

God as Light, God as Love

Chapter 2

I am a Daughter of the Church

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There are several **differences between the first forms of supernatural prayer** as described by Saint Teresa and that of Saint John of the Cross.

Saint Teresa speaks of **supernatural recollection and quiet**; Saint John of the Cross, of **contemplation**. Saint John requires the convergence of **three signs** as an indication of **contemplation**; Teresa only **one**.

The **difference** is really one of **climate**. Saint Teresa introduces us into an atmosphere that **dilates the soul** while Saint John detains us in one where there is **less warmth**, where **aridity, powerlessness**, and often even **disquiet** seem to prevail. One could even **wonder** if Saint Teresa and Saint John are even talking about the **same period of spiritual life**. But there is no doubt that they are **both** speaking of the **first manifestations of the supernatural action of God in prayer**. There are **characteristic points of agreement**: certain traits of Saint John's presentations seem to have been borrowed from Saint Teresa and vice versa.

This article proposes to **explain and reconcile these differences** between these two teachers of the same school who at the Convent of the Incarnation in Avila collaborated closely in the spiritual direction of the nuns.

A. Light and love in the mystical experience:

Supernatural contemplation, that simple **gaze of faith** perfected in its exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit, proceeds from a **twofold supernatural activity**: that of the

soul; and that of **God** through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This twofold activity yields a **twofold fruit: loving faith**; and God gives a certain **experience of Himself** and of His **grace....**

The **senses** and the most **exterior powers** are the first to experience this **interior action of God in the soul**, which Saint Teresa compares to the **flute-the call of the Good Shepherd**. It is a call so delicate and gentle that the wandering faculties hardly hear it but they recognize His voice and experience **passive recollection**, the first form of supernatural prayer.

In the **prayer of quiet and contemplative dryness** which follows recollection, God's action is experienced in the more **interior faculties**, the **will** and the **understanding (or intellect)**. In the **prayer of union**, it is the **center** of the soul that is touched by God Himself.

Let's now explain the **difference** between the **prayer of quiet** of Saint Teresa and the **contemplative dryness** of Saint John of the Cross.

God is both light and love. These two **attributes** correspond to the two human **faculties** of the soul: the **intellect** and the **will**. God is **light** to the **intellect** and to **faith**, grafted into it at Baptism. He is **love (charity)** to the **will** and to supernatural **charity also** grafted into it at Baptism. On His side, God gives Himself as **light** by the **gift of understanding** and is experienced as **love** by the **gift of wisdom...**

It is then as **light** and as **love** that God will give Himself in **contemplation...**Saint John assures us that **either light or love is dominant...**the distinction is more marked and important in the **first stages of contemplative prayer...**in which **divine action** is received in the **understanding** or in the **will**.

By looking at these two manifestations of **God-light** and **God-love** the **differences**

between Saint John and Saint Teresa will be clarified.

1. LIGHT AND THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING

Saint John explains that God as **light** can only be experienced by the **intellect**. He writes:

The understanding (intellect) in its bodily prison has no preparation or capacity to receive the clear knowledge of God...

And the Saint adds:

Thus ...contemplation whereby the intellect has the loftiest knowledge of God, is called mystical theology or secret wisdom of God. Ascent

The human understanding is not fitted to perceive this **divine light**. Yet it receives it and experiences it in the **diverse effects** that it produces. Let's point these effects out now. When **divine light** falls upon the intellect (or understanding) it renders it **incapable of consecutive thoughts**. Writing of a person who has arrived at this stage the Saint says:

He can no longer meditate or reason with his imagination...

This inability to meditate ... may result in a complete **paralysis of the faculties**. The powerlessness is accompanied by an **uneasiness** ... caused by the meeting of **two contraries**, the **light of God** and the **impurities of the soul**:

...this dark contemplation is ...in its beginnings painful to the soul; for, as this Divine infused contemplation has many excellences ... the soul that receives them, not being purged, has many miseries that are extremely bad... Two contraries cannot coexist in one subject-- the soul--it must of necessity have pain and suffering... as two contraries war against each other. Dark Night

A more complete **inflowing** of this **divine light** usually creates an **impression of darkness...**and a **confused** and **loving general knowledge** ...

