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St. John of the Cross' teaching on Contemplation

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Contemplation is an important aspect of our prayer and spiritual life. In this state, our prayer becomes more affective and more passive because God takes over the prayer. Here we will also be transformed into a new person and will be able to experience peace and love totally and completely. Therefore, without the grace of contemplation we will never make progress in virtue and the spiritual life, or we will never entirely escape from our weaknesses and imperfections.

Considering the importance of contemplation, the purpose of this study is to examine the teaching of St. John of the Cross on contemplation. For John, contemplation means "infused contemplation." This description seems very abstract, but according to Kieran Kavanaugh, "What John means by infused contemplation is that the loving knowledge is communicated directly to the spirit, without particular images and ideas as means. Without this palpable means, contemplation comes divested of the particular and is therefore a general, or obscure, loving knowledge. It is God's life, his self-communication; in us it is the theological virtues"¹, that is, faith, hope and love or charity. Is his teaching similar with the other spiritual masters or different? And what is the goal of spiritual life according to John of the Cross? Before answering such questions, it

¹ Kieran Kavanaugh, *John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1999), 114. Cf. James Arraj, *From St. John of the Cross to Us: The Story of a 400 Year Long Misunderstanding and What It Means For The Future of Christian Mysticism* (Inner Growth Books, 1999), 13.

is helpful to begin with a brief review of the mystical tradition that influenced John of the Cross.

1. Influences on John's teaching on Contemplation

Reflecting on the mystical tradition that influenced John's writings, Crisogono argues that "the problem of mysticism began to preoccupy [him]."² It was a problem because although John was aware of and had read the tradition of the spiritual and mystical writings, it is difficult to identify the works he read apart from the Bible. John only refers to the mystical tradition in general as in what is said by "philosophers," "theologians," "mystical theologians," and "wise men".³ However, Jose de Jesus Maria, who got his information from John's fellow-students, mentioned the special study he made of mystical writers, "in particular of St. Denis and St. Gregory."⁴ According to this account, John was interested in the exact determination of the nature of contemplation, new doctrines that were acquiring ascendancy – probably ideas of the illuminist type.⁵ All these gave him the impression of being a deviation from the true

² Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, *The Life of St. John of the Cross* (New York: Harper, 1958), 38.

³ Thomas Myladil, *St. John of the Cross and The Bhagavad-Gita: Love, union, and Renunciation* (Cross Cultural Publications, Inc. Cross Roads Books, 2000), 76. Myladil also points out that according to *Concordancias de los Escritos de San de la Cruz*, there are 24 references to "philosophers," 13 to "theologians," one to "mystical theologians," and several to "wise man."

⁴ Crisogono, 38.

⁵ Illuminism is "a single native heretical movement—the movement of the *alumbrados*, of men and women 'illuminated' by the Holy Spirit." This movement "was accused of claiming that those who surrendered themselves to the love of God had no need of the ceremonies or sacraments of the Church, that they should desist from all activity, being cleansed of sin in their union with the Deity." For more information see Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism Sixteenth Century Spain: The Alumbrados* (Cambridge, Clark, 1992).

spiritual teaching of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and so he examined and compared them.

However, even though John of the Cross himself never gave any reference to the mystical tradition, Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene has pointed out that “John owed too much to his predecessors, even though his own contribution was to be so outstanding as one day to win him the title of a Doctor of the Church.”⁶ This is true because the careful readers of John of the Cross will find that he “articulated much of his thought using the terminology of the scholastic theology of sixteenth-century Catholic Spain, his vision of the spiritual life transcends Christian scholasticism and reflects several religious and philosophical traditions.”⁷

In this respect, we can broadly identify and examine the main tradition that influenced John of the Cross in his teaching. According to Thomas Myladil, “[John]’s philosophical and theological ideas generally display the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastics (e.g., transformation in God through beatific vision, the development of theological virtues, actual and habitual grace).”⁸ His teachings on apophatism, mystical darkness, and the soul as the image of divinization echo the influence of St. Augustine, Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius. Also, in his teaching on the three signs of the soul’s entry into the mystical state, or degrees of love, he shows his acquaintance the works of the German and Flemish mystics, i.e., Ruysbroeck (1293-1381), Tauler (1290-1361), Suso (1300-1366), and Denis the Carthusian (1402-1472). Among these figures, Tauler and Denis the Carthusian are the more visible in the works of

⁶ Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene, *The Spiritual Director: According to the Principle of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by a Benedictine of the Stanbrook Abbey, (1951), 38; Also see A Benedictine of the Stanbrook Abbey, *Medieval Mystical Tradition and Saint John of the Cross*, (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1954), 13-14; Thomas Myladil, 75.

