

14. How to Read John of the Cross

Again we reflect upon the words of St. John of the Cross: "With God's help, then, we will propose doctrine and counsel for beginners and proficients that they may understand or at least know how to practice abandonment to God's guidance when he wants them to advance" (A, Prologue 4). Something in the psyche of Christians who want to pray more deeply and to advance in the spiritual life says that they ought to take a look at John of the Cross. After all, John's poetry and commentaries have become Christian classics. Like other classics, John's texts were composed in a very different time and in a culture very different from our own. Just as scripture scholars need to develop a hermeneutics, principles of interpretation, to help better interpret the scriptures, we must approach John's writings with some basic principles for better understanding John of the Cross.

I. Reading with a Listening Heart: I have met many people who say that John of the Cross is not their cup of tea, or who started to read John and gave up quickly. Those experiences are unfortunate. Usually, those who start to read John (and stop soon thereafter) do so because they begin by reading "The Ascent of Mount Carmel." My work with the North American Forum has taught me some ways in which we can enhance our study of John of the Cross, which I have listed here.

Take John's Prologues seriously. There is useful advice in these prologues for understanding what John is trying to say. Pay special attention to the prologue to "The Spiritual Canticle".

The life and writings of John of the Cross are all about prayer. We need to approach these writings in a spirit of prayer and to pray as we read John, or else what he has to say will seem like abstract theory.

We need to read John with a listening heart, a *leb somea*, the words that Solomon used when he responded to God in a dream. God made Solomon the wise man that he was because he wanted a *leb somea* (1 Kgs 3.9). The poetry and commentaries of John of the Cross must be read very attentively considering how much wisdom is condensed in those texts. As John noted, there are many levels of meaning in his texts (CB, Prologue).

II. The Mystical and Contemplative Experience: We must take John at his word when he says that there has been more than enough written about ordinary prayer. He decided to write from his experience about contemplative or mystical prayer. John had reason to make that choice because he had the gift of mystical prayer and also the *gratia sermonis*, the gift of speech that was described in a previous topic—

the gift of sharing with others what one has experienced. John was a wise man who taught what he experienced, what he knew first hand. Mysticism has much to teach all of us and we might keep in mind Karl Rahner's conviction that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic or she will be nothing at all."

The life of grace is a continuum from baptism to contemplation. Significantly, John says that grace of baptism and the grace of contemplation are the same grace (CB 23.6). So mysticism has much to tell us who are trying to grow in our baptismal grace.

III. Basis in Scripture: I have noticed that students often pass over the biblical citations in John's writings without paying much, if any, attention to them. John of the Cross could not disagree more. Over and over again he stresses in his prologues that he bases his doctrine on scripture. It is interesting that John of the Cross imitates his professors at the University of Salamanca, who wrote commentaries on the scriptures verse by verse. John commented on his poetry in the very same way. When he turned to scripture, he cited it sometimes with a quotation or sometimes with a mere phrase. It is good to take the biblical context of those few words into account.

We ought to also know that John knew there was a literal interpretation of scripture, but was interested more so in their spiritual interpretation. John had only two books of the Bible, and a collection of the lives of the saints, but he also had a biblical imagination, which is a goal for every Christian.

To understand John of the Cross on his own terms, we need a familiarity with the Song of Songs and its tradition. These contain key metaphors and symbols used by Juan de la Cruz.

IV. Genre and the Order in Which to Read His Writings: There is a need to recognize the various genres used by John of the Cross and their places within his writings. First of all, we must recognize the primacy of his poetry and develop a way of becoming thoroughly conversant with this poetry. Comments will be made below on the various genres when I recommend an order in which to read John's writings. There is also a decided benefit in reading John, especially his poetry, in Spanish.

John of the Cross does not want to discourage his readers. In the prologue to the Ascent, John says this: "Readers should not be surprised if this doctrine on the dark night . . . appears somewhat obscure. This . . . will be the case as they begin to

read, but as they read on they will understand it better since the latter parts will explain the former." I find that the order with which one reads John is critical. So I will now make a suggestion about that order:

- Much has already been said about the primacy of the poems. In 1993, John Paul II declared John of the Cross patron of Spanish poets and song writers, something the Spanish government had done in 1952.
- I would turn next to the surviving letters of John of the Cross, of which there are around 33. Here one can listen to John's advice to directees. These letters show John as a compassionate and caring correspondent.
- "The Dark Night," poem and commentary: Here we find John sharing his insights into the liberation of the human person by God's love. Recall how important it is to read all the prologues before taking up any of the commentaries.
- "The Spiritual Canticle": Version B, poem, and commentary. Aided by the rich symbolism mined from the "Song of Songs," John describes the whole contemplative journey to transforming union in God through love.
- "The Sayings of Light and Love": John's pithy spiritual guidance that he shared with his directees.
- "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," a commentary on the "Dark Night." Save reading this text until now. John had not yet found his rhythm as a commentator when he composed this work. Moreover, John of the Cross is here exploring the freedom that humans need to let God love them as God wishes. Human freedom is no easy task, much talked about but more often than not avoided in practice.
- "The Living Flame of Love": In this stunningly beautiful poem and commentary, John celebrates a journey that takes one to a time when one "knows creatures through God and not God through creatures" (4.5). Now one's transformation in God through love has restored one's ability to love all things without inordinate attachments.

When we read John of the Cross, we need to remember that John was writing primarily for the nuns and friars of the Discalced Carmelite Reform, and then for others who espoused a contemplatively oriented life. Modern readers must make the appropriate adjustments in reading John without, however, watering down John's teachings.

Other suggestions for a more profitable reading of John of the Cross are scattered throughout these lectures. It is such a delight to listen to the poetry of Juan de la Cruz, and to paraphrase Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The poetry of John of the cross

is charged with the grandeur of God."

I will close these notes on reading John of the Cross with a letter written to a Discalced nun in Segovia during October or November of 1591, "Have great love for those who contradict and fail to love you, for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love. God so acts with us, for he loves us that we might love by means of the very love he bears toward us." (Letter 33)

Review Questions

1. Which one of John's poems do you think you would most like to read? Why?
2. Which ones of John's poems do you think you would least like to read? Why?
3. Have you ever felt like you didn't want to finish a poem or other piece of you feel that way?
4. After listening to this program, do you think it will be easier for you to read poems and commentaries by John of the Cross?