

**Human Transformation and Union According
to the Writings of St. John of the Cross
Ongoing Formation
Volume II**

**National Formation Program
Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites**



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Dedication

This volume of ongoing formation is sincerely dedicated to:

Father Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, for introducing the new translations of the major writings of St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross to the English-speaking world and for devoting his entire life to teaching the essence of their writings by means of study guides and other major resources.

Father Saverio Cannistra, OCD, Superior General of the Discalced Carmelite Order (2009-2022), for planting the first seed of an idea to develop a single formation program for all Carmelite Seculars in the USA.

Father Miguel Marquez Calle, OCD, current Superior General of the Discalced Carmelite Order (2022-), for his encouragement and support.

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	1
Introduction.....	3
Major writings.....	3
Minor works.....	4
Why read John of the Cross today?	5
Explanation of the nature of union with God:.....	7
Loving knowledge (wisdom) of God.....	7
How should I decide which of John’s books to read first?	9
Formation Guidelines.....	12
Active Night of the Sense:	12
Active Night of the Spirit:	12
Faith, Hope, and Love:	13
THE ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL, Book Three.....	16
Purification of the Memory	17
Session One: Natural apprehensions: Purification of the memory by the practice of hope	17
Session Two: Supernatural apprehensions; Purification of the memory by the practice of hope	20
Session Three: The benefits obtained through the rejection of the apprehensions of images and forms	22
Purification of the Will	24
Session One: Joy in temporal goods – the first emotion of the will	24
Session Two: Natural goods: The vanity of willful joy in natural goods, and the method of directing oneself through them in God	29
Session Three: Purgation of sensory goods	32
Session Four: Purgation of Moral Goods	34
Session Five: Supernatural goods, the fifth kind of good in which the will can rejoice, and how joy in them must be directed to God through the purgation of this joy	37
Session Six: Purgation of joy in spiritual goods	39
Session Seven: Joy in spiritual goods. Continues the discussion of motivating goods. Oratories and dedicated places of prayer.	42
Bibliography	43
THE DARK NIGHT LEADING TO GOD’S ACTION, an Introduction (<i>Dark Night</i> – Books One and Two) ...	44
THE DARK NIGHT – BOOK ONE.....	47
Session One: The Imperfections of Beginners	47
Session Two: Beginning of the exposition of <i>The Dark Night</i> . Signs of Passive Night and Purgation.	52
Session Three: “Fired with love’s urgent longings – ah, the sheer grace! I went out unseen.”	56
THE DARK NIGHT – BOOK TWO	60
Session One: “The One Dark Night”	60
Session Two: Contemplative Purgation	62

Session Three: Impact of Contemplation	65
Session Four: “Fired with love’s urgent longings”	68
Session Five: The deepening of transformation	71
Session Six: Departing in “disguise” – “in darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled”	76
Bibliography	78
GLORIFICATION — Understanding the concepts of Transformation and Union	79
THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE	81
Session One: Stanzas 1-21	81
Session Two: Stanzas 22-25	84
Session Three: Stanzas 26-30	88
Session Four: Stanzas 31-35	94
Session Five: Stanzas 36-40	96
Bibliography	104
THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE	105
Introduction	105
Session One: Stanza 1 commentary 1-17	108
Session Two: Stanza 1 commentary 18-36	111
Session Three: Stanza 2 commentary 1-15	112
Session Four: Stanza 2 commentary 16-20	113
Session Five: Stanza 2 commentary 21-36	114
Session Six: Stanza 3 commentary 1-17	116
Session Seven: Stanza 3 commentary 17-29	119
Session Eight: Stanza 3 commentary 30-50	120
Session Nine: Stanza 3 commentary 67-85	123
Session Ten: Stanza 4 commentary 1-17	124
Bibliography	125
Appendix	126
Task Force Completion and Appreciation	129
Copyright notice	130

FOREWORD



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Ongoing formation has become an important topic in society in general all over the world. In his article, *What is Ongoing Formation?*, Hugh O'Donnell, CM,¹ states that “ongoing formation is a process for keeping up with the times in one’s chosen profession. Initial formation and professional training are only the foundations of a lifelong process of being current and up-to-date.” Initial formation, as important and essential as it is, is not enough. The world is always changing and we need to be prepared to face the new challenges and welcome the opportunities that the modern world brings.

The Catholic Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council, has remarked the importance of being up-to-date. In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope Paul VI states that “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (4). In order to do so, men and women have the responsibility to be committed to ongoing formation.

The Discalced Carmelite Order has taken seriously the importance of ongoing formation. In the document, *Being Discalced Carmelite Friars Today, Declaration on the Carmelite-Teresian Charism*, approved by the OCD General Chapter in 2021, it is mentioned that “the whole life of a Carmelite becomes a journey without rest, knowing that when we do not move forward, we remain stationary, and that whoever does not increase, decreases (cf. 7M 4:9). Above all, we are invited to live in an attitude of constant willingness to learn and grow with a true *docibilitas* which opens us to permanent updating” (9). In Carmel ongoing formation is an essential part of the vocation of all its members.

Being aware of the importance of formation, the OCDS members of the US Task Force, published the *National Formation Program* that covers the different stages of initial formation in the OCDS. The program has been very well received and has become an excellent instrument for formation throughout the country, and even abroad people have recognized its value as a formation program.

