THE FIRST BLIND GUIDE:  
John Of The Cross And Spiritual Direction

Thomas H. Green, S.J.

DISCOVERING JOHN OF THE CROSS

In my forty years as a religious and a pray-er, and my almost twenty-eight years as a priest and spiritual director, I have come to value St. John of the Cross as one of the truly great directors—perhaps the greatest—in the history of Christian spirituality. It was not always so. During the early years of my Jesuit formation, John’s writings were considered “mystical” in a way that made them un-Jesuit. In fact, they were not readily available to us—being confined to a locked section of the library that we young Jesuits referred to as “hell” and more or less (it seemed) in the category of Gibbon, Voltaire and others on the Index of Prohibited Writings.

When, during my philosophy years—and because my own prayer was beginning to be dark and dry—I did obtain permission to read John’s Ascent to Mount Carmel, the result was trauma. I recall telling my spiritual director that, if John was correct about nada and the need to renounce all our desires, then it seemed to me as if our whole Jesuit life of involvement in the world was on false foundation. The director’s response was kind but challenging: perhaps, he said, my anxiety was a sign that I was not yet ready for John. I obeyed his suggestion and gave up my reading of the Ascent. But a nagging
question lingered: What did it mean to be “ready”? When would I be ready? When would I be able to see the teachings of John and Ignatius of Loyola, both canonized saints, as integral, and therefore compatible, parts of the same Christian vision of prayer and holiness?

I don’t remember precisely when I returned to John of the Cross. What I do recall is that the darkness and dryness persisted (as they have, essentially, till now)—and that, by my theology years, I had found in John the strength to persevere in the darkness and to hope that it was all God’s work. At the same time, it became progressively clearer to me (particularly when I made a retreat at the Trappist monastery near my home in Rochester, New York, shortly after ordination) that my own vocation was to be a Jesuit—and that in some mysterious ways my two “callings” were compatible.

On the 400th anniversary of John’s death and the 500th of Ignatius’s birth (1991), I was able to put into writing—in Drinking From a Dry Well—the compatibility I have discovered. It is now clear to me that John and Ignatius are truly kindred spirits, possessed by the same vision of being free from all inordinate attachments and desires only in order to be totally free for God and his will, although they differ (and this I think was the cause of my earlier anxiety) in that Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises writes for generous beginners, whereas John presupposes these beginnings and writes for the “proficient” or “mature.”

It is not my purpose to repeat that story in the present article. But having laid to rest one of the great puzzles of my life, I should now like to pay particular tribute to John (an utang na loob, or debt of gratitude, as we say in the Philippines) by sharing with you his masterful vision of spiritual direction and of what it means to be a good spiritual director. There is a crucial and classic passage in the commentary on the third stanza of the Living Flame of Love (Flame 3, 27-67), which I as a director try to reread every year to keep myself honest in my own work of direction. Before considering that classic source, however, let us see the general picture of direction and of the good director that John of the Cross gives us.
THE VALUE AND THE DANGER OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

John’s Own Example: Compassionate but Challenging

St. John’s final years were troubled and marked by persecution, and as a consequence most of his letters have been lost, but the picture that emerges from those that remain is of a compassionate but challenging guide for souls seeking to grow in the Lord. As the fox warned the Little Prince in Saint Exupery’s classic tale, John felt forever responsible for those he had helped to “tame.” He says as much in a letter to Madre Ana de Jesús dated 6 July 1591 (less than six months before his death), when she expressed her fear that the troubles in the Order would deprive her of his invaluable guidance: “I still fear that they will make me go to Segovia… [But] leaving or staying, wherever or however things may come to pass, I will neither forget nor neglect you, … because truly I desire your good forever.”

In the “General Introduction” to the Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translation of John’ Collected Works, Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, says of him (Kavanaugh, 29):

Sinners, too found it easy to manifest their conscience to him. “The holier a confessor,” he said, “the less fear one should have of him.” In directing others, John stressed the life of faith, hope and charity, understanding that man’s good consists especially in interior acts, not in exterior acts. Thus he was known as a moderator of penances, and in different monasteries of the Reform he ordered that the practices of penance (so severe in those times) be kept within bounds lest they degenerate into the “penance of beasts.”

