
Among the best-kept secrets of the spiritual life is this: that St. John of the Cross is one of the truly great spiritual directors in the history of the Church. Most pray-ers have the impression that John is “too deep” for them, that he writes only for mystics whose experience is far beyond that of ordinary friends of God. Thus when I was a seminarian some thirty-five years ago, the writings of John of the Cross were in a special locked section of the library (known to us as “hell”), together with writings on the Church’s “Index of Forbidden Books,” and obtainable only with special permission from superiors. Not only was John too deep — he was also considered too dangerous for relative beginners like us.

This restriction was not entirely misguided. John of the Cross does say that he is not writing for beginners, since there were already good books available to guide them in the early stages of their spiritual life. St. Teresa had died just a few years earlier, and her “Way of Perfection” is undoubtedly one of the works he had in mind. Even today, I would not recommend John’s writings to a real beginner in the life of prayer, since his “nada” doctrine could easily be misinterpreted as a repudiation of all the human goods — nature, family, friends, learning — which form the natural foundation for our discovery of God’s love and goodness.

THE DARK NIGHT AS THE NORMAL GOAL OF A LIFE OF PRAYER

At the same time, however, it is not true that John wrote only for “mystics,” people with a rare and special call to contempla-
tion. What he describes is the ORDINARY experience of those who persevere beyond the beginnings in the life of prayer. If we are faithful and generous, the time inevitably comes when the beauties of nature and the love of friends no longer have the power to move us so deeply and to lift our hearts to their Creator. "Do not send me any more messengers," John exclaims to the Lord in his classic poem, "for they cannot tell me what I need to hear." All these created goods are merely "messengers": when they have led the devout soul to God, they must fade into the background. As the Samaritan townspeople told the woman at the well, "We believe now, not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have seen him, and we know that he really is the Savior of the world" (Jn 4:42).

It is at this point, when messengers can no longer tell us what we need to hear, that John of the Cross becomes the master guide and director. When we can no longer "meditate" as we have been accustomed to — when the well of our affections and reflections runs dry — we think we can no longer pray, that somehow we have lost the Lord whom we have come to love. If we are fortunate enough at this point to encounter John of the Cross, or a director like him, we will discover that what seems like failure is really growth. And then John's "Nada" will make good sense to us: Compared to the Lord himself whom we seek, all of these created goods really are "nothing."

In explaining this relative nothingness to maturing pray-ers, I often cite the example of my own father's love for my mother. They were very close — not only spouses but best friends for forty-two years. Suppose that, towards the end of his life, I had dared to say to my father: "Dad, don't you find it boring spending your whole life with just one woman? After all, there are many interesting women in your office and in your social world — women, perhaps, who have gifts that Mom does not have." I would have risked my life by asking such a question, but if I had done so I know what his answer would have been: "Compared to your mother, all of those other women are nothing." That is a response born of true love. And it expresses beautifully, though it is only a shadow of the divine truth, the "nada" of St. John of the Cross. Compared to the God whom the pray-er has come to love, all these created shadows are really nothing.

The problem is that we seem to be left hanging between earth
and heaven. We can no longer hear the messengers, and yet we cannot hear God himself either. It is this no-man’s-land that John of the Cross calls the Dark Night. And, surprisingly, it is this experience which is true “contemplation.” The dark night IS contemplation, John says, since it is a direct experience of the God who transcends all our thoughts about and images of Him. When the Lord of love chooses to encounter us directly, no longer through “messengers,” our natural faculties of thinking and imagining “blow a fuse,” as it were. They are finite, and so cannot contain the experience of the infinite God Himself. Hence, the darkness of the dark night. Far from being ecstatic (as that term is usually understood) or visionary, the initial experience of contemplation is terrifying for the pray-er. Like Moses, she is face-to-face with the Living God who cannot be “named” by her. She cannot correlate this encounter with anything in her ordinary human experience. Hence, God seems absent—precisely because He is too present. The soul is blinded by an excess of light in the dark night of prayer.

THE PURPOSE AND EFFECT OF THE DARK NIGHT

It is this initially terrifying experience of darkness which Barbara Dent explains in her recent book, My Only Friend is Darkness. Since John of the Cross was an outstanding theologian in the Thomistic-Scholastic tradition of the 16th century, his work can be discussed in one of two ways: theologically or experientially. A notable example of the former is John Paul II’s doctoral dissertation (in his student days as Fr. Karol Wojtyla) on the scholastic basis of John’s concept of faith in Book II of “The Ascent of Mount Carmel.” The Pope’s work is scholarly and technical, valuable as such but scarcely accessible to the ordinary pray-er seeking to come to grips with the experience of darkness in his own life.

