

## John of the Cross's Message for Today

The focus of St. John of the Cross is the call to contemplation. Vatican Council II left no doubt about the universal call to holiness; the clergy, the laity, and religious are all called to the same high degree of union with God. John of the Cross locates that perfection in contemplation.

Vatican II emphasized life in this world. It called Christians out of the ghetto and into the mainstream of worldly existence. Lay people particularly were to work for the betterment of humanity through science, politics, education, economics, and the professions. Such work is part of the Christian vocation; moreover, for Christians the motivation and animation for doing the work is the same in the marketplace and the family as it is in the cloister. The source is a loving relationship with the Trinity. This is the holiness at the heart of every vocation. Call it love, call it contemplation. It is the same biblical reality of knowing you, the only true God, and him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3) or, in another formulation, knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship in his sufferings (Ph 3:10). It is loving knowledge, for contemplation is knowledge by way of love. It is what St. Thérèse called her vocation, to be *Alove* at the heart of the church. In the lapidary formula of St. Paul, contemplation is the excellence of faith expressing itself through love (Ga 5:6).

Contemplative prayer and contemplation are no longer to be seen as the domain of an elitist group. People in all sectors of church life and lay life are claiming their birthright and practicing contemplative prayer every day. John of the Cross can be their guide. In this paper I want to indicate how contemporary forms of

contemplative prayer, specifically centering prayer and Christian Meditation, and the Jesus Prayer, fit into John's synthesis. I will first present a sketch of his teaching on the beginnings of contemplation and then relate this doctrine to the contemporary movements.

### Contemplation, according to John of the Cross

Contemplation, according to John of the Cross, Faith as the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God runs like a mantra through the works of John of the Cross. Loving faith, shown in word and deed, is the only road to God. Every act of faith, however small, is a ray of light piercing the darkness in one's consciousness. It is the light of Christ shining through. By acts of faith we let Christ in, we allow the Spirit to form Christ in our very being. Of course, he is always there in the depths of our spirit, in the innermost chamber of our inner castle, the unscathed center of our being, where only the true God dwells.<sup>1</sup> But he is dormant there until we awaken him through activated faith.

Our individual, discrete acts of faith are like the dots of light on a television screen. Multiply them, and the screen is fully illuminated. The soul is like the television screen: on it the dots of faith coalesce to form the image of Christ, fulfilling the words of St. Paul: I live now, no longer I, Christ lives in me. Thus are we configured to Christ. The rest of the quotation is equally important: *AI still have my human life, but it*

is a life of faith in the Son of God@ (Ga 2:20).

Our faith life brings purity of heart, the condition for this configuration. We are pure of heart to the extent that we live by faith. Purity of heart is not just chastity; it is all the virtues ordered and integrated in our being, giving us an openness to the indwelling God. In early stages God meets us in our rational minds, in our disparate thoughts and images and will acts. These are so many actual graces. When purity of heart is more perfect, we enter more deeply into ourselves at the spirit level where God reveals himself in a certain wholeness in contemplation. Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God. Seeing God occurs in holy thoughts and desires and more fully in contemplation.

The metaphor in John of the Cross that corresponds to the television screen is the window pane that lets in the sun. When the window is clean, the sun comes through without any obstruction: the sun and the glass are like one same thing (Ascent 2.5.6). This is a beautiful image of purity of heart, of the entry of God. When all our desires are ordered by faith, we are transparent to God's in dwelling. At first God comes to us in images and concepts, facsimiles and metaphors. When the soul is truly pure, that is to say, when it is free and detached and faith-filled, God comes in contemplation as Gracious Mystery, in his inscrutable reality. Our response then is simply a *yes* to this gift, resting in the presence, experiencing communion. Communion (*koinonia*, *communio*) is being one with God by participation in a unitive, nondualistic experience. Contemplation is the experience of communion.

The experience of contemplation is ineffable: it cannot be put into words. We

can have feelings about God, and they are sensible consolations or spiritual affections. Feelings are resonances of the experience of God. They are moments of enthusiasm or discouragement, joy or sorrow. They are secondary and accidental to the basic contemplative experience of presence and communion, which is incommunicable. The contact with God is the original experience of the theological virtues, whereas the emotional or spiritual resonances are the overflow. Often we have no assurance that we are experiencing the presence of God in contemplation other than blind faith. Feelings are ambiguous and need to be discerned.