Thus John preached moderation in everything except love and generosity. As Kavanaugh notes, though, “his deepest concern was for those who in their spiritual life were suffering,” especially those undergoing the various stages of what he called the “dark night.” It is they whom he has principally in mind in his references to spiritual direction. And in these references we can note three main themes:
the value of spiritual direction; what a desire for direction reveals of
the pray-er's spirit; and, the danger of poor direction. Let us briefly
consider each of these in turn.

The Value of Direction

In the Prologue to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John asks why
souls do not advance in spirituality. He answers: “Sometimes they
misunderstand themselves and are without suitable and alert directors
who will show them the way to the summit” (*Ascent*, Prologue, 3). He
returns to this question in Book II, Chapter 22 of the *Ascent*, where
he says of those experiencing apparently supernatural revelations and
graces that they need “human counsel and direction,” and should not
rely only on themselves in judging divine communications. As he
goes on to say: “Whatever is received through supernatural means (in
whatever manner) should immediately be told clearly, integrally and
simply to one's spiritual director” (II *Ascent* 22, 16). Why? He gives
three reasons. First, to completely confirm the “effect, light, strength
and security of many divine communications” (*Ibid.*). Second, be-
cause “a soul ordinarily needs instruction pertinent to its experiences
in order to be guided through the dark night of spiritual denudation
and poverty” (*Ibid.*, 17). And finally, “for the sake of humility, sub-
mission and mortification” (*Ibid.*, 18). For confirmation, for instruc-
tion, for humility. While John's specific concern here is “divine commu-
nications,” the three values he describes would be applicable to any sin-
cere pray-er desirous of growing in union with God, particularly to one
who has begun to experience the purification of the dark night.

The Desire for Direction as the Mark of a Good Spirit

St. Ignatius Loyola tells us that the devil loves secrecy (like a false
lover), since he can easily have his way with one who is not open to a
good director. Similarly, John tells us in the *Dark Night* Book I, Chap-
ter 12 that the desire to submit to a spiritual guide is a sign of a sub-
missive, obedient spirit in the dark night. Since she is so aware of her
own wretchedness, her one desire is to be directed and told what to
do “by anyone at all.” Of course, John realizes that it would be dan-
gerous to be directed by “anyone at all,” as the rest of this piece will
make clear. But his point is that hard-headedness and a self-willed spirit are very dangerous in the life of prayer.

He expresses this point more adequately and in greater detail earlier in the *Dark Night*, when speaking of the imperfections of pride that must be purified in beginners. And he contrasts such persons with "souls who are advancing in perfection." Of the latter he says: "These souls humbly and tranquilly long to be taught by anyone who might be a help to them.... [They] are ready to take a road different from the one they are following if they are told to do so" (*Night* 2, 7). Moreover, "they have an inclination to seek direction from one who will have less esteem for their spirit and their deeds," rather than one who will canonize them or be in awe of their virtue (*Ibid.*). Whenever I read these lines I think of St. Teresa of Avila who says that John did her more good than any of her many other spiritual directors—precisely, it seems, because he was firm with her very strong character, and was never intimidated by her holiness or by the fact that he was twenty-seven years younger than she was. For John, Teresa's desire to be treated lovingly but firmly (hard as this was for one with such a strong character) must have been among the surest signs of the genuineness of her spirituality.

**The Danger of Poor Direction**

Unfortunately, the story is not as simple as this might suggest. There are two human beings involved in the work of direction: the directee and the director. And John insists that the pray-er must exercise great care in choosing a spiritual director. For, as he says in *Ascent*, a spiritual director can cause great harm in times of consolation by his or her lack of discretion: in giving too much importance to the directee's "visions," by not guiding her to humility, and by giving her poor instructions because of his own fascinations with revelations and preternatural phenomena (*Ascent*, 18). None of these extraordinary experiences, John insists are necessary to holiness, and all of them can be produced by the devil or by an overactive imagination. The way for perfection is, for John, always a dark way. Hence such directors err by their failure to "disencumber and divest" their directees of all desire for visions and other "mystical" experiences.
Similarly, many directors are “a hindrance and harm rather than a help” in times of darkness and desolation, because they themselves “have neither enlightenment nor experiences of these ways.” Some say “all of this is due to melancholia or depression, or to temperament, or to some hidden wickedness.” And “others tell him he is falling back,” thus confirming his fear and belief that somehow he really lost or offended God. Such directors, like Job’s comforters, merely increase the suffering and distress of the soul in the dark night (Ascent Prologue, 4-5).

