

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL.

Book One

We know from internal evidence that this book of 'The Dark Night' is a continuation of the themes of the 'Ascent of Mt.Carmel' For example in the Prologue to the 'Ascent' John wrote, 'We shall discuss all this with the divine help....the signs for the recognition of this purification of the soul(which we call the Dark Night) whether it is the purification of the sense or of the spirit.'

The most obvious link is that both books are by way of commentary on the same poem, and indeed on the same stanzas of the same poem. In fact in his commentary on Stanza one of the Living Flame, John refers to the 'Dark Night of the Ascent of Mt.Carmel'. In the present work, just as in the Ascent, John only completes his commentary on two of the stanzas of the poem and ends abruptly after he has started to comment on the third stanza. These stanzas are now to be understood in a passive sense, as the direct work of God in the soul.

The stanzas are as follows:

`One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
- Ah the sheer grace I -
I went out unseen
My house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure
By the secret ladder disguised
-Ah the sheer grace,
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now at rest.`

In this book of the Dark Night then John is addressing himself to people who have taken his instruction in the Ascent very seriously and have been assiduous in divesting themselves of all that could impede union with God. The individual is now able to sing a new song in regard to its 'escape' from the house of the senses. It has died to itself and begun to live the "sweet and delightful life of union with God". We are now at that important transition period of spiritual life, namely

the change from meditation to contemplation. For St. Teresa this is the transition from the Third to the Fourth Mansion or in the terminology of her 'Life' the prayer of the Third Water! So John is here thinking of people who have been led along the ways of contemplative prayer and are in a state of union with God. He points out what God is doing within them because God has taken the initiative. This is what we understand as 'the passive purification of the soul during the dark night of the senses and the spirit.'

Book 1 will deal then with the passive dark night of senses. The people he has in mind have been praying and meditating for a long time - earnestly engaged in preparing for this loving encounter with the Lord. This work has taken them as far as is humanly possible. The Lord himself now takes over and begins to expose them to the burning and purifying rays of his love. This process reveals some glaring faults and defects which need the divine correcting hand. In order to appreciate the need for this purification we ought to understand the pattern of development that has taken place.

When an individual gives himself or herself to God there is usually a period of 'first fervour'. This is an intense experience of divine love along the lines of a romantic attachment. Every thing is beautiful and there can be a passionate dedication to prayer and to acts of love for God. As St. John says the Lord here is acting like a loving mother who nourishes and caresses her child. The devout person then will be intensely drawn to silence and to spending long periods perhaps in the dim light of the chapel where all the senses are bathed in a feeling of well-being. This is the initial phase of being in love with God. But there is a long spiritual road ahead, and if this new-found love is to deepen and develop, it must become increasingly independent of feelings of sweetness and inebriation of the senses. The golden moon is fading from the sky and the individual must wake to the cold light of dawn. So here in the first

book of the Dark Night, John examines the defects of these people so as to highlight the need for the kind of purification he will describe.

First of all we find a tendency in people who are serious in their search for God to parade their virtue before others. They will indulge in numerous stratagems to impress people. They will pontificate on spiritual things and will be very critical of others who do not seem to be as devout as themselves. People like this will be anxious that they alone will appear holy and so they will be jealous of others. If their spiritual director is less than enthusiastic about them they will shop around and switch to someone else who will be more approving. They will be so anxious to appear holy in the eyes of their spiritual director or confessor that they may withhold anything that shows them up in a poor light. Some times they will be disconsolate when they realise the extent of their faults as they had imagined themselves to be saints already. They plead with God to remove their faults, not realising that if He did so they would become even more proud. What is really needed however is that the individual consider everyone else as better than himself. A truly humble approach to God realises that there is nothing we can do for God and what is done amounts to nothing. They will not court praise or flattery will be embarrassed if it should come their way. Unlike the self-important person, the humble will be glad to hear others praised and they will highlight, their own faults instead of disguising them. John would seem to be here giving an exact description of St. Teresa from what we know of her life: she was always self-effacing and tried to put herself in the lowest place. He writes: "These souls would give their life's blood to anyone who serves God, and they will do whatever they can to help others serve Him.

Another remark John makes concerns what he calls 'spiritual gluttony'. People who are imperfect can also be grasping in a spiritual sense. They will have an obsession with reading spiritual books and engaging in spiritual conversations. They

may also be over attached to religious objects as we saw in Book 3 of the Ascent. All this and similar defects is material for the passive purification that God will work in the soul.

John also mentions difficulties that can arise that are of a sexual nature and which can be occasioned by the very feeling of delight and satisfaction felt in regard to God's love. This may occur at the very moment when the person is immersed in prayer, or receiving Holy Communion. The reason for this is that when the person feels joy deep inside this feeling tends to overflow into the body. Some people need reassurance in this area because of the anxiety caused by this experience. The main thing is to try to alleviate this fear and put our minds at rest. In this connection John also deals with an unbalanced attachment to someone; such a relationship will tend to diminish one's love for God. John gives us a criterion for discerning the proper from the improper - "The affection is purely spiritual if the love of God grows when it grows, or if the love of God is remembered as often as the affection is remembered or if the affection gives the soul a desire for God - if by growing in one the soul grows in the other" (Bk.1.4.)

