

Reinventing Mysticism  
by Fr. Pius Sammut, OCD

*A simple and deep introduction in the message of Saint John of the Cross*

Introduction

Pope John Paul II met Saint John of the Cross when he was twenty years old. The year was 1940. Krakow was already under the Nazi regime. The Germans, paranoid of anything which may give way to breeding ground for anti-Occupation conspiracies, systematically stripped the parish of Saint Stanislaw Kostka in Debniki of its Salesian clergy. Eleven of these priests died in concentration camps, including the pastor. They were too much focused on youth apostolate. So, the Salesians turned to laymen to lead what had now become clandestine ministry.

The most effective of these laymen was Jan Tyranowski, a tailor by profession. Inspired by a phrase heard during a homily, "it is not difficult to become a saint", he started living an intense life of prayer and organizing meetings for the young people of the parish. He initiated the Living Rosary groups - bodies of fifteen young people each led by another youth who received in-depth training in their faith. Karol Wojtyla was very active in these groups.

Sensing that John of the Cross would appeal to young Wojtyla, Jan Tyranowski introduced Karol to this mystic and poetic genius. This first taste of the literary fruits of Carmelite mysticism marked Karol for ever. (1)

Carmelite mysticism is a spirituality of abandonment. An adventure in love where one gradually learns to lay aside everything to acquire Everything. Radical emptiness which leads to a radical fullness. God is beyond reach of feeling, thought or imagination and hence one can meet Him only in complete self surrender.

This was just the opposite to the Nazi will-to-power philosophy. This is also the opposite to what we are taught from day one in our system, where everything is based on self-affirmation. This imitation of Christ explicitated in a complete handing over of every worldly security to the merciful will of God caught Karol Wojtyla's imagination. It would become the defining characteristic of his discipleship. It can become ours also.

Life and Writings

Unfortunately Saint John of the Cross never seems to have caught the imagination of many, even in our Carmelite circles. Saint Therese of the Child Jesus - which many consider as the optimal disciple of Saint John of the Cross - and Saint Teresa are by far more popular and more read. His works seem to be dry and impersonal, mysterious and difficult. One way to dislodge this problem is to keep in mind always his life.

This is very important. His writings may sound like arid academic flights of mysticism. But really behind them there is a life of passion. Real love. He is a good teacher because he is a good witness. He walked through unexplored land and left behind him a hint of the map he traced out. He gave us directions for the road, showed us the pitfalls of this journey and pointed out the facilities where we can get the energy we need to arrive at our destination.

Evelyn Underhill in her study of mysticism refers to the mystics as "pioneers of humanity". Led by the Holy Spirit, they venture forth into the limits of humanity where our spirit touches the spirit of God. Saint John of the Cross is one of these pioneers. A very energetic explorer.

This is what makes his writings (2) appealing. He is not a professional writer. He lived a very normal community life, working in the garden and on building sites, praying, hearing confessions and teaching catechism... When he was provincial of Andalusia (1585-87) he traveled more than 6000 miles, visiting monasteries and giving spiritual direction to nuns. He did most of the traveling on foot or on a little donkey. This is very important for us secular Carmelites who have to travel, commute, lead a very busy life. This was also John's normal life!

Knowing his life helps us to understand better his message. Just to take one example. In the beginning of The Dark Night, he compares God to a loving mother feeding her baby with milk, pressing him to her heart and caressing him. A few years ago, a little incident was discovered which I find very enlightening. Apparently when the saint was only a baby of a few months, Catalina, his mother, took the task of being a wet-nurse for a baby girl to earn a little extra money. The little girl's father later testified that he was ready to pay a little bit extra because he desired his daughter to imbibe the goodness of the mother with her milk. His mother had to do so many sacrifices to rear her children after the death of her husband. All this marked his life... and his imagery.

### The story of the frogs

A simple story outlines what John believed.

Once there was a group of frogs who lived in a dark deep well - filthy and murky, no light, hardly any food. They suffered a lot. But they thought that this is all there is to life. Until a Bird, a beautiful Bird, came down the well and announced to them that outside there is another world full of air and sun and light and flowers and snow and stars.

