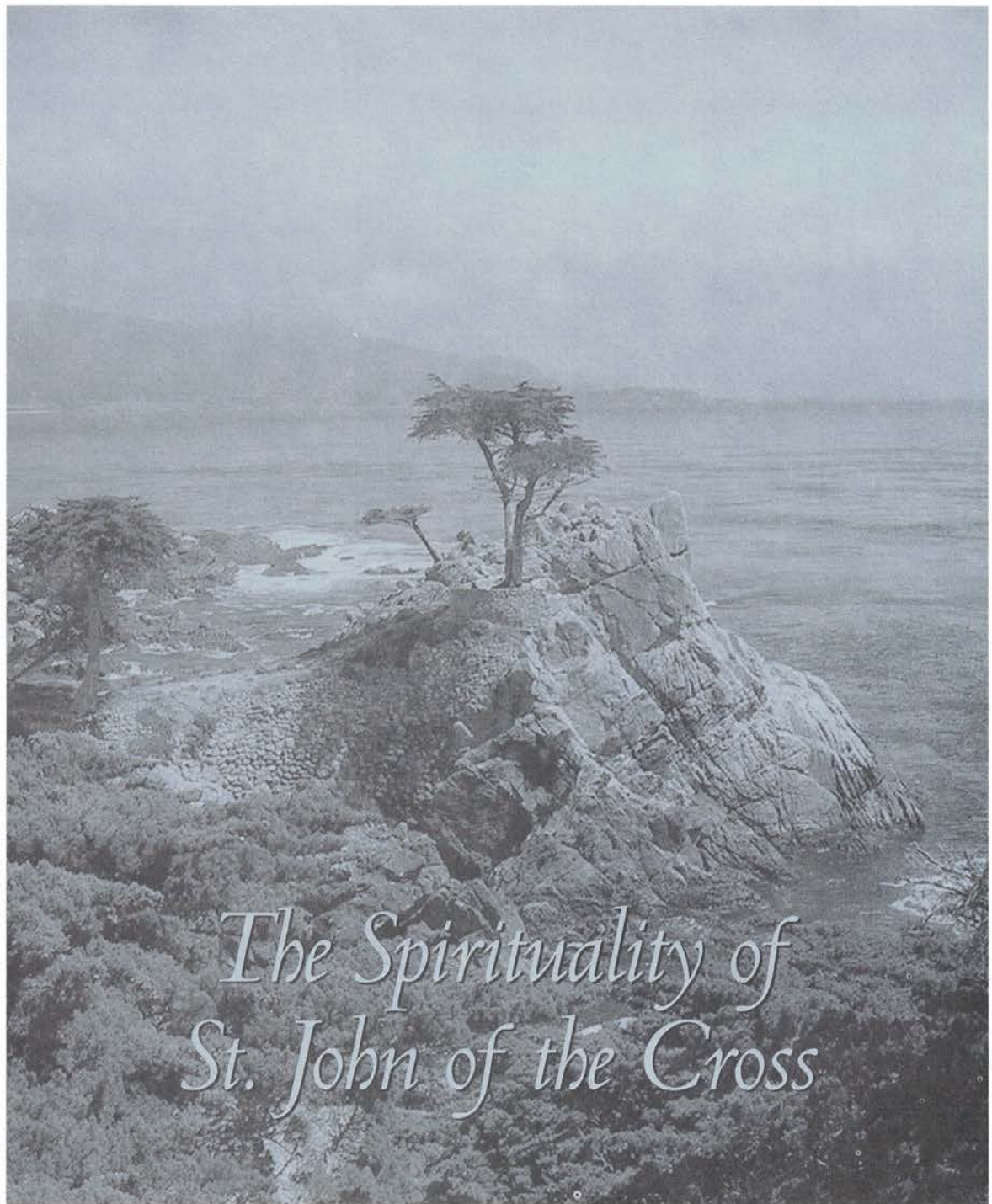


CARMEL CLARION

July - August 2007 Volume XXIII No. 4



*The Spirituality of
St. John of the Cross*

CARMEL CLARION

July - August 2007 Volume XXIII No. 4

Discalced Carmelite Secular Order, Washington, D.C.

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Editorial

In this issue of the *Clarion*, we are presented with three necessary aspects of one's spiritual journey: the possibility of union with God in this life; the desire for this goal; and the necessity of the help of others to reach this goal.

Iain Matthew's fourth article explains that prayer is relationship, the presence of persons one to the Other, and shows how the Mystical Doctor sets us in a world where being with God, the Beloved, is a real possibility.

Ms. Flynn in her article shows how important desire is in our spiritual journey. She points out that desire is the driving force in every stage of the journey from the first step of the journey to the ultimate goal of union with God. Only with an increasing desire for God will it be possible to weather the various painful and necessary purgations of the journey.

And finally, using his own experience in his personal life and his priestly ministry, Green turns to the teaching on spiritual direction by John of the Cross, as found, especially in Book 3 of the *Living Flame of Love*. He gives, first of all, the positive aspects of spiritual direction and its value in advancing in one's spiritual life. Then he outlines the dangers of choosing the wrong spiritual director and the harm, according to John of the Cross, he or she can do.

Now to a more practical matter. I think it is important for you to know some facts regarding the *Clarion*. With the new postal rates, which went into effect in May, it now costs us \$8,200.00 for the year (6 issues of the *Clarion*; 1 calendar) versus \$5,152.00 for the previous year. The *Clarion* is sent under the postal designation: Media Mail. This means that it will not be forwarded. We also do not request that undelivered *Clarions* be returned to us because it is too costly. So be sure to inform us of any changes in your mailing address immediately so that you won't miss an issue of the *Clarion*.

In the near future the Church will beatify 31 Spanish priests, martyrs of the Spanish Civil War. Of the 31, four of the friars spent time in the United States and of those four, two spent time in the Washington Province at the monastery at 150 Rhode Island Avenue, NE.

Fr. Luke of St. Joseph spent a number of years on the missions in Arizona. In 1919-1920 he resided at our monastery in Washington, DC, where he wrote his well-known book *Holiness in the Cloister*.

Fr. Edward Farré came to Washington, DC, in 1923 to study at Catholic University where he received a degree in theology. He served as prior of the Washington monastery from 1927-1930 after which he returned to Spain.

I hope each of you has a very blessed and restful summer.

Fr. Regis, O.C.D.



Fr. Luke



Fr. Farré

St. John of the Cross and the Seasons of Prayer

IV: Presence

Iain Matthew, O.C.D.



In this fourth article of a new series, Iain Matthew, an assistant editor of Mount Carmel and member of the Carmelite retreat center, Oxford, continues to explore the teaching of John of the Cross. He explains that prayer is relationship, the presence of persons one to the Other, and shows how the Mystical Doctor sets us in a world where being with God, the Beloved, is a real possibility.