Responding to the requests of many US OCDS communities, the Task Force recognized the benefits of an Ongoing Formation program that would promote and value the Discalced Carmelite charism while allowing the freedom and flexibility that each OCDS community needs to adapt the program to their specific needs. The importance given to ongoing formation by society, the Catholic Church, and the Carmelite Order, led the US Task Force to develop a comprehensive program for ongoing formation, which further led them into the challenging task of brainstorming and outlining the specific topics that resonate within the Carmelite charism. At

¹ Vincentiana, March-April 2005

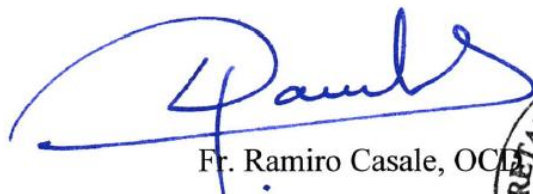
the initial stages they became aware of the need for clarity and the turbulent process of translating abstract ideas into text. Different perspectives were explored and relevant information and a wide range of resource materials were also considered in the development of an ongoing formation program.

After much work and dedication, the efforts of the US Task Force have become a reality. They have been able to create a roadmap for the writing process and identified the major themes and points that truly nurture the Spirit of Carmel. The ongoing formation program they developed is divided into two books and gives special attention to the writings of the three Carmelite doctors of the Church, the Word of God, Church documents and the writings of other Carmelite saints and blessed.

The first handbook, *The Path of Mount Carmel – The Perfect Spirit*, explores important themes such as how to grow in the charism of prayer, reflects on the apostolic dimension of the OCDS and gives prominence to St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. The second handbook, *Human Transformation and Union According to the Writings of St John of the Cross* is the continuing study and reflection on the major writings of our Holy Father. The themes in these handbooks are to be applied in one's daily life. The members of the US Task Force recognize that Carmelite Spirituality is meant to be lived in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives because God communicates not so much through books and abstract ideas, but rather through the witness of life and interactions with others.

We thank all the members of the US Task Force for their work and dedication that have made possible for all OCDS in the United States to have these handbooks in their hands. We are certain that this ongoing formation program is a precious instrument and an excellent resource for all OCDS communities and individuals.

From our General House in Rome on June 15, 2025, Solemnity of Most Holy Trinity.


Fr. Ramiro Casale, O.C.D.
General Delegate of the Secular Order
of the Discalced Carmelites



Introduction

Please note: Volume II, like Volume I, is intended to serve as a model and resource for ongoing formation. The program provides flexible and versatile options. **With the guidance of the local council**, communities may use the entire program as outlined or may choose an individual topic (e.g. Purification of the memory through the practice of hope; Purification of the will through the practice of charity). Participants may choose other books for study and discussion while still following the program's guidance and information. This program is offered by way of suggestion and example. Local councils are free to adapt the program as needed.

Volume II of Ongoing Formation is the continuing study and reflection of major writings of St. John of the Cross. For John, the soul refers to the whole human person. Its two major levels are sense and spirit. The growth in prayer and the living witness to the Discalced Carmelite charism is like a journey or path in the right direction. However, John does not explain the methods of prayer or offer a devotional treatise on prayer. Rather, his teaching involves how to behave as one embarks on a lifelong journey of love and transformation. "With divine help we will discuss ... how individuals should behave" (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Prologue #6). The process of purification and our behavioral changes in each stage of our spiritual journey constitute a form of prayer from meditation to contemplation, and on to union.

Silence and solitude of detachment

Following the tradition of Discalced Carmelite spirituality, walking in silence and solitude, without imposing techniques and methods, is very characteristic of John's teaching. What John means by solitude is the singleness of heart. This authentic solitude is not necessarily physical but a solitude of detachment or poverty of spirit for the sake of the Beloved (see footnote 1, SC, Stanza 35).

John uses the word solitude of detachment in two ways. First, he refers to the solitude of the "active night," those choices that we make to detach ourselves from our ego-driven desires so that we can create a space of solitude for God in our hearts. Second, John speaks of the solitude that is the consequence of these choices; the detachment or empty heart has not become a void but a "nest," a "place for God" where the soul "attains to complete refreshment and rest" (Canticle 35.1:4). Throughout John's writings, the solitude of detachment is presented in a positive light because he connects it to the peace and inner harmony that it brings to the soul (see *The Ascent to Joy*, footnote 7, page 143).

Major writings

His major works, *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night*, were written using the framework of his famous poem, *The Dark Night*. His prose composition explains the purification process of human formation, "progressing from the lesser to the greater and from the more exterior to the more interior..." (*The Ascent*, Book Two, 12:1). In *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*, John explains the soul's intimate recollection and union by using vivid imagery and descriptive language to convey his message.

In his prologue, John also strikes his customary cautious note to readers who are ready to embark on this journey:

Readers should not be surprised if this doctrine on the dark night – through which a soul advances toward God – appears somewhat obscure. This, I believe, will be the case as they begin to read, but as they read on they will understand it better since the latter parts will explain the former. Then, if they read this work a second time, the matter will seem clearer and the doctrine sounder.

But if some people still find difficulty in understanding this doctrine, it will be due to my deficient knowledge and awkward style, for the doctrine itself is good and very necessary. But I am inclined to believe that, even if it were presented with greater accuracy and polish, only a few would find profit in it, because we are not writing on moral and pleasing topics addressed to the kind of spiritual people who like to approach God along **sweet and satisfying paths**. We are presenting a substantial and solid doctrine for all those who desire to reach this nakedness of spirit (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Prologue #8, emphasis added).

“Those who seek God and yet want their own satisfaction and rest ... will not find him” (SC.3:3).

John further observes that many books are written on the sensory level of purgation, but hardly anything is said of spiritual purgation in sermons or writings (see *The Dark Night*, 1.8.1:2).

