

Ascent Three

Talk FIVE

The third and final book of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel is devoted to the purification of the memory and will, the two remaining faculties of the soul. The second book dealt, with the purifying process (active) as applied to the mind or intellect. This third book in fact remains in an uncompleted state as we shall see. We should note that we are still concerned with the active dark night of the spirit. Let us recall what St. John had staged in Ch. 1 of the Ascent, "We shall deal with this second night in so far as it is 'active, in the second and third sections of the book."

The purification of the memory then, in John's terminology the second faculty of the soul is brought about by the working in it of the theological virtue of hope, just as the mind has been purified by lay faith. John reminds his readers that the instructions he gave about the purification of the intellect are also applicable to the purification of the other two faculties, memory and will.

In setting out his teaching on this subject, John is well aware that it may be misunderstood or taken merely in a negative way. So again he reminds us that he is not concerned with the needs of beginners in the spiritual life, but with those who have made considerable progress. If John suggests that the faculty of memory should be purified by a process of emptying out it is because, as he says, he wants to make room for the inflow of the supernatural in a deeper contemplation. The theme is the same as before. "we must get to know God through what he is not, rather than through what he is". Just as in regard to the other faculties, John approaches this subject systematically - he will examine three categories of impressions' namely 1. natural, 2. supernatural/imaginative, and 3. spiritual.

Now in the first place in regard to 'natural' impressions that arise by means of the external senses, John insists that the memory must be purified from 'all forms' in order to be united with God. This he tells us 'is an absolute requirement'.... "In great forgetfulness, without the 'remembrance of anything, the memory is absorbed in a supreme good". We might compare this position with the teaching of the Cloud of Unknowing. In Ch. 6 we read, "In the work now before us, thought) must be put down and covered with a cloud of forgetting". In the following Ch. the author advises concentrating on a particular word such as 'God' or 'love' and he says, "With this word you will suppress all thought under the cloud of forgetting". It may be helpful to recall William Johnston's elucidation here,

"The cloud of forgetting is nothing else but the abandonment of all images and concepts to allow the soul to love mystically". The

blind stirring of love has begun to burn in the breast of the contemplative; it is leading to a higher knowledge (for God can be known by love) and therefore the soul must be careful not to smother

this love with meditations and conceptual thinking. Images are now a barrier between the soul and God. That is why they must be forgotten."

The spiritual advice found here in the 'Cloud' betrays the influence of 'Mystica Theologia' or 'Hid Divinity' of Pseudo-Dionysius who also obviously influenced St. John of the Cross. It is apophatic knowledge or knowledge acquired by negation. God is not like any of the things to which we instinctively liken Him. In the kindred little work to the 'Cloud' known as the 'Privy Counsel', we find the same emphasis on the 'naked will or intent'. It is interesting to notice that the same approach is found in a classic of Russian Orthodox spirituality, called "The Way of a Pilgrim". This book advocates focussing our minds on the repetition of the 'Jesus Prayer'.

Let us come back to the Ascent; John says that while the memory is in process of being purified, it will often appear that the person is abstracted or absent-minded. He will overlook ordinary matters of everyday life and 'forget whether he has seen something or said such and such'. I would love to be able to use this as an excuse sometimes but nobody would believe me. The reason for this is that the memory is absorbed in God. The Pilgrim found that his concentration became so intense that it reached the subconscious and he tells us 'early one morning I was so to speak aroused by the prayer'. (Treasury of Russian Spirituality)

Chesterton once remarked that 'absence of mind in one area means that it is present somewhere else'. St. John holds however that this condition will be remedied when perfect union with God is reached. John realises that people will object that this advice would result in destroying the natural activity of the faculty of memory. Yes, says John, that is true, but this is only a temporary thing and union with God will bring about a transformation of the memory onto the divine plane whereby the person will be directly moved to action by the Holy Spirit. John tells us that he will explain this action of the Holy Spirit in the 'Passive night of the soul', or what is usually referred to as the 'Dark Night of the spirit'. In regard to what we can do ourselves actively, John advises us not to store up what we see and hear in the memory - just leave them as is and forget all about them'. Again he refers us back to what he said about the purification of the intellect in Bk. 2, and he points ahead to the teaching of the Dark Night. The Scriptural foundation for this he finds in St. Paul to the Romans, "The children of God are moved by the Spirit of God, (8.14). St. John feels that an unwillingness to void the memory in regard to everything retards progress towards union with God and leaves the way open to deception, whether from oneself or from the devil. John holds that by giving in to ourselves in regard to the rich

