

JOURNEY IN DARK NIGHT

Thomas Kochumuttom*

1. Introduction

St. John of the Cross (1542-91), himself a great mystic, wrote on mysticism with clarity and precision, and systematically, too. Mystical phenomena invariably defy human logic, and frequently are beyond empirical verification. They are, therefore, incomprehensible and ineffable, and for that matter scientific treatment of them is not common. John's writings do not disprove this statement. Even so, on the one hand, his works are exceptionally clear, precise, detailed, consistent and systematic and, on the other, he is extremely careful not explain away any of the mysteries and matters of faith that are proper to the world of mysticism. Basically, it is his own mystical experiences that he describes, and that he does on two levels. First, he portrays them in poetry using symbols and figures, which, very expressive and eloquent as they are, are not readily intelligible for the common readers. However, dealing with the author's own experiences, they are authentic and credible. Then, in response to the request of his spiritual daughters, mostly members of the reformed Carmelite Order of St. Theresa of Avila, he wrote extensively commenting on the stanzas. Thus, no room is left for disputes about the meaning of the poetic works. All the same, John's works are not material for light reading and instant consumption. It requires patience and painstaking attentiveness for one to follow his thought, and only those already initiated into the deeper aspects of spirituality are likely to enjoy and benefit from them. His major works are: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love*. He has quite a few minor works as well.¹

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¹For the present article, which summarizes John's mystical theology as presented in his *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*, in referring to his

2. Mysticism Aiming at the Highest

2.1. The Highest

John aims at nothing short of the highest, which he says is the total and habitual union of the soul² with God. He describes it as “the total and permanent union according to the substance of the soul and its faculties.” It is not visible but obscures a habit of union. It is different from the two other kinds of union, natural and actual.

By natural union God is always present with the creatures, preserving them in being. This is also called substantial or essential union. It is the sustaining presence of God in the creatures, by which He naturally communicates Himself to the soul through nature.

By actual union is meant the more intense union that the mystics experience at times. This, too, is total and supernatural, but not habitual. Incapable of being permanent here on earth, it is transient.

In the habitual supernatural union there occurs the transformation of the soul in God. John calls it “the union of likeness.” This exists when God’s will and the soul’s are in conformity with each other. For it, the soul should rid itself completely of whatever is repugnant and un-conformed to the divine will. Not only the actual voluntary imperfections but also the habitual involuntary imperfections should be annihilated so that the soul would be transformed in God through love. God, then, supernaturally communicates Himself to the soul through grace. In this union, the likeness and conformity are so complete that the soul and God would seem to be one although they do not lose the respective identities.

John illustrates the point with the example of the sunlight falling on a window. When the glass is clean and polished, the sun light illumines it completely and transforms it into itself. The cleaner the window, the brighter is its illumination. The extent of illumination depends not on the sunlight but on the window. A totally clean and pure window will be so illumined and transformed by the sunlight that they look identical, although each of them retains its distinct nature. Similarly, when the soul

works we use the following abbreviations: ‘A’ stands for *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ‘N’ stands for *The Dark Night*, ‘C’ for *The Spiritual Canticle*, and ‘F’ for *The Living Flame of Love*, followed by the numbers of the book, chapter, and paragraph, and finally the page number of Kieran Kavanaugh, and Otilio Rodrigues, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Trivandrum: Carmel Publishing Centre, 1996.

²For John, “soul” means not merely the spirit in man but the total human person.

is purified of all the imperfections, God illumines and transforms it into Himself:

And God will so communicate His supernatural being to it that it will appear to be God Himself and will possess all that God Himself has... So great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God's as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has an existence distinct from the ray. (A 2.5, 117-18)

2.2. Conformity through Purification

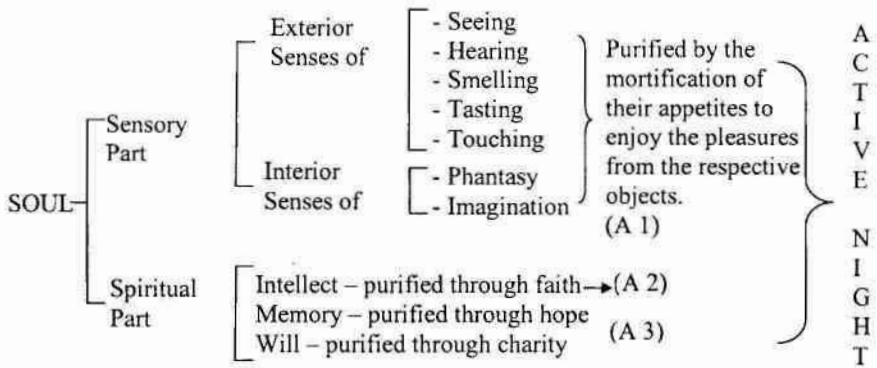
The soul should, therefore, purify itself so as to deserve the highest union with God. The process of purification consists in the renunciation of all that is not God. But it is not merely a negative act of giving up. It is at the same time a positive act of love. For it is for the love of God that one renounces the other things:

A man makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting his will perfectly to God's; for to love is to labour to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God (A 2.7, 117).

Dealing with the question of purification, John presents the human person as composed of two parts, sensory and spiritual. The sensory part consists of the five exterior senses and the two interior ones. The exterior senses are those of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, while the interior ones are phantasy and imagination. The spiritual part of the soul consists of intellect, memory, and will.

It is by the purification of those constituents that the soul is purified. The sensory part is purified when the senses, exterior as well as interior, are purified by the mortification of their appetites to enjoy the pleasures from their respective objects. The spiritual part is purified when the faculties of intellect, memory, and will are purified, respectively, by the practice of the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. The process of purification as far as it is within the human power is called "active night," whereas, as far as it is God's work, it is called "passive night."³

³For an explanation of "night," see below 30-31.



