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ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THE HIDDEN GOD

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This year the Catholic world celebrates the 400th anniversary of the death of St. John of the Cross. Pope John Paul II, who wrote his doctoral dissertation at the Angelicum on St. John's teaching concerning faith, has recently issued a beautiful Apostolic Letter on the thought of this great man who was both a mystic and a theologian. Fr. Donald Haggerty, in this beautiful essay, probes the dogma of the indwelling presence of the Trinity in the soul as found in the writings of this reformer of Carmel.

Where have You hidden, Beloved,
and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling You,
and You were gone.



THESE AGONIZED, OPENING LINES OF THE BRIDE IN *THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE* of St. John of the Cross do far more than set the poem firmly in the tradition of lyrical love poetry. Clearly the voice we hear bursting forth from silence, unleashing pent-up emotion, identifies a lover tormented by her own solitude. The complaint she makes is not so much a rebuke of her Beloved, but an overflow of unrelieved frustration. Yet even more fundamentally, this piercing lament of the bride presupposes a former period of joy in the presence of her Bridegroom, some prior experience with Him that left her once ravished, wounded, and suffering for His return. A mood of anguished tension is thus exposed, and the reader can rightly expect some subsequent resolution of the bride's self-conscious loneliness caused by her lover's absence.

But this is the first stanza of a poem whose lyric beauty has become inseparably bound to a systematic commentary by the same author, written some six years after the poem at the request of Madre Ana de Jesus, Prioress of the Discalced Carmelite nuns of St. Joseph in Grenada - and at least in part upon the author's knees - to unveil hidden meanings of a mystical import. It is a poem, moreover, of which the first thirty-one of forty stanzas were composed in the mind of the poet in a windowless six-by-ten foot converted closet that served as his prison cell for eight months in the Calced Carmelite monastery of Toledo. There, reduced to the verge of starvation and periodically

humiliated by public lashings before the assembled monks, the man who would later be called the Mystical Doctor of the Church endured his dark night of the soul. Doubtless he was unaware when he finally escaped before dawn on an August day in 1578 that the stanzas he carried in his memory would fructify into perhaps the richest writings the Church possesses on the mystical path.

Turning from the poem to the commentary of St. John of the Cross on this first stanza of *The Spiritual Canticle*, the reader encounters not a prosaic interpretation inferior in emotional power to the verses, but spiritual teaching as evocative as the poetry itself. Examined with a view in mind of St. John of the Cross' entire spiritual theology, this commentary on the first stanza possesses a remarkable synthetic power and can serve as a kind of beacon of theological light for the orientation of the would-be seeker of the path to union with God. The pivotal principle enunciated in these few short pages is the relation of the soul to God's divine presence. It is here we see how tightly linked are the poem and its commentary. In point of fact, the interplay of absence and presence, of thirst and satiation, of frustration and fulfillment in the bride's relations with her Bridegroom will prove the poetic correlative to the dynamic tension of spirit driving the soul onward to deepening union with God.

As a kind of miniature tapestry of St. John of the Cross' spiritual theology, this first stanza commentary depends on a particular dogmatic truth. This dogma we call the indwelling presence of the Blessed Trinity in the souls of the just. The importance of this commentary on the first stanza of *The Spiritual Canticle* for the entire commentary is directly connected to the centrality of this dogma in spiritual theology. Indeed Father Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P. went so far as to say that "the great mystical doctors, St. John of the Cross particularly, have built their works on the dogma of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity."¹ It should be no surprise, then, when we see St. John of the Cross speaking precisely of this dogma in section six of this opening commentary:

It should be known that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Ghost, is hidden by His essence and His presence in the innermost being of the soul. A person who wants to find Him should leave all things through affection and will, enter within himself in deepest recollection, and regard things as though they were nonexistent. St. Augustine, addressing God in the Soliloquies, said: I did not find You without, Lord, because I wrongly sought You without, Who were within...

God, then, is hidden in the soul and there the good contemplative must seek Him with love, exclaiming: "Where have you hidden?"²

St. John of the Cross' statement of the doctrine here is revealing because of the words he has chosen to express it. Rather than simply saying that the Trinity is present in, dwells in, or inhabits the souls of the just, that is, by an ontological formulation, St. John of the Cross has nuanced his description by adding an experiential dimension to the reality of the divine indwelling in the just soul. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not simply present in the soul, but hidden in the innermost being of the soul. The significance for St. John of the Cross of this quality of hiddenness in God's presence within the soul cannot be overstressed.



St. John of the Cross

Before we begin speaking of the nature of God's presence to the soul, and the quality of hiddenness in that presence, certain precise distinctions are in order. We need initially to prescind from our usual sense of the meaning of presence when applied to created objects. We think ordinarily of a finite object as occupying a circumscribed space, existing in a defined set of 'geographical' parameters that identify it as separate from other created objects. This sense of localized place which constitutes the reality of presence for material creation becomes completely unacceptable when referring, on the one hand, to God's omnipresence, that is, His so-called presence by immensity. The reason is that God is an infinite, self-subsistent being who cannot be confined, restricted, or localized to some spatial position relative to other created beings. Such a notion of localized spatial restriction would place

an impossible limitation on God's essential attribute of infinite being. God is absolute Spirit,³ the transcendent Other, and when we speak of His presence, we do so always from a conception of the infinite being who overwhelms all modes of the relative, the limited, and the divisible. "In Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 4:13)

But God's being, present everywhere, filling all things, and nowhere absent, must be distinguished from the particularity of God's actions. However penetrating, diffusive, and all-encompassing the presence of God's immensity is, it is necessary to affirm a special presence of the Trinity indwelling the soul in the state of grace above and beyond, so to speak, the presence by immensity. In actual fact, it is the same God present everywhere by His immensity who in a special manner 'comes' to the soul in the state of grace, thereby acting upon it and communicating Himself to it. The doctrine of the indwelling presence thus presupposes the presence of God's immensity. But this notion of God's coming to the soul when He is already present there needs some explanation, and we find it in our understanding of grace. Indeed, any consideration of the doctrine of the divine indwelling is always connected to the Church's teaching on grace.