During these days, let your heart be taken up in wanting the Holy Spirit to come; and at Pentecost and after, be taken up in the Spirit's constant presence. Let this be so important to you that nothing else will matter to you or draw your attention; nothing painful, no unsettling memory. Throughout these days, even if others' behavior at home is not as it should be, let it be, for love of the Holy Spirit. You owe it to your heart to give it this peace and stillness, since your heart is a place where the Spirit is pleased to dwell.¹

This is a tender letter, measured to one woman's pain, leading her to new possibilities. It is also a characteristic letter, declaring what John habitually saw, and the way this led him to pray. What he saw was presence: 'the Spirit's constant presence'. His prayer was to welcome that presence. In these pages we want to pick up John's sense that presence is paramount, and to hear his lesson of welcome.

Nothing Less Will Satisfy

'At recreation and other times he would usually sit on the floor among the friars; and seeing him do this, they would do the same.'² This testimony to John's behavior in community depicts his soul: being there for the other, and opening the other by being there. He learned this in prayer. There he sits by the One who, laying aside his outer garment and dressing like a slave, has sat there first. The God of John's prayer is the one who is present, and whose openness opens us to him.

There could be other emphases. St Ignatius Loyola can sign off his letters, praying 'that we might feel his most holy will and entirely fulfill it.' His Exercises lead to a perception of that will and to a ready 'yes'. Such prayer is the prayer of Jesus who assents to the will of the Father.

John of the Cross typically begins his letters, 'Jesus be in your soul'. His wish for his correspondents is that Jesus should 'be in' them: that Christ and the person be intimately available to one another. His prayer is the prayer of Jesus who 'abides in' the love of the Father.

Ignatius and John say the same thing. Both were mystics, both were hearers and doers of the word. But there are nuances, and if Ignatius' life was 'a permanent "election",³ John's was a permanent reception. 'The Spirit's constant presence'.

Presence, or absence, is the issue. The core need that is felt in night is the need of acceptance by, and connection with, the other. What most strips the person is *not dryness*, or confusion, or revulsion at oneself, but a sense of *rejection, alienation*; the loved one has gone (2N 6:2; 7:7).

So the Jesus, who in *Ascent* makes of darkness a healing place, cries out, 'Why have you forsaken me?' (2A 7:11; Mt 27:46). Why are you not here? The key issue in the crucifixion is not asphyxiation or traumatic shock, but the presence, or absence, of the Father.

John's cry in Toledo is not, 'What must I do?' but, 'Where have you gone? 'Where have you hidden, Beloved...?' The issue is the presence, or absence, of Christ.

The Human Face

Canticle reveals just this personal focus. If reading were limited to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, a powerful vision of prayer would emerge: a progressive opening to divine inflowing. *Canticle* is more lyrical, picturesque, ostensibly less useful. But it is essential to understanding John's message. *Canticle* discloses a face, where other writings might suggest just a system. What drives the author of *Ascent* in advocating detachment, faith, contemplative stillness, is his passion for the person of Christ.

So the first twelve stanzas, the bride's breathless quest for the hidden spouse, focus the reader in only one direction. Where is he? (stanza 1). If you see him, tell him I need him (2). I shall not stop until I find him (3). Tell me, have you seen him? (4). (Then, to the Beloved:) Please, no more messages - 'You be the messenger and the message!' (6). Mere news of you is not enough (7). Let me see you - no one else will do (10). As John comments, 'Since she sees that nothing can cure her pain except the presence, the sight, of her Beloved', she abandons 'hope in any other remedy...' (SCB 6:2).

Canticle was a work in progress. Begun in Toledo, poem and commentary grew after escape as John's experience blossomed. The last stanza to be composed he located as stanza 11. It declares superbly the focus of his longing:

Unveil now your presence
and let the vision of your beauty slay me.
See how the pain
of love will only heal
if you are here and let me see your face.

This focus of *Canticle* is itself a lesson in prayer. The heart of prayer is the other person: a presence and a face, *presencia y figura*. Being with him is a value worthy of a person's life.

Heart Presence

'Let this be so important to you that nothing else will matter to you.' The presence of which John speaks is heart presence, not mere geography. Neighboring

*The heart of prayer
is the other person*

bodies may sandwich you on the underground, but there is no presence. You can be a hemisphere away from a friend, and still be close.

John means it when he says that the soul *lives where it loves* (SCA 8:2).⁴ Spirit is the person at her most mobile. Love makes one participate, for better or worse, in what is loved. This has its downside in lust and addiction, where yearning shapes one to the smallness of one's obsessions. But the power of love to 'make present' has its glory in God, where the love of Father and Son means that each lives in the other, and the Spirit-love uniting them makes them a single lover (Rom I-3). God's love creates the universe to join this circle of availability (Rom 4).



John's 'Let go; put it *down!*' is an education in availability. He had been trained in this himself: prayer, spent in raw expectancy, or in hushed attention; time tending the diseased or receiving a brother's despondency. Faith, not pet ideas, hope, not ambition, charity, not selective affections, had made John God-like in his openness. Here John and Ignatius join company. If the Carmelite call is to 'be with' Christ, such companionship demands surrender. Presence means not spatial proximity but hearts in tune.

So John can define union—two being together - as oneness of will (2A 5); and he has a Therese-like focus on the desire to 'please' God.⁵ *Canticle* puts this desire in its own idiom. Stanza 17 echoes *Night* in its intensity: 'the experiences of the Beloved's *absence* which the soul suffers in this state of spiritual betrothal are a cause of great affliction. At times they are such that no pain can compare with them. The reason is that, since her love for God in this state is great and strong, great and strong is the torment of love in his absence' (SCB 17:1; cf. 2N 11-13). So she invokes the 'south wind', the Holy Spirit, who will dispel winter's chill, increase her love, and wake up the fragrance of virtue in the soul. But her main aim in doing this is 'that the Son of God, her Bridegroom, might rejoice and delight more in her, since for her the point of everything is to make her Beloved happy' (SCB 17:2; cf. 17:8).

'Being with' is heart presence; wanting what he wants; wanting to bring him joy.

Easter Witness

Presence, as persons, in tune, is the issue. And that presence is a reality. This is John's primary gift to the church, his testimony to the givenness of God.

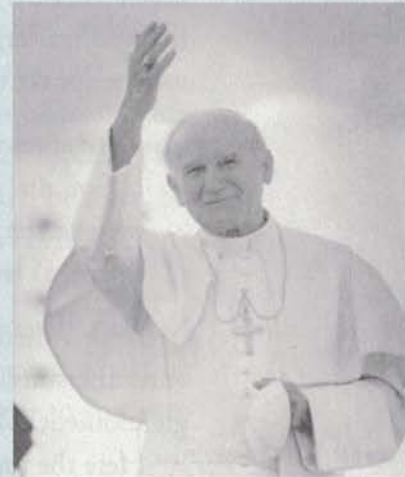
When the Carmelite escaped from his dungeon, he took with him the tale of a God whose closeness took his breath away. His poems sing this gift of togetherness, 'resting her neck on the fair arms of the Beloved' (SCB, stanza 22); 'my face resting on the Beloved' (N, stanza 8); 'you wake in my heart / where secretly, alone,

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In his Apostolic Letter NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE, Pope John Paul II writes on prayer, 'How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teaching of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila?' Further on in this document he writes of another Carmelite Saint, 'Love is truly the heart of the Church, as was well understood by St. Therese of Lisieux, whom I proclaimed a Doctor of the Church precisely because she is an expert in the scienta amoris: "I understand that the Church had a Heart, and that this Heart was aflame with Love. I understood that Love alone stirred the members of the Church to act...I understood that Love encompasses all vocations, that Love was everything.'" (Nos. 33 and 42)



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When did her Carmelite vocation of silence evolve into her heavenly mission "to draw souls by helping them to go out of themselves to cling to God by a wholly simple and loving movement, and to keep them in this great silence within that will allow God to communicate Himself to them and transform them into Himself"?

