

The Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel (1)

"O night that led'st me thus!
O night more winsome than the rising sun!
O night that madest us,
Lover and lov'd, as one,
Lover transform'd in lov'd, love's journey done!"
(St. John of the Cross) (2)

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542-1591) is well known for his ascetic and mystic masterpieces. He is the Mystic Doctor *par excellence* of the Catholic Church. He not only wrote and spoke of mysticism, but he had himself lived a fully mystical life: he is an experienced mystic. As a mystical lover, St John of the Cross sang the loves of the mystical soul. He is the Saint, the Doctor, and the Poet of Christian Mysticism.

His major works are four: *Subida del Monte Carmelo* (Ascent of Mount Carmel); *Noche Oscura* (Dark Night); *Cantico Espiritual* (Spiritual Canticle); *Llama de Amor Viva* (Living Flame of Love). The first two works — *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night*—form the object and the main sources of the present article.

These two treatises, known as the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*, are but one complete work. Traditionally, both treatises are published separately, though in reality the *Dark Night* is a continuation of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. As a matter of fact, the Author himself, in his *Living Flame of Love*, refers to the *Dark Night* as pertaining to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in the famous passage where he declares that in this work of his—*Living Flame of Love*—he does not intend to treat about certain questions concerning the passive night:

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- (1) Quotations from the Works of St John of the Cross are taken from "*The Complete Works of Saint John of the Cross Doctor of the Church, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers from the critical edition of P. Silverio de Santa Teresa, O.C.D.*"—New Edition, revised 1953, London, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd.
 - (2) *En una noche oscura*, stanza 5—Vol. II, p. 417, stanza 5.

“—we have treated this in the *Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel*” (3).

The plan traced out by St John of the Cross himself in the Argument of the Ascent is not in reality completed. “All the doctrine whereof I intend to treat in this *Ascent of Mount Carmel* is included in the following stanzas, and in them is also described the manner of ascending to the summit of the Mount, which is the high estate of perfection which we here call union of the soul with God” (4). In both treatises, St John of the Cross commented only on two stanzas; the third stanza is begun in Chapter XXV, Book II of the *Dark Night*. Apart from this third stanza, the number of stanzas left without comment is six. Nevertheless, this composite work presents a remarkable outline of Christian Perfection from the point at which the soul first seeks to rise from earth and soar upward towards union with God. St John of the Cross omits detailed description of the most elementary of the exercises incumbent upon all Christians, because he assumes his reader to be familiar with the elements of the spiritual life.

In many passages, St John of the Cross shows that in this work he intends to treat about that which we may call the *way to union*, or, the purification which is necessary to attain to the “*high estate of perfection which we here call union of the soul with God*”; and from the very prologue of his work, he presents this *way to union* under the figure of a *dark night*. And not only the whole journey of the soul to union is called a “*dark night*” by the Spanish Carmelite Mystic, but each part of this journey is also called “*night*”. “For a soul to attain to the state of perfection, it has ordinarily first to pass through two principal kinds of night, which spiritual persons call purgations or purifications of the soul; and here we call them nights.....” (5). “The first night or purgation is that of the sensual part of the soul, which is treated in the present stanza, and will be treated in the first part of this book. And the second is of the spiritual part; of this speaks the second stanza, which follows; and of this we shall treat likewise, in the second and third part, with

(3) *Living Flame of Love (Second Redaction)*, Stanza I, n. 25—Vol. III, p. 118, n. 25.

(4) *Ascent, Argument*—Vol. I, p. 9.

(5) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. I, n. 1—Vol. I, p. 17, n. 1.

respect to the activity of the soul; and on the fourth part, with respect to its passivity" (6).

The general division of this composite work—the *Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel*—according to the latter passage, is as follows :

Active Night of the Senses	Book I, <i>Ascent</i>
Active Night of the Spirit	Books II & III, <i>Ascent</i>
Passive Night	Books I & II, <i>Dark Night</i> .

In this composite work—the *Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel*—the Carmelite Mystic teaches the way the soul must travel in order to attain to the high estate of perfection, which he calls union of the Soul with God; and this journey of the soul to union is presented under the figure of a "dark night". Why does St John of the Cross call the journey of the soul to union with God a *dark night*? This question is the subject-matter of the present article, and, therefore, our work will consist in finding the resemblance which the Carmelite Mystic has seen between the natural dark night and the way to union with God, which is the high estate of Christian Perfection.

THE DARK NIGHT

The "dark night" is the journey made by the soul to union with God, because the soul "journeys, as it were, by night, in darkness" (7).

