The Mystery of God and of the Human Person in San Juan de la Cruz

VICTORIA B. PARCO, PH. D.
THEOLOGY DEPARTMENT
ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY
PHILIPPINES

Of San Juan de la Cruz, a mystic, it is well-known: *No sabia hablar de otra cosa sino de Dios* [He did not know how to speak of anything besides God]; “*Siempre sus palabras eran de Dios* [His words were always about God]; “*Lo mas ordinario era tratar y hablar de Dios*” [It was most usual for him to treat and speak of God].¹ The centrality of God in his mystical affirmations notwithstanding, there emerges from his works a theological perspective on the human person as a mystery who is fundamentally open to God whose Mystery is characterized by Transcendence (Distance), Immanence (Presence and Communion (Love).² These terms are meant to be understood from the perspective of a mystic who addressed the so-calld beginners, proficients and the perfect who desire to respond to the call of genuine contemplation in order to reach perfect union with God.³


³San Juan de la Cruz specified that the exigencies in the spiritual life are
The Mystery of God

In the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, San Juan de la Cruz characterizes the relationship between the Divine Being and creatures, including human beings, as a relationship of “two contraries.” God is “infinitely distant”; in comparison, creatures are “nothing.” “[Whereas God is] above the heavens and speaks from the depths of eternity,” “the human being, who is “[of] this earth” and “understands only the ways of the flesh and time,” is incapable of comprehending the secret truths and diverse meanings of God’s sayings.” Just as “there no likeness between what is not and what is,” there can be no fellowship between God, who is Uncreated Light, and the darkness of human beings. God is an utterly Other Being (*de otro ser*) from creatures by virtue of being infinitely above all of them.”

For although it is true that all creatures have, as theologians say, a certain relation to God and a trace of God … yet there is no essential likeness or connection between them and God; rather, the distance between their being and His Divine Being is infinite.

On surface, such assertions appear to contradict the emphatic affirmations of *The Book of Genesis* and the Christian Creeds which proclaim the genuine value of creatures since they come from God’s comprehensible and applicable only if a spiritual director can discern the signs of contemplation in the life a person. Otherwise, the exigencies do not apply.


- **AS**: The Ascent of Mount Carmel
- **DN**: The Dark Night
- **SC**: The Spiritual Canticle
- **LF**: The Living Flame of Love
- **RM**: The Romances

*I* AS 4, 4.

*I* AS 4, 2-3.

*II* AS 12, 2. While recognizing the “analogy of being,” the saint is clearly more inclined towards the negative dimension of the analogy, taking his cue from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): “Between the Creator and the creature there can be no likeness perceived which is not surpassed by a greater unlikeness between them.” (Cited in Ross Collings, O.C.D., *John of the Cross* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 30.

*III* AS 8, 3.
creative and sustaining action upon them.⁹ One important consideration is the fact that these notions of the relationship between God and creatures are found in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, a work intended for beginners in the contemplative life. As much as they might already be receiving contemplative graces, beginners still have to continue to struggle against the appetites (*apetitos de su voluntad*).¹⁰ Through the “heat of [these] immoral desires”¹¹ for creatures, they become vulnerable to reducing the properly infinite capacity of their spirit into an obsession with mere contingency. When persons grasp at creatures in this false, alienating way, they destroy their true value as a mediation of the Infinite Source of all values.¹²

San Juan de Cruz’s unremitting *via negativa* towards creatures in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is a device, therefore, of critique and interrogation, specifically of those disordered desires in human persons by which the very perfection of creatures as creatures is transformed into provocations for human persons to take up these things in false, self-alienating ways. Thus, when San Juan de la Cruz asserts that “all the beauty of creatures, compared with the infinite beauty of God is

---

¹⁰Ibid.
¹¹IAS 9, 1.
¹²One finds a radically different characterization of creatures in the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love* where the mystical doctor addresses those in whom the purifying and transforming work of grace is thought to be more advanced. At this stage, human persons experience the authentic harmony that exists between them and the whole of creation. Jesus Christ Himself, the Bridegroom and the Beloved, is perceived and described through the symbol of created realities. Hence, San Juan de la Cruz intones:

My beloved is the mountains,
And lonely wooded valleys,
Strange islands,
And resounding rivers,
The whistling of love-stirring breezes.