In the next section we see that this concern for the harm done by inept or self-centered directors is one of John’s major preoccupations in the Living Flame of Love. Before turning to that classic discussion, though, let us note John’s positive conclusion in the Prologue to the Ascent. The good director, he says, realizes that the dark night is not a time for harshness or recrimination on the part of the director. Rather it is a time “for leaving these persons alone in the purgation God is working in them, a time to give comfort and encouragement that they may desire to endure this suffering as long as God wills (Ibid., 5). We might summarize John’s teachings by saying that the good director, like the Holy Spirit whose instrument he or she is, is the strengthener and consoler of the pray-er in her journey to union with God. There may be a need at times for the challenging word, but directors must have great sensitivity to recognize this need. They must be, in St. Ignatius’s famous image (Exercises, 15), like the balance of the scale, leaning one way or the other only to keep the soul centered on God her Lord.

THE FIRST BLIND GUIDE

The Context

In the Living Flame of Love (III, 27), St. John of the Cross begins a lengthy digression that has become a classic in the literature of prayer—and in which we find a systematic development of all the themes culled from the scattered references above. He has been
speaking of the way the pray-er moves through the various stages of
the journey toward union with God or “spiritual marriage,” and he
noted that very few persevere, in this life, to the end of this unitive
journey. This leads him to say:

Oh, what an excellent place this is to advise souls on whom
God bestows these delicate unctions to watch what they are
doing, and into whose hands they are committing themselves,
that they might not turn back! This does not pertain to our
subject, yet the compassion and grief that comes to my heart
in seeing souls fall back ... is so great that I do not think it
improper here to warn them....

John starts his discussion with a note of reassurance: “In the
first place it should be known that if a person is seeking God, his
Beloved is seeking him much more” (Flame III, 28). Dark as our
prayer may seem, we should be consoled by the knowledge that (as I
have often expressed it) the very desire for God is a clear sign that
God is present. For we could not even desire God if he were not at
work with us. “No one can come to me unless the Father draw him”
(Jn. 6: 44, 65). What then must we do in this darkness? John of the
Cross puts it very simply: “The soul, then, should advert that God is
the principal agent in this matter, and that He acts as the blind man’s
guide who must lead it by the hand to the place it does not know how
to reach” (Ibid., 29).

“The blind man’s guide”—this is the role of God in the dark
night. Hence the pray-er “should use all its principal care in watch-
ing so as not to place any obstacle in the way of its guide.” And how
would it place an obstacle in the Lord’s way? Only “by allowing
itself to be guided by another blind man.” And who is this blind
guide who can lead the soul astray? There are three, John says, “who
can draw it off the road: the spiritual director, the devil, and the soul
itself” (Ibid.).

Thus John begins his famous discussion of the three blind guides
who seek to lead the soul astray in the dark night. What is remarkable
is the comparative amount of space he gives to each. He treats of
the second blind guide, the devil, in just three paragraphs (Ibid., 63-65), and the third, oneself, in only two (Ibid., 66-67). The devil seduces the pray-er with the “bait” of sensible consolation and “some clouds of knowledge,” when it should now be content to abandon all its own activity. “Abandon your activity, for if this helped you, when you were beginners, to deny world and yourselves, now... it is a serious obstacle.” John values the meditative ways by which beginners come to know God. He would have little sympathy with the advice, sometimes heard today, that even beginners can simply “center” on a God they do not yet know. We humans can only love what we know.

Nonetheless the time comes—and this is the situation of the pray-er to whom John speaks here—when the ways of beginners are no longer suitable and must be abandoned. The devil will try to keep us to these beginner’s ways. And the soul itself (its own “third blind guide”) will also interfere with God’s work if, thinking it is doing nothing in prayer, it strains to perform acts with its faculties (understanding, memory and will). John compares such a person to a child kicking and crying “in order to walk when his mother wants to carry him,” or to a person moving a painting “back and forth while the artist is a work” on it (Ibid., 66). What should we do? In the next paragraph John tells us that we advance much faster when carried by God than when walking by ourselves—even though we don’t feel God’s pace or sense God’s movement. Hence, once the darkness of prayer sets in, we must simply abandon ourselves into the divine hands.