Through sanctifying grace, received ordinarily at baptism, God comes to dwell in a new manner within a soul, which becomes, as it were, the temple or abode of the Blessed Trinity. Such a gracious gift on God's part is essentially a personal communication by which He gives Himself to the soul in order that a more intimate bond may exist between the soul and Himself. God's communication through grace, then, never takes place, however incomprehensively, without God imparting His own divine Self to the soul. With grace the soul receives the sublime privilege of an intimacy of friendship with the three divine Persons, an enjoyment of them through knowledge and love. In truth the soul can be said to participate through grace in the divine nature without, needless to say, losing its own creatureliness and distinction from God.

Why is the doctrine of the indwelling presence so vital to spiritual theology? Strictly from a consideration of ontological truth, the special presence of God in the depths of the soul in grace is ordered to a transformation of the soul. God inhabiting the soul can now become the intimate object of a knowledge and love that unites the soul with God in the bond of grace. The divine Persons

give themselves to the soul so that it might possess them in a real and substantial manner. But a real possession requires a real ontological presence of the divinity. Grace and the indwelling presence are thus inseparable ontological foundations for the soul's deepening knowledge and love of God.

There is, however, a psychological factor at work, and especially prominent in the writings of St. John of the Cross, by which this doctrine of the indwelling presence is intuited as the nexus for a singular intimacy between the soul and God. Any notion of a distant or impersonal God dissolves when He is understood to be the Guest of one's own flesh. Yet such a realization does not represent, at least for St. John of the Cross, a shift philosophically to an emphasis on the divine immanence in creation. Paradoxically it would seem, the more God is experienced as the source of one's own life of the spirit, the more powerfully transcendent, incomprehensible, and inaccessible His divinity becomes. For St. John of the Cross, the indwelling God, the God vivifying the soul with divine life, communicating Himself most certainly, nevertheless is, somewhat surprisingly, the quintessentially hidden God.



In the very beginning of his commentary on the first stanza of *The Spiritual Canticle*, St. John of the Cross alerts his reader to the allegorical nature of the bride's initial outburst of loving protest. On the one hand, St. John of the Cross identifies Christ as the real 'Beloved' of the poem. He is the true source of the bride's longings, and the vehemence of her passion now becomes perfectly understandable. Any less intensity would be crudely disproportionate to the perfection of love she must possess for union with the divine Son. The Christological locus of all the soul's strivings is thus early and unambiguously established.⁴

On the other hand, St. John of the Cross defines the terminus of the soul's quest: "The soul, enamoured of the Word, her Bridegroom, the Son of God, longs for union with Him through clear and essential vision."⁵ This latter phrase - "union with Him through clear and essential vision" - serves a dual purpose. While clarifying exactly the end of her desire, these words likewise betray

the inevitability of her suffering. Clear and essential vision of Christ contrasts with the evident blindness of earthly eyes unable to attain the invisible reality of the divine Person. For to gaze upon God, to see Him face to face, is a privilege reserved to the soul only upon entrance into heaven.

Consciousness of an incapacity for the beatific vision in this life necessarily causes a frustration in the soul seeking union with God. St. John of the Cross translates that frustration of a soul bound to life in the flesh as a distressing sense of the divine absence. “She must suffer her Beloved’s absence, for she is not freed from mortal flesh as the enjoyment of Him in eternity requires.”⁶ The reader would be remiss not to recognize an essential point here. The spiritual quest for union with God will culminate definitively only in the next life. As such, it is preconditioned by the soul’s basic inability in the present life to see the face of God. Always some element of incompleteness, perhaps of obscurity or of tenuousness, some unabated hunger or gnawing dissatisfaction, will mark even the highest states of holiness. The fact that St. John of the Cross has introduced mention of the state of beatitude at the outset of his commentary is no insignificant matter. Only when we realize that the glory of eternity in heaven will consist of a direct, unhindered vision of the divine essence does the actual deprivation of our limited perception of God in this present life dawn on us.

If we turn for a moment to hear what St. John of the Cross has to say of the soul in heaven near the end of *The Spiritual Canticle*, we are privy to more than simply a pious speculation on an unknown reality. In actual fact, the goal conditions the nature of the path to it.

Just as the soul, according to St. Paul, will know then as she is known by God (1Cor. 13:12), so she will also love God as she is loved by Him. As her intellect will be the intellect of God, her will will be God’s will, and thus her love will be God’s love. The soul’s will is not destroyed there, but it is so firmly united with the strength of God’s will, with which He loves her, that her love for Him is as strong and perfect as His love for her, for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God’s ... it is precisely by giving her His love there, that He shows her how to love as He loves her. Besides teaching her to love purely, freely, and disinterestedly, as He loves her, God makes her love Him with the very strength

with which He loves her. Transforming her into His love, as we said, He gives her His own strength by which she can love Him...

