

Spiritual Accompaniment in the Carmelite Tradition

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Abstract

The Carmelite tradition of spiritual accompaniment is based on the fundamental principle of God's love constantly seeking all, bringing them to wholeness in the reign of God. Moreover, God here is seen always as the principal agent bringing it about in one's day to day life. A guide must have knowledge, discretion and experience. Thus, the guide needs to be aware of his/her own abilities, remembering always that the Holy Spirit is the true guide who leads each one according to their sacred story. Through Faith and the Law of God, the person sees and trusts the Spirit in the journey. The guide helps the person to solitude, quiet, and freedom, knowing that God takes care of the person. The foundational role of the guide according to St John of the Cross is to prepare the person for God's work, helping the person to listen to the Spirit trusting always that nothing in life is wasted and that everything somehow enters the process of becoming whole human beings in God.

Introduction

Though spiritual accompaniment has a variety of expressions there is one which offers solid foundations for this process: the Carmelite Tradition. At the center of this way were St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and particularly St John of the Cross (1542-1591). We shall concentrate particularly on the sanjuanist approach in this article. From Scripture and his own life experience, John developed a way of spiritual

accompaniment which accented the primacy of the work of the Holy Spirit as well as the freedom and uniqueness of each person being graced by God. As a Carmelite John made Scripture his daily nourishment from which he derived many insights which enabled him to guide others in their journey to union with God (Vilnet, 1949). Moreover, his own life provided him with personal experience of how God works with each person in a way which empowers the individual to find his/her own unique path to union with God (Hardy, 2012).

In sixteenth century Spain and hence during the time of John there were directors who were very popular but had a rigid approach to directing people who desired a deeper spiritual life. These men accented the imaginative process of meditation. For every person they guided, they followed the same method, urging the people to meditate using their imagination. When the person later felt drawn to a quieter, silent process of prayer, many directors forced them back to the use of the imagination and meditation. So, the person who was in fact being brought by God into contemplation was stymied and held back. It was in this context that St John of the Cross presented his view of spiritual accompaniment particularly in his commentary (*The Living Flame-B*, III, 27-67; Kavanaugh, 1991: 683-701). Here we find all the basic principles which form the sanjuanist approach to accompanying another in their journey to the Loving God whom John knew in his personal experience of the path.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

1) God seeks the person constantly

In the whole of one's life not only is the person being drawn to God, but God is being drawn to the person. This joining of God and person is the foundation for everyone's journey to full union with God. John says "If anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more" (*The Living Flame-B*, III, 28; Kavanaugh, 1991: 684). Attracted by the goodness in the person who loves incarnatedly God is irresistibly drawn to the person more and more, as the person lives and acts in this world as the incarnation of God. The Trinitarian God finds in the person that beauty and wholeness which are in fact the gift of Father, Son and Spirit. This not only draws God's love and desire to have the person live the dynamic of Trinitarian life which is love, but in that desire God gives more to the person. God offers deeper opportunities of love, compassion, and concern which when enacted draw the person more deeply to God. God can never remain unaffected. At the very instant of the person's birth, as with all of creation, God is drawn to the being

who now exists. Love has created all and Love who is God desires the fullness of being for the person. That fullness of being the person finds only in a union with God in Love. So it is that God seeking the person becomes the true guide through a variety of people and experiences in the very life she/he lives in all its concreteness and particularity. Nothing is wasted. All retains the potential to empower the person to become one with the God who is the person's All.

2) God is the principal agent

Having reminded us that God seeks each of us constantly, in the following paragraph John enunciates a fundamental principle related to his notion of spiritual accompaniment: "The soul, [the person], then, should advert that God is the principal agent in this matter. He acts as guide of the blind, leading it by the hand to the place it knows not how to reach" (*The Living Flame-B* III, 29; Kavanaugh, 1991: 684). We must constantly keep in mind that it is God who in fact does everything *in and through life* to bring her/him to total union with God. Yet, while God does all and keeps seeking the person the person can put obstacles in the way of full development of this process which God has initiated and into which the person has chosen to enter.