The Carmelite Mystic explains :

"We may say that there are three reasons for which this journey made by the soul to union with God is called night. The first has to do with the point from which the soul goes forth, for it has gradually to deprive itself of desire of all the worldly things which it possessed, by denying them to itself; which denial and deprivation are, as it were, night to all senses of man. The second reason has to do with the mean, or the road along which the soul must travel to this union—that is, faith, which is likewise as dark as night to the understanding. The third has to do with the point to which it travels—namely, God, Who, actually, is dark night to the soul in this life" (8).

The way to Christian Perfection, therefore, is mortification of desires, to walk in faith, or, according to faith (*en fe* or *segun*

(6) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. I, n. 2—Vol. I, p. 18, n. 2.

(7) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. I, n. 1—Vol. I, p. 17, n. 1.

(8) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. II, n. 1—Vol. I, p. 19, n. 1.

la fe), and communication of God. The denial of worldly desires is, as it were, night to all senses of man; faith is as dark as night to the understanding; communication of God is dark night to the soul in this life.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SENSES

In the following passage the Carmelite Mystic explains the nature of this mortification: "We are not treating here of the lack of things, since it implies no detachment from them of taste and desire, for it is this that leaves the soul free and void of them, although it may have them; for it is not the things of this world that either occupy the soul or cause it harm, since they enter it not, but rather the will and desire for them, for it is these that dwell within" (9).

The Saint goes on to declare these desires: this mortification implies *all voluntary* desires, which are *contrary* or *less agreeable* to the will of God (10). According to the Carmelite doctrine, the soul must be *totally* detached from worldly things in order to attain to the "high estate of perfection", which is the union of the soul with God. It is not "the lack of worldly things" that is necessary, but the total detachment from them. The soul must be free not only from those desires which may constitute a venial or mortal sin, but also from those which may constitute an imperfection (11).

Therefore, the cause of this night of the sensual part is that of the privation of the desires in *all* worldly things.

The mortification of all voluntary desires, which are contrary or less agreeable to the will of God, may be called night for the soul, "for, even as night is naught but the privation of light, and, consequently, of all objects that can be seen by means of light, whereby the visual faculty remains unoccupied and in darkness, even so likewise the mortification of desires may be called night for the soul. For, when the soul is deprived of the pleasure of its desire in all things, it remains, as it were, unoccupied and in darkness" (12).

This total deprivation or mortification is a necessity: an inescapable consequence of the true love of God. The union to-

(9) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. III, n. 4—Vol. I, p. 23, n. 4.

(10) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chaps. XI & XII—Vol. I pp. 48-56.

(11) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. XI, n. 2—Vol. I, p. 49, n. 2.

(12) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. III, n. 1—Vol. I, p. 21, n. 1.

wards which the Carmelite Mystic is directing the soul is one of perfect love, wherein the will of man must be one with God's. The soul must mortify all its desires of worldly things, because such desires constitute an impediment to the total development of the love of God and the total conformity of the human will to that of God (13).

"Charity causes emptiness in the will with respect to all things, since it obliges us to love God above them all; which cannot be unless we withdraw our attention from them all in order to set it wholly in God" (14).

Therefore, the first reason why the journey which the soul has to make to union with God may be called night is that the soul must love God truly, which love necessarily implies the mortification or denial of all affections which are not according to God, which privation is for the soul as the privation of light—*night*—is for the visual faculty.

FAITH

That the soul may attain to union with God, it must abide "alone in faith to the exclusion; not of charity, but of other knowledge acquired by the understanding" (15). Faith, the soul's star on its journey to union with God, does not exclude charity. Were it otherwise, it would destroy the first reason why the journey to union may be called night.

What kind of faith is this, according to which or in which (*segun la fe* or *en fe*) the soul journeys to union with God? As one may see from the context, according to the Carmelite doctrine, this faith is not only the theological virtue of faith, but it denotes the standard according to which the soul must proceed in the mortification of all desires.

As a matter of fact, when the Carmelite Mystic explains in what manner joy of the will is lawful in moral good (e.g. virtues), he writes: "...humanly speaking, for their own sakes, a man may well rejoice in the possession of them, and may practise them for that which they are in themselves, and for the blessing which they bring to man in human and temporal form" (16). But since the Christian has the light of faith, where-

(13) Cf. *Ascent*, Bk I, Chaps. IV, VI & IX—Vol. I, pp. 23-28, 33-36, & 48-53.

(14) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. IV, n. 4—Vol. I, p. 81, n. 4.

