

## Silence Enflamed: John of the Cross and Prayer

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*I shall lead her into solitude and there speak tenderly to her heart [Hos2:14] (F3.34).*

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**Abstract:** St John of the Cross teaches about desire for union with God and the peace which follows this desire into the solitude of the indwelling presence. The article introduces us to the beauty of John's language and his image of the "night" which permeates all his works. In particular, the "night" experience imparts a transformative awareness of God's presence in the depths of the heart. The article explores how, for John, God enflames the heart in a silence that transforms into loving union with Christ the Word and Wisdom of God. The various phases of the "night" experience prepare one for new awakening in light of the resurrection to breathe and live in fruition in the one boundless love of the Trinity. [Editor]

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**Key Words:** union with God; dark night of the soul; contemplative knowing; abyss of God; divine indwelling; Trinitarian love

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I'd like to begin by inviting you to enter into the solitude of your own heart, to listen to the silent music, that canticle of love that resounds in the deepest depths of who we are. It is a song so silent, so sweet, so gentle that it immerses us in the divine passion that seeks to be one with us. This silence stills and awakens our inner eye of love, to see and to feel blindly and nakedly the loving Presence in the inner-most intimate centre of our heart. John of the Cross invites our soul to journey into the night of solitude, to trace it back to its source and to live there. This does not mean doing anything or trying to become somebody. It is simply sharing in the solitude of God. This divine solitude is not isolation from people and disconnection from the beauty of creation. This solitude imparts oneness. It reveals the fullness of the creativity of the Trinity dwelling in our hearts.

John of the Cross guides us along this dark path to live in solitude, and like a faithful dove build a nest of silence. Delight in this solitude, the *Canticle*<sup>1</sup> sings:

In solitude she lives,  
and there in solitude has built her nest;  
in solitude he gives  
her guidance, love and rest,  
wounded, like her, in solitary quest.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle*, a poem of 31 stanzas, was written in 1578, while John was captive in Toledo. The final stanzas were added in 1580-84 and a prose commentary, in second redaction, written in 1584-6. Inspired by the *Song of Songs*, the *Canticle* describes the love between the soul (the Bride) and Christ, the Bridegroom. All references to John's commentary are from *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kananaugh and Otilio Rodriquez (Washington: ICS, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> St John of the Cross, *Centered on Love: The Poems of St John of the Cross*. Translated by Marjorie Flower OCD (Varroville: Carmelite Nuns, 2002), 20.

In each of his poems, San Juan de la Cruz draws us into the great romance between God and the soul that takes place as we journey into our heart in prayer. God is the Lover who dwells in the centre of our heart and we, human beings, are the Beloved. John draws us into *solis*, into a silent, still, nest of solitude, a wound of silence, into the womb of silence, which is God.

In this article, we will focus on what John teaches us about our desire for union with God, and the peace we find when we follow this desire into the solitude of the indwelling presence in our heart. After immersing ourselves in the beauty of the language of John and identifying the image of “night” that permeates all John’s poems and prose, we will focus on how John leads us to experience “nights” that impart a continually transformative awareness of God’s presence in the depths of our heart. Then, in an atmosphere of “night”, we will explore how God enflames our heart in a silence that transforms us in loving union with Christ the Word and Wisdom of God. Finally, we will see how this one night with its many phases prepares us for awakening in the light of resurrection to breathe and live in fruition in the one boundless love of the Trinity.

### “STARRY MANNA” JOHN’S WAY WITH WORDS

In a perceptive poem, *The Books of Saint John of the Cross*, Jessica Powers likens John’s words to “starry manna”, starlight that feeds our soul with bread. Like points of light radiating from the point of all creative light, John’s language shines through the night sky to feed the hungry wandering soul, famished from not being able to find food that will sustain as our spiritual journey sets in. With her usual ability to pierce into the heart of the matter, Jessica illuminates how, even crumbs of these “immortal delicacies” infuse us in eternal wisdom that will sustain us as we take the way of the darker nights of contemplation. She concludes:

and I, so long a fosterling of night,  
here feast upon immeasurably sweetened  
wafers of light.<sup>3</sup>

And so, we, who like Jessica, are fosterlings of night, discover in John’s writings immortal food to feast upon, trustworthy wisdom from the man whose spirit was utterly blinded as he risked choosing the way of contemplation. This is wisdom born of loving in a loving family, of suffering loss of a father at an early age, of knowing the sadness of a mother forced into poverty, of a desire for God, of the search for community, of disillusionment and imprisonment, of friendship and loyalty.<sup>4</sup> This is the language of a sensitive lover, of a poet, of one who looks for, sees and meets the Beloved in nature and in the human condition. Radiantly colourful, lusciously sensual and magnetically alluring, John’s writing is “a treasure of divine light” (A1.8.6). It is a reservoir of cosmic enlightenment that illuminates our darkness. John’s language is the language of the heart.

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<sup>3</sup> Regina Siegfried, ASC and Robert F. Morneau, ed. *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers* (Washington: ICS Publications, 1999), 132.

