

“Spiritual Poverty, The Message of John of the Cross,”

Ernest Larkin, O.Carm.

Father Ernest Larkin, was a well known spiritual writer and professor of Carmelite Spirituality. He died in 2006 after more than sixty-six years in Carmel. Carmel in the World has previously published several articles from the vast corpus of writings and publications he left and has received much favorable notice by its readers for making Father Ernest's writings available to contemporary Carmelite audiences. This is a wonderful message on Saint John of the Cross.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. After nearly 2000 years, we still trip and stumble over Jesus' first beatitude. St. John of the Cross did not. Spiritual poverty was the cornerstone of his spirituality. What he wrote for the 16th century remains a timely message for the twentieth.

Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) is a saint on a pedestal for most Catholics. They may look for guidance to Teresa of Avila but they shy away from John. He either scares them or otherwise puts them off with his intransigent, absolute demands. Some few have made the discovery of the compassionate saint beneath the harsh surface of his writings. They no longer look at him in terms of austerity and penance. They have found that he is single-minded and unswerving in his search for God. But the choices he proposes are based on love, not heroic asceticism. John is first and last a lover, and he would share the secrets of his own love life with Christ.

To those with only hearsay knowledge he is an angel, perhaps the avenging angel of divine prerogatives. But even in the yet to be demythologized hagiography that continues to be

the source for our knowledge of John's life, we find a Pied Piper of a gentle confessor, who exerts a mysterious attraction for weak sinners wherever he goes. He is the dutiful son of a poverty-stricken but much loved mother, the widow Catalina, who turns up as part of the monastery family wherever John is assigned. This man, whose first "precaution" is that "you should have an equal love for and an equal forgetfulness of all persons, whether relatives or not, and withdraw your heart from relatives as much as from others," admits that his brother Francesco is his closest friend, one whom he loved, "more than anyone else in this life." As local religious superior, he frequently takes over the care of the sick himself and moves into the kitchen to prepare tasty morsels even against the dietary restrictions of his Order's Rule. Well should he be sympathetic to suffering, whether physical or moral wherever he found it. Born in economic insecurity, losing his father in infancy, and growing up in poverty, he had spent long years in contact with human suffering. His last experience before entering the Carmelites in Medina del Campo at the age of 20 was orderly work in the local hospital for contagious and venereal diseases. John of the Cross learned by experience that life is tough. God is not to be trifled with, and progress in the love relationship depended on fixing one's eyes on Him and making choices in His favor. It is John's honesty rather than his austerity that should frighten us.

John speaks forthrightly but warmly and compassionately. This is especially true of his letters which contain the same lessons as his commentaries. As for his poems there is only intense passion and nothing of the didactic preaching. At one place in his commentary, *The Living Flame of Love*, in the middle of a profound exposition of exalted mystical experience, he launches into a long digression on beginnings, which, he admits, "do not pertain to our subject." But it is "the compassion and grief that comes to my heart in seeing souls fall back" that grips his soul and moves him to the harsh words about ignorant spiritual directors (*Living Flame* 3, 27).

In the next 15 pages John belabors the point on the “one thing necessary” for spiritual growth, the disposition of being free and transparent and poor in spirit in order to receive the gentle anointings of the Lord. The passage addresses “beginners” on the threshold of contemplation and develops the centerpiece of John’s doctrine on the way to the summit—namely, spiritual poverty. These fifteen pages are a beautiful, self-contained treatise and one well worth study by spiritual directors. In this article I would like to contextualize the brief excursion on spiritual poverty and develop as succinctly as possible the broad lines of John’s synthesis of spirituality. This article is an overview and not a specific guide to his writings. It is presented with the conviction that to know where John is coming from and where he is going is an immense hermeneutical help for reading his works and catching his fire.

Orientations

John’s four extended prose works, all of them commentaries on poems, are “how” books, though not “how to” treatises. There is a difference. He provides the skeleton but not the tissue and small bones of a spiritual life. He sees through and beyond the phenomena of daily life to the ultimates deep within. John’s only concern is the fundamental option. He does illustrate that basic option with multiple examples and on different levels. But to think he is laying down a complete program of ascetical and mystical disciplines, covering all the angles of a Christian life, is to mistake his purpose. He is giving basic orientations, not checks and balances. John is the exuberant poet whose life goal was *estarse amando al Amado*, “to be loving the Beloved.” (*The Sum of Perfection*) This ultimate, over-arching goal dictates a very simple life stance, but it does not work out the details of human living. The exuberance of John-the-poet is reined in by the plodding distinctions and elaborations of John-the-scholastic-theologian of the commentaries. He