The Worst Blind Guide

But how do we know that the time has come to abandon all our efforts at prayer? How do we recognize that sensible consolations, helpful for beginners, are no longer desirable and are the devil’s attempt to seduce us? This is where we need good direction. And because such direction is so crucial to interior growth, John devotes about thirty-two paragraphs to the spiritual director as the first, and worst, blind guide. These paragraphs (Ibid., 30-62) are the ones I reread every year to keep myself honest in the crucial work of spiritual direction. In considering the main points John makes in this
important section, I would suggest the following outline: The Danger of Inexperienced Direction (30-45); The Holy Spirit as The Director (46-52); A Portrait of the Blind Guide (53-58); and, finally, A Portrait of the Guide with Good Vision (59-62). Let us say a word about each in turn.

The Danger of Inexperienced Direction

John's main point in the opening paragraphs (30-31) of his discussion of the first blind guide is that an inexperienced director, because he or she does not understand the ways of God, is likely to keep the directee to baser, beginner's ways—when the Lord is leading her to growth and purification in the dark night. To remedy this, John presents a brief "catechism" of the normal ways of interior growth. He contrasts (32) the beginner's state, when meditative and affective prayer are right and proper, with the "state of contemplation," when the soul must let go of all these attempts to "do something," and simply learn to submit gracefully to the interior purgation that the Lord is working in darkness (33-34). Even that "loving attentiveness," which John recommends in the Ascent to the souls no longer able to meditate but drawn simply to be present to the Lord in love, is now impossible. It must be surrendered—to be used "only when he does not feel himself placed in this solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening" (35).

Characteristically, John cites several scriptural passages in support of his argument (36-38), and then he explains (39) why this "holy idleness and solitude" is an inestimable blessing despite all appearances. It withdraws us from all that is not God ("a weariness with all creatures and with the world") and draws us to solitude—to a total centering on him. Since this work of love is very subtle, it is scarcely perceptible either to the pray-er or to the director.

Hence the danger. The insensitive director agrees with the pray-er that she is wasting her time, and so encourages her to force acts of meditation and devotion to avoid this wasteful "doing nothing." In this way the careless or inexperienced director does great harm by destroying the soul's recollection and causing her distraction (42-
44). Unfortunately such directors are, John says, the norm rather than the exception: “Scarcely any spiritual director will be found who does not cause [this harm] in souls God is beginning to recollect in this manner.” Such directors are “like a blacksmith [who] knows no more than how to hammer and pound with the faculties” (43). The result? “Thus all [the soul’s] effort are like hammering the horse-shoe instead of the nail, and on the one hand he does harm, and on the other he receives no profit” (45).

The Holy Spirit is the Director

The work of God is always mysterious from our human perspective. And at this time, when the dark night sets in and love no longer follows on knowledge, the Spirit’s ways are far beyond our normal human mode of thinking and acting. It seems to us that we should be busy forming ourselves into good instruments, and sensitizing ourselves to the needs of the world we are called to serve. But good directors must remember that theirs is primarily a work of discerning sensitivity to what the Lord is doing in the directee. They should recall that the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, and that we are merely instruments for directing “according to the spirit God gives each one” (46). If directors cannot recognize this spirit in their directees, at least they should “leave them alone and not bother them.”

Positively, though, a good director faced with a directee experiencing the dark night (or “dry well”) can help much by leading her to a greater “solitude, tranquility and freedom of spirit.” In this way, as noted earlier (38), the director cooperates best with the Holy Spirit, by disencumbering the soul, by bringing it to solitude and “idleness” even with respect to spiritual things. The whole process (if inactivity can be called a process!) is profoundly mysterious. But “by their fruits you shall know them.” If the pray-er does as the Spirit asks, it is “impossible that God fail to do His part by communicating Himself to it secretly and silently”—like the sun rising and shining on clear ground (46-47).