<sup>4</sup> Juan de Yepes y Álvarez was born in 1542, near Avila in Spain. His father died when he was two. His mother then struggled to support her family and placed John, her youngest in an institution for children of the poor, in the town of Medina del Campo where he stayed until he was seventeen. He then attended a Jesuit school to be educated. He entered the Carmelite Order at 20 and was given the name Fray Juan de Santo Matía (Fray John of St Matthias). He studied philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca and was ordained a priest in 1567. Often malnourished and ill, he died in 1591.

## ONE DARK NIGHT

John places the prevailing experience of being loved and courted by our Lover in the context of “night” (*noche*). In his artistic hands, “night” is an “immortal delicacy” and “wafer of star light” that feeds our starving soul. It becomes what Karl Rahner identifies as a “primordial word”, a word that shines out like a brightly lit house against the night sky. Filled with the soft music of infinity, it whispers something about everything. Yet, if we try to trace out its boundaries, we become lost in the infinite, because it possesses something of the luminous darkness of God.<sup>5</sup> Each person has an experience of the mystery of night. In John’s poetry “night” holds this experience, shapes the experience and points far beyond the experience to infinite possibility for contemplative union with the one who is Infinite Night.

The metaphor has its source in Elijah’s climb to the summit of Mt Carmel (1Kgs 19:11-12) where he waits in the cave and encounters God in the “sheer silence”, and the Old Testament love story, told in the *Book of Tobit* (6:18-22) where the angel orders Tobias to wait three nights for union with his bride. On the first night he is to burn the fish’s heart in the fire. In a similar way during the first night, the affections are consumed in the fire of divine love. On the second night, the angel directs Tobias to live by faith alone. In this night of spirit, God communicates secretly beyond the intellect and the night becomes darker. The third night Tobias is joined to his bride. John explains: “On this third night when (God’s communication to the spirit, which usually occurs in extreme darkness of the soul) has passed, a union with the bride, who is the Wisdom of God then follows” (1A2.4). In this final phase love comes to fruition in the mystical marriage. John observes that:

...these three nights comprise only one night, a night divided into three parts like natural night. The first the night of the senses, resembles early evening, that time of twilight when things begin to fade from sight. The second night of faith, is completely dark, like midnight. The third the night of union is like the very early dawn just before the break of day. (1A 2.5).

In this “one dark night” lover and beloved become transformed into each other, “like” each other until they are one. This one night is a night of glorious beatitude.

In John’s way of understanding human beings, we need to undergo these phases of night to experience mystical union, because, we have lost our centre. Though we are always one with God in our substantial soul, one in image, one in the deepest inner centre of our heart, we have lost vision of the truth that we are one in the boundless love of the Trinity (See 2A5.3). We are distracted and not “like” God in all things.<sup>6</sup> The return to knowing the reality we already dwell within, occurs through falling in love with Christ the Word of God, who is Wisdom personified, entering into the nights of contemplation and becoming one with him in the mystical marriage. As the night unfolds this uniting presence touches the soul, until it is permanently one in the mystical marriage. Then, one

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner’s Theological Writings*, edited by Karl Lehmann, Albert Raffelt; translated by Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 161.

<sup>6</sup> This is Augustinian: Let us make man in our image and likeness (Gen 1:26), not in “my image” or in “your image,” we must believe that man was made in the image of the Trinity. For Augustine, “the image always remains whether it be so faded that almost no image is left, whether it be obscured and defaced or bright and beautiful.” *De Trinitate* XIV 4.6.

in the Beloved, Christ returns us to the Trinity. The soul sees darkly through contemplation the love it is in. Poignantly, for John, this return to our original likeness takes place only through love.

In his *Canticle*, John explains the nature of the contemplation in the night: “In contemplation God teaches the soul very quietly and secretly, without its knowing how, without the sound of words, and without the help of any bodily or spiritual faculty, in silence and quietude, in darkness to all sensory and natural things” (C39.12). In the darkness of one’s heart, tenderly, beyond words and images, Christ, Word and Wisdom fills the beloved with a loving knowledge of the boundless love of the Trinity. “The language of God has this trait”, he says in *Night*: “Since it is very spiritual and intimate to the soul, transcending everything sensory, it immediately silences” (2N17.3). Contemplation is ineffable. It is “Ah, ah,ah! [Jer 1:6]” (2N17.4). It is “Pure Spirit to pure spirit”. (2N17.4). It is like “hiding the soul within itself” (2N17.6). It is as if we are being engulfed in a “secret abyss” (2N17.7). The appropriate response is to wait in silence and quietude in “loving and peaceful attentiveness in God” (1N10.6).

“Night”, then is an ever revealing symbol, that holds together our encounter with the Beloved Christ, the inflow of the boundless love of our Espoused One who is both Word and Wisdom, and our experience of purgation and ecstasy as our awareness of this presence transforms. “Night” maintains the creative tension between the fear of darkness and obscurity, and the security of illuminating darkness. Night erases boundaries between absence and presence, ascent and descent, movement into the heart and movement out, dying and birthing. Night is the womb of solitude where Beloved and lover are transformed into each other. “Night” infuses us in eternal wisdom and sustains us as we take the way of the darker nights of contemplation.