(15) *Ascent*, Bk I, Chap. II, n. 3—Vol. I, p. 20, n. 3.

(16) *Ascent*, Bk III, Chap. XXVII, n. 3—Vol. I, p. 273, n. 3.

in he hopes for eternal life, without which nothing that belongs to this life and the next will be of any value to him, he must rejoice principally and solely in the possession and employment of this moral good after the second manner—namely, in that by doing these works for the love of God he will gain eternal life” (17).

Therefore, to journey in faith, or according to faith (*caminar en fe* or *segun la fe*), not only comprises the realisation of theological faith, strictly speaking, and of its higher exercise, which is infused contemplation, but also all the other virtues, as supernatural prudence and discretion and the submission to the Church’s Authority.

THE DARK NIGHT OF FAITH

In Chapter III, Book II, of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St John of the Cross shows “how faith is dark night to the soul. This is proved with arguments and quotations and figures from Scripture” (18). By the nature of his arguments, the Carmelite Mystic shows clearly that faith is here taken in its strict sense, that is, in the sense of theological faith.

The Carmelite Mystic explains :

“Faith, say the theologians, is a habit of the soul, certain and obscure. And the reason for its being an obscure habit is that it makes us believe truths revealed by God Himself, which transcend all natural light, and exceed all human understanding, beyond all proportion. Hence it follows that, for the soul, this excessive light of faith which is given to it is thick darkness, for it overwhelms greater things and does away with smaller things, even as the light of the sun overwhelms all other lights whatsoever, so that when it shines and disables our visual faculty they appear not to be lights at all. So that it blinds it and deprives it of the sight that has been given to it, inasmuch as its light is great beyond all proportion and transcends the faculty of vision. Even so the light of faith, by its excessive greatness, oppresses and disables that of the understanding; for the latter, of its own power, extends only to natural knowledge, although it has a faculty (19) for the supernatural, whenever Our Lord is

(17) *Ascent*, Bk III, Chap. XXVII, n. 4—Vol. I, p. 274, n. 4.

(18) Vol. I, p. 219.

(19) Here St John of the Cross refers to what the Schoolmen call “*Potentia Obedientialis*”

pleased to give it supernatural activity" (20). "Wherefore a man can know nothing by himself, save after a natural manner, which is only that which he attains by means of the senses. For this cause he must have the phantasms and the forms of the object present in themselves and in their likenesses; otherwise it cannot be, for, as philosophers say: *Ab objecto et potentia paritur notitia*. This is: From the object that is present and from the faculty, knowledge is born in the soul. Wherefore, if one should speak to a man of things which he has never been able to understand, and whose likeness he has never seen, he would have no more illumination from them whatever than if naught had been said of them to him" (21). "Even so is faith with respect to the soul; it tells us of things which we have never seen or understood, nor have we seen or understood aught that resembles them, since there is naught that resembles them at all. And thus we have no light of natural knowledge concerning them, since that which we are told of them bears no relation to any sense of ours; we know it by ear alone, believing that which we are taught, bringing our natural light into subjection and treating it as if it were not" (22).

Faith is necessary in order that we may believe in supernatural mysteries, which God is pleased to reveal to us. With the aid of faith we come to know that our natural concepts do understand somehow analogically ("*analogice*") supernatural mysteries. But, without faith, we do not know of that resemblance—analogy; we do not know anything about these mysteries. Moreover, through faith this resemblance remains *inevident* for us; nevertheless, we accept this resemblance on the authority of God, Who reveals it to us. Therefore, our natural light remains obscured, blinded by the light of faith which uplifts us towards the region of *inevidence*.

To believe, or to journey in faith or according to faith, according to the doctrine of the Carmelite Mystic, means "to blind our natural light"—(*cegando nuestra luz natural*) (23). And this is the reason given by St John of the Cross why to journey in faith, or according to faith, is "*as if it were, by night, in darkness*". Night is "*privacion de luz*"—privation of light;

(20) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. III, n. 1—Vol. 1, p. 67, n. 1.

(21) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. III, n. 2—Vol. I, p. 67, n. 2.

(22) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. III, n. 3—Vol. I, p. 68, n. 3.

(23) Cf. Vol. I, p. 68, Note 3.

and faith is "privation of the natural light of the understanding"; hence, St John of the Cross teaches that faith is *dark night* to the soul.

"Faith, which is as a black and dark cloud to the soul (and likewise is night, since in the presence of faith the soul is deprived of its natural light and is blinded), can with its darkness give light and illumination to the darkness of the soul" (24).