3. Mortification of Senses

The senses' appetites are to be mortified. Other expressions that John uses for "appetites" are attachment, affection, the love of creatures, the will for something, inclination, and desire (A 1.11, 48). From them we can reasonably conclude that by "appetite" is meant the soul's affection for or attachment to some sense objects, which distracts its attention from God, and hinders the perfect union with Him. The appetites are classified as voluntary and involuntary (or natural). The involuntary ones "do not hinder a man as to prevent him from attaining divine union" (A 1.11, 96). Nor is it possible to eradicate them totally in this life. The voluntary appetites are different. They may involve either mortal sins, or venial sins, or imperfections and as such they are inordinate, not directed towards the pure honour and glory of God, but meant for some personal satisfaction. In all these forms, they, especially when they are habitual rather than actual, hinder union with God, and, therefore, are to be mortified. To mortify them is to put them to death; that is, by not consenting to them one rejects them (A 1.11, 49). This is and should be an act of supernatural love insofar as by the denial of consent one is directing the appetites to God through love, and employ them in loving God.

All the voluntary appetites, even the slightest ones, should be mortified. A bird may be tied by a thin thread or a cord. In both cases, it is equally impeded from flying. This is the lot of a man attached to anything, big or small. He may be a virtuous man. Even so he cannot reach the freedom of the divine union (A 1.12, 97). The reason is that in the state of divine union a man's will is so completely transformed in God's will that it excludes anything contrary to God's will, and in all and through all is

motivated by the will of God (A 1.12, 96). The saint emphatically states that it is not the creatures in themselves but one's inordinate appetites for them that hinder the union with God. In other words, it is not the creatures but the inordinate appetites that are to be eliminated:

We are not discussing the mere lack of things; this lack will not divest the soul if it craves for all these objects. We are dealing with the denudation of the soul's appetites and gratifications... Since the things of the world cannot enter the soul, they are not in themselves an encumbrance or harm to it; rather, it is the will and appetite dwelling within it that causes the damage (A 1.3.4, 77).

4. Purification of Intellect through Faith

4.1. Self-Transcendence

Intellect is the cognitive faculty of the soul, that is, the power by which the soul gets knowledge. It brings knowledge through the working of the senses and reason. But, obviously, the knowledge got through them is invariably of objects that are limited by time and space. Therefore, all the knowledge the soul comes to have through them is of limited finite beings. This is natural knowledge, which includes even the most advanced science and technology.

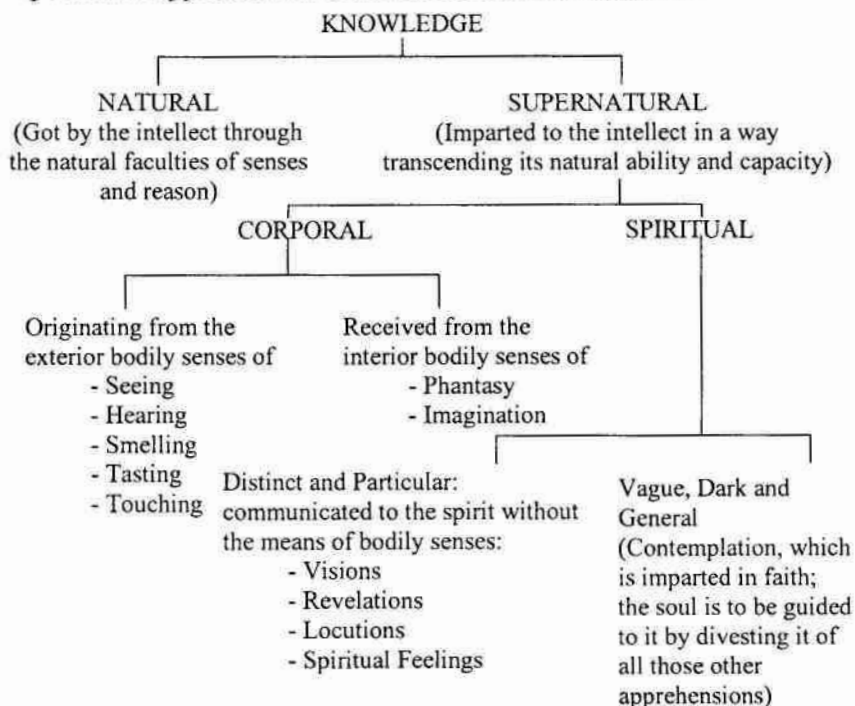
Therefore, God who is without any limit whatsoever is beyond the natural capacity of human intellect. God as He is cannot be reached by the senses and reason. We can have only analogical knowledge of Him on the basis of our experience of creatures. We cannot have sense-perception of Him because He does not have any sensible quality, and for that matter we cannot have any mental concept of Him, either. All our concepts and words about Him are mere approximations. He is incomprehensible as well as ineffable. Hence, to know God as He is and to realize the perfect union with Him, we must go beyond our natural powers, the senses and reason, and in that sense we must transcend ourselves, which is called an act of faith. God reveals Himself and His mysteries, which being beyond the natural light of senses and reason, are to be received by the supernatural light of faith. "It [faith] brings us to believe truths revealed by God which transcend natural light and infinitely exceed all human understanding" (A 2.3.1). In the words of John, the light of faith "suppresses," "overwhelms," and "nullifies" the natural light of intellect. But, more positively, "only by means of faith, in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest Himself to the soul. The more intense a man's faith, the closer is his union with God" (A 2.9.1, 129). For the

intellect to attain the union with God faith is “the only proximate and appropriate means” (A 2.9.1, 129).

A man, then, is decidedly hindered from the attainment of this high state of union with God when he is attached to any understanding, feeling, imagining, opinion, desire, or way of his own, or to any other of his works or affairs, and knows not how to detach and denude himself of these impediments. His goal transcends all of this, even the loftiest that can be known or experienced. Consequently, he must pass beyond everything to unknowing (A 2.4.4, 113-14).

