

## Desire in John of the Cross

Jean Evans, RSM

Mercy Center, Burlingame, California, USA

---

### *Abstract*

In religious circles at times desire is vilified and considered a stumbling block on the path towards perfection. However, John of the Cross speaks of the need of enkindling of desire, rather than its suppression. According to him through directing and purifying our desire we can attain remarkable experiences of a God who loves persons so much as to make them equals in love. John clearly and precisely demarcates dangers and hazards on the path of pursuing one's desires. The path towards the ultimate union with God demands a progressive detachment and non-possessiveness of the ungodly. A holy desire is works like an internal propeller that helps the individual not to get stuck on the way towards perfection. A continuous purification of possessions is experienced as a dark night for the souls in progress. John's reaction against attachment to visions and all extraordinary phenomenon of religious experience is explained not only by his temperament, but also by his context: illuminism.

### **Introduction**

Many centuries ago, an African Christian wrote, "The life of a Christian is in fact an exercise of holy desire."<sup>1</sup> It is the growth and exercise of holy desire that is the focus of much of the writing of John of the Cross. He, like Augustine and the psalmists before him, understood that holy desire prepares one for the ultimate goal of union with God (LF 3,26).<sup>2</sup>

- 
- 1 St. Augustine quoted in *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*. 1998. Silver Spring, Maryland: Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 784.
  - 2 The works of John of the Cross are abbreviated as follows: *Living Flame of Love*, LF; *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ASC; *Spiritual Canticle*, SC; *Dark Night of the Soul*, DN; *Sayings of Light and Love*, SLL.

The themes of desire for union and purification of desire are evident throughout the writings of John of the Cross. The purpose of this article is to show how holy desire and union with God are related to each other at various stages of our spiritual journey.

St. John of the Cross tries to establish several things about desire for God. His first affirmation is that it actually originates from God. "O Lord, my God," he writes, "who will seek you with simple and pure love, and not find that you are all one can desire, for you show yourself first and go out to meet those who seek you?" (SLL, No. 2, 85). According to John God initiates, ("you will show yourself first") and sustains the relationship. John writes on this point in the *Living Flame of Love*, "...when you of your own power have the desire for God, your desire amounts to no more than a natural appetite; neither will it be anything more until God informs it supernaturally" (LF 3, 75). Secondly, purification of desire is an absolutely necessary means to re-order one's appetites and bring them into alignment with one's most authentic desire. "A person has only one will and if that is encumbered or occupied by anything, the person will not possess the freedom, solitude and purity requisite for divine transformation" (ASC 1, 11, 6). Thirdly, as one nears union with God, God actually increases the intensity of a soul's desire. In this excerpt from the *Spiritual Canticle*, John writes that the bridegroom (who is God) revealed "some deep glimpses of his divinity and beauty by which he greatly increased (the bride's) fervor and desire to see him" (SC 11,1). Lastly, John believes deeply in God's desire for union with individuals and in their ability to engage God in a mutually benefiting relationship, as astounding as this may seem. "Return to me," the bridegroom says in the *Spiritual Canticle*, "for I am he whom you, wounded with love, seek. For I, too, like the stag wounded by your love, begin to reveal myself to you in your high contemplation and *I am refreshed<sup>3</sup> and renewed in the love that arises from your contemplation*" (SC 13, 2).

Within this context we can see that the desire for union with God is crucial in John's writings. Desire is vital and takes precedence over and gives direction to activities aimed at its purification. The process of purification of desire re-orders the "passions" (emotions) as John describes them: joy, hope, fear, and sorrow now directed toward one end - the desire for union with God. This union with God is possible only through love (Stein, 1960:66). God's love purifies and transforms the appetites and desires. The outcome of this process is divinization.

---

3 Italics mine. Text indicates mutuality.

Welch puts it this way, “For John of the Cross this experience of his transformed desire was itself a participation in God, an experience of divinization” (Welch, 1990:65). In John’s view divinization is the goal of human life and is the fruit of God’s desire.

