



**With St John of the Cross
To the Soul's Center which is God**
(cf. *Flame* 1,12)

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Mystics have the special gift of making us aware of the Transcendent reality. This fact is understandable since they themselves have been touched by the divine Mystery and share this experience through poetry and symbols. This is exactly what we find in Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), the greatest exponent of mysticism and of Spanish poetry of the 16th Century.

Guided by the teachings of the mystical Doctor and by the beauty of his poetic works, we are urged forward towards the One who is the *heat and the light*, the Living Flame of *Love*. As someone from the summit of the Mount inciting us to climb and admire the beauty of the panorama and as a fountain ever gushing forth its water in the most profound center of each human being, John of the Cross invites us to indulge in the abundance of goods, even in the dark and arid nights of life, in this interior Source of happiness which is the Holy Trinity.

The various themes our Holy Father covers in his teachings are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to speak of one without mentioning the others. It is a doctrine which harmoniously groups together all its elements. Therefore, I chose some aspects of the Saint's doctrine which I hope will help us deepen the reflection on the general theme of this OCDS Congress: "*Enkindling the fire within: Carmelite Spirituality for today's world*".

I will start by presenting the Major Works of John of the Cross, focusing on the theme: *union with God* (1); I will then go on presenting some features of his view of the human being (= soul) which is John of the Cross's anthropology (2). This will be followed by a synthesis of the theological virtues which are the appropriate means to reach the union with God (3), as well as the role of desire in the union (4). As the ultimate destination of the spiritual itinerary, I will present the state of transformation in the Beloved, especially described in the Flame (5) and will conclude with the Saint's request: "Proclaim this to the world!" (6), which reminds us of the mission to make known the interior wealth of all human beings inhabited by the Holy Trinity and called to enter in communion with the Father, with the Son and with the Holy Spirit.

1) "O sweetest love of God, so little known, whoever has found this rich mine is at rest!" (S 16)

Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) is known as the master in faith; he is also called the saint of the dark nights, of the nothing, of the renouncement, of the cross... However, these tags involve only some aspects of his doctrine, which, if separated from the central purpose of the Saint, do not correspond to the truth.

In fact, John wants to raise awareness of the "sweetest love of God" to ultimately lead us to communion with Him. His writings reflect his experience of the ineffability of the love of God-Trinity. A God of Communion hidden in the heart of each and every one of us (SC1,6-7) and whoever wants to live a loving and profound relationship with Him, or wording it as the Saint would, "union" with Him (Cf 2A 28,1; 16,9;9,4; 3A 15). However, in each of his Major Works he does this from a different point of view depending on the stage of the spiritual life he is describing. Being a master in the journey to God, he offers clear and secure guidance as to the divine paths which must be travelled to reach union. We shall see this later, when making a brief synthesis of each of his Major Works, in which we will discover the doctrinal project of John of the Cross.

The three books of the Ascent of Mount Carmel deal with the active purification of the person. His purpose is to lead us to a “total and permanent union according to the substance of the soul and its faculties, as to the obscure habit of union” (1 A 5,2). Book I of the Ascent covers the active purification (night) of the senses. This is the mortification of the voluntary disorderly appetites of all natural and supernatural things that can hinder union with God (1 A 4,1; 5,2; 11,2-3). This first book serves as a general introduction to the theme, which is “the night”. The second book of the Ascent deals with the active purification (active night) of the spirit by means of the theological virtues. These virtues work together (2 A 24,8) and cause darkness in the faculties of the soul (intellect, memory and will) as to their natural function. As for the third book, it focuses on the purgation in the active night of the memory (3 A 2-15) and of the will (3 A 16-43) through hope and charity.

These three books above all describe ascetic efforts to be freed from one’s own appetites and natural impulses, which stand in the way of communion with God. John of the Cross especially intends to “regulate the will according to reason” (3 A 17,2) and thus submit to reason the natural impulses and appetites that hinder union with God:

“Hence, we call this nakedness a night for the soul, for we are not discussing the mere lack of things; this lack will not divest the soul if it craves for all these objects. We are dealing with the denudation of the soul's appetites and gratifications. This is what leaves it free and empty of all things, even though it possesses them. Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within that cause the damage when set on these things” (1 A 3,4).

The motive for this radical option is to “imitate Christ in all deeds by bringing one’s life into conformity with his” (1 A 13,3) and discover that God is “all and everything” (2 A 16,10): “in its eyes all things are nothing and it itself is also nothing. Only God is everything” (SC 1,32). As an answer to this desire, the soul empties itself of all that is not God for the very love of God.