⁷ Thomas Myladil, *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

John of the Cross. The author of *Medieval Mystical Tradition and Saint John of the Cross* points out this fact in the following paragraph:

Though this is an exaggeration, it is impossible to study the works of writers such as Tauler and Denis the Carthusian, in particular, without discovering how both, especially the former, anticipate St. John of the Cross. When the day came when his teaching had to be defended, these northern mystics were cited, as well as the order authorities...in proof of that he [St. John of the Cross] was quite in the sound and orthodox tradition.⁹

In fact, the *Institution* of Tauler with its emphasis on renunciation, which John of the Cross seems to have used, teaches that “the soul must never lose sight of the Passion and must aim at utter detachment both from creatures and from sensible devotion, and become ‘dead and annihilated to all that is not God.’”¹⁰ Besides renunciation, there are other aspects in Tauler which are similar to John’s teaching such as the treatment of mortal and venial sin. He discusses, for example, “how the secret of sanctity is that the human will should become one with the divine will.”

John of the Cross also makes use of themes and even the language of the earlier Spanish mystics; for instance, Bernardino de Laredo’s work *The Ascent of Mount Zion*, may have suggested to John the title of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. His approach to the path of recollection may show his use of Francisco de Osuna. Moreover, the sensual imagery of his poems echoes the impact on him of the Spanish poetry in his time, especially the works of Garcilasco de la Vega and Juan Boscan. Finally, there are also the influences of “the teaching of the Moslem

⁹ A Benedictine of the Stanbrook Abbey, 101; Also see Thomas Myladi, 79.

¹⁰ Ibid, 103.

mystics or sufis, who flourished there [in Spain] in the Middle Ages.”¹¹ Of course, their influence on John of the Cross makes sense because “in all cities and villages that were the scenes of the life of St. John of the Cross -- Arevalo, Salamanca, Granada, Alca, Segovia, Avila, and Toledo -- the statistics of the seventeenth century reveal that even then there existed many nuclei of *Moriscos* (Moors).”¹²

It is clear that although John of the Cross did not specify any authors and sources in his writings, he was indebted to the accumulated traditions. In this respect, the author of *Medieval Mystical Tradition and Saint John of the Cross* firmly places John in the main-stream of mystical tradition:

He [John of the Cross] is at once original and traditional, and certain figures of speech and expressions had long become the common property of all spiritual theologians. We find the same language century after century; all the later writers draw upon the earlier authorities, and as says his most able modern editor [P. Silverio de Santa Teresa]: ‘We have not read St. John of the Cross long before we find ourselves in full current of mystical tradition.’¹³

In John’s time, there was not the same concern with accurate texts and scholarship as there is today. Moreover, he did not write for academics, but for the needs of the Carmelite nuns and friars, or special people who requested him to write. As we have seen, John of the Cross often quoted, sometimes from memory, from the medieval compilations of the mystical traditions that he read

¹¹ Stephen Clissold, *The Wisdom of the Spanish Mystics*, (A New Directions Book, 1977), 3; Also see Robert Richmond Ellis, *San Juan de la Cruz: Mysticism and Sartrean Existentialism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 120.

¹² Thomas Myladil, 79.

¹³ A Benedictine of the Stanbrook Abbey, 23; Also see Thomas Myladil, 76.

and made his own. Quoting Colin P. Thomson, George Every puts it this way, "Certainly his is a borrowed language, but he has made it his own, because he controls the images and redirects their tremendous power into the channels he prepared for them."¹⁴

However, it is important to notice here that John of the Cross not only learned from other traditions and borrowed their language. He also took from his own experience, drawing both from his contact with others involved in spiritual direction and from his own interior life. Emphasizing the influence of other traditions on John's teaching, and also his dependence on his own experience, Karol Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) wrote as follows: "We would say that speculative theology provided the principles, the spiritual authors gave the terminology and a vast area of comparative study, but the writings of St. John of the Cross are the fruit of experience. It was a vital experience of the supernatural reality that is communicated to the soul, a dynamic experience of participation in the intimate life of the Blessed Trinity, and finally, an experience of the unifying power of that which serves as a 'means of union' with God."¹⁵ In other words, John only used the principles and terminology from other traditions in order to better articulate his own profound spiritual and mystical experience.