Unified within the one dark night,<sup>7</sup> active and passive phases unfold organically, as the living presence of the divine bridegroom infuses the senses and spirit of the heart.<sup>8</sup> Over and over again, the soul experiences many nights as sense and spirit are purified. So we may focus on how John portrays transforming union, I will give an over-view of active sensual nights of prayer and more passive spiritual experiences of night. We will distinguish the felt sense of yearning and actively hushing and stilling our house and going out to seek our Beloved, and the more passive experience of the Spirit of the Beloved penetrating darkening and enkindling in the heart the same flame that burns in his.

## MY SOUL DESIRED YOU IN THE NIGHT [Is26.9] (2N11.7):

### *Hushing the House: Sensual Nights*

How does one hush one’s house asks Jessica Powers? She responds in her poem, “The House at Rest”:

The house must first of all accept the night.  
Let it erase the walls and their display,  
impoverish the rooms till they are filled

<sup>7</sup> The Spanish speaks of ‘noches’, ‘nights’ plural 1.A1.1 which holds the one and yet many phases of this night.

<sup>8</sup> The Dark Night is prose commentary, written in 1582-85, on the Dark Night poem. It takes up where The Ascent to Mount Carmel finishes. It has 2 books. Book 1, 14 chapters and book 2, 25 chapters. John never finishes his commentary and it comes to an abrupt end.

with humble silences, let clocks be stilled  
and all the selfish urgencies of day.<sup>9</sup>

Once we accept the invitation from our dark Beloved to enter the night, begin to choose times for silence and stillness, and go into our heart in recollection, our prayer modifies from imaginative sensual prayer, to a more silent, still prayer. This initial turning point in the active darkening of our senses corresponds to the movement between the third and fourth dwelling place in Teresa's *Interior Castle* where prayer becomes more recollected, until we realize that a beautiful, origin-less, eternal spring flows and runs deep in the inner centre of our soul, in the prayer of quiet. In John's words: "That ever-living spring is hidden fast and yet I found its dwelling place at last, although it is night."<sup>10</sup> This spring with origin-less source will fill and overflow in us if we can "hush our house" and give it a chance to flow.

John's *Dark Night* poem hauntingly captures this sensual transformation that must occur if this love affair with our God is to reach fruition.<sup>11</sup> Timeless words tell of the experience:

So dark the night! At rest  
and hushed my house, I went with no one knowing  
upon a lover's quest  
—Ah, the sheer grace! —so blest,  
my eager heart with love aflame and glowing.<sup>12</sup>

The initial experience of this lover's quest initiates a movement from active, sensual, meditative prayer to dark contemplation. John likens this to experiencing desert solitude. Because the soul is unaccustomed to solitude, it feels like the Israelites wandering in the desert after being in Egypt. It weeps for the way God fed us with the consolations of the senses. John reminds us, that these tastes are unrefined and crude (1N9.5). In this phase of prayer, the Beloved is drawing the soul to union beyond sensual ways of knowing. This leaves bodily external senses feeling dry and disorientated.

*An Example of Prayer.* At this time in our life images feel barren and lifeless and prayer becomes dry. A woman recalls a time when life and prayer were dark and cold like winter.

I always used to love meditating on the scriptures and entering the scene with Jesus. On this retreat though, I would sit for hours by an ice covered pond alone, in the dark with only a shimmer of moonlight. My senses were frozen, my affections felt like dry ice. Each moment of prayer felt like an eternity. I felt I couldn't pray. I couldn't change anything, and yet I didn't want to change anything. I wasn't frightened. I was in love but I did not know how to love any more. I yearned for God and strangely the absence I felt kept me yearning and kept me true. Now I realize loving Wisdom was tearing through the veil of my senses and wounding me deeply forcing me to confront my

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<sup>9</sup> Siegfried and Morneau, *Selected Poetry*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> When describing the early stages on the journey to union with God, John creates a dichotomy between sense and spirit that is often misinterpreted as separating sensual and spiritual with a disregard for the sensual. It is only after many years of our senses being filled with love that these sensual ways of knowing close so a deeper richer more sensitive way of knowing may emerge.

<sup>12</sup> Flower (Tr), "Dark Night", *Centered on Love*, 12.

loneliness and my pain and creating fissures in my self-image. This darkness continued for some years and now all I can say is “Ah the sheer grace.”<sup>13</sup>

This invitation to take the secret stair to pure nakedness and poverty of spirit takes us deeper into the darkening of the intellect.

*Signs of the Night of Sense.* We can discern if this experience is a sensual night of meeting our Beloved, if even in spite of all this discomfort, there is an urgent longing for God and in the face of dryness and pain, we still inexplicably long to be alone and in quiet. Called into this desert solitude, without our usual sensual feelings, without knowing the way, the resonance of the great song of night disturbs within. Yet, in spite of all contradiction, this night opens into a sensual darkness and at the same time longing becomes luminous. John gives three clear signs that a person’s commitment to prayer is leading them into this night of sense:<sup>14</sup> First, everything feels dry. The soul does not get any satisfaction or consolation from the things of God, or of creation. Second, because in the past the memory would naturally turn towards God, the soul now thinks it has lost its love for God and is going backwards. Third, in spite of all effort there is a powerlessness and inability to meditate and make use of the imagination.