lived in exuberant times among exuberant people. His truth is revealed in the poetry. The commentaries, at least the two expositions on the way up the mountain, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*, actually moderate that intensity; they establish rational foundations. Both works submit life to sweet reason rather than let it suffer the hazards of excessive zeal. The problem in contemporary spirituality is perhaps the reverse, *viz.*, to light the fire rather than control it. For this reason John's poetry probably serves as a better introduction to John's teaching today. It must be noted, however, that *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame*, his other two prose works, are themselves mystical treatises, full of fervor and passion. What is implicit in the poetry and often explicit in the commentaries is John's simple view of reality as either-or. For him there are two ultimates in spirituality, the void and divine union. These elements are called the "Nothing" and the "Everything," *Nada y Todo*. Actually the pair denominates one ultimate in spirituality, which is God Himself. He is the beginning, the ground, and the end of life. But the two names denote the double aspect of transformation into God. On the one hand everything not of God or in God or for God needs to be voided, denied, and mortified, *i.e.*, killed. The goal is God Himself who is nothing of that previous existence. On the other hand this transcendent Reality who is the supreme object of human existence is everything that a fragmented creation expresses. When He is possessed, all creation sings of that infinite beauty which belongs to Him. Thus God is the "Nothing" and the "Everything" of the spiritual adventure.

Human Existence

The anthropology behind John of the Cross' teaching may help to appreciate this reductionism. For him there are two levels of life, the sensible and the spiritual. The sense level describes human experience from the outside in and includes not only the action of the exterior

and interior senses, but all the lower operations of the spiritual level as well, such as our ordinary thinking and willing. These are the natural functions of the human composite, as the scholastics understood them.

The higher operations of the spiritual level move from the inside out. This is the level of contemplation and mysticism. God is active in the lower, natural functions, but in a way accommodated to the limitations of human functioning. On the level of pure spirit the person is only receptive to divine grace. At this level the soul is open to receive God Himself and to enter into a supernatural union with Him. It is the level of pure potential, the scholastic “obediential potency.” Grace is at work in the lower operations and there is union with God; but any union from the outside in is human and limited. The higher spiritual union comes by gift alone. God himself actuates the person’s deepest spirit, the “substance” of his soul. This is the divine union to which all of John’s teaching leads.

The poem, “The Living Flame” seizes the mystery of the deepest reality of the human personality under the image of “the deep caverns of feeling.” These caverns are the void, the substance of the soul, pure spirit. They are like a yawning canyon within us that aches for the presence of God. Imagine the “ache” of an immense canyon. God alone can fill this space. But the cost is considerable. The average person has neutralized the pull of these inner depths by smothering the desire for God with ersatz substitutions, with goods and actions that distract and sedate the restlessness within. These are the familiar “attachments” of the spiritual tradition. One must be freed up from these enslavements by an affective freedom in their regard. One does not necessarily give the things up, but one must be free to use or leave them in accordance with whether or not they are from God, in God, and for God. The fear and anxiety, however, of separating one’s self from the defense systems of one’s life is very great. One’s gratifications and

controls render a person secure and safe. Why? Because they beguile us from our own mortality. The pain, in other words, of facing the void that is our utter emptiness and dependence on God propels most people into self-defensive patterns of settling for the less instead of the more. John would lead us out of this prison. He would guide us to the gift of God in Christ Jesus, which alone satisfies the deep caverns of feeling. One can see here the obvious solution to the problem described magisterially in Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*.

The goal, then, is life in God, the fullness of the divine self-communication announced in Scripture as life in Christ Jesus and developed in theology over the centuries, notably in our time in the magnificent God-centered theology of Karl Rahner. John fixes his eyes on this goal and allows no deviation, no compromise, no watering down, no pragmatic bartering away of the divine in favor of divided spoils. In this he is profoundly biblical and asks no more of his followers than do the prophets of the old covenant or Jesus in the gospel. God is over all and above all and He alone demands our absolute allegiance. Put in this way, the divine demands are intelligible. They are the cost of being children of God. But so exalted a goal means absolute renunciation. The transcendent character of the kingdom of God is at issue. John does not let us forget this. He describes in great detail how all our desires must be rooted in this divine orientation. This means that our wants and needs must shed their limited finiteness and be rooted in the infinity of God. Any desire outside God is too small. All desires must take on the unconditional character of Desire itself. We need to let ourselves be swept up in that Desire. It is the life of God spread into the universe. It is God possessed in Himself and only secondarily in the concrete realities of human life. God alone is the worthy object of human striving and that means that every human desire must be reoriented into the divine pattern or else it must be rejected. Ultimately the only way it can be fully reoriented into God is to have our life proceed

from the inside out. We only possess God to the extent that we come at the world from the presence of God and do not go to Him with our own non-negotiable game plan.