Finally, as indicated earlier, in his writings and even throughout his life as a friar, the practice of reading Scripture in a liturgical and devotional context formed and shaped John. George Every captured this when he said that "for John the spiritual sense of Scripture can be apprehended only by a person who is inspired by the Spirit, a person who is open to receiving in contemplation the knowledge that comes through love."¹⁶

¹⁴ George Every, "John of the Cross and the Traditions of Monastic Exegesis," in *From Ignatius Loyola to John of the Cross*, ed. Terence O'Reilly (Variorum, 1995), 115.

¹⁵ Karol Wojtyla, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 21-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 110.

2. The Signs of the Beginning of Contemplation

As we begin to reflect on John's description of the beginning of contemplation, first of all we must clarify his mystical teaching on the dark night as the actual beginning of infused contemplation or mystical experience. John describes the beginning of contemplation especially in Books I and II of the *Dark Night*. Like other spiritual writers, John of the Cross explains contemplation as being integral to prayer. His focus is on the transition from meditation or discursive mental prayer to more affective prayer, and then to more passive prayer in which God takes over the one who is praying in contemplation. The process of this transition will cause dryness and aridity. This is a dark night. But how does the soul know whether this dryness is the result of the dark night or some other illness? In order to help the soul to discern this question, John of the Cross gives three signs, and according to Constance Fitzgerald, "traditionally, [these three signs] have been recognized as theological signs of the passage in prayer from discursive meditation to contemplation and are, therefore, descriptive of one's spiritual development, one's interpersonal life."¹⁷

John gives the three signs both in the second book of *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (A, 2, 13, 2-4)¹⁸ and in the first book of the *Dark Night* (DN 9, 2-8). Interestingly, in both works, John not only treats the similarity between the signs, but also

¹⁷ Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. Joan Wolski Conn (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1986), 293.

¹⁸ All quotations from St. John of the Cross are taken from *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991). The abbreviations for St. John's writings cited in this paper are: A = *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*; DN = *The Dark Night*; C = *The Spiritual Canticle*; F = *The Living Flame of Love*. For *The Ascent and Night*, the references are given to book, chapter, and paragraph. Thus, A,2,13,2-4. indicates *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* book 2, chapter 13, paragraph 2-4. *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love* are referred to by stanza and paragraph. Thus, C.20.15 is to the 20th stanza of the *Spiritual Canticle*, paragraph 15.

emphasizes the significant differences between them. As Marc Foley has pointed out, “in the *Ascent*, John underlines the soul’s desire ‘to remain alone in loving awareness of God without particular consideration, in interior peace and quiet and repose...’ (A.2.13.4)”¹⁹, but in *Dark Night*, the simple awareness of God’s presence is not found there. “One of the common explanations for this difference”, says Foley, “is that in the *Ascent*, John describes a soul that has become accustomed to contemplation; whereas, in the *Dark Night* John describes a person in whom this simple awareness of God’s presence is new.”²⁰ Or again: “the *Ascent* signs are given from the side of the person’s faith response, the *Dark Night* signs from God’s side”, but basically, they are the same and can be correlated.²¹

The first sign describes the fact that one cannot make discursive meditation or receive satisfaction from it as one did before. This is dryness because now God does not communicate himself through the senses, “but begins to communicate himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation in which there is no discursive succession of thought.”²² However, even though the soul cannot make discursive meditation or mental prayer and draw satisfaction from it, John advises not to abandon this method immediately. Why? Because there is a time when the meditation must be discontinued, that is, the time when the soul is placed “in interior peace and quiet” in the third sign.

The second sign is “an awareness of a disinclination to fix imagination or sense faculties on other particular objects, exterior or interior” and therefore it will bring “emptiness in life experiences and deadness of desire.” This dryness is not only in prayer, but also in our life, relationships, marriage, ministry, and

¹⁹ *John of the Cross – The Ascent to Joy: Selected Spiritual Writings* (New City Press, 2002), 79.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 80.

²¹ Constance FitzGerald, 293.

²² *DN*, 1, 9, 8.

so on. John puts it this way: "Souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from things of God [and] they do not get any out of creatures either. Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, he does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything."²³

The third sign is more important because in this situation "a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of intellect, memory and will. Such a one prefers to remain only in general, loving awareness and knowledge we mentioned, without any particular knowledge and understanding."²⁴ Compared with the two first signs, this sign is more positive because in this new way the soul wants to remain alone in loving awareness of God. When the soul experiences an interior peace, quiet and repose, this is the beginning of contemplation.