The act of contemplation is a return to the subject, a turning back on one's self in faith and love. It is moving from the Christ *for* us, who is objective and out in front of us, so to speak, to the Christ *within* us, who has become one with us. Thus contemplation is resting in the fruit of one's labor and search; it is the fruition of one's new, transformed self. The whole process is "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ," which begins with one's desires, purifying old ones and developing new ones one by one, and ends in the contemplative act of communion, when two things become one in participatory knowledge and love. This is nondualistic thinking, like the *advaita* of Eastern religions. God and the soul are united in a oneness that is not pantheistic, but pan-en-theistic. Communion is the common denominator of all the modes of contemplation, whether ordinary or extraordinary, active or passive, acquired or infused.

Communion grows gradually as we are transformed in God. The one obstacle to our experiencing our oneness with God is our unredeemed self, which is our false self

or egoic self. Specifically, this bad self is our disordered desires. They are our attachments, an innocuous word better translated in our idiom as addictions and illusions. These are the persons and things and mindsets that control us, distort our thinking, and move us in the wrong direction. We deal with them by the two-pronged attack of getting to know Jesus better (so as to perceive his attractiveness) and letting go of competitive desires. There are two principles here, knowing Jesus and letting go. They are the two directives set down in the strongest language by John of the Cross as the necessary and sufficient program for holiness (*Ascent* 1.13.3-4).

The strategy is to work on habitual, deliberate failings one by one until God negates them all in one sweep by leading a person into the "dark night." At that time one loses the attraction and pleasure in anything other than God. In John of the Cross, the gift of initial infused contemplation is the cause of this state. The budding contemplative is counseled to stop discursive activity, embrace the emptiness, and be present in loving attention to God, who is "infusing" light and love.

At first the experience is distressful, because one fears she has lost God and everything else. The infused light and love are too subtle to be recognized. The landmarks of the old spiritual journey are gone: God is no longer available, one cannot pray in the old ways, the excitement of ministry goes dead, and there is a malaise about everything. The only positive quality is an ache for God, which is aggravated by the fear of having lost the Beloved. Eventually one becomes comfortable with this new way of relating to God, and peace and serenity replace the anxiety.

Thus in John of the Cross the ascetical efforts that begin the journey to divine union do not complete the task. The dark night is needed for that. Why? Because our devious human nature, one's false self, goes underground into the unconscious and blocks a person's surrender to God in disguised ways. Jungian psychology calls the buried false self the shadow. It is made up of the capital sins, like lust or pride; in pious people these weaknesses take on forms of pseudo-piety that are as destructive as the crass expressions. Centuries before Jung, John was an expert on uncovering the shadow or dark side of human nature. His teaching is that only God can heal the shadow at its roots. God does this, not by Afixing@ it, much less removing it, but by helping us confront and accept it and then move on to total surrender to God.

One of John's great contributions is this teaching on the dark night. The dark night in general is the whole spiritual journey from beginning to end; the dark night under consideration here is one phase of the purification process, and is called the passive dark night of the senses. The new knowledge and love that are pure gift from God at this point (and called infused contemplation) reconfigure the spiritual life. Inner worldly goods all lose their appeal. One sees them in their truth, and in comparison with God (*Ascent* 1.4; 3.20.2), and so they recede into irrelevance. At the same time God is no longer available in the cozy relationship of the past. The new knowledge and love of God is camouflaged and not knowledge in the usual sense, since it is apophatic, that is, knowing by unknowing. Nothing is felt by the senses, and the action of God is too subtle to be recognized. The result is ennui and accidie.

John of the Cross reassures the beleaguered soul that the new state is an advance. The darkness is from God. John gives signs to authenticate the true grace from counterfeits. They are persistent dryness, the inability to function in the old ways, and the ache for God. Something new is going on. God is present in the scary silence. The person must relax and let God take over. Such is the dark tunnel of beginning infused contemplation.

The new way of relating is communion. Instead of "I" and "Thou" outside one another, the experience is "we" or *Aus.* Mystics revel in this intimacy. It is at-one-ness with God. Such is the experience of this and every other kind of contemplation. It is in contrast to rational thinking about an object out in front. This is the way to just being, participating in one life together, "abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in the person" (see Jn 15:5).

Contemplation happens in prayer, in ministry, and in human relationships. It is a fine-tuning of the state of grace. It happens when childish babbling and chatting with God give way to silence. Only silence can handle the new knowledge and love. The silence may disconcert and cause anxiety, because nothing seems to be going on and one fears the emptiness. In fact, a great deal is going on, and the soul is undergoing a deeper purification and illumination. John tells the person to stay quiet, at attention.

This blessed state is the proximate objective of the beginner in meditation. In John's view it may take a year or so to reach it.<sup>2</sup> In my experience the apprenticeship is longer. It may take several years before one moves beyond discursive meditation into this prayer of silence.