The three books of the Ascent are complemented by the two books of the Dark Night of the Soul. In the first, the Saint addresses the passive purification of the senses and, in the second, the passive purification of the spirit. Night means the influx of divine interference in a person’s life and the intensity of the divine light, far exceeding the natural capacity of human understanding and knowledge, which causes darkness in his faculties. By the experience of the night, (and here we have one of the most original aspects of the Saint), we know that even in the midst of sufferings, God remains faithful to His love for the person, He does not abandon him. He watches over him faithfully. But it is a veiled presence, unnoticed by the senses. At the same time, it is a blissful experience since it permits to pass through the night and reach union with God: “O night that has United the Lover with his beloved”. Passive night also means that the person suffers and is patient during the healing. The apparent passivity experienced during this night shows that God alone can lead him to divine union. The person responds with faith and trust in Him even though he is surrounded by darkness and suffering. In this way, he allows the progress of the purification process of habits and attitudes of the “old” self, to put on the “new” self shaped by the harmony of love. Here is how the Saint describes it:

*“One might, then, in a certain way ponder how remarkable and how strong this enkindling of love in the spirit can be. God gathers together all the strength, faculties, and appetites of the soul, spiritual and sensory alike, so the energy and power of this whole harmonious composite may be employed in this love. The soul consequently arrives at the true fulfillment of the first commandment which, neither disdaining anything human nor excluding it from this love, states: *You shall love your God with your whole heart, and with your whole mind, and with your whole soul, and with all your strength* (Dt. 6:5)”. (2N 11,4)*

The Saint starts his Spiritual Cantic showing a soul already wounded by the love of its Spouse and goes on to describe its firm decision to begin a process of pursuit and union with the Beloved. It has been enticed by such thoughts as “the nowness of life”, “the redeeming love of Christ” and now flees from itself and all created things burning with love for Christ. Placed under the spiritual category of matrimony, this process is lived by the soul anxiously seeking and finding the Beloved/Spouse in profound and intense encounters in which He reveals Himself, and then hides again, provoking a cycle of new search and ever deeper encounters. When reaching the culminating stages of the spiritual process, it experiences an ever-increasing longing for eternal life (SC 35-40) and consummation of the definite union with God in eternity. In the *Flame* Saint John will say: “*All the gifts, first and last, great and small, that God grants to the soul, he always grants in order to lead it to eternal life*” (Flame 3,10).

Finally comes the Living Flame of Love, the book of his spiritual maturity. This is where John of the Cross describes “*the intimate and qualified union and transformation of the soul in God*” (Flame ep.). Of all his writings, the Living Flame of Love is the book that narrates God’s surrender to the soul. The four stanzas of this poem proclaim in an unsurpassed way the mystery of the actual authentic union of the soul with God. Explaining it stanza by stanza, John tries to translate into words this high state of substantial union with the Trinitarian Being, especially using the symbol of fire. But he feels the difficulty of putting into words this state of union with the Trinity and so refuses to go on with his comments: “*I do not desire to speak of this aspiration, filled with goods and glory and delicate love of God for the soul, for I am aware of being incapable of doing so; and were I to try, it might seem less than it is.*” (Flame 4,17). This is an entirely understandable reaction since the Saint had previously written that: “*What a person knows and experiences of God in this awakening is entirely beyond words*”. (Flame 4,10).

In short, John of the Cross’s doctrinal Project, as set down in his Works, is described as a journey - ascent - search, also as purification - interior renewal - leading to a full communion with God. A union of likeness through love:

“Consequently, in discussing union with God we are not discussing the substantial union that always exists, but the soul's union with and transformation in God that does not always exist, except when there is likeness of love. We will call it the union of likeness; and the former, the essential or substantial union. The union of likeness is supernatural; the other, natural. The supernatural union exists when God's and the soul's will are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love” (2A 5,3).

It is important to remember that the union is proportional to the greater or lesser capacity of each soul (2A 5,10) so is the time frame in which it happens: “*This preparation takes time, for some more than for others, since God carries out this work according to the mode of the soul*” (Flame 3,25). The intensity of union also varies in degrees. As the individual purifies and voids himself of all attraction to the things of this world, divine love is slowly infused to fill this void and transform him interiorly (2A 15,4), completely unifying him in the love and service of God:

“Since in the last stanza the soul - or better, the bride - said she surrendered herself entirely to the Bridegroom without keeping anything back, she now tells her mode and method of accomplishing this, saying that now she occupies her soul and body, her faculties and all her ability, in nothing other than the service of her Bridegroom. And she says that on this account she no longer goes about in search of her own gain or pleasures, nor occupies herself with things and matters foreign to God; and even in dealing with God himself she has no other style or manner than the exercise of love, since she has now traded and changed all her first manner of dealing with him into love” ... (SC 28,2).

Plenitude of human life is thus reached: to live in communion of love with God. This is why the human being was created in the image and likeness of God (SC 39, 3-4; Cf GS 19): *“When the soul has become established in the quietude of solitary love of her Bridegroom, as has this one of whom we are speaking, she is settled in God, and God in her, with so much delight that she has no need of other masters or means to direct her to him, for now God is her guide and her light”*. (SC 35,1).

