former as the divine communication to the soul in the spiritual espousal; the latter is the resounding of this communication to the intellect by way of a lofty and most delightful knowledge of God, which constitutes the satisfaction, and fruition derived from this state.'

The poem continues with the beautiful lines (My beloved is) –

'The tranquil night,

At the time of the rising dawn
Silent music
Sounding solitude
The supper that refreshes and deepens love.'

Winter Is Now Over.

There's a great aura of peace about this passage. The darkness of night is receding and we're given glimpses of the approaching morning. We're reminded of that lovely passage in the Song of Songs itself -

'Arise, my love, my lovely one and come,
For see the winter is now past, the rains are over and
gone,
The flowers appear in the earth, the season of glad songs
has come,
The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.'

John has heard all this music in his heart. He was, as we know a music lover, so he could say, 'creation will be for the soul a harmonious symphony of sublime music, surpassing all concerts and melodies of the world.'

Many years ago Estelle White in one of her hymns: 'O the love of my Lord is the essence of all that I love here on earth' is hinting at what John is saying. The last line goes, 'His touch is as gentle as silence.'

Again the poet Keats comes to our rescue with this beautiful illustration of what his fellow lyricist sings about here:

'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are
sweeter;
therefore ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.'

'The supper that refreshes and enkindles love.' The image here is that of the supper and there are many scriptural echoes for this. One that is pertinent here is Ps. 22.

'He has prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes,
My head he has anointed with oil,
My cup is overflowing.'

John doesn't mention the eucharist specifically but perhaps equivalently, for he says that the supper is the beloved and what more appropriate description of Holy Communion can you get?

We move on in Stanza 16 to discuss the same theme. But in this life we're reminded that there's no such thing as uninterrupted communion with God. We must realise the reality of the human condition and our vulnerability to suffering and temptation. John indicates that the devout person can be troubled by sexual temptations and other disturbances connected with sensuality. These temptations must be resisted and warded off in the normal way of Christian life, namely by resolute prayer.

At this stage of spiritual development there's special need to allow God to do his work. God wants to communicate himself to the individual and any activity or effort on our part will only impede this inflowing. It's a question of waiting on God.

Stanza 17 sets out to provide an antidote for an obstacle that arises. Everyone who sincerely tries to pray has experienced this problem. How do we cope with dryness? The chilling wind freezes and dries up the heart. This Artic breeze sends shivers down our spine. The idea that to 'chill' is a desirable state is an invention of modern youth culture! The Lord seems to be absent, far away. This is something very painful and causes great suffering. John's remedy is disarmingly simple but perhaps difficult to carry out. In a way it

seems to beg the question – ‘If you can't pray, then just keep on praying.’

The second great remedy is to call on the Holy Spirit - ‘On our dryness pour your dew.’ The theme of trial, temptation and various kinds of disturbance runs through the next stanza also, the 18th; unruly movements of the lower appetites continue to obtrude themselves on the quiet of the heart. It needs to be insisted that this is a life-long struggle and nobody is ever immune from this kind of temptation.

The following Stanza (19) prays for God's communication to come to it, but to bypass the realm of the senses, because the senses cannot sustain the force of these communications. Knowledge of God that comes through the senses is necessarily inferior to that which is communicated directly by God to the mind. What John is really asking here is that God should give himself as he is to the person who longs for him. This is a sublime request but it's exactly what is understood by the full blossoming of the Christian life of grace in people. We're now nearing the completion of the second stage of spiritual growth. The scriptural inspiration for it has been these words of Hosea,

‘I will espouse you to me in faith.’

The picture is one of a gradual build-up of strength and fortitude for the life of union with God. Peace and tranquility begin to reign within as a result of the compelling influence of God's grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit. There's a harmony introduced into the personality that resembles the original harmony planned by God.

In the language of the *Dark Night* as applied to both sense and spirit it's like, ‘My house being now at rest.’ John paints a picture of someone, and of course, in this case himself, who is completely at rest in God. He doesn't hope for anything because being now satisfied with union with God in this life there's nothing left to hope for. John is not saying that we live in an unreal world, not feeling anything at all, but rather

that we don't feel joy and sorrow as formerly. It means that all the time a deep peace is preserved within. Remember St. Teresa's bookmark 'Nada te turba', 'Let nothing disturb you'.

Spiritual Marriage.