The Chief Frog stood up and commented : "Did you hear? The world which the Bird is speaking about is heaven - all the good frogs, those who obey the laws will go there."

But some of the frogs croaked loudly, protesting that this was not the message of the Bird. The Bird had said that this world exists now, that it is possible to live otherwise now.

A philosopher-frog, after analyzing the whole situation, arrived at this sensible conclusion :  
"What the Bird really meant is that we can improve this world, we can build a better world. If only we enhance the light system, put in air conditioning, acquire better food, we would fulfill all our dreams..."

"No!" protested heavily some of the frogs-who-had-believed in the Good News of the Bird. "This world exists. It can be ours. We can enjoy it. It is not a question of just improving. It is a whole new creation. The Bird has actually seen it."

Many frogs got mad at these few believers. They taunted them, they laughed at them, they threatened them prison for their stubbornness. Until... the frogs-who-believed made a leap. They jumped out of the dark, murky well and, sure enough, there was it was .... the sun and the stars, and the flowers and the trees, and the wind and the clouds, and the moon and the snow...

Yes Life CAN and SHOULD be otherwise! And it can and should be otherwise now. This is what Juan de la Cruz believed. He is the bird. We are the frogs!

### The Basic Perception

John had a vision. Vision is important in life. What kept the people of God walking in the desert was the constant awareness of the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey which God has given them.

This is where most of our battles are fought. The devil comes and steals the promise from our mind. Hence everything becomes unbearable and tedious. A chore. Why should I keep going if perhaps there is nothing at the end? Why even bother? I travel a lot and what keeps me going during my traveling - most of the time cramped and uncomfortable in an plane - is the realization that this is only temporary, soon I will be home and sleeping in a real bed and eating real food and walking on real ground!

We have an enemy. Three actually, says Saint John of the Cross - the flesh, the world and the devil. (3) The most subtle obviously is the devil who is always ready to interpret badly the events which happen in our lives. We look around and find out that many people just go through the motions of living. Day in, day out. Their only worries seems to be money and health and food and keeping a good figure. No expectations. No dreams. Conscious of our limits and our own failures, we start adapting ourselves. Resigning ourselves to what it is. Lowering our ideals. Mediocrity is the virus which has killed many a soul in her journey towards God. Discouragement, the supreme weapon of the devil, creeps in. We feel tired. Why bother praying? Why go to fraternities? Why be an agent of spirituality?

The reason why this happens is always the same. We have forgotten the promise. The vision which was once bright and shining has faded away. That is why what George Bernard Shaw once remarked, makes a lot of sense. "You see life as it is and you say 'why?' I see life as it is

not and ask 'why not?'"

### The Heart of the matter

What did John see which perhaps we do not see?! John builds his world on two very simple premises.

First premise. God is awesome, or to use his own expression "Que bien Dios tenemos..." God is extraordinarily beautiful and phenomenally good. "El Todo". In the Spiritual Canticle, he just feels overwhelmed with the radiance of this, 'his' God :

My Beloved, the mountains,  
and lonely wooded valleys,  
strange islands,  
and resounding rivers,  
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,  
the tranquil night  
at the time of the rising dawn,  
silent music,  
sounding solitude,  
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

"Why do you love so much the mass of the Holy Trinity?" the nuns once asked him. "Because the Trinity is the greatest saint in heaven"! he replied. Once he laid down on the ground praying in the chapel. When he went to hear confessions, his face was shining with joy. "Why are you so happy?" he was asked. "How can I not be happy after seeing and adoring my Lord!? Oh what a good God we have!"

It always touches me very deeply that the last words he wanted to hear before dying, was not the normal devotional litany, but the emotional amorous words of the Song of Songs. "At eleven o'clock, he asks the Prior to bring him the Blessed Sacrament so that he can look at it for the last time with his bodily eyes. At eleven thirty, when the Prior starts reading the prayers of the Ritual for the dead, Fray John stops him and says: Father, read me the Song of Songs. What precious pearls!! - he begins to murmur while listening to those passionate and fiery words."  
(God Is a Feast - 4)

This is central to John and hopefully it will become central to us! If the idea of God is big, vivid and concrete, then we shall live in greater depth and with more enthusiasm. If our idea of God is vague and foggy, then our Carmelite life will be shallow. John says that there are persons who only meet God as if in a painting. All of us know how different it is to look at a photo of someone you love and to have him in front of you.

