INTRODUCTION: SEEING JOHN THROUGH IGNATIAN EYES

St. John of the Cross and St. Ignatius Loyola, both Spaniards, both 16th-century men, both key figures in the early stages of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, are rarely thought of as kindred spirits. John is considered mystical, otherworldly, a master in the deeper reaches of a life lived alone with God. And Ignatius a man of action, whose prayer was methodical and totally oriented to forming servants of the Church and of God in the world. But a closer look reveals, I believe, a striking affinity between these two giants of the 16th-century Church.

There is, of course, some truth to the stereotypes. While St. John was a scholarship student of the Jesuits in Medina del Campo from 1559 to 1563, he decided upon completing his course there in the humanities to enter the Carmelite monastery in that town. He was from a very poor family, orphaned of his father soon after his birth in 1542 and disinherited by the father’s wealthy relatives (who disapproved of his father’s marriage to a humble weaver from Fontiveros), and attended a “Catechism School” for the poor during his elementary years. When he was 17 he went to work in Medina del Campo’s Plague Hospital. The founder, Don Alonso Alvarez, sponsored him as a working student at the Jesuit College.

Don Alonso hoped that John would continue his studies for the priesthood, and offered to pay his tuition, in the expectation that John would then become the chaplain of his hospital. But the young man had other plans. At the age of 20 he entered the Carmelite Order and completed his studies for priesthood in 1567.
Still not satisfied with the quality of life in the Carmelites, in search of deeper prayer and greater solitude, he was considering joining the austere Carthusian Order — when he met Teresa of Avila in 1567. She was in Medina del Campo for the second foundation of her reform of the Carmelite convents, and John had returned to his home to celebrate his first canta misa. Teresa was 52 and he 25. And she immediately set about persuading him to join her in extending the reform to the Carmelite men. John was sceptical. He gave her one year to get the project started; if not, he would pursue his plan to join the Carthusians.

Teresa did, of course, meet John’s deadline. And he became one of the first male Discalced Carmelites. He also became one of the two directors (the other was the young Jesuit, Fr. Baltasar Alvarez) who, Teresa says, helped her most on the way of perfection. What interests us here is that St. John, despite his lengthy exposure to the Jesuits (beginning only three years after Ignatius’ death in Rome), does not seem to have considered joining the Company of Jesus. The spirit of Ignatius must have been still very much alive in the college of Medina del Campo. Yet John was following a different star. The reformed Carmelite men were to have an apostolate, primarily preaching and hearing confessions, but their essential spirit was contemplative — and austere, unlike the “ordinary” lifestyle which Ignatius prescribed for his new Society of apostolic men.

Thus John and Ignatius seem to have been cast from very different molds. They do share a common centennial, 1991 being the 400th anniversary of John’s death and the 500th of Ignatius’ birth. But their essential spirits appear, on the surface, to have been quite different. And yet I became convinced, long before this centennial year, that they are really — if we look deeper — essentially kindred souls. I first encountered John during my philosophy years, when my prayer became dry and dark and I was desperately searching for a guide to make sense of what was happening. Jesuits were, according to the received wisdom of the day (the mid-1950s), supposed to be lifetime “meditators.” Darkness and dryness, except as the fruit of negligence and as an obstacle to be overcome, were not part of the Jesuit ideal of prayer.

Hence it was that my initial contact with John of the Cross was
traumatic. He did speak to the dryness I experienced; but it also seemed, as I told my director at the time, that if John was correct (about the "nada" and the radical otherness of the God he described) then our whole Jesuit way of life was mistaken. The director was kind and, in his own way, understanding: he suggested that perhaps my distress meant that I was not yet ready for John of the Cross. I loved my Jesuit vocation, and I wanted to be docile — so I set John aside, without much concern whether and when I would ever be "ready" for him.

But, despite the novelty of a missionary assignment and the challenge of being a neophyte teacher in Cagayan de Oro, the dryness and darkness persisted and even intensified. There was new "darkness in the marketplace," and a much more radical awareness of my own sinfulness. Ready or not, it was clear that sooner or later I would have to return to John of the Cross. And that second encounter, greatly facilitated by Leonard Boase's new but truly classic The Prayer of Faith, was much more fruitful. Boase was a Jesuit, and so he spoke to me in my own language. But his message was, in essence, John's. For the first time it seemed possible that John and Ignatius might, after all, be compatible guides — a possibility that would be confirmed some twenty years later, when I wrote When the Well Runs Dry (Ave Maria Press, 1979) and discovered that my personal experience was shared by many apostolic pray-ers, lay and religious, throughout the world.