By contrast, Barbara Dent’s approach to John of the Cross is experiential. She is an educated person, a retired English teacher in New Zealand with three children and ten grandchildren. And, as the book jacket tells us: “She has been writing since she was 13, has had four books published and hundreds of poems and articles in magazines and journals in New Zealand, the U.S., Ireland and England.” But her book has a very different purpose and tone from that of the young Karol Wojtyla. Hers is, as I said, experien-
tial: it is based on her own terrifying experience, and seeks to explain that experience to herself and to others who have shared it, by relating it to John’s classic discussion in “The Ascent of Mount Carmel” and “The Dark Night of the Soul.”

As I read her book, it seemed to me that My Only Friend is Darkness is really two books. One is autobiographical, comprising mainly chapter 1 and the striking poems which conclude each of the 18 chapters, as well as (implicitly) several sections in the second half of the book. Here we learn of her own agony in the darkness, and (especially in chapter 1) of her personal history of childhood rejection and the periods of psychiatric counselling which were later required to come to terms with her past. This autobiographical part of the book is important, since it makes us realize that the experience of the dark night, the experience of God in prayer, is unique to each pray-er. HOW we encounter God in the darkness depends to a large extent on WHO we are — our histories, our personalities, our temperaments. No two of us will respond in precisely the same way to the dark experience of contemplation. Although all of us will (I suspect, since I myself did!) wonder, at some point in our hanging between earth and heaven, whether we are “crazy,” most of us are not — at least no more than our companions. Thus, it is important for the reader of Barbara Dent’s book to realize that her experience is to some extent uniquely conditioned by her own personal history. Similarly, when I direct mature pray-ers, I must be aware that no two of them will have precisely the same experience. God is working to transform THIS person, and I must have a sensitivity for the “this.” I must not try to fit my directees — nor should they try to fit themselves — into a single Procrustean bed.

I said that My Only Friend is Darkness seems to be two books, the first being Dent’s own spiritual autobiography. The second “book,” however, treats of those elements of dark contemplation which are common to all maturing pray-ers. Here, Barbara Dent follows closely the phenomenological description of John of the Cross in the Ascent and the Dark Night, with his division of the night into four phases: the active nights and the passive nights, each of sense and of spirit. As she says, for John, they are interwoven in the pray-er’s experience. They do not follow a neat chronological sequence, though the active nights (what we can do to liberate ourselves) tend to predominate earlier in the contem-
plative life and the passive nights (what God does to liberate us) later. Dent’s discussion, from chapters 2 to 18, concerns itself primarily with the passive nights (from about chapter 6 onwards) — apparently because this has been the most challenging, most searing part of her own experience, and because she assumes (correctly, I believe) that the same will be true for all mature pray-ers.

As I read her explanation of John’s doctrine, I had the impression that these chapters were originally conferences which she delivered to a group of lay Carmelites. My impression may well be correct, since the book jacket tells us that she is a secular Carmelite (as the Carmelite tertiaries of old are now called) and that she spends much time “giving spiritual and psychological guidance to those who turn to me for it.” Perhaps she is the formation directress of such a community? In any event, the thought leads me to suggest to anyone reading Dent’s book that she or he use it as a companion to the text of John of the Cross. Her explanation is wise and quite accurate, but it would make much more sense to someone who is actually reading the text along with her. Certain parts, especially of her later chapters, would be quite obscure for a reader unfamiliar with the Dark Night.

A final comment concerns the “agony” of the dark night. Perhaps because of her own personal history, Barbara Dent’s book could leave the reader with the impression that the life of contemplating is one of almost unrelieved misery. But John does say (in Book II, chapter 1 of the Dark Night) that the soul that has passed through and survived the night of sense “usually spends many years exercising itself in the state of proficients . . . liberated . . . with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit.” Also in chapter 6 (paragraph 6), he tells us that: “Only at intervals is one aware of these feelings (of annihilation and poverty) in all their intensity.” Otherwise, “a person would die in a few days!” Dent does not deny this brighter side of the experience, of course, but I think it needs to be emphasized more. Even at this time of radical transformation, our Beloved Lord remains a God of peace and not of confusion. Although the dying is never easy or enjoyable, we CAN learn to love the darkness. It can truly be, as Barbara Dent’s striking title proclaims, “my only friend” — because I have discovered from experience that John of the Cross is, indeed, one of the great directors, one of the great interpreters of the ways of God with those He draws to His love.