## Contemplation Today

But something different is happening on the contemplative landscape today. Instead of working for years with discursive meditation and perhaps not entering the dark night of the senses at all, people in all walks of life are choosing to practice a new kind of contemplative prayer. The contemporary practice is a new category and not the same as the contemplative prayer and contemplation of John of the Cross. For him these two terms are synonymous and always describe the absolutely free gift of infused contemplation. Contemplative prayer today is not discursive meditation, nor is it per se infused contemplation. It is an intermediary between meditation and contemplation. Centering prayer, Christian Meditation, and the Jesus Prayer cultivate silence and presence to God. In John's terminology these forms belong to meditation, since the prayer is active, personally chosen, and self-directed. But they are a kind of contemplation, because they are silent, without words or images or discursive movement from point to point. They are a species of contemplation, because they are communion with the Trinity.

Thousands of people are practicing this self-initiated contemplative prayer. They are not forced into this way of relating to God; they choose it. They enter into deliberate and wordless silence. Instead of being busy inquiring, analyzing, and making multiple acts of the affections, they remain present to the divine indwelling in simple awareness and attention to the gift of grace within.

This form of prayer is on the growing edge of Christian life. I believe that it is a gift to the church at this point in history. There is a widespread conviction that we do not have to wait until we are

forced into the silence. We can choose it and foster it, and a fruitful kind of prayer results. All our other prayer, such as the liturgy and lectio divina, and our apostolic action and community relationships as well, are affected by this entering within. We come at life from a deeper level. All we need is an "open mind and open heart" to welcome the God hidden in the depths of our souls. This prayer is simply presence, silence, encounter beyond words.

The challenge in this kind of prayer is to maintain the silence, to keep focused on the presence of God. The three forms under consideration use a word or a phrase as a way of maintaining attention. Centering prayer uses a holy word like Abba or Jesus to express one's consent to the divine presence and renew one's presence to God; the word is repeated as often as it is needed. Christian Meditation and the Jesus Prayer use the sacred word as a mantra, that is, a phrase repeated throughout the prayer. The usual mantra in Christian Meditation is the Aramaic word "maranatha," which means ACome, Lord. It is a greeting found in the New Testament. The mantra of the Jesus Prayer is the words "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

You will not find these prayer forms in the writings of John of the Cross. The architects of these prayer disciplines do not presume the presence of infused contemplation, though they hope that the practice will lead there. John Main maintained that Christian Meditation was a traditional form of meditation in the medieval church. Actually he was not a stickler about terminology or theological distinctions; he saw meditation, contemplation, and contemplative prayer as synonyms. The method of meditation taught by John of the Cross may well have been

along the lines of John Main. Beginners were to "ponder a divine mystery."<sup>3</sup> A common way of doing that in early monasticism was to repeat phrases from Scripture in drone-like fashion with no attempt to unpack their meaning. This was John Cassian's famous recommendation that inspired John Main. It could be called *apophatic* meditation, that is, dark and without content, because it did not consist in analyzing or questioning, but simply sitting with the truth. With the methods of meditation proposed by Ignatius Loyola and Louis of Granada and others in the 16th century, meditation became more cerebral and later, under the influence of the Enlightenment, even rationalistic. The neglect of the contemplative dimension in lectio divina in modern times was one reason for creating and promoting centering prayer.

The three modes indicated in this paper are basically the same prayer of silence. They all presume some knowledge and love of the Lord derived from previous prayer and study. Practitioners are advised to choose and stay with one or another of the three and to practice it faithfully for twenty minutes to a half hour each day, morning and evening. These two periods are to be the linchpins of one's spiritual life. They are also the hinges on the door to a renewed spiritual life.

### **Prayer Forms Whose Time Has Come**

I have presented John of the Cross's teaching about beginning contemplation in terms of the dark night and communion. I want to argue now that both these factors are part of religious culture today. The dark night has become democratized; the world

seems to be in the grip of a religious malaise that makes it difficult to relate to God in the old ways. And communion is an apt summary of Vatican II theology as regards both church functioning and personal spirituality. Pope John Paul II would authorize both these statements. He has written magisterially on the collective dark night, and has chosen communion as the watchword for the new millennium.<sup>4</sup>

Other writers have used the metaphor of dark night to describe the contemporary world. They do not take the phrase in the strict sense of John of the Cross, but as describing people's sociological lostness, confusion, and uncertainty that make it difficult for them to relate to God. Many today cannot imagine God as a real being, much less perceive him in any reassuring way.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is the horrendous suffering of the past century. "Our age," the pope writes, "speaks of the silence and absence of God. It has known so many calamities, so much. . . . suffering. The term *dark night* is now used of all of life and is not just a phase of the spiritual journey."<sup>5</sup> There have been wars, genocide, famine, AIDS, the terrorism of 9/11, and tragedies like the destruction of the shuttle *Columbia*. God seems to have abandoned the world. The optimism of modernity, which expected constant progress, has given way to the skepticism of postmodernism with doubt, fear, and anxiety the result. Authors speak of the "eclipse of God@ (Martin Buber, James Bacik) and Awintry, overcast" piety (Karl Rahner). Christ seems less the risen Pantocrator, Lord of all, than God on the cross in the middle of suffering and unanswered questions.