Until attaining this equality of love the soul is dissatisfied.⁷

The root of this unavailing dissatisfaction in the soul will be discovered, then, in the unrealizable nature of its present desire. However relentless its pursuit of the divine Lover, what the soul seeks is hopelessly beyond its reach in this life. “She seeks the manifestation of His divine essence, because the hiding place of the Word of God is, as St. John asserts (Jn. 1:18), the bosom of the Father, that is, the divine essence, which is alien to every mortal eye and hidden from every human intellect.”⁸ It should be no surprise that this verse from the Gospel of John begins by saying that “no one has ever seen God,” for the sentence quoted initiates St. John of the Cross’ discussion on the first line of his poem - “Where have You hidden?” The significance of this phrase, as we suggested earlier, is at the crux of his teaching. The soul’s path to union with God will be above all a dynamic movement of personal relations with a God unseen, yet known in the Son, carried out quietly, unobtrusively, and secretly, within the heart of the soul.

St. John of the Cross’ own understanding of God’s apparent impenetrable hiddenness in His relation to the soul’s experience of Him is a fundamental spiritual truth. However far advanced a soul may proceed toward union with God, one reality remains unchanged: the struggle for union with God will involve a deepening confrontation with the incomprehensibility and inaccessibility of the One loved and longed for. From beginning to end in its pursuit of holiness, the soul will be driven by its very blindness to seek the hidden One whom it cannot see.⁹ St. John of the Cross states this truth quite explicitly in section eleven of this first stanza commentary: “Even though the soul reaches union in this life (the highest state attainable here below), she always exclaims: ‘Where have You hidden?’ For even in the state of union He is still hidden from her in the bosom of the Father, which is how she wants to enjoy Him in the next life.”¹⁰

It is important to realize that when St. John of the Cross states that God is hidden and the soul must necessarily seek Him as hidden if it is to remain in truth, he is neither denying a real and singular relationship between a unique soul and God, nor implying that the soul has no personal experience of that relationship. But for St. John

of the Cross it is only by the soul's own plunge into the heart of God's mystery that the ontological truth of God dwelling in the innermost being of the soul is guarded from distortion.¹¹ And yet that mystery, of an infinite depth, impedes the very aim of the soul for clear experience and knowledge of God. What St. John of the Cross is doing, in effect, when he lays a primary accent on the hiddenness of God, is to modify immediately any discussion of the soul's direct experiential knowledge of God with a fundamental truth about the being of God. The following words from the first stanza commentary are particularly impressive in this regard:

However elevated God's communications and the experience of His presence are, and however sublime a person's knowledge of Him may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to Him, because, indeed, He is still hidden to the soul. Hence, regardless of all these lofty experiences, a person should think of Him as hidden and seek Him as one who is hidden, saying: 'Where have You hidden?'

Neither is the sublime communication or the sensible awareness of His nearness a sure testimony of His gracious presence, nor is dryness and the lack of these a reflection of His absence. As a result, the prophet Job exclaims: If He comes to me I shall not see Him, and if He goes away I shall not understand. (Jb. 9:11)¹²

The emphasis in the first paragraph is upon the insufficiency of the soul's personal knowledge and experience to do more than intimate, hint at, or apprehend distantly and tentatively the reality of God, who remains always "still hidden to the soul." Because God is infinitely transcendent to His creatures, His communications to the soul can never be equivalent to possession of the fullness of His being.¹³ Yet for St. John of the Cross it is not so much in the creature's conceptual knowledge of God but in a person's affective experience of God that the divine transcendence subdues the human effort to penetrate it. Thus we see in the second paragraph above that he completely discounts the experiences of sensible consolation or aridity as valid criteria for God's real presence or absence to the soul. It seems that the inaccessibility of the divine nature to human affectivity plays a weightier

role than the incomprehensibility of the divine nature to human intelligence. St. John of the Cross is not unconcerned with the soul's knowledge of God, but the cognition he aims at is the mystical knowledge of undeniable contact with the being of God. The question he will address, then, is not whether metaphysics can lay hold of the essential truth of God but whether our soul can be grasped by definitive experience of the divine truth.

One of the most powerful passages in St. John of the Cross' entire corpus occurs in section twelve of this first commentary. It illustrates well his concentration on the subjective consequences for the soul which an awareness of God's transcendence provokes. Notice in particular how the hiddenness of God acquires a positive aspect. God's hiddenness to the soul, His inaccessibility and concealment, though a cause of pain for the soul, is not an obstacle that the soul must seek to overcome as though it were stripping veils away to uncover the underlying divine reality. No, the sense of God's hiddenness plays a dynamically positive role and is meant to intensify for the soul as it draws nearer to divine Love. By a magnificent paradox the transcendence of God becomes more transcendent for the soul as God becomes more immanently the absolute focal point of the soul's interior life. And the experience of darkness and obscurity increases in proportion as the 'distance' between God and the soul diminishes.¹⁴



*"Never stop with loving
and delighting in your
understanding and experience
of God, but love and delight in
what is neither understandable
nor perceptible of Him."*



