

THE DARK NIGHT OF JOHN OF THE CROSS

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A WELL-KNOWN image of St John of the Cross that has come down to us is that of a stern, bald-headed ascetic, seated with finger raised in emphasis, addressing a kneeling penitent, Ana de Peñalosa, who looks up to him with tear-filled eyes. His words are stark and absolute: 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, even to the stripping of our very skin for Christ'.

I *The Symbol*

These words are the call and the initiation into the dark night. One who takes them seriously is assured by the saint of entering quickly into the first stage of that night, the night of the senses. Classical authors call this resolve the proposal of 'total abnegation'. It is the desire to live 'purely for the honour and glory of God'.¹ It initiates 'second conversion', in which a stabilized but mediocre spiritual life is changed into one of fervour and manifest growth, and is moved to a higher level.

The candidates for the programme of total abnegation are not new converts. They are souls of some experience, who 'now have had practice for some time in the way of virtue and have persevered in meditation and prayer, whereby, through the sweetness and pleasure that they have found therein, they have lost their love of the things of the world and gained some degree of spiritual strength in God'.² It is important to note this fact, lest an indiscriminate application of the programme do harm to those for whom it is not intended. Only advanced 'beginners' on the threshold of contemplation are directly envisaged.

Such is the person who 'finds his delight in spending long periods – perchance whole nights – in prayer; penances are his pleasures;

¹ Allison Peers E.: *The complete works of St John of the Cross* (London, 1953), 3 volumes; the one-volume edition is shortly due for re-printing by Antony Clarke Books.

² *Dark Night of the Soul*, 1, 8, 3.

fasts his joys; and his consolations are to make use of the sacraments and to occupy himself in divine things'.³

But do not exaggerate. Such people are still on an elementary level, often on the plateau of mediocrity. They 'are moved to these spiritual exercises by the consolation and pleasure they find in them', and have 'many faults and imperfections with respect to these spiritual actions of theirs'.⁴ They belong to the third mansion of St Teresa's *Interior Castle*; dutiful but complacent and pharisaical, they are still too filled with themselves to experience the joy and the freedom of the children of God. Their great need is to surrender to the Spirit in a more radical fashion.

Liberation will come by way of self-denial and mortification. The asceticism proposed by John of the Cross is absolute. It spells darkness to normal sense-pleasures and thus induces the state that is rightly called the dark night of the senses.⁵ The more significant principle of this stage, however, is the subtle contemplation that is the passive complement to this active purification. The asceticism is possible because 'another, better love (love of one's heavenly bridegroom) is stirring in the soul'.⁶

This initial contemplation is at first so tenuous and delicate that it would go undetected without the outside assurance of a spiritual director. It is dark contemplation, sometimes painful, sometimes serene, and it finds its theological explanation in a faith that has become more personal. The darkness increases with each step towards a purer and more naked faith; eventually the darkness becomes 'midnight', the night of faith properly so called. The 'night of the senses' thus gives way to the 'night of the spirit'. The two nights are two degrees of the one night of faith. Both are ordered to the final night, which is not only contemplation but the beginning of the experience of union. Occasionally and intermittently the mystic experiences immediate contact with God, overwhelming and blinding by its powerful light. While it is difficult to be precise, the experience seems to occur around the spiritual betrothals and before the spiritual marriage.

This 'night of God' is the third dark night, occurring in faith and, therefore, in darkness. But it is just before the dawn when shadowy rays of light are beginning to filter through the darkness. Unlike the other two nights, this phase is not painful but delightful, calm

³ *Dark Night*, I, 1, 3.

⁴ *Dark Night*, I, 1, 3.

⁵ *Ascent*, I, 2, 1.

⁶ *Ascent*, I, 14, 2.

and serene.⁷ God has become a 'tranquil night' to the soul.⁸ The three nights are portions of the one same night of faith, however much the third differs in terms of experience from the two purgative periods.⁹

Only the first two nights are treated explicitly and at length in the *Ascent* and the *Dark Night*, as these uncompleted commentaries on the poem 'Dark Night' have come down to us. Later stanzas of this poem refer to the third night, as do the poem 'Spiritual Canticle' and its prose commentary. The symbol of the night is absent only in the sublime descriptions of the mystical experience in the *Living Flame of Love*. This does not mean that union with God has ruptured the veil of faith. The veil is still there, but it is most transparent; the experience is a foretaste of heaven.

