

# The artistic interpretation of the painting St. John of the Cross, 'In the dark night' by John Martin Borg

The painting was commissioned by the Discalced Carmelite Order in 2001 and now hangs in the "Sala Madonna tal- Karmnu" at Birkirkara. It represents St John of the Cross suspended in a state of ecstatic love, at the point when he discovered what he calls: 'the secret meeting place with God'.

*'My face reclined on the Beloved',*



At this point the darkness, that once dominated the saint's spiritual and physical life, melts away and is transformed.

This transformation is depicted by a symphony of colours which expresses the joy that the saint experiences in coming face to face with his most beloved, i.e. God.

"Oh, night that guided me,  
oh night more lovely than the dawn,  
Oh night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover  
transformed in the beloved."

The artist further emphasizes this blessed encounter in the prominent use of red around the saint's neck and hand, red being the colour depicting God.

"with his gentle hand he wounded my neck  
and caused all my senses to be suspended."

Such an interpretation helps to shed a light on the spirituality of the saint, who in his intimate journey of love with his Beloved, acknowledges that suffering (*The dark night*) is in truth the path through which the saint's love for his beloved reaches its maturity as echoed in the book of Wisdom:-

"If they experienced suffering as men see it,  
Their hope was rich with immortality;  
Slight was their affliction, great will their blessings be.  
God has put them to the test  
And proved them worthy to be with him;  
He has tested them like gold in a furnace,  
And accepted them as a holocaust." Ws 3:4-6

The golden lines that encircle the Saint's figure are a representation of the breeze: - *'that blew from the turret'*; However the very same breeze symbolizes the spirit that transports the saint into unknown spiritual heights.

In his painting the artist gives great importance to the expression of the saint's hand, recalling the saint's own saying: *"I will let go of everything to acquire 'The Everything'."* This helps the viewer to understand better how the saint's experience of such intimacy with God led him to lose all his earthly ties to acquire God in his completeness. *'Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.'*

The artist further emphasizes this by placing the flaming red colour in the palm of the saint's hand.

‘... The breeze blew from the turret As I parted his locks;  
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck  
And caused all my senses to be suspended.  
I remained lost in oblivion;  
My face I reclined on the beloved.  
All ceased and I abandoned myself,  
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.’

Indeed the painting invites the viewer to pause for a while and meditate upon the phrase from the Gospel:-

*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field." Mt 13: 44*



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