Stanzas 22 – 40, End).

This is the beginning of the highest spiritual state possible. It entails a complete liberation from the obstacles that hinder a loving union with God. The way to this happy state has led through mortification and meditation on spiritual things. John himself states that these exercises lasted until the stage when the lover sang:

'Pouring out a thousand graces.'

From there on she embarked on the contemplative way which led to the state of Spiritual Espousal. Now at this stage we progress to the unitive way, which involves a wonderful array of favours from God. This is now the path which leads to a total transformation in Christ. Here nothing less than a complete surrender is called for. Teresa treats of this state of spiritual marriage in the *Interior Castle*, Mansion 7. John tells us that the Lord wishes this state of union to come about just as much as the lover has desired it. There is in fact a vast difference between this grace of spiritual marriage and the preceding one of espousal. John writes: 'The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as in possible in this life.' Such an exalted condition only comes about through the person being confirmed in grace. John calls it 'a union of two natures in one spirit and love.' This is now a completely new experience of intimacy with God. It's an intimate embrace of the lover with God. The person is greatly fortified for this embrace by God who gives it the necessary strength to sustain it.

In Stanza 23 there now follows a communication of secrets on the part of the bridegroom, because it's the bride's privilege to know the secrets of her bridegroom. This communication of secrets involves a more intimate knowledge of the incarnation of the Word and the redemption of the human race.

The 'apple-tree' in the Song of Songs has been traditionally understood as referring to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and also to the tree of the cross. That's how John interprets it in this stanza. For John, Jesus in redeeming us also espoused us to himself and tells us that each one was espoused by the Son of God on the cross and this grace is then applied to the soul when it receives the sacrament of baptism. But this has to be worked out progressively in the living of a life of perfection.

In the next stanza the theme is one of total and mutual giving and the desirable qualities of this ultimate stage of spiritual progress are outlined. The picture that John paints reminds us of the beloved disciple leaning on the breast of Jesus at the last supper.

The strength of the divine virtues and qualities afford protection from the enemy - the devil. The one condition that might describe this state is one of 'security.' Closely allied to this is a state of quietude or freedom from anxiety. The soul's abode is now decked out and hung with the purple of divine charity.

This new development described in Stanza 25 in the life of the individual, literally makes it advance by leaps and bounds, running the way of perfection. This is the first notable effect of the new union, providing a stimulus to greater love. Secondly the Lord frequently visits the lover to enkindle its love. Thirdly there's an intoxicating effect which causes the person to ceaselessly praise and thank God. St. Thérèse has a lovely commentary on the words of the Song of Songs: 'Draw me, and we shall run after you in the odour of your ointments.' She

says: 'When I allow that fragrance to cast its spell over me, I don't hasten after you in the first person singular - all those whom I love come running at my heels.' John says the person is conscious and aware of God's goodness not just to itself but to others also. This high level of divine love is nourished by the Lord himself when he bestows a 'subtle touch' deep within, and this when least expected. (cfr. *Ascent*, 2 Chap. 25) An additional favour is that of 'divine inebriation' something we see in St. Teresa and in St. Gregory of Nyssa, and this also greatly stimulates the love of the devout person.

John here gives us his well-known comparison: 'New lovers', he says, 'are like new wine.' All is anxiety while the process of fermentation is going on and so too moderation should be maintained. The 'old lovers' on the other hand, those tried and practised in virtue are like 'old wine' consequently they are more loyal in the service of God.

By Stanza 26 the person has now reached a state of spiritual maturity and fulfilment and in the words of the psalm, she 'drinks at the torrents of your delights.'

Love In Seven Degrees.

As this is all a work of the Holy Spirit, John invokes the help of that same Holy Spirit in order to describe this state of perfection. He elaborates seven degrees of love in all, corresponding to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. This union with God involves the person's powers or faculties being filled with God. But as he points out elsewhere and as Teresa repeats, the faculties are not always in actual union. The person's particular knowledge is assimilated to that of God, and so what he calls 'forms and figures' are eliminated in favour of a more absorbing kind of love. This is now the familiar 'state of unknowing.' Moreover the 'herd' of imperfections is left behind.