The tranquil night
The time of the rising dawn,
Silent music,
Sounding solitude,
The supper that refreshes and deepens love. *(SC 14-15)*
supreme ugliness,” that “all the grace and elegance of creatures compared with God’s grace is utter coarseness and crudity,” or that “all the goodness of creatures in the world compared with the infinite goodness of God can be called evil, since nothing is good,”13 he does not at all have in mind the denigration of creatures. What he is thinking of, rather, is the cultivation of attitudes that might empower especially the so-called beginners to identify and resist whatever interior blocks might prevent them from relating with creatures in the context of an authentic and total openness to God, the Ultimate Source and Goal of their existence.

By underscoring the “nothingness” of creatures, San Juan de la Cruz is seeking to affirm, in the strongest terms possible, the fact that God is the One toward Whom a human person ought to “direct his heart ... with delight and joy, because [God] is in Himself ... beauties and graces in the most eminent degree and is infinitely high above all created things.” The “nothingness of creatures” is his way of stressing the unassailable transcendence of God over the whole of creation.

Transcendence, however, does not mean separation from human persons, as though God were uninvolved with them. The meaning of the Spanish term, “sustancia de los secretos” is communicated in this translation: “The substance of the secrets is God Himself, for God is the substance and concept of faith and faith is the secret and mystery.”14 God is “inexhaustible, surpassing everything, richly endowed beyond conception.” Like “hidden treasures,” there is always something new to be discovered about God; at every contact, one discovers new aspects, new qualities.15 This involves “entering further, deep into the thicket”16 of God’s mystery, wisdom, knowledge. It means going “to the high caverns in the rock” “for there is so much to fathom in Christ” who is like “an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures,” so that however deep we go into them, we never reach the end or the bottom, “but rather in every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere.”17

13I AS 4,4.
14SC 1, 10.
16SC 36.
17SC 37, 3-4.
In speaking about God, San Juan de la Cruz deploys word combinations to bring out how God's limitless transcending includes God's surpassing generosity, how God's uniqueness implies his loving-kindness and closeness. God is immense but also compassionate: Immense Father, distant but equally tender. In Letter 23, San Juan de la Cruz describes "this great God of ours" as great, yet intimate with respect to us. By means of statements paradoxical in meaning, he brings reflection to bear on God's transcendent, making certain that it is understood positively, not just negatively through such terms, such notions as the invisible, the obscure, the painful, the far away. Has not God, he asks, transcendent and unfathomable, become lovingly near in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ? This unity of seeming opposites is well-illustrated in the following passage:

In this interior union God communicates Himself to the soul with such genuine love that no mother's affection, in which she tenderly caresses her child, nor brother's love, nor 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.

Distant mystery, God's unique transcension does not render Him absent, indifferent, unconcerned. God is equally immanent, since His delights are to be with the children of this world. Juan de la Cruz adverts to the immediacy of God's creative presence saying:

O woods and thickets
Planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
Coated bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has He passed by you?

---

18SC 27, 1.
19Ruiz Salvador, St. John of the Cross, p. 22.
20SC 27, 1.
Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
With His image alone,
Clothed them in beauty.\textsuperscript{21}

The "woods and thickets" indicating the diversity and richness of creation, are called into existence by God, filled with innumerable good graces, and imbedded in life-affirming connections of mutual dependence.\textsuperscript{22} God’s work is perfected when, through the Incarnation and Resurrection of the Son, all of creation, but especially, "all who are free," all who transcend the other creatures by their capacity to "tell me a thousand graceful things of You," are clothed in dignity and beauty, participating in God's very life through grace.\textsuperscript{23}