### Advice to Beginners

We turn our attention now to John’s treatment of the two themes of desire for God and purification of desire in relationship to the stages of development in the ascent to the mount of God. Let us consider first John’s advice to beginners. Here the task is the re-ordering of the affective life or what can be called *active purification of the senses*. This process is dealt with primarily in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Muto writes: “What we are pacifying again is the *passion* for or the *inordinate attachment* to satisfactions that are self-centered; expectations that are willful; anxieties rooted in our search for security; and depressions due to lack of control when things do not go our way” (Muto, 1991:33-34).

Working to re-order one’s appetites and desires is essential because of the nature of desire. Dubay notes that “desires beget desires. They whet the appetite as crumbs do a famished person. Or, like the saint says, ‘they are like restless children always whining after their mother’...” (1989:40). In his book on the writings of John of the Cross, Iain Matthew calls these wayward desires “blockages” to the inflowing of God (1995:39). Again, John, an astute observer of human nature, notes that “the more objects there are dividing an appetite, the weaker becomes the appetite for each” (1995:39). When desire is out of order, it causes all the symptoms of desolation - fatigue, confusion, anxiety, a sense of guilt and inability to do anything about it and diminishes the desire for union with God (1995:41).

Those who begin the way of prayer and contemplation must be clear about their purpose: “If you desire that devotion be born in your spirit and that the love of God and the desire for divine things increase, cleanse your soul of every desire, attachment, and ambition in such a way that you have no concern about anything” (SLL, No. 78, 91). Be focused on the love of God, John tells beginners in the spiritual journey, and let every other desire or attachment fall away.

In sixteenth century Spain, there was an “unrestrained infatuation with ecstasy and other extraordinary phenomena,” as Kavanaugh writes (1989:73). People were looking for spiritual experiences. In some way swoons and ecstatic experiences were considered “indicators”

of holiness. These experiences were, more often than not, only self-inflating. On this point Morel writes: "The reaction of John of the Cross against attachment to visions, and generally, to extraordinary phenomenon of religious experience is explained not only by his temperament, but also by his context: illuminism" (1960:74). John of the Cross instructs strongly against coming to prayer in search of spiritual favors such as visions or locutions. He sees desire of this kind as an exercise in self-love and he warns beginners: "Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and for Christ, desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world" (ASC I, 13, 6).

While much has been made of John's doctrine of "nada" as a means of conquering the appetites, John is very clear that the primary desire must be to find union with God in Christ. "First and foremost is the habitual desire to imitate Christ in all one's deeds" (Muto 1991:32). In the introduction to the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* Kavanaugh and Rodriguez note that beginners are able to enter the active night of the senses if they "study the life of Jesus Christ and imitate him; out of love for him remain empty of any sensory satisfaction that is not purely for the honor and glory of God" (1991:105). In what Morel (1960:202-203) describes as one of the most beautiful texts to be composed, John puts on the lips of the Father these words to those in search of revelations and favors:

If you desire me to answer with a word, behold my Son subject to me and to others out of love for me, and afflicted, and you will see how much he answers you. If you desire me to declare some secret truths or events to you, fix your eyes only on him and you will discern hidden in him the most secret mysteries. (ASC II, 22, 6).

Thus John advises beginners, "This is a venture in which God alone is sought and gained; thus only God *ought* (italics mine) to be sought and gained" (ASC II,7,3). Furthermore, he states emphatically, "souls ought to desire with all their might to attain what in this life could never be known or enter the human heart" (ASC II, 4,6). "Such faith-desire," writes Matthew, "is the dynamo to John's system. When the goal seems impossibly distant, he does not suggest that we settle for something manageable. He (John of the Cross) agrees that it is distant, and says desire will get us there" (1995:33). Desire is not to be shunned, but enkindled. Inevitably, true desire for God will lead to a purified heart, a heart whose thirsts and activities will be united.

