

## John of the Cross --

Consider the backdrop: The Reformation (1517 - ) and The Inquisition (1478-1834)

John of the Cross (1542-1591) met Teresa of Ávila(1515-1582) when she was fifty-two years old, John was a newly ordained Carmelite priest at twenty-five. John was planning to join the Carthusians and become a hermit, but Teresa asked him to join her instead in reforming the Carmelites. Teresa and John shared a rich friendship and correspondence.

Both of them are rooted in the mainstream of the mystical traditions of the Church. Teresa read Bernardo de Laredo and Francisco de Osuna, while John of the Cross was familiar with Dionysius and the *Institutions* attributed to Tauler[a disciple of Meister Eckhart and Dominican], and they both can be placed in that current of mysticism that stretches from the Scriptures to Clement of Alexandria and Origen to Gregory of Nyssa, and from Dionysius to the Victorines and the mystics of the Rhine. The originality of these great Carmelite saints should not be looked for in some kind of departure from the Church's mystical heritage, but in their revolutionary expression of this age-old mystical current.

Like Teresa, John believed that Infinite Love is the architect of our hearts, and we are made in such a way that nothing less than an infinite union with Infinite Love will do. Love is our origin and our destiny. Creative love sustains us breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. John writes:

“God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By this union He [supports] their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist.

Consequently, in discussing union with God, we are **not discussing the substantial union** that is always existing **but the soul's union with and transformation in God**. This latter union is not always existing, but we find it only where there is likeness of love. We will call it “the union of likeness”; and the former, “the essential or substantial union.” The union of likeness is supernatural [meaning graced or given]; but the substantial union, natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love.”

One of the operative principles of love is that love does not rest as long as there is an inequality in love. In seeing the beloved down, the lover is moved to lift the beloved up. John says the infinite love of God will not rest until you are equal to God in love. Even though you would be absolutely nothing without God, God will not rest until you are as much God as God is God. God **will not settle for a trace of inequality**. In the “dark night of the soul,” we are weaned away from the ego's finite ideas

and feelings about God. We come to know that no idea about God is God. We are also weaned from our ideas about our self as being a finite, separate self apart from God.

In his writings, John taught about the transition from what he called meditation to contemplation.

By ordinary prayer St. John meant any kind of prayer that we can do by our own efforts aided by God's grace. He called this **meditation**. In it we make use of our natural faculties, that is, our senses, imagination, intellect, memory and will in order to pray. ... for John of the Cross... **meditation** embraces all these kinds of ordinary prayer.

John also gives a precise meaning to the word **contemplation**. It is a kind of prayer that we cannot do whenever we want, for it does not depend on the natural working of the faculties. It is a prayer given by God in the depths of the heart so it is called infused contemplation, or mystical experience. The goal of the Christian life is union with God, and contemplation is a mysterious experience of that union.

There is not a sharp duality here. John describes what one might call a mystical timeline of experience as one traverses the gap between meditation and contemplation. Among the events is the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the soul. Those were periods to be experienced as one moved toward the contemplative union. Like a good teacher, John helps us in our spiritual travel by describing the emotions, the encouragements, and the potential pitfalls of the journey.

For example, in describing the exterior appearance of mystical union, John writes: "The third and surest sign is that this infused contemplation [quietude] is being given to us is that a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God (con atención amorosa a Dios) without particular considerations, in interior peace and quiet and repose, and without the acts and exercises (at least discursive, those in which one progresses from point to point) of the intellect, memory and will, and that he prefers to remain only in that general loving awareness and knowledge (con la atención y noticia general amorosa) we mentioned, without any particular knowledge or understanding."

Quotes here come mainly from *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*. The book is St. John's systematic treatment of the ascetical life in pursuit of mystical union with Christ, giving advice, and reporting on his own experience.

Now jump beyond John's time to the 1680s. Quietism is the name given (especially in Roman Catholic Church theology) to a set of Christian beliefs that rose in popularity in France, Italy, and Spain during the late 1670s and 1680s, were particularly associated with the writings of Father Miguel de Molinos ( Jesuit, 1628-1696)

In the year 1675, Molinos published his most famous work, the *Spiritual Guide*. The initial Spanish edition was quickly followed by an Italian translation. The work was published with the usual approval from the ecclesiastical authorities – the book received the imprimatur from the pope's own theologian. However, the writings of Molinos were condemned as heresy by Pope Innocent XI in the papal bull *Coelestis Pastor* of 1687. The "Quietist" heresy was seen to consist of wrongly elevating "contemplation" over "meditation", intellectual stillness over vocal prayer, and interior passivity over pious action in an account of mystical prayer, spiritual growth and union with God . As a result of the bull, Father Molinos was condemned to life in prison where he died in 1696.

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) George Fox (1624-1691). John of the Cross canonized in 1726.

Quietism was also influenced by the thought of St. Francis de Sales (1567 – 1622) with his emphasis on pure love resulting from spiritual practice.

The notions underlying Quietism influenced George Fox (1624 – 1691) who subsequently founded the Quakers.

John of the Cross was canonized in 1726.