Since the Incarnate and Risen Lord fully reveals the mystery of God, San Juan de la Cruz highlights how believers ought to fix their eyes on Him and not on any mystical vision or locution. The Gospel writers refer to the Father's words concerning Jesus Christ as His Beloved Son to whom we ought to listen. San Juan de la Cruz writes:

He is my entire locution and response, vision and revelation, which I have already spoken, answered, manifested, and revealed to you, by giving Him to you as brother, companion, master, ransom and reward. If you desire Me to declared some secret truths or events to you, fix your eyes on Him, and you will discern hidden in Him the most secret mysteries and wisdom, and the wonders of God.\textsuperscript{24}

"In giving us His Son, His only Word (for he possesses no other), He spoke everything at once in this sole Word — and He has no more to say."\textsuperscript{25} Owing to His unique status as God's only Begotten Son whose hiding place is the bosom of the Father (John 1: 18), Jesus is the full Revealer of the Father, "by the total fact of His presence and self-manifestation by words and works, signs and miracles, but \textit{above all by his}

\begin{footnotes}
\item SC 4-5 (stanzas)
\item SC 4.
\item SC 5-7.
\item II AS 22, 5-6.
\item II AS 22, 3.
\end{footnotes}
death and resurrection from the dead. In the poem, "Otras canciones y lo divino de Cristo y el alma," or "Un Pastorcico," Christ is likened to a lone young shepherd filled with love for a shepherd girl, his heart, "an open wound of love." Propelled by this love, "he gives himself up to brutal handling in a foreign land." The last stanza evokes the crucifixion.

After a long time he climbed a tree,
And spread his shining arms,
And hung by them, and died,
His heart an open wound of love.

The perspective of the cross is maintained throughout the poem notwithstanding the fact that there is no reference in it to the traditional images of the Passion. With each stanza ending with the verse, "His heart an open wound of love," the poem succeeds in expressing the unfathomable depths and nearness of God's love through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ who reveals God at the moment of his extreme abandonment. Yet, if it is the moment of complete annihilation, it is also the moment of his most marvelous accomplishment, surpassing all previous works and bringing them to completeness. Thus did Christ bring about the reconciliation and union of human beings with God through grace.

Granted that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual transformation of persons? San Juan de la Cruz first situates the Holy Spirit within the Immanent Trinity, as described in the "First Romance," stanzas 6-7.

As the lover in the Beloved
Each lived in the other,
And the Love that unites them
Is one with them.

---


27This is really a re-working of a profane poem. San Juan de la Cruz changed the final stanza, thus changing the tone and significance of the poem. Read the comments of Ruiz Salvador in Introducción, p. 161.

28II AS 7, 11.
Their equal, excellent as
The One and the Other;
Three Persons, and one Beloved
Among all three.

The role of the Holy Spirit in the process of spiritual transformation is defined through two symbols: the first in The Spiritual Canticle and the second in The Living Flame of Love. San Juan de la Cruz writes:

Be still, deadening north wind;
South wind come, you that waken love,
Breathe through my garden,
Let its fragrance flow,
And the Beloved will feed amid the flowers.  

The south wind is a delightful breeze, which, quite unlike the north wind, brings rain, causes plants to germinate, opens up flowers and spreads their fragrance all around. As such, the south wind is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The Bride, the person experiencing spiritual dryness, implores the Holy Spirit to enkindle her love for the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, to quicken and awaken her will, which has fallen asleep to the love of God. She asks the Holy Spirit to “breathe through her garden,” begs the Holy Spirit to prepare her as “the dwelling place” of the Son, “opening the flowers,” “uncovering the gifts and decorating it with the tapestry of graces and riches.” In this way, she can be made ready for the fullness of union with the Son in spiritual marriage.

In The Living Flame of Love, a second image is evoked. Here, the person who is greatly transformed in love, addresses the Holy Spirit.

O living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest center! Since
Now You are not oppressive,
Now consummate if it be Your will:
Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter.  