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you dwell' (LF, stanza 4). Contemplation, a loving attention to God's loving light, is this togetherness, assent in harmony, two hearts trustingly laid bare.

The apex of John's experience shows just how vulnerable God wills to be. The workmanlike progress of *Ascent* leads to a discourse on 'understanding of naked truth' (2A 26). Here the author turns hushed, abashed: 'for you should know, beloved reader, that [this gift to the soul] is beyond any words' (2A 26:1). With awe he speaks of 'pure contemplation', the 'union' which is the journey's goal:

a kind of touch of God upon the soul; so God himself is the one who is experienced and tasted there. And though this does not take place in an evident way, with clarity, as is the case in glory, yet this touch is so delicate a knowing and excellent a taste that it penetrates the core of the person's being [sustancia del alma]. (2A 26:5)

In this there is no danger of deception, since no counterfeit experience 'could enter the substance of the soul and renew it and set it alive with love, all in a single moment. This gift of naked knowledge of God does that' (2A 26:6).

Here the mystic testifies, at white heat, to the way God is. The word he offers to the church is a witness to the all-available Christ. His is Easter prayer, the experience of the one who ascended 'to fill the whole universe with his presence'⁶ (Eph 4:10); he who, receiving 'from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, has poured out this which you see and hear' (Acts 2:33).

Companions in the Night

Writing from a sun-blessed summit, John sees the world pervaded with light—'the Spirit's constant presence'. That lets him read rightly the absence felt in the climb. His confidence is arresting: 'This dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul,... in which God is secretly teaching the soul and training her in perfect love' (2N 5:1). What seemed to be darkness, absence, rejection, was really a mystery of presence: presence too close, too personal, too Godlike for the person's groundling senses to perceive. The Prologue to *Ascent-Night* sets out the diagnosis:

It may happen that God will be carrying a person along a most favored path of dark contemplation and dryness, and she feels she has lost her way... She seems to see it clear as day: she is full of evils and sins; whereas in fact this comes from the light which God is giving her in that contemplative night. (A/N Prol. 4-5)

Transformation takes place outside, beneath the stars, not in a familiar indoors with its fluorescent glare. Night means adjustment, sensitizing the person to a gentler kind of closeness. 'Within this dark pain, this loving pain, the soul feels a certain inner strength and companionship, which accompanies and gives her strength...' (2N 11:7).

The Pentecost letter with which we began ends on just this note, with encouragement not to fear the void. 'Live in faith and hope, even though it be in darkness, for in this darkness God is supporting the soul.'

Whose Absence?

John's Easter witness to the closeness, even in night, of the all-pervading Christ, raises the question of just who it is that is absent. 'Lord my God! You are no stranger for the one who does not draw apart from you. How can they say that you are the one who is absent?' (Say 50(47)). The language of *Canticle* returns in the *Shepherd* song, but this time in truer perspective. The one who suffers the other's absence, and longs for—dies for—her presence, is the man on the tree, his heart torn apart by love.⁷

Of Christ's presence there is no question. The mystic's awareness of this, God's givenness, clarifies the truth of every person: 'the center of the soul is God' (LF I:12). It sees displayed the communion hidden at the heart of each believer. So John's summit perspective lets him answer his *Canticle* question, 'Where?': 'Don't you see: he is here. He is with you. He is in you. Welcome him.'

Soul, most beautiful among all creatures, you who so long to know the place of your Beloved, so as to seek him and become one with him! Now you are hearing the answer: you yourself are the room where he dwells. [He is] so close to you as to be within you... Desire him there, adore him there. (SCB I:7-8)

In the terms of John's Pentecost letter: the Spirit is pressing in upon you; do not let worry stop you seeing that.

So, how to see it? How to come down to the floor where he is already kneeling, waiting? John's answer: 'seek him in faith and love' (SCB I:11). This is the prayer of presence. One degree of love unites you with him at your center (LF I:13). Believe, trust, love, and your presence to him becomes heart presence; you are together; you are with him. And his presence to you transforms.

*'seek him in faith
and love'*

Transformation

'Enter within your heart and work in the presence of the Bridegroom, who is always present, loving you well' (Max II/Say 90). Enter with him, because the company you keep has power to change you.

Jean Vanier tells of the L'Arche community in Suyapa, Honduras. When Claudia came there, she was seven years old and had spent practically her whole life in a dismal, overcrowded asylum.

Claudia was blind, fearful of relationships, filled with inner pain and anguish. On arrival at the community, 'everything and every one frightened her; she screamed day and night and smeared excrement on the walls.' But the companionship of people who loved her brought change. It was 'the gentle presence of Nadine and the others in Suyapa that gradually weakened Claudia's great walls of defense. Little by little, she began to trust that she was not bad, but capable of loving and being loved.'¹⁸

'Only being loved is being saved.'⁹ Being with the one who loves is the road to healing. The simplicity of John's prayer, an attention in love to the one who is loving you, is a supremely 'happening' place. It holds out the possibility of transformation: that in being with him, we would be made like him.

Commenting on the line, 'there you will show me' (SCA, stanza 37), *Canticle* attests this power of God's love to open new possibilities in the heart:

In this transformation, God communicates himself to the soul: he shows her love, love that is total, generous and pure; love in which he communicates the whole of himself to her, *most lovingly*, transforming her in himself... So this really is 'showing her how' to love— [like a craftsman] putting the instrument in her hands, telling her how to use it, and using it along with her. (SCA 3 7:3)

Prayer here is divine apprenticeship, in which God's tenderness makes the soul, too, an expert in loving—*maestra de amar*:

So it is that the soul has been not only instructed in love; she has become an expert in loving, united with the expert himself, and, as a result, she has found fulfillment; fulfillment will be hers only when she comes to love like this. (SC 37:3)

The Prayer of the Poor

Utilitarian ethics and a sensationalist culture have little room for those who find it hard to communicate; little esteem 'for anyone who, like the unborn or the dying, is a weak element in the social structure, or for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection' (Evang. Vitae # 19).

In this light, the prayer welcoming 'the Spirit's constant presence' is no esoteric affair. Like Mary standing by her Son when he was at others' mercy, the prayer of presence sets the believer alongside those who cannot compete. It takes one to a spacious, night-time place, where the veins of the world's suffering meet; the home of the incompetent and defenseless, who 'can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection'. For John, being with Christ in that still place is a priority—'so important that nothing else [should] matter to you or claim your attention'. A world in pain is waiting there.