But, one may ask: what is the concept that Saint John of the Cross had of the human being? This will be answered in the following presentation of the general lines of anthropology according to Saint John of the Cross.

2) **“The soul, in itself is a perfect and extremely beautiful image of God” (1 A 9,1).**

God and the human being are the central figures of Saint John of the Cross’s doctrine. God gives Himself to us in Jesus, “so the God would be the Man, and the Man would be the God”. This very man whom the Holy Spirit guides to become the likeness of Christ (Romance 2). He also prepares to be the dwelling of the Word (SC 17,8). Man was created by divine love and “awaits the conclusion of this work” (SC 9,8) for this is the reason why he was created (SC 39,4). Keeping in mind those two fundamental facts, let us have a look at some features of Saint John of the Cross’s anthropology .

Above all, it is important to remember that the doctrinal basis for Saint John of the Cross’s anthropology coincides with the Biblical anthropology and the Catholic doctrine. The human being is created after God’s likeness and is redeemed by Christ (Gn 1,26; cf SC 1,1; 39,4). It is a unitary being composed of body and spirit in one “suppositum” (2N 1,1). It is “sensual and spiritual” at the same time (3A 26, 3-4) predestined to glory and “to love God even as it is loved by Him” (SC 38.3-4) and “having infinite capacity” (2A 17,8; Flame 3, 18.22).

John of the Cross describes the human being as a unitary being composed of body and soul, he claims that the two parts are related and that there exists communication between them (1N 14,2; 2N 3,1), between the senses and reason (SC 18,7; 19,5), between knowledge and love (SC 2,6; 6,2). The interdependence and communication between those parts form an inseparable unit, “one person only” (2 N 1,1).

This unit, however, experiences the tension which exists between the sense and the spirit since this reality is part of human nature, as pointed out by Saint Paul (cf Rm 7). Therefore, his doctrine conceives an integration between “the sense and the spirit” through purification (night: 1 A 1,2). Likewise, he teaches how to pass from the stage of being a “sensual” man to become a “spiritual” man (3 A 26,3), from the old self to the new self, (1 A 5,7; 2N 3,3). It is a journey towards freedom of the spirit (1 A 4,6; 2 N 14,3) which is reached at the highest peak of union (SC 26,4; Flame 2, 78).

The sensual man allows impulses and appetites to dominate him: “whoever looks for gratification and enjoyment in sensible objects deserves no other title than sensual, animal, earthly, and so on” (3 A 26,3; 2 A 19,11). The forces of the sensory part of the human being concern creatures and temporal things (2 A 4,2). This sensory part is composed of “the body and its senses and interior and exterior faculties” (C 28,4 3 A 24,1), which in a general way he calls sensuality (1 N 42) and are related to sensory objects (2 A 6,6). The symbols in the Canticles are *the suburbs* of the soul (SC 18,7) which have to do with meditation (2 A 14, 6-7; 1 N 12,5). Whoever is guided by the senses will easily be misled (Flame 3,73) since the senses lack competence in purely spiritual matters (1N 9,4; SC 19,5; Flame 3,54). Therefore, whoever is guided by the senses is unable to know and understand God (3 A 24,2).

The “spiritual” man, on the contrary, tends to focus his life on the spirit, “on what is spiritual” (2 A 4,2), which is the “part of his nature that bears relation to God and communicates with Him” (3 A 26,4). This superior part of the human being is interior (C 18,7) and rational (2 A 2,2). It is also the part which relates and communicates with God (3 A 26,4; 2 A 4,2). Belonging to this superior part are the interior spiritual faculties (2 A 6,6; 14,12 SC 16,11):

understanding, memory and will. However all knowledge received by them is through the senses (1 A, 3,3; 2 A 3,2; 8,4: 16.. 2-4; 17,3). “The soul cannot work naturally here, nor make any efforts of its own otherwise than through the bodily senses” (Flame 1, 11; 3,66). However, it has the capacity of reaching what is spiritual (Flame 2,14).

Saint John uses the expression “natural understanding” as being the normal human way of knowing. Through his own “work” he purges the values and services of the senses, forming clear and distinct or specific ideas and knowledge. Those too must be denied (Flame 2,14) to reach union since “God does not pertain to distinct and particular knowledge” (3 A 2,4; 2 A 16,7). This originates the need for faith which “darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding” (2 A 21,11), which is, according to Saint John, doing things according to reason (S 19.36.43-45; 2 A21,1-4; 22,15) and not motivated by the relish of things (S 34).