Seek Him ever as one hidden, for you exalt God immensely and approach very near Him when you consider Him higher and deeper than anything you can reach. Hence, pay no attention, neither partially nor entirely, to anything which your faculties can grasp. I mean that you should never desire satisfaction in what you understand about Him. Never stop with loving and delighting in your understanding and experience of God, but love and delight in what is neither understandable nor perceptible of Him. Such is the way, as we said, of seeking Him in faith. However surely it may seem that you find, experience, and understand God, you must, because He is inaccessible and concealed, always regard Him as hidden, and serve Him who is hidden in a secret way. Do not

be like the many foolish ones who, in their lowly understanding of God, think that when they do not understand, taste, or experience Him, He is far away and concealed. The contrary belief would be truer. The less distinct is their understanding of Him, the closer they approach Him, since in the words of the prophet David, He made darkness His hiding place. (Ps. 17:12) Thus in drawing near Him, you will experience darkness because of the weakness of your eye.¹⁵

Although St. John of the Cross' perspective here is clearly to enlighten the soul's subjective experience, the paragraph resonates with the objective truth of an absolute ontological demarcation between creatureliness and the infinitely transcendent God.¹⁶ This description of the profound distinction between God and creature, however, should not be off-putting, discouraging, or uninviting. To speak of God as hidden and concealed is far different than to say He is distant, or absent, or to proclaim His death.¹⁷ Concealment presumes presence, and in fact, prior to this quotation St. John of the Cross explicitly recalls the dogma of the indwelling presence, and draws out the consequences of the doctrine with an almost admonitory tone of voice.

Oh, then, soul... so anxious to know the dwelling place of your Beloved that you may go in quest of Him and be united with Him, now we are telling you that you yourself are His dwelling and His secret chamber and hiding place ... so close to you as to be within you ... What more do you want, O soul! And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess ... your Beloved whom you desire and seek? ... There is but one difficulty, even though He does abide within you, He is hidden.¹⁸

The consolation of the ontological truth of the indwelling of the Trinity within the soul is thus offset by dissatisfaction on the experiential level of the soul's subjectivity. St. John of the Cross acknowledges that conflict and counters with his own provocative answer to the dilemma: "Since He Whom my soul loves is within me, why don't I find Him or experience Him? The reason is that He remains concealed and you do not also conceal yourself in order to encounter and experience Him."¹⁹

Thus far our primary effort has been to expose the prominence St. John of the Cross grants to the quality of impenetrable hiddenness which God never fully

relinquishes while the soul remains in this life. Are we facing somewhat clashing truths, or is not a reconciliation in order, such that the reality of the Trinity's substantial presence dwelling within the soul profoundly affects the soul's experience of God? Are we confounded by St. John of the Cross himself and forced to relegate all questions of the soul's experience of God to the category of hiddenness and the unknown? Or can it rather be said that once we have embraced the fact of God's concealment to the soul's experience of Him, the definitive path to union with God is openly in view?

"Mystical wisdom, which comes through love and is the object of these stanzas, need not be understood distinctly in order to cause love and affection in the soul, for it is given according to the mode of faith, through which we love God without understanding Him."²⁰ This concise statement from the prologue to *The Spiritual Canticle* is as potent with implication as it is brief. St. John of the Cross is clearly distinguishing the soul's love for God from its understanding of God. As the soul's love deepens, there is no necessary correlation to an expanded knowledge of the God of mystery. For the soul knows God through faith, a virtue which, as St. John of the Cross tirelessly repeats throughout his works, "causes darkness and a void of understanding in the intellect."²¹ Though the increase of love implies no enlargement of understanding, greater love does indeed transform the soul's mode of knowing God by vivifying the virtue of faith. Through the increase of love the soul knows God with a more intense certainty, but without a corresponding diminishment of obscurity in the intellect.²²

There is no contradiction between the soul's certitude in knowing God and the lack of clarity in that knowledge. According to St. John of the Cross, an un-failing obscurity of intellect characterizes the soul's experience of faith. Indeed, he is very exacting and forceful in stating that the virtue of faith causes a darkness in the intellect, but a necessary darkness if the soul is to draw nearer to God.

Faith is darkness to the intellect. Since the intellect cannot understand the nature of God, it must journey in submission to Him rather than by understanding, and thus it advances by not understanding.²³

The reason for the darkness is simply the unattainable nature of the divine truth for human intellect.

Through the assent of faith the intellect adheres with certitude to divinely revealed truths beyond its natural capacity for knowledge.²⁴ These revealed truths known in faith constitute invisible realities outside any apparent natural evidence. No proof by sense exists to support their affirmation. Yet the intellect in its natural mode of understanding acquires knowledge precisely through the senses. Every object of natural understanding ultimately depends on knowledge derived from the senses. Even conceptual knowledge is bound to symbols and analogies culled from sense experience.

Because the supernatural truths of divine revelation transcend the intellect's natural capacity for knowledge, the intellect engages them to the frustration of its natural powers. The clarity of knowledge which the intellect seeks by its very nature gives way to a painful obscurity. For the divine truths of faith as objects of knowledge are un-proportioned to knowledge acquired through the senses. There is a great abyss separating knowledge of supernatural realities and knowledge of the natural world.

Everything the intellect can understand, the will experience, and the imagination picture is most unlike and disproportioned to God.²⁵

As such, faith conveys a light of knowledge to the intellect, but this is a supernatural knowledge that blinds the natural powers while illuminating the soul with excessive light.