To accept this challenge is to enter the dark night. This is the beginning of true spirituality. It means to put God first in one's life and to honor nothing that leaves him aside. John is even more categorical. The first task, he says, is to fix our eyes on Jesus and the second, which is like a condition for the first, is to free our heart in order to see only Jesus. These two rules are set down as practical directives in the famous chapter 13 of Book 1 of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The simplicity of this double principle is based on the Sanjuanist perspective. The two operative principles are the void and divine union. Nothing is said about the many other elements that go into the formation of a spiritual program. Relatively little is said explicitly about the role of Christ, the Scriptures, the Church, the Sacraments; there is no consideration given directly to the physical and psychological development of the person. John hardly mentions the fate of the less-than-ultimate in one's life, for example, one's cultural and professional development, one's participation in community and ministry, the values of secularity in all its ramifications. For John the penultimate values will take care of themselves if they are rooted in the one ultimate source. John does not busy himself with problems on this secondary level, on the self-deceptions and deviations, for example, that might be perpetrated in the name of the "Nothing" or the "All." Visible creation for him is the symbol of the invisible Reality; it flows out from God, not vice versa. The source is within, never without, so that the visible leads to the invisible only if, and as, it originates there in the first place. In all of this John of the Cross is no different from the prophets of God from Jeremiah to Jesus, who are caught up with divine transcendence.

Contemplation

It is obvious that John of the Cross teaches a spirituality of contemplation. Very early on in this system God meets the struggler with the divine unctions, with the contemplative graces that make divine union possible. For this reason John has no extended direction for the uninitiated, for real beginners in the spiritual journey. The work of socialization in the spiritual life is presupposed. The divine encounter of contemplation takes place soon after one begins to follow John's program. It may occur in crisis fashion and we have the experience of the "dark night," really and properly called the passive "dark night of the senses," in which the person is disoriented by the impact of beginning contemplation. The person loses the ability to use the old "natural" methods of functioning at prayer and the new way of God's breaking into consciousness from within is still too weak to be self-validating. John's teaching is clear. The new way is to be prized and fostered in prayer; one is to practice simple, loving attention, such as is promoted today in the schools of centering prayer. In one's normal daily activities one continues to function in the usual manner. But in prayer the efforts of much activity give way to simple receptivity, in a relaxed though alert state, and even this loving attention is disregarded if God takes hold of the person in an experience of divine absorption. These are the initial stages of the contemplative way. Until divine union is reached when the person lives habitually under the divine influence, there will be undulating patterns of darkness and light, anxiety and serenity, as the persons make their way into the fullness. Everything is grace; all depends on the divine in-breaking. But from the human point of view the determinant is spiritual poverty. As the person becomes more free, detached, and hence spiritually poor, as one comes more in touch with the emptiness and void within, the pain of separation from the Ground of our being becomes more intense, the darkness more profound. One must know by experience one's own emptiness before he/she can accept and own it and not be destroyed in the process. This is the way of the cross.

Only the way of the cross, the example of Jesus on Calvary gives us an inkling about the mystery of darkness and light, of sin and grace, of the death that leads to life. John of the Cross helps us understand the central mystery of our faith, the Paschal Mystery of dying and rising with Jesus.

Conclusion

John of the Cross writes for those who really love God but who also still love the things of this transitory world. His goal is to describe the process whereby the love of God is purified, i.e. whereby all other loves are integrated into the unconditional love for God. This state is called “divine union” or “spiritual marriage.” The way is up the slopes of Mount Carmel, the “Mount of Perfection,” which is a pencil sketch from John’s own hand which delineates the cancellation of our worldly or heavenly desires that do not flow out of God. There are six such “nothings” described in the picture, corresponding to six limited desires for temporal or spiritual goods. These errant loves are going nowhere. They need to be redeemed by incorporating them into the only one legitimate thrust in life, the Desire for God. In that context they can be repossessed. John’s concern is about the ultimate questions of life, the “no” to anything less than God and the full “yes” to God. On analysis this means losing our identity in God, not in a metaphysical sense but affectively. God himself is the *Nada* and the *Todo*. He is no-thing (*Nada*), because he is beyond everything; He is everything (*Todo*), because all reality expresses Him. On our side our “no” becomes utter spiritual poverty. It is our way to experience our true self. Spiritual poverty means dwelling in “the caverns of deep feeling.” To experience that void is so threatening that we spend our lives protecting ourselves against it. But our hearts are restless until they go down into the depths, until they get in touch with this void. Then indeed the restlessness will cease, because our hearts will rest in God.