

## Merton's Understanding of the Mystical Doctrine of Saint John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul

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GENERALLY SPEAKING, ST JOHN OF THE CROSS HAS OFTEN BEEN PORTRAYED by Sanjuanist scholars as a strict ascetic who had a great propensity for mortification. As Helmut A. Hatzfeld noted, St John of the Cross "became famous especially because of his emphasis on the bitter periods in the mystical life, which he calls with an unforgettable symbol, *La noche oscura del alma* (*The Dark Night of the Soul*)."<sup>1</sup>

The rigid asceticism represented by John's doctrinaires is no longer accurate, for it is difficult to reconcile the 'masochistic' interpretation of the *via dolorosa*, which accepts suffering as the only salvable way to God, with the incarnational Christian doctrine of the religion of Jesus in the Gospels as well as with John's life events, his mystical doctrine, and his sublime poetry.

Thomas Merton was an avid reader of John's works and the Carmelite saint never stopped influencing his life. As a matter of fact, a relic of the saint was found among Merton's few possessions after his untimely death in Bangkok in 1968. Merton's commentaries on St John of the Cross are refreshing and emphasize the need to re-evaluate the Sanjuanist mystical doctrine of the "dark night of the soul."

Let me first point to the Sanjuanist influence on Thomas Merton. In my research I discovered that Merton's passionate love for St John of the Cross resulted in mixed feelings. As Peter France put it, "the contradictions in the life of Thomas Merton produced the tensions that enriched his creativity."<sup>2</sup>

Merton purchased the first volume of Allison Peers' English translation of St John of the Cross' *Collected Works* in New York. Merton mentioned it in his best-seller:

So at great cost I bought the first volume of the *Works* of St John of the Cross and sat in the room on Perry Street and turned over the first pages, underlining places here and there with a pencil. But it turned out that it would take more than that to make me a saint: because these words I underlined, although they amazed and dazzled me with their import, were all too simple for me to understand. They were too naked, too stripped of all duplicity and compromise for my complexity, perverted by many appetites. However, I am glad that I was at least able to recognize them, obscurely, as worthy of the greatest respect.<sup>3</sup>

In an early study (written about 1948), an essay entitled 'Transforming Union in St Bernard and St John of the Cross,' Merton made the following comment on St John of the Cross:

Perhaps there is no other mystical writer who has ever set such high standards in the spiritual life as St John of the Cross.<sup>4</sup>

In 1950, Merton considered St John of the Cross to be one of the greatest as well as the safest mystical theologians God has given to His Church...<sup>5</sup>

In 1951, Merton dedicated a whole book to the study of St John of the Cross, in *The Ascent to Truth*. He tried to integrate the dogmatic theology of Thomism with the Sanjuanist mystical theology, but he felt uneasy with the dry theology of the scholastics. In a letter dated June 20, 1964, Merton claimed that this book

...is my wordiest and in some ways emptiest book...it is a book about which I have doubts. I think the material in it may be fairly good, but it is not my kind of book, and in writing it, I was not fully myself."<sup>6</sup>

Merton viewed St John of the Cross as the culmination of the long Christian mystical tradition of the Desert Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, and all the other medieval mystics. He wrote:

Saint John of the Cross is the leader of the 'apophatic' theologians, the teachers of the 'dark' knowledge of God. He completes and fulfills the tradition of the greatest contemplatives among the Greek Fathers—Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who really founded the apophatic school; Evagrius Ponticus, and Saint Maximus. But what is much more important, he avoids all the ambiguities and exaggerations inherent in Patristic mysticism, and he does so by basing his whole doctrine upon the solid foundation of Thomism, which he acquired at the University of Salamanca.<sup>7</sup>

In 1952, Merton wrote in *Saints for Now* that St John of the Cross is the most accessible of the saints, that is only another way of saying that he is my favorite saint—together with three others who also seem to me most approachable: St Benedict, St Bernard, and St Francis of Assisi.<sup>8</sup>

In the same year, Merton paid homage to St John of the Cross by calling him

the patron of contemplatives in the strict sense, and of their spiritual directors, not of contemplatives in the juridical sense.<sup>9</sup>

Merton acknowledged that not all monks are contemplatives in the strict sense for only a few have received God's mystical graces. Merton welcomed St John of the Cross' definition of contemplation found in the *Dark Night I*, 10.6. when he said:

For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and loving inflow of God, which if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love.<sup>10</sup>

In 1953, Merton wrote:

...But those who have made the acquaintance of St John of the Cross will find that practically everything that is said about contemplative prayer follows from lines laid down by the Spanish Carmelite.<sup>11</sup>

Merton made no claim to be either 'revolutionary' or 'original.' Merton saw his work in conformity with the Catholic mystical tradition where Saint John of the Cross stands as the 'Mystical Doctor' of the Church.