If the relationship is improper, the process will work in reverse and the love of God will evaporate. The remedy is to grow in the love of God and the improper relationship will be corrected. There are other areas too of course

where unredeemed human nature makes its appearance even now it manifests itself in the spiritual realms. There could for instance be a great lack of moderation in the whole approach to spiritual exercises and a lack of discretion in doing penance because of the latent satisfaction derived thereby. Such people may also have a serious limitation in regard to prayer which will impede their progress and growth in faith. Because these people have been attracted to prayer in the first place by pleasurable sensation they will find it very difficult to let go of these feelings and base their prayer on something less frothy. The individual is tempted to try and induce delightful and fervent feelings which however only result in tense headache. When consolation is absent, the person will feel discouraged and think that everything has come to a standstill. Anything that

doesn't yield satisfaction is avoided. Now obviously a person who is motivated in this way is overlooking the place of the cross in Christianity.

This serious defect will be remedied by the sufferings and frustrations of the dark night of the spirit. It is obvious that the Lord will need to intervene gently and lovingly so as to adjust such behaviour in order to lead the person closer to himself. If then the individual perseveres in prayer for many years irrespective of whether there is any satisfaction there or not, considerable progress is made and the soul is being adapted to a new purely contemplative way of praying. Trying to meditate is like hitting one's head on a stone wall and there is an inevitable feeling of frustration. All around is dry and arid and the soul feels like a parched and waterless desert. One needs to take the best line of approach when overtaken by this kind of situation. There may even be a sense of

desolation and abandonment on the part of God. However any anxiety to pray and meditate in the normal way will only hinder God's effort to lead the individual forward.

In Bk. 1 Ch. 9 John again treats of the three signs of initial contemplation which he has already covered in Bk. 2. of the Ascent. In the present context he is thinking of the more passive and infused forms of prayer which are now imminent. The transition may not occur abruptly but instead there may be a period of normal meditation alternating with the beginnings of what is sometimes called obscure contemplation. John here however introduces a major distinction in regard to the kind of prayer that now begins to develop.

One category of people will continue all their lives in this pattern of prayer. Another group, a minority of those who practice prayer will be led into deeper detachment from 'lower' forms of prayer and so they will enter the highest contemplation.

Those people then whom the Lord in his providence intends to lead along the highest path must undergo a more thorough 'night of contemplation'. They will believe that everything is lost and that they have been forgotten and abandoned by God. No matter how hard they try they cannot

pray. Have patience and trust in God, John advises. The temptation is that people at this point feel they are doing nothing and only wasting time, but John counsels them not to worry. His point is that God is communicating Himself to the soul through this obscure indefinable and 'thoughtless' contemplation. John brings Ch.10 to a close with this definition: "For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love....".

St. John of the Cross maintains that initially contemplation is imperceptible, although occasionally a "certain longing for God" is experienced. The origin of this love and thirst for God is not immediately evident, but is hidden in a 'cloud of unknowing'. It can be compared to an image emerging from an obscure background; at first it is completely covered over, but little by little the picture begins to take shape. First the outline appears, then the colours and other details until finally a clear and striking image comes into focus and stands out in bold relief.

This passive night of the senses is very painful and severe but it brings innumerable advantages. When the heart is no longer orientated towards sensual satisfaction the deep roots, of evil are cut off and wither away. John notes 'that self-knowledge and an awareness of one's limitations are directly attributable to this dark and painful contemplation. When things were going well there was a tendency for the individual to live in cloud-cuckoo land, thinking that he was giving adequate service to God. Moreover the tone of a person's prayer will change somewhat and a more sober and reverential approach to God is adopted. John is really saying that the person is learning good 'spiritual manners'. This self-knowledge opens the way to a salutary knowledge of God - *noverim me, noverim te*'. This purgative fire has brought about a kind of chastening in outlook - the fact that you may be further along the spiritual road than others does not even

enter your head. You will be so painfully aware of your own misery that you will have very little time to observe the defects of others. And so the former attitudes born of pride are completely reversed. One is now more liable to err by default by not piling up spiritual exercises as was done previously. The delightful feelings that fed the sensual side of nature no longer bubble up as formerly and the exercise of love is more restrained and subdued. The soul is no longer spiritually grasping and the previously unchecked impulses die down through lack of nutriment. It is now possible to enjoy a more peaceful and tranquil communion with God. He is always in one's thoughts. There is a remarkable growth in virtue and good qualities which are nourished by this purification. Sometimes an oasis appears in this broad and arid desert; the Lord lovingly visits the soul to encourage it and this when least expected. There remains a great anxiety and solicitude about serving God and a longing to be close to Him. If only the soul realised it, the grace of God working within it is allowing it to escape into a land of freedom. In John's poetic language, the house of the soul is now 'all stilled'. In the final Ch. of Bk 1 of the 'Dark Night', the mystical teacher is looking ahead to the complete purification that will be effected in the 'passive night of the spirit'. The affliction that the individual experiences in the first night is a good preparation for this. John mentions however that not everyone undergoes the more thoroughgoing purification of the second night. We might make an observation here which should go a long way towards removing the stern and forbidding image that many people have of this master of the spiritual life. John here depicts God in a most loving and most delicate way adapting and accommodating Himself to the needs and the capabilities of each individual. "God is faithful and will not suffer us to be tempted beyond that which we are able, but he will so arrange things that we may be able to bear it. The whole work of purification then is a long drawn out process spanning one's life. It is fitted to the

circumstances, spiritual needs and potential of each one, and everyone is different. The Lord's hand works gently, sometimes chastening, at other times elevating and caressing. John tells us that if a soul is strong, God will purify it intensely in order to draw it quickly and intimately to Himself. But if it is weak then like an understanding and loving mother He will lead it onwards gently with only the bare minimum of suffering. We may think here of Jesus the Good Shepherd in these prophetic words of Ezechiel, "I myself will pasture my sheep, I myself will show them where to rest - it is the Lord who speaks. I shall look for the lost one bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong. I shall be a true shepherd to them'.