II *Presence in Absence*

The dark night is perhaps the most characteristic and original symbol in St John of the Cross. It describes the heart of the mystical itinerary, from the end of the purgative way through the illuminative and into the unitive way. The symbol, especially as explained didactically in the prose commentaries, expresses the aspect of absence in all divine encounter and the long, painful growth process that must precede full mystical union.

The doctrine of the nights gives the lie to instant mysticism, to any theory of easy access to perfect love of God that would by-pass the cross. At the same time it is something of a validation for a large number of christians in our day whose lives are burdened by a loss of clarity in their faith-experience and a troubled sense of not being able to find God in their prayer.

The dark night is a negative way of experiencing God. It is the counterpart of negative or apophatic (dark) theology. Negative theology proceeds by denying to God all the limitations of created reality; in a true sense it is non-knowledge. The dark night is the experience of void, of emptiness, of no-thing and non-being; it is the condition of kenosis and poverty of spirit. The sense of absence and negation is painfully real. Yet the experience seizes the reality of God more truly, because it touches him as he is, beyond feelings, images and concepts. Living faith alone can achieve this, and the purer and less encumbered the faith, the more real the possession

⁷ *Ibid.*, (A), 14, 22; 38, 9.

⁸ *Spiritual Canticle*, 14, 23.

⁹ *Ascent*, 1, 2, 5.

of God. By the same token, however, God, the object of faith, becomes less 'visible' or empirically experienced in any human terms.

The experience of absence is different in each of the three phases of the night. In the first two cases the potential of the prayer – first of meditation, then of contemplation – seems to be exhausted. The third night inaugurates the state of real possession. A fearful sense of loss replaces the previous sense of peaceful possession. The God who seemed so near is now lost from sight. St John reassures the pilgrim contemplative that these changes are advances, that the loss in each case is a real gain, that the absence is a deeper presence. The law of the nights might be stated thus: the sense of full presence at the end of each of the first two stages along the way, namely meditation and contemplation, gives way to absence. This absence itself is a deeper presence that will grow into a felt presence. This is the spiral of spiritual growth. Thus meditation loses itself in a contemplation that is more absence than presence, and mature contemplation becomes a deeper absence that leads to the reward of mystical union in the strictest sense.

One who meditates is supported in his prayer by sensible consolations and intellectual satisfactions. Through this approach he finds a real sense of divine presence. But the contact is at best distant and ultimately unsatisfactory, since it does not touch God as he is in any experimental fashion. The euphoria cannot be sustained; boredom sets in; the psychological and spiritual rewards follow the law of diminishing returns. Eventually the point is reached when the beginner either settles for mediocrity or lays himself open to the deeper potentials of faith, hope and charity by cultivating a more simple and unselfish approach to God. If he follows the ascetical programme of John of the Cross, he will shortly experience the dark night of the senses.

To the uninstructed this night looks like disaster. It is in fact the entrance into a new stage of spiritual development, the way of purer faith that dispenses with the props of earlier methods of prayer. The apparent regression, consisting in a felt absence instead of some real sense of presence, is actually progress; it is presence in disguise.

Proof that divine presence is real, says John, comes from the combination of a strong desire for God, a free, detached spirit, and the inability to reach out to God in meditation. These are the famous 'three signs' of John of the Cross, described in the *Ascent* 2, 13–15 and the *Dark Night* 1,9. Meditation has run its course and,

to one degree or another, has outlived its usefulness. God is providing the better fare of contemplation, which is 'a secret, peaceful and loving infusion from God, which enkindles the soul with the spirit of love'.¹⁰ 'Moral and delectable ways' have shifted dramatically to 'solid and substantial' spirituality.¹¹

The contemplation develops on this new level in dark faith, with a deepening of the original experience. Eventually a deep, peaceful, yet very simple communion with God becomes normal, and this may last for years.¹² Then the same cycle of purification begins over again and the second night occurs. Unprecedented darkness destroys the tranquil contemplative presence which till now seemed so secure. There is a new and greater agony of absence. If the first night was 'bitter and terrible to sense', the second is incomparably worse; it is 'horrible and awful to the spirit'.¹³ Relatively few pass through the second night, which John of the Cross equates with purgatory.