As the postscript to another letter puts it:

Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God, silent in spirit and with the tongue; for his only language, the one he hears, is the silent language of love.¹⁰

1. Letter 20, to a Carmelite nun, Pentecost (date unknown).

2. Jeronimo de la Cruz, in *Crisogono, Vida de San Juan de la Cruz*, Madrid: BAC, 1982, p.264, n.87.

3. Javier Melloni, SJ, *The Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition*, Leominster: Gracewing / New Malden: Inigo, 2000, p.51.

4. Already a catchphrase in sixteenth-century spirituality.

5. *Agradar a Dios*: 3A 35:7; see also 3A 28:8; 30:5; IN 3:2; 6:6; 2N 19:4.

6. Good News Bible: Today's English Version.

7. The bride in *Canticle*: 'penado en la ausencia' (SCB I:21); Christ in the Shepherd: 'olo... penado... ausencia'.

8. Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999, pp.20-1.26.

9. Cardinal J Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995, p.74.

10. Letter 8, to the Carmelite sisters of Beas, November 22nd, 1587



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Desire in John of the Cross

Kathleen A. Flynn, OCDS

Some degree of understanding of the role of desire in the writings of St. John of the Cross is essential for anyone who wishes to use his works as a guide for the spiritual journey. John wishes to guide us to fulfillment of our deepest innate desire, desire for union with God in love. Participation in an intimate communion of love with the Trinity, that is our goal, and desire plays a critical role in the journey to that end.

In the commentary on the first stanza of *the Spiritual Canticle*, #2, John of the Cross writes that “the soul, enamored of the Word, her bridegroom, the Son of God, longs for union with him through clear and essential vision” (Kavanaugh, 478). This clear and essential vision that the soul desires is the beatific vision she hopes to enjoy for all eternity in heaven, the ultimate fulfillment of our human desire. This is the desire with which she begins the journey (although she might not articulate it as such), and this is the desire with which she ends the journey in this life. This desire for union with God is fueled by love, love for the God who has first loved us. The more he reveals himself to us, the greater grows our desire to both experience his love and return his love. Thus we are led on this journey, forever seeking more of “I-don’t-know-what,” - God’s mysterious, obscure but awesome presence in our lives.

There is, built into the human person, this desire for union with God—our ultimate destiny and source of fulfillment. But if you were to ask most people who are in the early stages of prayer and their relationship with God, they probably would not give this desire as the reason for seeking Jesus or growth in faith. The reasons they give would probably be more temporal in nature, because they as yet do not have any understanding of what union with God might mean. None of us, of course, have a clear understanding of what this phrase means, but some people have experienced God’s love in a deep enough way to have a tiny inkling of the possibilities. Once we have progressed enough in our spiritual journey to realize that nothing else can compare to what God offers us, we are more aware of our deep innate longing for an intimate love relationship with him.

In the beginning of our life of prayer, we often experience God’s sweet, tender love for us in the form of consolations. These experiences reveal God’s love for us, and increase our love for him. So we desire to develop this relationship further, partially because we want to return the love God has shown us, and partially because the experience gave us pleasure and we would like more of this pleasure in our lives. At this point our motives for seeking God are not pure, our desire for our



own pleasure is as strong or stronger than our desire for God, and so our desire must be purified.

John's teachings on our need for purification, and the process of purification, are very helpful for anyone who wants to grow in their love for God. It is much easier to persevere in the difficult times if we at least have some evidence that we are on the right track. Scripture states that "our God is a jealous God," he wants all of us—heart, soul, mind and strength - and will give all in return. "Seek first the Kingdom, and all else will be given you besides." This process of learning to put God first in our lives is a long and arduous one, one that we can only complete with God's help. It requires a tremendous amount of purification, purification of our entire being, or to use the terms of scholastic theology, purification of our intellect, memory and will. Every motivation, desire, thought or movement of the will that is not of God must be subjected to God and his will out of love.

John advises in the commentary on stanza I, #9 of *The Spiritual Canticle*, that "you should forget all your possessions and all creatures and hide in the secret inner room of your spirit and there, closing the door behind you (your will to all things), you should pray to your Father in secret [Mt. 6:6]" (Kavanaugh, 481). In the early stages of the spiritual journey, we can work at conforming our ways and manner of being to God's way. This is active purification. Later, God will have to step in and help us do what we cannot do ourselves. This is the beginning of contemplation. As we progress further, God will take over entirely, purifying the "roots" of our sins and imperfections (passive purification). Jesus' words to Peter in John's Gospel remind me of this process, "Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (Jn 21:18). The Scripture continues, saying that this passage signifies by what kind of death Peter will glorify God.

I identify this Scripture passage with the process of the purification of our desires because the purification process is also a type of death by which we glorify God. As when Peter was young, in the beginning of the spiritual journey, we pretty much do what we want, we are just beginning the process of self denial. As we progress however, it becomes more difficult. The Lord asks us to give up things/habits/behaviors that we may not really want to give up - we are attached to them, they provide satisfaction or fulfill some "perceived" need (St. Augustine experienced a similar reluctance to change, as exemplified by his prayer, "make me chaste, but not yet").

Later still, when God takes over completely, purifying those areas of our lives that we cannot change by our own efforts, it may seem that we have lost all control in our lives. Things that we have depended upon may be suddenly withdrawn from us. At this point, we may experience confusion and feel as if our life has been turned upside down. We thought we understood the path our life was taking, but things don't seem to make much sense anymore. We may try to regain or replace what has

been lost in our lives, usually with little success. This state feels very much like death because it is, in fact, the death or purification of our will, and so we may feel like Peter that someone (God) is leading us where we do not want to go. Here we are challenged to a radical faith. In great pain and darkness, unable to see any good in the situation, we are called to trust the Lord rather than our own perceptions.

The purification of desire, a prerequisite for union with God, is not a process for the faint-hearted; it is at times excruciatingly painful. But the soul does not undergo the purification process so that, later, it can gain God's love. It is God's love itself that causes the purification, and as the soul is purified, God's love grows within it. This in-flowing of God's love brings about a self-knowledge that reveals the soul's imperfections, and it is this love that purifies the soul of them, so that it is more closely conformed to God's will.

In stanza 7, numbers 2, 3 and 4 of *The Spiritual Canticle*, John speaks of three ways of suffering for the Beloved (wounds of love) which correspond to three kinds of knowledge of him. The first type, called a wound, is caused by the knowledge of God a soul gains from creatures. This simple wound is the mildest and quickest to heal. The second type, a sore wound, penetrates more deeply and is longer lasting. This wound is caused by knowledge of the Incarnation and the mysteries of faith. Since these mysteries demonstrate God's love more profoundly, they produce a more intense love in the soul. The third type of suffering of love can be compared to a festering wound, it is like dying. John states that the soul in this state "lives by dying until love, in killing her, makes her live the life of love, transforming her in love. This death of love is caused in the soul by means of a touch of supreme knowledge of the divinity, the "I-don't-know-what" that she says lies behind their stammering" (Kavanaugh, 500).