In Stanza 27 John gives us a marvellous description of God's self-communication to the person. It's a picture of

complete tenderness: 'In this interior union, God communicates Himself to the soul with such genuine love that no mother's affection, in which she tenderly caresses her child, nor brother's love, nor friendship is comparable to it.' ³⁴

John is now talking about a mutual surrender between the Lord and the lover, a surrender in which the Lord himself takes the initiative. God communicates his love and secrets to the lover. There is here some interchange in John's commentary between the two last phases of spiritual life which is understandable in view of the two redactions we have of the *Spiritual Canticle*. (Cfr. *Spiritual Espousal*.)

Stanza 28 talks about a certain equality between the Lord and the individual. John reminds us of what Jesus says to his disciples at the last supper: 'I have called you friends, because all I have heard from my Father, I have revealed to you.' (Jn. 15:17.)

All one's energies are now dedicated to God and employed in God's service. We recall the Lord's words to Teresa: 'You will look after my things and I will look after yours.' St. Thérèse quotes stanzas 26 and 28 in her *Story of a Soul*, and also adds a verse from one of John's poems. This is her most extensive quote from John of the Cross. She prefaces these quotations with the words: 'Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass.'³⁵

In Stanza 29 John makes a plea for an attentive life of prayer, waiting on God alone on the part of those who have advanced to this stage. This is the part Mary chose which Jesus referred to as the 'one thing necessary.' (Cfr *Cloud* Ch.17.) This however should not be anticipated in advance, but the prayerful person should ordinarily busy herself in the Lord's service until called to this kind of contemplation.

'More Things Are Wrought By Prayer..'

³⁴ Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, p.517.

³⁵ *Story of a soul*, p.178.

The famous quote from John occurs here: 'For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all those works put together.'³⁶ St. Thérèse also quotes these lines in the letter to her Sister Marie. John then castigates those who 'think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works' instead of giving half that time to prayer. Consequently the person dedicated to prayer and communion with God ought not to be criticised as if they were doing nothing. But in this we must cultivate freedom of spirit and also be on our guard against human respect.

Then in Stanza 30 John goes on to say that the mutual exchange between lover and God is ineffable. It's a time of festivity and mutual rejoicing: 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.' John sees a greater merit in the virtues acquired in youth, which he calls 'cool mornings' because of the strength of temptation at that time of life. A second meaning here would point to virtues acquired in the teeth of difficulty and dryness which is very pleasing to God. But the person needs to cooperate with the Lord in nurturing these gifts and graces. John here also shows his awareness of the ecclesial nature of holiness. Those who grow and mature in holiness are an adornment for Christ the Head of the Church.

In Stanza 31 there's an extremely strong description of divine union. 'The soul seems to be God, and God seems to be the soul.' he writes. John sees an illustration of this in the love of David and Jonathan, whose souls were 'knitted' to each other. The Lord is the 'principal lover' who absorbs the loved one as a torrent absorbs a drop of morning dew. John exalts the quality of strong love that attracts divine love. God was drawn to us when he became incarnate in Jesus, 'God has first loved us.' (Jn.4:10).Faith also attracts the divine gaze and moves him further to love the person. (Cfr.*Living Flame*)

³⁶ Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, p.522.

Stanza 32 tells us that love has power over the heart of God: it exercises a loving constraint to which God duly submits. We might think of Esther's hold on the heart of King Assuerus. The lover is now pleasing to God. There's a wonderful feeling of divine affirmation - the Lord has chosen and singled out this lover for his special favour and she knows it. She knows also that this is due to no merit of her own but due purely to the gracious love of God. This is a work of God's mercy and it must be a wonderful feeling to be the recipient of God's grace in this experiential way. In the gospel we read that Jesus looked at the young man and loved him: John now says that the Lord looks with love on the devout person. John later reflects on the loss those people suffer who lack God's grace, who live or who more correctly are dead in sin. God looks on us with love because he has forgiven our sins. The Lord no longer accuses us of our sins once he has forgiven them, for God never judges twice. However although we are forgiven in the sacrament of penance, we ourselves ought not forget our sinfulness. The Lord increases and multiplies his grace, he 'gives grace for grace' as St. John says in the gospel.

'You Are Altogether Beautiful.' (Songs)

Now in Stanza 34 the dialogue of love continues; the Lord proceeds to affirm and even praise the lover because she is newly clothed in the beauty of his grace. Her habitual prayer is one of thankfulness and triumph, quiet praise and contemplation. In this divine fulfilment we're now reaching the end of our search and the goal of our seeking. This then is the fruit of contemplation.