4.2. Kinds of Knowledge

To make the point clear John sets up a division of all the natural and supernatural apprehensions of the intellect as follows (A 2.10):



The saint, then, explains how among all these different kinds of knowledge, only the last one – namely, the vague, dark, general, spiritual, and supernatural knowledge – has for its object God as He is, and, therefore, effects the soul’s union with Him. The other kinds of knowledge

have for their objects His creatures and gifts, which, good as they are, are not God in whose search the soul has set out. Therefore, to stop for them or to be stopped by them is to fail to realize the goal of journey. Those objects as well as the knowledge of them have only a relative value insofar as they may call the soul's attention to, and direct its affection towards their Creator and source, God. Even as the soul may use them prudently as a help for the attainment of the union with God, it should be careful not to be distracted or harmed by them. For example, possession of those objects and their knowledge can make one proud, arrogant, vain, uncharitable, greedy, and what not!

4.3. Faith the Only Adequate Means

We have already discussed John's instruction regarding how one should deal with the natural knowledge, namely, that one should mortify the sense appetites for pleasures derived from its objects. Regarding all kinds of the supernatural knowledge except the last one, also, he warns that one should be extremely careful not to make much of them, and not at all to get attached to them. His general advice regarding them is that one should ignore them, and be indifferent and resigned to their occurrence and non-occurrence:

It must be known that even though the (supernatural corporal) apprehensions come to the bodily senses from God, one must never rely on them or accept them. A man should rather flee from them completely, and have no desire to determine whether they be good or bad (A 2.11.2, 132).

[Regarding the representations supernaturally received in the interior senses,] to reach this essential union of love of God, a person must be careful not to lean upon imaginative visions, forms, figures, or particular ideas, since they cannot serve as a proportionate and proximate means for such an effect – they would instead be a hindrance. As a result, a person should renounce them and endeavour to avoid them... Admitting them is unnecessary for the attainment of this good effect; for the sake of progress, rather, one should always deny them (A 2.16.10, 152).

There is no advancing in faith without closing one's eyes to everything pertaining to the senses and to clear, particular knowledge (A 2.16.15, 154).

Evidently, then, even though the words and revelations be from God, we cannot find assurance in them, since in our understanding of them

we can easily be deluded, and extremely so. They embody an abyss and depth of spiritual significance, and to want to limit them to our interpretation and sensory apprehensions is like wanting to grasp a handful of air, which will escape the hand entirely and leave only a particle of dust (A 2.19.10, 167).

John observes that it is not easy to discern the genuineness of those supernatural experiences. They may originate from “the divine spirit, who moves and illumines the intellect; the natural light of the intellect; and the devil who can speak to it [the intellect] through suggestion” (A 2.29.11, 206). To act on those arising from one’s own intellect or the devil will certainly be disastrous for the soul. So, one should outright reject them. Only those experiences originating from the Spirit of God are genuine and worth one’s attention, if at all. But one should ignore them as well, says John. In doing so one needs not have the fear of offending God, nor of blocking His plans.

Such representations and feelings, consequently, must always be rejected. Even though some may be from God, this rejection is not affront to Him, neither will one upon voluntarily dismissing them cease to receive the fruit God wishes to produce through these communications (A 2.11.5, 133).

John’s point is that when God is at work He will certainly produce the effects irrespective of what stand the soul takes about it. John illustrates the point with the example of how the sunlight shining upon a clean window invariably illumines it without any effort on the part of latter:

The good these imaginative visions can communicate to the soul is either knowledge, or love, or sweetness. But that they do this, it is unnecessary for a person to have the desire of accepting them... As a window is unable to hinder the ray of sunlight shining upon it and is disposed through its cleanness to be illumined passively without active effort, so, too, however much a person wants to reject these visions, he cannot but receive the influences and communications of those figures. A negative will, humbly and lovingly resigned, cannot resist supernatural infusions. Only imperfections and impurity of soul hinder these communications, just as stains on a window impede the bright sunlight (A 2.16.10, 152-153).

4.4. Spiritual Director’s Role

The person receiving the supernatural experiences may at best mention the matter to the spiritual director, if he/she has any, and abide by his/her

counsel. "It should be kept in mind that a person must never follow his own opinion nor do admit anything told to him through these locutions, without ample advice and counsel from another" (A 2.30.6, 209). According to John, consultation with the spiritual director in matters concerning the supernatural experiences is necessary for safety in spiritual journey:

Whatever is received through supernatural means (in whatever manner) should immediately be told clearly, integrally, and simply to one's spiritual director. It may appear that there is no reason for a manifestation to one's spiritual director, or that doing so would be a waste of time... Yet it is always necessary to manifest the entire communication... (A 2.22.16, 185).

John is also clear about the role of the spiritual director and the manner in which he/she should guide the soul. His responsibility for the most part is to help and persuade the disciple not to get attached to anything that is not God.

The spiritual director should try to see to it that his disciple is not detained by the desire of giving heed to supernatural apprehensions..., and he should turn him away from all visions and locutions and teach him to remain in freedom and the darkness of faith... (A 2.19.11, 167).

[T]he director should instead be kind and peaceful. He should give these souls encouragement and the opportunity of speaking about their experiences, and, if necessary, oblige them to do so, for at times everything is needed on account of the hardship some find in discussing these matters (A 2.22.19, 186-187).

Spiritual director should guide them in the way of faith, by giving them good instructions on how to turn their eyes from all these communications; they should explain how one done in charity is more precious in God's sight than all the visions and communications possible – since they imply neither merit nor demerit – and how many who have not received these experiences are incomparably advanced than others who have had many (A 2.23.19, 187).

One should submit to the spiritual director's advice, even against one's own convictions and reasoning:

... he must not, on account of this conviction, fail to believe and give assent of reason to the instructions and commands of his spiritual director, even if they are extremely contrary to what he feels. In this

way one will be led by faith to the divine union, for a soul must journey to it more by believing than by understanding (A 2.26.11, 196).