By purifying the senses and the spirit (Cf 1 N 4,8) John of the Cross propose a way for integration of existing tensions and conflicts between the sensual and spiritual parts of the human being, a process to recuperate original harmony. The human being, as a responsible and free being, is requested to build himself into a vital synthesis. “In this purgation, these two portions of the soul will undergo complete purification, for one part is never adequately purged without the other. The real purgation of the senses begins with the spirit. Hence the night of the senses we explained should be called a certain reformation and bridling of the appetite rather than a purgation. The reason is that all the imperfections and disorders of the sensory part are rooted in the spirit and from it receive their strength. All good and evil habits reside in the spirit and until these habits are purged, the senses cannot be completely purified of their rebellions and vices. In this night that follows both parts are jointly purified” (2N 3,1; Cf. S prol., 3).

Through meditation, which is fundamental to beginners, “the spirit makes progress in particular acts and receives morsels of spiritual communication” (2 A 17,5). Such acts entail growth and the practice of virtues as well as strengthen the spiritual part. The new man looks up to conformity with Christ as his ideal (1 A 13,3). One must then “study” Christ’s life, that is, “consider with particular attention and esteem what is observed” (1 A 13,3; SC 31,4) so as to forget the human way of proceeding and assume the divine one.

In this purifying process of transformation, one must necessarily be guided by the three theological virtues which unite us to God, purifying our relationship with Him and with others as we will see hereafter.

3) “These three virtues ... are the means and preparation for the soul's union with God” (2 A 6,6)

Before discussing the three theological virtues, it is important to emphasize that this journey is undertaken under the guidance of Christ. The person of Christ is God the *Father’s only Word*, he is the answer to all questions, vision and revelation. In Jesus we have a “brother, master, companion, ransom, and reward”; in Him God the Father has spoken all and has revealed and manifested Himself definitively. He has nothing else to reveal by extraordinary means (cf 2 A 22,5). Once we receive redemption and are immersed in the Mystery of Christ we are espoused once and for all through Baptism (SC 23,6). Baptism gives all conditions to live a new relationship with God through the theological virtues. According to Saint John of the Cross faith, hope and charity are the appropriate means for union with God and refer directly to Him (cf. 2N 2,5; 2 A 32,4; 2 A 29,6).

In order to defeat the three traditional enemies of the soul (the world, the devil, and the flesh: Cf SC 3) and walk securely, one must “journey through this dark night with the support of these three virtues which darken and empty it of all things” (2 A 6,1). They are virtues that work together (2 A 24,8) and purify the soul of all that is not God, therefore leading it to union with God (2 A 6, 2 N 21). St. John Paul II in his letter to the Order on occasion of the IVth centenary of the death of Saint John of the Cross, recognized that “One of the most valuable contributions of Saint John of the Cross to Christian spirituality is his doctrine on the development of the

theological life. In his written or oral teachings, he focuses on the trilogy of faith, hope and charity, which embodies original attitudes of the Christian existence”.

In his project of leading the whole man to union with God, Saint John of the Cross links each of the theological virtues to a corresponding psychological dimension of the person:

“We must discuss the method of leading the three faculties (intellect, memory, and will) into this spiritual night, the means to divine union. But we must first explain how the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity (related to these faculties as their proper supernatural objects), through which the soul is united with God, cause the same emptiness and darkness in their respective faculties: faith in the intellect, hope in the memory, and charity in the will. Then we shall explain how in order to journey to God the intellect must be perfected in the darkness of faith, the memory in the emptiness of hope, and the will in the nakedness and absence of every affection” (2 A 6,1).

“As a result, it will be seen how necessary it is for the soul, if it is to walk securely, to journey through this dark night with the support of these three virtues. They darken and empty it of all things. As we said the soul is not united with God in this life through understanding, or through enjoyment, or through imagination, or through any other sense; but only faith, hope, and charity (according to the intellect, memory, and will) can unite the soul with God in this life” (2 A 6,1).

Faith is bound to the intellect and “gives and communicates to us God Himself” (SC 12,4) “for the likeness between faith and God is so close that no difference exists between believing in God and seeing him” (2 A 9,1). “Faith is the proximate and proportionate means to the intellect for the attainment of the divine union of love” (2 A 9,1). Individuals should, therefore, journey in the way of faith (2 A 22, 19; 23, 1; 27,7; 2 N 2,5; 19,11), grow in faith so as to only seek God in faith (SC 1,12), and not lean on one’s own experience or knowledge of God, who is incomprehensible and inaccessible to human intelligence (1N 6,6; 2 A 4,2).

Hope purges the memory of possessions and places it in a crisis of being, going from “memory of self” to “memory of God”, since “in the measure that individuals dispossess their memory of forms and objects, which are not God, they will fix it on God and preserve it empty, so as to hope for the fullness of their memory from him” (3 A 15,1). “Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St Paul says, *“hope is for that which is not possessed”* (Rom 8:24). It withdraws the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for” (2 N 21,11). Both faith and charity act on hope. Faith gives true knowledge of God and all reality (2 N 21,6). This is why “the greater the soul’s knowledge of God the greater is its desire to see Him and the greater its pain when it cannot” (SC 6,2). On the other hand, love “makes the soul run swiftly toward God... and it runs driven by hope which was strengthened by love” (2 N 20,1 13,5).