The **general** and **loving knowledge** which characterizes **supernatural contemplation...** may be **imperceptible** not only at **the beginning of the contemplative prayer** but also when this soul attains to **great purity** and **perfect simplicity**. The Saint says:

When the Divine light strikes the soul with less force, it never perceives darkness nor observes light... The soul remains in a great forgetfulness. Ascent

... This general knowledge... is at times so subtle and delicate, particularly when it is most pure and simple and perfect ... most spiritual and most interior, that though the soul may be occupied ... it can neither realize it nor perceive it...

This will be clearly understood by the following comparison. If we consider a ray of sunlight which enters through a window...the more the ray is charge with ... particles of matter, the more ... visible and bright it appears to the eye ... If the ray were completely pure and free from all particles ... it would appear completely dark and invisible to the eye, since all that could be seen would be absent from it... If there is no visible object in the sun's rays ... nothing will be seen... So if the ray of light entered by one window and went out another, without meeting anything having material form it would not be seen at all. Ascent

In sum then in this analysis of **Divine light**: the divine light cannot be perceived because the soul has no faculty apt for receiving it. It can only experience the **privative effects of powerlessness, of suffering, or of darkness; painful effects** ...ordinarily infused with a sweetness that comes from love.

2 LOVE AND THE GIFT OF WISDOM

If the communication of **God as light** is privative and deceptive for the human faculties, those of **God as love** are **positive and**

delightful. The disproportion between God and the human doesn't allow the understanding to perceive divine light, but does not hinder the **will** from experiencing God as love... For the will to love, a **contact** suffices. It matters not if the two beings united in love appear to one another on a certain plane of equality....love effects its own work of ...union making them equal. So the will and the senses can receive God-love ... unite with Him and experience Him...

In the **first forms of contemplative prayer** that we are speaking of here, the gift of wisdom allows one to experience, not God Himself, but the gift that His charity makes to the soul... The **prayer of quiet** and the **sleep-of-the-powers** are typical **manifestations of God as love** in the **faculties** of the soul.

3 UNITY OF CONTEMPLATION AND THE TWO CONTEMPLATIVE GIFTS

...Saint Teresa speaks of a **delightful and sweet love in the will**; Saint John of the Cross speaks of a **knowledge in the understanding**, which is blinded by it.

Are **there two distinct forms of contemplation**: one enlightening to the understanding according to Saint John of the Cross; the other full of love, that of Saint Teresa?

To **distinguish two forms of contemplation** ... would run **contrary** to the very **nature of contemplation**...and **contradict the exposition** set forth by Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa.

To the **two privative signs** produced by the blinding effect of God's light falling on the faculties, the Saint John of the Cross adds a **third sign**, the most **certain** and a **positive one**... He writes:

This third and surest sign is that the soul takes pleasure in being alone and waits with loving attention upon God....Ascent

This **third sign** is closely allied to the **quietude** described by Saint Teresa. And Saint Teresa's **description of quietude** points out its **privative effects** in the **understanding**:

It may come about that the soul is enjoying the highest degree of quiet, and that the understanding has soared far aloft that what is happening doesn't seem to be going on in its own house at all; it really seems to be a guest in somebody else's house, looking for other lodgings since its own lodging no longer satisfies it and it cannot remain there for long together. Way

We find ... no more **precise** or **picturesque** a description in Saint John of the Cross of the **disarray** of the **understanding** when the light strikes it. Saint Teresa often returns to this **agitation of the understanding** during the **prayer of quiet**, saying that the **understanding** must be treated like a **madman**.

To further **reduce the difference** between the contemplation of Saint Teresa and that of Saint John of the Cross one can affirm that during the long years in which she remained in **aridity**, **unable to make use of her imagination or understanding**, Saint Teresa was in a **contemplative state** of which she perceived only the **suffering**. The Saint had already been favored with the **prayer of union**; the memory of those graces, while rendering her **faculties powerless**, made her **long for divine positive manifestations**.

Not knowing the **nature** and the **value** of these **privative effects**, she was only **harassed** by them and awaited the outpourings of the **gift of wisdom** to speak of contemplation. (Footnote 15) The **communication of God as light and as love** are with rare exception **concomitant or associated in contemplation**, even in its early stages. It is by the **communication of love** that the **soul first becomes aware of light in the understanding** per Saint John of the Cross. The **third sign** is necessary to **determine the value of the other two**...

... In conclusion there is **no essential difference in the manifestations of God as light and those of God as love**. They are but **reflections of divine attributes** cast upon the soul which **produce different effects** but are the **one identical essence of God**.