John's unambiguous teaching that faith alone is the only adequate means for the divine union should not be understood as a call to ignore or reject the gift and role of reason. Instead, in pursuit of perfect union with God, one should employ to the maximum one's natural powers including the reason. But there will always come a point beyond which reason cannot take us; there, gratefully and gracefully leaving the reason behind, we must go still forward in the light of faith so that we can reach out for God as He is and His mysteries that are otherwise beyond our reach. Here, even as we appreciate and make full use of the reason, we are realistically admitting the limit of reason and decidedly resisting the temptation of mistaking its gains and objects for God. This is what is meant by the purification of intellect. While recognizing its proper role and rightful place in spiritual life, one should avoid the presumption of making it absolute. Shedding the intellectual pride, one must humbly submit to the guidance of God's Spirit in the light of faith.

One reason why John has reservation about all kinds of supernatural knowledge except the vague, dark, and general one, is that even if they are from God, their objects invariably are particular, and, therefore, obviously not God Himself. Whatever is clearly experienced, corporally or spiritually, is not the Infinite but finite, not the Absolute but relative. So, one should detach and free oneself from them, and single-mindedly turn and move towards the Infinite, Absolute God. That you experience anything that is distinct and particular means that you are not in the light of pure knowledge which is the same as God. John cites the example of the ray of sunlight entering the room through a window:

[T]he more it [the ray] is pervaded with particles of dust, the clearer and more palpable and sublime it appears to the senses... [W]hen it is more purified of these specks of dust it seems more obscure and impalpable to the material eye... If the ray of sunlight should entirely be cleansed and purified of all the dust particles ... it would appear totally obscure and incomprehensible to the eye, since visible things would be absent... The spiritual light has a similar relationship to the intellect, the eye of the soul. Supernatural, general knowledge and light shine so purely and simply in the intellect and is so divested and freed of all intelligible forms ... that it is imperceptible to the soul. This knowledge, when purer, is even at times the cause of darkness,

because it dispossesses the intellect of its customary light, forms and phantasies and effects a noticeable darkness (A 2.14.9-10, 145).

Again, the disregard for those supernatural experiences implies that in our journey in the light of faith towards divine union, we should depend not on extraordinary experiences but the ordinary means provided by the natural reason, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, His Church and His ministers:

There is no necessity for any of this [supernatural] kind of knowledge, since a person can get sufficient guidance from natural reason, and the law and doctrine of Gospel. There is no difficulty or necessity unsolvable by these means, which are very pleasing to God and profitable to souls (A 2.21.4, 174).

One should disbelieve anything coming in a supernatural way, and believe only the teaching of Christ, the man, as I say, and of His ministers who are men (A 2.22.7, 187).

5. Purification of Memory through Hope

5.1. Making Room for God

We have discussed how the intellect is purified by being detached from its possessions in the form of various kinds of natural and supernatural knowledge of objects other than God. Similarly, the memory also should be purified by being emptied of all its contents other than God. The memory stores up the images experienced in the past and recalls them from time to time. These images are of those objects of different kinds of natural and supernatural knowledge mentioned above. Among them only the last one – the mystical knowledge, the vague, dark, and general knowledge – has God for its object, and, therefore, effects union with Him. All others are about particular objects – natural, supernatural or spiritual. The memory filled with their forms and images will have no place in it for God. Any of those forms cannot be God, either, because He is formless, imageless. Hence, they should give way to God.

The annihilation of memory in regard to all forms is an absolute requirement for union with God. This union cannot be wrought without a complete separation of the memory from all forms that are not God. For, as we mentioned in the night of the intellect,⁴ God cannot be contained in any form or distinct knowledge. Since, as Christ affirms, no one can serve two masters [Matt. 6:24], and the memory cannot at the same time be united with God and with forms and distinct knowledge, and since God has no form or image

⁴For an explanation of "the night of the intellect" see below see below 30-31.

comprehensible to the memory, the memory is without form, figure, or phantasy when united to God; and in great forgetfulness, without remembrance of anything, it is absorbed in a supreme good. This is noted every day through experience. That divine union empties and sweeps the phantasy of all forms and knowledge, and elevates the memory to the supernatural (A 3.2, 215).

There are of course exceptions. For example, “a person should always strive to remember the knowledge of Creator communicated to him/her through the spiritual apprehensions. For it will produce in the soul a notable effect: touches and spiritual feelings of union with God, the goal to which we are guiding the soul” (A 3.14.2, 235). Similarly, for the sake of moving the spirit to love, one may recall the forms and images associated with the spiritual apprehensions such as visions. Again, one may, without paying attention to those forms and images, advert to the love of God caused by the same apprehensions. Finally, “a man is not required to cease reasoning and thinking about what he must do and know, for, since he is not attached to the possessions of these thoughts, he will not be hindered” (A 3.15.1, 236). Granting these exceptions, John advises “not to store up in the memory the objects of hearing, seeing, etc., but to leave them immediately and forget them... The memory, as though it were non-existent, should be left free and disencumbered and unattached to any earthly or heavenly consideration” (A 3.2.24, 218).

John, then, describes in detail the harms resulting from not emptying the memory of all objects with forms and figures so that it can reach union with God who has no form. Some of the harms, for example, are mistaken understanding of facts, arousal of sense appetites and emotions, wrong and unjust judgements, devil getting occasions to make the soul proud, avaricious, angry, envious, etc., and to distract the concentration of faculties on God; loss of tranquillity, peace, and moral virtues, and the esteem for the particular objects of memory causing base and improper judgements of God. On the contrary, many indeed are the benefits derived from forgetting the forms and images in the memory. For example, one enjoys tranquillity and peace of mind, pure consciousness; the devil gets little opportunity to tempt the soul; one experiences deep spiritual repose and quiet; and more time is saved for more profitable exercises. In short, the more detached and withdrawn the person is from the forms and images in the memory, the more closely he/she approaches God who has neither form nor image.