**Beyond the Beginnings: Passive Purification of the Senses and Spirit**

In this ensuing passage in the journey, the soul enters the 'dark night', named so because "it does not invade from without, but arises in the interior of the soul and assails only the particular soul in which it appears" (Stein 1960:27). The conversion of human desire, including the transformation of images, is achieved through "this light... so simple, so pure" (DN II, 8,5) and so unintelligible. Welch writes: "The night of the spirit may be understood as a process of self-transcendence in which the person is challenged to surrender to the Mystery of God and to allow the entire psychic structure to be transformed by God's love" (1990:160).

As John describes it, the movement through the beginners' stage is fraught with difficulties and illusions. Beginners, he says, "think that gratifying and satisfying themselves is serving and satisfying God" (DN I, 6,3). Not only that, their desire to feel or taste God as if God is readily accessible and tangible amounts to a very serious imperfection. It is only when God initiates or enkindles what John calls "another better love" will the appetites be quieted (ASC I, 14,2). It is at this point that the soul begins to travel on a dark path with only faith as guide (ASC II,3,6). As St. Edith Stein writes, "Faith is not only a dark night but also a way to the goal the soul desires, that is, union with God" (1960:40).

The person begins to enter the *passive night of the senses*. "Strengthened somewhat by the consolations obtained from meditation, the beginner is now ready for a dramatically new phase of the mystical life" (Egan 1984:177). This new phase is characterized by a prayer that is arid and bitter and yet profoundly life-giving (1984:177) because through it, God in "denuding the senses... transfers His goods and strengths from sense to spirit" (DN I, 9, 4). Through the experience of this prayer, God begins to "strip the will of old cravings and satisfactions" (ASC I, 5,7). God purifies desires, humbles the soul, leads the person to freedom of spirit, and protects her from evil (1960:37).

At the same time, God begins a curative process in the soul. This is what Carmelite author Iain Matthew calls "healing darkness."<sup>4</sup> On this same theme of healing, John of the cross says of the passive purgation of the dark night, "God will heal them (souls) of what through their own efforts they were unable to remedy in order to bring them to the perfection of love in divine union" (DN I,3,3). What God begins in the person is achieved through the gifts of faith to the understanding, hope to the memory, and love to the will (1960:42). In fact, these foundational virtues of faith, hope and love sustain people who may wish to run away from the dryness of this healing night. The saint intimates that they are like

4 See the whole chapter "Healing Darkness" in Matthew's book, 72-85 for a very readable treatment of the dark night.

spoiled children and need to mature: "Such an attitude is not the hallmark of self-denial and nakedness of spirit but the indication of a spiritual sweet tooth" (ASC II,7,2). And other people will still seek themselves in God, as John says, "looking for caresses and consolations of God."

In this part of the journey, God takes on the task of purification, weaning people away from "gratifications and delights" (DN I,8,5). During this time, John writes, they must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him" (DN I,10,4). Later on, in the dark night of the spirit, they are purged of their imperfections and weaknesses by God's "divine spiritual light" (DN II, 8, 4) that seems like darkness. However, at this time God will begin to enkindle a flame within the person: "At times this flame and enkindling increase to such an extent that the soul desires God with urgent longings of love" (DN II, 11,1). It may happen, John continues, that these longings increase so intensely that the persons begin to feel "that their bones are drying up in this thirst of love," a living thirst for God.

Significantly, as God touches or wounds the soul, all the desires that previously distracted or deflected the person's glance and energies are "recollected in this burning of love" (DN II, 11,5). It is as if God brings into one place all the "captives" and runaways by this touch of love. However, this burning of love afflicts the soul "with desire and anxiety of love in the innermost parts of the spirit" (DN II, 11, 7). Through this process, the soul is led up the ladder of love and becomes indifferent - "in no way seeks consolation or satisfaction either in God or in anything else; neither does it desire or ask favors of God" (DN II, 19, 4). As the soul ascends the ladder of love, the fifth step imparts to the soul an impatient longing for God, an intense desire for the Beloved.