Around the same year, Merton dedicated two more essays to the Carmelite saint in *Disputed Questions*, warning the reader that in order to understand the "sanctity and Doctrine of St John of the Cross" we must place his life and writings under the light of the biblical tradition and that of the central mystery of the cross. He said:

In this way, we will be preserved from the danger of giving the writings of the Carmelite Doctor a kind of stoical bias which makes his austerity seem pointlessly inhuman, and which, instead of opening our hearts to divine grace, closes them in upon themselves in fanatical rigidity.<sup>12</sup>

In 1964, Merton, in a letter to a priest, told him that in the past he has been "much more inclined to that kind of 'contemplation' which looks into the ground of one's being, the Rhenish tradition, John of the Cross, etc." And he made the following assertion:

My personal vocation tends to be solitary and reflective, but one learns over a period of years to go beyond the limits of a narrow and subjective absorption in one's own 'interiority.'<sup>13</sup>

In 1965, Merton wrote:

...it is in this tradition itself – in St Thomas, St John of the Cross, the Greek and Latin Fathers – that I find the strongest warrant for this immediate and direct access to God in everyday Christian life, which is to be regarded not merely as a moral preparation for a heavenly existence but, as St Thomas said, the very beginning of eternal life, *inchoatio vitae aeterna*.<sup>14</sup>

In 1968, Merton went even further in his definition of "dark" contemplation when he said that

contemplation is not a deepening of experience only, but a radical change in one's way of being and living, and the essence of this change is precisely a liberation from dependence on external means to external ends.<sup>15</sup>

Now we need to trace what Merton had to say about St John of the Cross' mystical doctrine of "the dark night of the soul." Merton wrote at the end of his life that John is regarded as

a life-denying and world-hating ascetic when in reality his mysticism superabounds in love, vitality, and joy.<sup>16</sup>

For some readers, the "dark night" means turning away from all created and sensible things at the expense of excluding fraternal union and our love for the world. For Thomas Merton, "this is bad theology and bad asceticism."<sup>17</sup>

Merton suggested that the real purpose of St John of the Cross' ascetic work is to empty the soul of all that is not God, to clear it of all images and of all attachments to the things of the world

so that it may be clean and pure to receive the obscure light of God's own presence. The soul must be stripped of all its selfish desires for natural satisfactions.<sup>18</sup>

John's mystical theology has, therefore, a twofold "dialectical" movement: that of letting go of all the egotistical desires (*kenosis*) and that of letting God be God in us (*pleroma*). The former path is known as the apophatic way (or the *via negativa*), by which one affirms by way of negation and by radically detaching from all that obstructs the human soul to reach the Divine so the soul is totally naked before God in faith. John's notion of *la Nada* is the equivalent of what mystical theologians called *kenosis*, or self-negation in Christ. The

latter path is the cataphatic way (or the *via positiva*), by which one affirms God's attributes after one has gained direct knowledge from a living encounter with the Divine. John's notion of *el Todo* is the equivalent of what mystical theologians called *pleroma*, or self-affirmation in Christ. By God's grace the human soul is divinized.

Merton summarized in a nutshell his mystical theology in the following passage:

One of the greatest paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love.<sup>19</sup>

Merton identified the Sanjuanist "dark night of the soul" with such expressions as "poverty of spirit" and "dark, pure and naked faith." The Spanish Carmelite, referring to this contemplative purgation, wrote in the *Dark Night II*, 4.1.2.:

Poor, abandoned, unsupported by any of the apprehensions of my soul...left to darkness in pure faith, which is a dark night for these natural faculties, and with my will touched only by sorrows, afflictions, and longings of love of God, I went out from myself. That is, I departed from my low manner of understanding, and my feeble way of loving, and my poor and limited method of finding satisfaction in God...This was great happiness, a sheer grace for me, because through the annihilation and calming of my faculties, passions, appetites, and affections, by which my experience and satisfaction in God were base, I went out from my human operation and way of acting to God's operation and way of acting.<sup>20</sup>

John's ascetico-mysticism placed the symbol of the "dark night" in the context of the mystery of the cross where the old self dies as a sign of death to the egotistical desires and the new self is reborn in Christ as a sign of life and resurrection in this life. Thomas Merton argued that