God no longer communicates to the soul through the senses but begins to communicate through pure spirit, in the spiritual senses of the heart, in simple contemplation where there is no discursive succession of thought. The exterior and interior senses feel nothing. As we orientate ourselves to this deeper call to intimacy, it is essential that we do not give up prayer, but simply remain in loving attentiveness centered in our heart which is in God, even though we don’t know it, and feel wounded and disorientated. This takes us to a whole new commitment to identify with our Beloved who is wounded in love for us, not seeing, not feeling our Espoused One, but simply remaining loving our Beloved in quiet solitude. The night of sense unfolds into a night of spirit.

### *Lost in the Fathomless Abyss of God: Nights of Spirit*

Jessica Powers, again has a poem that captures the experience of the movement into the deeper dark night of spirit that “blinds the tainted spirit utterly”. The loving in this night voids, even annihilates our memory, understanding and will, so that in loving silence our heart may be enflamed in love. Jessica sheds light on this invitation:

There was a man went forth into the night  
with proud step I saw his garment blowing;  
I saw him reach the great cloud of unknowing.  
He went in search of love whose sign was light.  
From the dark night of sense I saw him turn  
into the deeper dark nights of the soul  
where no least star marks a divine patrol.<sup>15</sup>

Usually, after settling into contemplation and coming to an equilibrium in loving, with our outer and inner physical senses still and recollected, and our deeper inner spiritual senses more refined, an opaque night of spirit falls. The Divine Spouse invites us

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<sup>13</sup> All prayer examples are used with permission.

<sup>14</sup> See 1N9.1-9.

<sup>15</sup> Siegfried and Morneau, *Selected Poetry*, 135.

to be wounded in love as he is wounded, to live his crucifixion, his dying, so we may truly be his bride in resurrection with a naked spirit.

The night of spirit wounds. The soul feels it is experiencing wound upon wound. The memory is wounded. The intellect and usual ways of knowing are voided and thrust into a cloud of unknowing. The memory is emptied. The affection becomes naked (Cf. 2A6.2). Like John's sketch of Christ crucified the soul feels naked, hanging and lifeless.<sup>16</sup> This usually means a total reorientation of our life, what we do with our time, our work, and of course, who we are. If we resist and cling tenaciously to our previous security, we become lost in the wilderness of mediocrity and compromise. If we take this way of unknowing, we follow our Espoused One to the cross. John likens this encounter at midnight to the annihilation of soul Christ experienced when, without any consolation of the presence of God, he cried "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" [Mt27:46] (2A7.11). In this existential cry into all that is absurdly nothing, the tears of the Wisdom-Word, which are the tears of all creation, transform all suffering. In his cry the Wounded One places a bond of union where God feels most absent. He becomes the archetype for the wound of suffering to be the wound of love. He exemplifies how we may be totally detached and free in both sense and spirit from all things, and be nakedly one with pure Wisdom. John shows how in this annihilation, our Beloved becomes the door-way to contemplation. He becomes the abyss of love that holds us as we undergo the annihilation of our spirit and surrender into the same act of love.

John reassures that in the cry of abandonment, in voiding all images in a kenosis of unknowing, God infuses us. We are: "transformed into simple and pure Wisdom, the Son of God" (2A15.4). John explains how in this experience of being reduced to nothing, the soul enters into the highest degree of humility in union with the spouse. No longer mediated by imprecise senses, feelings and ideas, union through, with and in our Espoused One, is an accomplished fact, even though the intellect does not know it. The soul enters the *nada*. The *nada* that is all. The cries of the heart penned in John's sketch of the climb of Mount Carmel ring true: "To reach satisfaction in all desire satisfaction in nothing. To come to the knowledge of all desire the knowledge of nothing. To come to possess all desire the possession of nothing. To arrive at being all desire to be nothing."<sup>17</sup> *Nada* becomes the only way.

*An Example of Prayer.* A man describes his experience of living the crucifixion of Christ, crying the cry of abandonment as an expression of desire to surrender all meaning, all intellectual constructs into an abyss of unknowing and lovingly risk all security for Jesus the beloved of his heart. He speaks of his prayer:

One day while journeying with Jesus to the cross, I had a deep dark yearning to say totally and absolutely yes to Jesus. Yes I will be with you in this crucifixion, and yes let it be done, even as my intellect reacted in confusion and despair to the implications of this surrender. My response continued to be yes. I love you. I surrendered into the empty darkness with Jesus as he cried My God, my God why have you abandoned me?, although in that moment I felt lost to him. All I could feel was absence. And versions of this absence lasted many years. I felt lost in an abyss of unknowing.

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<sup>16</sup> Kananaugh (Tr), *Collected Works*, insert.

<sup>17</sup> Kananaugh (Tr), *Collected Works*, 111-112.

Now I can see how John's poem about the falcon holds the experience for me: "Love was my goal. I took the way: the leap I made was dark and blind but raised me higher than the mind can compass, so I seized my prey...lowly, more humbled grew my heart. More downcast than I ever knew, 'Saying no one can find the way'. In my esteem I fell so low (yet higher soared than I could know) that in the end I seized my prey).<sup>18</sup> I felt confused. Abandoned. I had no theology left to hold me secure as my heart yearned. I felt discarded. I wondered if I could ever make meaning of this great mystery again.