St. John of the Cross' pointed, almost ruthless stress on the soul's need to disregard all apparent communications and experiences of the presence of God begins to make greater sense now. The incomprehensibility of God's infinite existence to the human intellect conditions the entire path to union with Him. That path to union with God does not entail ever more sublime communications from a God slowly chiseling for view the contours of His true face. No, the real path proceeds as an advancement through darkness, with the certitude of faith as support and guide, toward the God always beyond the reach of a definitive experience or of comprehensive knowledge.

For God's being cannot be grasped by the intellect, appetite, imagination, or any other sense, nor can it be known in this life. The most that can be felt and tasted of God in this life is in-

finitely distant from God and the pure possession of Him.²⁶

Only by abiding in the blindness of faith, that is, in a certitude of belief in God's being, does the soul proceed deeper into the boundlessness of God's truth.²⁷

A more intense certainty in the mode of knowing God bears a fitting relation to the persistent hiddenness of God for the soul. It is the soul's increasing sensitivity to the hidden presence of God that elicits from it an ever greater surrender of faith. Indeed the very nature of faith requires belief in a reality that cannot be seen.

Faith nullifies the light of the intellect, and if this light is not darkened, the knowledge of faith is lost. Accordingly, Isaias said: *Si non credideritis, non intelligetis* (If you do not believe, you will not understand.)²⁸



A deeper certitude in knowing God through faith, then, does not procure a knowledge of God less veiled in mystery. Even as a more certain faith grows, the divine mystery abides intact, and God remains the perennial hidden One, cloaked in shadow and enigma. But the soul becomes more and more aware of this truth. It is the living God unfathomable to the intellect who is known more truly in the increase of faith. This God whom a deeper faith embraces more certainly is precisely the God more resistant to all semblance of conceptual limitation. It is the personal God of hidden mystery, transcending distinct ideas, who seizes the very lifeblood of the soul and transforms the soul's attraction for the divine truth into an absolute longing for union with the infinite Godhead Himself. As the soul's certainty of belief deepens, the God neatly encapsulated in dogmatic definition and known distantly no longer satisfies. The soul now seeks to slake its thirst at the living Source.

We have been emphasizing the soul's lack of distinct understanding concerning the God concealed from view of the intellect. For St. John of the Cross, this continuing absence of particular knowledge of God is nec-

essary if the soul is to advance in faith toward deeper union with God. “The less distinct is their understanding of Him, the closer they approach Him.”²⁹ The pertinent matter now becomes the question of an immediate encounter, despite the darkness of faith, with the God who transcends the conceptual knowledge enunciated by the propositions of faith. Is the soul capable of experiencing God in some direct manner? Can the soul experience a new and deeper mode of knowing God as it approaches nearer to God - despite the obscurity of faith?

St. John of the Cross indicates as much in his first stanza commentary of *The Spiritual Canticle*:

Since you know now that your desired Beloved lies hidden within your heart, strive to be really hidden with Him, and you will embrace Him within you and experience Him with loving affection.³⁰

These words affirm the possibility of enriching the knowledge of faith through contemplation, which, for St. John of the Cross, is a secret or hidden knowledge, a wisdom “which is known through love and by which one not only knows but at the same time experiences.”³¹ Although it is “a knowledge belonging to the intellect,”³² says St. John of the Cross, contemplation is ineffable and uncomprehended as knowledge. The paradox of a knowledge that is incomprehensible is due to the fact that God is infusing Himself into the soul through this knowledge, and as we have seen, the intellect is incapable of grasping through any particular knowledge the fullness of divine truth. Contemplation nevertheless brings the intellect into experiential contact with God as long as it does not occupy itself with particular knowledge of God and remains empty of everything comprehensible to it. Only then can the loving supernatural knowledge of contemplation be infused by God into the soul.

But this knowledge is nonetheless dark, general, and unintelligible to the intellect because “God in one act is communicating light and love together.”³³ The divine



light that penetrates the intellect transmits a “knowledge through love”³⁴ that exceeds the intellect’s capacity for particular understanding. The element of knowledge in contemplation is thus described paradoxically as a “knowing by unknowing.”³⁵ Rooted in love, but communicated in the dark certitude of faith, contemplative knowledge is, in a sense, an inspired knowing, an infused knowing dependent on God’s gracious initiative. “God communicates this knowledge and understand-

ing in the love with which He communicates Himself to the soul.”³⁶ But the absolute requirement for these direct communications of God through an infusion of love into the soul rests upon an act of surrender by the intellect of all distinct knowledge of God.

While the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God but withdrawing from Him. It must withdraw from itself and from its knowledge so as to journey to God in faith, by believing and not understanding ... It thereby empties itself of everything comprehensible to it, because none of that is God; as we have said: God does not fit in an occupied heart.³⁷

Since contemplation leaves the incomprehensible divine nature still uncomprehended, the question becomes how the intellect can enjoy a ‘secret knowledge of God’ that remains hidden and beyond its human mode of grasping. In his first stanza commentary St. John of the Cross states that if the soul desires to find the Bridegroom who dwells in the hiding place of its own soul, it must:

Seek Him in faith and love, without the desire for the satisfaction, taste, or understanding of any other thing than what you ought to know. Faith and love are like the blind man’s guides. They will lead you along a path unknown to you to the place where God is hidden ... The soul will merit through love the discovery of the content of faith, that is, the Bridegroom Whom she desires to possess in this life through the special grace of divine union with God.³⁸

It is the action of love, then, that somehow trans-

forms the conceptual knowledge of faith into the possibility of direct experiential contact with God, that is, discovery of the Bridegroom who is the content of faith.

