

Therese and Saint John of the Cross

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Thérèse's Affinity with John

After she entered Carmel Thérèse openly admitted her debt to John of the Cross: "Ah! how many lights have I not drawn from the works of our holy Father, St. John of the Cross! At the ages of seventeen and eighteen I had no other spiritual nourishment" (A 83r). But these lights began earlier and continued increasing until her death. When in a period of dryness she focused on the Gospels in her prayer, and left aside spiritual books, John of the Cross remained the exception, perhaps the only one. She continued reading and quoting from him with the same fondness as before. In the last months of her life, she frequently relived and repeated words from the *Living Flame of Love*. Explicit references to John of the Cross appear throughout her writings. Direct testimonies abound that she continually mentioned his life and doctrine in her conversations and oral teachings.

Contrasts in Life and Culture

The attraction is surprising. Given the differences in origin, family, epoch, life, temperament, and education, the harmony between the two is unexpected. In Therese we find a childhood surrounded by affection and bounty, a temperament sensitive and emotional; she was the centre of attention for her whole family, isolated from the world and its suffering. In John of the Cross, on the other hand, we find a childhood of suffering and privation, hard and humble work, study, and care of those with contagious diseases. Within Carmel the life of the two manifests little in common. Therese writes at age twenty in a narrative, autobiographical, and anecdotal style. John at forty writes in a clean, essential, and symbolic language.

But beyond the differences, there prevails a kind of pre-established harmony. When Thérèse was twelve or thirteen years old her father hid the works of St. John of the Cross from her for fear that his rigorous teachings would warp her spiritual growth. Precisely from those years of growth an autograph has been conserved, in which she repeats in a handwriting exercise the strong motto of John of the Cross: "Lord, to suffer and be despised for you."

The Type of Relationship

Her interest in her Carmelite father and master was not a matter of simple devotion or of recalling luminous passages. What we find is a convergence in key points of their teaching. Thérèse experienced a profound and spontaneous communion with the very person of the saint, and not merely with his writings. He is "Our Holy Father," the spiritual father of the Teresian Carmelite family. Attitudes and sentiments of veneration, affection, and discipleship were mingled: he is the saint, the father, the master, a brother and friend. Her admiration was spontaneous for this mature man, this experienced and sure witness to God, who was also a theologian of keen insight. She feels she is his disciple, sister, reader, daughter. In him she finds a spiritual model who empowers, strengthens, inspires, and offers her sometimes even the exact word for expressing her own experience.

Toward the Nucleus

An unerring instinct guides her directly to the nucleus of John of the Cross's experience: love, vocation in the church, dark and sure faith, the cross, hope, death and glory. She discovers the dynamics of the theological virtues in John's synthesis at a time when the theological-spiritual study of his doctrine had not yet come to a similar precision. All her quotations and all that strikes a chord in her are connected with the life of the theological virtues: union of love, intimate experience (in intensity and extension) of union with God in faith, love, and hope. This tri-dimensional relationship with God has from the beginning to the end the same axis for both saints: love, the life and death of love. We know that among the few books Thérèse kept in her room for personal use are the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*, bound in one volume. Love is her centre, but not her boundary. Impelled by an expanding love, Thérèse takes upon herself the demands and experience of the *todo-nada* (the "all-nothing") found in the *Ascent*, as well as the "night of faith" found in the *Dark Night*.

Love

By grace, vocation, and temperament, Thérèse from the beginning centres on love and takes the *Spiritual Canticle* as her preferred book. Here she sees portrayed John of the Cross himself, “the saint of love par excellence,” and she finds herself portrayed as well in her most intimate aspirations. For her, stanzas 25-29 form the heart of the work: young souls in love with Christ, the inner wine cellar, the total gift through love, the contemplative vocation, service of the church. John here shows Thérèse how to love, the plenitude of Christian, ecclesial, and Carmelite life, and how to be contemplatives so as to love. Now she wants no other office, only to devote herself to love: to love and be loved.

She encounters the supreme value of the church and the meaning of her own vocation in one of John’s classic phrases that fills her with enthusiasm: “A little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works put together” (*Canticle*, 29, 2).