Stanza 35 tells us there is now in the spiritually advanced person an increased need for solitude, to be alone with the alone. 'I will lead her into solitude and will speak to her heart.' The Lord then becomes the only guide of the soul, as St. Thérèse says. Again the faculties of mind, will and memory are

completely taken up and filled with God. John says that the devout person's love is reciprocated in solitude by the Lord.

Again in Stanza 36 we find that the trait of a sincere and genuine love for God is a desire to be alone with God in deep communion, to the exclusion of all else. The person wants to experience the love of God, and to see itself mirrored in the beauty of the Lord's love. It's the same as if lovers gazed into one another's eyes to rejoice in their mutual beauty.

Furthermore there's a 'desire to learn the secrets of the beloved.' Cfr. *Hopkins*, *Leaden Echo*, 'Beauty's self and beauty's giver.'

John refers to our adoption as children of God in the Church. We participate in God's nature with Jesus who is the natural Son of God. There's also a desire to explore the divine riches more deeply. These are inexhaustible, but to discover them it's necessary to embrace suffering and trial. Suffering, for the person becomes a means of revelation, helping it penetrate further into the mystery of God. The Irish writer Oscar Wilde was imprisoned in Reading Gaol for what were considered crimes at the time. While there he wrote his 'De Profundis': 'People sometimes speak of suffering as a mystery, I see it as a revelation.'

John writes: 'O if only we could but now fully understand how a soul cannot reach the thicket and riches of God which are of many kinds of suffering, finding in this her delight and consolation.' In other words the cross must be accepted as a means of knowing and loving God.

Stanza 38 now looks at the lover's longing to be plunged into the mystery and beauty of the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God. This is a longed-for and sought-after goal. It's the revelation of the face of God made visible in Jesus, through whom the human race is united with God. Everything revolves round the loved person of Christ Our Lord. This section on the person of Jesus is the one selected by the Church as the second reading for his feast, as most typical of John. He

alludes to what the holy doctors have written on the incarnation but says that even they can never exhaust it.

We might think of the great work of St. Athanasius, 'De Incarnatione,' 'On the Incarnation' written in the early centuries of the Church, while he was still a young man of 23. Christ is a mine of hidden riches, 'In him dwell all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge.'

At One With The Lord.

Stanza 38 describes how the prayerful person has been engaged on a quest to discover the wisdom of God, both in himself and in its created manifestations, in 'the things that have been made.' Now the question arises, 'how will this discovery take place?' This desire has been instigated by that legitimate longing, namely to love God as perfectly as God loves us. The answer lies in a complete transformation into God whereby the two wills are oned, and this is brought about by the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the happiness that awaits those destined for the joy of heaven. The last stanzas of this poem are an effort to describe and offer a foretaste of the happiness of heaven. This happiness is first of all a communication of the Holy Spirit. John quotes St. Paul to the Galatians: 'Since you are children of God, God has sent the Spirit of his son into your hearts, crying Abba, father.' Our saint then goes on to comment on a sublime passage from the fourth gospel, Chap. 17, where it talks about us being one with Christ through a union of love, just as Father and Son are one in an essential loving union. The famous passage from 1 Pet. crops up again, with the thought that we are destined to become 'partakers of the divine nature.' And this makes John cry out in loving desperation, 'O souls created for these grandeurs and called to them! ...What are you doing? How are you spending your time?'³⁷

In his *Canticle* John gives us the beautiful image of the nightingale's song, the music of Spring and the experience of

³⁷ Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, p.559.

new love. This is what heaven is like. This is the voice of the bridegroom calling to the beloved to sing a new song; 'Cantate Domino canticum novum!' We might again recall some beautiful lines from the biblically inspired Keats on the nightingale.

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.
The same that oftentimes hath
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn.

Earth can never be our true home - perhaps here Keats unconsciously hinted at the beyond, the 'yonder' of Gerard Manly Hopkins. Again we recall what indeed John reminds us of in the Song of Songs: 'Arise, make haste my love and come, for see, winter is now past, the rains are over and gone.'

Another quality of this blessedness is the 'beauty of the grove.' By this is signified God as the abundant source of all beauty. Again there's the gift of contemplation which John characteristically calls 'a serene night.' And finally there's the flame of the Holy Spirit. As we shall see in the next section John would devote a whole book to exploring the riches of this transformation. This flame consumes, completes and brings to perfection.