I think that these types of sufferings of love run a parallel course with the purification process. As we grow in our knowledge of God, our love, our awareness of our need for purification, and our willingness to undergo the purification process, deepens. And so we undergo purification, which through the in-flowing of God, leads to greater knowledge, and therefore greater love, of God.

This process of purification requires a corresponding growth in faith. In describing the process to others, I like to say, "The farther I go, the less I know." In the beginning, the knowledge of God that we gain is comprehensible, our intellects can understand it. As we progress and begin to enter into contemplation however, things become progressively more obscure. Where previously we gained our knowledge from Scripture, books, discursive meditation, other people, etc., now our growth in knowledge comes more directly from the Holy Spirit. Our ability to meditate discursively is lost, and as we progress, things just don't seem to touch us as they once did.

People at this point may say they don't feel anything anymore, they may feel like they are dead, figuratively speaking, that even if you pinched them they wouldn't feel it. This is of course not true in a literal sense, but is in a spiritual sense. It is



not that God or other meaningful experiences in life are absent, but rather that God is infusing a "hidden knowledge" that cannot be grasped with the intellect. Of this hidden, "I-don't-know-what" experience of God John writes, "If what I understand wounds me with love, what I do not understand completely, yet have sublime experience of, is death to me" (Kavanaugh, *Canticle*, 502). We are now required to walk more in faith, believing God to be active and present in our lives even if we can't perceive him. Here we no longer feel anything in prayer, and often we no longer gain satisfaction from our ministry. The lack of satisfaction and sensible experiences of God encountered at this time helps purify our motives for seeking and serving God.

I think gradually we gain a sense that he is with us, but even this grows more obscure as we progress, until sometimes we may wonder if we are deluding ourselves. Walking ever more in faith, we are also growing in love, although we don't feel love as we often think of it either. That too is obscure and hidden, yet active and effective in our lives.

"It should be known that however spiritual a soul may be there always remains, until she reaches . . . perfection, some little herd of appetites, satisfactions, and other imperfections, natural or spiritual, after which she follows. . ."

The period of spiritual betrothal (which John, at times, also refers to as a union of love), precedes spiritual marriage or transformation. It is the time of final purification. In *The Spiritual Canticle* John states, "It should be known that however spiritual a soul may be there always remains, until she reaches . . . perfection, some little herd of appetites, satisfactions, and other imperfections, natural or spiritual, after which she follows. . ." (Kavanaugh, 580).

Here, the soul suffers great longings for union with God. Even though God is close to the soul, because she is not yet purified, the brightness of his supernatural light blinds her, darkening her vision so that she cannot perceive his presence. This is so throughout the period of purification that comes through contemplation. With our weak, impure "eyes," God's brightness "blinds" us, so that his presence is perceived as darkness, just as things appear dark after someone has been looking directly at the sun.

John states that "The reason the soul suffers so intensely for God at this time is that she is drawing nearer to him; so she has greater experience within herself of the void of God, of very heavy darkness, and of spiritual fire that dries up and purges her so that thus purified she may be united with him" (Kavanaugh, *Canticle*, 519).

During this period of spiritual betrothal, the soul does not only experience darkness and longing. At times, the Lord grants her abundant communications which include among other things, great sweetness and delight of love, peace, and a hidden and lofty knowledge of himself.

Finally, God, having completed the purification of the soul, brings her to the state of spiritual marriage or transformation. In stanza 26, #5 of *The Spiritual Canticle*, John states, ". . .this communication is diffused substantially in the whole soul, or better, the soul is transformed in God. In this transformation she drinks of God

in her substance and in her spiritual faculties. With the intellect she drinks wisdom and knowledge; with the will, sweetest love; and with the memory she drinks refreshment and delight in the remembrance and the feeling of glory” (Kavanaugh, 576). Here the soul’s desires have been purified so that she desires God alone. Of this state, which is union with God, John writes of the soul, “She is conscious that love is so valuable in her Beloved’s sight that he neither esteems nor makes use of anything else but love, and so she employs all her strength in the pure love of God, desiring to serve him perfectly” (Kavanaugh, *Canticle*, #3, 583). In this union of love with God, the soul “easily extracts the sweetness of love from all things that happen to her; that is, she loves God in them” (Kavanaugh, *Canticle*, #8, 583). God, for his part, delights in bestowing sublime gifts of grace on the soul.

In this state of love, desire no longer needs to be purified, for the soul’s only desire is union with God in love. She does however, want the completion of this union, the beatific vision, which is not possible in this life. Even in this state of spiritual marriage, the soul will draw ever closer to God until she is called through the door of physical death to a new life in eternal glory with her Beloved.

It seems, in considering the role of desire in the writings of St. John of the Cross, that the desire for union with God has primacy over the purification of desire. Union with God is both the motivation and the goal of the soul’s journey, while the purification of desire is part of the process necessary for the attainment of the goal. The purpose of the purification of our desire is to remove desire for all things that are not God, so that we are focused on the one thing necessary for the goal we seek—God himself.

The desire for union with God is built into the human person, is given by God himself to each of us, and grows or matures as we progress on the spiritual journey. The need for the purification of our desire, however, stems from our weak, sinful human nature. Once our sinful, selfish desires and inclinations have been overcome by God’s grace, a process with which we must cooperate, then the need for purification no longer exists. When we seek only God, in love, then we have become persons fully redeemed, living life with and in God.

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News from the Northeast Region

As previously reported, the six Northeast Districts have planned many regional programs for 2007. Below are the remaining programs for 2007. OCDS members from outside the Northeast can register later if there is room on these dates:

September 28-30 2007, Friday to Sunday. District 6 retreat: "Light and Warmth in the *Living Flame of Love* — St. John of the Cross," by Fr. Bonaventure Lussier, OCD at the Franciscan Guest House, St. Anthony's Monastery, in Kennebunk, ME. COST: Double: \$130; Single (very limited): \$185; Deposit: \$50 (non-refundable) Final payment due on or before July 16, 2007. For map & views of retreat house only: <http://www.franciscanguesthouse.com>. Contact: Doug Treadwell OCDS, 451 Lowell Street Methuen, MA 01844-2249; email: josangels@comcast.net or Norma Hurrell OCDS 26 Shaw Street, Lawrence, MA 01843-3521 tereseofmary@comcast.net

November 9-11, 2007 Friday to Sunday, District 3 retreat, "Foundations for a Spiritual Life" by Fr. Paul Fohlin, OCD at Notre Dame Retreat Center, in Canandaigua, NY. Contact Pat Brazo, 1393 Mecklenburg Road, Ithaca, NY 14850-9389; 607-273-0821; ebrazo@acmenet.net

In Remembrance

The Immaculate Heart of Mary Community of Willow Grove, PA recently lost two members. **Lois Zurbach, OCDS**, began eternal life in November 2006. **Anayansi (Ana) Ott, OCDS**, began eternal life on May 9, 2007.

Marie Flowers, OCDS, began eternal life on October 28, 2006 at the age of 93. She was a member of the Our Lady of the Paraclete Community in Detroit, MI, received her scapular in November, 2000 and was definitively professed on January 8, 2006.