Likewise, St. Teresa observes that “We always hear about what a good thing prayer is, and our constitutions oblige us to spend so many hours in prayer. Yet only what we ourselves can do in prayer is explained to us; little is explained about what the Lord does in the soul, I mean about the supernatural” (*Interior Castle*, 1.2:7). Hence, it’s important that we delve deeply into the writings of St. John of the Cross for better understanding and experiencing the progression in prayer.

Minor works

The following “minor” works are part of *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*:

- *The Letters*
- *The Sayings of Light and Love*
- *The Precautions and Counsels to a Religious*
- *The Poetry* (that were not included in his major works)
- *Censure and Opinion*

Merely because these works are described as “minor” doesn’t mean they are less important in terms of their overall contribution to John’s complete body of work. Participants are encouraged to cultivate a regular habit of reading these works because they provide insights into John’s line of thought and evolving themes. Reading these enriches one’s understanding of his more celebrated works.

Why read John of the Cross today?

The following excerpt is taken from the introduction to *Love Awakened by Love* by Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B., ICS Publications.

The Christian tradition has been blessed with many superb teachers and examples of deep prayer, sanctity, and faithful discipleship. In that sense, St. John of the Cross is one among many of our ancestors in the faith who illuminate the Christian path for us. ...

It is a fundamental presupposition of the present work that the writings of John of the Cross are well worth the effort that it might require to unlock their treasures – not to mention the fact that there is so much “low-hanging fruit” to be savored even if the reader were never to grasp all of the spiritual wisdom that he has to offer.

John of the Cross is a universal Doctor of the Church for good reason. He offers one of the first true systematic presentations of Christian mystical theology, drawing on multiple resources to describe, explain, and analyze the experience and path of deepening prayer. In the last five hundred years, countless women and men who were already advanced in the ways of prayer have found in his teaching a way of understanding their experience. Certainly, even more individuals, beginners in prayer, have benefited from his presentation of the path that lies ahead – its pitfalls, obstacles, and demands – so that they can set out in earnest. His poetry especially serves for God-seekers (at whatever point they are on the journey) as a constant reminder of the sublime invitation that God holds out for us all.

In our society today, perhaps more than ever, we want what we want, and we want it now. We might not be wealthy, but we often have fairly easy access to much of what we desire. With ever better technologies to make everything easier for us, we are accustomed not to have to struggle to enjoy what we want. We even want prayer without effort and without discipline. Well, to desire easy prayer is natural enough; to expect it is quite another matter. We want good “prayer experience,” good feelings in prayer. But, as we have all learned, if one’s prayer depends on how it feels, we probably won’t stick with it for very long because feelings in prayer come and go. ...

In prayer, we are seeking a deeper communion with God. We want union with God – the uniting of our hearts, minds, and wills with God. But how can we hope to attain such union when our daily lives are, in fact, inconsistent with God’s will and God’s ways? How could we be fertile ground for the contemplation that is ultimately a gift from God if we have not prepared the ground, emptied the vessel, or cleaned the house? ... This is just another way of expressing what John of the Cross has to say about purgation – exterior and interior – in the senses and in the spirit. With keen insight into our humanity, sinful and graced, John lays out the tasks that lie ahead for someone who really wants to be disposed for deep union

with God – rather than one who is just seeking good experiences in prayer from time to time.

We don't think much about asceticism these days – not so much in the sense of doing penance for our sins but in the much richer and positive sense of engaging in the struggle to be conformed to God, the effort to free ourselves of everything or anything that keeps us from attaining deep union with God. John of the Cross is no masochistic dualist, a vestige of some bygone spiritual tradition now transcended. No, he is a particularly focused and clear spokesperson for a deep truth that has been experienced by centuries of saints, officially canonized or not. The truth is that we are sinners who must engage actively, with God's help, in a daily work of conversion. True contemplation and union with God are normally gifts that rain upon and bear fruit in ground that has been made ready by the hard work of the one who diligently and faithfully cultivates one's mind and heart.

John of the Cross also addresses our natural desire for good experiences and good feelings in prayer. For beginners in prayer, feelings of devotion and an active sense of God's presence are important to keep us faithful to prayer. But spiritual feelings come and go. We will not be faithful to prayer in any regular way if our fidelity is based on something as transitory as feelings. In fact, our tradition tells us, sometimes the best prayer is dry prayer – prayer that is offered to God without the reward of superficial feelings, prayer that is built on faith that God's truest work occurs at a level deeper than anything that we could experience in an ordinary sense of that word. Here John of the Cross stands in a long tradition – though perhaps he is bolder and more firm than others – in teaching that the true and living God transcends not only our feelings but also our images, our concepts, our ideas. ...

Authentic, deep encounter with this living and transcendent God is always beyond what our senses can grasp, though God is always seeking to draw us nearer in prayer and in daily life. In the end, the sign of good prayer is not warm feelings in prayer but the fruit that our prayer bears in our daily living: **Are we more generous, forgiving, humble, selfless, and loving?** If the answer to this question is yes, then we have good reason to believe that our prayer is deepening even if it is as dry as a bone (emphasis added).

In the end, we should read John of the Cross today because he sings of the unfathomable depth and breadth of God's love for us. He shows us the way to allow ourselves to become truly open, profoundly empty, and finally free to receive and respond to divine self-giving. We should read this great mystic today because he speaks a profound truth that perhaps we sometimes wish were not so: responding to the self-offering of a transcendent God and an invitation into the divine life demands a total commitment on our part. This is nothing more than what Jesus says when he challenges us to love God with our entire being. As soon as we try to live up to that challenge, we discover immediately how right John of the Cross is (courtesy: *Love Awakened by Love*, Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B.).