This surrender into unknowing beyond memory and understanding was an act of unconditional love.

John's language is searing, and not to be misinterpreted. He is not pushing us into an unhealthy desolation, or a hopeless nihilism. He is awakening us to the most sublime love, the transforming touches of pure divine love that only a silent and empty heart can receive. As John says, unless these caverns of the faculties of memory, intellect and will are wounded and emptied, "they do not feel the vast emptiness of their deep capacity" (F3.18) The memory is to be free of past hurts, the intellect released from limiting thoughts and the will to be totally in love and responsive to the Beloved.<sup>19</sup> John seeks to expand restrictive ideas of self, world and God, so that the soul may be truly one with God.

Within this horizon of these nights of sense where we hush the house, and of spirit where we become lost in the abyss of divine love, we will now focus on how our Word-Wisdom draws us into deeper solitude, to build our nest of serene silence one in him. We will focus on being awakened by the flame of love, the silent music and sounding solitude we come to hear, and the sweet breathing of the Trinity that becomes our very breath. Finally I will draw out implications for our Church today.

## ENFLAMING SILENCE

### *Awakened by the Flame of Love*

Once prayer enters a phase of silent simplicity, an awareness dawns in us that what felt desolate, abandoned and empty is now being enflamed in love. A radical change of desire and consciousness takes place as we come home to our centre. Previously, like fire burning wood, the fire of love penetrated our soul in a night of painful contemplation. As the flames darkened and consumed our unrefined ways of seeing, knowing and loving, we felt wounded deeply in our spirit. We understood nothing. Our intellect was in darkness. Now, far beyond the limits of the intellect, the Spirit is recollecting our senses and spirit and inflaming a deeper ever-consuming passion of love for the Beloved. The wound of not knowing becomes an exquisite burning wound of love. John explains:

Since this love is infused, it is more passive than active and thus generates in the soul a strong passion of love. This love is now beginning to possess something of union with God and thereby shares to a certain extent in the properties of this union. These properties are actions of God more than of the soul and they reside in it passively, although the soul does give its consent. But only the love of God that is being united to the soul imparts the heat, strength, temper, and passion of love, or fire (2N11.2).

Here the flame wounds and dances and unites. And we become aware of this enflaming in a pure silence experienced far beyond the limits of our sensual and

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<sup>18</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> This emptying corresponds to receiving faith hope and love.

intellectual ways of knowing. Silence feels enflamed. In this fertile silence the burning Spirit unites the soul to the Beloved Spouse, the resurrected and glorified Christ whose love has wounded and pierced through to the secret centre of the soul. This awareness swells our heart in love. The soul sings:

Flame, living flame, compelling,  
 yet tender past all telling,  
 reaching the secret centre of my soul!  
 Since now evasion's over  
 finish your work, my Lover,  
 break the last thread,  
 wound me and make me whole!<sup>20</sup>

Now each time the flame of divine love burning in our heart assails us, we long for it to do so. And this flame does so tenderly as though it is tearing through the last threads of veil after veil, that have separated us from awareness of the Trinity's indwelling presence in our deepest centre. The night becomes enflamed and all that we have experienced in encountering our dark God becomes radiant in love.

John explains what he means by "*profound centro*", the secret centre of our soul. John also refers to this centre as "intimate centre of the substance of the soul" (F2:8) and "the middle of the heart of the spirit (F2.10). This centre is a mystery of oneness in God beyond words. It is further translated as "inmost core"<sup>21</sup> or "deepest centre".<sup>22</sup> John explains: "The soul's center is God. When it has reached God with all the capacity of its being and the strength of its operation and inclination, it will have attained its final and deepest center in God, it will know, love, and enjoy God with all its might" (F.prol.12). This deepest centre is more than a purely anthropological point of union. It is a dynamic fusing of God and the soul in one ground that is personal, communal and cosmic. It is the sublime communion taking place on the summit of My Carmel in the centre of our soul. Contemplation awakens and centres us in the heart of this communion.

Eloquently, John invites us into our own experience of this Loving Presence:

Who can fittingly speak of this intimate point of the wound, which seems to make its mark in the middle of the heart of the spirit, there where the soul experiences the excellence of the delight? The soul feels that the point is like a tiny mustard seed, very much alive and enkindled, sending into its surroundings a living and enkindled fire of love. The fire issuing from the substance and power of that living point, which contains the substance and power of the herb, is felt to be subtly diffused through all the spiritual and substantial veins of the soul in the measure of the soul's power and strength. The soul feels its ardor strengthen and increase and its love become so refined in this ardor that seemingly there flow seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love. It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for conscious of the living point or centre of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love (F2.10).

In this intimate point of our centre revealed through the wound of love, that is the middle of the heart of the spirit, we commune with our Spouse in the boundless love of

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<sup>20</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> St John of the Cross, *The Poems*, Translated by Roy Campbell (London: Harvill Press, 1951), 47.

<sup>22</sup> Kananaugh (Tr), *Collected Works*, 636.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This point feels like a tiny mustard seed enflamed, diffusing our entire soul in radiant light, until we feel like a sea of fiery love. In this infusing and diffusing our spirit is enkindled. We realize all is one, heaven and earth, the universe, the cosmos. All is boundless love.