Faith, therefore, the soul's star on its journey to union with God, is looked upon by the Carmelite Mystic from a double point of view: faith causes darkness—it blinds the natural light of understanding; but this darkness also illumines, that is, gives knowledge. "The knowledge that is of faith is acquired without the illumination of the understanding, which is rejected for faith; and its own light, if that light be not darkened, is lost" (25). Faith, therefore, has a double aspect: positive and negative. Faith is something positive, that is, it gives something: it illumines the soul (infused contemplation). Faith is something negative, that is, it denies something: it blinds the natural light of human understanding. In the Carmelite teaching, the negative aspect is a necessary consequence of the positive aspect of theological faith. In Chapter III, Book II of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (26), the Carmelite Mystic insists on the negative aspect of faith, because his intention here is to show how faith is dark night to the soul. But, in Chapter IX, Book II of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (27) and in many other passages in his works, he speaks of the positive aspect of faith.

In the way of faith, or according to faith, (according to the Carmelite Mystical School, whose heads are our Holy Mother St Teresa of Jesus and our Holy Father St John of the Cross, the great and successful Reformers of Carmel) there is no standstill: the soul must go always forward and onward in perfection; because there comes a stage in the spiritual life where the soul has to leave the remote means to take up the proximate means for union with God. This proximate means is a higher or superior exercise of faith—exercise, which in the beginning is a little imperfect (*contemplatio infusa initialis* or *contempla-*

(24) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. III, n. 5—Vol. I, p. 69, n. 5.

(25) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. III, n. 5—Vol. I, p. 69, n. 5.

(26) Vol. I, pp. 67-70.

(27) Vol. I, pp. 93-95.

via acquisita) (28), but, once the soul enters into it, it makes progress along the way to union with God: it reaches its zenith on the summit of the spiritual Mount of Carmel, which is, union with God. This higher exercise of faith is "*mystical contemplation*" or "*infused contemplation*", which often is simply called *fe*—faith—by the Carmelite Mystic: "After some manner, *this dark and loving knowledge which is faith*, serves as a means to Divine union in this life; in the next life, the light of glory serves as an intermediary to the clear vision of God" (29).

The exercise of the theological virtue of faith, and especially, its higher exercise, which is infused contemplation, may be called night, because both imply necessarily the denial of any distinct forms of knowledge, which the natural understanding may acquire. Furthermore, the Carmelite Mystic distinguishes these distinct forms of knowledge, and, accordingly, shows how necessary it is for the soul to deny them to itself in order to attain to the high estate of perfection, which is union of the soul with God.

GOD IS DARK NIGHT

God is *dark night* to the soul, according to the teachings of St John of the Cross, inasmuch as He communicates Himself to—unites Himself with—the soul, which journeys to union with Him. In the teaching of the Carmelite Mystic, this communication of God is communication of knowledge and love of God to the soul. This same communication of God to the soul may be received by the soul *with delight and fruition*—the end, or *with affliction and torment*—the means, according to the stage and period of the journey—the spiritual life. It is clear that not delight and fruition cause night, but affliction and torment.

(28) The Carmelite (Discalced) Mystical Theologians speak of an "acquired contemplation" or "initial contemplation". In the Carmelite sense, this kind of contemplation is *also* infused: God instils it into the soul. It forms the very first stage of mystical contemplation. Cf. for further information the work in the series "Spiritualità Carmelitana of P. Gabriele di S. M. Maddalena O.D.C.: "*La Contemplazione Acquisita*".

(29) *Ascent*, Bk II, Chap. XXIV, n. 4—Vol. 1, p. 117, n. 4.

The Carmelite Mystic teaches that faith gives us and communicates to us God Himself, which means that faith makes us understand God as He is in Himself, yet, inevidently (30).

The communication of God to the soul in the passive night of the spirit is the "infused contemplation" (31). Infused contemplation is "Divine love and knowledge in one—that is, a loving knowledge, wherein the soul has not to use its natural acts and reasonings, for it can no longer enter into them as before" (32). Infused contemplation, in the doctrine of St John of the Cross, is a higher or superior exercise of theological faith. Hence, as faith is "dark night" to the soul, it follows that infused contemplation would be "dark night" to the soul as well.