Explanation of the nature of union with God:

One of the central teachings of John is about the nature of one's union with God. In Book Two, chapter 5 of *The Ascent*, St. John of the Cross describes both the "substantial union" (essence/natural union) and the "union of likeness" (active participation). This "union of likeness" does not exist except when there is a likeness of love by active participation in it. This chapter is fundamental to his entire work because the whole process of purification flows from the nature of union and our willing participation (see A.2 ch. 5, footnote 1).

"To understand the nature of this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it he conserves their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist. Consequently, in discussing union with God we are not discussing the substantial union that always exists, but the soul's union with and transformation in God that does not always exist, except when there is likeness of love. We will call it the union of likeness; and the former, the essential or substantial union. The union of likeness is supernatural; the other, natural. The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul rids itself completely of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love" (A.2.5:3).

"When God grants this supernatural favor to the soul, so great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God's as it was before..." (A.2.5:7).

In fact, Jesus tells us, "I am the vine, and you are the branches, he who abides in me and I in him will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).

Side note: It is important to note that the indwelling presence of God – who is naturally communicating Himself to souls through nature and through grace (natural and supernatural) – is not different in kind, but in intensity. **The soul is now more aware of the presence of God.** This increase of consciousness happens because in the process of purification, the soul's capacity and receptivity for God has increased; it has made more "room for God" – A.2.5:7 (see *Ascent to Joy*, The Goal: Union with God).

Loving knowledge (wisdom) of God

Another important teaching of St. John of the Cross is that we seek God as an object of knowledge and love and the source of this knowledge is Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom of God (see 1 Cor. 1:30). According to John, progression in prayer is the increase in knowledge and love; from lower to higher and from external to more interior. This increase in knowledge does not come from reading many books or meditating on abstract ideas; rather by imitation of Jesus Christ who is the knowledge and wisdom of God. "...have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in

all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and behave in all events as he would” (A.1.13:3).

“Those who now desire to question God or receive some vision or revelation are guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him by not fixing their eyes entirely on Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty” (A.2.22:5). John goes on to explain through the voice of the Father: “If you desire me to answer with a word of comfort, behold my Son..., fix your eyes only on him and you will discern hidden in him the most secret mysteries, and wisdom, and wonders of God, as my Apostle proclaims: ... In the Son of God are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God [Col. 2:3]” (A.2.22:6). Throughout his work, from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* to *The Dark Night* and *The Spiritual Canticle* to *The Living Flame of Love*, John leads the spiritual seeker to this loving knowledge of God.

In *The Ascent*, quoting Proverbs at length, John highlights the importance of seeking Divine Wisdom, and her open invitation to the children of God. “Divine Wisdom speaks, here, to all those who are attached to the things of the world. She calls them little ones because they become as little as the things they love. She tells them...that the riches and glory they love are with her and in her, not where they think; and that lofty riches and justice are present in her. ... She tells them to bear in mind that her riches are more precious, that the fruit found in them will be better than gold and precious stones, and that what she begets in souls has greater value than cherished silver, which signifies every kind of affection possible in this life” (A.1.4:8).

In every stage, God imparts this loving knowledge to the soul:

“This loving knowledge is communicated in the beginning through the exercise of interior purification, in which the individual suffers, as we said, and afterward in the delight of love” (LF.3:34).

When inordinate desires are cast out, “The soul will be clothed in a new understanding of God in God (through removal of the old understanding) and in a new love of God in God... As a result, one’s activities, once human, now become divine. This is achieved in the state of union...” (A.1.5:7).

“...when the soul has departed from the house of her own will and the bed of her own satisfaction, outside she will find divine Wisdom, the Son of God, her Spouse” (SC.3:3).

John relates this loving knowledge to the prayer of contemplation:

“... an infused loving knowledge [contemplation] that both illumines and enamors the soul, elevating step by step to God, its Creator. For it is only love that unites and joins the soul to God” (DN.2.18:5).

““There he taught me a sweet and living knowledge’ – The sweet and living knowledge that she [soul] says he taught her is mystical theology, the secret knowledge of God that spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is a knowledge through love. Love is the master of this knowledge and what makes it wholly agreeable” (SC.27:5).

“... Divine Wisdom is united with the soul in a new bond of the possession of love” (DN.2.24:3).

Contemplation is the highest wisdom and language of God (see LF.3:37).

The kind of knowledge that is born of faith (contemplation) knows the difference between the shallow empirical knowing (theories and research that affirm the truth; that can be observed through human physical senses) and contemplative knowing – a deeper kind of truth. As a result, one's life is always directed by the wisdom of God, and it is a matter of seeing ordinary, everyday life as a place of God's presence and action.

*There is to be sure, a certain wisdom
which we express among the spiritually mature.
It is not a wisdom of this age...
No, what we utter is God's wisdom:
a mysterious hidden wisdom.
God planned it before all ages for our glory.
(1 Cor. 2:6-7)*

How should I decide which of John's books to read first?

Concerning this topic, many leading authorities and scholars in Carmelite spirituality have made countless suggestions to make the reading of John's writings more enjoyable. Scholars often recommend beginning with either *The Spiritual Canticle* or *The Living Flame* for a better understanding of John's writings; and still others make his poetry the preferred starting point. However, for the purpose of our present study and reflection, we turn to Our Holy Father John of the Cross for his guidance in reading his works.