The experience articulated in the *Spiritual Canticle* is "the story of the heart seeking fulfillment, and experiencing a graciousness which is in accord with its deepest desires" (1990:175). The *Spiritual Canticle* depicts the mystical betrothal and spiritual marriage of the soul with God. The task of purifying desire is achieved by God's wounding love that "drives the contemplative away from self-love and disordered love of creatures" (1984:193). Not only does God re-orient the person's desires, but the divine touches of God bestow a deep experience of the Trinity.

At the same time these touches of God create an intense longing for union with the Beloved. In answer to this longing, the soul is told to seek and find the Beloved within: "Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection with him, for you have him so close to you. Desire

him there, adore him there" (SC 1, 8). In this state of love, the bride experiences herself desiring complete union with the Beloved, Christ. "Since she lives with that driving force of a fathomless desire for union with God, any delay whatever is very burdensome and disturbing" (SC 17, 1). In fact, she is dying with the desire to see him (SC 11, 1). John says that the ardor of longing creates incredible pain in the soul who experiences herself to the one who is not yet given to her (SC 12, 9). Once more, her desire is absolutely focused: she "surrenders herself wholly to him in the desire to be totally his and never to possess in herself anything other than him" (SC 27, 6).

At the end of the poem of the *Spiritual Canticle*, it is clear that there is "only one thing left for her to desire: perfect enjoyment of God in eternal life" (SC 36, 2). Once the union is complete, the bride desires "to employ herself in those things proper to love" - to receive the joy and savor of love, to become like the Beloved (transformation into his beauty), and to look closely and know the things and secrets of the Beloved himself" (SC 36, 3). Her desires focus on the Beloved who wants to reveal to her the secrets of the mysteries of God (SC 1, 10).

*The Living Flame of Love* shows that the outcome of a deep and intense union with God rendered through the transforming action of grace is, as Welch puts it, "a consonance of desires." "What you desire me to ask for, I ask for; and what you do not desire, I do not desire, nor can I, nor does it enter my mind to desire it" (1990: 48). The faculties of intellect, will, and memory are afflicted by intense thirst, hunger, and yearning for the possession of God who has created this capacity for infinite longing within them. "During the time of the betrothal and expectation of marriage," John writes, "the anointings of the Spirit... make the soul relish him and desire God even more, a desire that prepares for union" (LF 3, 26). And when the soul desires God fully, it then possesses God (LF 3, 23).

## Conclusion

It is true to say that in the pilgrimage of this life, the Christian person moves along steadily when the motivation is "holy desire," as Augustine taught. John refines the teaching for us and allows us to hear God saying in us: "Fasten your eyes on him [Christ] alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all, and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire (ASC II, 22, 5). This activity of fixing one's gaze on Christ not only purifies desires but also unifies and orders them. Desire for union with God is primary. With that in first place, all other desires take their rightful position. And the unexpected result - the

kindling of desire, rather than its suppression - leads to an even more remarkable experience of a God who loves persons so much as to make them equals in love (SC 32, 6).

### References

- Dubay, T. 1989. *The fire within*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.
- Egan, H. 1984. *Christian mysticism. The future of a tradition*. NY: The Pueblo Publishing Company.
- Kavanaugh, K, "Spanish sixteen century: Carmel and surrounding movements" in Dupré and Salier, *Christian spirituality*, III. London: SCM Press.
- Kavanaugh, K and Rodriguez, O. 1991. *The collected works of St. John of the Cross*. Washington, DC: ICS Publications.
- Matthew, I. 1995 *The impact of God. Soundings from St. John of the Cross*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Morel, G. 1960. *Le sens de l'existence selon S. Jean de la croix*. I. Paris: Aubier.
- Muto, S. 1991. *John of the Cross for today. The Ascent*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.
- Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, 1998. *Morning and evening prayer*. Silver Spring, MD: Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas.
- Stein, E. 1960. *The science of the cross. A study of St. John of the Cross*. Eds. Trans. Gelber, L. and Leuven, R. London: Burns and Oates.
- Welch, J. 1990. *When gods die. An introduction to John of the Cross*. NY: Paulist Press.