5.2. Purifying Hope

In the process of purifying the memory of all the images and forms of the past experiences, the decisive role is played by the theological virtue of hope. While the memory looks back to, and takes delight in, the past experiences and achievements, the hope looks forward to the future possibilities. The object of Christian hope is what God has promised – promises that he will fulfil not in the present but in the future world. They are things that the eyes have not seen, the ears have not heard, and the mind has not understood (1 Cor. 2:9), which, in the final analysis, is the same as union with the incomprehensible God. Then, to preoccupy ourselves with what we already possess – the bodily, mental, and spiritual achievements – is to refuse to look to and hope for the future gains. "Every possession is against hope; as St. Paul says, hope is for what is not possessed [Heb. 11:1]" (A 3.7.2, 224). Conversely, to hope means to forget the present and past possessions, and thus to empty the memory of them:

In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of the things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be union with God; for in relation to God the more a soul hopes the more it attains. And when, precisely, it is more dispossessed of things, it hopes more; and when it has reached perfect dispossession, it will remain with the perfect possession of God in divine union. But there are many who do not want to go without the sweetness and delight of this knowledge in the memory, and therefore they do not reach supreme possession complete sweetness. For who does not renounce all his possession cannot be Christ's disciple (A 3.7.2, 225).

John agrees that his doctrine "results in the destruction of the natural activity and use of faculties and that man then lives in oblivion ... without remembrance [even] of natural necessities and operations" (A 3.2.7, 216). Thus, in the early stage of union with God, when it is being perfected, the person necessarily experiences a great forgetfulness of all things. For, then, the forms and knowledge are being erased from the memory. Moreover, the memory being absorbed in God, there will be many deficiencies in the person's external behaviour. He will forget even to eat, drink, etc. (A 3.8, 216).

However, once the divine union becomes habitual, there will be no more lapses of memory in matters related to one's moral and natural life. He/she will do things with great perfection. But his/her operations are no more produced through the memory which is by then transformed in God.

As a result, all the operations of the memory and other faculties in this state are divine. God now possesses the faculties as their complete Lord, because of their transformation in Him. And consequently it is he who divinely makes and commands them according to His Spirit and will. As a result, the operations are not different from those of God; but those the soul performs are of God and are divine operations. Since he who is united with God is one spirit with Him, as St. Paul says, the operations of the soul united with Him are of the divine Spirit and are divine (A 3.2.8, 216-217).

In this state of union God makes the soul know or ignore or remember or forget the right things at the right times (A 3.2.9, 217).

6. Purification of Will through Love

Union with God is realized only when one's will becomes one with God's. For it the human will should be rid of all that disagrees with the divine will. Even the purification of the intellect and memory would be of no use unless the will is purified and made to conform to God's will. John, in this regard, bases his teaching on the scriptural text: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt. 6:5). This means that the human should employ all his/her faculties, appetites, operations, and emotions in loving God, not anything else. Thus, one should employ the faculty of will, too, in loving God. Its direct operation is to make decisions and choices. The act of choice is controlled by what John calls the four passions or feelings of the will: joy, hope, sorrow, and fear. That is, one makes decisions either in favour of things that bring joy or are hoped for, or against those that cause sorrow or fear. Therefore, for the will to be fully employed in loving God through its acts of decisions, one should rejoice only in God's glory and honour, hope only for it, and feel sorrow and fear only about blasphemous things. Thus, the will should be purged of the passions in such a way that it may be changed "from a human and lowly will into the divine will, made identical with the will of God" (A 3.16.3, 238). Rather, the passions should be so ruled that "the individual rejoices only in what is purely for God's honour and glory, hopes for nothing else, feels sorrow only about matters pertaining to this, and fears only God. The more a person rejoices over something outside God, the less intense will be his joy in God; and the more his hope goes out toward something else, the less there is for God; and so on with the others" (A 3.16.2, 237-238).

7. Passive Dark Night

7.1. Period of Transition

So far John was concerned more about the active role the "beginners" in spiritual life have to play with God's help. By "beginners" he means not those who having just given up the sinful ways, are still struggling to avoid mortal sins, and are accustomed only to vocal prayers. Instead, "they [the beginners] are already detached to a great extent from the temporal things of this world" and "will more easily grasp this doctrine on the nakedness of spirit" (A 2. Prologue 9, 73), and "practise meditation on the spiritual road" (N 1.1, 297-298). As we have already seen, they have to work hard in order to purify the senses and the spiritual faculties of intellect, memory, and will. It involves a lot of self-denial, renunciation, and austerity. But they also receive a lot of encouragement from the Lord. Like a loving mother, He supports the soul with "a new enthusiasm and fervour in the service of God ... causes it to take sweet and delectable milk and experience intense satisfaction in the performance of spiritual exercise... The soul finds its joy, therefore, in spending lengthy periods at prayer, perhaps even entire night; its penances are pleasures; its fasts, happiness; and the sacraments and spiritual conversations are its consolations" (N 1.1. 2-3, 298).

These beginners, not yet being strong in spirituality, "conduct themselves in a very weak and imperfect manner" and "their motivation in their spiritual exercises and works is the consolation and satisfaction" (N 1.1. 2-3, 298). Hence, they develop numerous imperfections which John discusses in detail as seven spiritual capital vices. First of all, they feel a certain kind of pride causing complacency, vain glory, presumption, contempt for others, etc. Secondly, they develop spiritual avarice which makes them not content with the spirit God gives them, and wanting to have more and more consolation in spiritual matters they run after counselling sessions one after another, collect spiritual maxims, books, pious articles, etc., and display the spirit of possessiveness and attachment. The third imperfection is spiritual lust – lust which proceeds from spiritual things. It is the impure movements, the lustful feelings they experience while engaged in spiritual exercises, deep prayerfulness, and even while receiving the sacraments of penance and Holy Communion. The origin of such lustful feelings may be the human nature itself, or the devil or the undue fear the person has in this regard. Fourthly, many beginners, because of strong desire for spiritual gratification, feel anger when they are left without it. The fifth imperfection is spiritual gluttony:

Some, attracted by the delight they feel in their spiritual exercises, will kill themselves with penance, others will weaken themselves by fast, and, without the counsel or command of another, overtax their weakness; indeed, they try to hide these penance from the one to whom they owe obedience in such matters. Some will even dare perform these penances contrary to obedience (A 1.6.1, 307).