Three different paragraphs have been chosen to support our suggestions for reading the writings of St. John of the Cross:

"...we can proceed with order, progressing from the lesser to the greater and from the more exterior to the more interior until reaching the intimate recollection in which the soul is united with God. We have been following this very order: First we discussed divesting the exterior senses of their natural apprehensions, and, consequently, of the natural strength of the appetites. This we did in the first book [of *The Ascent*] when we spoke of the night of sense. Then, in the preceding chapter, we began to divest these senses of the supernatural exterior apprehensions so as to lead the soul into the night of the spirit" (A.2.12:1).

"In order that God lift the soul from the extreme of its low state to the other extreme of the high state of divine union, he must obviously, in view of these fundamental principles, do so with order, gently, and according to the mode of the soul. Since the order followed in the process of knowing involves the forms and images of created things, and since knowledge is acquired through the senses, God, to achieve his work gently and to lift the soul to supreme knowledge, must begin by touching the low state and extreme of the senses. And from there he must gradually bring the soul after its own manner to the other end, spiritual wisdom, which is incomprehensible to the senses. Thus, naturally or supernaturally, God brings people to His supreme spirit by first instructing them through discursive

meditation and through forms, images, and sensible means, according to their own manner of coming to understand” (A.2.17:3, emphasis added).

Note: This is the key chapter that can serve as a guide to reading John’s whole body of work.

As we can see in the preceding two paragraphs, John sets before us an orderly scheme of guidance into the life of prayer. His primary interest was to educate spiritual seekers how to grow in holiness. He professed that growth in holiness comes about only through purification of the faculties: intellect, memory, and will.

John’s explanation in *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night* of the purification is foundational for union with God. Beginning with *The Spiritual Canticle* or *The Living Flame of Love*, makes it more difficult to put into context what John is saying about the more advanced stages of transformation and union.

St. John continues to explain the order in which one is guided toward union with God. Let us follow his explanation in *The Living Flame of Love*:

“In *The Dark Night of The Ascent of Mount Carmel* we dealt with the intensity of this purgation... and the time or stage along the spiritual road in which each begins. ... Let it suffice to know that the very God who desires to enter within the soul through the union and transformation of love is he who first assails and purges it with the light and heat of his divine flame, just as the fire that penetrates the log of wood is the same that first prepares it for this, as we said. Hence the very flame that is now gentle, since it has entered within the soul, is what was formerly oppressive, assailing it from without. Such is the meaning of the present verse, ‘Now you are not oppressive’” (*The Living Flame of Love*, stanza 1:25-26).

The purgation of the soul leads to glorification and union with God. John chose to discuss in detail the process of union in *The Spiritual Canticle* (stanzas 10-40) and *The Living Flame of Love*. God’s very divine flame that was previously oppressive is now gentle and burning within the soul as the living flame of love.

As can be seen, St. John of the Cross put forward an orderly guideline to follow and understand the doctrine behind the “oppressive state” (lower level) and the “non-oppressive state” (higher level). Moral theologian Fr. Mark O’Keefe, O.S.B., observes that an authentic spiritual life is built on a good Christian moral life. John of the Cross is profoundly aware of this truth when he first begins to explain the necessity of purification in Book One of *The Ascent* within the framework of “liberation.” This inner liberation is utterly essential so that we can be truly free to love God (see Introduction to *Love Awakened by Love*).

Hence, it is important that we follow the guidelines proposed by Our Holy Father John of the Cross as we continue to journey on the road up Mount Carmel.

St. John’s teaching is about this great journey from slavery to liberty to divine union. It is the knowledge and love of God that drive a soul to persevere and climb the glorious Mountain. At the end, John takes all those who walk in this path to the glad and guiding night of transformation and union with God.

*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.
(The Ascent of Mount Carmel, stanza five)*

Formation Guidelines

The following formation guidelines are divided into four separate categories for proper understanding of human transformation and union within the context of Christian and Carmelite formation.

- Active night of the sense: Sense includes the five bodily senses (touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste) and the interior senses of the imagination, phantasy, and sense memory (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book One)
- Active night of the spirit: Purification of intellect, memory, and will by the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Books Two and Three)
- Passive nights of sense and of spirit: Summary of the dark night (passive purification) leading to God's action (*The Dark Night*, Books One and Two)
- Glorification: Understanding the concept of transformation and union – Trinitarian life (*The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*)

Side note: “Before we continue, we need to recognize that the four nights – the active nights of sense and of spirit, and the passive nights of sense and of spirit – do unfold, in some way, like stages or phases that we pass through. At the different points of our journey, our focus is more exterior or interior, and we experience ourselves as more active or as more evidently receptive. There is a type of progression... This logical arrangement, however, does not coincide exactly with their normal unfolding in life... Thus, while acknowledging that the divine and human are active in each level and that these are not absolutely separable stages, we can see that the two nights of sense, active and passive, precede the two nights of spirit, active and passive” (*Love Awakened by Love*, ch. 7, pg. 127-128).

Active Night of the Sense:

Book One of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*: As discussed previously, (see Formation II, Year A, Part One), John uses the term “active night of the sense” to explain the purification process of our senses. He calls this night “**the point of departure**” (A.1.2:1). Its focus is on behavioral change, correcting obvious faults and self-centered ego. “The point of departure” is a sense of need, a recognition that our life will not be complete until God is at the center. In this active night, we work with God's grace to free ourselves from disordered desires that we perceive through our senses.

Note: A brief review of the syllabus (Formation II, Year A, Part One) would help the definitively professed members to understand the purification process of the senses (active night) according to St. John of the Cross.