"This dark night is an inflowing of God into the soul, which purges it from its ignorances and imperfections, habitual, natural, and spiritual, and which is called by contemplatives infused contemplation, or mystical theology. Herein God secretly teaches the soul and instructs it in perfection of love, without its doing anything, or understanding of what manner is this infused contemplation. Inasmuch as it is the loving wisdom of God, God produces striking effects in the soul, for, by purging and illuminating it, He prepares it for the union of love with God. Wherefore the same loving Wisdom that purges the blessed spirits and enlightens them is that which here purges the soul and illumines it" (33).

Therefore, "infused contemplation", or "mystical theology", shows the soul its miseries and imperfections, and, at the same time, purges the soul of them; it illumines and purges.

"For two reasons this Divine Wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul, but is likewise affliction and torment. The first is because of the height of Divine Wisdom, which transcends the talent of the soul, and in this way is darkness to it; the second, because of its vileness and impurity, in which respect it is painful and afflictive to it, and is also dark" (34). In the light of this spiritual communication, or "infused contem-

(30) *Spiritual Canticle (Second Redaction)*, Stanza XII, especially n. 4—Vol. II, pp. 235-240, especially p. 236, n. 4.

(31) *Dark Night*, Bk II, Chap. XXIII—Vol. I, pp. 447-453.

(32) *Living Flame of Love (Second Redaction)*, Stanza III, n. 32—Vol. III, p. 160, n. 32.

(33) *Dark Night*, Bk II, Chap. V, n. I Vol. I, p. 381, n. 1.

(34) *Dark Night*, Bk II, Chap. V, n. 2—Vol. I, p. 381, n. 2.

plation", the soul comes to know that it is not serving God so perfectly as it should do" (35).

Therefore, among its afflictions and torments, the soul learns how to serve God perfectly: through "infused contemplation" of the passive night of the spirit, the soul gains knowledge of God and comes to know the standard according to which it has to serve Him to perfection.

In the beginning of the passive night of the spirit, this dark knowledge, which is "infused contemplation", causes in the soul a great and strong love of estimation (*amor aestimativus*) for God. This same love of estimation emboldens the soul to love and serve God in the best way possible to it (36). Finally, when the purification comes to its end, the soul enters to partake in the mystical banquet, that is, it attains to union with God; and, victorious in all its spiritual battles, it rests, lost in oblivion, reclined on the Beloved: all is cleared now, and the soul abandons itself to God completely, leaving all its cares forgotten among the lilies (37).

"Infused contemplation", or "communication of God", or "mystical theology", is "dark night" for the soul, because it deprives and purges the soul of all its miseries and ignorances, which God makes it understand under the mystical light of "infused contemplation". "Infused contemplation", therefore, leaves the soul unoccupied and in darkness; and it leads the soul through a "dark night", because here the soul journeys also 'as it were, by night, in darkness'.

CONCLUSION

In the works "*Ascent of Mount Carmel*" and "*Dark Night*", which are but one complete work, St John of the Cross outlines the way to the high estate of perfection, which he calls union of the soul with God.

St John of the Cross presents this way to union under the figure of a "dark night". The Saint compares the journey to union with a "dark night". The mean, adopted by the Carmelite Mystic in his comparison, is *privation*: the "dark night" is a

(35) *Dark Night*, Bk II, Chap. VI—Vol. I, pp. 384-387.

(36) *Dark Night*, Bk. II, Chap. XIII, nn. 5-8; Chap. XVI, n. 14.

(37) Cf. last stanza of the poem "*En una noche oscura*"—Vol. I, p. 10, Stanza 8; and, Vol. II, p. 418, Stanza 8.

figure (38) of the way to union inasmuch as the said dark night is *privation of light*. The journey of the soul to union with God may be looked upon from a double point of view: the positive point and the negative. The "dark night" presents the journey of the soul to union with God directly under the negative aspect.

Therefore, the way to union may be called "night", "for, even as night is naught but the privation of light, and consequently, of all objects that can be seen by means of light, whereby the visual faculty remains unoccupied and in darkness" (39), even so likewise the way to union with God is naught but the *privation of all things* contrary or less agreeable to the love of God, which is mortification of all desires of worldly things, and privation of all that is contrary or less agreeable to the "way of faith", for which privation the soul remains, as it were, "unoccupied and in darkness".

That the soul, therefore, may attain to the summit of the Spiritual Mount of Carmel, union with God, it must journey in faith and love of God, which is the positive aspect of the way to Christian Perfection—the summit of Mount Carmel.

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(38) Some writers have made attempts to declare which kind of figure of speech is the "Dark Night" of St John of the Cross.

(39) *Ascent*, Bk. I, Chap. III, n. 1—Vol. I, p. 21, n. 1.