Ellen Dwyer Vandover, OCDS, began eternal life on April 23, 2007. She was a member of the Community of the Sacred Heart in Frederick, MD.

Mary Doyle, OCDS, Mary of the Cross, began eternal life on May 8, 2007. She was a member of the Community of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in Washington, DC.

The First Blind Guide: John of the Cross and Spiritual Direction

Thomas H. Green

Introduction: Discovering John of the Cross

In my 40 years as a religious and a pray-er, and my almost 28 years as a priest and spiritual director, I have come to value St. John of the Cross as one of the truly great directors—perhaps the greatest—in the history of Christian spirituality. It was not always so. During the early years of my Jesuit formation, John’s writings were considered “mystical” in a way that made them un-Jesuit. In fact, they were not readily available to us—being confined to a locked section of the library that we young Jesuits referred to as “hell” and more or less (it seemed) in the category of Gibbon, Voltaire and others on the Index of Prohibited Writings.

When, during my philosophy years—and because my own prayer was beginning to be dark and dry—I did obtain permission to read John’s *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the result was trauma. I recall telling my spiritual director that, if John was correct about the *nada* and the need to renounce all our desires, then it seemed to me as if our whole Jesuit life of involvement in the world was on a false foundation. The director’s response was kind but challenging: perhaps, he said, my anxiety was a sign that I was not yet ready for John. I obeyed his suggestion and gave up my reading of the *Ascent*. But a nagging question lingered: What did it mean to be “ready”? When would I be ready? When would I be able to see the teachings of John and Ignatius of Loyola, both canonized saints, as integral, and therefore compatible, parts of the same Christian vision of prayer and holiness?

I don’t remember precisely when I returned to John of the Cross. What I do recall is that the darkness and dryness persisted (as they have, essentially, till now) and that, by my theology years, I had found in John the strength to persevere in the darkness and to hope that it was all God’s work. At the same time, it became progressively clearer to me (particularly when I made a retreat at the Trappist monastery near my home in Rochester, NY, shortly after ordination) that my own vocation was to be a Jesuit—and that in some mysterious way my two “callings” were compatible.

In my 40 years as a religious and a pray-er, and my almost 28 years as a priest and spiritual director, I have come to value St. John of the Cross as one of the truly great directors—perhaps the greatest—in the history of Christian spirituality



Just this year, on the 400th anniversary of John's death and the 500th of Ignatius's birth, I was able to put into writing—in *Drinking From a Dry Well* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991)—the compatibility I have discovered. It is now clear to me that John and Ignatius are truly kindred spirits, possessed by the same vision of being free from all inordinate attachments and desires only in order to be totally free for God and his will, although they differ (and this I think was the cause of my earlier anxiety) in that Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* writes for generous beginners, whereas John presupposes these beginnings and writes for the “proficient” or “mature.”

It is not my purpose to repeat that story in the present article. But, having laid to rest one of the great puzzles of my life, I should now

like to pay particular tribute to John (*an utang na boob*, or debt of gratitude, as we say in the Philippines) by sharing with you his masterful vision of spiritual direction and what it means to be a good spiritual director. There is a crucial and classic passage in the commentary on the third stanza of the *Living Flame of Love* (F3, 27-67), which I as a director try to reread every year to keep myself honest in my own work of direction. Before considering that classic source, however, let us see the general picture of direction and of the good director that John of the Cross gives us.

The Value and the Danger of Spiritual Direction

John's Own Example: Compassionate but Challenging. St. John's final years were troubled and marked by persecution, and as a consequence most of his letters have been lost, but the picture that emerges from those that remain is of a compassionate but challenging guide for souls seeking to grow in the Lord. As the fox warned the Little Prince in Saint Exupery's classic tale, John felt forever responsible for those he had helped to “tame.” He says as much in a letter to Madre Ana de Jesus dated July 6, 1591 (less than 6 months before his death), when she expressed her fear that the troubles in the Order would deprive her of his invaluable guidance: “I still fear they will make me go to Segovia.... [But] leaving or staying, wherever or however things may come to pass, I will neither forget nor neglect you, ...because truly I desire your good forever.”

In the “General Introduction” to the Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translation of John's Collected Works, Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, says of him:

Sinners, too, found it easy to manifest their conscience to him. "The holier a confessor," he said, "the less fear one should have of him." In directing others John stressed the life of faith, hope and charity, understanding that man's good consists especially in interior acts, not in exterior acts. Thus he was known as a moderator of penances, and in different monasteries of the Reform he ordered that the practices of penance (so severe in those times) be kept within bounds lest they degenerate into the "penance of beasts."

Thus John preached moderation in everything except love and generosity. As Kavanaugh notes though, "his deepest concern was for those who in their spiritual life were suffering," especially those undergoing the various stages of what he called the "dark night." It is they whom he has principally in mind in his references to spiritual direction. And in these references we can note three main themes: the value of spiritual direction; what a desire for direction reveals of the pray-er's spirit; and the danger of poor direction. Let us briefly consider each of these in turn.

The Value of Direction. In the Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John asks why souls do not advance in spirituality. He answers: "Sometimes they misunderstand themselves and are without suitable and alert directors who will show them the way to the summit" (*Ascent* Prologue, 3). He returns to this question in Book II, Chapter 22 of the *Ascent*, where he says of those experiencing apparently supernatural revelations and graces that they need "human counsel and direction," and should not rely only on themselves in judging divine communications. As he goes on to say: "Whatever is received through supernatural means (in whatever manner) should immediately be told clearly, integrally and simply to one's spiritual director" (II A 22, I6). Why? He gives three reasons. First, to completely confirm the "effect, light, strength and security of many divine communications" (*Ibid.*) Second, because "a soul ordinarily needs instruction pertinent to its experiences in order to be guided through the dark night of spiritual denudation and poverty" (*Ibid.*, I7). And finally, "for the sake of humility, submission and mortification" (*Ibid.*, I8). For confirmation, for instruction, for humility. While John's specific concern here is "divine communications," the three values he describes would be applicable to any sincere pray-er desirous of growing in union with God, particularly to one who has begun to experience the purification of the dark night.

The Desire for Direction as the Mark of a Good Spirit. St. Ignatius Loyola tells us that the devil loves secrecy (like a false lover), since he can easily have his way with one who is not open to a good director. Similarly, John tells us in the *Dark Night*, Book I, Chapter I2 that the desire to submit to a spiritual guide is a sign of a submissive, obedient spirit in the dark night. Since she is so aware of her own

wretchedness, her one desire is to be directed and told what to do “by anyone at all.” Of course, John realizes that it would be dangerous to be directed by “anyone at all,” as the rest of this article will make clear. But his point is that hard-headedness and a self-willed spirit are very dangerous in the life of prayer.