Active Night of the Spirit:

Realizing the need of continuous purgation, in **Books Two and Three** of *The Ascent*, John explains the purification of the spirit or higher part of the soul, consisting primarily of the

faculties: intellect, memory and will. He also introduces the function of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in the purification process of a human person. This period of purification is identified by John as the “active night of the spirit,” when the intellect is purified by faith, the memory is purified by hope, and the will is purified by charity. John is searching for union with a transcendent God. Accordingly, his explanation is that the soul might leave the “point of departure” for the **means**, which is “faith” “hope” and “love” – a way to emptying and purifying the spiritual faculties (intellect, memory, and will) of all that is not God (see A.2.6:6, emphasis added). This process of letting go of our disordered desires is not an intellectual pursuit, rather it is a passion, an encounter that enlightens and transforms the person.

“What clearly follows is that when individuals have finished purifying and voiding themselves of all forms and apprehensible images, they will abide in this pure and simple light and be perfectly transformed in it. ... [The] soul in its simplicity and purity would then be immediately transformed into simple and pure Wisdom, the Son of God” (A.2.15:4).

Note: The active purification of the intellect by the practice of faith has already been covered in Formation II, Year A, Part Two. A quick review of the syllabus would help the definitively professed members to understand the purification process of the intellect by faith according to St. John of the Cross.

Book Three of *The Ascent*: “We have already given instructions for the intellect, the first faculty of the soul, so that in all its apprehensions it may be united with God through pure faith, the first theological virtue. The same has to be done for the other two faculties, memory and will. They must undergo a purification of their respective apprehensions in order to reach union with God in perfect hope and charity” (A.3.1:1).

Faith, Hope, and Love:

Theological virtues: faith, hope, and love (charity); working interdependently and being the likeness of God, they are the means that bridge the infinite distance between God and His creatures. They are the only proper and proximate means to union with Him (see *Collected Works* Glossary of Terms, pg. 776).

Moral theologian Fr. Mark O’Keefe, O.S.B., makes an important observation about the three theological virtues: “For John of the Cross, faith, hope, and love are gifts of God as well as instruments of what I am calling an inner liberation, given to us precisely so that we can be ready to receive the gift of contemplative prayer that God wants to give. In this way, John of the Cross offers us a critical tool for the deepening of the Christian life, yet his teaching in this area is little discussed in commentaries on his thought, at least not in English. To understand his thinking on these virtues, it is necessary to see how these three virtues function within the context of the broader work of liberation that must first occur within the Christian and that must continue into a still deeper purification” (*Love Awakened by Love*, Introduction, pg. 5).

Note: The point is that we need to prepare the soil (of the soul) with the help of the three theological virtues and make it a fertile ground to receive the prayer of contemplation that is ultimately a gift from God.

Definitively professed members are called to live their life of prayer beyond initial stages within the context of active and passive purification of the intellect (by faith), the memory (by hope), and the will (by charity). According to the OCDS Constitutions, Secular Carmelites are called to live the theological virtues of **faith, hope, and love**. A few quotations are worth citing here:

Natural moral virtues are “acquired,” which is to say that we ourselves develop these good habits, with the help of grace, by our choices and actions over time. The theological virtues of **faith, hope, and love** are infused virtues that direct us beyond this merely human life. They are described as “infused” because they are given by God and not “acquired” by our own effort. More particularly they are “theological” virtues because they are directed immediately to God and enable us to cooperate with God’s action, drawing us into the divine life. Through the gift of the three theological virtues, we are given the necessary means to embrace this divine friendship and participate in it in this life. For John of the Cross, the same theological virtues that aim to unite us with God do so precisely by purifying us at the deepest level. (see *Love Awakened by Love*, ch. 3).

The Rule of St. Albert is the original expression of the spirituality of Carmel. One of the principles of the Rule is: Arming ourselves with the practice of virtues, as we live an intense life of **faith, hope, and charity** (see OCDS Constitutions, Art. 6.f, emphasis added).

One of the fundamental elements of the vocation of the OCDS is: “to give particular importance to prayer which, nourished by listening to the Word of God and by the liturgy, is conducive to relating with God as a friend, not just in prayer but in daily living. To be committed to this life of prayer demands being nourished by **faith, hope and, above all, charity** in order to live in the presence and the mystery of the living God” (Const., 9.c, emphasis added).

“In the Secular Order a special place is given to the liturgy, understood as God’s Word celebrated in active **hope**, after having received it by **faith** and the commitment to live it in effective **love**” (Const., 23, emphasis added).

“... Secular Carmelites are called to strive to make prayer penetrate their whole existence, in order to walk in the presence of the living God, through the constant exercise of **faith, hope and love...**” (Const., 17, emphasis added).

Every aspect of life of the lay faithful enters into the plan of God, who desires that these very areas be the “places in time” where the love of Christ is revealed and realized for both the glory of the Father and service to others. Every activity, every situation, every responsibility are occasions ordained by Providence for a “continuous exercise of **faith, hope and charity**” (see *Christifideles Laici*, #59, emphasis added).

“Saint John of the Cross... inspires the Secular Carmelite to be vigilant in the practice of **faith, hope and charity.**” (Const. 8, emphasis added).

Because these virtues of **faith, hope and love** have the function of withdrawing the soul from all that is less than God, they consequently have the mission of **uniting the soul with God** (see DN.2.21:11-12).



THE ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL, Book Three

Introduction

This ongoing study on the nature and characteristics of purification are based on the doctrine of Our Holy Father St. John of the Cross. He provides the best analysis of one's journey through different stages of purification of body, mind, and spirit. His focus is not on method but on the relationship of encountering Jesus Christ on every step of the journey. One's life begins to mirror that of Jesus and all he provides through his sacrifice, love, and resurrection. Meditation in silence cleanses one's mind and creates a space for God.