THE ESSENTIAL MESSAGE OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

It is widely conceded that John of the Cross is the greatest poet that Spain has produced. His output was small (about 1000 lines), but those few lines have echoed throughout the succeeding centuries. Best known is his "Spiritual Canticle," modelled on the biblical "Song of Songs," which sings ecstatically of the union in love between God and the soul captivated by him. This is the John of the Cross familiar to most people: magnificent but mysterious and very deep. Like the Carmelite sisters to whom John dictated his verses after his escape from prison, they find it very difficult to relate his Canticle of love to their own lived experience. Hence the tradition which sees John's doctrine as far beyond the reach of ordinary mortals — and quite unlike the methodical, practical,
action-oriented teaching of Ignatius of Loyola.

There is, however, another John of the Cross. And, without in any way denying the value and grandeur of his song of mystical union, I believe it is this ‘second’ John who has been given to the Church as a guide and director (perhaps the greatest in her history) on the journey to maturity in Christ. This is the John who wrote the commentaries on the poems — when his readers and hearers complained that they found the latter hard to understand, — and who did his greatest work not in the Canticle but in The Ascent of Mount Carmel (of which our present Dark Night of the Soul was originally Book Four). The Canticle presents a magnificent, panoramic vision of the whole sweep of the interior life. The Ascent (including the Dark Night), by contrast, gives detailed and practical guidance to those travelling the most difficult and daunting part of that journey.

While he often refers to his readers in the Ascent as “beginners,” it is clear that he does not write for beginners in the usual sense of that word. As he says in the Prologue (#9): “My main intention is not to address everyone, but only some . . . whom God favors by putting them on the path leading up to this mount. . . . Because they are already detached to a great extent from the temporal things of this world, they will more easily grasp this doctrine on the nakedness of spirit.” So John has in mind pray-ers who have laid a solid foundation of meditative prayer and mortification. He realizes the importance of this foundation, but he believes that Teresa of Avila in her Way of Perfection (and, most likely given John’s own background, Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises) have already provided good guidance for such beginners. His task, and his charism, is to guide those whom God is leading beyond the beginnings, for whom “the well has run dry” (to use Teresa’s metaphor).

What does he teach them? That, when dryness or darkness sets in, they can safely abandon the meditative ways of beginners wherein nature and friends and scriptural meditations, and all the other created goods that speak to us of God (John calls them “messengers”), are our stepping-stones to an encounter with their Creator. Indeed, the dryness or darkness of mature prayer is precisely what John means by contemplation: “purging contemplation, which
passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things" (Dark Night, Book I, "Explanation" preceding Chapter 1). Hence, for John, contemplation does not mean visions or ecstasies or other preternatural experiences — all of which he teaches, are dubious and, even if genuine, are not essential to holiness. It means, rather, the darkness which invades our senses, and even our "soul" — as a good Thomist, John equates the soul with the faculties of memory, understanding and will, — when the Lord chooses to encounter us directly and no longer through "messengers." It is dark because God is too close — and not, as it seems to the pray-er, because He is absent.

Moreover, this experience of contemplation is not, for John, something rare and extraordinary. It is the normal development in the life of anyone who perseveres generously in prayer. John says, in fact, that all faithful pray-ers enter the darkness — but very few persevere to the end in this life, either because they do not wish to pay the price or because they do not understand what is happening and so take for failure what is really growth.

It is here that John's greatness as a spiritual director is seen most clearly. He is addressing generous souls, who have entered the darkness and who lack good guidance at this crucial moment on their journey. In a famous section of The Living Flame of Love (III, 27-67) John speaks of the "three blind guides" who can lead the soul astray: the spiritual director, the devil, and oneself. And 33 of these 40 paragraphs (#30-62) are devoted to the spiritual director! It is a section I, as a director, try to reread every year — to keep myself honest and humble. John's main point is that most spiritual directors do more harm than good — because they try to make their directees carbon copies of themselves. Whether out of well-intentioned ignorance or out of vanity (and John discusses both) they try to keep their directees on the familiar paths of meditative prayer and pietistic practices, and so prevent them from truly growing through darkness to a deeper union with God.