John summons us to centre all our love in this luminous point, in the middle of the heart of our spirit, and to tear through the veils of sensual and intellectual ways of knowing through entering deeper and deeper recollection in silence. Passive and detached, we delicately align every molecule of our being into consenting to the burning of the flame of love wounding and penetrating into our centre. He urges us to surrender to the tearing of the last threads that keep us separate from awareness of this secret inner centre. In her translation of the *Flame*, Ackerman points out that John's mother was a weaver, so John had a love for woven cloth. She shows how the word "tela" alludes to an array of nuances evoking the images of Spanish veils, ribbons or delicate lace.<sup>23</sup> The veil is the silver veil of faith that when torn reveals the gold of divine truths (C12.4). It is the bride's veil that is removed at the wedding (2N24.3). It is the threads of distractions that prevent us from seeing clearly the love we dwell within and entering the deepest centre of our heart. The veil will finally dissolve when we die into Love. Prayer responds to the tender touch of the flame enkindling our spirit and tearing the threads of the veil away in an act of love. And we cry: "Burn! That is for my healing! Wound of delight past feeling!"<sup>24</sup> Contemplation helps us co-operate with the Holy Spirit in removing the veils.

*An Example of Prayer.* Prayer at this time takes on a new feeling of deep inner freedom and lightness of heart. A woman describes her experience:

I love to come to my Beloved in prayer, my Silent One. We meet and melt together in the wine cellar. I calm and still my body and my mind, recollect my outer feelings and draw all that I am, every particle of my being to the centre. I simply sit in love and if a thought arises or a feeling scatters me, I simply breathe into my Silent One. I lose myself breathing in the breath of boundless love. I know I belong to the all in all.

Entering into the eternal silence of God in recollection each time we go to prayer returns us to our centre. It awakens us to the breathing of the indwelling Presence, to the breath that is our only life and source. Now solitude becomes a necessity.

### *Silent Music: Tranquil Nights*

The enkindling of our spirit by the flame of love creates a profound inner silence and loving communion in our centre, which flows out into an integration of the scattered fragments of veils that have kept us separate. The words of the next line ring true: "Ah gentle hand whose touch is a caress".<sup>25</sup> The caress of the Espoused One quietens the soul. We recognize the Beloved Presence in our heart in silence, peace and tranquility. "The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul" (S.100), John writes in his *Sayings*. In his letters he often quoted "In silence and in hope shall our strength be [Is. 30:15]" (L30).

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<sup>23</sup> John of the Cross, *the Living Flame of Love*, Translated by Jane Ackerman (Arizona: Arizona State University, 1997), 12.

<sup>24</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 22.

And in a letter to the Carmelites at Bea, he encourages silence as “silence and work recollects and strengthens the spirit”(L8). “It is impossible to advance without doing and suffering virtuously, all enveloped in silence.”(L8), he repeats. John affirms that “when we are turned to God then we are strongly and inwardly drawn toward silence” (L8). John’s words whisper something about everything as they soak the soul in silence.

Therefore, like the immortal delicacy of “night”, “silence” is an “immeasurably sweetened wafer of light” that unites us with our Beloved in the night. In one sense being recollected, naked and silent unites us with the Word the Father spoke in eternal silence, and in another, the Word is the silence. John’s *Canticle* gives us some of the most exquisite hints of the wonder of this silence that makes us one with God in image and likeness. He elaborates on the silent music and sounding solitude we experience in our heart:

Lonely valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady, and flowing with fresh waters; in the variety of their groves and in the sweet song of the birds, they afford abundant recreation and delight to the senses, and in their solitude and silence they refresh and give rest. These valleys are what my Beloved is to me (C14-15.7)

Once the soul enters the valleys of quiet a serene night sets in. The soul hears the music of silence and the sound of solitude and discovers the Espoused One to be:

silent music because in him she knows and enjoys this symphony of spiritual music. Not only is he silent music, but he is also sounding solitude... When these spiritual faculties are alone and empty of all natural forms and apprehensions, they can receive in a most sonorous way the spiritual sound of the excellence of God, in himself and in his creatures (C14-15:26).

The silent Word is a symphony of spiritual music, pure harmony in the soul. Empty in sense and spirit, the spirit sings with this silent music, in harmony with the loving of the Holy Spirit. We become “a symphony of love” (SC14-15:26). This silent love song creates a cosmic symphony of love. Now stabilized in resurrection light the night unfolds into the rising dawn.

Just as dawn dispels the darkness of night and unveils the light of day, so the spirit at rest in God expands beyond the darkness of narrow knowledge, to the morning light of the boundless wisdom of God. Dawn imparts resurrection. Gently and lovingly caressed by the Espoused Word-Wisdom the soul awakens and realizes it can breathe in harmony with the breath of God.

### *In Your Sweet Breathing*

This enflaming love so exquisitely and delicately felt, as God rests and reposes in our tranquil heart, sensitizes us to the sweet breath of the Beloved, at home in our heart: John’s *Living Flame* becomes a paean to the fullness of boundless divine love.