The purpose of the dark night, as St John of the Cross shows, is not simply to punish and afflict the heart of man, but to liberate, to purify and to enlighten in perfect love. The way that leads through dread goes not to despair but to perfect joy, not to hell but to heaven.<sup>21</sup>

Merton clearly understood that the symbol of the "dark night" can be interpreted in different ways. Merton made the following observation:

Just as Saint Gregory of Nyssa takes Moses through three stages in his ascent to God, so Saint John of the Cross divides his night into three [See *Ascent*, I, 2.5. Peers tr., vol. 1, pp. 20-21, 66-69]:

These three parts of the night are all one night; but like night itself, it has three parts. For the first part, which is that of the sense, is comparable to the beginning of night, the point at which things begin to fade from sight. And the second part, which is faith, is comparable to midnight, which is total darkness. And the third part is like the close of the night: which is God, the part which is near to the light of the day.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, the "dark night" of St John of the Cross is the moment in which the human soul meets God at the deepest center of the soul. The goal of the mystical union is achieved when the human soul is fully transformed in God. This is the highest degree of perfection that one can reach in this life. The image of the activity of fire that has penetrated the wood, transformed it so inwardly that now "...it is not merely united to this fire but produces within it a living flame."<sup>23</sup> The divine fire thereby does not consume the human soul for it "...never kill[s] unless to give life, never wounds unless to heal."<sup>24</sup>

For John, the transformative effect of the divine fire in the whole person

...does not consume and destroy the soul in which it so burns. And it does not afflict it; rather, commensurate with the strength of the love, it divinizes and delights it, burning gently within it.<sup>25</sup>

The fully matured Christian abides and lives in the glory of God forever. Merton put it this way:

To admit, with St John of the Cross, that we encounter God in the "inmost center" (or "ground") of our own being is not to deny His personality but to affirm it more forcefully than ever, for He is also, precisely, the cause of our own personality and it is in response to His love that our freedom truly develops to personal maturity... In the personal mystical experience of St John of the Cross, God was known as "unknown," and the All was attained as "Nothingness" (*Nada*)... Only those with a certain experience of the life of faith are able to apprehend these paradoxical statements without misinterpreting them as "atheism" or "pantheism."<sup>26</sup>

Merton saw that the Sanjuanist ascetico-mystical doctrine aimed at "an ideal balance of the human and the divine." He said:

Just as we can never separate asceticism from mysticism, so in St John of the Cross we find darkness and light, suffering and joy, sacrifice and love united together so closely that they seem at times to be identified.

It is not so much that we come through darkness to light, as that the darkness itself is light... Hence the essential simplicity of his teaching: enter into the night and you will be enlightened. 'Night' means the 'darkening' of all our natural desires, our natural understanding, our human way of loving; but this darkening brings with it an enlightenment... The 'darkness' which St John teaches is not a pure negation. Rather it is the removal and extinguishing of a lesser light in order that pure light may shine in its place.<sup>27</sup>

For Merton, the Sanjuanist apophatic mysticism of the "dark night" does not end in nihilism but rather ends with John's mysticism of love. The Sanjuanist mystical doctrine of the "dark night of the soul" does not imply a pure negation but rather the highest expression of light, love and truth. God is encountered in the "dark night" because there is no-thing to see. God is not an object. God is beyond any concept or vision whatsoever. Paradoxically speaking, mystics often describe their experimental and sapiential knowledge of God as a mystical vision, a vision of God. As Merton put it,

The mystical night is not a mere night, absence of light. It is a night which is sanctified by the presence of an invisible light... The night of faith has brought us into contact with the Object of all faith, not as an object but as a Person Who is the center and life of our own being, at once His own transcendent Self and the immanent source of our own identity and life.<sup>28</sup>

We are able perhaps to understand why the late Merton still adores St John of the Cross, and comes back to the Carmelite saint time after time, but "now in light of a mature knowledge," as he questions:

If I would now go to Spain and see those stones for instance at Segovia  
And see those spaces (Castilla la-viega).  
Drink some of that wine feel some of that sun, some of that wind  
Its true raw bite in the spring  
And there read John of the Cross over again  
All in Spanish... Or would the same old wheel keep turning? <sup>29</sup>

#### Notes and References

1. Helmut A. Hatzfeld, *Santa Teresa de Ávila* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), pp. 141-142. Popularly speaking, the Sanjuanist "dark night" is often linked to any kind of suffering. Bob Hohler wrote in *The Boston Globe* an article dated May 1, 1999, entitled "Jackson prays with US soldiers held in Belgrade. Seeks an end to 'dark night.'" The first sentence stated: "They prayed for



morning to come after their 'long, dark night' of captivity." Was Mr Hohler thinking of John's captivity in Toledo?