In the Ascent (and Dark Night) John attempts to guide such souls well and truly. As we saw earlier, he tells them that it is safe, and desirable now, for them to give up their previous meditative practices. And he explains why. The darkness they now experience is God's purifying hand on them. He wishes to empty them
of all "desires" (Ignatius calls them, perhaps more clearly, "inordinate attachments") for everything less than Himself — even, and especially, for the "spiritual goods" to which the devout pray-er is attached. All creation, John affirms, is good. No creature in itself can be an obstacle to union with God. (How could a great poet have thought otherwise?) But the problem is our disordered attachment to creatures, particularly those (like our devotions) that seem good and holy in themselves. In Ignatius' terminology they are all "means"; the problem is that we make means into ends. We allow the creature to compete with God, our sole end.

It is here, above all, that we can see the close affinity between Ignatius Loyola and John of the Cross. To use modern terminology, both stress the need of "freedom from" as a function of "freedom for." We must be free from all other creaturely attachments in order to be totally free for God and His will. Ignatius launched the pray-er on this journey to true spiritual freedom in his Spiritual Exercises. John picks up the story where God takes up the work of liberation directly. His famous "passive nights" (of sense and of spirit) are the successive stages in the Lord's process of setting us free. Of course, God is always the primary agent. But as time passes we do less and less, and He does more and more.

Indeed, it now seems to the pray-er that he is doing nothing. And this is where John's good direction is most needed. We can do something to cooperate with the Lord. This is the point of John's "active nights." But our "something" is essentially to let go and let God. To let go of our own efforts, our own insights, our own ideas of God and of piety. To learn to do nothing gracefully. As John insists, the great obstacle at this time is our attachment to these spiritual goods — and not to material possessions. I often tell my directees at this stage of their prayer life: "If God makes it dry, you make it drier. Lean with the wind. Don't swim against the tide." How simple — and yet how extraordinarily difficult!

SEEING IGNATIUS THROUGH JOHN'S EYES

One of the most fruitful insights of the First Vatican Council (1869-70) was its stress on deepening our faith by means of a "comparatio mysteriorum inter se" — a comparison of the mysteries of our faith each with the others. We can only truly under-
stand Good Friday if we see it with Resurrection eyes. And the Paschal Mystery is incomplete if we do not include therein the Ascension and Pentecost. It is a prayerful technique which the great English spiritual writer, Caryll Houselander, has used beautifully and to telling effect in her *The Passion of the Infant Christ*.

Similarly, I have found that my years of tutelage by John of the Cross have enabled me to see my own father in the Lord, Ignatius Loyola, with new eyes. John has a way of stripping off the trappings, the accidentals, and bringing us face-to-face with the naked truth. In the case of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, where it is all too easy to get lost in the details of his methodical approach to prayer, this has meant for me a new and liberating stress on what is truly essential to him: the centering on Christ as the whole meaning of my life; the subordination of means to ends; the fact that knowledge of self and knowledge of God go hand-in-hand in any authentic spirituality; and the grace of “discerning love” — discernment as habit, as an ongoing, growing, progressive heightening of our sensitivity to the Lord in all the events of our lives, and not merely the mechanics of the specific act of discernment, — as central to the Ignatian charisma. Let us consider each of these essential elements.

John of the Cross’s spirituality has been called “theocentric,” God-centered — and Ignatius’ “Christocentric.” The experts tell us this is a characteristic feature distinguishing “contemplative” from apostolic spiritualities. The latter focus on, and model their lives upon, Christ the Incarnate Word, at work in the service and salvation of the world. But we must keep in mind that the Christ of Ignatius is Lord. He is not just a moral teacher or a model for ministerial effectiveness. Ignatius was truly captured (like Paul) by the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. This was the passion of his life. And it is this passion which he seeks to communicate to others by means of his *Spiritual Exercises*. “Those who wish to give greater proof of their love, and to distinguish themselves in whatever concerns the Eternal King and the Lord of all will . . . make offerings of greater value and of more importance in words such as these: ‘Eternal Lord of all things . . .’ ” (SE, #97-98). Personal love of the Lord is the heart and the animating force of the retreatant’s commitment to a life of apostolic service.
In order to live this commitment, I must have a clear sense of end and means. "We are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and in this way to save our souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for us to help us in the attainment of our end. . . . Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created" (SE, #23). This is the First Principle and Foundation of the whole retreat experience — as of our whole life. And Ignatius sees the failure to subordinate means to end as the main obstacle to making a good and discerning choice of a state of life (SE, #169).