The emphasis here on love as a catalyst to the experiential discovery of the divine Bridegroom is consistent with the properties of supernatural love. The activity of love carries the will out from itself so that the lover is united to the object of love and experiences the object of love as joined to his will. St. John of the Cross says later in *The Spiritual Canticle* that the soul “lives through love in the object of her love.”³⁹ As such, love is superior to knowledge, which always stands, so to speak, outside the object of knowledge. As St. Thomas Aquinas says:

Knowledge is perfected by the thing known being united, through its likeness, to the knower. But the effect of love is that the thing itself which is loved, is, in a way, united to the lover ... Consequently, the union caused by love is closer than that which is caused by knowledge.⁴⁰

The power of love is grounded in this unifying effect. Love of God, by its very nature, possesses an active dynamic character that unites the soul and God. “Love makes the beloved to be in the lover, and vice versa,” says St. Thomas.⁴¹ The soul thus rests in God in a quite real manner and through love penetrates Him as He is in Himself.

Love, then, includes a quality of experiential knowing in the union it produces. It transforms the lover by establishing a certain connaturality between a lover and the object of his love. Indeed, a primary effect of the love of God is that God Himself is touched in an immediate though obscure manner by reason of the love which unites the soul and God. Through love the soul can attain to God immediately as He is in Himself, intimately united to Him by a union of wills, even while he remains hidden to the grasp of intellect in the obscurity of faith. This transformative power of love in concentrating the will outside itself is described vividly by St. John of the Cross in *The Spiritual Canticle*.

Where there is union of love ... the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is, that in the union and transformation of love each gives possession of self to the other, and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other

and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love.⁴²

As the passion of love informs the knowledge of faith, it transforms the dominant mode of faith from obscurity in the intellect to an affective experience that touches and tastes with immediacy the inaccessible object of its knowledge. In this immediate loving contact between the soul and God, the intellect penetrates and knows that there is more hidden in the truths of faith than the obscurity of faith manifested. The object of faith - God Himself infinitely transcendent in His intimate proximity to the soul - is now united to the intellect by an immediate experience. God makes of Himself, in effect, a gift of Himself through a taste of love uniting the soul with God. “Remaining hidden with Him, you will experience Him in hiding, that is, in a way transcending all language and feeling.”⁴³ While the hidden reality of God remains still absolutely beyond the cognitive grasp of the intellect, the affective union with God through love elevates the soul’s knowledge of God grasped in the certitude of faith.

Thus love transforms the obscure knowledge of faith by penetrating the intellect with the immediacy of an intimate possession of God. No longer reducible simply to an obscure knowledge, this loving contemplative knowledge of God renounces the mode of clarity in favor of an ignorance that joins the intellect in the certitude of faith to the hidden God beyond all limiting particular knowledge. By freeing the intellect from the natural mode by which it knows through the signs of concept and analogy, the infusion of love overcomes the distance between the soul’s intellect and the God it knows in the absolute certitude of faith. Jacques Maritain in *The Degrees of Knowledge* used a striking quote from John of St. Thomas precisely to illuminate this dynamic relationship of faith and love in contemplative knowledge.

In its darkness faith attains God yet as He remains at a distance, inasmuch as faith is of things not seen. But charity attains God in Himself immediately, intimately uniting us to that which is hidden in faith. And so, even though faith rules love and the union with God, inasmuch as it is faith that proposes their object, yet, in virtue of this union in which love clings to God immediately, the intellect is, through a certain affective experience, so elevated as to judge of divine things in a way higher than the darkness of faith would permit. This is

so because the intellect penetrates, and knows that more lies hidden in things of faith than faith itself reveals, ever finding there more to love and taste of in love. From this more, which love makes the intellect feel is hidden there, it judges more highly of things divine under a special instinct of the Holy Ghost.⁴⁴

In his first stanza commentary St. John of the Cross offers a metaphor for such undeniable action of God upon the soul when he speaks of the Bridegroom wounding His bride. These wounds pierce the soul with a transitory visit from the Bridegroom, “leaving it,” as St. John of the Cross vividly describes, “wholly cauterized with the fire of love.”⁴⁵ The effect of these spiritual wounds of love inflicted upon the soul by the touch of experiential contact with God is to “make her go out of herself and enter into God.”⁴⁶ But there is more here than merely a descriptive image of mystical experience. The inflammation of the heart, the intense burning of the affections, and the engagement of the will in the heat of the divine flame are not without a higher purpose beyond the experience itself. Each of these transitory piercings of the soul by the fire of divine love arouses a seething desire in the soul, or more specifically in the affections of the will, for absolute possession of the Beloved.

