

The Ascent of Mt. Carmel

Introduction.

My first remark is that idea of 'ascent' in relation to the spiritual journey is not unique to John. Many other spiritual writers have availed of this idea. For instance St Bonaventure wrote a work entitled '**Ascent of mind to God**'.

'Ascent' of course was a readymade idea for someone whose background was the Order of Our Lady of Mt Carmel. So really the first point I'm making is that John, for all his originality, fits seamlessly into the great tradition of Christian and Carmelite spirituality.

John was heir to a rich tradition - just think of 'Institution of First Monks'. There we read: 'The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire, with the help of divine grace, through our efforts and virtuous works. This is to offer God a holy heart, free from all stain of actual sin. We do this when we are perfect and in Cherith, that is hidden in that charity of which the Wise man says: "Charity covers all offences" (Prv 10:12). God desired Elijah to advance thus far, when He said to him: "Hide yourself by the brook Cherith."

The other part of the goal of this life is granted us as the free gift of God: namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the soul, not only after death but even in this mortal life, the intensity of the divine presence and the sweetness of the glory of heaven. This is to drink of the torrent of the love of God. God promised it to Elijah in the words: "You shall drink from the brook."

More significant perhaps was the mentoring John received from St Teresa herself. The result of this, as we know, is that we now have a near complete synthesis of Carmelite spirituality. This is all the more satisfying in that this synthesis has the benefit of male/female complementarity.

John of Cross didn't write a poem on climbing Mt. Carmel though this book - the Ascent of Mount Carmel - is the longest component of his works. However as we know, he tried his hand at other fine arts, painting and sculpture for example. His sketch of the mount - although obviously great art or even any kind of art, which Carmelites probably first encountered in the novitiate, is literally an illustration of his doctrine, especially of the famous Ch.13 with which you're all so familiar.

Many years ago I was given a little collection of poems, written by an English Carmelite nun who was already deceased at the time. Her name was M.M Grace. The title of the booklet was 'The Steep Ascent of Carmel'. The phrase comes from the last poem in the book appropriately called 'Envoi'.

Go mourn with those who toil for souls, who weep
By Babylonian waters;
And on the steep
Ascent of Carmel pause
With those, now willingly bereft of light,
Who in the dark of night
With steadfast faith their sightless vigils keep. (M M Grace)

It goes without saying that John's spiritual teaching is a treasure we Carmelites have inherited. We hold this gift in trust for the church. We best show our own appreciation by our familiarity with his teaching and by the effort we make in our lived witness to this teaching.

What is the book about?

This book then is a commentary on the eight stanzas of John's great poem the 'Noche Oscura' or 'The Dark Night'.

'**Oscura**' or 'dark' here is a significant word not just a poetic one I think. This is because of the emphasis John puts on 'obscure contemplation' in the development of his teaching on prayer life.

'Dark night', as a phrase has passed into general usage - but can mean anything from toothache to severe trauma...

The book comes in the form of a commentary but we need to understand 'commentary' here in a fairly loose sense.

It is really a book of spiritual instruction, a guide to the person seeking **union with God**. [We should note that John did not intend the book for Christians in general but for the members of the Carmelite Reform and indeed only for 'some of these' as he says.

The aim then of St. John of the Cross in this work is to lead the individual to perfect union with God in so far as that is possible in this life. This **union with God** is achieved through love. We need to labour this point, I think because it's so central to Carmelite spirituality.

I'm probably not saying anything new or original but prayer and love go together. Prayer and love grow apace like twins it seems to me. Prayer is really the language of love. All three great poems involve dialogues between lover and beloved

John's other poetry is also on the same theme of love - love poetry - or should I say mystical love poetry but based on the ballad tradition of the Spain of his time.

To scale the heights of Mount Carmel and reach the summit - that is the objective. John wants to make us successful spiritual mountaineers as he himself was.

We all feel humbled, I think when we allow ourselves to be exposed to this great symphony of heavenly doctrine -

- after all John refers to 'silent music,' - that comprises the legacy of John and Teresa to us. For that reason I like to look at it as a constant source of inspiration in the same way as a Mozart symphony might yield us an experience of great inspiration and beauty.

We have a dim awareness that what John and Teresa are talking about is indeed possible even in our own situation. They assure us that the Lord is more than willing to give himself to us.

John's books are indeed marvelous guides. In times of doubt and confusion you can consult this luminous guide. It's like when going to an unfamiliar country, especially if a third world one, you would be advised to buy a Lonely Planet guide.

