

## St John of the Cross: Loving knowledge of God

### **Biography**

St John of the Cross (1542-1591) was born and brought up in extreme poverty. He joined the Carmelite order, and was on the brink of leaving for the Carthusians when he met St Teresa of Avila who persuaded him to remain and reform the male branch of the Order. Attracting the envy of his brothers who objected to the Reform, he was abducted and imprisoned. It was in prison that he wrote some of his finest mystical poetry. His insights on the dark night of the soul and dryness in prayer, are a great help and comfort to many.

### **Teaching**

St John teaches that we go to God by two means: mortification and prayer. St John's teaching on the first – the way of self-abnegation – is an application of Our Lord's teaching to deny oneself daily (Lk 9.23). He wants us to extinguish every appetite however small, since these frivolous attachments (even to trifles) impede union with God. A little bird is as unable to fly – he explains – if it tied to a fine thread, as if it were attached to a thick cord. It is for the joy and beauty that attends a deep relationship with the Lord that John wants this freedom for us, and urges on us the renunciations which are the means of attaining it.

The principal need for the soul that seeks God is solitude. John invites us to enter our inner room to pray to Our Father, and to 'shut the door' on all the memories, and distractions, and selfish preoccupations that can get in the way. John, like Teresa, teaches us to discern and to use those things that help us to God, but cast aside whatever takes us away from Him.

### **Meditation**

John wishes us to imitate Christ. To imitate Christ, we must get to know Him, and we know Him by reading and pondering the Gospels. Devotion to the humanity of Christ and the love of Scripture is something we never abandon.

John teaches us the true purpose of meditation:

'The end of meditation and mental consideration of divine things is to obtain some knowledge and love of God' (*Ascent II*, 14.2).

John wants us to have immense desires. He doesn't leave us a method of meditation but the following describes an approach that was used by his novices:

The most important first step in prayer is 'making contact with God', and setting aside all our other preoccupations and personal projects. Without this, the whole enterprise can hardly get off the ground:

'Before reading the material for meditation, we should take great care to put ourselves in the presence of God, seeking by means of an energetic act of the will to put aside all alien thoughts, all preoccupation and haste.

'God is always present to us, but it is we who are not always present to Him. Therefore, we must establish contact with Our Lord and place ourselves near Him, by a conscious realization of His presence' (Fr Gabriel, *Divine Intimacy*, p. 450).

We can put ourselves in the presence of God either by:

- considering the Most Holy Trinity dwelling in our heart,

- or by approaching Jesus in the tabernacle,
- or by picturing to ourselves interiorly a scene from the life or passion of Christ.

We read the Gospel and then speak with God about it, as friend to friend, child to father. As we become aware of the love God has for us, this may lead us into expressions of gratitude, contrition and making resolutions and asking God to help us keep them. Getting into a conversation with the Lord about the subject we are pondering is the main end of meditation.

### **Indwelling/Recollection**

St John of the Cross teaches that God is within a soul in the state of grace through the presence of friendship: 'If anyone loves Me... My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and will make our home with him' (Jn 14:23).

'O soul, most beautiful of all creatures, that so greatly desires to know the place where your Beloved is, in order to seek Him and be united with Him.... It is a matter of great contentment and joy for you to see that He is so near you as to be within you. Rejoice and be glad in your inward recollection with Him, since you have Him so near. There desire Him, there adore Him, and do not go to seek Him outside yourself' (*Spiritual Canticle* 1.7,8).

### **'Dryness' (lack of consolation) leading to the Prayer of 'Loving Attentiveness'**

John gives very helpful insights on the state of spiritual dryness, and how this can be a very real gift from God who is drawing us into a deeper form of prayer. He gives guidance on how to distinguish whether this loss of consolation in prayer comes from infidelity, indisposition (illness or fatigue) or attachments, or when it is God inviting us to let go of more discursive meditative approaches to prayer, for a simpler prayer of loving knowledge.

Though it may not feel very satisfying in reality God is giving the person a very great blessing. The person praying should apply himself or herself

**'to remaining calmly in the presence of God attentive to Him by means of a simple glance of faith and love.** It should stay there and keep Him company, glad to be with Him, even if it has no feeling of His presence.... It is in contact with God in a way which is substantially better than that which it formerly had'.

### **So what do we *do* in this state?**

'Let the soul learn how to be still in God, fixing its loving attention upon Him, in the calm of the understanding though it may think it is doing nothing' (*Ascent Book II* 15.5).

Fr Gabriel explains

'This loving knowledge of God ... consists in a general, obscure 'sense of God, who secretly enamours the soul, without the assistance of feeling. This is why the soul, especially at first ... has the impression that it is no longer doing anything' (*Divine Intimacy*, ch. 158).

It is still good to prepare for prayer, with the Gospels, and begin always by making contact with God. As we become more sensitive, we will have a sense of when we are in the presence of God, albeit in obscurity, and when we are really in the middle of a tenacious distraction and are no longer really praying. At such moments we can pick up the Gospels again. We might 'yoyo' for some time between meditation and this simple glance of love: 'As long as the soul can reason with pleasure in meditation, it should not stop doing so until it is in the peace and quiet ... of loving attentiveness to God' (*Ascent II* 13:2-4).

In these times when we feel no love, St John encourages us, then is the time to give Him concrete *proofs* of love – doing little acts of love, simply to please Him. It is ultimately living the virtues of faith, hope and love that John believes prepare us for contemplative prayer, and unite us to Christ and transform us into Him.

The gains which come from this state are very great. The person becomes much more aware of her poverty and total need of God, more established in a continuous remembrance of God (1 *Dark Night* 13.4) and enjoys a greater reverence for Him. S/he is less tempted to judge others.

### **Reading John**

Fr Norbert Cummins OCD recommends starting with John's minor works – his Precautions, letters, Sayings and Maxims, and then reading *The Spiritual Canticle*, before embarking on the *Ascent* and *Dark Night* which logically ought to come first. To glimpse the beauty and joy of the journey's end (transformation in Love and the bliss of union with God), will mobilise us more readily to undertake the Way of the Cross that takes us to it, doing away, bit by bit, with our self-centredness and all that obstructs our path to God.

**by Dolgellau Carmel, Wales**

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