God works quietly and secretly in the person. There are many kinds of benefits and blessings which God gives the person deep within. God works a transformation "hiddenly" within the person (*The Living Flame-B*, III, 40; Kavanaugh, 1991: 689). God does this "in no other manner than as God" (*Prologue to The Living Flame-B* #2; Kavanaugh, 1991:638). This means God does it all "with infinite goodness and love". The limitless compassion and Love who is God becomes the pure gift the person receives throughout a lifetime. At some point these special blessings and the transforming work of God will become apparent. However, now is the time for the person to simply rest in the silence of God's work. This allows God to be God in us. The guide enables the person simply to be receptive trusting that the Divine is indeed lovingly working to bring the person deeper and deeper into that oneness of union with Father, Son, and Spirit.

Moreover, the one who accompanies another must remember and assure the other knows that God loves each person deeply. In his *Living Flame of Love -B* III, 6 (Kavanaugh, 1991: 675-76), John of the Cross tells us how much God treasures each of us and all creation. Moreover, he accents how God knowing us as we are, loves us with an unfathomable openness. Being all Love, Mercy, Kindness, Gentleness and Truth, he tells us that God relates to us with all those qualities. God comes to us

as this God of love. After speaking of God relating to us in this way, John says this:

God loves you with supreme humility and esteem and makes you his equal, gladly revealing himself to you in these ways of knowledge, in this his countenance filled with graces, and telling you in this his union not without great rejoicing 'I am yours and for you and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you.' (*The Living Flame of Love-B*, III, 6; Kavanaugh, 1991: 676)

God not only **desires** to make us equal to God, but in fact he does that very thing. God makes us able to live that life who is God - a life of love. It is a pure gift from God. This gift is God opening out to us the Godself in our day to day lives. More than that, this gift is God opening us out to all of creation in the very movement of opening the Godself to us. Nothing we could say or do could make God love us. God's love is free, pure and totally *gift*. God simply loves us without any condition. God does not love us because we are good. God just loves every person as we are at *any* given moment.

In the last part of this quotation John tells us that God is constantly taken by us and makes us one with Trinity. So infinitely captivated God says to each one: "*I am yours and for you and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you.*" God not only wants us to be one with God but everything that God is "forces" God to give the whole life God is to each of us and to the whole human community. From the creation of the world God loves and is for all. Thus we have God as our love and life here and now in our day to day living. God becomes the Ultimate Reality giving meaning to our lives and thus He is the "atmosphere" of our human lives day after day.

Here John presents us with an authentic insight into God's love for us. Those words John ascribes to God are the words of Father, Son, and Spirit. The Trinity in all its dynamic life is the one who speaks with us constantly bringing us little by little into that same dynamic of Trinitarian life. This life is Infinite Love lived in our finiteness for the Godself, for our fellow human beings, as well as ourselves and for all of creation. This is something that we must remember in the journey to Life in God - whether it be our personal journey or that of others who are on the way as well. This is what the guide attempts to help the person realize and indeed actualize in one's own life.

Once the guide and the person on this journey keep this God of love before them, they realize there is no place for fear or guilt - only for

thanksgiving. So it is that the guide helps each one to see how that thanksgiving can be given in the way most appropriate when one considers the individuality of each person who is on this journey to God.

QUALITIES OF THE GOOD GUIDE

John understands the absolute importance of the one who journeys with another and so he spends most of his time speaking of the qualities a guide should have. John realizes the one who journeys along the path will be stamped by the qualities of the person who guides him/her. For John of the Cross the guide must have three qualities: knowledge, discretion, and experience.

1) Knowledge

The knowledge which the guide must possess is first of all an intellectual knowledge. This is to say the guide must know the history of God's action with people as well as the knowledge of the human psyche and how grace works in time. The guide needs to know the stages, levels and processes with all their components in order to enable the person to move in the right direction. Without this intellectual knowledge the guide could in fact lead someone away from union rather than to it. John himself was able to be such a guide precisely because of the deep knowledge he had of what it means to be human and alive in God (Welch, 1990).