People who are sincere in their search for God nevertheless reach a point where further growth seems to be arrested for one reason or another. One such reason could be an unwillingness to accept the necessary purification involved in order to make progress. Another reason could be the lack of adequate counsel and spiritual direction and a consequent failure to understand what is happening to them. It is also possible for us to unwittingly put obstacles in the way. That means we resist the divine initiative that is seeking to lead us forward.

There are many pitfalls to be encountered on the spiritual journey. Some of the harm is done by clumsy directors who do not recognise the authentic signs of spiritual progress and growth in prayer. Sometimes it may be necessary to change or modify exercises that the individual has superseded and needs to discard.

All this shows the need for the kind of clear guidance, which John sets out to provide.

Opening Themes.

The theme of the first section of the book then celebrates the escape or liberation of the soul from the fetters of sense. We shall see in due course what is understood by this process. In our own context this effort might entail trying to escape the web or net of modern consumerism.

John asks us to prioritise our values. It could happen that people might put their physical health before their spiritual health. And people now chase their dreams in a great variety of ways. People tend not to visit city churches, but they are more than willing to spend time - and money - on the fitness palace next door...these promise renewal and reinvigoration.. Again we might be more interested in physical food than spiritual nourishment.

So John starts really with people who have been praying and meditating for a long time and as a result are on the verge of **contemplative prayer**. That means his 'beginners' category concerns those who are on the border-line of what he calls 'initial contemplation'. It is obviously important to bear this in mind.

The first part of the process of purification with which St. John deals concerns the mortification of everything that can appeal to our corporal nature. John usually gives us a scriptural headline for everything he proposes. He does not do so here **but** there is a line in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians that sums up what he says

"You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires".

John proposes a 'night' of mortification for both the senses and the spirit.

He would entirely agree with what the metaphysical poet John Donne wrote in one of his Holy Sonnets.

"I am a little world made cunningly of elements, and an angelike spright,
But black sin hath betraid to endless night.
My world's both parts, and so both parts must die'.

The apt metaphor which John uses for his purpose is that of 'night'. It will be a night

in a threefold **sense**, the 'night' of deprivation of the senses, the night of faith which is darkness to the mind and thirdly even God himself who in this life is a dark night to our minds. "Now we see darkly as in a mirror (and a pretty clouded one at that) but then face to face God. Try this for size: "All the beauty of creation compared with the infinite beauty of God is supreme ugliness". The same thing holds, he says, for all other qualities. Compared with God created things are completely lacking in graces and goodness and wisdom. But notice - compared with God - not in themselves.

This admittedly seems strange coming from someone who had such a profound appreciation of the beauty of nature and who could enjoy the warmth of human love and friendship as we see from his letters.

St. John indeed devotes several chapters of the Ascent to describing the various ways in which ones energies are diverted from God by uncontrolled desire. He maintains that the damage done is twofold:

- (1) uncontrolled desire deprives us of the Spirit of God and
- (2) it wearies, torments, darkens, defiles and weakens us.

[It is interesting to notice what the Hindu author of the Bagavad Gita has to say about desire. He thinks in exactly the same terms as John, "Wisdom is clouded by desire, the ever present enemy of the wise, desire in its innumerable forms which like a fire, cannot find satisfaction".]

Each chapter in this section of the Ascent then goes on to explain in detail how inordinate desire induces this weariness, torment, defilement and weakness in the soul.

We have to realise that there is a deep thirst within the human heart, which only God can satisfy. "All you who thirst come to the waters " the Prophet Isaiah cries. John sees how human beings endlessly pursue that mirage that promises to deliver happiness - but it is all just that - a mirage.

Mercifully John realises we are only human. He is not an ogre and he visualises people being guilty of sins and imperfections that are not fully deliberate. St. John is certainly insistent that unruly desire must be mortified.

He points out that unless we concentrate our desire on God our situation resembles hot water that is left uncovered. 'Or', he says 'it is like leaving the top off a bottle of perfume - the scent evaporates'. So John's approach is quite devastating. He makes the famous remark, "it makes little difference whether a bird is held by a thin thread or by a cord - they're both equally effective in holding it captive."

There is a remorseless logic in everything John writes, "Not to go forward on this road is to turn back, and not to gain ground is to lose",

In Ch. 13 of the Ascent, John enumerates his famous principles for the following of Christ. Here he assumes that we ourselves will take the initiative. Later on the Lord will take over.

He says this will be the subject of the 4th Book of the Ascent. However, the 4th Book was never in fact written and the Book of the Dark Night deals with that theme. What then are the principles?

- (1) First, have an habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with His". This would then extend reading and mediating on the Gospels.
- (2) "Every satisfaction offered to the senses, which is not for God's honour and glory, must

be renounced and rejected for the love of Jesus Christ."