The Saint uses word combinations to bring out this vibrant realization of the beauty of God. In the commentary on Stanza 27 of the Canticle he speaks of the "Immense Father" - outstanding and yet a daddy. In Letter 23 he writes "This great God of yours" - again, eminent yet ours. At the beginning of the Prayer of a soul taken with love, he addresses God as "Lord God, My Beloved." Just listen with your heart to this :

"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!" (Stanza 27 of Canticle)

One day chatting with Fray Francisco during recreation, the Saint asked him a formidable question, "who is God for you?" The Brother came out with an answer which delighted the Saint so much that he could not stop repeating it for many days. He said, "God is what He himself wants to be." God is bigger, more beautiful, more wonderful, more intelligent, more cool!

Being so magnificent, God has amazing plans for us. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11).

He can be extravagant and reckless with His gifts! God loves as only God can love. In the Flame John produces a very valid principle : When one loves ... he loves according to his condition. The poor as a poor, the rich as a rich, man as a man, woman as a woman. Therefore God loves as only God can love! Let us listen to his words ....

"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."

God is happy that He is God because this means that He can give more. This comes out very clear in his Romances (5) . Like a millionaire who is glad that he has so much more to give! When God falls in love with a soul, you cannot imagine how generous He can be.

### "Plans to prosper"

So, what are His plans for us? John of the Cross uses a very simple image. Marriage. God wants to marry us. Just a beautiful symbolism? No, John says it is real. He knows through his own personal experience that one can enter into such a deep intimacy with Jesus Christ that he becomes your bridegroom, the beloved of your heart, and you become his 'unique' loved one. First of all, we must say that if a soul seeks God, even more so does the beloved seek her.

This is the conviction of John of the Cross. He believed that God made man for only one purpose : God wishes to live united with man.

"You marry the person you love most. You marry the person whom you consider as the most beautiful and precious in your eyes. You marry the person without whom you feel life would be impossible to live. God feels all this when he ponders about you and me.

In this union, the soul submerges itself in a strong way in God - and He gives himself even more fully to her. Passionate love on the part of God. Passionate love on the part of man. A passion which leads to total union between God and man.

The Saint prefers the word union to the word perfection, because union is more dynamic, more alive.(6) Perfection implies the law, something cold and dead; it implies stress and effort. Union on the other hand means togetherness, love. It means necessarily two persons, a relationship which grows and develops. It means self giving by God and self giving by man. It means a tension of love." (God is a Feast)

"Every wish and aim of the soul - and of God - in all its works, are the end and completion of this state, therefore the soul does not tire until it comes to this state ... Now it is resting in the arms of its beloved, by whom she feels embraced continually in the spirit. This embrace is real and through it the soul lives the life of God."

I repeat. This is not a simulation but a reality. And the greatest news this morning is that you can be the protagonist of this adventure of love. Christian life is not obey - live a respectable life - be a good boy - and you go to heaven if you have followed the rules... It is a love story.

Fray Jeronimo de la Cruz, the Saint's companion, stated in the apostolic process for his beatification which was held in Jaen, that "on voyages he would normally read something ... The servant of God had the custom to keep repeating in a quiet recollected voice, the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. This he did with great devotion, which he would also

transmit to his companions." He knew this chapter by heart.

The seventeenth chapter is the prayer of Jesus for his apostles. It is an prayer of intimacy between the Son and the Father where Jesus looks on his great friends and asks the Father to give them the gift that "they recognize you, the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" and most of all he insists on the Father that he protect them so that they be one as we are one. A very momentous prayer indeed : "As you are in me, Father, and I in you, so may they be also one IN US, so that the world may believe that you have sent me!"

One just feels stunned simply thinking of this vision which the Father has of us!

