



Monthly Letter of the Carmelite Secular Order

JANUARY 1985.

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Dear Friends in Carmel,

We now move on to consider the spiritual doctrine of St. John of the Cross as outlined in Book Two of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel. This middle section of the book really constitutes a treatise on faith. We may remember that St. John is writing a commentary on his poem 'the Dark Night', and now he is dealing with Stanza 2 which is as follows:

"In darkness hid from sight
I went by secret ladder safe and sure
- Ah! grace of sheer delight! -

So softly veiled by night,
hushed now my house, in darkness and secure."

(Translator; Marjorie Flower OCD.)

This second book of the Ascent then deals with an inner or spiritual purification which concentrates on a person's spiritual nature and its attendant tendencies. We are still in the active night but it is now the active night of the spirit as opposed to the active night of sense with which book one dealt.

We need to remember that St. John had proposed to talk about a 'night of faith' which is dark night to the soul. Faith then is the means by which this second purification is brought about. In the poem cited above, faith is referred to poetically as a 'secret ladder'. For St. John of the Cross, faith understood as a theological virtue is always and ever the 'sure guide' that, like Dante's Beatrice, will take us by the hand and lead us along the spiritual path that leads to God. John will never tire of driving home this point; it is faith first and last. If we refuse to lean on faith then we will inevitably stumble and fall. If we keep this fact in mind then the teaching of the Ascent becomes clear.

John warns us that this second night will be more severe than the first, (ie night of sense). The reason for this is because our spiritual life is a higher form of life than our sense life (The life we share with the animal world), so it will be a stiffer proposition to introduce harmony and control into the spiritual side of our nature.

St. John reminds us that faith is a God-given power by which he communicates to us things concerning Himself about which we would otherwise be ignorant. Faith is indirect knowledge of God and it cannot be acquired by our own unaided efforts. It gives us knowledge of God but it is information that cannot be tested empirically or scientifically. For instance faith tells us that there are Three Divine Persons in God. In itself this knowledge is supreme light, but obviously the

human mind has to struggle with it: it is too big for the mind. The knowledge we receive from God in faith cannot be clearly grasped and for that reason it is said to be night or darkness to the mind.

Mystical writers are fond of using the biblical image of the cloud to illustrate this point, namely the obscure nature of faith. In the great event of the Exodus from Egypt a cloud illumined the night for the Israelites. John refers to this scriptural background. St. Gregory of Nyssa, who may be referred to as the Father of Mysticism, writing in the 4th century has this to say in his 'Life of Moses':

"The true vision and true knowledge of what we seek consists precisely in not seeing, in an awareness that our good transcends all knowledge - is everywhere cut off from us in the darkness of incomprehensibility".

We see then that St. John insists that we can only learn to know God by entering into darkness. And it is not enough just to enter the darkness of recollection, we must also draw the blinds across our minds as well. He tells us that we must distrust all our own purely natural insights regarding everything that relates to God, ie any understanding, feeling or imagination and so on. John tells us that you cannot be united to God if you are attached to your own opinions, tastes and desires in regard to God. These latter simply fall short, infinitely short of what God is in his own nature. "Passing beyond all that is naturally and spiritually intelligible of comprehensible, a person ought to desire with all his might to attain to what in this life is unknowable and unimaginable".

There is here a paradox; the more we live in the darkness of faith, the more the divine light will shine in our hearts. The English mystical treatise, 'The Cloud of Unknowing' gives us exactly the same advice. "Should any thought arise and obtrude itself between you and the darkness, asking what you are seeking, and what you are wanting, answer that it is God that you want, Him I covet, Him I seek, and nothing but him". (Cloud of Unknowing Ch. 7.)

NEWS SECTION.

Your prayers are requested for the following people who have died:
Josephine Gardiner of the Glasgow Group who died on December 10th.

Lord Richard Barclay de Tolly of Guernsey who died before Christmas. We extend our deep sympathy to his wife Mary. May they rest in peace.

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Congratulations to the following:

Eric Lewis from the Leeds group who mad his final Promise on Sunday Dec. 2nd '84.

Anne McArthur who was received into the Secular Order in Aberdeen.

I would like to draw your attention to the large selection of cassettes on subjects of Carmelite interest produced by Fr. Antonine Newman ODC.

- 1. St. Teresa . 2 St. Therese of Liseaux. 3 Blessed Elizabeth of Trinity.
- 4. Edith Stein.

These cost £4.50 each (by post) or £19.00 for Album.

The second album contains the following:

- 1. Pope John Paul's visit to Spain 1982. 2 St. John of Cross. 3 Edith Stein. 4 H. Cohen
- 6. Centenary Mass for St. Teresa. All at £4.50 each or complete Album £27.00.

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May I wish you all a Happy New Year and many thanks again for your greetings and subscriptions during December.

*you order in Carmel.
Fr Tadgh Tierney ODC.*