

INTRODUCTION TO ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND
ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL

Cooper, 2017

Our Group, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, selected “Dark Night of the Soul” by St. John of the Cross as the focus of our first study of spiritual classics. This work is actually a continuation of The Ascent of Mount Carmel, (written between 1578-85 in Granada, Spain). It is a “treatise which presents an outline of Christian perfection from the point at which the soul first seeks to rise from the earth and soar towards union with God.”¹ Both of the works are a commentary on an eight stanza poem of 5 lines each written by this Church Doctor and Spanish mystic of the 16th C who helped St. Teresa of Avila to reform Carmelite order. Thomas Merton describes him as the greatest of all mystical theologians. What sets him apart is his poetic vision, trying to express what is inexpressible. This poem was likely inspired by portions of the “Song of Solomon”. The Ascent of Mount Carmel is a work that was to have comprised four books, but breaks off in the middle of the third. The Dark Night of the Soul continues the explanation of the poem which is attached to these handouts. It breaks off in the second book. Both of these works supplement each other.

St. John drew a schema of the Mount of Perfection for the AMC as a representation of the mystical way. It was the face piece to the AMC. Its final form consisted of three paths. The ones on either side were labeled the “roads of imperfection”, broad and winding, which did not reach the summit of the mount. The

¹<http://catholicfirst.com/thefaith/catholicclassics/johnofthecross/ascent/ascent03.html#ARGUMENT>

center “road of perfection” began as very narrow and broadened as it reached the peak. Only the perfect could attain the top where they would enjoy the “heavenly feast”. According to his disciple, Fray Martin de San Jose, “by this image he taught that in order to reach the “Mount of Perfection”, one must desire neither the good things of earth nor heaven, but desire only to seek and strive after the glory of God in all things.”

In the Carmelite tradition, prayer is the basis of all spirituality, the goal of which is deification, or transformation in God through love. The works written by St. John are for those who are already familiar with the basics. Purification or purgation is needed to attain union with God. Blogger Tom Mulcahy of CatholicStrength.com is helpful in giving an outline of these works of St. John of the Cross. The starting point is “God is All in All; therefore we were created to set our hearts on God.” He emphasizes that God is “nearer to us than we are to ourselves.” The process for union with God begins at baptism. Through sanctifying grace we are given the three theological virtues—faith, hope and love, infused moral virtues and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. How do we grow closer to God? By loving Him with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. But our problem is that our heart is more often with our treasures rather than with the Pearl without price. We are attached to many things that are not of God. False loves and attachments must be purged, not only sins, but appetites. “The purpose of entering into the “dark night” is to be purified so as to draw closer to God.² The mortification or purification which St. John calls the “dark night” involves a four step process:

² Tom Mulcahy, CatholicStrength.com Oh Blessed Night of Pure Faith: A Bird’s-eye View of the Spirituality of ST. John of the Cross

- 1) The Active Night of the Senses (Book 1, Ascent of Mount Carmel)
- 2) The Passive Night of the Senses (Book 1, Dark Night of the Soul)
- 3) The Active Night of the Spirit (Books 2 and 3, Ascent of Mount Carmel)
- 4) The Passive Night of the Spirit (Book 2, Dark Night of the Soul)

With this overview, we can now explore in more depth The Ascent of Mount Carmel. The three books have a total of 92 chapters, each of which deals with a specific topic as indicated in the index. I have used the book by Dr. Susan Muto of Duquesne University's Institute for Formative Spirituality entitled John of the Cross for Today: The Ascent, Ave Maria Press, 1991 to help me in this process.

In Book 1, The Active Night of the Senses, Ch 1-15, we read that those ready to make the ascent need God. They are looking for something MORE. The goal here is to liberate us from our worldly attachments, to come to share in the spiritual insights and obstacles to be faced, which St. John has found through prayer and study, and to describe in detail how we can find the way to a life in freedom of spirit needed for divine union. He says that desire for God, Scriptures and the wisdom of the Church were his guides. Lack of discernment and poor spiritual directors are obstacles to achieving these goals.³ These first 13 chapters are a commentary on the first line of the poem. St. John describes the night as follows: Twilight is the point of departure, the time of purgation, deprivation of pleasures, possessions, and powers. Grace draws us deeper into the midnight hour. Here the means of ascent is faith alone. Night gives way to daybreak, the point of God's arrival, union of the lover and the