Regarding the sixth vice, envy, many of the beginners feel sad about the spiritual good of others and do not want to hear them praised. They also are open to sloth, the seventh vice, and as a result they become easily tired of those spiritual exercises which do not yield sensory satisfaction. It is delight that they seek in the spiritual practices; when they do not get it, they become bored and give up the practices: they run away from the cross of Christ and seek spiritual gratification and consolations.

The beginners need to be purged of those imperfections in order to enter the state of the proficients. But left to themselves they cannot ever accomplish the purification, says John of the Cross. So, God steps in and does it by introducing them into the passive "dark night." There, through pure dryness and interior darkness, He weans them [the beginners] from the breasts of these gratifications and delights, takes away all these trivialities and childish ways and makes them acquire the virtues by very different means.

7.2. Dark Night

"Dark night" perhaps is the most known expression in John's mystical theology and writings. According to him, spiritual life is a journey in dark night. It begins, continues, and ends in darkness. It begins with the mortification of sense-appetites for worldly possessions. One closes the senses which are the windows and doors for the light from the world to come into oneself. They being closed, one finds oneself in darkness as far as the worldly possessions and delights are concerned. It is there that one begins the journey of spiritual life. This is the dark night of senses which forms the subject-matter of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book 1 (A 1).

The journey continues by means of faith. One journeys along the road in the light of faith. With regard to matters of faith the reason and senses are in darkness and, therefore, to go by faith is to journey in darkness. In spiritual life, the proper light is that of faith which is darkness for the senses and reason. Hence, the spiritual faculties of intellect, memory, and will have to be purged of their tendency to seek and remain confined to the realm and objects of reason and senses. This purification is

called the dark night of spirit, which is presented in the second and third books of the same work: the former (A 2) dealing with the purification of intellect, and the latter (A 3) with that of memory and will.

The end of the journey also is in darkness, for God as He is, in whom the journey ends, is incomprehensible and, therefore, darkness for the human reason and senses. The infused knowledge of Him, otherwise called mystical knowledge, is God's communication, "a general and obscure knowledge," "contemplation imparted through faith" (A 2.11.4). To receive it the soul is to be further purified which is not the work of the human being but of God. Therefore, it is called passive night in contrast to the previous ones, which were active nights in which the human being with God's help was purifying the senses and spiritual faculties. *The Dark Night* (N) deals with the passive night, its first and second books discussing God's role in purifying, respectively, the senses and spiritual faculties. The three nights which "pass through a soul, or better, the soul passes through" (A 1.2.1, 75) are, in fact, a single one with three parts: "[T]he first part, the night of the senses, resembles early evening... The second part, faith, is completely dark, like midnight. The third part, representing God, is like the very early dawn..." (A 1.1.5, 75).

8. Passive Night of Senses

8.1. Signs of Genuineness

The beginners have been going on for some time in the way of virtues and discursive meditation, experiencing spiritual delights and satisfaction, which helped them to gain detachment from worldly things and some spiritual strength. It is the time "when in their opinion the sun of divine favour is shining most brightly on them" (N 1.8.3, 312). Simultaneously, however, there is also the danger of their falling into the imperfections of the capital vices with regard to spiritual matters. To counter it,

God darkens all this light and closes the door and spring of the sweet water they were tasting... God now leaves them in such darkness that they do not know which way to turn... [T]hey cannot advance a step in meditation... He leaves them in such dryness that they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, as they formerly did, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter... He weans them from the sweet breast so that they might be strengthened... This change is a surprise to them because everything seems to be functioning in reverse (N 1.8.3, 312).

In genuine cases, this is God's work in the soul that is a "requirement for entering the happy night of the senses" (N 1.8.4, 313). But such dryness and darkness can also originate from "sin and imperfection, or weakness and lukewarmness, or some bad humour or bodily indisposition" (N 1.9.1, 313). So, John gives three signs to discern that one is treading the path of sensory night: (1) It is not only in the things of God that the soul fails to find satisfaction but also in other creatures. God does not allow it to find it in anything (N 1.1.9.2, 313). (2) In spite of this distaste for the things of God, the soul solicitously turns to God and feels concerned about not serving Him (N 1.9.3, 313-315). (3) In spite of its efforts, the soul is powerless to meditate discursively. The reason is that God having stopped to communicate Himself through the exterior and interior senses, now begins to do so through the pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation... (N 1.9.8, 315-316).

In this night of aridity in the senses, the persons suffer considerable affliction: they feel being abandoned by God and are afraid of having offended Him by some sin. They, then, try hard in vain to return to discursive meditation and other exercises in the hope of deriving some satisfaction. That is certainly a wrong move by which they impair God's work. The right thing for them to do is "to persevere patiently and not to be afflicted" (N 1.10.3, 317). They should

pay no attention to discursive meditation... They should allow the soul to remain in rest and quietude, even though it may seem ... that they are doing nothing and wasting time... Through patience and perseverance in prayer, they will be doing a great deal without activity on their part. All that is required of them here is freedom of soul, that they liberate themselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts and care not about thinking and meditating. They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without ... the desire to taste or feel Him (N 1.10.4, 317).

8.2. Infused Contemplation

God bestows the infused contemplation which one should receive "with more peaceful plenitude... For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love..." (N 1.10.6, 318). This enkindling of love sometimes causes such longings for God that the person may feel that his/her bones are drying up in thirst (N 1.11.1, 319).