Ah! Gentle and so loving  
you wake within me, proving  
that you are there in secret and alone;  
your fragrant breathing stills me,  
your grace, your glory fills me  
So tenderly your love becomes my own.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 23.

Like the flame flickering, the fragrant breathing of the loving silent Word-Wisdom stills and fills our heart with the glorious breath of resurrection peace. With our spirit burnt through, annihilated in abandoning all, the flame enkindles our spirit “like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air.” (F3.9) This is the breath of the Spirit alive, living in us, a living flame of love. “The flame flickers and flares together with the enkindled air...to bring the air with itself to the centre of its sphere,” John explains. (F3.10) This air the flame produces is exquisite. John’s tone is graceful:

...it is as though the soul were to say: How gentle and loving... is your awakening, O Bridegroom Word, in the center and depth of my soul, which is its pure and intimate substance, in which secretly and silently, as its only Lord, you dwell alone, not only as in your house, nor only as in your bed, but also as in my own heart, intimately and closely united to it. And how delicately you captivate me and arouse my affections toward you in the sweet breathing you produce in this awakening, a breathing delightful to me and full of good and glory (LF4.3).

Secretly and silently, our Bridegroom Word at home in our own heart, breathes in us, enlivening our spirit with his Spirit. Present now as Holy Spirit, our Bridegroom-Word absorbs, impassions and enflames us in love. We are no longer praying, but are passively responsive to the gentle sighs of the Spirit’s breath in us, in sighs too deep for words. This breathing of the Spirit takes over who we are. Every breath, thought, emotion, desire, action, is in-spired by the Spirit. Enkindled, we breathe in a harmonious, energizing, boundless mystery of love.

Earlier in his *Canticle* John describes this sublime breathing of the Holy Spirit in our soul, which he portrays as a garden full of budded flowers of virtue:

Soft breathing of the air,  
sweet song of nightingale above the plain,  
the graceful thicket, where  
a night serene and fair,  
brings flame that burns, consuming with no pain.<sup>27</sup>

The soft breath of the Spirit breathes through us, opens all the buds of virtues, and uncovers the aromatic spices of our gifts. John stretches language to its limit as he shows how in this mystical marriage we breathe with the same breath of the Spirit as our Beloved, a breath of the love that unites us in the Trinity in one boundless love:

This spiration (breathing) of love is the Holy Spirit who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to himself. There would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed in the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity in an open and manifest degree. And this kind of spiration (breath) of the Holy Spirit in the soul, by which God transforms her into himself, is so sublime, delicate, and deep a delight that a mortal tongue finds it indescribable, nor can the human intellect, as such, in any way grasp it. Even what comes to pass in the communication given in this temporal transformation is unspeakable, for the soul united and transformed in God breathes out in God to God the very divine spiration (breath) that God - she being transformed in him - breathes out in himself to her (C39.3).

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<sup>27</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 21.

In this silent stillness where our senses, our memory, our understand and our will are at rest, we experience an infusion of God . We feel we are not breathing and realize that God is breathing in us and in our breath we are returning to God the very life and love God gave to us.

John elaborates in the *Flame*: “This is a remarkable quality, for the soul loves through the Holy Spirit, as the Father and the Son love each other, according to what the Son himself declares through St. John: That the love with which you have loved me be in them and I in them [Jn. 17:26]” (F3.82). We love in the same way “through the Holy Spirit who is given to us [Rom 5:5]” (C38.3). We now breathe in God, the Father’s breathing in the Son, the Son’s breathing in the Father, and both their breathing out in the Holy Spirit. This sublime delicate deep delightful mystery of three and one is transforming us into Trinitarian love. John sings:

Oh, how happy is this soul, which ever experiences God resting and reposing within it!  
Oh, how fitting it is for it to withdraw from things, flee from business matters, and live in immense tranquility, so that it may not, even with the slightest speck of dust or noise, disturb or trouble its heart where the Beloved dwells (F4.15).

The breathing and reposing in this union of divine love make us happy. We are wounded, but now our wounds are enflamed in love to share the life, the very breath of the Trinity. We share in the loveliness of God. John refers to this total mutuality, which Flower’s translation highlights as “strange new found glowing”, which Ackerman translates “strange lovelinesses”.<sup>28</sup> This awareness is “strange” because it is foreign to our old way of thinking and feeling. John explains:

A reciprocal love is thus actually formed between God and the soul, like the marriage union and surrender, in which the goods of both... are possessed by both together. They say to each other what the Son of God spoke to the Father through St. John:... (All my goods are yours and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them) [Jn. 17:10] (F3.79).

Indwelling, mutual, reciprocal love is at the heart of our humanity. The soul now gives to God what God is giving to humanity. John’s words ring true:

O lamps of fire bright burning  
with splendid brilliance, turning  
deep caverns of my soul to pools of light!  
Once shadowed dim and knowing,  
now their strange new found glowing  
gives warmth and radiance for my Love’s delight.<sup>29</sup>

The deep caverns of feeling that were once obscure, together with the deep caverns of our memory, understanding and will, become not only bright and clear, but like a resplendent light, giving forth “so rarely, so exquisitely, both warmth and light to their Beloved.” Once wonderfully and marvelously pervaded with the splendors of divine light, they give forth to God, in God, the very splendors we have received. In John’s words:

Inclined in God toward God, having become enkindled lamps within the splendors of the divine lamps, they render the Beloved the same light and heat they receive. In the very manner they receive it, they return it to the one who gave it, and with the same

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<sup>28</sup> Ackermann (Tr), *Living Flame*, 210.

