

A LOVER'S QUEST: RELATIONSHIP IN JOHN OF THE CROSS

Many years ago, as I walked in a crowded city street, I caught a snatch of conversation between two young people walking in the opposite direction. They were talking about the 'dark night of the soul' and John of the Cross. I wondered how they understood this phrase.

It is understandable that the 'dark night' can be perceived as indicating undesirable experiences; John himself calls it a 'frightful night' in his commentary (2DN 1:1). However, the poem 'The Dark Night' sets quite a different tone right from the beginning.

One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
– ah, the sheer grace! –
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.¹

It can be helpful to ponder these opening lines without reading into them any preconceptions we may have about the dark night. John speaks here of an event that is welcomed (*dichosa ventura*) and love as the impetus for going forth.

Encounter in the night

The 'dark night' is often linked to John's harrowing experience of darkness in his Toledo prison and his eventual escape in the night. But John loved the night. One commentator writes: 'There are many witnesses to his great love of the night. He would often go out into it to pray, sometimes with a companion, frequently alone – under the trees, near the river among the crags, open to the stars. *More lovely than the dawn*, it was the natural ambience of his communion with God.'² John desired the night, experiencing it as a place of encounter with God.

This association of the night with a place of encounter with God is also familiar to us today. We know, for instance, that at the Eucharistic celebration, the liturgy proclaims: 'on the night he was betrayed...'³ At the Easter Vigil we sing, 'This is the night, that Jesus Christ, rose triumphant from the dead.' And on that night, through Scripture, we remember the night in which the Israelites passed over from slavery to freedom (cf. Ex 12:42). Even our celebration of the birth of Christ is wrapped in night as we sing, 'O holy night! The stars are brightly shining. It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth!' And it is even possible to celebrate this birth literally in the middle of the night, at Midnight Mass.

These familiar references to the night have a subtle nuance of both paradox and mystery and are associated with an essentially positive event – an encounter with God. Can we understand John's 'frightful night' also as an essentially positive, even desirable, experience?

Focusing on relationship

John's writings, both the commentary and the poem, describe a lover's quest – *a relationship of love*. Beginning with what we know *from our own experience* of developing, loving, human relationships is one way to attempt to understand what John is saying about the experience of

¹ *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD & Otilio Rodríguez, OCD, Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1991, 50.

² Ross Collings, OCD, *John of the Cross*, Collegeville, MN ('The Way of the Christian Mystics' series, vol 10), 1990, 61.

³ From Eucharistic Prayer III.

night. John in fact begins his commentary by focusing on human relationships as he briefly introduces the analogy of a mother and child to highlight the loving purpose motivating God's actions. He writes: 'the mother...sets the child down from her arms, letting it walk on its own feet so that it may put aside the habits of childhood and grow accustomed to greater and more important things' (1DN 1:2). Since the mother's intention is to encourage growth in the child and in the relationship with the mother, she no longer merely 'nurtures and caresses' (1DN 1:2).

This description of what happens between God and the soul, expressed by the analogy of the relationship between a mother and child, is readily understood as a positive interaction. It relates to what we already know about relationships of love – if not from our own experience, then from common sense.

Similarly, we know that all such long-term relationships ideally involve growth, both in the individuals and in the relationship itself. Whether it is a bond between mother and child, or within a friendship, a marriage, a family or community, all true relationships of love necessarily mature beyond the initial stage of 'gratifications and delights' (1DN 7:4-5). So it is not uncommon, in any of the relationships mentioned, that the initial joy and enthusiasm can be replaced by the tedium of the familiar. There is less or even no experienced 'sweetness or delight' (1DN 9:2), but rather a lack of satisfaction in previously habitual and satisfying aspects of the relationship. Although this may not happen in all relationships, *this pattern is not unfamiliar* in our everyday experience and we can recognise it as part of the normal progression of a healthy, relationship.

Invitation to a new depth

This is the very pattern of growth and progress which John portrays. He describes three signs by which to discern progress in the soul's relationship with God, progress that takes it into the night of the senses (cf. 1DN 9).

The *first sign* of progress is that, when this lack of satisfaction occurs, the person does not find 'sweetness or delight' (1DN 9:2) elsewhere. There is no desire to look for 'satisfaction in something other than the things of God' (1DN 9:2), as the person recognises that the longed-for satisfaction does not lie elsewhere.

The *second sign* is that such persons continually turn to God in all circumstances, even though they think they are not serving God: 'the soul thinks it is...turning back, because it is aware of this distaste for the things of God' (1DN 9:3).

The *third sign* is that they cannot go back to where they were before, as all efforts to recapture the time when the communications of God could be experienced through the senses are to no avail; John describes this as 'powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts' (1DN 9:8).

In some ways these signs are also applicable to other relationships of love, and considering these signs may help elucidate the experience of the night of the senses that John describes. It can also keep such an experience firmly grounded within a relationship of love.

In committed human relationships, when lack of satisfaction occurs the person does not 'find sweetness or delight' elsewhere. There is no desire, for instance, to look for another relationship as the person recognises that the longed-for satisfaction does not lie elsewhere. The second sign is that the person is disturbed that the relationship is no longer as it was and yet continually turns to the other with a driving desire and energy to rekindle the felt sense of love. Paradoxically, they doubt their own intentions due to the lack of satisfaction. This is compounded by the third sign. All efforts to return the relationship to the way it was are to no avail. What John describes as an experience of 'powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts' can apply to human relationships of love.