All and Nothing

Love, for Thérèse as for John of the Cross, is not an isolated feeling but the total gift of one’s entire life, a renunciation of all that is not love of God. The experience of love uncovered for her the demands of an unconditional vocation. She entered, then, into the rhythm of the Ascent of Mount Carmel “To love is to labour to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God” (*Ascent*, 2, 5, 7).

From the time she was a child, she chose “all,” not love by half measures. Her vocation of love asserted itself with markedly Sanjuanist colours. Marie of the Trinity tells us that she insisted that “her little way of humility and love was none other than that of St. John of the Cross: the nothing that we are, the all that God is.” She does not reject the harshest expressions of her master: it is necessary to suffer, to suffer much; I suffered before, but I didn’t love suffering.

Night of Faith

Unexpectedly, a final discovery of faith, pure and dark, came over her. It was a painful experience that pressed upon and precipitated her into an abyss of darkness. She entered into the world of suffering for which she was not psychologically predisposed and converted it into a supreme form of union of love. It is the mark of her interior and exterior life during her last months. The fraternal word of her brother John was both spiritual company and a precious help. In her desolation, she and her sisters referred to the experience with terms taken from the “dark night of faith” of St. John of the Cross.

It was an all-encompassing problem regarding life and meaning. She spoke with the same words and examples of the master: temptations toward blasphemy, scruples, and even the sense that death would be a relief. And we find also the same positive elements: interpretation of the experience in the key of faith, trust in God who never abandons us, and solicitude about serving him, at least materially, with gestures that seemed to her of little value.

Hope and the Death of Love

All her life and work resonated with the virtue of hope: great desires and certitude about their fulfilment. Two of John’s principles form the basis for this: “The more he wants to give, the more he makes us desire” (Letter 15); “for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains” (*Ascent*, 3, 7, 2). God does not inspire us with unrealisable desires.

She identified with the *Living Flame of Love*, especially the verse of the first stanza, “tear through the veil of this sweet encounter: to live by and die of love. “With what longing and what consolation I repeated from the beginning of my religious life these other words of St. John of the Cross: ‘It is of the highest importance that the soul practice love very much in order that, being consumed rapidly, she may be scarcely retained here on earth but promptly reach the vision of her God face to face (DE 26.7.5; HLC 113). During the last months of her life, Thérèse and her sisters seemed to be reliving this scene from the Flame.

Personal and Cultural Adaptation

The benefit Thérèse sought to derive from the Sanjuanist corpus was limited by her simplicity of thought and life. The selection was not guided by criteria such as gentleness or rigor, love or renunciation. She accepted without reserve the master's most exalted expressions as well as his most austere.

One notes her silence in certain areas, or at least the absence of explicit references to them: the mystical life, its graces and phenomena; the prayer of loving attention; the purifying of all mediations through faith and love; the transcendence of God in the *Ascent*; and the Trinitarian perspectives of the *Canticle* and *Flame*. Carried along by her own experience or under the influence of some other source, she modified many of the things taken from her father and master. Regarding love, she enlarged and went deeper into the meaning of the reference to the church in stanzas 27-29 of the *Canticle*. She developed her own ideas about abandonment and victim-hood, words that John of the Cross never used. As for the image of night, she introduces into the living experience of the dark night shades of atheism and materialism, unthinkable in John of the Cross's time and environment; she lives the dark night at the end, not as an earlier phase of the journey. One could add many other divergences.

Common Grace

We all benefit from this spiritual kinship and affinity. The reader of John of the Cross's works will encounter new stimuli and orientations in Thérèse's simple and profound rereading of John: 1) She confirmed what John foresaw, that these matters will be understood better through the affinity gained from mystical experience than through the study of scholastic theology. 2) She identified from the outset the essential nucleus of the Sanjuanist doctrine without getting lost in minutiae of style or contrasting viewpoints. 3) She engaged in an authentic reading, open to the reality of grace and her personal experience, a faithful, dynamic, and original reading.

In the final analysis Saint Thérèse did not take the word of Saint John of the Cross as a book or doctrine, norm or project. Hers was a personal story about the common life of grace: this is what John of the Cross lived, and this very same thing is what is now happening to me.

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Conrad de Meester (ed.)

Saint Therese of Lisieux: Her Life, Times, and Teaching

Washington: ICS Publications, 1997.

Available from www.icspublications.org US\$44.95

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