The next step is to bring the emotions under control by deliberately choosing what is distasteful on every occasion - 'Not the easiest but the most difficult, not rest but labour, not the best but the least and so on.' St. John cheerfully tells us that we will get to like this way of behaving after a while. He would also advise a degree of self-depreciation and self-effacement which is meant to promote humility. Ch.13 concludes by incorporating the verses John had previously composed and written on his 'sketch of the Mount'. This sketch was originally done for the Carmelite nuns at Beas where he was confessor and for them he also wrote his commentary on this spiritual canticle.

"To reach satisfaction in all, desire its possession in nothing. To come to possess all, desire to possess nothing.....to come to the knowledge you have not You must go by a way you know not."

There is a remarkable similarity between this and some lines from East Coker, one of the four Quartets by T.S. Elliott

"... To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a **way** which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession."

Admittedly this programme of self-denial has all sounded somewhat negative, even forbidding. It is this 'agere contra the going against the grain of the ascetics.

St. John is very aware that he needs to inspire some spiritual enthusiasm to offset the starkness of these demands. In his next Chapter John says that our spontaneous inclination to what is most pleasurable must be replaced by another and better love which is that of Christ. Only the love of Christ could inspire this necessary generosity of- courage to embark on his programme of self-denial. This must be accompanied by an enkindling of longing for God to replace desire of an inferior kind.- St. John will deal more at length with this loving yearning in the Dark Night and also at the beginning of the 'Spiritual Canticle'. Here he just mentions this 'longing' in passing and goes on to conclude Bk I of The Ascent. The result of this generous " Asceticism " whereby the individual takes the initiative in what is called this " Active night of Sense", is that a true liberation is experienced and the person is prepared for further spiritual growth.

We would do well to remember as we reflect on this austere challenge of St. John that St. Teresa herself is no less exacting though in a more painless sort of way. This is simply the Carmelite understanding of the 'cost of **discipleship**'. For example we read at the beginning of 'The Way of Perfection' "... Our **primitive rule** states that we must pray without ceasing. If we do this with all love possible - for unceasing prayer is the most important aspect of the rule - the fasts, the disciplines, and the silence the order commands will not be wanting. For you already know that if prayer is to be genuine, it must be helped by these other things - prayer and comfortable living are incompatible.St. Therese imbibed this spirit wells "And our Lord let me see clearly that if I wanted to win souls I'd got to do it by bearing a cross so the more suffering came my way, the more strongly did suffering attract me."

All the great Christian teachers have insisted on the need for a vigorous response to

the challenge of the gospel of Christ.

For instance, John Calvin, a near-contemporary of John of the Cross, (1564 when John was 23). In Institutes of Christian Religion` he writes in the `Institutes of the Christian Religion" –

"The devout heart must ascend still higher, namely to where Christ calls His disciples when He says that every one of them must "take up his cross'. Those whom the Lord has chosen and honoured with His friendship must prepare for a hard, laborious, troubled life, a life full of many and various kinds of sufferings." So we see that what is asked is not something different or superfluous or optional. St. Luke for all his gentleness does not water down the words of the Master. " Another said, "I will follow you, sir, but first let me go and say goodbye to my people at home'. ' Jesus said to him, "Once the hand is laid on the plough no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God" (Lk. 9v 61)Well we have now come to the end of Bk. I of the Ascent. It has outlined for us a thorough and far-reaching system of mortification, in order to subdue the appetitive faculty of the soul. This he has called the Active Dark Night of the Senses. We should remember however that this complete mortification is not something you quickly achieve, then you are ready for the next stage. This total mortification of irregular, voluntary and often sinful appetite or desire is not achieved until a soul reaches perfect union with God. Another point to remember is that St. John is looking at the work to be done from a different position to us. He is looking down the mount, having attained the heights, from where he had felt God's presence and tasted a profound joy in the possession of God. To reach this point, to arrive at this height, everything seemed well worthwhile.

There is no question, however, but that St. John of the Cross is calling for absolute **generosity**.

The ideal is high, the highest possible and no compromise can be allowed. Nothing less than a passionate commitment to the Lord will do. John could not abide half-measures his earnestness and his impatience, is the impetuosity of the lover. There is a story told that he was once seen standing over a very distressed Anne de Penrlosa, of whom in fact he was very fond, and simply repeating 'Nada, nada, nada'. '

John is only asking us to do the same or even half as much as we would do for someone we loved.

In 1974 a book appeared an English translation, written by Ernesto Cardinal called 'Love'. In it we find many echoes of St. John of the Cross. He writes; "God wants youth and fervour and passion and dreams. He asks of you what marriage would demand because His love is marriage (P.77). To sum up, John wants us to restrain and impede an over-activity of the senses so as to give free scope to the interior world of the spirit.