dimension of life concerned with memory, we often upset ourselves needlessly and worry about the wrong things. John's main preoccupation is to endeavour to make us preserve a deep peace of mind in all circumstances. He feels that there are many positive advantages to be gained from taking this approach. Such mortification will result in serenity and purity of conscience. Here is a typical quote;

"Thus if the whole world were to crumble and come to an end and all things were to go wrong, it would be useless to get disturbed, for this would do more harm than good. This advice is repeated almost word for word in one of John's minor works, 'Counsels to a religious on how to reach perfection'. There we find the following, "In order to practice the first counsel concerning resignation, you should live in the monastery as though no one else were in it. And thus you should never by word or by thought meddle in things that happen in the community nor with individuals in it, desiring not to notice their good or bad qualities or their conduct. And in order to preserve your tranquility of soul, even if the whole world should crumble you should not desire to advert to this or interfere".

John gives exactly the same advice also in another minor work, the Precautions - "The third precaution is very necessary that you may know how to guard yourself in the community against all the harm that may arise in regard to the religious."

Both of these short works were probably first given to the Carmelite nuns at Beas where John was spiritual director. They are interesting in this that they show that this particular advice on detachment appears as a practical application of what seems to be a rather abstruse and even controversial section of the Ascent. John is telling us in practice how we ought to behave towards others whereas in the Ascent he was setting out a theoretical exposition on the denudation of the faculty of memory.

It would certainly be wrong to interpret this advice as a selfish cutting off of oneself from the interests and wellbeing of the community. Neither John nor Teresa could be accused of this kind of conduct in their lives: they always showed themselves aware of and concerned about the needs of their brothers and sisters. John is rather thinking of the people who cannot mind their own business and also of those who are scandalised by the behaviour of other members of the community, thinking that they themselves are the only ones who keep the Rule.

The next point St. John makes, occurring in Ch7 is that an individual ought not to reflect on or preserve within himself "supernatural impressions" in the memory. If he does he is likely to be deceived. And here we meet a typically Johannine gem; "In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God; for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes 'the more it attains'. The danger with cultivating special favours lies in this; there is the 'ever-present possibility of presumption and pride in being the recipients of something special from God. John is here as always very anxious that we 'steer clear of that hallmark of the Pharisee - pride. Here again what John is driving at in these chapters of the Ascent, is that

there is the danger as in other contexts of allowing some limited concept of God to take the place of the God who cannot be comprehended. John repeats the advice he gave in chs. 16 and 7 of the 2nd book of the Ascent. This means that in being detached from spiritual possessions an individual is allowing God to work passively in the soul. Anything we ourselves can do or conceptualise in this situation would only amount to a purely natural activity, whereas God is trying to accomplish something more, something that is beyond the capacity of the natural. We have seen then that hope is a virtue that tends directly to the possession of God - a theological virtue. In this sense it is the virtue of progress in the spiritual life. It is a dynamic force that urges us forwards and draws us on towards God. Hope is evocative of Springtime with its upsurge of new life and new growth. In the Dark Night St John more poetically refers to the 'green livery of Hope'. St. John has shown us how hope works in the soul to cleanse and purify the faculty of memory. Memory is something like a deposit of archives and as a Carmelite commentator Fr. Marie-Eugene writes, 'St. John would have us burn every entry in the archives'.

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Talk SIX

In Ch 16 John begins to talk about the purification of the will, the third faculty of the soul. According to the outline set before us by John, we are still involved in the active dark night of the human spirit. The faculty of will is purified through the power of love - that is love for God understood as a theological virtue.

John's scriptural jumping-off ground for this section is the famous 'Shema' of Israel as we find in Ch. 6 of the book of Deut. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and your neighbour as yourself", we may remember that this passage from Scripture is incorporated in the Carmelite Rule. We may remember how Jesus in the Gospel commended the Scribe who saw that this was the primary requirement of the law.