In Stanza 40, the final stanza, John sketches the final details on his picture of the person who has reached union with God:

1. Detachment from all things has been achieved,
2. The devil is conquered and put to flight.
3. The emotions are brought under control.
4. The emotional and sensual side of the personality is in harmony with the spiritual side.

This work has all been undertaken for and with the help of Christ as a preparation for union with him. The *Interior Castle*

or as John calls it more simply, the 'house' is now at rest and the siege has been lifted. Now nothing remains but to look forward to the consummation of heavenly glory.

'The marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready.'

4. The Living Flame of Love.

In his introduction to this work (addressed to Dona Ana de Penelosa) St. John of the Cross refers us to his favourite scriptural theme of the Indwelling, as we read about it in St John's Gospel, (John.14:23).

John's other writings had led up to an advanced state of union with God or transformation in God. This new book then professedly deals with a further intensification of the life of union with God which, as John states, comes about with time and practice. When the person reaches the desired goal (i.e. union with God), there's a great sense of happiness and peace. As John the Evangelist writes: 'From its bosom flow rivers of living water.' (John 7:38).

This is now a deeply loving and intimate encounter with the Lord in prayer. The person has remained for many years in the Lord's presence, allowing the fire of contemplation to purge and purify it and fill it with a knowledge, awareness and intense love of God. This has achieved the perfection of faith, everything has been leading up to this. The person addresses the Holy Spirit in these words:

O living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest centre!
Since now you are not oppressive,
Now consummate: if it be your will;
Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter.

The praying person in a state of union with God constantly tries to rise to God through prayerful words of love and desire.

‘The Spirit himself comes to the aid of our spirit in words beyond all utterance.’ (Rom 8:26). John echoes what he has asserted in the *Spiritual Canticle* (Stanza 29), ‘that one of these acts of love is more valuable than anything else the person has done.’ John compares this state to a log of wood that is steadily burning, and has itself been transformed into fire. Now and again a flame will rise from the object, according to the intensity of the fire. This is the living flame of love. John touches on the ‘deification’ theme of Greek theology: the soul now acts in a divine way because of its transformation in God. It is able ‘to share the divine nature.’ (2 Pet. 1:4).

In a loving communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the lover enjoys a foretaste of eternal life. This is the experiential working of grace within one, a living, vital encounter with God. God is an ocean of love and beauty that inundates the lover causing her to melt and flow with that same mighty torrent. We’re dealing here with a deep mystical experience of divine love. The lover is held in the ecstatic embrace of God’s love but it’s a gentle, delicate experience that doesn’t manifest itself as ‘violently’ as previously. This all adds up to a time of celebration and festivity, and as John puts it, characterised by all the arts and stratagems and playfulness of divine love.

What God Can Do.

What we witness here then, proceeds completely from the divine initiative. We’re dealing with infused contemplation, so the lover is completely passive to God’s working within it. John is saying that for such a person God has now become its centre of gravity towards whom it has ‘gravitated’ with all its strength. Love has been the ‘great attractor’³⁸ that has drawn the lover to God. Again we meet the love that intensifies literally by degrees, seven in all, like the seven mansions of

³⁸ This phrase is used in astronomy to describe a cluster of galaxies thousands of times more massive than the Milky Way and attracts whole galaxies to itself.

Teresa. John reminds us that in this 'deepest centre' we're on the threshold of eternal life, to which it bears a great resemblance, and so he feels it's daring even to talk about it. This experience is ineffable and also incredible, because it's hard to believe that God can be so condescending with us as to live in a deep communion with one of his creatures. We're dealing not just with a fire, but a conflagration that gets out of control, a raging spiritual bushfire! John writes in the language of tenderest love, a love that touches and wounds, whispers and embraces.

This has been a great and glorious development by contrast with what has preceded it along the road of spiritual progress. When the flame of God's love touches the heart that's not yet purified, it meets with tremendous resistance from human nature. What in itself is glorious, at an earlier stage, appears like something that torments and harasses, rather than a love that soothes and embraces. In the *Ascent* and *Dark Night*, we have seen this fire at work on the praying person's sins and defects. There the divine light only served to throw in relief the misery and darkness of the individual. This has been a veritable martyrdom for mind and spirit as they pass through purgatorial fires. When the divine flame has done its work of purification, it's no longer heavy and oppressive but rather light and sweet. Before this it was a painful assault from outside, now it's a gentle smouldering from within.