These dynamics in the relationship are experienced as painful: the lack of clarity about what is going on; the lack of ability to do anything about it, despite one's desire to improve the situation; the disturbing possibility that the relationship will never recover; the uncertainty about motivations; the longing for things to be the way they were, or at least other than the way they are now – all this is indeed a painful experience. Going through a time such as this, in any relationship, is not *experienced* as a welcome stage of growth, yet may well *be* just that. In our human relationships, this dissatisfaction may well encompass an invitation to a new depth of love. Being faithful to the other through such difficult times can allow a much-desired deepening of the ongoing relationship to occur. Conversely, seeking to avoid the pain, limits the potential for growth.

Although the analogy with the development in human relationships falls down in some respects, it demonstrates that the spiritual experience which John describes in his commentaries is *not entirely foreign* to what we know from other relationships. When such an experience occurs in one's developing, loving relationship with God, although painful, it is an invitation to a new depth. John calls it a 'night'. This 'night' is a place of deepening encounter with God: the milieu of the lover's quest.

Delight in dark faith

An intense experience of this 'night' can be seen in the life of St Thérèse of Lisieux. In the last eighteen months of her life, she experienced what has been called her 'trial of faith', and which she describes in terms of darkness. In John's language, this is the 'night of the spirit'. Prior to this experience, she recalls, 'I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear *faith*, that the thought of heaven made up all my happiness...' (SS 211).⁴ Then God 'permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment' (SS 211). And she continues:

When I sing of the happiness of heaven and of the eternal possession of God, I feel no joy in this, for I sing simply what I WANT TO BELIEVE. It is true that at times a very small ray of the sun comes to illumine my darkness, and then the trial ceases for *an instant*, but afterwards the memory of this ray, instead of causing me joy, makes my darkness even more dense. (SS 214)

Thérèse does not *experience* what by faith she knows to be true and wants to believe. Yet she still gives assent with her intellect to the reality of heaven, her imminent union with God through her impending death. Her faith is what John calls 'dark faith'. He explains: 'Thus, to reach union, the soul must enter the second night of the spirit. In this night both the sensory and spiritual parts are despoiled of all these apprehensions and delights, and the soul is made to walk in dark and pure faith...' (2DN 2:5).

Thérèse's example also shows us, however, a 'delight' that is given in this dark faith. She writes: 'in spite of this trial which has taken away *all my joy*, I can nevertheless cry out: "*You have given me DELIGHT, O Lord, in ALL your doings*"' (SS 214; cf. Ps 91:5). Such is the delight – the *dichosa ventura* of which John speaks in his poem – that occurs in the midst of the 'struggle and torment' (SS 211). Such is the paradox, the mystery, of our God of love whom we encounter in the night.

Test or quest?

⁴ SS = *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996.

Keeping the experience of night firmly grounded within a relationship of love leaves no place for the often misunderstood notion of being tested. God is not setting us a test to see if we pass or fail, even though we may *experience* the night as trying or testing. God is a God of relentless love who wants us to be fully united with God. And so, all that is not God, all concepts, methods, structures or habits, must be challenged and purified. It is a quest, not a test – a lover’s quest.

Before her trial, Thérèse, for instance, had said, ‘the thought of heaven made up all my happiness’ (SS 211). Yet the concept of heaven – or however Thérèse envisaged ‘the eternal possession of God’ (SS 214) – this was still something other than God and less than God. Out of love, God placed her in the dark night purposely, in order to bring her to divine union (cf. 2DN 1:1).

John writes: ‘God makes the soul die to all that he is not, so that when it is stripped and flayed of its old skin, he may clothe it anew’; thus, he says, through all the processes of the dark nights the soul will become ‘more divine than human’ (2DN 13:11). Dark nights are not the action of a demanding God who requires proof of our love.⁵ If we view God in this way, and experiences of the dark night in this way, not only will *we* not become divine but we will not allow *God* to be divine. We will reduce God to what we think we know of God; we will solidify the boundaries of who and what God is, and so continue to tread familiar paths in the light of our own expectations.

John’s quest for union with God has no such clear boundaries but is a hidden quest of dispossession, pursued in the obscurity of a ‘dark faith’ whilst grounded in clear faith in the God of love.

Guiding night

It was noted earlier that the analogy of the development in our relationship with God and our development in human relationships falls down in some respects. It does so because relationship with God goes well beyond any such human analogy. God is essentially mystery: unattainable, ungraspable, uncontrollable, unknowable. Anything we can hold onto is not God. Since union with this unknowable (dark) and mysterious God is the goal of the quest, the quest too must be in unknowing (darkness) and mystery. The fifth stanza of ‘The Dark Night’ reveals that *the night itself* is the guide to God. The fifth stanza reads:

O guiding night!
 O night more lovely than the dawn!
 O night that has united
 the Lover with his beloved,
 transforming the beloved in her Lover.⁶

John’s image of night, then, far from having oppressive, negative connotations, is ‘more lovely than the dawn’. It guides, ‘more surely than the light of noon’ (st. 4), through transformation in the night – and, ultimately, to the ‘night that joined Beloved with lover’.

I’ll never know what those two young people in the city street thought the ‘dark night of the soul’ meant. But our own understanding can be securely grounded within the context of a desirable, even chosen, lover’s quest. With this understanding of the ‘dark night’, it can be embraced as an invitation to a new depth of love, and truly become a welcome ‘happy chance’ on this continuing quest towards union with God.

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⁵ This is not to be confused with the spontaneity of heart with which Thérèse wanted to prove her love for Jesus, out of her desire to return love for love. She writes: ‘He gives me a chance of proving to Him that I love Him’ (LT 142).

⁶ Kavanaugh & Rodríguez (trs.), *op. cit.*, 51.