During Christmas, the fathers in Granada and Segovia used to have a makeshift theater. Two of the brothers representing Mary and Saint Joseph used to pass through the cloister where various brothers acted as innkeepers. These innkeepers who refused lodging to the Holy Family took off their scapulars and hoods. John of the Cross never tool this part of innkeeper! He always befriended Joseph and Mary!!

#### Premise Two - The problem is Don Rodrigo!

What is the problem then? The problem is us! Mother Anne of Jesus was a big friend of the Saint; he dedicated the Spiritual Cantic to her. One day a nobleman, Don Rodrigo, came to the parlor in Granada. They had a good conversation and apparently Mother Ann must have liked him a lot. A few minutes after his departure, John of the Cross, who was the confessor of the convent arrived, and they started talking. Seemingly Mother Ann kept repeating "Gosh! Don Rodrigo said just the same words!" Finally the Saint told her "Listen , Mother, your head is full of Don Rodrigo!" Mother liked this witty criticism that she repeated to her sisters. And so whenever a Sister talked too much about someone or something, the saying was always " Sister, your head is full of Don Rodrigo!"

Our heads and hearts are too full of too many Don Rodrigos...

Two basic experiences dominate John's imagery - the experience of being wounded and the experience of being healed. His major works contain pain : a night in which one is lost (Dark Night), abandonment of the Beloved (Spiritual Cantic), a fever which burns (Living Flame). The spirituality of Saint John is no tougher than life itself! He speaks of realities which we would rather not face. Who has not been hurt, lost, wounded?

Saint John of the Cross analyzes the problem of man very well. In the first book of The Ascent of Mount Carmel, he does not ask what kind of prayer or devotions we have. Externals are what they are - externals, outsiders. He asks what is the state of our affections, our emotional maturity, our attachments to things and to persons.

He calls these attachments 'appetitos', drives, cravings. The desire to be esteemed, to be

popular, the love of money, our sexual urges, these constant cravings for consolation, security, devotions, always wanting to be number one, touchy, arrogance, Mr. Perfect attitude, always knowing what is best... "It is sad to consider the condition of the poor soul in whom they dwell. How unhappy it is with itself, how cold toward its neighbors, how sluggish and slothful in the things of God! No illness makes walking as burdensome, or eating as distasteful, as do the appetites for creatures render the practice of virtue burdensome and saddening to a person. Ordinarily, the reason many people do not have diligence and eagerness for the acquisition of virtue is that their appetites and affections are not fixed purely on God."

He is very lucid in his analysis. He focuses on the five kinds of damage they can do. They tire, torture, darken, defile and weaken us.

He compares them to restless, discontented children... satisfied one moment, they demand more attention the next. The more their mother tries to quiet their cravings, the more demanding they become. An appetite, as they say, is like a fire that blazes up when wood is thrown on it, but necessarily dies out when the wood is consumed.

This is our daily experience; despite all our endeavors to satisfy ourselves, we always feel more empty, more disillusioned, more stressed.

They not only wear us out. They also torment us! They gnaw at us mercilessly. They blind us. Our ability to discern rightly is clouded. He uses the image of Samson. This mighty man, who was once a "a free, strong judge of Israel", a consecrated man from his birth, finds himself blinded and chained to grind at the millstone where he was "grievously tortured and tormented". This same thing happens to a person in whom the enemy appetites reside and triumph. First these appetites weaken and blind... then they afflict and torment by chaining that person to the mill of concupiscence, for they are the chains by which a soul is bound.

In Chapter 11 of the Ascent the Saint confesses how sorry he is to see so many souls of great natural capacity and quality, even gifted with supernatural graces who make no progress just because of these unchecked cravings. He uses two examples. The first is the one of the bird which cannot fly away because it is tied by a thread, even "one single thin thread" can do all the harm. The second is taken from the myth of the remora, "which, if successful in clinging to a ship, will hold it back and prevent it from reaching port, or even from sailing, even though this fish is exceptionally small. It is regrettable, then, to behold some souls, laden as rich vessels with wealth, deeds, spiritual exercises, virtues, and favors from God, who never advance because they lack the courage to make a complete break with some little satisfaction, attachment, or affection (which are all about the same) and thereby never reach the port of perfection."