The lover now requests the perfection and consummation of this union which comes about in the beatific vision. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, the lover hears the Bridegroom's voice calling to it: 'Arise and make haste my love, my dove, my beautiful one and come, for winter is now past, the rains are over and gone . . .' (*Canticle* 2). The lover enjoys a 'sweet encounter' with its beloved and there's nothing between them but the thin veil of mortal life.

John gives us a marvellous description of a holy death unsurpassed in spiritual literature. He tells us: 'The death of

such persons is very gentle and very sweet, sweeter and more gentle than was their whole spiritual life on earth. For they die with the most sublime impulses and delightful encounters of love, resembling the swan whose song is much sweeter at the moment of death.' This could be a very appropriate description of the death of Thérèse of Lisieux about three hundred years later! Thérèse referred to this thought as she endured her final weeks of suffering. There was no let-up in that suffering until her final moments when witnesses say that she died in an ecstasy of love.

John's prayer bears the stamp of the impetuosity of the lover, calling on the divine power to intervene suddenly and 'break the web of this sweet encounter.' John says that the Lord takes to himself, before their time, souls that love him ardently.

Stanza 2

'O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
That tastes of eternal life.....'

John now addresses the Holy Spirit in the words 'O sweet cautery.' This is because the Spirit is a fire that burns and transforms. The loving, burning breath of the Spirit caresses the person, enkindling her in love and causing her to glow brightly and ardently. It both wounds and heals at the same time and infuses a feeling of deep satisfaction and peace into the depths of the heart. 'Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love.'

If the needle that cauterises the flesh is not sharp and pointed but tender and soothing, then the wound it causes is not hurtful but instead gives immense delight. Moreover this new wound acts like a healing cautery by touching all the person's old wounds, whether those caused by its sins and

limitations and transforms them into one joyous wound of love. And so the lover's ills, including all hurtful memories, are healed by the deep working within of the Spirit of love. John's language here is truly sublime as he describes for us this paradox of love; he maintains that the more wounded the lover, the healthier he or she is, and the remedy lies in inflicting wound after wound, to such an extent that the entire person dissolves in one wound of love (Stanza 2 par.7). This wound is a touch of the divinity, something John has described in the *Ascent*, Bk 3, and in the *Spiritual Canticle*.

In the present stanza John also talks about a slightly different form of this divine wound whereby an angel pierces the heart with an arrow – 'O delightful wound.' He is obviously alluding to the experience recounted for us by St Teresa in Chap. 29 of her Life. This interpretation is beyond doubt for he mentions that founders may receive this grace in order to have the riches of the Spirit to share with and pass on to their followers. Teresa relates her experience in the incident known as the transverberation of her heart: 'It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me ... and he left me all on fire with great love for God.'³⁹

Continuing his commentary on the stanza, for John, the 'gentle hand' signifies the Father and the 'delicate touch' signifies the Son. He meditates on the marvel of the omnipresent Father resting with gentle hand upon the lover. This prompts him to address the Son, the Word of God, in a beautiful prayer of praise and thanksgiving for his delicate and delightful touch, unsurpassed in spiritual literature.⁴⁰ He writes: 'O you, then, delicate touch, the Word, the Son of God, through the delicacy of your divine being, you subtly penetrate the substance of my soul and, lightly touching it all, absorb it entirely in yourself in divine modes of delights and

³⁹ Collected Works of St. Teresa, p.252.

⁴⁰ O toque delicado. John repeats 'delicate touch' several times in his commentary.

sweetnesses unheard of in the land of Canaan and never before seen in Teman [Bar.3:22]!’⁴¹

For John the feeling is inexpressible and ought really to be received and savoured in silence. In the liturgy of the Church, we often think about and anticipate the ‘reward of eternal life.’ Again, John sees here the lover enjoying a foretaste of that future state. This reward comes after many labours and sufferings which have been endured along the road to this blessedness. Through these the dedicated person has died to itself and so now it experiences a veritable resurrection. A complete metamorphosis has come about and the lover lives a divine life. It becomes God through participation, but John shows he is no pantheist, pointing out that the individual retains her or his own identity. So keen is the feeling of delight here, that the lover imagines that it has become the special object of God's favour, that he has no time for anyone else besides itself. ‘It feels . . . that he has no one else on the earth to favour nor anything else to do, that everything is for the soul alone.’⁴²