These **different manifestations of God as light and as love are not in mutual opposition**. Both Saint John of Cross and Saint Teresa exchanged their experiences with each other. These mutual

confidences caused no trouble....rather they transported them both in common ecstasy.

There is only **one sort of Christian contemplation** which **leads the soul to God** but which **produces different effects** in different souls.

These **differences** do in fact occur....in an **attempt to unify them**, let's **avoid trying to make them uniform**. The manifestations of **God-light and God-love**, not excluding one another and being **concomitant in each stage of contemplation**, are **revealed through forms of contemplation differing in tonality and spiritual climate**.

Their **different method of exposition**, **descriptive** in the case of Saint Teresa, **scientific** in that of Saint John of the Cross can't explain all their differences. These can be accounted for only by the **difference in the experience**.

But a **new problem** presents itself when we ask ourselves why their experience was different, so let's take a look

B. Saint Teresa's experience and that of Saint John of the Cross

An easy explanation would be to attribute the differences simply to the **action of God**. We are indeed in the domain of the divine mercy... The divine God's pleasure would explain everything and would dispense us from further inquiry. But to attribute the differences to God and to his direct, immediate action in souls, the different effects of contemplation would seem to leave out of account the divine ways of **divine Providence**.

God's action does in fact make use of **natural means**... It would seem that the **difference in the temperaments** of Teresa and of John of the Cross explain the particular form of their experience... God is an ocean from which each one draws according to the measure and the form of the vessel that he brings to it.

Think then of Saint John of the Cross, an artist but especially a thinker, theologian, philosopher, used to **intellectual pursuits**, and of Teresa marvelously balanced with an ardent heart, refined sensibility and a strong will....is it not normal that the **same action** should produce

different effects? Whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the recipient... When the **prayer of union** is reached the faculties of the soul are **deprived** of their activity; but in the **beginning of contemplative prayer** they can **react** in a personal way. From this **divine communication** Saint John of the Cross draws mainly **light**, stressing its **privative effects** in the **understanding** and that **loving knowledge** produced in the depths of the soul; while Saint Teresa experiences the **savor of pure love and emphasizes sweetness that captivates the will** and arises from the inmost Source, God.

Does this **solve the problem** of the **differences** between the two Saints in their exposition of the **early stages of contemplative prayer**? Can one conclude that these **manifestations of God as light and love**, reaching at these **early stages** no further than the **faculties**, come from the same 'bright rays of the divine Sun **reflecting the different tones** of the souls that receive them?'

... Can the **differences** be explained by the **differences in temperament** of the souls who experience them? How could we make such an affirmation out of the mystery of **God's direct and personal dealings with a soul** of which He jealously **guards the secret**? Considering a reasonable **law of the divine action** a suggestion has been made that holds in many cases.

In looking for God's action in events, it is important to avoid two contrary errors: the one sees only **natural causes** for everything; the other view is seeing **God's direct intervention** in all things. An enlightened spirit knows how to discover the role of **secondary causes** in events and the **primary role** of God who **uses everything** in the **realization of His design**.

(Footnote)

Despite the uncertainty ...it is surely **possible** to base on them a **judgment and practical directives for the life of prayer in our time**.

Today there is widespread admiration for the marvelous richness of Saint Teresa's personality... many souls are attracted by her prayer. Yet, it would seem that when they have made **progress in mental prayer**, they are usually **more at home** in the **dry atmosphere** of Saint John of the Cross's contemplation than in the delectations of Teresian quietude. The choice is not theirs; as they would surely have chosen

the **fruitful riches** of the spiritual Mother than the **detachment** of the Mystical Doctor. But the **modern soul**, after the example of Therese of the Child Jesus, experiences more frequently the **privative effects of contemplation**. Feeling themselves **poor in God's sight**, they turn to Saint Therese and through her to Saint John of the Cross.

How to reconcile the sense of poverty in the presence of God? ... Could it be that civilization has made us **intellectuals**? The **prideful intellect** has extended its empire over all things.....and so falling into **agnosticism**.

The **mind** dried up by its **pride** is **thirsty for life**. Even in its **relationship with God** it is **proud and intellectual** and can accept only a **light that dazzles and impoverishes** it; but this time to **purify and enrich** it.

Surely it was to **meet** this **attitude and need** of the **modern soul** that the **Church** declared Saint John of the Cross, who was a mystical Doctor of Carmel, a **doctor of the Universal Church**. **Amen**