Charity gives us the whole spirit for “God is love” (1 Jn 4,8.16), meaning that before all it is a gift and grace and that “He loves us that we might love by means of the very love he bears toward us” (Letter 33). Those who have God as their all find delight in all things in Him for as St Paul states: *“though they have nothing in their heart, they possess everything with greater liberty”* (2 Cor 6:10) (3 A 20,3). Whoever purifies the will through love, that is “labors to divest and deprive himself for God of all that is not God” (2 A 5,7), finds pleasure in all things and experiences in this the fullness of his being. Therefore, declares Saint John of the Cross “the spiritual form of the spirit is the union of love” (2 N 3,3) and those who want to reach it, must go through a process of self denial, overcoming themselves, “going forth out of themselves, which is brought about by the love of God” (SC 1, 20-26). Such attitude must be “fired with love’s urgent longings ... finding satisfaction and strength in this love” (1 A 14,2).

The active purification of the spirit by the theological virtues triggers the entrance of the individual in those nights (Cf. 1 A 13,1; 2 A 6; 2 N 210). Saint John describes them as follows:

“This night, which as we say is contemplation, causes two kinds of darkness or purgation in spiritual persons according to the two parts of the soul, the sensory and the spiritual. Hence one night of purgation is sensory, by which the senses are purged and accommodated to the spirit; and the other night or purgation is spiritual, by which the spirit is purged and denuded as well as accommodated and prepared for union with God through love” (1 N 8,1).

There is an intimate relationship between the two forms of purification and one cannot go without the other: “In this purgation, these two portions of the soul will undergo complete purification, for one part is never adequately purged without the other. The real purgation of the senses begins with the spirit (2N 3,1).

Journeying through the nights, the individual restores the lost harmony which initially existed between the faculties (understanding, memory and will) and the senses (SC 18,3 lost; 25,11). Thus, the the soul gradually recovers the beauty it had originally received from the hands of the Creator (SC 33,3).

When leaving the state of meditation to enter that of contemplation, it is also important to remember the form of prayer which Saint John describes as *loving awareness*. The individual remains in the presence of God, without the acts and exercises of the faculties of the intellect and memory, without doing any particular act. John speaks of being “in the loving general knowledge or awareness of God” (2 A 14, 6) or “in the general obscure knowledge” (2 A 10,4; 15,3; Flame 3,49). Such a prayer implies knowledge together with love and goes beyond the usual mental and ideal concepts. He thus recommends that the individual “without particular considerations” (2 A 134), persists in a contemplative attitude, in loving awareness, in silence and interior listening. Such disposition has a highly healing effect on the faculties of the soul, especially on the memory since it heals with the love of God (cf. 2 A 14,6. 10-11) and leads to living all situations in the actual presence of God, observing his action in all things (2 A 26,6). Describing the second step on the ladder of love, the Saint says:

“The soul goes about so solicitously on this step that it looks for its Beloved in all things. In all its thoughts it turns immediately to the Beloved; in all converse and business it at once speaks about the Beloved; when eating, sleeping, keeping vigil, or doing anything else, it centers all its care on the Beloved, as we pointed out in speaking of the anxious longings of love. Since the soul is here convalescing and gaining strength in the love found in this second step” (2 N 19,2).

Thus, “the spiritual person is restored from the distraction into which he had fallen through excessive use of his senses. He becomes recollected in God “conserving his interior spirit” (3 A 26,2) and acquires “true liberty and wealth, bringing with it inestimable blessings” (2N 14,3). And the human spirit “having as it were an infinite capacity” (2 A 17,8; Flame 3, 18,22), makes the person live his being “God’s interlocutor” by means of Christ. To that end, he must enter “the deep caverns of the rock”, which are “deep with many windings” where he will discover “the deep mysteries of the wisdom of God in Christ (SC 37,1-4) and finally will “reach the centre of the spirit, the perfect life in Christ” (Flame 3, 14).

Consequently, this is the meeting point of the beginning and reason of the human being – created in the image and likeness of God, and his end – predestined to communion with God and to equality/union of love with Him. It is the fulfilment of the soul’s desire “to love God even as it is loved by Him ... because the lover would not be satisfied unless he felt that he loved as much as he is loved” (SC 38, 3-6).

To reach this goal and such equality of love, desire is essential.

4) “It is here calling out to creatures” (The Spring)

9. This eternal spring is hidden
in this living bread for our life's sake,
although it is night.

10. It is here calling out to creatures;
and they satisfy their thirst, although in darkness,
because it is night.

The natural desire a person has for God is an essential characteristic for the understanding of the human being.