3. Contemplation

As indicated earlier, John of the Cross described contemplation as "infused contemplation," but it is difficult to find an adequate description and none of the attempts to delineate what infused contemplation is will ever excel the works of the Mystical Doctor. This is because John's teaching on contemplation is "so imbued with the reality of what communing with God means that no concise definition can completely capture his experience and reflect his thinking. We can, however, help ourselves along by systematizing the various elements that make up infused prayer as we find them flowing effortlessly from the saint's

²³ *DN*, 1, 9, 2.

²⁴ *A*, 2, 13,1-4; Also see Kieran Kavanaugh, 107.

pen.”²⁵ Only reading and rereading the works of the saint can help us to grasp infused contemplation.

First of all, John of the Cross gives a general description of the beginnings of infused contemplation in the following paragraph:

Actually, at the beginning of this state the loving knowledge is almost unnoticeable. There are two reasons for this: First, the loving knowledge initially is likely to be extremely subtle and delicate, almost imperceptible; second, a person who is habituated to the exercise of meditation, which is wholly sensible, hardly perceives or feels this new insensible, purely spiritual experience.²⁶

This description underlines the very threshold of contemplation as a peace that cannot be analyzed or described. It is “unnoticeable,” a “calm and repose of interior peace.” The peace, quiet and repose here envisioned is not what we can sometimes achieve by our own effort, but “it is a new experience, one that is due to no oriental techniques or occidental methods. At the beginning it is delicate and hardly perceptible, even though it is real. One is being led into a perceived contact with God indwelling.”²⁷

Furthermore, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*, John explains infused contemplation as wisdom.²⁸ Infused contemplation is “secret and loving wisdom...[and] this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God

²⁵ Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel- on Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 60.

²⁶ A, 2, 13, 7; Also see Kieran Kavanaugh, 118; James W. Kinn, “The Central Paradox of John of the Cross,” *Review For Religious* 68, no.3 (2009): 290.

²⁷ Thomas Dubay, 61.

²⁸ Cf. Daniel Chowning, Lecture on “John of the Cross: A Spirituality of Wisdom,” at the Annual Seminar on Carmelite Spirituality, in Saint Mary College Notre Dame Indiana, June 15, 2009.

through love.”²⁹ “It calls this dark contemplation ‘secret’ since, as we mentioned, contemplation is mystical theology, which theologians call secret wisdom and which St. Thomas says is communicated and infused into the soul through love. This communication is secret and dark to the work of intellect and the other faculties.”³⁰ “The wisdom of this contemplation is the language of God to the soul, of pure spirit to pure spirit.”³¹

John refers to contemplation as “secret wisdom,” “wisdom of love,” “interior wisdom,” “mystical wisdom,” and the “abyss of wisdom.” Infused wisdom is a “secret ladder.”³² Reflecting on this “secret ladder,” Edith Stein notes that “principally, contemplation is called a ladder because it ‘is a science of love, an infused loving knowledge of God, that both illuminates and inflames the soul with love, elevating her step by step to God, her creator.”³³ Further, Edith explicitly distinguishes and summarizes John’s description of ten rungs of the ladder that elevate the soul to God as follows:

The first rung makes the soul sick, for her good...But this sickness is not unto death, rather for the glory of God; the second rung causes a person to seek God unceasingly; the third rung of the ladder of love prompts the soul to action and awakens her to fervor so that she does not tire; the fourth rung causes in the soul a persisting suffering for the sake of the Beloved; the sixth rung causes the soul to hurry quickly toward God and she frequently perceives his nearness by the senses; the seventh rung, the soul is extremely emboldened; the soul attains the eighth rung which gives her possession

²⁹ DN, 2, 5,1.

³⁰ DN, 2, 17, 2.

³¹ DN, 2, 17, 4.

³² Daniel Chowning, Lecture on “John of the Cross: A Spirituality of Wisdom.”

³³ Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, trans. Joesephine Koepffel (Washington D.C: ICS Publications, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2002), 143.

of the Beloved and union with him; the ninth rung ...is ...the state of those who are perfect, who already burn in the sweet love of God; and the tenth and the last rung of hidden ladder of love no longer belongs to this life. "It makes the soul perfectly like God because of the vision of God."³⁴

For John, however, contemplation is not only a ladder but is also "secret." It is "secret" for two main reasons. First of all, it is beyond what we can grasp by our senses or by any clear image or idea. Secondly, it is an ineffable experience; it is difficult to give it expression. It is a wisdom that is communicated directly to the spirit. Divine Wisdom is a path of unknowing.³⁵

God's wisdom is "loving wisdom." John says that God's wisdom leads us to "the heart of the science of love."³⁶ Wisdom and Love are inseparable. Wisdom leads to love and love leads to the deepest Wisdom. Moreover, in the state of infused contemplation, love of God also becomes stronger and deeper. This is a new loving of God, a love that comes from the experience of being loved by God. The typical expressions used by John for this new love are "this divine, loving fire of contemplation...this burning of love...the fire and wound of this forceful love...this very fire of love", etc. "The infusion from God grows to a point that the person is 'dying with love of Him.'"³⁷ Probably for those who have not experienced advanced prayer, all these expressions are very hard to understand. But for mystics or spiritual persons, that is the best way to express their experience of God's presence in the soul.