The third night brings relief and offers intimations of the mystical union that is the goal of the christian life. The pre-dawn rays of light are momentary experiences of union. But they pass away, having whet the desire for a more lasting, indeed for a full and permanent, possession of the Beloved. The 'enraptured soul' is a soul on fire, waiting to be consumed by the reality that blinded it with his brightness in the first encounters. Only when the nuptial union is sealed will there be the full possession by the Lord that bespeaks total transformation into the Beloved. The darkness of the night will have almost disappeared.

III *Purification*

No one reaches the heights of mystical union or even the lower reaches of contemplation without passing through the dark night of renunciation and faith. For St John of the Cross 'contemplation or detachment or poverty of spirit . . . are almost one and the same thing'.¹⁴

This fact is graphically expressed in the drawing from the saint's hand called 'Mount Carmel' or the 'Mount of Perfection'. The picture is a simple pencil sketch, the mount represented as a large oval, and three paths are at its base. In the original drawing, and

¹⁰ *Dark Night*, 1, 10, 6.

¹¹ *Ascent*, Prologue, 8.

¹² *Dark Night*, 2, 1, 1.

¹³ *Dark Night*, 1, 8, 2.

¹⁴ *Dark Night*, 2, 4, 1.

in adaptations faithful to the saint's doctrine, only the centre path, that of 'the perfect spirit', opens on to the mountain. It is identified as the way of the 'nothings', the word *nada* marking each stage along the road and describing the mountain itself. The other two paths, 'the way of the imperfect spirit', denote the search for 'goods of earth' and 'goods of heaven'. Both are dead ends and lead nowhere, not even to the foothills of the mountain itself. Both imperfect spirits describe beginners who never move beyond that state.

The mountain represents the mystical union that is the universal christian vocation. Its perspectives are thoroughly 'sanjuanist', from above, the vantage point of God, who is the *Todo* or All. The 'nothings' are the condition and concomitant, the underside as it were, of perfect love. *Todo* and *nada* are correlatives: the two are possessed in the same degree. The detachment of the perfect soul is utter freedom; the goods of both earth and heaven are repossessed after the burdens of purification, as John's jubilant *Prayer of the Enamoured Soul* states:

Mine are the heavens and mine the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me.

This journey into the heart of God's universe is the quest of love. For pilgrim man on his way to full redemption, however, John's preferred definition of love is 'to labour to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God'.¹⁵ Love is a process as well as a goal, and its first order of business is the destruction of every species of selfishness and every form of idolatry in as effective a way as possible. The way is negative: it is the dark night of the renunciation of desires on the affective level and the denial of mere human understandings on the noetic level, the rejection of the soul's 'scant understanding, its lowly perception, and its miserable loving and liking'.¹⁶ For convenience's sake we call the affective purification 'exorcism', the cognitive bypassing 'iconoclasm'.

'Exorcism' demands the removal of whatever does not find its source and orientation in God. The test for the legitimate use of created goods which John proposes in many places is a rigorous

¹⁵ *Ascent*, 2, 5, 7.

¹⁶ *Living Flame of Love*, 3, 38.

discernment of one's intention. God must be affirmed, even in apparently innocuous sense-gratifications. The person must find 'more satisfaction in the thought of God than in the sensible object', and accept 'no gratification in the senses save for this motive'.¹⁷ Autonomous self-expression that leaves God out of the picture is to be renounced. Like an Old Testament prophet, John proclaims that the Lord lives and that no activity should escape his direction. In their unconverted state, senses, emotions, even reason and will, are ambivalent and must be 'exorcized'. The problem of relating to the world is inside man, not in outside creation; the problem is man's divided heart. Affirming the rights of God and suppressing voluntary expressions of independent desires, especially habitual ones, is part of the *via negativa*. Once the senses and spirit are purified by the night, a man's whole emotional apparatus will orchestrate the love of God.

