



# **Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul, & A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and Bridegroom Christ**

*St John of the Cross*

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St. John of the Cross was founder (with St. Teresa) of the Discalced Carmelites, doctor of mystic theology, b. at Hontoveros, Old Castile, 24 June, 1542; d. at Ubeda, Andalusia, 14 Dec., 1591.

It has been recorded that during his studies St. John particularly relished psychology; this is amply borne out by his writings. He was not what one would term a scholar, but he was intimately acquainted with the "Summa" of St. Thomas Aquinas, as almost every page of his works proves. Holy Scripture he seems to have known by heart, yet he evidently obtained his knowledge more by meditation than in the lecture room. But there is no vestige of influence on him of the mystical teaching of the Fathers, the Areopagite, Augustine, Gregory, Bernard, Bonaventure, etc., Hugh of St. Victor, or the German Dominican school. The few quotations from patristic works are easily traced to the Breviary or the "Summa". In the absence of any conscious or unconscious influence of earlier mystical schools, his own system, like that of St. Teresa, whose influence is obvious throughout, might be termed empirical mysticism. They both start from their own experience, St. Teresa avowedly so, while St. John, who hardly ever speaks of himself, "invents nothing" (to quote Cardinal Wiseman), "borrows nothing from others, but gives us clearly the results of his own experience in himself and others. He presents you with a portrait, not with a fancy picture. He represents the ideal of one who has passed, as he had done, through the career of the spiritual life, through its struggles and its victories".

His axiom is that the soul must empty itself of self in order to be filled with God, that it must be purified of the last traces of earthly dross before it is fit to become united with God. In the application of this simple maxim he shows the most uncompromising logic. Supposing the soul with which he deals to be habitually in the state of grace and pushing forward to better things, he overtakes it on the very road leading it, in its opinion to God, and lays open before its eyes a number of sores of which it was altogether ignorant, viz. what he terms the spiritual capital sins. Not until these are removed (a most formidable task) is it fit to be admitted to what he calls the "Dark Night", which consists in the passive purgation, where God by heavy trials, particularly interior ones, perfects and completes what the soul had begun of its own accord. It is now passive, but not inert, for by submitting to the Divine operation it co-operates in the measure of its power. Here lies one of the essential differences between St. John's mysticism and a false quietism. The perfect purgation of the soul in the present life leaves it free to act with wonderful energy: in fact it might almost be said to obtain a share in God's omnipotence, as is shown in the marvelous deeds of so many saints. As the soul emerges from the Dark Night it enters into the full noonlight described in the "Spiritual Canticle" and the "Living Flame of Love". St. John leads it to the highest heights, in fact to the point where it becomes a "partaker of the Divine Nature". It is here that the necessity of the previous cleansing is clearly perceived the pain of the mortification of all the senses and the powers and faculties of the soul being amply repaid by the glory which is now being revealed in it.

St. John has often been represented as a grim character; nothing could be more untrue. He was indeed austere in the extreme with himself, and, to some extent, also with others, but both from his writings and from the depositions of those who knew him, we see in him a man overflowing with charity and kindness, a poetical

mind deeply influenced by all that is beautiful and attractive.

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