He expresses this point more adequately and in greater detail earlier in the *Dark Night*, when speaking of the imperfections of pride that must be purified in beginners. He contrasts such persons with “souls who are advancing in perfection.” Of the latter he says: “These souls humbly and tranquilly long to be taught by anyone who might be a help to them.... !They are ready to take a road different from the one they are following, if told to do so” (I N2, 7). Moreover, “they have an inclination to seek direction from one who will have less esteem for their spirit and their deeds,” rather than by one who will canonize them or be in awe of their virtue (Ibid.). Whenever I read these lines I think of St. Teresa of Avila, who says that John did her more good than any of her many other directors—precisely, it seems, because he was firm with her very strong character, and was never intimidated by her holiness or by the fact that he was 27 years younger than she was. For John, Teresa’s desire to be treated lovingly but firmly (hard as this was for one with such a strong character) must have been among the surest signs of the genuineness of her spirituality.

The Danger of Poor Direction. Unfortunately, the story is not as simple as this might suggest. There are two human beings involved in the work of direction: the directee and the director. And John insists that the pray-er must exercise great care in choosing a spiritual director. For, as he says in the *Ascent*, a spiritual director can cause great harm in times of consolation by his or her lack of discretion: in giving too much importance to the directee’s “visions,” by not guiding her to humility, and by giving her poor instruction because of his own fascination with revelations and preternatural phenomena (I A 18). None of these extraordinary experiences, John insists, are necessary to holiness, and all of them can be produced by the devil or by an overactive imagination. The way to perfection is, for John, always a dark way. Hence such directors err by their failure to “disencumber and divest” their directees of all desire for visions and other “mystical” experiences.

Similarly, many directors are “a hindrance and harm rather than a help” in times of darkness and desolation, because they themselves “have neither enlightenment nor experience of these ways.” Some say “all of this is due to melancholia or depression, or to temperament, or to some hidden wickedness.” And “others tell him he is falling back,” thus confirming his fear and belief that somehow he really has lost or offended God. Such directors, like Job’s comforters, merely increase the suffering and distress of the soul in the dark night (*Ascent* Prologue, 4-5).

In the next section we see that this concern for the harm done by inept or self-centered directors is one of John’s major preoccupations in the *Living Flame*

of Love. Before turning to that classic discussion, though, let us note John's positive conclusion in the Prologue to the Ascent. The good director, he says, realizes that the dark night is not a time for harshness or recrimination on the part of the director. Rather it is a time "for leaving these persons alone in the purgation God is working in them, a time to give comfort and encouragement that they may desire to endure this suffering as long as God wills" (Ibid., 5). We might summarize John's teaching by saying that the good director, like the Holy Spirit whose instrument he or she is, is the strengthener and consoler of the pray-er in her journey to union with God. There may be a need at times for the challenging word, but directors must have great sensitivity to recognize this need. They must be, in St. Ignatius's famous image (Exercises, no. 15), like the balance of a scale, leaning one way or the other only to keep the soul centered on God her Lord.

The First Blind Guide

The Context. In the *Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, Section 27, St. John of the Cross begins a lengthy digression that has become a classic in the literature of prayer—and in which we find a systematic development of all the themes culled from the scattered references above. He has been speaking of the way the pray-er moves through the various stages of the journey toward union with God or "spiritual marriage", and he has noted that very few persevere, in this life, to the end of this unitive journey. This leads him to say:



Oh, what an excellent place this is to advise souls on whom God bestows these delicate unctions to watch what they are doing, and into whose hands they are committing themselves, that they might not turn back! This does not pertain to our subject, yet the compassion and grief that comes to my heart in seeing souls fall back...is so great that I do not think it improper here to warn them....

John starts his discussion with a note of reassurance: "In the first place it should be known that if a person is seeking God, his Beloved is seeking him much more" (F3, 28). Dark as our prayer may seem, we should be consoled by

Good directors must remember that theirs is primarily a work of discerning sensitivity to what the Lord is doing in the directee. They should recall that the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, and that we are merely instruments for directing "according to the spirit God gives each one" (46). If directors cannot recognize this spirit in their directees, at least they should "leave them alone and not bother them."

the knowledge that (as I have often expressed it) the very desire for God is a clear sign that God is present. For we could not even desire God if he were not at work in us. "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him" (Jn 6:44, 65). What then must we do in this darkness? John of the Cross puts it very simply: "The soul, then, should advert that God is the principal agent in this matter, and that He acts as the blind man's guide who must lead it by the hand to the place it does not know how to reach" (Ibid., 29).

"The blind man's guide." This is the role of God in the dark night. Hence the pray-er "should use all its principal care in watching so as not to place any obstacle in the way of its guide." And how would it place an obstacle in the Lord's way? Only "by allowing itself to be guided by another blind man." And who is this blind guide who can lead the soul astray? There are three, John says, "who can draw it off the road: the spiritual director, the devil, and the soul itself" (Ibid.).

Thus John begins his famous discussion of the three blind guides who seek to lead the Soul astray in the dark night. What is remarkable is the comparative amount of space he gives to each. He treats of the second blind guide, the devil, in just three paragraphs (Ibid., 63-65), and the third, oneself, in only two (Ibid., 66-67). The devil seduces the pray-er with the "bait" of sensible consolation and "some clouds of knowledge" when it should now be content to abandon all its own activity. "Abandon your activity, for if this helped you, when you were beginners, to deny the world and yourselves, now...it is a serious obstacle." John values the meditative ways by which beginners come to know God. He would have little sympathy with the advice, sometimes heard today, that even beginners can simply "center" on a God they do not yet know. We humans can only love what we know.

Nonetheless the time comes—and this is the situation of the pray-er to whom John speaks here—when the ways of beginners are no longer suitable and must be abandoned. The devil will try to keep us to these beginner's ways. And the soul itself (its own "third blind guide") will also interfere with God's work if, thinking it is doing nothing in prayer, it strains to perform acts with its faculties (understanding, memory and will). John compares such a person to a child kicking and crying "in order to walk when his mother wants to carry him," or to a person moving a painting "back and forth while the artist is at work" on it (Ibid., 66). What should we do? In the next paragraph John tells us that we advance much faster when carried by God than when walking by ourselves—even though we don't feel God's pace or sense God's movement. Hence, once the darkness of prayer sets in, we must simply abandon ourselves into the divine hands.

The Worst Blind Guide. But how do we know that the time has come to abandon all our own efforts at prayer? How do we recognize that sensible consolations, helpful for beginners, are no longer desirable and are the devil's attempt to seduce us? This is where we need good direction. And because such direction is so crucial to interior growth, John devotes about 32 paragraphs to the spiritual director as the first, and worst, blind guide. These paragraphs (Ibid., 30-62) are the ones I reread every year to keep myself honest in the crucial work of spiritual direction. In considering the main points John makes in this important section, I would suggest the following outline: The Danger of Inexperienced Direction (30-45); The Holy Spirit as The Director (46-52); A Portrait of the Blind Guide (53-58); and, finally, A Portrait of the Guide with Good Vision (59-62). Let us say a word about each in turn.