Stanza 3

Prayer is now completely infused and so the knowledge of God is flowing abundantly and lovingly into the person. This is a divine gift of the Spirit that lights up the person causing it to burn vehemently. ‘From his fullness we have all received.’ (John 1:16). God loves us in a sovereign way in accordance with his infinite attributes. ‘....I am yours and for you, and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you.’⁴³ The individual feels inundated with the torrent of divine goodness and ‘drinks deep from the wells of salvation.’

⁴¹ Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, p. 601.

⁴² Ibid., p.609.

⁴³ Ibid., p.613.

John now describes for us the working of God's grace in an individual completely united with him. 'He who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit with Him.' There's a marvellous interaction between the Lord and the lover because, she shares in the very life of God. This is the meaning of grace in the Christian life. In this loving exchange with God, all one's energies are engaged and all one's powers cling to God who is their object. The mind thirsts to know God more fully, the will hungers for God and the memory longs to possess God. The lover has moved from being 'engaged' to God to possessing God in a mystical marriage. During the intervening period after the person had given its 'yes' to God like Mary, the desire to possess God grew enormously. The Holy Spirit bestows his anointings on the person which serve to prepare it for the longed-for union.

John tells us: 'In the first place it should be known that if a person is seeking God, his beloved is seeking him much more.'⁴⁴ This means the beloved will draw the lover onwards through the fragrance of his ointments, through his divine inspirations and loving touches. This has been a great theme of the *Spiritual Canticle*.

John departs from his subject at this point to touch on another concern of his — his anxiety that people receive enlightened guidance especially at times of critical spiritual growth. This has been very thoroughly covered in the *Ascent/Night*. There's a long discussion on the role of the spiritual director, especially in guiding the person through the transition period between meditation and contemplation. An ill-equipped director can retard or block progress at this stage.

Other obstacles, John warns, are placed in our way by the devil or by ourselves. The whole personality had formerly lived in darkness and obscurity before being purified by the dark nights and the suffering involved in them. Now however she is

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.620.

utterly transformed, and so reflects the divine glory in a mutual exchange of love.

In this spiritual marriage there's mutual giving and mutual surrender. Such a lover praises God for what God is in himself and because he has given himself to her.

Stanza 4.

In this final stanza of the *Living Flame*, the lover rejoices in having arrived at the state of spiritual marriage. The spouse now turns to her Lord where he awakes in the nuptial chamber of her heart. This is an unspeakable experience of spiritual awakening, because Jesus the Word of God is intimately united with her, and so there's a marvellous sense of oneness with God. The lover is no longer alone, they are no longer two but one, for all her thoughts and desires have now mingled with those of the Son of God. Everything seems to come alive, like a dawn chorus in the soul, and so the heart seems to expand in all directions like a rose opening to the sun. The Lord treats the lover like a friend, a brother, a sister, a spouse, and so too his love is supremely gentle and delicate and removes all fear. Because the heart has been cleansed and made ready the bridegroom abides there, holding the loving person in a close and intimate embrace.

John writes: 'The bride is reposing on the arms of her lover and she awakes to feel the breath of the Holy Spirit upon her. He is usually there, in this embrace with his bride, as though asleep in the substance of the soul. And it is very well aware of Him and ordinarily enjoys Him.'⁴⁵ The final verses of the stanza talk about this sweet breathing of the Holy Spirit. Here John draws his commentary to a close, abruptly leaving aside his pen..

He who has written so sublimely about the love of God is now powerless to say more. He tells us that he has no desire

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 649.

to speak of this experience. It's a deep feeling of the Spouse's presence that further inflames and stimulates love, so it's fitting that St John of the Cross, doctor of divine love should leave us, singing the praises of that great Lord who unites himself with the human person in the most intimate embrace of love.

5. *The Minor Works.*

As stated at the beginning, only a brief word is needed here. Broadly speaking the additional material adds nothing to John's teaching, and sometimes simply repeats it. For example, echoing the same thought in the *Ascent* John writes: 'The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul.' (*Maxims and Counsels* 21.)