Every contact with divine love likewise begets an increase in the soul’s love. Its desire and yearning to love will determine the extent of that increase. “God does not place His grace and love in the soul except according to its desire and love.”⁴⁷ As much as the will in its passion and affection for God is consumed in the flame of these divine visits, to that extent does the soul suffer afterward a sense of the divine absence and “the impossibility of possessing Him here as she wants.”⁴⁸ The subsequent pain from these wounds of love thus extends beyond the experience of contact with God, which is delightful and desirable in itself to the soul, to affect the soul’s passion for union with God. As St. John of the Cross says in this commentary on the first stanza, God:

bestows these to wound more than heal, and afflict more than satisfy, since they serve to stimulate knowledge and increase the appetite (consequently the sorrow and longing) to see God.⁴⁹

Though the intense piercing of the wounds of love is a passing experience delightful in itself, the after-

effects linger in the soul as a kind of dying-to-itself. This gradual and progressive death by love, a source of immense torment to the soul, is precisely the soul’s path of transformation in God. “She lives by dying until love, in killing her, makes her live the life of love, transforming her in love.”⁵⁰ Moreover, this painful transformation is directly connected, interestingly enough, with an abiding element of ignorance in the experience of the soul. “The death of love is caused in the soul by means of a touch of supreme knowledge of the divinity, the ‘I-don’t-know-what’.”⁵¹ Lest we imagine that St. John of the Cross is speaking of a knowledge of God in some manner complete and unsurpassed, he explains further on that he is referring to a source of extreme discontentment for the soul.

There is a certain “I-don’t-know-what” which one feels is yet to be said, something unknown still to be spoken, and a sublime trace of God, as yet uninvestigated, revealed to the soul, a lofty understanding of God which cannot be put into words ... this which I do not understand completely, yet have sublime experience of, is death to me.⁵²

Once again we hear the recurrent note of God’s inaccessibility provoking the soul to plunge deeper into the hidden mystery of God’s truth.

The passionate longing of the soul for union with God clearly becomes the driving thrust of the spiritual path to God. The soul’s torment in not possessing her Beloved, despite terrible yearnings and the periodic visitations of the divine touches that wound her, is the cause of a constant suffering. Even as the soul draws nearer the actual consummation of union with God in the so-called spiritual marriage, it experiences intently its own emptiness of God, the absence of His former visits, undergoing a very heavy and purifying interior darkness.

This is the reason the soul’s suffering for God at this time is so intense: she is drawing nearer to Him, and so she has greater experience within herself of the void of God, of very heavy darkness, and of spiritual fire which dries up and purges her, so that thus purified she may be united with Him. Inasmuch as God does not communicate some supernatural ray of light from Himself, He is intolerable darkness to her when He is spiritually near her, for the supernatural light darkens with its excess the natural light.⁵³

This description of purifying darkness within the soul on the verge of union with God resounds strikingly with our former statements on the necessary role of faith for the soul's progress. The only recourse for such a soul, seemingly desolate of all divine support, is to cling wholly to the certitude of faith.

We should better understand, then, why St. John of the Cross ascribes the greatest importance to a radical purification of the soul by a two-fold process: the soul's own voluntary self-emptying by detachment from all sensual and spiritual self-satisfactions and the interior voiding of soul effected progressively by experience of the divine absences. Such a process of dispossession of self through purification cannot help but forge a concentrated intensity in the soul intrinsically related to the degree of its love. Only the unremitting work of love emptying the soul of all attachments other than God is able to ensure the advance toward union with God.

When the soul frees itself of all things and attains to emptiness and dispossession concerning them, which is equivalent to what it can do of itself, it is impossible that God fail to do His part by communicating Himself to it, at least silently and secretly.⁵⁴

St. John of the Cross' description of the nature of perfected love is without ambiguity. It consists in a total, undivided, and intense cleaving of all the soul's passions and appetites to the Beloved. "He who truly walks in love lets himself lose all things immediately in order to be found more attached to what he loves."⁵⁵ A detachment stripped of all self-seeking is the keynote. Nothing other than God is to gain the semblance of a dominating note upon the passions: thus the necessity to annihilate the relentless obstinacy of the natural appetites.⁵⁶ All one's concentrated strength of passion, implying the frightful sacrifices of the saintly life, must be centered exclusively upon the divine Lover who alone is worthy of the soul's surrender in love. "It is the property of perfect love to be unwilling to take anything for self, nor does it attribute anything to self, but all to the Beloved."⁵⁷ Only the soul dispossessed, empty of attachment, and full of selfless love is capable of this degree of heroic virtue.

The crucial note in the description of the exclusivity required for authentic love of God is the pain of

absence, the lack of contentment, the frustration of soul which the true lover of God must endure as purification. The loving soul hungers always to love more vehemently and cannot be satisfied until it attains to full possession of the Beloved. "Everything else not only fails to satisfy it but ... increases the hunger and appetite to see Him as He is."⁵⁸ Thirst of soul thus presupposes an interior desert of soul. The heart must be willing to become an empty vessel of painful craving and expectation.

Since she loves nothing outside of Him, she finds no rest or relief in anything. This is how we recognize the person who truly loves God: if he is content with nothing less than God.⁵⁹

An absolute self-abnegation thus requires from the soul a conscious annihilation of all the subtle traces of self-absorption that linger in the soul as inclinations toward spiritual consolation, complacency, or self-aggrandizement. To whatever extent the soul refuses the martyrdom of an unrelenting interior and exterior self-denial, it undermines its own progress. St. John of the Cross' statements on the demands of love in his first stanza commentary can be poignant and biting.