In the following paragraphs (48-53) John explains this good fruit by recapitulating his teaching, masterfully and lengthily expounded in
Books II and III of the \textit{Ascent}, on the purification and transformation of the three faculties of the soul: the intellect, which now knows and approaches God only by faith (48); the will, which now lives by a love infused by God, who himself makes acts of love in her, and not by a love arising from her understanding of the good (49-51); and the memory, no longer dependent on the "forms and figures" of "meditation and imaginative reflection," but on a hope directly induced by the Spirit of God (52-53).

\section*{A Portrait of the Blind Guide}

Having explained, as best he can, why this "holy idleness" is really the will of the Holy Spirit for the mature pray-er, John returns to the trouble caused by blind and insensitive directors. Because they themselves have not progressed beyond discursive meditation and "feelings of fervor," they cause great anxiety and serious harm to their more mature directees. They themselves do not know what spirit is, nor how God himself is "making the natural acts of the faculties fail," since they are not "capable of spirit" (53-54). Some "err with good will," since they do not know any better (56); others, even more inexcusable, act out of vanity—refusing to let the directee out of their hands even when another style of direction is clearly called for (57).

This last remark suggests that a director might well be helpful to a pray-er at a certain stage of her growth, and yet not be suitable at a later stage. For this reason I have found it very important to give my directees full freedom to change directors whenever they feel it would be helpful to do so. This can cause pain, of course, but it is the only reasonable attitude, if our primary concern is truly the good and growth of the directee. As John notes, even those directors who err with good will and out of ignorance are still culpable, "for rudely meddling in something they do not understand, instead of leaving matters to one who does understand" (56).

What does this mean in the concrete? To explain the different stages of good direction, John uses the analogy (57-58) of fashioning wood into a statue. At various stages we need a hewer, a carver, a
perfecter and polisher," and finally a painter and finisher. The hewer's role is "guiding the soul to contempt of the world and to mortification of its appetites"; and that of the carver is "introducing it to holy meditations." These are the stages when the soul is actively using its own faculties in prayer. Thereafter, the work is God's and the good director knows enough not to interfere. "No man can do more with the statue than what he knows how to do, and were he to try to do more than this, he would ruin it" (57).

CONCLUSION: A PORTRAIT OF THE GUIDE WITH GOOD VISION

John of the Cross's specific concern, in this famous passage on the "three blind guides," is for the pray-er experiencing the dark night of contemplation, but his essential teaching is applicable at every stage in the work of direction. This can be seen most clearly in the last paragraphs of his discussion of the first blind guide, the director. In section 59 he tells us what not to do and in section 61 what we should do.

First of all, he says, realize that "God leads each one along different paths." Hence, don't "tyrannize souls and deprive them of their freedom, and judge for yourself the breadth of the evangelical doctrine." Live in awe of the mystery of God working his unique design in each human being. Don't, we might say, judge the whole elephant from one small part that you—the Buddha's blind man—are able to touch. Also, don't be jealous and possessive, like quarrelsome married couples (as John himself puts it!), "if by chance you learn that one of [your directees] has consulted another." The director cannot possess the soul of his or her directee. I cannot demand total allegiance to me.

As I have long realized, the prayer lives of even those directees I know best and most deeply are still profoundly mysterious to me. I well recall the time when one of my earliest and best directors, the Jesuit priest and philosopher Norris Clarke, was transferred from the philosophate to Fordham University. We scholastics had a farewell
party for him. And when it came time for him to say a few words, he said something like this: “I would like to thank you for many things these past years. But most of all I would like to thank those who trusted me more to be their spiritual director. They were really saying to me, ‘I do not understand myself. So I would like you to journey with me to the most private and personal core of my being. Perhaps together we can make sense of it.’ And that is a tremendous act of trust. No matter how long I live or what I might accomplish, that is the greatest compliment anyone will ever pay me.”

Fr. Norris Clarke’s words touched me deeply at that time, almost forty years ago. And I am sure they capture the essence of John of the Cross’s teaching on spiritual direction. As I have lived my own life as a director, and countless people have paid me that “greatest compliment,” I have become ever more aware of the sacred responsibility involved. “Set my people free,” the Lord says. “Free from themselves and their fears and attachments. Free from you, the director. Free from all that is not God. Free to journey into the darkness that is light—free to find me, their Love.” That, in essence, is St. John of the Cross’s classic teaching on spiritual direction.

REFERENCES