John is anxious that a person's full and rich emotional life be disciplined and harnessed to serve the great goal of union with God. He wants us to direct the major feelings of the soul to God and love Him with all the energy of our being.

"Riches I need not, nor man's empty praise.

Thou mine inheritance through all my days;

Thou and thou only the first in my heart,

High King of heaven, my treasure thou art".

This means that we must find our joy in God, hope for nothing else but Him, and fear only Him. St. Teresa in one of her maxims gives us exactly the same message;

Let your desire be to see God

Your fear to lose Him,

Your grief to be separated from Him

Your joy to be united with Him,

Thus will you live in profound peace."

John's principles are very clear. They are exactly the same as those of the first Book of the Ascent which concentrated on the purification of the external side of human nature. Now his starting-off point is this; "The will should rejoice only in what is for the honour and glory of God, and the greatest honour we can give Him is to serve Him according to evangelical perfection; anything unincorporated in such service is without value to man" (Ch. 17).

John warns us that it is idle to concentrate our joy on the things of this world, such as

affluence and fame, or indeed on the good good things of the world can cause us to withdraw from God. The response of the soul to God is blunted and clouded over. The net result of all this is that the individual becomes less earnest about prayer and instead more concerned about recreational pursuits. Mediocrity in the performance of spiritual exercises becomes the norm. In an extreme form this will lead to complete carelessness and indifference even in regard to the law of God. This state has been described by Jeremiah, "They have abandoned me the fount of living water and have dug for themselves leaking cisterns that can hold no water". (Jer. 2. 13.) Ultimately this leads to thinking of riches as the end and goal of life and allowing them to become a substitute for God. If only one can become detached from the, tyranny exercised by the bank balance, then the result is a great inner freedom and expansiveness in the heart. Even in the normal course of life, one will enjoy things much more if you are not possessive of them. St Paul spoke about 'having nothing, yet possessing all things', (2 Cor.) St. John states, "He then whose joy is unpossessive of all things rejoices in them as though he possessed them all. (Ch. 20) It is this attitude of mind and status in reality that the religious vow of poverty sets out to procure for the individual who takes it. This is in imitation of Jesus himself who lived in poverty and free from earthly concerns. This living out of poverty is perhaps best exemplified in the life of St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan spirit: it is 'in giving to all men that we receive'. John himself underlines the real benefit that flows from this detachment, "It is the freedom of the heart for God."

John himself was able to cry out in his 'Prayer of the enamoured soul', "Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth, Mine are the nations, the just are mine.

And mine are the sinners. The Angels are mine
And the Mother of God and all things are mine;
And God Himself is mine and for me
Because Christ is mine and all for me".

John also warns against attachment to the attractive qualities either in oneself (if you have any) or in others. Abuse in this direction also distracts the energies of the heart from God. Somewhere in our subconscious we must recall the remark for the Book of Proverbs quoted by John, "Grace is deceitful and beauty vain; she that fears the Lord..

John views from a scriptural angle realistically what the poet describes in despairing fashion,

"Here where beauty cannot keep her
lustrous eyes
Nor new love pine at them beyond
tomorrow"

John sees similar spiritual disadvantages flowing from the wrong attitude in regard to gifts and graces as in the case of wealth - namely pride and presumption. There is a lack of proportion in

interpersonal relationships that may sometimes indeed lead to sinful expression. The result of all this is that it fosters lukewarmness and impatience with divine things. John is a great realist and his century was no different to ours or any other. He draws our attention to the numerous crimes of murder, adultery and rape that occur when sinful tendencies are left completely unchecked. No area of life and no group of people or no individual is immune from trouble in this respect. John refers us to the advice of the Roman poet Ovid - 'Apply the remedy in the beginning'. (Remedium amoris).)

If this powerful emotion of love is rightly regulated however, then innumerable benefits follow.