Desire is a very important part of the doctrine professed by Teresa of Jesus, Thérèse of Lisieux and John of the Cross, Teresa Carmel's three Doctors of the Church. Saint Teresa of Jesus advises that “we should not cramp our good desires” since they help to go along journeying in love and prayer, if accompanied by works of virtues (Life 13,2-4; 15,14; 19,2, etc.). Saint Thérèse of Lisieux states “God cannot inspire unrealizable desires” (MC 2v) as that of being fully holy or fulfilling her vocation of being love in the heart of the Church (MB); following John of the Cross, she knows that God gives the desire to also fulfill it.

In Saint John of the Cross's doctrine, as we have already seen, the person in its totality is called to union with God (2N 1,1; 3,1; SC 13,4; cf. SC 28 4,8). Therefore, his spiritual pedagogy giving immense importance to this force could easily be called *pedagogy of desire*.

The Saint distinguishes between many desires and the desire. Ordinary desires are dispersive while the ultimate desire is fulfilled only with God, as he wrote in one of his sayings: “Deny your desires and you will find what your heart longs for” (Sayings 15). This is the “abysmal desire” which exists in the human heart: it is as fathomless as an abyss since it is the desire of the Supreme Good which “naturally and supernaturally attracts” (SC38,3). And this abysmal desire “is the disposition for union with God” (Flame 3,27).

When distinguishing between *many desires* and *the desire*, John warns us to check the objectivity and validity of the desires which guide and drive the spiritual process. He offers a very important checking criterion in his comments to Stanza II of the Spiritual Canticles saying:

“She calls her desires, affections, and moanings “shepherds,” because they pasture the soul with spiritual goods - a shepherd or pastor is one who feeds or pastures - and by means of these yearnings God communicates himself to her and gives her the divine pasture. Without them he communicates little to her. “You who go,” is like saying, you that go out through pure love. Not all the affections and desires reach him, but only those that go out through true love” (SC 2,2).

It is only when the spiritual desire springs from the love of God faithfully expressing it that it can lead to Him. Thus, the will unifying *all desires* in *the desire* leads the soul from dissipation caused by the appetites, affections, passions and all other desires, to unification of all in the one desire of “the honour and glory of God” (1 A 13,4; 16,2; 3 A 20,3), which one “desires with all its might” (SC 17,8).

Desire also seems an answer to the desire of God coming from the experience of first having been loved by the divine love, which left the soul “wounded with love” (SC 1,19). Suffering because of the absence and wanting to correspond to this love in the concrete life, it comes out of itself to engage “in the practice of all virtue and in the spiritual exercises of the active and contemplative life” (SP 3). This because only good desires are not enough as John himself wrote to a confrere: “I rejoice to see that God granted you so saintly desires, but greater joy would I have should you effectively practiced them”.

Another important point in Saint John of the Cross's pedagogy of desire appears when he comments on the verse: "fired with love's urgent longings" (1 A 14):

"The love of its Bridegroom is not the only requisite for conquering the strength of the sensitive appetites; an enkindling with urgent longings of love is also necessary. For the sensory appetites are moved and attracted toward sensory objects with such cravings that if the spiritual part of the soul is not fired with other, more urgent longings for spiritual things, the soul will be able neither to overcome the yoke of nature nor to enter the night of sense; nor will it have the courage to live in the darkness of all things by denying its appetites for them" (1 A 14, 2).

The inflammation of love for Christ, the preferential love for Him, is what makes it possible to overcome the force of desires and appetites for material and spiritual things.

On the other hand, on the journey to union, God's help becomes ever more important: God grants certain glimpses of Himself to stimulate the soul to leave behind desires of things of no value and go forth towards what really is important. He wrote to Sr Leonor of St Gabriel: "And I thank God for having desired to use you ...since His Majesty has done this in order to bring you greater profit. The more he wants to give, the more he makes us desire - even to the point of leaving us empty in order to fill us with goods." And God stimulates his desires granting "certain profound glimpses of His divinity and beauty to quicken their fervour, and to prepare them more and more for those graces which He will give them afterwards". Consequently, those special graces "make the soul long and faint away with the desire of that which is hidden in that presence" (SC 11 1.4). Such is the divine pedagogy that granting spiritual sweetness and comfort, God feeds the soul, so it may have the strength to detach itself from earthly things and desire only divine things (Cf Flame 3,32; 2N 3,1).

Thus, desire and its traction power are an integral part of Saint John of the Cross's total spiritual project, highly contributing to the union and transformation in God.

5) "Transforming the beloved in her Lover".

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

When describing the graces received during prayer, Saint Teresa has a double purpose: to reveal how merciful God has been with her and "to cause souls to covet so sublime a blessing" (Life 18,8) which is God's friendship.