It is also important to notice that "the contemplation of which St. John is

³⁴ Ibid, 143-145.

³⁵ *DN*,2,17,2.

³⁶ *DN*, 2, 17, 6; Also see Thomas Dubay, 63.

³⁷ Thomas Dubay, 61.

speaking is not a completely infused prayer, but rather the mingling of a certain infused light with the simplified activity of the soul, which is the natural result of meditation.”³⁸ In other words, even though infused contemplation is a completely free gift from God, we need to prepare ourselves to receive this gift through the practice of a discursive meditation in prayer. Further, John of the Cross not only speaks of the infusion of divine light, but also of infused love. The saint, then, defined contemplation as “nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of Love.”³⁹ This element of contemplation is very important because it helps us to understand better how contemplation leads us to the transformation of love or the perfection of passive love. Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene affirms this when he writes: “Contemplation awakens love, introduces it passively into the soul; and this passive love will grow so strong that at last it will bring it perfect transformation.”⁴⁰ At this point, “we are entering fully upon the realm of infused love which is to end in the passive union of the spiritual marriage. Yes, the passion of love ‘has in it something of the most perfect union with God.’”⁴¹ In short, if contemplation strengthens our love, the passion of love becomes more unitive, that is, the perfect union with the Triune God.

Finally, the language or expressions John uses for contemplation are also interesting. As James Arraj points it out, “in the *Ascent* he calls contemplation: a general and pure act, interior quiet, loving knowledge, general knowledge, or general loving knowledge, supernatural knowledge of contemplation, general

³⁸ Father Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalene, *St. John of the Cross: Doctor of Divine Love and Contemplation*, trans. A Benedictine of Stranbrook Abbey (The New Man, 1946), 53.

³⁹ *Ibid*; *DN*, 1, 10, 6; Cf. Thomas Dubay, 63; Also see John Welch, *An Introduction to John of the Cross: When God's Die* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1990), 97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 60.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

loving advertence, attention and general loving knowledge."⁴² Yet, in his other works John uses different language and expressions. For example, "in the *Dark Night* contemplation becomes: obscure and dry contemplation, interior refreshment, a loving calm advertence, infused contemplation, obscure and secret contemplation, and a sweet, peaceful, loving infusion of God."⁴³ And in *The Living Flame of Love*, John describes contemplation as: "loving knowledge, wisdom and loving knowledge, simple and loving knowledge, loving advertence, passive loving advertence, recollection and interior solitude, infused love, silence, quietude, and emptiness and solitude."⁴⁴ Clearly, John of the Cross uses a wide variety of expressions with reference to contemplation that make his teaching more profound and rich.

It is also important to notice here that before explaining the contemplation in prose, the mystical Doctor and poet had already experienced contemplation as something he called, "entering into unknowing." Listen to the Saint's verses:

I entered into unknowing,
 Yet when I saw myself there,
 without knowing where I was,
 I understood great things;
 I will not say what I felt
 for I remained in unknowing
*transcending all knowledge.*⁴⁵

Contemplation is like entering into unknowing, into the oceanic love of God

⁴² James Arraj, 27.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁴⁵ Stanzas concerning an ecstasy experienced in high contemplation, 1.

without knowing where we are, but just staying in peace and joy in the love of God.

4. An Excursus on St. Teresa of Avila⁴⁶

It should be noticed here that John's description of contemplation as "infused contemplation" had influenced many spiritual writers. Inspired by John of the Cross, for example, J. de Guibert, S.J, defined infused contemplation as "a contemplative prayer in which simplification of the intellectual and affective acts in the soul results from a Divine action which surpasses, or even sometimes, contradicts that which would be produced by the simple causes of a psychological order when they are at work."⁴⁷ Besides de Guibert, there are Garrigou- Lagrange, Saudreau, Poulain, de La Taille, Arintero,⁴⁸ (to mention only few) also influenced by John. Even though each of those spiritual writers has his or her own point of view, all of them agree with John of the Cross on the three essential characteristics of infused contemplation: 1) in contemplation we have some vague experience of God as present within us; 2) this direct contact is general and dark in the beginning; it is not accompanied by images or distinct notions, but consists of a simple and dark intuition; 3) we receive the experience passively, not as a result of our own efforts. We cannot obtain it, retain it, or recall it.⁴⁹ It is completely grace or a gift from God.