2. Peter France, *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 190.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 238-239. Later, Merton got the Spanish works of St John of the Cross edited by Fr. Silverio de Santa Teresa which he often consulted when the English translation was not sufficiently clear or the mystical doctrine required a deeper understanding in its native language. On March 20, 1947, he wrote that he began to read the practical counsels of St John of the Cross as a preparation for his "profession" (*The Sign of Jonas*, 40).

4. Thomas Merton, *On Saint Bernard* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980), p. 189.

5. Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1981), p. 55.

6. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation* (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1988), p. 56.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1981), 17. At the end of the book, Merton cited a short biography of the Carmelite saint stating the following: Saint John of the Cross has never been a very popular saint, outside his native Spain. His doctrine is considered 'difficult,' and he demands of others the same uncompromising austerity which he practiced in his own life. Nevertheless, a close study of his doctrine... should prove that Saint John of the Cross had all the balance and prudence and 'discretion' which mark the highest sanctity. He is not a fanatic... In actual practice, Saint John of the Cross was relentlessly opposed to the formalism and inhumanity of those whom he compared to 'spiritual black-smiths,' violently hammering the souls of their victims to make them fit some conventional model of ascetic perfection (pp. 330-331).

8. Thomas McDonnell, *A Thomas Merton Reader* (London: Lamp Press, 1989), p. 291. Merton also called St John of the Cross "one of the greatest and most hidden of the saints, that of all saints he is perhaps the greatest poet as well as the greatest contemplative, and that in his humility he was also most human..." (293). In a letter dated February 9, 1952, to Dom Jean-Baptiste Porion, Merton wrote: "I am happy with St John of the Cross among the rocks" (*The School of Charity*, 33).

In a letter to Sister M. Madeleva written in 1964 Merton said: "But Julian [of Norwich] is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is with Newman the greatest English theologian" (*Seeds of Destruction*, pp. 190-191).

9. Thomas McDonnell, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, 293.

10. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodríguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), p. 382. St John of the Cross' definition goes back to Pseudo-Dionysius when he defined contemplation in the *Mystical Theology* 1.1. as "a ray of darkness." St John of the Cross understands faith as "a dark night" which "it illumines the soul that is in darkness" (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 4.6., 159).

11. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A Dell Book, 1956), p. 10.

12. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: A Mentor-Omega Book, 1965), p. 160.

13. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 222-223. Merton further said: "The contemplative life is not, and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one's back on the world with its sufferings, its crises, its confusions and its errors" (7). Merton saw clearly the dangers of quietism within the monastic life. His definition of contemplation broadened over the years.

14. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 320.

15. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 217.

16. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1968), p. 81.

17. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1990), p. 38.

18. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1985), p. 349.

19. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 40-41.

20. Kavanaugh & Rodríguez, *The Collected Works*, p. 400.

21. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1969), p. 148.

22. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 52. See Kavanaugh & Rodríguez, p. 121.

23. Kavanaugh & Rodríguez, *The Collected Works*, p. 639.

24. Kavanaugh & Rodríguez, *The Collected Works*, p. 663.

25. Kavanaugh & Rodríguez, *The Collected Works*, p. 658.

26. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, pp. 270-271. In *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Boston: Mandala Books, 1980), Merton distinguished the No-thing-ness of the mystic from that of the atheist. He declared that "... As St John of the Cross dared to say in mystical language, the term of the ascent of the mount of contemplation is 'Nothing'—*Y en el monte Nada*. But the difference between the apophatic contemplative and the atheist may be purely negative, that of the contemplative is so to speak negatively positive" (pp. 172-173).

27. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions*, p. 163.

28. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1993), pp. 247-248. Merton had previously asserted that "Our life of 'watching in the night,' of sharing in the resurrection of Christ, which is the very essence of Christianity, the source of all Christian action and the center of Christian contemplation, receives its most perfect liturgical expression in the Paschal Vigil" (p. 238).

29. Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: A New Directions Book, 1979), p. 117. This poem is found in 'The Newsnatch Invention', a notebook that Merton kept holding his latest writings. Merton was attracted to St John of the Cross not only as a mystical theologian and reformer but also as a poet. Merton deeply appreciated John's sublime poetry.