

7. John of the Cross: Spiritual Guide

I want to introduce this topic from John of the Cross as spiritual guide with a prayer that John wrote as a prologue to his "Sayings of Light and Love." This prayer reveals much about John and his agenda as a spiritual guide: "O my God and my delight, for your love I have also desired to give my soul to composing these sayings of light and love concerning you. Since, although I can express them in words, I do not have the works and virtues they imply (which is what pleases you, O my Lord, more than the words and wisdom they contain), may others, perhaps stirred by them, go forward in your service and love - in which I am wanting. I will thereby find consolation, that these sayings may be an occasion for your finding in others the things that I lack. Lord, you love discretion, you love light, you love love; these three you love above the other operations of the soul.

Hence these will be sayings of discretion for the wayfarer, of light for the way, and of love in the wayfaring. May there be nothing of worldly rhetoric in them or the long-winded and dry eloquence of weak and artificial human wisdom which never pleases you. Let us speak to the heart words bathed in sweetness and love that do indeed please you, removing obstacles and stumbling blocks from the paths of many souls who unknowingly trip and unconsciously walk in the path of error - poor souls who think they are right in what concerns the following of your beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, in becoming like him, imitating his life, actions, and virtues, and the form of nakedness and purity of spirit. Father of mercies, come to our aid, for without you, Lord, we can do nothing."

I. Spiritual Guidance from John of the Cross: John of the Cross, as a Carmelite, belonged to an order that had become a mendicant community like the Dominicans and Franciscans. Neither John nor Teresa ever suggested that Carmelites men should be anything other than friars. As friars, they were and are active ministers in the church.

As mentioned previously, John chose not to be an academic; rather, his principal ministry was spiritual guidance for Carmelite women and men as well as for clergy and lay persons. We also know that John preached, but we do not have any of his sermons, which is what they would have been called at that time (rather than homilies).

During the decade that John of the Cross spent in Andalusia, he was much involved in spiritual guidance. At the same time, though, he ministered to the Discalced Carmelites as a busy administrator. John of the Cross does not use the terminology of spiritual direction. Rather, he writes of spiritual guidance and

spiritual guides, spiritual teachers (maestros) and spiritual fathers. The Kavanaugh-Rodriguez English translation uses the word "director," but that word is not found in the Spanish text.

Not only did John of the Cross offer spiritual guidance orally and personally, it is clear that he intended his poems and commentaries as written spiritual guidance. I suggest that John of the Cross's writings are there for those who wish to pray more deeply, that is, John of the Cross is still offering spiritual guidance.

II. Mystical Prayer: John of the Cross thought that there was more than enough written on ordinary prayer. His intent was to offer guidance for those who were called to contemplative and mystical prayer. John has little to say about the practice of meditation, other than offering signs when it is time to forsake meditation for contemplation. There is, however, a report on what John taught his novices about meditation. Fr. Ian Matthew offers a summary of that teaching. See *Impact of God*, p. 143.

John of the Cross had a calm and tranquil personality. But, like Jesus, who was angry with the money changers in the temple, John could get angry. For an example of John's strong displeasure, see the long digression in "The Living Flame of Love," stanzas 27-67. There, John takes to task spiritual guides who impede the transition from meditation to contemplation, calling them blind guides and blacksmiths of the soul. These blind guides are obstacles to "the life of the soul, which is the Holy Spirit" (FB 3. 62), and the enemies of the soul can be one's "director," the devil, or one's self.

John of the Cross felt that too many spiritual guides were inexperienced in contemplative prayer themselves, and were unable to apply the three signs of the onset of mystical contemplation that John is famous for: A 2.13; N 1.9, and Sayings 119. John thought that a bumbling guide may keep one trapped in meditation when God is calling that person to mystical prayer. A distaste for prayer and spiritual matters may be a sign that God wants one to surrender to God's love and to let God be the giver of contemplation and the person the receiver. God gives, we receive.

John of the Cross knew what a great gift the life of mystical love/contemplation is for the person and the church. He wrote: "...a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works put together" (CB 29.2).

III. Spiritual Wisdom: As a spiritual guide, John of the Cross had the custom of giving to those whom he guided slips of paper with pithy spiritual sayings for their reflection. He, as we have noted, called the spiritual wisdom on these slips of paper, "Sayings of Light and Love." It is likely that he was imitating, consciously or unconsciously, the custom of the fathers and mothers of the desert in this regard.

What remains of John's correspondence contains much spiritual guidance. His letters show him to be tender, gentle, and compassionate, but also holding up a high ideal. In fact, John intended his poems and the rest of his writings to be spiritual guidance. That is why he wrote. The writings of John of the Cross now constitute a rich source of spiritual guidance for anyone who wishes to pray more deeply and who understands how to approach these writings. They are a great aid for a more contemplative Christianity.

I conclude this topic with John's words known as "Prayer of a Soul Taken with Love": "You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me in your only Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire. Hence I rejoice that if I wait for you, you will not delay" (Sayings, 26).

Review Questions

1. If John of the Cross were alive now, would you consider asking him to be your spiritual guide?
2. Since all we now have are John of the Cross's writings, would you look to these writings as a source of personal spiritual guidance?
3. What do you think of the recommendation that one take up John's poems as spiritual guidance?