Later in *The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 45 (Kavanaugh, 1991: 690) John speaks of the harm guides can do without this knowledge. When it is time to move from meditation to contemplation, guides who attempt to move the person back to meditation and imaginative activity do not know what prayer really is; nor do they know how the Spirit works deeply in each person bringing each one in their sacred story to a hidden depth where the person will be hidden with God in the deepest center of their authentic selves. By following a path of acts and meditation when he/she is being called deeper to authentic contemplation the person hinders God who now leads the person in a different way. By engaging in those "natural operations" the person is in fact refusing to allow the Spirit to work. Fortunately, that grace will continue to be offered in other ways because God so passionately loves us that God cannot let us go away. When the guide urges the person back to meditation, the guide is like a blacksmith who hammers things into the shape he/she wants rather than creating a context for the person to hear and follow the Spirit (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 45; Kavanaugh, 1991, 690-691).

2) Discretion

John tells us that the guide must possess discretion. The discretion John speaks of here refers to the ability of the guide to go to the heart of what is being discussed and what God is doing in the person and especially to prudently open paths of choices the person has. (Culligan, 1992:75). It is a perspicacity of perceiving in and through the whole person the actual situation of the person and helping the person see the path most useful to the person. To do this the guide needs to go beyond what the person says. Why is it important to go beyond just the words? One reason is the person always speaks from one's own situation and condition. Hence, one always picks and chooses what seems important to her/him from among the many elements of that particular person's life situation. There is no doubt that the way the person sees and expresses what one sees of oneself is important. However, the guide is required to be able to sift through and to take all elements (physical, psychological, spiritual) into account to see the full reality of where and how the Spirit is leading the person. The director must listen, compare what he/she hears and sees with the knowledge one has and try to see into the center of the person and listen to God there, incarnated in this particular life story. Moreover, the guide must enable the other to listen to that same Spirit.

3) Experience

Furthermore, John maintains the guide must be someone who has experienced this process or at the very least knows of it through the experience of others. One who has experienced this union with God and its different stages can truly understand. This means that one can guide another only to the extent that one has gone through that process as well. So, it is that there may come a stage where the guide must honestly say that he/she has gone as far as they can with this person in the process and the person should seek someone else with whom to journey the rest of the way. For as John says: "the directors will not succeed in leading the soul [person] onward in it when God bestows it, nor will they even understand it if they have no experience of what true and pure spirit is." (*The Living Flame of Love-B*, III, 30; Kavanaugh, 1991: 685). It is the experience of oneness with God that is paramount for the guide to be one who can truly help one journey with and to God.

THINGS OF WHICH A GUIDE NEEDS TO BE AWARE

1) One's abilities

John speaks of a delicate portrait and an unskilled hand that touches it up. (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 42; Kavanaugh, 1991: 689). Think

of a real work of art with all its simplicity and beauty – perhaps a treasured, valuable and unique Chinese hanging. Someone who has some knowledge of painting decides to repair or touch it up. Because this person lacks the skills and theoretical insight to do this, his or her effort actually destroys the beauty that the original artist put there. It would not be so bad if the hanging were of a much less quality, but with this especially rare and beautiful piece the unskilled person takes away the beauty which has been created and destroys it by her/his clumsy attempts. At the end of the paragraph, John asks: “Who will succeed in repairing that delicate painting of the Holy Spirit once it is marred by a coarse hand?” (*The Living Flame of Love-B III*, 42; Kavanaugh, 1991: 689). This rhetorical question makes people aware of the danger of doing things and going places where one is not competent. John tells us here that the guide needs to know when he/she has gone as far as one can go in assisting and journeying with this particular person.