In particular, the infused contemplation that John of the Cross is talking about is similar to St. Teresa of Avila's doctrine. James Arraj argues that "[St. Teresa]

⁴⁶ Ibid, 28-31.

⁴⁷ Eiten, Robert B., "Recent Theological Opinion on Infused Contemplation," *Theological Studies* 2, no.1 (Fall 1941): 90.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 89.

⁴⁹ Ibid; Also see James W. Kinn, "Beginning Contemplation according to John of the Cross," *Review For Religious* 66, no.2 (2007): 177.

naturally has her own distinct point of view, but in essence their doctrines on contemplation are identical.”⁵⁰ In describing the prayer of quiet, Teresa writes: “This quietude and recollection is something that is clearly felt through satisfaction and peace bestowed on the soul, along with great contentment and calm and a very gentle delight in the faculties (L,15,1,139).”⁵¹ Teresa continues, “This prayer, then, is a little spark of the Lord’s true love which He begins to enkindle in the soul; and He desires that the soul grow in the understanding of what this love accompanied by delight is. For anyone who has experience, it is impossible not to understand soon that this little spark cannot be acquired.”⁵² Further, Teresa also advises that “what the soul must do during these times of quiet amounts to no more than proceeding gently and noiselessly. What I call noise is running about with the intellect looking for many words and reflections so as to give thanks for this gift and piling up one’s sins and faults in order to see that the gift is unmerited.”⁵³

Moreover, in her works of *The Way of Perfection* and *Interior Castle*, Teresa develops two kinds of prayers of recollection that can precede this prayer of quiet. These two kinds of prayers are “active recollection” and “passive” or “supernatural recollection.” Describing the prayer of active recollection, Teresa writes: “It is called recollection because the soul collects all the faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God. Its Divine Master comes more

⁵⁰ James Arraj, 28.

⁵¹ All quotations from *St. Teresa of Avila* are taken from *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila Vol.3*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodrigos (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publication, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1985), and *The Way of Perfection*, edited and mildly modernized by Henry L. Carrigan Jr. (Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2000). The abbreviations for *St. Teresa of Avila*’s writings cited in this paper are: L= *The Book of Her Life*; W= *The Way of Perfection*; and IC= *Interior Castle*. The references are given to book, chapter, and paragraph. Thus, L, 15, 1, 139, indicates *The Book of Her Life*, book 15, chapter 1, paragraph 139.

⁵² L, 15,4, 141.

⁵³ L, 15, 6, 141-142.

speedily to teach it and grant it the Prayer of Quiet. Hidden there within itself, it can think about the Passion and picture the Son without tiring the mind by going to seek Him on Calvary, or in the Garden, or on the Cross."⁵⁴

In contrast to this active recollection, Teresa describes the passive recollection as follows:

It is a recollection that seems to me to be supernatural because it does not involve being in the dark or closing the eyes, nor does it consist in any exterior thing, since without first wanting to do so, one does close one's eyes and desire solitude. It seems that without any contrivance the edifice is being built, by means of this recollection, for the prayer that was mentioned. The senses and exterior things seem to be losing their hold because the soul is recovering what it had lost.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Teresa explains this supernatural recollection "like a good Shepherd, with a whistle so gentle that even [the souls] themselves almost fail to hear it, He makes them recognize His voice." Since God is within us and always calls the soul to hear His voice, "a preparation for being able to listen", says Teresa, "[is] the soul instead of striving to engage in discourse strives to remain attentive and aware of what the Lord is working in it."⁵⁶ Teresa continues to affirm that "when through His secret paths it seems we understand that He hears us, then, it is good to be silent, since He has allowed us to remain near Him."⁵⁷ Again, all these descriptions indicate that even though Teresa uses

⁵⁴ W, 28, 121-122.

⁵⁵ IC, 4, 3, 1, 77.

⁵⁶ IC, 4, 3, 2.4, 78-79.

⁵⁷ IC, 4, 5, 79-80.

different expressions, the essence of her teaching on contemplation is similar and identical with that of John of the Cross.