A story from Auschwitz told by Elie Wiesel illustrates this. Elie Wiesel himself

was a teenager in the death camp. Along with the other prisoners, he was forced to witness the execution of a young boy. As he watched the young boy swinging in the wind, too light to die immediately from the hanging, Wiesel heard a voice behind him say: "Where is God in all of this?" The answer came: "He is on that scaffold. God is suffering with us."

In the absence of answers and the presence of pain and suffering, our only recourse is faith without answers. Taking his cue from John of the Cross, the pope invites us to enter the night in a spirit of pure faith. God is silent as he was in the cave on Mount Horeb, where he revealed himself to Elijah the prophet. Elijah was fleeing for his life in desperation and reached Mount Horeb, another name for Sinai. In past theophanies God came in sensational cataclysms of nature, in fire, tornadoes, and storms. This time God came in the gentle breeze. A better translation for gentle breeze is "the sound of sheer silence" (NRSV version, 1 K 19:10). We meet God today in "the sound of sheer silence" in contemplative prayer.

This prayer promotes the experience of communion, which is the central concept of the spirituality proposed by Pope John Paul for the new millennium. The document under this title (*Novo millennio ineunte*) is like a last will and testament from our Holy Father. He has spoken elsewhere about the social and economic ills of our day. In this letter, he goes to the heart of the matter and addresses what must animate engagement with the world. "Be before you act,@ he says, and more specifically he offers the formula ALive the life of the Trinity and transform history."

"Live the life of the Trinity." This is the call to live in communion with God, to nurture the life of grace by the Holy

Eucharist and the sacrament of reconciliation, by reflection and meditation on the Bible, by prayer in all its modes, and significantly by the prayer of "silence and contemplation." In this last phrase the pope is hardly speaking directly about exalted forms of infused contemplation. He is promoting contemplative prayer for everyone. The whole letter emphasizes communion with God and with one another. The way of contemplative prayer actualizes the communion that is our gift in baptism. Our graced life is participation in the life of the Trinity. Contemplative prayer expresses that communion in an apophatic way, that is, knowing by unknowing, knowing by resting in the reality that is my true self and God within.

We are already one with God and with each other by our baptism. We are branches on the vine. We live in habitual communion, "no longer ourselves [alone], but Christ lives within us" (see Ga 2:20). Contemplative prayer recognizes that fact and makes it actual and conscious. "We need no wings to go in search of him," writes Teresa of Avila, "but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon him present within us."<sup>6</sup> We need only enter into silence on progressively deeper levels as we practice this prayer. Contemplative prayer will deepen our presence to God in our whole life. The Eucharist will enliven us more, the Bible will reveal the divine mystery more fully, the glory of God will shine on the faces of our sisters and brothers. We will make a greater difference in the world because we will be living *koinonia* in response to the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper:

I pray . . . that all may be one,  
as you, Father, are in me and  
I in you; I pray that they may

be [one] in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one, as we are one. I living in them, you living in me that their unity may be complete. (Jn 17:20-23)

**Ernest E. Larkin O.Carm** wrote "Desert Spirituality" for our July-August 2002 issue. His address remains Kino Institute; 1224 East Northern; Phoenix, Arizona 85020.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gunter Benker O.Carm, "A Contemplation, the Heart of the Carmelite Charism," in *Carmelite Formation*, ed. Alexander Vella and Gunter Benker (Rome, 2002), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Testimony of José de J.M Quiroga (1562-1628), cited by James Arraj in *From John of the Cross to Us* (Chiloquin, Oregon: Inner Growth Books, 1999), pp. 64-65.

<sup>3</sup> Arraj, *From John*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>4</sup> For the universalized dark night, see the apostolic letter "A Master in the Faith," for the centenary of the death of St. John of the Cross (Roma: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1991), pp. 22-23. For the role of communion in the church today, see John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001), especially part 4.

<sup>5</sup> "A Master in the Faith," p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, *Way of Perfection*, 28.2.