<sup>29</sup> Flower (Tr), *Centered on Love*, 22-23.

exquisite beauty; just as the window when the sun shines on it, for it then too reflects the splendors. Yet the soul reflects the divine light in a more excellent way because of the active intervention of its will. (F3.77)

The boundless love of each divine person is combined into the light and fire of love in our heart that fills us in joy. We glow in loveliness enjoying, delighting, praising and thanking in deep humility because God is God (Cf. F3.82-84). And so, radiant in the loveliness of silence enflamed, we create a permanent solitude of heart. We give thanks:

In solitude we live,  
and there in solitude build a nest;  
in solitude God gives  
us guidance, love and rest,  
wounded, like us, in solitary quest.

### *Living from the Centre of Love*

There are many implications for this crisis-time in our night of Church, but at this stage, I wish to highlight four: the implications of living from our centre in God, of participating in the life of God, of a contemplative way of knowing and truly believing that silence is the language of God.

*A Contemplative Centre.* John adds a rich array of images and words for union to our vocabulary, placing oneness with God at the foundation of what it means to be human. He shifts our gaze from what distinguishes and separates to what unties and makes whole. Contemplation has the power to transform human and cosmic relationships. Through going into the depths of the inner centre of the heart where we love and enjoy the divine presence, we can purge, free, enkindle and enflame the desire of our heart and activate the will to work for justice, to create a world vision where God is recognized as being in all things and all things are revered as in God. John invites us to go beyond the perimeters of our longing, to look over the edge of human consciousness and dwell there. He offers wise and time-proven insights into how to take this journey and live from the energies of union. This vision makes dualistic thinking redundant. It gives a heightened appreciation of human transcendence and of the human capacity to be one.

*Participating in the Life of God.* John's vision of human divine relating is nothing less than loving participative wisdom. He awakens our ways of knowing so we may realize that the divine animating Spirit that is boundless love is the life that gives us life. Contemplation prepares us to become present to this Spirit, aware of and transformed by the very breath and life of the persons of the Trinity. This means that the breath and life of God does not come from outside creation by a God self-contained and separate from the cosmos, but deeply and profoundly within the very life and spirit of this creation. Contemplation frees us from constrictive ways of feeling, thinking and knowing and focuses our ability to know nakedly and darkly that Spirit breath is our breath, if we can only breathe in harmony and not work against the divine breath. John awakens us to the potential of breathing out in God the very divine breath that God breathes in and out in the one boundless love of Trinitarian loving.

*A Contemplative Way of Knowing.* The nights of transformation that John leads us through, far from disregarding our humanity and our sensual and spiritual ways of

knowing and loving, free us to be truly human. Union with the Beloved Word-Wisdom creates a transformation in our senses, our mind, our memory, our desires, our will. Purifying our sensual ways of relating is not disregarding our senses but after many nights of our senses being filled with love, showing them how to become naked and clothed in nothing but God. This maturing capacity to recollect, to centre and repose in God beyond all sensations and feelings unites our senses to our spirit. Rather than create a dichotomy between senses and spirit, contemplation unites and reveals inner truths lost to our outer self.

The spiritual nights that are a kenosis, a surrender into unknowing, expand us beyond the limits of cognitive thought. Memory is erased with old wounds healed. Our will is harmonized and acts only through the divine desire. We come to know the virtue of pure faith, the ultimate assurance of trustworthy hope, and the totality of love. When the wound of the spirit lost in the fathomless abyss of God feels like nothing, we are ready to stabilize in resurrection. Now our beloved Word-Wisdom fills our mind, our heart our soul. Softened and gentled we are free and able to look for union and nourish it. We are ready to participate in the eternal memory of God with our consciousness enflamed.

*Silence is the Language of God.* The silent music and sounding solitude of divine silence is intrinsically healing, transforming and unitive. Contemplative prayer awakens us to the many qualities of silence that when entered into draw us into eternal silence that makes us one. John shows us how to harmonize and integrate all the noise and distracting energies so that we unite in the one boundless silent love of the Trinity. John helps us envisage how God spoke the Word from silence into the universe so that now this Word as Wisdom and Lover may embrace us in silence. This kiss of silence creates a tranquil and serene heart. It imparts peace, a true peace that is shalom. Silence is the fertile seed that can flower into world and cosmic peace.

## CONCLUSION

This moment in time in our history is “night” time. And “night” we recall is our Beloved Word Wisdom, one in the boundless love of the Trinity. Night is breathing with the breath of Trinitarian love from within this all encompassing divine life. Contemplation is at the heart of what it is to be Catholic. Contemplation is at the heart of what it is to be human. So in this “naked now” we have the opportunity to respond as Mary did when she said “Yes” to the spirit conceiving the silent Word-Wisdom in her. This is our *kairos* time. Can we risk her response: “Let it be done according to your Word”?

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