In addition, the similarity between John and Teresa is also found in their description on *Mystical Knowing and the Mystical Self*. Edward Howells summarizes this similarity between the two Carmelite saints' doctrines in five points as follows:

1. The soul is divided by the onset of mystical union between the interior part and the exterior part because of the special nature of union with God as a relationship "without intermediary," in contrast to the soul's ordinary exterior relations to creatures.
2. The relationship between the interior of the soul and God in union is a Trinitarian relation, not merely in the created image of God in the soul, but immediately, as the soul enters the inner life of the Trinity and is formed habitually within the Father-Son relation.
3. The soul, while remaining human, becomes "divine" in the interior relation,...In the spiritual marriage, the soul finds that it has not only become divine, but that it has been humanly accommodated to union through the process of transformation, such that it participates in the inner-trinitarian relation in the center of the soul and attains the human-divine self understanding of Christ.
4. The interior and the exterior parts of the soul retain their distinction, but the immediate relation to God in the center of the soul now overflows to include the whole soul and body in union, producing exterior works in perfect accord with God's will.
5. The process of mystical transformation is seen in retrospect to possess a unity deeper than division in the soul, so that mystical knowing and

ordinary knowing are combined in a unified subject, culminating in the habitual possession of mystical self.⁵⁸

Besides these similarities, Howells also points out some important differences between Teresa's and John's accounts of Mystical Knowledge and transformation. According to Howells, "the most prominent difference between [their] accounts of mystical knowledge and transformation...is that John's theology is more negative than Teresa's."⁵⁹ Even though both of them accepted "the negative psychological effects caused by the entry into union, such as suspensions and the feeling of the division in the soul, ...John alone makes this into a programmatic process of sensory and spiritual negation and suffering in the dark nights."⁶⁰ Following Dionysius, John explained his negativity and the three stages of spiritual journey – that is purgation, illumination, and union. In particular, John refers to Dionysius' idea that "illumination is to see God not as a light but rather as a 'ray of darkness.'" Also, in the stage of illumination, the purgation or purification is not decreasing but rather increasing and in "contact with the rational faculties, 'voiding' and 'darkening' them."

It should be noticed here that even though John refers to Dionysius, it does not mean that he is a "thorough-going Dionysian." In fact, John only applies the negativity of Dionysius' rational faculties in the middle, "midnight", stage of mystical itinerary, but when the soul arrives at the "early dawn", the "ray of darkness" or "dark illumination" ceases to be dark as light gradually enters it. In this view, John joins Teresa in thinking that "the soul is expanded by illumination such that it becomes equal to the infinite greatness of God in its

⁵⁸ Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing Selfhood*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 119-120. For more detail explanation about all these similarities see pp.120-128.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 129.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

own infinite capacity, and at this point it starts to know God positively in union.”⁶¹ Therefore, the differences between John and Teresa are found in their approach to union and in the early stages of the union, before the light of union starts to shine. In the progress to union, John always emphasizes the feeling of God’s absence that causes suffering, torment, and terror. Teresa on the other hand, stresses the presence of God because for her even in the early stage of union, the soul has already recognized God’s presence.

Another difference between John and Teresa is based on their treatment of supernatural apprehensions. For John, these supernatural apprehensions cannot be known reliably before the final union because of the darkness in the rational faculties. Teresa on the other hand, emphasizes that the supernatural apprehensions are part of union as soon as they begin. In the early stage the two Carmelite saints differ in approach, but at the final stage of union they join together. As Howells puts it, “in final union, the humanity of Christ is found within the soul in the same way for both Carmelites, in the soul’s inner-trinitarian knowing which is mediated to every part of the soul.”⁶²

This is a but a very brief explanation of the similarities and the differences between John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila in their account of mystical knowing and transformation. We return the John’s teaching and explore the stages of the spiritual journey and the transformative union with God.

5. The Stages of the Spiritual Journey

According to John of the Cross, the goal of spiritual life is union with God. In order to reach this union, the soul has to pass through the journey of faith and the journey of love. Following the mystical tradition, John of the Cross divides

⁶¹ Ibid, 130.

⁶² Ibid, 137.

the three stages of prayer into beginners/purgative, progressives/illuminative, and perfect contemplatives or perfect union.⁶³ The first stage is the beginners. Here John describes the beginners as those who practice active meditation by using fantasy and imagination. John writes: “the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflection with imagination.”⁶⁴ However, the beginners sometimes spend much time in prayer and their prayer is discursive, a “work through images, forms and figures.”⁶⁵ The quality of this prayer has not yet reached the depth for which his teachings are intended. With this in mind, John advises beginners not to abandon prayer too soon, “so that there is no ‘*volver atras*’ or regression.”⁶⁶ Discursive meditations are very important for the beginners because it helps them to dispose themselves for more spiritual interests. “By these sensitive means beginners dispose their spirit and habituate it to spiritual things, and at the same time they void their senses of all other base, temporal, secular, and natural forms and images.”⁶⁷ John emphasizes the importance of meditation or mental prayer for the beginners, but he spends little time describing it because he assumes that his readers already know it. He called the first stage as the active night of the sense in which the beginners cultivated a detachment from physical or worldly things.