Book Three of *The Ascent* "treats of purgation in the active night of the **memory** and **will**. It presents doctrine about the attitude required in the apprehensions of these two faculties so that a soul may reach union with God in perfect hope and charity" (A.3 intro, emphasis added). "... John does not raise the philosophical question of whether the faculties are specifically different or distinct. What is important for him is their interdependence and interaction. Everything that applies to one on the spiritual plane applies as well, with the proper adjustment, to the others. This threefold division of the faculties with their corresponding virtues appears throughout all of his writings" (A.3.1, footnote 1).

Required Reading: *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, ICS, 1991, 2017.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, Marc Foley, O.C.D., ICS, 2013; *The Ascent to Joy*, Marc Foley, O.C.D., ICS, 2002; *Love Awakened by Love*, Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B., ICS, 2014.

Purification of the Memory

Session One: Natural apprehensions: Purification of the memory by the practice of hope

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 1-6.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, (related to Book Three), pg. 137-153; *The Ascent to Joy*, pg. 97-104, *Active Night of the Spirit: Hope*; *Love Awakened by Love*, chapter 5, pg. 91-111.

Explanatory note:

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book One, John uses the term “**the point of departure**” for the purification of sense faculties of all that is not God. In Books Two and Three of *The Ascent*, John’s explanation is that the soul might leave the “point of departure” for the **means**, which is “faith” “hope” and “love” – a way to emptying and purifying the spiritual faculties (intellect, memory, and will) of all that is not God. The three theological virtues are the means and preparation for the soul’s union with God (see A.2.6:6). John discusses the faculties and the theological virtues separately; however, they do not function independently or in isolation from one another. When one is touched by divine grace, the whole of the soul is affected, not just part of it. As the vision of faith is transformed, so is the object of the soul’s hope and desire – transformed into a love that seeks the ultimate good (see *Ascent to Joy*, the *Active Night of the Spirit: Faith*).

In Book Three of *The Ascent* (ch. 1-6), John addresses one’s natural perceptions or mindset (apprehensions) that hinder union with God and the opposite benefits that come from forgetting or re-orienting them by the virtue of hope. John uses the term “purification of the memory” to make room for the “inflow of God’s loving knowledge.” John identifies clearly that “we are imparting instructions here for advancing in contemplation to union with God” (A.3.2:2).

Purification: The process by which one eliminates, through the theological virtues, all that is contrary to receiving into one’s own life the fullness of God’s life. The entire spiritual journey, however, is purifying, comprising God’s communication and the human person’s effort to respond (see Glossary of Terms, pg. 774).

Apprehensions: Denote the activity and content of perception. Are distinct; sensory or spiritual; natural or supernatural. Used frequently in chapters dealing with intellect and memory, they are contradistinguished from contemplation, which is a general, obscure knowledge given in faith (A.2.10:1-4) (Glossary of Terms, pg. 767).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- In this active night, a person’s “own efforts” plays an important role in bringing the memory into the night of purgation. (see A.3.2:14).
- The basic principles regarding the purification of the memory that John deals with in Book Three of *The Ascent* are applicable to the whole of spiritual life. He chooses to focus his attention on the importance of detaching oneself from thoughts and images

that hinder the soul's spiritual growth. It is within this context that one must read John's teaching on the purification of the memory very carefully. Thus, when he writes of "disencumbering, emptying, and depriving the faculties of their natural authority," (A.3.2:2) it is for a reason: to make room for the inflow of God's loving knowledge. (see *The Ascent to Joy*, Active Night of the Spirit: Hope).

Note: "Hope, then, plays a critical role both in the heart of the active work of purification and as a person draws near to the living God in deep communion" (*Love Awakened by Love*, pg. 92).

- God does not destroy nature, but rather perfects it (see A.3.2:7). Souls that are beginning to experience contemplative prayer must learn to silence and quiet the faculties so as to hear the voice of God (see A.3.2:2). John's proposal in these chapters is of healing the memory.
- "Disturbances never arise in a soul unless through the apprehensions of the memory. ... We observe that as often as people begin to think about some matter, they are moved and aroused over it, little or much, according to the kind of apprehension. If the apprehension is bothersome and annoying, they feel sadness or hatred, and so on; if agreeable, they experience desire and joy, and so on. ... Thus they will sometimes be joyful, at other times sad, now they will feel hatred, now love. ... Evidently, then, this knowledge is a serious impediment to possession of the moral virtues" (A.3.5:1-2).
- John's advice to his readers is that worrying and ruminating about something will never help a situation. "...distress and worry ordinarily make things worse and even do harm to the soul itself. Thus David proclaimed: *Indeed every human being is disturbed in vain* [Ps. 39:6]. Clearly, it is always vain to be disturbed, since being disturbed is never any help" (A.3.6:3).
- "Thus if the whole world were to crumble and come to an end and all things were to go wrong, it would be useless to get disturbed, for this would do more harm than good. Enduring all with tranquil and peaceful equanimity not only reaps many blessings but also helps the soul so that in these very adversities it may manage better in judging them and employing the proper remedy" (A.3.6:3). John promotes tranquility of soul and peace in all things, in adversity as well as in prosperity.
- "When the memory is transformed in God, the knowledge and forms of things cannot be impressed on it. As a result all the operations of the memory and other faculties in this state are divine. God now possesses the faculties as their complete Lord because of their transformation in him. And consequently it is he who divinely moves and commands them according to his divine spirit and will. As a result the operations are not different from those of God; but those the soul performs are of God and are divine operations" (A.3.2:8).
- John continues to observe that "God's Spirit makes them [the souls] know what must be known and ignore what must be ignored, remember what ought to be remembered – with or without forms – and forget what ought to be forgotten, and makes them love what they ought to love, and keeps them from loving what is not in God. Accordingly, all the first movements and operations of these faculties are divine" (A.3:2:9).