Similarly, in the Spiritual Exercises themselves we must be clear about means and end. As Ignatius says in the very first paragraph of the text, the end is "preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, in seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our souls." The various exercises proposed are but means to this end. As such, they are to be used, or not used, insofar as they help the retreatant to the freedom from — freedom for end of the whole enterprise. For this reason Ignatius gives different suggestions for different types of retreatants (#18-20). And the story is told that near the end of his life, when Jesuits and others began repeating the Spiritual Exercises annually, Ignatius was delighted — but with the caution that they select those exercises and those points most necessary at their present stage on the journey to God. It seems clear that, confronted with a retreatant in the dark night, he would encourage him at that time to follow the advice of John of the Cross.

The fact that knowledge of self and knowledge of God go hand-in-hand in a genuine spirituality is as clear in Ignatius as it is in John. For St. John, one of the sure marks of authentic, albeit dark, prayer is a growing awareness of one's own sinfulness. Not growing scrupulosity, but growing sensitivity to the real failings in us. The closer we come to the light of God, the darker our own darkness appears in contrast. This, for John, is the real anguish of the prayer in the dark night — not God's seeming absence, but my own radical unworthiness. Similarly Ignatius, in guiding beginners to a life of authentic prayer, presents genuine self-knowledge (the first week) as the necessary precondition of any authentic contemplation of and commitment to Jesus Christ (the second week). The
second week is indeed the heart of the Spiritual Exercises — the most important, hence the longest. But we can say that the first week is the most crucial, in the sense that, if it is done well and honestly, the rest of the retreat follows almost automatically. We can only be clothed with Christ if we have been able first to stand naked before Him.

Finally, discerning love is the primary apostolic fruit of the Spiritual Exercises. It is a habitual sensitivity to what pleases the Lord whom we love above all things. Ignatius does give us specific guidelines for judging our inspirations. And he expects us to use them, particularly at the beginning. But his deeper hope is that they will become second nature to us as we mature in love. The longer we live our lives in love with the Lord — like a married couple who have lived long and happily together — the more “instinctively,” spontaneously we sense what pleases and displeases Him. While John of the Cross rarely uses the word ‘discernment’ — and then, in the medieval tradition, more with reference to judging the genuineness of preternatural phenomena (see the Ascent, II, 16, 5 and II, 21, 7) — it is this very quality, in the Ignatian sense, which he most values in a good director. Such a director, because of his own lived experience of the Lord and of prayer, can sense the presence of the Good Spirit in his directee’s experience. He has what Ignatius calls “discreta caritas” (discerning love). And a poor director, by contrast, binds his directee to the tried and true and familiar (to him) precisely because he lacks this sensitivity of discerning love.

CONCLUSION: DIVERSE CHARISMS, KINDRED SPIRITS

Recently I wrote a book (Drinking from a Dry Well, Ave Maria Press, 1991), dedicated to John and Ignatius, in which I explored the situation of the pray-er who has come to be at peace in the dry well or dark night. How does the Lord then work in his life? How can he best cooperate in this work of transformation? In part one, where I explored the “vertical arm of the Cross” (formal pray-er), St. John of the Cross was my guide — particularly Book II of the Ascent, on which Pope John Paul II wrote a doctoral dissertation. Part two, the “horizontal arm” of apostolic service, drew
heavily from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius.

Even in part two, though, I found John a good guide (as in the preceding section of this article) to the essential teaching of Ignatius and its formative meaning in the life of an apostle. For the two arms make up a single Cross. They are in dynamic tension, but not in opposition to one another. Neither has any meaning without the other — or without the Christ who hangs on them. There is no doubt that the two arms are different. John, we might say, was essentially an introvert, happiest when he was alone with the Alone. And Ignatius was an extrovert, always concerned with the good of others and with extending the reign of Christ in the world. By a divine irony, though, each was driven in his life towards the other: Ignatius was chained to a desk in Rome for 16 long years, while his missionary sons (Xavier above all) roamed the world proclaiming the Good News; and John was kept very busy, for much of his adult life, with the government of the new Discalced Carmelite Order and with the direction of others.

Each had to learn that “all else [including contemplation and action] is means.” Our only end is the love of God. In my early years I read John through the eyes of Ignatius (with the help of Leonard Boase). And in these pages we have read Ignatius through the eyes of John. Both readings help us to strip away the accidentals — even the apostolic and contemplative thrusts, which John would call “spiritual goods,” — on which they differ, and to focus on what is truly essential: the love of God, and of neighbor purely for the sake of God. At this deepest point the two arms of the Cross meet. St. John of the Cross and St. Ignatius Loyola are kindred spirits.