Many are the benefits of this night of senses. First and foremost, "the aridity and voids of the faculties ... make the soul recognize its own lowliness and misery..." (N 1.12.2, 321), which makes it humbler and more God-fearing. Along with this self-knowledge God will bestow upon it also knowledge of His grandeur and majesty (N 1.12.4, 322). In the awareness of its own lowliness, the soul is purged of the spiritual pride, too, and grows in the love of neighbour, becomes submissive and obedient, and all other spiritual vices disappear (N 1.12.7-9, 323-324). Further, the soul acquires the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit (N 1.13.11, 326), "is also wondrously liberated from the hands of [its] enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil" (N 1.13.11, 326), is enabled to walk with trust in the love of God, with its natural concupiscence and vigour quenched (N 1.13.12, 326-327), and the solicitude for God increased (N 1.13.13, 327).

9. Passive Night of Spirit

9.1. Need for Deeper Purification

The passive night of the senses has purified the sensory part of the proficients. But they will continue to experience the habitual imperfections whose roots are in the spirit where the sensory purification does not reach. The purification of the senses is merely like cutting the branches without pulling off the roots, or rubbing out the fresh stains while leaving the old and deeply embedded ones untouched. "The stains of the old man still linger in the spirit..." (N 2.2.1, 331). Hence, there is a need for the passive night of the spirit. In John's own words, "the purgation of the senses is only the gate to and beginning of the contemplation which leads to the purgation of the spirit" and "serves more for the accommodation of the senses to the spirit than for the union of the spirit with God" (N 2.2.1, 331).

The proficients' imperfections include the natural dullness resulting from sin and a distracted spirit. At this stage they receive abundant spiritual communications and apprehensions, prophecies, visions, etc., some of which may be the creation of their own phantasy and/or of the devil. Easily charmed and beguile by them, they become presumptuous and proud, vain-glorious and even hypocritical. "They still think of God and speak of Him like little children," "because the gold of the spirit is not purified and illumined" and they are not full-grown men (N 2.3.3, 333). One should be purified of these imperfections before passing on to divine union. "In this night [of the spirit] both the sensory and spiritual parts are

despoiled of all these apprehensions and delights, and the soul is made to walk in dark and pure faith, which is the proper and adequate means to divine union... (N 2.2.5, 332).

In this purgation, both the parts of the soul undergo complete purification, for one part is never adequately purged without the other, for the two parts form one *suppositum*. All good and evil habits reside in the spirit, and until these habits are purged, the senses cannot be completely purified of their rebellions and vices (N 2.3.1, 332-333).

9.2. The Dark Night's Woes

In order to strip the faculties of the old man and clothe them with the new (Col. 3:9-10; Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 12:2), in this night, "[God] leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings" (N 2.3.1, 332-333). In this night, the intellect changes from being human and natural to divine so that "it no longer understands by means of its natural vigour and light but by means of divine wisdom..., the will having become divine no longer loves in a lowly, natural and human manner but with the strength and purity of the Holy Spirit... And the memory, too, was changed into presentiments of eternal glory" (N 2.4.2, 334-335).

Infusing the light of contemplation God illumines the soul, on the one hand, with regard to its wretchedness, and, on the other, with regard to His own purity and transcendence. This two dimensional illumination causes immense pain to the soul, which John explains by the principle that "two contraries cannot coexist in one subject" (N 2.5.4, 336). To make the point clear he cites examples: "[W]hen the eyes are sickly, impure and weak, they suffer pain if a bright light shines on them" (N 2.5.5, 336). "The brighter the light, the more the owl is blinded, and the more one looks at the brilliant sun, the more the sun darkens the faculty of sight, deprives it and overwhelms it in its weakness" (N 2.5.3, 335).

Similarly, the light of contemplation falling on the not yet fully purified soul darkens it, for this light not only surpasses but even destroys the soul's natural understanding. Being assailed by the pure light, which expels all the impurity of the soul, "a person feels so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against him and that he is against God" (N 2.5.5, 336). The soul feels convinced that it is worthy neither of God nor of any creature, that it will never be worthy, and that there are no more blessings

for it; it feels lost in its own miseries and evils, and that of itself it will never possess anything else (N 2.5.5, 336). In the process of renewing and divinizing the soul, the purgative contemplation "so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death; it feels as if it were swallowed by a beast and being digested in the dark belly, and it suffers an anguish comparable to Jonas's when in the belly of the whale [Jona 2:1-3]" (N 2.6.1, 337).

The thought of being abhorred, rejected and abandoned by God forever is the most piteous affliction for the soul. One feels "the absence of God," "the sorrows of hell," and as being in "the shadow of death" (N 2.6.3, 338), and also as "forsaken and despised by creatures, especially by one's friends" (N 2.6.3, 338). One also acutely experiences "one's own intimate poverty and misery" in all matters (N 2.6.4, 338). Suffering the void and suspension of its natural supports and apprehensions as well as the rejection from God, the soul feels as if it is "hanging in mid-air, unable to breathe." "As fire consumes the tarnish and rust of metal, this contemplation annihilates, empties, and consumes all the affections and imperfect habits the soul contracted throughout its life ... suffers ... an oppressive undoing and an inner torment" (N 2.6.5, 339) and "is purified like gold in the crucible [Wis. 3:6]... [It] feels terrible annihilation in its very substance and extreme poverty as though it were approaching its end" (N 2.6.6, 339). It experiences like seeing hell and perdition open before it, going down into hell alive [Ps. 54:16], and being in purgatory on earth (N 2.6.5, 339-340).

Equally afflicting is the memory of the past times of prosperity when the soul had enjoyed many consolations and delights in the service of God which now seem to be all over! (N 2.7.1, 340). "Added to this ... a person in this state finds neither consolation nor support in any doctrine or spiritual director... [F]or until the Lord finishes purging him in the way He desires, no remedy is a help to him in his sorrow... He resembles one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move, nor see, nor feel any favour from heaven or earth" (N 2.7.3, 341). Indeed, he loves God like anything, and he knows, too, that he does so; but it does not give him any relief, and "he is unable to believe that God loves him... He grieves to see within himself reasons for meriting rejection by Him Whom he so loves and longs for" (N 2.7.7, 343).