We are again as in the case of the mortification of mind and memory, prepared for God's love, we have a right regard for ourselves and a proper perspective on others - we are free to love them in a more objective way. I think we find here a very contemporary note in St. John of the Cross on the level of relationships, but he does insist on the ideal. He encourages an attachment to someone, yes, but he demands a greater attachment to God. That means that the more we love our friend the more our love for God grows and vice versa. Due proportion here also promotes tranquility of spirit and moreover the saying is verified "To the pure all things are pure".

St John also encourages us to allow the beautiful things in life to nourish and deepen our relationship with God in prayer. So when listening to a Mozart concerto or when looking at a beautiful landscape he would have us direct our joy to God. Still he very shrewdly asks us always to try to assess our motives because as he points out, some people will simply be enjoying a performance and try to make out that it is prayer. The test is whether we immediately rise to God when listening to the music or whatever. If we confine ourselves to the immediate source of the enjoyment and pleasure and we are forgetful of God, then it's an indication that we ought to curb it.

John details a long catalogue of undesirable effects from a spiritual point of view, which result when the tendency to sensual pleasure is given free rein. These all produce a kind of grossness which proceeds from an extravagant lifestyle in which every whim is pandered to and every desire indulged. This is an outlook on life which is not at all untypical of the age in which we live, in those circles which have the wealth to back up such decadence. The bad effects accruing from this style of life are disastrous for spiritual life: a feeling of emptiness results merely from the unrestricted indulgence in seeing things. When our ears are itching for every shred of gossip, the consequence is widespread dissipation. The same thing happens through an over-indulgence of the other senses e.g. delightful fragrances and the gourmet mentality. Special care must be exercised in what we allow the sense of touch, for a lack of moderation here can be particularly debilitating for the life of the spirit.

John very wisely reminds us however that these things can be relative to the individual, and so we must be careful not to judge others by what we find a source of trouble for ourselves. (Story of monk) Some people are more susceptible to temptation here than others in all of these areas.

The positive benefits that result from restraining the senses are many. The main plus is a deepened recollection or concentration of the energies on God. St. John of the Cross is perhaps in his approach here in some respects. The objective he has in view is necessary and desirable but the language is somewhat out of date. For example he feels that we ought to move from being sensual to being spiritual, from being animal to being rational.

What is needed rather is that these two sides of human nature be kept in harmonious balance. Neither side should be suppressed or obliterated. Psychology has come a long way since the 16th century and human nature is seen today to be more of a unity than in John's day.

On the next and higher level John proposes the mortification of what he calls 'moral good', in ourselves or others. These qualities are desirable even on the natural plane. For the Christian moreover they lead to eternal life. John adverts to the pursuit of virtue and justice that we find in Roman times, (at least at their best) We have only to think of the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius'. He was however no friend of the Christian Church. John's concern is that any feeling of satisfaction we derive from being morally good, should redound to the glory of God and not reflect on ourselves. If good qualities are referred to oneself the result is inevitably a pharisaical pride which was condemned by Jesus in the Gospel (Lk. 18.11-12)

St. John of the Cross in his writings and spiritual teaching mercilessly uncovers human pride and creeping self-seeking. As he looked at the monuments and beautiful works of art in Toledo Cathedral or in that of Salamanca where he attended the University, he must have wondered how much of it was commissioned solely for the glory of God and how much was due to human pride and vanity. He observes, "They perpetuate in the memorials their name, lineage and nobility," 28. 5) It is rare, he thinks to find people who are motivated in their works and spiritual exercises by God alone and not by personal self-satisfaction. We should try to lessen our dependence on what we can 'get out of it' and this will make us less prone to deception as well as making us more consistent and resolute in what we do. In other words we will be aiming at an evangelical poverty of spirit. There are two more categories of 'commendable things' left in regard to which John will teach detachment. These he deals with in the remaining chapters of the Ascent, namely 30 - 45. The division he suggests is as follows:

- (1) Supernatural goods.
- (2) Spiritual goods.