³ John of the Cross for Today: The Ascent, Muto, p 18

Beloved. This path of Purgation, Illumination and Union is not a one time event, but an ongoing cycle of deprivation, restoration and transformation.⁴

Original sin causes us to hold on to sensual pleasures, when our true aim and need is God. People or things become our idols. Night helps us to remember the God who is beyond our senses. Our will must be redirected to the greatest Good. Three steps help us achieve that: 1) Remembrance of the right relation between creation and Creator. We come to see all good things as gifts of God 2) Comparison of the finite, limited nature of things to the “how much more” of the Infinite. Compare eternal truth to what is temporal. 3) Renunciation leads to freedom of spirit and mortification of the flesh. In these ways, we desire to perfectly fulfill the law and pick up our cross. In Matt 11:28-30, Jesus calls us to “depart from our appetites” under which we become weary and heavily burdened—and He will help us find rest for our souls that the desires take from us. The intellect, will and memory are all defiled by disordered desires. They cause us to be lukewarm spiritually. Appetites interfere with acts of virtue.

Chapter 13 of Book 1 is often quoted. How do we overcome these appetites and become spiritually mature. 1) Like Paul, we must imitate Christ. In order to do that we must be continually in Scripture and practice lectio divina. 2) Renounce all sensory satisfactions that don’t first and foremost give glory to God. 3) If we want to walk with Christ, practice poverty of spirit, cast out anything from ourselves that is a hindrance to humility.⁵ Only if we desire nothing, can God give us everything.

⁴ Ibid, p 19

⁵ Ibid, p 34

Book 2 begins the Active Night of the Spirit. In this book the second stanza of the poem is expounded. Faith is the means of ascent to union with God. St. John compares faith to a “secret ladder” which leads us to the place where we can see God, “as through a glass darkly”. With faith we can overcome “the world, the flesh and the devil.” St. John describes faith as a “dark night” which gives light. He compares it to the “cloud” that separated the Egyptians and Israelites when God delivered the latter from the former. The Egyptians saw nothing but darkness but the Israelites were bathed with light by which to flee. Preparation for union with God requires purity and love. St. John says that the way of faith is both simple and complex. It is simple because “in order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the nakedness and absence of every affection.”⁶ It is complex because pride perverts faith, possessiveness perverts hope and pleasure perverts love. The narrow gate of Jesus Christ is the beginning and end of our journey.⁷

The journey in faith involves carrying the cross and following Jesus to Calvary. St. John himself walked this road, when he was imprisoned, tortured, humiliated, forgotten and betrayed by members of the Carmelite order who did not approve of the “Discalced” reforms suggested by St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. He tells us to beware of the “spiritual sweet tooth” of many Christians who despise the cross. He says that “self-denial” and “true humility” are the sum total of all virtues.⁸ Much of the Ascent of Mount Carmel is devoted towards making the point that the

⁶ Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book 2, Ch 6, St. John of the Cross

⁷ Ibid,

⁸ Muto, p 51

intellect must be purified by faith in the dark night. He says that “the brightest light in God is the complete darkenss to our intellect.”⁹ Both natural and supernatural knowledge (visions, spiritual feelings) will not allow union with God.

Book 2, Ch 12-15 of the AMC is meant to prepare us for the contemplation of God. The impediments to this are imagination and fantasy. These two are useful for meditation, but now with contemplation and they need to be “darkened” because of dependence on senses. When the soul empties itself of images and follows the lead of grace into the darkness of faith, God accomplishes this union. I Cor 2:9 says “eye has not seen, ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love him.” This is not the path of the beginner. What are the signs of passing into contemplation?

- 1) Learn to abide in quiet with loving attentiveness to God
- 2) Stop paying attention to imagination
- 3) Let your memory, intellect and will remain in a state of rest
- 4) Passively receive divine direction.¹⁰ As we let go of sinful impediments in humility of spirit, God will transform our souls. We are not to worry, but “Be still and know that He is God.”