One's inability to pray and meditate is yet another source of agony: "... [S]ince this dark night impedes his faculties and affections, he cannot

beseech God nor raise his mind and affection to Him ... and if sometimes the soul does beseech God, it does this with so little strength and fervour that it thinks God does not hear or pay any attention to it... God it is who is working now in the soul and for this reason the soul can do nothing. Consequently, a person can neither pray vocally nor be attentive to spiritual matters, nor still less attend to temporal affairs and business... [T]his night not only purges the intellect of its light and the will of its affections, but also the memory of its discursive knowledge... [There takes place] forgetfulness and lack of knowledge in the memory" (N 2.8.1-2, 334-344).

In short, in preparation for the divine union of love, "the soul with its faculties is first engulfed in the divine and dark spiritual light of contemplation and thereby withdrawn from all creaturely affections and apprehensions. Here, the brighter and purer the supernatural, divine light is, the darker it is for the soul. This is illustrated by a comparison with natural light" (N 2.8.2, 344):

We observe that the more a ray of sunlight shining through a window is void of dust particles, the less clearly it is seen, and that it is perceived more clearly when there are more dust particles in the air. The reason is that the light in itself is invisible and is rather the means by which the objects it strikes are seen; but it is also seen when it reflects on them. Were the light not to strike these objects, it would not be seen and neither would they... Instead ... there is more darkness where the ray is present, because, it takes away and darkens some of the other light... (N 2.8.3, 344-345).

Since this light [of contemplation] is so simple, so pure, and so general, and is unaffected and unrestricted by any particular intelligible object, natural or divine, and since the faculties are empty and annihilated of all these apprehensions, the soul with universality and great facility perceives and penetrates anything earthly or heavenly presented to it (N 2.8.5, 345).

10. Conclusion

Being purified, the intellect receives the lofty divine light, the will tastes divine affection, and the memory sees everything in the light of the future glory (N 2.9.2-5, 347-348). The soul is prepared "to attain inner peace that surpasses all understanding" (N 2.9.6, 348). Most importantly, "this purgative ... divine light ... has the same effect on the soul that the fire has on a log of wood" (N 2.10.1, 350):

The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odour. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents which are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself. Once transformed the wood no longer has any activity or passivity of its own, except for its weight and its quantity which is denser than the fire. For it possesses the properties and performs the actions of fire: it is dry and it dries; it is hot and it gives off heat; it is brilliant and it illumines; and it is also light, much lighter than before. It is the fire that produces all these properties in that wood (N 2.10.1, 350).

From now onwards, therefore, John speaks of the soul that is "Fired with love's longings." Indeed, "the fire of love" has penetrated the soul; now it experiences "a vehement passion of divine love" and "an enkindling of love;" it feels vividly and keenly as "being wounded by a strong divine love" and enjoys a certain "foretaste of God," although "it understands nothing in particular ... as the intellect is in darkness" (N 2.11.1, 352-353).

The spirit herein experiences an impassioned and intense love, because this spiritual inflaming engenders the passion of love. Since this love is infused, it is more passive than active and, thus, generates in the soul a strong passion of love. This love is beginning to possess something of union with God and thereby shares to a certain extent in its properties. But only the love of God which is being united to the soul imparts heat, strength, and passion of love or fire, as the soul terms it here. This love finds that the soul is equipped to receive the wound and union in the measure that all its appetites are brought into subjection, alienated, incapacitated, and unable to be satisfied by any heavenly or earthly thing (N 2.11.2, 353).

The soul experiences the "burning of love." "The touch of this divine love and fire so dries up the spirit and so enkindles the soul's longings to slake its thirst for this love that a person will go over these longings in his mind a thousand times and pine for God in a thousand ways" (N 2.11.5, 354). "It [the soul] finds rest in nothing... Everything becomes narrow for this soul: there is no room for it within itself ... in heaven or on earth; and it is filled with sorrows unto darkness... Nonetheless, in the midst of these

dark and loving afflictions, the soul feels the presence of someone and an interior strength which fortifies and accompanies it that when this weight of anxious darkness passes, it often feels alone, empty and weak" (N 2.11.6-7, 354).

"This inflaming of love serenely communicates mystical knowledge to the intellect, and forcibly enkindles love in the will" (N 2.13.1-2, 357). In the beginning, it is the esteeming love of God that causes the anguish that the soul has lost God and is abandoned by Him. Later, it is the burning love that causes the fear that all is over! When such a fear is not there, the soul boldly does strange things, accepts sufferings, and is ready even to die for God. For example, Mary Magdalene courageously ignored the crowd at the banquet, went to the Lord's tomb early in the morning, and boldly spoke with the man who she thought was the gardener (N 2.13.5-7, 358-359). God strips the soul of its old skin and clothes it with a new one:

This renovation is an illumination of the human intellect with supernatural light so that it becomes divine, united with the divine; an informing of the will with love of God so that it is no longer less than divine and loves in no other way than divinely, united and made one with the divine will and love; and also a divine conversion and change of the memory, the affections, and the appetites according to God. And thus this soul will be a soul of heaven, heavenly and more divine than human (N 2.13.11, 361).

The "dark night of contemplation," the "mystical theology," and the "secret wisdom" infused by God into the soul through love, the "wisdom of love," produces illumination that is ineffable. Even to the spiritual director "all they can manage to say is that they are satisfied, quiet, and content, and aware of God and that in their opinion all goes well. But the experience is ineffable, and one will hear from the soul no more than these general terms. [Unlike the particular communications such as visions and feelings], pure contemplation is indescribable ... and on this account 'secret'" (N 2.17.5, 369-370). "This divine contemplation ... is the way which guides the soul to the perfections of union with God, toward which one must advance humanly by not knowing and divinely by ignorance, since they are not humanly knowable" (N 2.17.7, 370).