A person can truthfully call God Beloved when he is wholly with Him, does not allow his heart attachment to anything outside of Him, and thereby ordinarily centers his mind on Him ... Some call the Bridegroom beloved, whereas He is not really their beloved because their heart is not wholly set on Him.⁶⁰

Yet freely embraced, absolute self-abnegation, while exacting a terrifying price, carves into the depths of the soul the supreme mystery of divine love emptying itself in human blood upon the cross. The soul, too, must shed its blood if it is to resemble the Beloved in His perfect love. No other likeness but that forged in the imitation of crucified love carries the fullness of meaning. The promised rewards, however, are formidable and deserving of a closing note. "In the real imitation of the perfect life of the Son of God, her Bridegroom," says St. John of the Cross at the end of this first stanza commentary, "she will merit the high perfection of union with the Son of God, her Spouse, and transformation in Him through love."⁶¹

NOTES

1Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Love of God and the Cross of Jesus*, 2 vols., trans. Sister Jeanne Marie, O.P. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1947 and 1951), vol. II, 208.

2*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 6.

3Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 101: “The boundless spirit who bears in himself the totality of Being reaches beyond ‘greatest’, so that to him it is small, and he reaches into the smallest, because to him nothing is small. Precisely this overstepping of the greatest and reaching down into the smallest is the true nature of absolute spirit.”

4Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 11, xxii, 5-6: “Fasten your eyes on Him alone, because in Him I have spoken and revealed all, and in Him you shall discover even more than you ask for and desire ... You will discern hidden in Him the most secret mysteries, and wisdom, and wonders of God.”

5*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 2.

6Ibid.

7Ibid., xxxviii, 3-4.

8Ibid., i, 3.

9Cf. Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Discovery of God*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1960), 159: “God is only found by always seeking him. He is always ‘the one sought’.”

10*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 11.

11Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 96: “The hidden God, the mysterious God, is not distant and absent: he is always the God who is near.”

12*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 3. Cf. St. Augustine in *De videndo Deo* (Epist. 147 as Paulinam), vi, n. 18: “When he is thought to be absent, he is seen - when he is present he is not seen.” Quoted by Henri de Lubac in *The Discovery of God*, 158.

13Cf. de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 130: “God would not be God unless he were - not unknowable but - beyond our grasp. He is always above and beyond all that we can say and think of him.”

14Ibid., 96: “If God conceals himself, it is in his very presence. His transcendence does not mean that he is exiled from the world; it is the exact opposite of an absence.”

15*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 12.

16 “For between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude.” *The Fourth Lateran General Council* (1215) DS 806.

17Cf. *The Spiritual Canticle*, vii, 9: “One of the outstanding favors God grants briefly in this life is an understanding and experience of Himself so lucid and lofty as to make one know clearly that He cannot be completely understood or experienced ... Those who understand God more, understand more distinctly the infinitude which remains to be understood; whereas those who see less of Him do not realize so clearly what remains to be seen.”

18Ibid., i, 7-8.

19Ibid., i, 9.

20Ibid., prolog., 2.

21*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, vi, 2.

22Cf. *ibid.*, II, vi, 2: “Faith, we know, affirms what cannot be understood by the intellect ... For though faith brings certitude to the intellect, it does not produce clarity, but only darkness.”

23*The Living Flame of Love*, iii, 48.

24Cf. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, iii, 3: “Such is faith to the soul - it informs us of matters we have never seen or known, whether in themselves or in their likenesses; in fact, nothing like them exists.”

25Ibid., II, viii, 5.

26Ibid., II, iv, 4.

27Ibid., II, iv, 3: “If the soul traveling this road leans upon any elements of its own knowledge or experience of God, it will easily go astray or be detained for not having desired to abide in complete blindness, in faith which is its guide. For, however impressive may be one’s knowledge or feeling of God, that knowledge or feeling will have no resemblance to God and amount to very little.”

28Ibid., II, iii, 4.

- 29*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 12.
- 30Ibid., i, 10.
- 31Ibid., prolog., 3.
- 32 Ibid., xxvii, 5.
- 33*The Living Flame of Love*, iii, 49.
- 34*The Spiritual Canticle*, xxvii, 5.
- 35Ibid., xxxix, 12.
- 36Ibid., xxvii, 5.
- 37*The Living Flame of Love*, iii, 48.
- 38*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 11.
- 39Ibid., viii, 3.
- 40*Summa Theologica* 1-11, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3.
- 41Ibid., q. 28, a. 2.
- 42*The Spiritual Canticle*, xii, 7.
- 43Ibid., i, 9.
- 44John of St. Thomas, *Curs Theol.* I-II, q. 68-70, disp. 18, a. 4, n. 14. Quoted by Jaques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 262.
- 45*The Spiritual Canticle*, i, 17.
- 46Ibid., i, 19.
- 47Ibid., xiii, 12.
- 48Ibid., i, 19.
- 49Ibid.
- 50Ibid., vii, 4.
- 51Ibid.
- 52Ibid., vii, 9.
- 53Ibid., xiii, 1.
- 54*The Living Flame of Love*, ii, 46.
- 55*The Spiritual Canticle*, xxix, 10.
- 56*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, v, 7: "To Love is to labor to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God."
- 57*The Spiritual Canticle*, xxxii, 2.
- 58Ibid., vi, 4.
- 59Ibid., i, 14.
- 60Ibid., i, 13.
- 61Ibid., i, 10.

