

St. John of the Cross: Mystic

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Within our community of faith, our understanding of ‘mystical’ refers to a literary work that expresses the encounter of the human person in a “direct, intuitional experience of God through unifying love...an encounter so intimate, so unique, so literally ineffable that it defies capture in human words.”¹ Those that have these experiences of union we call ‘mystics’ and those that are capable of expressing this encounter or attempts at expressing this encounter are called ‘mystical writers.’

In our own strivings for union with God we will at times come across writings of these mystics. We find ourselves drawn to them because in a way they are not only prophets of God’s loving and redeeming presence in our world but also witnesses of the possibilities of our own union (in varying degrees) with God even in this life. Their experience is an affirmation that God continues to be Emmanuel, ‘God-is-with-us’.

In John’s own journey of seeking union with God we see that God has responded to his desire and blessed him with that experience of union. But not only was John blessed, but through his experience, we were blessed as well. God blessed John with the grace to explain and teach us about the process of this journey towards God. From John’s own struggle and desire to be free from all encumbrances he is capable of giving general advice for all of us who find ourselves on the way to the ‘celestial Jerusalem.’ The ‘Celestial Jerusalem’ is symbolic language (as well as ‘the wedding feast of the Lamb’) for our own future complete communion with the Triune God through the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ. As John entered deeper into his transformative relationship with Christ Jesus, he entered into his own purification and

¹ New Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), vol. 10, “Mysticism in Literature”, 179

transformation. This journey and encounter with Christ is what John attempts to communicate in his poetry.

“Where have You hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling You, and You were gone.”

In all of his poetry we can intuit something of the ineffable, a something that draws us and captivates us whether we can understand it or not. There is something there that we ourselves are able to intuit about our own journey. There is an Absolute Truth that John has encountered and it has been an encounter of Love and Transformation. John points out the dynamism of this journey in his poetic language of yearnings through images of ‘the Encounter’, the ‘wound’ of being ‘enamored’, the ‘Betrothal’, the ‘Marriage of Bride and Bridegroom’, the ‘Nights’ and ‘Fire’ that transforms.

“How gently and lovingly
You wake in my heart,
Where in secret You dwell alone;
And in Your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory,
How tenderly You swell my heart with love.”
Living Flame, stanza 4

“The capacity of these caverns [the soul] is deep, because the object of this capacity, namely God, is profound and infinite. Thus in a certain fashion their capacity is infinite, their thirst is infinite, their hunger is also deep and infinite...”²
Living Flame, 3, 22

“He was not a philosopher or a theologian in a professional sense, but a man inebriated with God to whom everything else was of little or no importance.”³

May our Father St. John of the Cross intercede for us to find the gift of a transformed life in the Mystery of the Cross that we celebrate daily upon our altars.

² The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross (Washington, D. C.: ICS Publications, 1979), 618.

³ R. A. Herrera, *Silent Music: The Life, Work, and Thought of St. John of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 17.