The Danger of Inexperienced Direction. John's main point in the opening paragraphs (30-31) of his discussion of the first blind guide is that an inexperienced director, because he or she does not understand the ways of God, is likely to keep the directee to baser, beginner's ways—when the Lord is leading her to growth and purification in the dark night. To remedy this, John presents a brief "catechism" of the normal ways of interior growth. He contrasts (32) the beginner's state, when meditative and affective prayer are right and proper, with the "state of contemplation," when the soul must let go of all these attempts to "do something," and simply learn to submit gracefully to the interior purgation that the Lord is working in darkness (33-34). Even that "loving attentiveness," which John recommends in the *Ascent* to the soul no longer able to meditate but drawn simply to be present to the Lord in love, is now impossible. It must be surrendered—to be used "only when he does not feel himself placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening" (35).

Characteristically, John cites several scriptural passages in support of his argument (36-38), and then he explains (39) why this "holy idleness and solitude" is an inestimable blessing despite all appearances. It withdraws us from all that is not God ("a weariness with all creatures and with the world") and draws us to solitude—to a total centering on him. Since this work of love is very subtle, it is scarcely perceptible either to the pray-er or to the director.

Hence the danger. The insensitive director agrees with the pray-er that she is wasting her time, and so encourages her to force acts of meditation and devotion to avoid this wasteful "doing nothing." In this way the careless or inexperienced director does great harm by destroying the soul's recollection and causing her distraction (42-44). Unfortunately such directors are, John says, the norm rather than the exception: "Scarcely any spiritual director will be found who does not cause this harm in souls God is beginning to recollect in this manner." Such directors are "like a blacksmith who knows no more than how to hammer and pound with the faculties" (43). The result? "Thus all the soul's efforts are like hammering the horseshoe instead of the nail, and on the one hand he does harm, and on the other he receives no profit" (45).

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The Holy Spirit is the Director. The work of God is always mysterious from our human perspective. And at this time, when the dark night sets in and love no longer follows on knowledge, the Spirit's ways are far beyond our normal human mode of thinking and acting. It seems to us that we should be busy forming ourselves into good instruments, and sensitizing ourselves to the needs of the world we are called to serve. But good directors must remember that theirs is primarily a work of discerning sensitivity to what the Lord is doing in the directee. They should recall that the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, and that we are merely instruments for directing "according to the spirit God gives each one" (46). If directors cannot recognize this spirit in their directees, at least they should "leave them alone and not bother them."

Positively, though, a good director faced with a directee experiencing the dark night (or "dry well") can help much by leading her to a greater "solitude, tranquility and freedom of spirit." In this way, as noted earlier (38), the director cooperates best with the Holy Spirit, by disencumbering the soul, by bringing it to solitude and "idleness" even with respect to spiritual things. The whole process (if inactivity can be called a process!) is profoundly mysterious. But "by their fruits you shall know them." If the pray-er does as the Spirit asks, it is "impossible that God fail to do His part by communicating Himself to it secretly and silently" — like the sun rising and shining on clear ground (46-47).

In the following paragraphs (48-53) John explains this good fruit by recapitulating his teaching, masterfully and lengthily expounded in Books II and III of the *Ascent*, on the purification and transformation of the three faculties of the soul: the intellect, which now knows and approaches God only by faith (48); the will, which now lives by a love infused by God, who himself makes acts of love in her, and not by a love arising from her understanding of the good (49-51); and the memory, no longer dependent on the "forms and figures" of "meditation and imaginative reflection," but on a hope directly induced by the Spirit of God (52-53).

A Portrait of the Blind Guide. Having explained, as best he can, why this "holy idleness" is really the will of the Holy Spirit for the mature pray-er, John returns to the trouble caused by blind and insensitive directors. Because they themselves have not progressed beyond discursive meditation and "feelings of fervor," they cause great anxiety and serious harm to their more mature directees. They themselves do not know what spirit is, nor how God himself is "making the natural acts of the faculties fail," since they are not "capable of spirit" (53-54). Some "err with good will," since they do not know any better (56); others, even more inexcusable, act out of vanity—refusing to let the directee out of their hands even when another style of direction is clearly called for (57).

This last remark suggests that a director might well be helpful to a pray-er at a certain stage of her growth, and yet not be suitable at a later stage. For this reason I have found it very important to give my directees full freedom to change directors whenever they feel it would be helpful to do so. This can cause pain, of course, but it is the only reasonable attitude, if our primary concern is truly the good and growth of the directee. As John notes, even those directors who err with good will and out of ignorance are still culpable, “for rudely meddling in something they do not understand, instead of leaving matters to one who does understand” (56).

What does this mean in the concrete? To explain the different stages of good direction, John uses the analogy (57-58) of fashioning wood into a statue. At various stages we need a hewer, a carver, a “perfecter and polisher,” and finally a painter and finisher. The hewer’s role is “guiding the soul to contempt of the world and to mortification of its appetites”; and that of the carver is “introducing it to holy meditations.” These are the stages when the soul is actively using its own faculties in prayer. Thereafter, the work is God’s and the good director knows enough not to interfere. “No man can do more with the statue than what he knows how to do, and were he to try to do more than this, he would ruin it” (57).

Conclusion: A Portrait of the Guide with Good Vision

John of the Cross’s specific concern, in this famous passage on the “three blind guides,” is for the pray-er experiencing the dark night of contemplation, but his essential teaching is applicable at every stage in the work of direction. This can be seen most clearly in the last paragraphs of his discussion of the first blind guide, the director. In section 59 he tells us what not to do, and in section 61 what we should do.

First of all, he says, realize that “God leads each one along different paths.” Hence, don’t “tyrannize souls and deprive them of their freedom, and judge for yourself the breadth of the evangelical doctrine.” Live in awe of the mystery of God working his unique design in each human being. Don’t, we might say, judge the whole elephant from the one small part that you—the Buddha’s blind man—are able to touch. Also, don’t be jealous and possessive, like quarrelsome married couples (as John himself puts it!), “if by chance you learn that one of [your directees] has consulted another.” The director cannot possess the soul of his or her directee. I cannot demand total allegiance to me.

As I have long realized, the prayer lives of even those directees I know best and most deeply are still profoundly mysterious to me. I well recall the time when one of my earliest and best directors, the Jesuit priest and philosopher Norris Clarke, was transferred from the philosophate to Fordham University. We scholastics had a farewell party for him. And when it came time for him to say a few words, he said something like this: “I would like to thank you for many

things these past years. But most of all I would like to thank those who trusted me to be their spiritual director. They were really saying to me, 'I do not understand myself. So I would like you to journey with me to the most private and personal core of my being. Perhaps together we can make sense of it.' And that is a tremendous act of trust. No matter how long I live or what I might accomplish, that is the greatest compliment anyone will ever pay me."

Fr. Norris Clarke's words touched me deeply at that time, almost 40 years ago. And I am sure they capture the essence of John of the Cross's teaching on spiritual direction. As I have lived my own life as a director, and countless people have paid me that "greatest compliment," I have become ever more aware of the sacred responsibility involved. "Set my people free," the Lord says. "Free from themselves and their fears and attachments. Free from you, the director. Free from all that is not God. Free to journey into the darkness that is light—free to find me, their Love." That, in essence, is St. John of the Cross's classic teaching on spiritual direction.

Notes

I. All quotations from John of the Cross in this article are taken from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979).

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