#### Another story, our story

Once upon a time there was a beggar who lived near the king's palace. One day he saw a



proclamation posted outside the palace gate, announcing that the king was giving a great dinner. Anyone dressed in royal garments was invited to the party. The beggar looked at the rags he was wearing and realized that he could never make it. Until he hit on an idea. A risky idea but he decided to take a chance.

He went over to the palace and asked for an audience with the king. Graciously, the king accepted to see him. "You wish to see me?" asked the king. "Yes, your majesty. I want so much to attend the banquet, but I have no royal robes to wear. Can you give me one of your old garments so that I, too, may come to the banquet?" The beggar was trembling as he presented his request. But the king was kind. "You have been wise in coming to me," he replied, and calling his son, the young prince, he told him, "Take this man to your room and array him in some of your clothes."

The prince did as he was told and soon the beggar was standing before a mirror, clothed in garments that he had never dared hope for. "You can now come to the king's banquet," said the prince. "And what is even more important, you will never need any other clothes. These garments will last forever." The beggar was so happy and thankful.

However, as he started to leave, he looked back at his pile of dirty rags on the floor and started wavering. What if the prince was wrong? What if he would need his old clothes again. Quickly he gathered them up.

The banquet was far greater than he had ever imagined, but he could not enjoy himself as he should. He had made a small bundle of his old rags and it kept falling off his lap. He missed some of the greatest delicacies.

Time proved that the prince was right. The clothes lasted forever. They never grew old. Still the poor beggar held his old clothes always close to him. Just in case! Even the people used to call him the old man with the rags.

When one day he was dying, the king visited him. The beggar saw the sad look on the king's face when he saw the small bundle of rags by the bed. Suddenly the beggar remembered the prince's words and realized that his bundle of rags had cost him a lifetime of true royalty. He wept bitterly at his folly. And the king wept with him.

This simple story of the old man's rags may be well our story. We never enjoy life because we are fixated with our stupid rags!

### Marriage is a Journey

So what are we going to do? On one side, God the awesome Lover. On the other side, we, pathetic and paupers. God wants to fuse a cohesion, a togetherness. He wants to create in us a heavenly nature so that what is His can become ours. But how are we to go about it? Here the

genius of the Saint is really enlightening.

The only way, he states, is the way of the desert - the biblical journey from the slavery of Egypt to the promised land. Forty years. God had managed to break the external slavery when He pulled them out of Egypt - now He has to break open the internal slavery of the heart. Our life has been thrown off balance by our appetites. Now we need to restore equilibrium. We need to enter into a night.

This night which sounds so scary and frightening is basically another way of saying "falling in love". Love always implies a choice. And a choice always means saying yes to someone/something and no to someone/something else. Night is the 'no' side of love.

"Yet the truly loving soul, esteeming her Beloved above all things, trusting in his love and friendship, does not find it hard to say: 'Nor fear wild beasts,' and 'I will go beyond strong men and frontiers.' The wild beasts are the trials and temptations of the world. The strong men are the 'baffling' demons, the frontiers are the 'natural rebellions of the flesh'."

The night is beautiful because it means getting rid of all this trash! In order to illustrate better his message, he once painted a drawing of a mountain which he called Mount Carmel. There is the hill, which has a very high, dominant summit. Notice how this peak fills more than half the page. This is the important entity - God who lives on this summit. It is His abode. Here there is peace, security, beauty, wisdom. Everything is beautiful, everything is delightful. There are no laws. It is the place of God.

And the place of the man or woman who reaches the summit. The Word tells us that the focus of God is on how can He fill man with all the possible goods that He has created for him! The ambition of God is our happiness.

At the bottom of this hill, there are three roads. Two which meander and zigzag into nothing - they never make it to the top. The other, a straight one, reaches the summit.

Which are the roads which lead to nowhere except to sadness and anguish? One is the road of money, honors, fancy ideas, diplomas, comfort... It is the road of those who strive hard to acquire more things, more respect, more esteem, a bigger car, a bigger house, a better education, more impressive certificates, more comforts... They strive and strive and find themselves with an empty heart, and often with empty hands! Saint John of the Cross jots down a little, tiny comment which is very suggestive : The more I desired to seek them the less I had them. It is worth repeating it : The more I desired to seek them the less I had them.