29SC 17.
30SC 17, 8.
31LF 1.
The "flame of love," burning within the soul, bathing it in glory and refreshing it with the quality of divine life," is the Holy Spirit, the spiration of Love between the Father and the Son.\textsuperscript{32} Sacred Scripture asserts that such Love, this love which is the Holy Spirit, has been poured out into the hearts of the baptized, making them a new creation and calling them to their specific missions as witnesses of Jesus Christ in His Body the Church, as dwelling places of God One and Triune, the Communion of Love.

San Juan de la Cruz brings out the mystery of the Blessed Trinity in still another poem, "La Fonte" or "The Source."\textsuperscript{33}

Su origen no lo sé, pues no le tiene,
Mas sé que todo origen de ella viene,
Aunque es de noche. (Father)

El corriente que nace de esta fuente,
Bien sé que es tan capaz y omnipotente,
Aunque es de noche. (Son)

El corriente que de estas dos procede,
Sé que ninguna de ellas precede,
Aunque es de noche. (Spirit)\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{33}The full title of the poem: "Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe." This poem was composed during the last months of San Juan de Cruz's imprisonment at the monastery dungeon of Toledo. Scholars note the liturgical associations found in many of his poems. This poem in particular, belongs to the liturgical period falling between Trinity Sunday and the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, which, in the year 1578 fell at the end of May. The saint, in his prison cell, recalled the feast of Corpus Christi, celebrated in those days with great splendor at the City of Toledo. See Jesus Castellano, O.C.D., "Lecture théologique d'une symbole: la source," trans. from Spanish in Jean de la Croix: un saint, un maître, ed. Centre Notre Dame de Vie (Venasque: Éditions du Carmel, 1991), pp. 139-40.

\textsuperscript{34}"La Fonte," stanzas 2, 7, 8.

I do not know its origin, for it hasn’t one,
But I know that every origin has come from it,
Although it is night. Stanza 2
Six out of the eleven stanzas which constitute the poem invite the reader to contemplate the mystery of God, One and Triune, a hidden and ever-flowing source, giving life and satisfying the human person’s thirst for the eternal life with God. The Father is the Origin; the Son is the source that springs from the Origin, as deep and as great as the Origin and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son but is not preceded by either of them. Within the mystery of the Trinity reposes the mystery of the Eucharist, the gift of the Father, the presence of the Son and the powerful love of the Holy Spirit. Human beings are called to participate in the life of love of God, One and Triune, and chosen from all eternity to be holy, blameless, full of love, truly children of God (Ephesians, 1)

The Mystery of the Human Person

Under the light of the mystery of God, the human person is revealed in his or her fullest meaning. The human person, in San Juan de la Cruz’s view, is a mystery open to Mystery, fully intelligible only from the perspective of the Mystery who is the Source and Object of the insatiable desire at the very heart of human existence. In The Spiritual Canticle, the soul calls out in restless desire saying:

Where have You hidden
Beloved, and left me moaning?

I know well the spring that flows from this spring
Is mighty in compass and power,
Although it is night. Stanza 7

I know that the spring proceeding from these two
Is preceded by neither of them,
Although it is night.

35 Maria del Sagrario Rollán, “Amour et désir chez Saint Jean de la Croix,” Nouvelle Revue Théologique 113 (1991): 498-515, characterizes the person in the sanjuanist works as a being of desire. Desire implies an experience of absence or lack which engenders desire. The potential goal to which one tends is union in love. The work of San Juan de la Cruz is considered a purifying and ecstatic itinerary of desire (un parcours purificateur et extatique du désir). The whole process involves an authentic conversion from a desire lost in the idolatry of creatures to a desire, empty and poor, wounded by absence but maintained awake by the thirst of the Absolute.
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling You, and You were gone.\textsuperscript{36}

Of this creature of desire, "rushing toward God as impetuously as a falling stone attracted to its center," San Juan de la Cruz writes:

She knows that she is like a sketch or the first draft of a drawing and calls out to the one who did this sketch to finish the painting and image. And her faith is so enlightened that it gives her a glimpse of some clear divine reflections of the height of her God. As a result, she does not know what to do other than turn to this very faith which contains and hides the image and the beauty of her Beloved, and from which she also receives these sketches and tokens of love, and speak of it.\textsuperscript{37}