The second stage is the proficient -- the illuminative way. After the soul experienced the active night of the sense, now it enjoys the degree of illumination, receiving many insights, intuitions and even visions or prophecies about religious matters. John of the Cross names this way the *active night of the*

⁶³ Ibid, 138-146; Cf. Marilyn May Mallory, 14-16; See also Leonard Doohan, *The Contemporary Challenge of St. John of the Cross: An Introduction to His Life and Teaching*, 63-79; Peter Feldmeier, *The developing Christian: Spiritual Growth through the Life Cycle* (Mahweh NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 77-80.

⁶⁴ F,3,32.

⁶⁵ A,2,13,1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

spirit because in this night the soul must empty the self, or lose oneself, in faith, hope and love. "The individual of this 'proficient' stage is beyond prayer, readily finds God in profound recollection and initial contemplation, and sometimes is called to the prayer of quiet. Such persons know their lives have changed; filled with confidence, love of God and love of sacrifice, they also show an increased service of others."⁶⁸ In this stage, the person does not need to practice meditation or mental prayer as such, but begins practicing contemplation and also begins to experience the presence of God who dwells in the soul.

All this leads to the *passive night of the spirit* in which "God purges and illuminates the soul most radically" and "the soul is engaged in contemplation to a high degree." If in the *active night of the spirit* the soul strives to purify the spiritual faculties-intellect, memory and the will, now in the *passive night of the spirit* God takes over in order to purify the soul from the world, the flesh and the devil. John describes this in the second book of the *Dark Night of the Soul*. At the end of this night the soul comes to experience the dark fire of God's love as a thing of delight.

The third stage is the perfect contemplative or perfect union. In this stage, the soul is united to the Beloved in a '*spiritual betrothal*' and then in a '*spiritual marriage*'. According to John of the Cross, the union experienced at the end of the journey is a supernatural transforming union that "exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other."⁶⁹ This union is found only when there is a likeness of love that John calls "the union of likeness." Moreover, this likeness is attained through the purification of the nights, that is, the intellect, memory, will, appetites, and all movements of the person are united with God. John writes: "accordingly, the intellect of this soul is God's intellect; its will is God's will; its memory is the

⁶⁸ Leonard Doohan, 71.

⁶⁹ A,2,5,3.

eternal memory of God and its delight is God's delight...[It] has become God through participation in God."⁷⁰ Finally, all this leads us to focus our whole life on God and in conformity with all God wills, culminates in a union so profound that John calls it "spiritual marriage," "a total transformation in the Beloved."⁷¹ In this "spiritual marriage," the soul finds a much greater abundance and fullness of God, a more secure and stable peace, and an incomparably more perfect delight...As a result the soul usually experiences an intimate spiritual embrace, which is a veritable embrace, by means of which she is lives the life of God. The words of St. Paul are verified in this soul: *I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me*[Gal.2:20]⁷²

Conclusion

St. John of the Cross' teaching on contemplation draws from tradition and his own experience. John begins with describing the three signs as the beginning of contemplation. Those three basic signs are loss of pleasures, inability to meditate discursively, and the painful longing for God. After passing through these three signs, the soul begins to enter into contemplation. For John, as for other spiritual writers, contemplation is infused contemplation with three essential characteristics: 1) in contemplation we have some vague experience of God as present within us; 2) this direct contact is general and dark in the beginning; it is not accompanied by images or distinct notions, but consists of a simple and dark intuition; 3) we receive the experience passively, not as a result of our own efforts. We cannot obtain it, retain it, or recall it. It is completely a grace or a gift from God. John's teaching on contemplation as infused contemplation is similar

⁷⁰ F,2,34.

⁷¹ C, 27,3.

⁷² C, 27,5.

to St. Teresa of Avila's doctrine. While the two Carmelite saints differ in their distinct points of view, in essence their teaching on contemplation is identical. According to St. John of the Cross, the goal of our spiritual life is transformative union with God through love. Following the spiritual tradition, John describes the journey of our spiritual life in three stages such as first the beginners, second the proficient or the illuminative way, and lastly the perfect contemplative or perfect union.