This is our daily experience. We sweat to have a beautiful house and the moment we have it... we start fussing about mortgage, about termites, about the maintenance. We struggle hard to find a good suitable job and then we realize that this very work binds us down and does not let us enjoy even our children. How foolish we can be!

The second road which leads nowhere is the road of consolation, security, pleasure... Yes, she serves the Lord, she goes to mass, she always says the rosary, but God forbid, if the Lord does not abide by what she, such a good pious woman, desires! God forbid if an accident - her son dies, she crashes with her car, she goes to pray and feels no consolation - happens to her! "Why is God treating me so badly after I serve Him so well! In life perhaps it is better to be bad because good things only happen to good people...."

This is the road of those who serve the Lord so that they can suck back something from Him - health, consolation, happiness, rest, less trouble. Here also Saint John puts in a crisp short comment : The more I hankered, the less I found. God is not your servant. God is your leader!

Then there is the third road, the road in the middle. A straight road which leads you direct to God. On this road, he wrote only one word : NADA - nothing. Nothing repeated several times. It is the road of those who love nothing except God. They have learnt to put God first. Not money before God, but God before money. Not solace before God but God before solace. Not marriage before God, but God before marriage.

This does not mean that we have to throw everything away. It means that we have to learn to use everything without being riveted to them. Things go wrong when I become attached to a place instead of walking towards the Lord. Things go wrong when I become attached to a person instead of continuing walking towards the Lord.

Here Saint John of the Cross adds another concise short sentence. Now that I least desire them, I have them all without desire. The Nothing leads to Everything.

It is in this light that one must view the negation for which Saint John of the Cross became so famous. In his vision, detachment from everything is not the ascetic effort of a fanatic, but an intelligent awareness in the use of things. Use everything, love everything, appreciate everything, but hang on to nothing, be bound to nothing, because if you do, you will suffer and cause suffering in others. Build relationships with others but do not idolize anyone.

"The Saint liked beautiful pictures because they helped him to pray. Once he drew a picture of a crucifix which was very impressive and which he liked so much that he put it in the breviary which he used every day for prayer. Sister Ana Maria of the monastery of the Incarnation saw it and liked it. The saint was very candid; "Do you like it? Take it!" ... A clear example of one who could enjoy things without tying up his heart to them.

Another incident. Before he escaped from the conventual prison of Toledo, he wished to give a small present to the friar who had looked after him, brought him food and tried to lessen the rigor of his prison. Naturally he could not tell him that he was about to escape but he wished to show him his gratitude in some way. What did he do? He had a small crucifix which was very beautiful and which Saint Teresa herself had probably given him. It was very dear to him. It was the only thing which had kept him company in those dark nights in prison. He just reached out for it and gave it to this friar. He considered it more important to make this young twenty-seven

year old friar happy than to keep a crucifix cramped to his chest.

A detached man is a free man, a happy man." (God is a Feast)

### It is all grace

There is nothing voluntaristic about all this. What John is proposing is not another pious exhortation to try harder. Striving more will not lead to any results. This is a mistake which is very common. In Christianity 'where there is a will there is a way' does not apply. This is why Saint John speaks of the active and passive night.

"It should be understood, consequently, that a person ordinarily enters this night of sense in two ways: active and passive. The active way,... comprises what one can do and does by oneself to enter this night. The passive way is that in which one does nothing, but God accomplishes the work in the soul while the soul acts as the recipient." Example

In I Ascent 13, he suggests two ways of tackling the active night.

First of all he suggests a positive attitude : strengthen in yourself another appetite - the love of Christ. Our energy of love needs an object. Put Christ as the object of your love. The more you meditate on the life of Jesus Christ, the more you look at Him, the more you love Him. And the more you love HIM, the less you feel the need to love other things! "Take God for your spouse and friend and walk with Him continually, and you will not sin and will learn to love, and the things you must do will work out prosperously for you." (Counsels of Life and Love no 65) I

This can be done with a double approach. On one hand, reduce as far as possible superficial and unnecessary activity which can lead you away from Christ. Too much TV, too much internet, too much gossip, too many magazines, too many devotions .. are harmful. They lead to dissipation and distraction.