The shortness and directness of this route justify its intransigence. In order to be wholly receptive to the divine influence at each stage of growth, the contemplative closes his eyes to terrestrial goods and endeavours to regard the world with detachment. Detachment is not apathy. It is to look on the world with God's eyes; only then can one see its 'truth', its 'best side', its 'substance'.¹⁸ Detachment does not impoverish the human dimension of life; even on the human level it is its own reward, as the saint states trenchantly in a very contemporary chapter of the Ascent.¹⁹

The 'iconoclasm' goes beyond the rejection of disordered use intimated in the process of 'exorcism'. This second negation has images and concepts in view, since these instruments of knowledge are counter-productive in contemplation and hinder the delicate relationship with God that has been reached. Images and concepts do not represent God as he really is. The contemplative, therefore, must 'rise above' thoughts about God to foster the contact with the reality himself.²⁰ The advice is for prayer, and the strategy is aimed at promoting perfect contemplation.

John is perfectly consistent in his teaching at every stage of the spiritual life. His disciple will always go directly to God and from God to the world of man, never vice-versa, even in the final transformation when God and his creation are possessed together in one ecstatic love. 'Iconoclasm' is thus a high form of the practice of the

¹⁷ *Ascent*, 3, 24, 5.

¹⁸ *Ascent*, 3, 20, 2.

¹⁹ *Ascent*, 3, 20.

²⁰ *Ascent*, 3, 15, 1-2.

presence of God. It is not the cultivation of the absence of God, much less promoting the state of nirvana. It is seeking out God as he is.

Contemporary readers might criticize St John of the Cross for his negative attitude to the universe. John does espouse a negative course, but only when it is a question of creation standing in the way of the Creator, only when human selfishness and human obtuseness stand in the way of total transformation into Christ. Denial does not give way to affirmation of created goods until the affection and use are totally subject to the divine order. In no way does this denigrate God's magnificent gifts which John himself celebrates in poetry and life. He simply sees the possibility of enjoying these gifts only by the removal of all selfishness, by a complete poverty of spirit. The christian must slough off the old man and be totally attuned to the Spirit. Then he can really appreciate life. The way to this goal is no more (or no less) than perfectly virtuous action. One achievement of the genius of St John is his detailed delineation of the implications of that 'no less'. He is able to express how much is involved in perfect behaviour. Any loss in the process is only temporary; none of God's gifts is permanently lost; in the end the world is found in God and God in all things.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the sanjuanist viewpoint in a non-contemplative context is that of St Ignatius of Loyola, who preceded John by one generation in the effervescent 'golden age' of Spain of the sixteenth century. Ignatius proclaimed the same high ideal of christian perfection as John, but in the setting of apostolic action rather than hidden contemplative life. Ignatius proposed a no less rigorous negative way. But since his goal was a concrete choice of human means, he could not appeal to wholesale denial of the human element in order that the divine shine through. Instead, Ignatius sought God's will in action by multiplying examens and placing immense stress on discernment of spirits. The contemplative mystic, as Evelyn Underhill remarked, can 'brush aside the universe'. The apostle cannot be so cavalier; he must deal in the nitty-gritty of the human, with more involvement in the human dimension. But the difference between the two saints' doctrine is accidental. Both of them stand as a warning to overly optimistic christians, who underestimate the depth of man's weakness and the transcendence of the christian vocation.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has identified ignatian indifference with biblical faith, a waiting on God's word before any action is taken.

Sanjuanist detachment is the same reality. When all is said and done, the mystical doctor is the doctor of faith; his doctrine of the dark night is an explanation of the demands of faith, which is 'the mean or the road along which the soul must travel to this union (with God)'.²¹ John does not present a super-christianity; his spirituality is that of the gospel, pure and simple. He spells out certain aspects, such as the reality of the divine presence in the experience of divine absence, and the long, painful but necessary process of purification. On both of these counts, and others as well, he challenges our brand of christianity. At the same time he consoles those who anguish over the phenomenon of the absence of God in our time, and offers a clue to turn to advantage modern man's frequently expressed inability to achieve the lesser unions of the spiritual life. John's word is *Ascende superius*. Go higher, friend.

²¹ *Ascent*, 1, 2, 1.