Because the human person's very existence depends upon the continuous act of the Creator God,\textsuperscript{38} there exists between them the most intimate rapport of fundamental God. Human persons retain the freedom to accept or reject the divine presence, to be lukewarm or indifferent towards it. They are free to adopt either the disordered love of those who seek to gratify their selfish desires or interests, or the pure, disinterested love of the God who loves, and by so doing gives life and existence to others.\textsuperscript{39} In choosing and accepting God's unmerited offer of graced relationship with Him and thus "cooperating with grace," human persons are eventually transformed in God, becoming \textit{dios por participación}, divinized, appearing to be like God, possessing all that God Himself has. San Juan de la Cruz writes:

\begin{quote}
[W]e are not discussing the substantial union which is always existing, but the union and transformation of the soul in God. This union is not always existing, but we find it only
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36}SC 1
\textsuperscript{37}SC 12, 1.
\textsuperscript{38}"In this way, He is present not only in the holiest souls, but also in sinners and in all other creatures. For with this presence, He gives them life and being. Should this essential presence be lacking, they would all be annihilated. Thus His presence is never wanting to the soul: (SC 11, 3P. See also II AS 5, 3. San Juan de la Cruz thus speaks of the presence of God through ESSENCE.
\textsuperscript{39}SC 38, 4.
where there is likeness of love. We will call it "the union of likeness," and the former, the essential or substantial union." The union of likeness is supernatural and the other, natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul completely rids itself of what is repugnant and unconfirmed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love.\(^{40}\)

So, even if human persons remain naturally distinct from God, they reflect, to a remarkable degree, the beauty and sanctity of God, and specifically, of the Risen Christ, through a process involving the \textit{total liberation} within themselves of the image of God. Of these transformed souls, viewed through the nuptial symbols of the Bridegroom/Bride, San Juan de la Cruz writes in the \textit{Spiritual Canticle}, stanza 39:

\begin{quote}
The breathing of the air,  
The song of the nightingale,  
The grove and its living beauty,  
In the serene night  
With a flame that is consuming and painless.
\end{quote}

The "breathing of the air" refers to the soul's ability to breathe the same spiration of love that transpires among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit within the Trinity. There is no other way to explain how it is possible for human persons to attain this degree of transformation in love except by considering the prayer of the Son: "Father, I desire that where I am those You have given Me may also be with Me, that they may see the glory You have given Me (John 17: 24).

In \textit{The Living Flame of Love}, the mystical doctor writes of the work of each Divine Person in the transformed soul.

\begin{quote}
O sweet cautery!  
O delightful wound!  
O gentle hand! O delicate touch  
That tastes of eternal life
\end{quote}

\(^{40}\)II AS 5, 3.
And pays every debt!
In killing You changed death into life.\textsuperscript{41}

In the commentary to this stanza, the “sweet cautery” is identified as the Holy Spirit who produces an intense burning fire of love in the soul. The “gentle hand” is the Father who gives life, merciful and bountiful, powerful and rich, favoring the soul with rich and marvelous presents. The Father’s powerful hand has wounded the soul in order to cure it and raise it to the fullness of life. The Father’s hand touches the soul mightily with the delicate touch which is the Son. The soul addresses the Son in this way: “O You, then, delicate touch, the Word, the Son of God, through the delicacy of Your divine being.” In touching the soul, the Word purifies, cleanses with a touch that is infinitely, subtly, lovingly delicate. What the soul tastes is the work operated by each divine Person; it is the taste of “eternal life” in God.\textsuperscript{42}

Called to attain this state of transformation, human persons cannot do so without first having to undergo trials and temptations. For only by undergoing the purifying fires of the dark nights can “the soul become God from God,” participating in His life and sharing the splendor of His glory, symbolized by the “lamps of fire.”