On the other hand strengthen your recollection in HIM. When the cook Sister Catherine of the Cross, a simple innocent woman, asked Father John why, when she passed beside the pond in the garden, the frogs always jumped into the water and hid, he answered that the pond was the place where they felt most secure - You should do the same as well: escape creatures and throw yourself deep into the center which is God and hide yourself in Him.

When they were traveling through la Mancha, about 500 km from Madrid on their way to Granada, the companion of Saint John of the Cross suggested that they stop to see the great palace which was being constructed by the General who had won the victory of Lepanto in 1571. Father John answered simply "The Carmelite does not travel to see but not to see." And he added the reason why also. "I prefer conversing with God and with men than looking at palaces and buildings." This is not pointless harshness. For example, when the Sisters in Andalucia showed him a statue of Our Lady, he took it in his hand and remarked "I could spend

a lifetime in a hermitage with this statue." It is all a question of perspective, a spirit and not a law.

Secondly, he suggests valuable path. "Endeavor to be inclined always:  
not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;  
not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;  
not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;  
not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;  
not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;  
not to the most, but to the least;  
not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;  
not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing.

Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and, for Christ, desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world."

There are nine of these instructions and they are simply fantastic because they are so liberating. God marks our path and sometimes the way He marks is difficult. Events happen and they are not always pleasant. Hence John is telling us : accept suffering voluntarily so that when it comes on you involuntarily, you can take it in your stride without toil. Prepare yourself on your initiative for tasks which one day most certainly you will be asked to do. The devil always tries to get us away from God through suffering. Dupe him by accepting to suffer voluntarily. This will give you the freedom to do the will of God always. To love God and others always. If we are unprepared we shall fail to give the right response when the crucial test comes. A love which is independent of our inclinations is a pure and selfless love. Our senses have to be trained to love God and others better.

I once saw a documentary on how they train soldiers before the combat. They let them pass through excruciating pain so that if they are caught by the enemy they can endure the torture without breaking up. The Roman legionnaires exercised themselves in times of peace by carrying double the weight of what they would have to carry in time of war. So jokingly, they used to say that it is better if they go for a war, so that they may somewhat rest! If through, freely chosen practices, we have gained control over our senses, we shall find it easy to gain the victory in similar situations whenever they arise.

### When God starts working...

In the same light John views passive night. It is God working on us, killing the old man to resuscitate the new man. One way of transforming us into Him. What we cannot do, He does.

How? Through events which He wills or permits in our lives. A son runs away from home, the doctor diagnoses cancer, your daughter breaks to you the news that she is pregnant and she is only sixteen, you fail to get the promotion which you deserve, you fall into some serious sin...

these are not mistakes. Through events He is trying to reach out to us. He is trying to wrench the remote control from our hands!

React well, the Saint argues. See these events for what they are - graces, gifts, endowments.

John himself had suffered many nights in his life - the death of his father and his older brother when he was a little boy, the humiliation of having to beg for a living when he was an adolescent, the unjust imprisonment for nine months which he suffered at the age of thirty-five, the calumnies which were invented about him just a year before he died.

In this pain, he discovered something awesome. Night is not a calamity, pain is not a defeat. On the contrary, night can be a grace, pain may become a means of salvation:

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.

John believes that the night is necessary. Suffering is indispensable. It is absolutely essential to surrender all things in order to achieve intimacy with Him. And since we are not capable of doing this, God brings about this miracle of love Himself; since we are incapable of detaching ourselves, He does the disconnection!

Again, the Saint becomes very practical. He knows that many react negatively - self pitying themselves or getting angry and resentful. He says no. When something which troubles you or something you do not like happens to you, look at Christ crucified and keep silent. Live in faith and through hope, even if you are in the darkness, because just in these things God comes to the aid of the soul .

Do not complain. Do not whine. But embrace the cross and you will start cherishing life.

Again, his experience is enlightening.