Saint John of the Cross accomplishes this describing the state of mystical marriage as he does in *The Living Flame of love*.

He wrote the books *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul* because he was aware that many people were prepared and had the proficiency to attain union with God but got lost on the road to perfection for want of adequate spiritual direction. Besides giving information and guidance, his solid doctrine encourages the individual to move forward. Thus, the Saint dares "explain this matter" (A prol 3) to seek the high state of communion of love with God, especially in the *Living Flame of love*.

People who knew him say that *the Living Flame of Love* actually depicts Saint John of the Cross's own interior. This book shows clearly the profound communion he had with the mystery of the Holy Trinity. "Thus, the soul

magnifies the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, extolling those three grand gifts and graces which They perfect within it, in that They have changed death into life, transforming it in Themselves” (Flame 2,1).

So, being in communion with the Trinitarian Being, dwelling in the most intimate of himself, “the Holy Spirit is breathed into his soul in the Father and the Son in that transformation so as to unite it to Himself” (SC 39, 3). John of the Cross describes the action of each divine Person. Jesus Christ, the Son, is the Divine Word symbolized by the touch of the tender hand, which is the Father. This touch can be noted only by those who have already “profoundly polished and purified the very substance of the soul and who, making themselves strangers upon earth, shall purify themselves hidden from the face of all creatures” (Flame 2, 17.19). Indicating the Son by the touch, Saint John says that it is impossible to explain it conceptually because of its extreme tenderness. He declares that it has *a certain foretaste of eternal life* and *that the substance of God touches the substance of the soul* (cf. Flame 2,21).

“A reciprocal love is thus actually formed between God and the soul, like in the marriage union and surrender, in which the goods of both (the divine essence that each possesses freely by reason of the voluntary surrender between them) are possessed by both together. They say to each other what the Son of God spoke to the Father through St John: *Omnia mea tua sunt et tua mea sunt et clarificatus sum in eis* (All my things are yours and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them) (Jn. 17:10)”.

This is the state of permanent and constant union with God. The soul frequently feels the action of the Holy Spirit symbolized in the Living Flame of Love “not only as fire which consumes it, and transforms it in sweet love, but as a fire burning within it, sending forth a flame” (Flame 1,3). They are acts of union being like “flames which rise up out of the fire of love” (Flame 1,4). It “is said to be a burn: for the fire there is more intense, and more concentrated, and the effect of it surpasses that of all other fires” (Flame 2,3).

Very often the Beloved “reminds” (= awakes cf. Flame 4,4) the soul making it conscious of His presence with *acts of union in qualified and substantial love*, frequently involving the faculties. Thus, He raises awareness of the habitual and permanent union which exists in the substance of the soul (Flame 4.16). In this state, it is the “Holy Spirit” who acts and move the person to action (Flame 1,4; 4,16).

In other circumstances the soul act together with God: “The work of God and that of the soul is but one” (Flame 3, 78), “different in their being” they are one in their action: “The movements of the flame are the work of the soul and of the Holy Spirit together” (Flame 3, 10). All the movements of the soul are divine, and though of God, still they are the soul’s, because God effects them within it, itself willing them and assenting to them” (Flame 1,11).

In this state, the soul also experiences in itself the divine attributes as a mirror reflection. The divine attributes of omnipotence, wisdom, goodness, mercy, justice, strength, love, etc. (Cf Flame 3,3.9-10) are reflected in the soul and it receives light and warmth for effective action. For example, let us take the attribute of goodness: God is “essentially goodness” (1 A 4,4) which He communicates to the souls and loves them with the same goodness, having them experience his infinite goodness. The souls, in turn, correspond being good towards God and others. This capacity comes from “the goodness which it has in its inmost self” (Flame 3,3.7.15.78; 4,8). And so it is with all the other divine attributes. “The light which emanates from each of the attributes of God and from all the others, produces in the soul the fire of the love of God as such, as each one of these attributes is the very being of God. Thus God is to the soul in these communications and manifestations of Himself, which are, I think, the highest possible in this life, manifesting Himself as innumerable lamps from which light and love proceed” (Flame 3,3).

Therefore, describing the state of mystical marriage in the Living Flame of Love, Saint John of the Cross encourages us to fly high sustained by the strength of love, *surpassing ourselves to catch the prey* (Poem 10 – Of Falconry). This state leads the human being to live human and spiritual fullness.

“Having been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation. Although it is not God as perfectly as it will be in the next life, it is like the shadow of God. [28]

Being the shadow of God through this substantial transformation, it performs in this measure in God and through God what he through himself does in it. For the will of the two is one will, and thus God's operation and the soul's are one. Since God gives himself with a free and gracious will, so too the soul (possessing a will more generous and free the more it is united with God) gives to God, God himself in God; and this is a true and complete gift of the soul to God.