O lamps of fire!
In whose splendors
The deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscure and blind,
Now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
Both warmth and light to their Beloved.\textsuperscript{43}

Since the virtues and attributes of God are like enkindled and resplendent lamps, they cannot but touch the soul by their shadows, being so close to the soul. The shadows that the lamps of God’s beauty cast over the soul will make the soul beautiful, too, with the very beauty of God. Since there are many lamps of God’s attributes, each lamp casts a shadow on the soul. Thus will the soul be truly filled with the splendor of God. Indeed, for such glorious splendor has the soul been

\textsuperscript{41} LF 2
\textsuperscript{42} LF 2, 2; 6, 16; 23.
\textsuperscript{43} LF 3.
created; towards such grandeur and beauty has she been predestined. The King of heaven reveals to the soul “the might of His power and the love of His goodness,” communicates to the soul “His strength and love.” Deploying nuptial/spousal images, San Juan de la Cruz, in *The Living Flame*, comments:

... going out to it from His throne, which is the soul itself, like the Bridegroom from His Bridal chamber ... touching it with his scepter and embracing it. There we find the royal garments, God’s admirable virtues; there the splendor of gold which is charity; there the glittering of the precious stones of knowledge ... there the face of the Word, full of graces which shines upon the queen, which is the soul, and clothes it in such a fashion, that, transformed in these attributes of the heavenly King, it is aware of becoming a queen.

Thus the soul sits as the right side of the King as His Queen, rejoicing in beholding His beauty, a beauty in which she shares. Transforming union and spiritual marriage unite the soul with God in the closest possible union in this life of faith. Does this beautiful and utterly privileged transformation isolate the soul and separate her from her brothers and sisters? It does not seem possible. The gifts of God are always a call to mission. Thus, related to the Father as a child of God, the transformed person shares in God’s all embracing love. United to the Son as His Bride and Queen, she is asked: “Do you love Me? Feed my lambs, feed my sheep.” Filled with the Spirit who is Love, she is bound to the movements of the Spirit who ceaselessly renews the face of the earth, associated with the saving plan of God, the hastening of the Kingdom, the service of the Church. The mysticism of the dark nights is a mysticism of love. No better proof of this can be given than the witness of the great mystics — all of them reformers, founders, missionaries or hidden contemplative apostles in the Church.

The theological anthropology of San Juan de la Cruz is grounded in the truth that God is manifesting the God-Self and becoming present to the world and human persons in a progressively fuller and more intense manner. Until the total transformation of human persons into *dios*

---

44LF 4, 13.
45Ibid.
por participación, they suffer like exiles in a foreign land, painfully aware of the immense distance that separates them from the Beloved: the distance of creaturely existence, the distance of sin, the distance of the already but not yet. San Juan de la Cruz expresses the mystery of human persons impelled by desire and in perpetual quest:

O souls, created for these grandeurs and called to them!
What are you doing? How are you spending your time?

While all are indeed called to reach these grandeurs, so few make it to this high state of perfect union with God and it is not because God desires only a few souls to be so elevated. How much God wants all to be perfect as the Father is perfect. So where does the problem lie? San Juan de la Cruz writes:

He finds few vessels that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. Since He tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work, unwilling to be subject to the least discomfort and mortification, it follows that, not finding them strong and faithful in that little (Matthew, 25, 21.23), in which He favored them by beginning to hew and polish them, He realizes that they will be much less strong in these greater trials. As a result, He proceeds no further in purifying them and raising them from the dust of the earth through the toil of mortification.

In the theological anthropology of San Juan de la Cruz, then, the mystery of God and the mystery of the human person are in strict correlation. The human person reveals God, transcendent and immanent, a mystery of communion and love who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

46Secundino Castro, O.C.D., Hacia Dios con San Juan de la Cruz (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1986), p. 43 refers to a Romance written by the saint based on Psalm 137 and entitled “Super Flumina Babylonis.” By means of the sentiments of a Jew in exile, the poem expresses the longing of a human person for his true home and his truest self.
47SC 39, 7.
48LF, 2, 7.