The guide needs to be aware of where the Spirit has brought the person. At one point the person finds he/she can no longer meditate or pray in ways that bring some kind of sensory benefit. At this time the person is being brought into contemplation. One feels a deep sense of peace, of being drawn to quiet. There is a sense of peace in simply being open and receptive, doing naught but living in the Presence awaiting the action of the Spirit. Where they might have delighted and loved to meditate or spend time *talking* with God, now they just want to be quiet with God (*The Living Flame of Love III*, 43; Kavanaugh, 1991: 689).

John affirms that such people must be helped to remain in this quiet and serenity and solitude, which John calls a “lonely idleness” This must be the prime concern of the guide at this time. However, John tells us that some guides refuse to do that. This is type of guide he describes as “a blacksmith [who] knows no more than how to hammer and pound with the faculties.” (*The Living Flame of Love-B III*, 43; Kavanaugh, 1991: 690). Such a guide thinks the person is just being lazy or slipping back into a non-interest in prayer and things spiritual. So, he/she demands the person go against their will, their inclination and forces them to meditate. The guide sometimes will even tell them to force their wills to make acts of love. All this goes against the work of the Holy Spirit. These actions of such a fellow journeyer show how he/she is not aware of one’s own abilities or lack thereof.

John reminds us that a good guide “is one who knows and understands the various stages of prayer.” (*The Living Flame of Love-B III*, 44; Kavanaugh, 1991: 690). For John the Spirit now leads the person to deeper and deeper levels which may have begun with meditation and

reflection, imagination and speaking. Ultimately these are meant to be left behind as the only form of prayer. He says: "In contemplation, the activity of the senses and of discursive reflection terminates, and God alone is the agent who then speaks secretly to the solitary and silent soul" (*The Living Flame of Love-B*, III, 44; Kavanaugh, 1991: 690). Moving back distracts the person from living in the secret gifts God gives at this time. Here, John says something strikingly simple: "If those who have reached the end of their journey continue to walk in order to reach the end, they will necessarily move away from that end, besides doing something ridiculous" (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 44; Kavanaugh, 1991: 690). In essence, the person needs to remain in this quiet and serenity while the guide empowers the person to do just that if the guide is indeed one who knows what he/she does in the process.

2) The Spirit of God is the principal agent. (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 46; Kavanaugh, 1991: 691-692)

As guides or those who accompany others on their spiritual journey, John would tell us we have been chosen to journey with this person precisely because of who we are. Our personality, our ability, our very being is just what the person needs at this time. And we must remember that it is a mutual affair. We need them too for somehow they are meant to be part of our own journey as well. Reflecting that we are instruments and not the main impetus we become more aware of the need to listen to the movement within the other which is the Spirit. So, the guide for John becomes one who listens and empowers the person to hear and follow the voice of God. This he/she does not necessarily by telling the person directly what should be done so much as helping the person to see it for her/himself through a variety of means.

The Spirit moves, works within each person as well as within the guide that both may discover the depth to which the Spirit calls them both. So the guide needs to remember that the process opens her/himself too to the wonder of the Spirit. She remains the Real Guide and Light whose work is unseen. This is one of the absolutes which John consistently affirms in his works and his life as he speaks of or acts as a guide for another on the journey to union with God.

3) The Holy Spirit's Movement is to Union through Faith and the Law of God

The guide journeys with one through faith and the law of God as John says. The movement, change and constant conversion to which each is called is accomplished through Faith. Even when God seems non-

existent or absent this Faith maintains the relationship. To risk and let go of all for God requires such a faith: a loving trust in the Goodness and Love of God. To act in Christian growth and life means to believe, to trust our God constantly and always. The blindness of Faith at times seems that one is on a road to darkness rather than light. It is indeed a Dark Night. However, John reminds the guide that it is this affirmation of loving Trust that ultimately brings about the light filled union.

