

The Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel (Part 1) Excerpt from Melita Theologica 6/2 (1953): 98-109

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 the stage and period of the journey – the spiritual life. It is clear that not delight and fruition cause night, but affliction and torment.

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.¹

The communication of God to the soul in the passive night of the spirit is the “infused contemplation”.² 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.”³ 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.

* Gabriel of the Incarnation (Joseph Grech) O.C.D. (1920-2003) was various times Provincial Superior of the Discalced Carmelites and a professor of theology. He was also knowledgeable of mysticism and mathematics.

¹ *Spiritual Canticle* (Second Redaction), Stanza XII, especially n.4.

² *Dark Night* II, XXIII.

³ *Living Flame of Love* (Second Redaction), Stanza III, n. 32.

“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.”⁴

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.”⁵ In the light of this spiritual communication, or “infused contemplation,” the soul comes to know that it is not serving God so perfectly as it should do.”⁶

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 aestimatus*) for God. This same love of estimation emboldens the soul to love and serve God in the best way possible to it.⁷

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.⁸

⁴ *Dark Night* II, V, 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, II, V, 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, II, VI.

⁷ *Ibid*, II, XIII, 5-8; XVI, 14.

⁸ See last stanza of the poem “En una noche oscura”, Stanza 8.

“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.”

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 “dark night.” The mean, adopted by the Carmelite Mystic in his comparison, is privation: the “dark night” is a figure⁹ 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,”¹⁰ 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.

⁹ Some writers have made attempts to declare which kind of figure of speech is the “Dark Night” of St John of the Cross.

¹⁰ *Ascent* I, III, 1.