It is conscious then that God is indeed its own and that it possesses him by inheritance, with the right of ownership, as his adopted child through the grace of his gift of himself. Having him for its own, it can give him and communicate him to whomever it wishes. Thus it gives him to its Beloved, who is the very God who gave himself to it. By this donation it repays God for all it owes him, since it willingly gives as much as it receives from him” (Flame 3, 78).

6) “Proclaim this to the world!” (Flame 2, 17)

We have now reached the end of our journey to the “center of the soul which is God”! Guided by Saint John of the Cross, we join him repeating his loving outpouring to the Holy Trinity:

“O gentle breeze, since you are a delicate and mild breeze, tell us: How do you, the Word, the Son of God, touch mildly and gently, since you are so awesome and mighty?

Oh, happy is the soul that you, being terrible and strong, gently and lightly touch! Proclaim this to the world! But you are unwilling to proclaim this to the world because it does not know of a mild breeze, and will not experience you, for it can neither receive nor see you (Jn. 14:17). But they, O my God and my life, will see and experience your mild touch who withdraw from the world and become mild, bringing the mild into harmony with the mild, thus enabling themselves to experience and enjoy you. The more you dwell permanently hidden within them, the more gently you touch them, for the substance of their soul is now refined, cleansed, and purified, withdrawn from every creature and every touch and trace of creature. As a result, you hide them in the secret of your face, which is the Word, from human disturbance” (Ps. 30,21), (Flame 2,17).

Proclaim this to the world! This is our Holy Father's request ...

Proclaim to the world that we have an interior life so full of goods, an *interior castle* in which is hidden God the Trinity, anxiously waiting for a loving relationship with everyone created in his image and likeness, “saying: I am thine and for thee, and it is My pleasure to be what I am, that I may give Myself to thee and be thine” (Flame 3,7).

Proclaim to the world that the way to meet with God consists in affectively leave yourself and all things behind to rise above everything reaching the Creator of all...

Proclaim to the world that in Jesus Christ, the gentle touch, in Whom are enclosed all treasures and divine wisdom, we have the guarantee of the faithfulness of the Father to his covenant: “You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me in your only Son, Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire” (S 26).

Proclaim to the world that:

“as the sun rises in the morning and shines on your house so that its light may enter if you open the shutters, so God, who in watching over Israel does not doze or, still less, sleep, will enter the soul that is empty, and fill it with divine goods. God, like the sun, stands above souls ready to communicate himself” (Flame 3,46-47).

Proclaim to the world exclaiming with John:

“O souls created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing? How are you spending your time? Your aims are base and your possessions miseries! O wretched blindness of your eyes! You are blind to so brilliant a light and deaf to such loud voices because you fail to discern that insofar as you seek eminence and glory you remain miserable, base, ignorant, and unworthy of so many blessings! *“(Spiritual Canticle 39,7).*

Proclaim to the world that:

“When individuals love and do good to others, they love and do good to them in the measure of their own nature and properties. Thus your Bridegroom, dwelling within you, grants you favors according to his nature. Since he is omnipotent, he omnipotently loves and does good to you; since he is wise, you feel that he loves and does good to you with wisdom; since he is infinitely good, you feel that he loves you with goodness; since he is holy, you feel that with holiness he loves and favors you; since he is just, you feel that in justice he loves and favors you; since he is merciful, mild, and clement, you feel his mercy, mildness, and clemency; since he is a strong, sublime, and delicate being, you feel that his love for you is strong, sublime, and delicate; since he is pure and undefiled, you feel that he loves you in a pure and undefiled way; since he is truth, you feel that he loves you in truthfulness; since he is liberal, you feel that he liberally loves and favors you, without any personal profit, only in order to do good to you; since he is the virtue of supreme humility, he loves you with supreme humility and esteem and makes you his equal, gladly revealing himself to you in these ways of knowledge, in this his countenance filled with graces, and telling you in this his union, not without great rejoicing: "I am yours and for you and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you" (Flame 2,6).

Proclaim to the world that such love is a lot deeper than any other experience of human love:

“In this interior union God communicates himself to the soul with such genuine love that neither the affection of a mother, with which she so tenderly caresses her child, nor a brother's love, nor any friendship is comparable to it. The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favors and exalts this humble and loving soul reaches such a degree - O wonderful thing, worthy of all our awe and admiration! - that the Father himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though he were her servant and she his lord. And he is as solicitous in favoring her as he would be if he were her slave and she his god. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God!” (SC 27,1).

Let us conclude with the following prayer of our Holy Father Saint John of the Cross:

“Awaken and enlighten us, my Lord, so we might know and love the blessings that you ever propose to us, and we might understand that you have moved to bestow favors on us and have remembered us” (Flame 4,9).

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