

## 11. The "Dark Night" According to John of the Cross

Again we reflect upon the words of St. John of the Cross: "O guiding night! / O night more lovely than the dawn! / O night that has united / the Lover with his beloved, / transforming the beloved in her Lover" (N, 5). In this topic, we will explore one of his great contemplative masterpieces, the "Dark Night."

**I. The "Dark Night"** The sumptuous beauty of John of the Cross's "Dark Night" poem has placed this poem among the world's great poetic achievements. And John's own experience has enabled him to provide a commentary on the poem that guides spiritual seekers through the pain and joys of the dark nights. In this program, we will refrain from calling this experience the "Dark Night of the Soul," and instead refer to it as the "Dark Night," John's preferred terminology.

John's pervasive use of soul for the whole human person is important for understanding his texts. While John may not have said so in the vivid terms of Thomas Aquinas, he would have agreed with Thomas's bottom line: "If only my soul is saved, I am not saved at all." The dark nights of sense and of spirit concern the whole human person.

In modern times, there has been a tendency to apply the dark night imagery to any impasse in life, e.g., nuclear warfare, ethnic cleansing, pandemics, cancer, alcoholism, addictions, etc. While that usage can be appropriate, we need to keep in mind that John of the Cross uses this imagery to describe progress in contemplative prayer, when meditation is set aside for the gift of contemplation. For John of the Cross, the onset of the dark night signifies the need to surrender to God's love, realize God's gift of contemplation, and give way to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Famously, John of the Cross has offered three signs to indicate the onset of the dark nights. With these signs, John helps spiritual guides understand that it is time to forgo meditation and to let God take over in prayer. John offers these signs in "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" (2.13), the "Dark Night", (1.9) and Sayings 119. John describes how a person:

- Finds meditation difficult or impossible
- No longer finds joy in spiritual matters
- And yet maintains a strong desire to be with God

**II. The Senses and Spirit:** Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross set a very firm line between what we can do in prayer with God's ordinary grace and what God in and through us does (supernaturally) on the journey to union with God in love.

"The Dark Night of the Senses" begin this process with a purifying and liberating love that heals the senses of the obstacles to God's love.

In "The Dark Night of the Spirit," God's inflow of love cures our spiritual capacities of deeper obstacles. For John of the Cross, "The Dark Night of the Spirit" is the real night. This is when God's love works deep within the human person to heal its spiritual faculties of intellect, will, and memory. John of the Cross is similar to Augustine in his use of these three faculties, while more people are used to the two-tier faculties of body and soul, as can be seen in Thomas Aquinas.

Thus far we have explored John's use of darkness imagery as he used it in the "Dark Night." In "The Ascent of Mount Carmel" 1.2.1-4, John uses night language more broadly:

- To describe the departure from attachment
- To describe faith for the intellect, and
- To describe God, who is a dark night to the soul in this life (God as mystery)

**III. God's Light:** John of the Cross assures his readers that the dark nights are always about light, life, and love. However, God's light is so strong that one's human "sight" is darkened. The pain of the dark night comes from the human resistance to God's love by being attached to human rather than divine ways of being. God persists in curing and healing the human person so that we may be liberated from whatever is an obstacle to God's love. That is the divine "work" of the dark nights.

The "Dark Night" commentary, like "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," is an unfinished document. John of the Cross was not a patient writer. He had other things to do, and he frequently indicates that he does not want to linger over his writing.

There is an obvious difference between the love story of the "Dark Night" poem and the story in "The Ascent of Mount Carmel." In the "Dark Night," a woman sets out in the night seeking her lover. They meet and embrace with the beloved transformed in her lover. This is a sensual story woven from the imagery of the "Song of Songs." The poem is an extended metaphor of the soul in search of God as Lover.

The poem ends on this note: "I abandoned and forget myself, / laying my face on my Beloved; / all things ceased; I went out from myself, / leaving my

cares/forgotten among the lilies." John explains in the prologue to the Dark Night that "we should remember that the soul recites them [stanzas] when it has already reached the state of perfection - that is, union with God through love - and has now passed through the severe trials and conflicts," that is, the poem was composed when the dark nights were completed and with love one flies (volar) to God (N 2.25.4).

### Review Questions

1. Restate for yourself the three signs that John has articulated for the transition from meditation to contemplation.
2. Describe why, when it is God's love that flows into one's heart, the dark nights are painful.
3. Ask yourself how, even if one is a lifelong meditator, one can still learn about divine love from the dark nights.