If the guide is to journey well with another on the path of continuous development and growth through Faith there is a second element that goes hand in hand with it: the Law of God, What is that Law of God? One might think first of laws and commandments. However what John talks about here is the law of God which is nothing other than Love: Love of one's fellow human beings and love of our God. In this law of Love nothing therefore is excluded. Faith if it is to be real and productive must be more than simply trusting. It must be a loving trust. That is to say it must be a trust that is active and outgoing, compassionate and compassioning. It is a trust which moves the individual and the community into fuller concern and love for each other. It is a love which is incarnated fully. It is God's all inclusive, all embracing love that each person is meant to enflesh. This is the law of God which the guide enables a person to see and choose. Being aware of this the guide must also be aware of the individual he/she journeys with in a special way.

4) The Spirit leads each person according to their sacred story

The guide helps each one to union "according to the spirit given by God to each one." This is a statement of individual concern that God has and the respect God shows each person. Each of us has a story, a background which constitutes the person we are. Because of the deep rooted sensibility John has for each person, he realizes that there can be no one way in which each and every person must act. There are a variety of persons in life and there are a variety of ways to union according to their sacred story. There must be the freedom for each one to be and to become who they are in God. This is one of the most beautiful things about the spirit of Carmelite spirituality – a respect for and concern for the individuality of each within the whole process of the journey to God.

5) The path on which God leads the other

John says it clearly: "Thus the whole concern of the directors should not be to accommodate souls [persons] to their own method and condition, but they should observe the road along which God is leading one; if

they do not recognize it, they should leave the soul [person] alone and not bother it." (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 46; Kavanaugh, 1991:691).

Some guides want each person to follow the way which the guide wants and which is his/her way. So, thinking they know best, they tend to force the person into the little "box" of the guide's own way of doing and thinking. However, John reminds us here that the guide is to watch, observe any patterns which seem to be there or are developing. Thus the guide will be listening carefully to the Spirit's call and challenge to the person. In doing this, the guide will move away from his/her own preconceived plan and help the person see where the Spirit wishes to move one. If the guide is unsure, then the best action, John tells us, is simply to accompany the person and be there with encouragement and affirmation. Or the guide should perhaps recognize her/his abilities to go further have ended and suggest someone else to journey with the person.

6) The Guide is to enable the person to enter into solitude, quiet and freedom

At this stage of deepening union with God the role of the guide is not to give absolute directions. Rather, through questions or other means the guide assists the person to hear God speaking and leading one onward. The guide "should strive to conduct it [the person] into greater solitude, tranquility, and freedom of spirit" (*The Living Flame of Love-B*, 46; Kavanaugh, 1991: 691). It is important for us to note that John is not talking about physical solitude and silence. Rather, he is speaking of solitude of heart and tranquility of the heart. What is most important here is the state of being where the person is open to God, undisturbed by concerns, anxieties, and wants.

If a person is filled with various concerns and worries, the person is bound to be occupied with these and not God. The whole of one's attention will be turned to those things and they become unable to hear, see, or be with God here and now in this sacred moment of life with God. Their being – both physical and spirit – is often taken up by a variety of things and desires. All these things may hinder one from being able to see and hear the path which God proposes to the person and thus cannot go on. We all know and experience this being preoccupied with a variety of things, even spiritual things such as prayer and pleasure in prayer. During these times we become so taken that we devote all our time to them while leaving God aside, thinking we are being truly holy and devoted to God.

What is needed is that we allow ourselves to be freed from all that holds us down and keeps us away from a quiet being with God in

which we can hear this God. The guide assists in freeing people of all things which so captivate them that the real thread of life which is the journey to God can be seen, felt, and followed. God alone is to be the central focus. So for John the guide disencumbers the person from any and all things hindering the person from full growth into God on this path. There are some situations that cannot change – caring for a sick partner or elderly parents – which tax us with worries and fatigue. So, here the guide helps the person move into a tranquility that enables the person to find God in the solitude of one's heart even here in this concrete experience of concern. How the guide does this depends upon the person before him/her and the best approach to enable the person to enter into that peace and quiet of heart with God.