What does he mean by 'supernatural goods'? We are really dealing here with what are known as 'gratiae gratis datae', that is gifts which are known in theology as being bestowed for the benefit of others. So he is saying that one ought to be spiritually indifferent to unusual charisms which may be given by God; these are gifts of the Spirit - wisdom and knowledge, faith, the healing ministry, prophecy and the discernment of spirits, the gift of tongues interpretation of them. These special charisms are as we say, literally given for the benefit of others not of oneself. If these charisms are used indiscriminately or incorrectly, then the door is opened to self-deception. A more serious disadvantage is that these graces could be detrimental to and destructive of faith itself if they are not properly integrated into God's purposes. Furthermore we should be on our guard against occult practices which have always been a temptation to human nature, On

the other hand however, if unusual charisms are properly utilised, then the Lord can indeed be praised and glorified. Although it cannot be denied that these extraordinary manifestations can be marvellously effective in turning peoples' hearts to God, yet John's central theme stands, namely that the primary consideration should be the deepening of one's faith, because only faith can unite us with God.

The final type of benefits treated by St. John in the *Ascent* come under the heading of what he calls 'spiritual goods'. He will not in fact be covering every variety here as some of these have been covered in previous teaching, for instance the detachment need from knowledge and feeling. He will now confine himself to those things which incite the will to prayer and love of God. The first of these concerns the use of holy images and places of prayer and pilgrimage. The second are inspirational in character such as listening to conferences and sermons and performing exercises of devotion. John had also intended to discuss two additional types of spiritual good, which he calls 'directive and perfective', we do not know what he meant by these as the book breaks off abruptly in the middle of a sentence in a chapter on sermons! We may note that at the beginning of Ch. 16, John had proposed to give instruction on the purification of the four chief feelings or emotions of the soul namely joy, hope, sorrow and fear. In reality he only deals with the first of these and the remaining three are not tackled at all.

Images had in fact a significant place in the lives of both St. John and St. Teresa. In Segovia there is preserved a painting which is known as the Christ who spoke to St. John of the Cross. This refers to the incident when he is reputed to have heard the words, "John, what do you wish as a reward for your labours?" and John's reply is said to have been, "Domine pati et contemni pro te.", 'Lord to suffer and be despised for thee,!' Similarly in the case of Teresa a painting of Christ on the column had a profound effect on her one particular day and it sparked off a deeper conversion to the love of God. The sight of the suffering Christ caused her heart to break. (Life Ch. 9). In Ch. 39 of her 'Life' she recounts how a painting of Christ on the column in the convent hermitage spoke very gently to her.

St. John is in favour of devotion & holy images approved by the Church, but he has harsh words for the prevailing fashion in the Spain of his day in carrying such devotion to excess. However he has explicitly rejected the stand of the Reformers on this question, especially the position of Calvin who attacked the cult of images in the Church. In Ch. 15 of the *Ascent* (in connection with the purification of the memory) he wrote,

"Yet it must be noted here that by our doctrine we are not in agreement nor do we desire to be, with that of those pestiferous men, who, persuaded by the pride and envy of Satan, have sought to remove from the eyes of the faithful the holy and necessary use and the renowned cult of the images of God and his saints"

of the Cross. John is not enthusiastic about going off with a crowd on a package pilgrimage; He would prefer people to do like Jesus and go to a lonely place by themselves away from noise and distraction. He has no time for the commercialism that exploits holy places such as the Holy Land or Lourdes. We find the same sense of values in people like Carlo Garretto who like to go to the desert in order to make contact with God. John is here waging war against the restless gadabout mentality that never wants to stay in the same place, (or the same Order), but flits around like a bee going from one flower to another. John however admits that a beautifully landscaped solitary area can be very conducive to prayer. He himself was very fond of the solitude at a place called El Calvario and he sometimes took the students out into the hills to pray.

John touches on devotional exercises and strongly condemns all kinds of superstitious practices such as saying a fixed number of prayers which must be said on a certain day and at a certain time and so on. All we need to do, he says, is say the 'Pater Noster' well;

everything is included in that. His remarks on the liturgy may be a bit antiquated but they are interesting: "The manner of saying Mass should be left to the priest who represents the Church at the altar, for he has received direction from the Church as to how Mass should be said"!

The final Chapter of the Ascent as we have it is on preaching the word of God and his observation here are of perennial value; "For although (preaching) is practiced through exterior words, it has no force or efficacy save from the interior spirit". He is all in favour of a good sermon well delivered, but his considered opinion is this, "the better the life of the preacher, the more abundant the fruit".