

## 5. John of the Cross

The 16th-century Carmelite, John of the Cross, has long been considered to be the outstanding mystic and mystical writer in the Christian tradition. His mystical life and his literary-theological skill to describe it in incisive detail, offer such an extraordinary guide to the life of perfection that he is judged in many circles to be the normative teacher of the mystical ascent to God. One senses throughout John's apophatic writings that he had reached in, through, and beyond images, symbols, and concepts to experience and live in naked faith the mystery of the ever-greater God who both indwells and transcends all things - again, a brilliant exposition of apophatic mysticism. Thus, in 1926, Pope Pius XI bestowed upon him the title, "Doctor of the Church."

**I. John of the Cross:** This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorance and imperfections and which contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly. - *The Ascent to Joy*. John of the Cross is considered to be the outstanding mystic and mystical writer in the Christian tradition. Doctor of the Church. Reputation as the normative teacher of the mystical ascent to God. Apophatic emphases.

Brief biography: Hardship in childhood. Entered the Carmelite order, attended the university of Salamanca, ordained priest in 1567. Helped Teresa of Avila to restore austerity to her Carmelite convent and his own. Cofounder of the discalced Carmelites. Experienced political and ecclesiastical intrigue and turmoil, was imprisoned. Rose to positions of responsibility in his Order and showed remarkable skill as an administrator. More turmoil. His major works were in the last fourteen years of his life.

**II. Theology and Works - His View:** The mystical life progresses from an entrance into a twilight of the senses (by which one transcends the world of appearances) to a total night of the spirit (by which the self is transcended) to a mystical dawn and journey toward the noonday sun involving spiritual betrothal and marriage. Mystical poetry.

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel and The Dark Night*, were written for the reformed Carmelites and their lay associates and aimed to instruct travelers on the path of mystical ascent. Criticism of incompetent guides. Three signs that indicate that a contemplative is being graced to progress from "meditation" to mystically infused contemplation. This stage demands that the one making spiritual progress be satisfied with a loving and quiet attentiveness to God.

Mystical "contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving infusion from God." John of the Cross. God's loving inflow into the soul, which John calls both "infused contemplation" and "mystical theology," rather than causing sweetness and delight also produces pain and suffering because of the soul's weakness and sinfulness. Owl blinded by gazing into the noonday sun. Infused contemplation awakens the person not only to his most secret sins and hidden resistance to God, but also to his own nothingness and radical distance from God. Cruel, spiritual death. The "sorrows of hell." Nothing can remove the sufferings. The complexity of trials. Purgation and increasing the soul's ability to love usually require many years of this night.

God's primary purpose in this process is not to cause suffering but to cleanse the person so "that he may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all." John of the Cross Lead the soul to condition "as it were, divine, deified, so that in even its first movements it has nothing which stands contrary to God's will, insofar as it can understand." John of the Cross.

**III. More Works - *The Spiritual Canticle*:** Directed at the most advanced of contemplatives. The exchange of love that transpires between the soul and Christ. Only a "thin veil" now separates the soul from the beatific vision.

*The Living Flame of Love*: Focuses on an even deeper and more nearly perfect love in this state of transformation. Distinguishes between a "union of love alone" and a "union with an inflaming of love." Holy Spirit's activity in the soul is far greater in the union with an inflaming of love. Similar to embers that shoot forth a living flame. "So great is this union," John taught, "that even though God and the soul differ in substance, in glory and appearance the soul seems to be God and God seems to be the soul." John of the Cross, 253.

Numerous and complex "awakenings" of God in the soul. The most sublime, when God's Word "moves" in the soul's substance and it finds all things in God and God in all things. The contemplative now knows "creatures through God and not God through creatures." *The Living Flame of Love* should be read before his more intimidating works, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*.

**IV. Features of John's Mysticism:** John's single-minded spirituality and mysticism are highlighted by his comparison of the contemplative to a turtledove - a bird that never lands, perches, rests, eats, drinks, or enjoys companionship until it

has found its mate. The following quotation sets the tone of his entire mystical enterprise: "To reach satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing. To come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing. To come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing." John of the Cross: *The Ascent to Joy*, 68.

John insists that the bodily senses help the contemplative's spirit only if at the first stirring of any sensuous delight he "immediately" directs his thoughts and affections to God, receives more satisfaction in the thought of God than in the sensible objects that caused it, and finds no gratification in the senses, save for God.

John's masterpieces breathe forth the scriptures and are practically a Castilian bible. Concentrates on God-tormented great individuals in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, the mystical life is the life of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Evocative ink drawing of the crucified Christ - from the Father's perspective, that is, from one looking down upon Christ. Examples of imitating Christ. Moses sheltered in the rock and saw God's "back." The contemplative discovers that God's "back" is Christ's humanity. To become a "Son by participation."

Contemplation is apostolic, surpasses every other activity, and is the greatest of all gifts because contemplative attentiveness to God is love - out of which and for which we were created.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. John of the Cross faced a great deal of hardship in his life, and most of his writings are from the last 14 years of his life. How do you think this shaped the expression of his thought?
2. John espouses the idea that Moses saw God's back, and that the contemplative discovers that God's "back" is Christ's humanity. What are the implications of this revelation for one's relationship with God?
3. John notes that "infused contemplation," or the inflow of God's love into the soul, is not just sweetness but can cause pain. Can you relate to this?