John speaks of a renunciation of temporal or corporeal things and the dispossession of spiritual things. This means God calls the person to let go of all things as *their possessions* and be free to live, love and be in the world. One is called to move in trust and love. The person is both of the earth and of heaven. However, he/she does not possess any of it, nor allows oneself to be dominated by it. The guide helps the person to let go but not to hate or destroy. Rather he/she will help the person to let reality be what it is meant to be and thus enable oneself and the whole of creation to be fully who and what we are intended to be in God's loving plan of wholeness. Everything is part of our journey with and to God. We are to hate nothing. We are to see all in its beauty as God's creation and indeed as God's gift to each one in their story of Love.

This whole paragraph *The Living Flame of Love-B III, 46* is a re-iteration of the basic position of John of the Cross: that all persons are ultimately to let go of their possessiveness and domination in order for all to be living fully this divine-human life now and forever. The Nothing which is so important for John of the Cross is in fact the freedom to live and to be as God has created them, always in God who remains in and yet beyond all. On the summit of the Mt Carmel drawing, he wrote *Nothing, Nothing, Nothing...* This is the summit of our ultimate freedom where we find a full and free relationship with God in which we are neither possessed nor possess. God is the ultimate and infinite freedom (Nothing) and we are being brought to live this divine life which is this ultimate Freedom: Nothing.

7) Guide is aware that God takes care of the person

In the final section of this paragraph #46 John tells us that once we have done all we can God will do the rest. The following sentence is a constant encouragement to the person involved in the process. "It is

impossible that God fail to do His part by communicating himself to it, [the person] at least silently and secretly" (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 46; Kavanaugh, 1991:691). God will come and give the Godself to all even if one does not consciously sense it. Here John affirms the constancy and the ever-present Love of God for each and every person. Nothing indeed can separate one from the Love of God – both God's Love for us and our love for God. Even if the person feels he/she at times lets go of God, God never lets go of the person.

Just as he had said in the beginning of this paragraph that the Holy Spirit was not neglectful of persons, in closing he returns to the same theme of divine care and Love for all: "God who is watching over Israel does not doze (Ps 121:4) or still less, sleep, will enter the soul [person] that is empty, and fill it with divine goods" (*The Living Flame-B*, III, 46; Kavanaugh, 1991: 691-692).

John wants the person and the guide to be aware of God's constant loving presence in which they both live and find the fullness of their being.

8) The Guide prepares the Person for God's Work

The whole of paragraph 47, *The Living Flame of Love-B* III (Kavanaugh, 191: 692) remains a paragraph of *grace*. God's love and work in the person brings the person to a depth of union with God which God has always desired. The one who accompanies the person has the role of enabling the person to let go and remain in emptiness in expectation of God's filling presence. John reminds all that everything is truly from God who touches each one deeply, caresses us with incredible love which makes the person whole in total openness to God.

The guide allows the person to be open to God and God's way. She/he becomes more and more supportive as the person moves through the various stages especially those of darkness. It is then that the guide becomes God's grace. We all come to realize that deepening union with God comes about by God's movement in us not by our actions. Thus, at the end of this paragraph, John says: "not doing anything... it is accomplishing a great deal by doing nothing" (*The Living Flame of Love-B* III, 47; Kavanaugh, 1991: 692). The guide knows more and more clearly that there is a point when God accomplishes that union. It happens only when the time is ripe, that is in God's time, not ours.

Both the guide and the person are to listen carefully to God's special presence and not let any desires or acts get in the way of God's action. What is absolutely essential in the journey to union is surrender to God alone in utter trust.

Conclusion

The whole thrust of St. John of the Cross's approach to spiritual accompaniment opens a way of deep, personal relationship with God who remains the true Guide. God is constantly seeking each person with a deep desire for that oneness. This means that on the journey God is the principal Agent. God does all in the process even if God engages the one who accompanies and the one in whom the process is centered. God loves the particular person with their whole story in which God finds nothing to be wasted. Respecting all that one is God comes and relates with the person in the best way which is most suitable to the individual treasure the person is. John wants us to keep in mind that God not only acts in the process, but loves and longs for all. God's longing for all is a longing for total oneness with all. With this focus both guide and the person on the way find the sure way of wholeness.

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