In Book 2, Ch 16-32 of the AMC, St. John discusses the misleading power of supernatural phenomena, whose origin may be divine or diabolical. Only by faith can we advance in our ascent. God’s goal is to move us from sensory experiences to a spiritual wisdom incomprehensible to the senses. God instructs us by moving from the know to the unknown, from the outer shell to the inner core, from the sensible to the spiritual.¹¹ In this way God brings us to contemplation. What comes from God is

⁹ AMC, St. John of Cross, Book 2, Ch 8

¹⁰ Muto, p 67-8

¹¹ Ibid, p 82

from God. St. John say the problem is in the translation. We need to abide in the dark night of faith. A good spiritual director is indispensable to help with translation.

In Book 3, St. John describes obstacles to union with God that come from the memory and will. Ch 1-15 describes how the theological virtue of hope can purge the memory to allow union with God. One has to disentangle memories, so as to essentially remember God who is the source of all good things. Never despair and suffer patiently with hope, knowing that this temporal phase will be swallowed up in eternity. We need to know that the object of hope is never possessed. The greater the possession, the less the capacity for hope.

Book 3, Ch 16-17, deals with the purification of the will by love in the active night of the spirit. St. John of the Cross mentions 4 emotions of the will: joy, hope sorrow, and fear. Because he did not have time to fully expand on the last three, we only see his analysis of “joy” which is really a form of pleasure associated with our bodies. Hope here is used in the sense of expectations, not the theological virtue; sorrow is a source of despair; and fear is useless worry and lack of confidence in God. By loving God and neighbor as our self our will can be purified of all that is less than the love of God. “Joy in God’s goodness, hope in God’s promise, sorrow for our blindness and the fear of God become aids to union with God.”¹² The will can comprehend God and be united with Him only through love, not through any gratification of appetite. We must renounce all for the sake of the All. If we lose our life we will find Life. “The will should rejoice only in what is for the honor and glory of God. What gives God the greatest honor is our willingness to serve him in

¹² Ibid, p 147

1)obedience 2)poverty of spirit and 3) respectful love.”¹³ In the next 15 chapters, St. John deals with joy in temporal things which can lead to “withdrawal from God.” This breeds harm and evil in the soul. If God has given us health, intellect and love, we need to use these for His glory. We need to go beyond the sensory pleasures of the beauty of nature, good coffee, magnificent music to a praise and worship of the God who allows us to enjoy these things. When we observe the moral law or do works of charity, we need to not become proudful and pharisaical but remember that we are doing these for God’s glory, not our own. If we have received any supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, we must remember that these are to be used only for the building up of His Church.

The last part of the The Ascent of Mount Carmel is truncated for unknown reasons. Chapter 33-45 looks at how rosaries, paintings, statues, churches which can all motivate us to pray, meditate and worship may actually be the source of our joy and devotion rather than God himself. What must motivate us must be the love and worship of God alone, rather than what we feel or derive from a worship source. For instance, if we can only pray the rosary with one we bought in Medjugoree or we love the painting of St. Dominic by Fra Angelico more than we love the God whom St. Dominic served, then we need to become detached from those worship aids for the sake of our service to God. Muto says that “the active night of the will” refers to our capacity, our decision, not to allow our senses to be so absorbed in an epiphany of the holy that we cease moving through the “accidents” to the “substance”, to the divine and living essence of God.¹⁴ The last chapter of the AMC speaks to the preacher. He

¹³ AMC, Book 3,Ch 17

¹⁴ Muto, p 174

says preaching is more a spiritual than a vocal expression. Words of a preacher must flow from his interior spiritual life. Without living the law of God, one cannot preach it. His preaching must be self-effacing so that God may shine through him. In the same way that a preacher must prepare, a listener must be prepared by being willing to amend our lives by charity.

The Active Nights (AMC, Books 1-3) prepares us for the passive night of the senses in The Dark Night of the Soul. It is God who acts upon the soul during this period of time. God allows a period of spiritual dryness to come over the Christian, at this time, in order to lead to powerful purification of passions and desires. Sheer grace can then allow a break through of this “dark night” to allow the transition from meditative to contemplative prayer which ultimately leads to illumination/union of/with God.¹⁵ The Christian is then prepared to enter the Passive Night of the Spirit which is more painful than that of the night of the senses and may not occur immediately but more likely over a number of years. The Dark Night of the Soul only covers the period up to the end of stanza two of St. John’s poem. It was to be the discussion of “union” of the soul with God, but was never completed.

¹⁵ Mulcahy