He was forty six years old when in a General Chapter, that is a general meeting of the Friars, his colleagues did not elect him to any office. He did not agree with their policies so they put him aside. Men have always been the same! What was worse was that the man who replaced him, a young thirty year old friar called Diego Evangelista, began a campaign of calumnies and lies about him. Stories were spread about nuns and relationships and all sorts of stupid things.

The next six months were indeed hard ones for John. We know of two occasions when he cried; once when he was talking to a nun in Malagon and once in Toledo when he was returning from the chapter of Madrid. Both occasions were in this period of his life.

Meanwhile his health was deteriorating rapidly because of the the tumor in his leg which was infesting all his body.

This was indeed a dark night for John. Physical pain. Anguish caused by the lack of comprehension and even wickedness of his fellow religious.

We know his reaction from a letter - one of the few extant ones, since, in order to avoid increasing his trouble which was looming around him, he insisted on having all his letters destroyed. It is a letter which he wrote to one of the nuns in whom he had most trust - Ana de Jesus.

"Thank you very much for your letter; this puts me under greater obligation than before. If things did not turn out as you desired, you ought rather to be consoled and thank God profusely. Since His Divine Majesty has so arranged matters, it is what most suits everyone. All that remains for us is to accept it willingly so that once we believe He has arranged this, we may show it by our actions. Things that do not please us seem to be evil and harmful, however good and fitting they may be."

And in another letter, which he wrote to the mother of Sister Ana - a married woman who, after the death of her husband, became a Carmelite nun and was living in the same monastery as her daughter, he explains more his feelings.

"Do not let what is happening to me, daughter, cause you any grief, for it does not cause me any. What greatly grieves me is that he who is not at fault is being blamed. It is not men who do these things, but God knows what is suitable for us, and arranges things for our good. Think of nothing else but that God orders all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love."

When you begin to see things in this way, the darkness becomes light. The passive night will lead to real light.

And this is what life is all about.

Notes:

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1. In his recent book *Witness to Hope*, a biography on the Pope, George Weigel describes in detail this introduction to the Saint of Karol Woytyla.

2. The writings of Saint John of the Cross are of three different kinds. First there are the poems, then there are the short practical maxims which he wrote as part of his spiritual direction and

then the commentaries to the poems - The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Dark Night, The Living Flame of Love and The Spiritual Canticle. He does not use overtly religious language but rather he tells a love story. The background is very scriptural and the background very earthly - mountains, valleys, breezes, seas...

3. The Cautelas are a real eye opener to anyone who wants to learn some of the ruses which these our enemies use to poison us. "The world is the enemy least difficult to conquer; the devil is the hardest to understand; but the flesh is the most tenacious, and its attacks continue as long as the old self lasts." It is very interesting, for example, to read the first Precaution against the Flesh if anyone has difficulty adjusting himself to the fraternity he goes for the monthly meeting. "Understand that you have come to the monastery so that all may fashion you and try you." The community is not so much a support group as an assassination group!!! God hand picks the brothers and sisters so that they can kill the old man in you!!! God uses one like a hammer, the other as a drill, and the third as sandpaper. To create a very beautiful statues. Remember always that we ourselves are exercising the same reverberations on others. Do not play the victim!!!

4. In this talk I have relied heavily on my book God Is a Feast.

5. Romance 3 represents the Father speaking to His Son telling Him that he created man so that he can have a bride to love him! So that together they can share in a divine meal! "Because of You she will deserve to share our company."

6. Computer study of his works have revealed an interesting fact. The word which is found more often in the writings of the Saint is 'dice' - he says, he speaks. Then the word 'Dios' God and the word 'anima' soul which appear 4500 times each. Well behind comes the word 'todo' everything and 'nada' nothing. The word union appears more than five hundred times. If we then add words with similar meaning such as 'to join, to change, to resemble', we then find that he uses the concept union more than a thousand times. In other words, the saint uses this word on purpose. The following stanzas include all the doctrine I intend to discuss in this book, The Ascent of Mount Carmel. They describe the way that leads to the summit of the mount - that high state of perfection we here call union of the soul with God. (Ascent - Prologue)