Included here are his *Precautions*, other spiritual maxims and counsels, *Sayings of Light and Love*, as well as some *Letters* that have survived. All these of course are necessary reading for a fuller understanding of John's work. Some are very practical and often break down theory into ways of responding to a given situation. I have referred to a few of the well known quotes in the course of this guide, especially the '*Prayer of the soul taken in love.*' 'Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth, etc.' One of John's most quoted lines is taken from his *Sayings of Light and Love*: 'In the evening of life you will be judged on your love.' In this section too we find the observation: 'One thought alone of a person is worth more than the entire world, hence God alone is worthy of it.'

John's letters are very few by comparison with those of St. Teresa. Letters can sometimes throw more light on a person than you can derive from their more objective writings. For instance the person we know from his treatises to be so utterly detached could write to a friend, Dona Juana de Pedraza in Granada: 'Write soon, and more frequently...' Carmelite

historians will never forgive John for burning all Teresa's letters to him. He treasured them so much that he felt he needed to show a perfect sign of detachment by putting a match to them!

Perhaps the best known quote from John's *Letters* is taken from a letter to Maria of the Incarnation, prioress in the Carmel at Segovia. On July 6·1591 he wrote her in the context of the ill treatment he had received: '...Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love....'

6. Poetry.

Here again a discussion of John's poetry need not detain us very long. His reputation is based on just three major poems and these have been the subject of John's own commentaries with which this guide has been concerned. I have included his great *Living Flame of Love* on the back of this booklet as it fits nicely! There are some additional poems as well which are very beautiful and fit in perfectly with the themes we have been considering. A few of the final poems in the 'Collected Works' have a question mark as regards authenticity. Following his classic poetry, we find one listed as number 4, entitled, 'Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation.' The first verses are as follows:

'I entered in unknowing,
And there I remained unknowing,
Transcending all knowledge.'

Poem number 5 is called, 'Stanzas of the soul that suffers with longing for God.' Here we have a theme remarkably like one of Teresa's poems which suggests there's a connection between them: it begins:

'I live, but not in myself,
And I have such hope
That I die because I do not die'.

Another well known poem based on contemporary love songs treats of the pain suffered by the shepherd boy singing

(or mourning) unrequited love. 'He weeps in knowing that he's been forgotten,' by the shepherd-girl.

Finally we have another longer poem entitled 'Romances,' nine in all, which deal with creation and redemption. These were composed as a gloss on the prologue to St. John's gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word.' Two stanzas from this poem reference one of John's favourite mysteries – the Word in becoming one of us has espoused each of us to himself. These may serve as a suitable parting thought taken from that treasure house which make up the writings of St. John of the Cross.⁴⁶

When the time had come
For Him to be born
He went forth like the bridegroom
From his bridal chamber,

Embracing His bride,
Holding her in His arms,
Whom the gracious Mother
Laid in a manger...

⁴⁶ Collected Works, p. 732

Biographical Note.

Juan de Yepes (John of the Cross) was born in the village of Fontiveros (Spain) in 1542. Avila of St. Teresa was some 40 kilometers away. John's father Gonzalo came from a wealthy family, but when he fell in love with a poor weaver, Catalina Alvarez, his family promptly disowned him. Gonzalo died soon after John's birth. Pleas for help to her husband's family were cruelly rebuffed, so the young John experienced dire poverty from the start. However the young John received a good education.

Eventually John joined the Carmelite Order of Ancient Observance and was sent to study at a college of the famous University of Salamanca run by the Order. John was ordained a priest in 1567, and soon after said his first mass in Medina del Campo where he had the fateful meeting with Teresa of Avila, inviting him to join her Reform. The rest certainly is history. (*See my Outline of St. Teresa's writings for an account of how John accepted her invitation to join her new Carmelite Reform.*) John had intended to transfer to the Carthusians but agreed on condition that 'he wouldn't have to wait too long!' Even saints who preach patience can be impatient themselves! John made an enormous contribution to the growth and consolidation of the first Carmelite friars of the Teresian Reform. John suffered greatly all his life and died of painful ulceration of his leg in the priory of Ubeda, Analusia on Dec. 14, 1591.

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Living Flame.

*O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! if it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!*

*O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
that tastes of eternal life
and pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.*

*O lamps of fire!
in whose splendors
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.*

*How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.*

St. John of the Cross.