- “Thus the works and prayer of these souls always produce their effects. Such was the prayer and work of our Lady, the most glorious Virgin. Raised from the beginning to this high state, she never had the form [image] of any creature impressed in her soul, nor was she moved by any, for she was always moved by the Holy Spirit” (A.3.2:10).

Explanatory note: John’s understanding is that we must withdraw from all distinct knowledge and apprehensible possession to supreme hope in the incomprehensible God (see A.3.2:3). In all his teaching, the emphasis is on the divine wisdom – knowledge of God. It is the way of living in the world with complete trust and confidence in God. John observes: “...souls are unaware of how they come by this knowledge. But its origin is divine Wisdom [the Son of God] ... As the Wise Man states: The artificer of all, who is Wisdom, taught me all things [Wis. 7:21]” (A.3.2:12).

Session Two: Supernatural apprehensions: Purification of the memory by the practice of hope

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 7-12.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 154-158.

Explanatory note: In chapters 1-6, John explains the natural apprehensions (memories, mental image, etc.) held in the mind and dwelt upon, causing emotional reactions (anxiety, fear, desire, elation, etc.) that disturb one's peace. In chapters 7-12, John speaks about supernatural apprehensions, such as knowledge originating from visions, spiritual feelings, etc. He goes on to explain, not only the harm caused by such experiences or knowledge but also speaks about the benefits that come from forgetting such knowledge. John repeatedly reminds us that all such activities are a hindrance to spiritual growth, if not promptly put aside and the attention returned to God Himself.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- In chapters 7 through 12 of *The Ascent*, Book Three, John deals with the supernatural knowledge held in the memory. If the soul becomes attached to the knowledge of spiritual experiences that are recorded in the memory, its attention is diverted from the contemplation that God is communicating to it in the present moment. In consequence, the soul's union with God is hindered. For the virtue of hope to grow, the memory must be purified from the images and knowledge originating from visions, revelations, and spiritual feelings.
- "Every possession is against hope. As St. Paul says, *hope is for that which is not possessed* [Heb. 11:1]. In the measure that the memory becomes dispossessed of things, in that measure it will have hope, and the more hope it has the greater will be its union with God; for in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains. And it hopes more when, precisely, it is more dispossessed of things; when it has reached perfect dispossession it will remain with perfect possession of God in divine union" (A.3.7:2).

The harm caused from reflection on this supernatural knowledge.

"Spiritual persons expose themselves to five types of harm if they prize and reflect on the ideas and forms impressed within them through supernatural apprehensions" (A.3.8:1).

- First, "...they will often be deluded in mistaking the natural for supernatural" (A.3.8:2).
 - "Spiritual persons will often think that the apprehensions are from God, whereas they will be only the product of the imagination" (A.3.8:3).
 - "Whatever these apprehensions may in themselves be, they are not as great help toward the love of God as is the least act of living faith and hope made in the emptiness and renunciation of all things [that are not for the honor and glory of God]" (A.3.8:5).
- "Second, they put themselves in the occasion of falling into presumption and vanity" (A.3.8:2).
 - "... those who receive them [these apprehensions] will be exposed to the idea that they themselves are now important because of these supernatural

communications... Consequently, without one's realizing it, an abundant spiritual pride will be bred" (A.3.9:1).

- To avoid this error, one should know that "all heavenly visions, revelations, and feelings – or whatever else one may desire to think on – are not worth as much as the least act of humility. Humility has the effects of charity: It neither esteems nor seeks its own, ... it thinks no good of self but of others. Consequently souls should not look for their happiness in these supernatural apprehensions, but should strive to forget them for the sake of being free" (A.3.9:4).
- "Third, the devil finds ample power to deceive them through these apprehensions" (A.3.8:2).
 - "To a blind soul falsehood no longer seems falsehood, and evil no longer evil, and so on, ... On this account the soul will fall into a thousand blunders in matters natural, moral, and spiritual; ... All this comes about because of failure from the beginning to deny the pleasure taken in those supernatural apprehensions. Since this satisfaction is slight, or not so evil, at first, the soul is not careful and allows it to remain so that, like the mustard seed, the evil grows into a large tree [Mt. 13:31-32]. As the saying goes, small mistake in the beginning, great one in the end" (A.3.10:2).
Note: For a better understanding of the devil's work, attentively re-read chapter 10.
- "Fourth, doing so would impede union with God in hope" (A.3.8:1).
 - "The soul, therefore, must live in nakedness and forgetfulness of distinct forms and knowledge about supernatural apprehensions so as not to impede union of the memory with God through perfect hope" (A.3.11:2).
Note: For deeper understanding, re-read and meditate on chapter 11.
- "Fifth, for the most part they will be judging God in a lowly way" (A.3.8:2).
 - All our thoughts, concepts, and images about God are inadequate whether they are from natural or supernatural experiences. This is because God is "incomparable" and "incomprehensible" (see A.3.12:1).
Note: For a better understanding of this important theme of "God being," re-read and meditate on chapter 12.

Session Three: The benefits obtained through the rejection of the apprehensions of images and forms

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 13-15.
The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections, pg. 157-158.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “In addition to the tranquility a person naturally enjoys when freed from images and forms, there is a freedom from care about the discernment of good ones from evil, and about how one ought to behave with different kinds. ... The time and energy that would be wasted in trying to discern them can be employed in another, more profitable exercise (the movement of the will toward God), ... Individuals practice this latter by desiring and striving after detachment from these forms, since they thereby receive the great gain of approaching God, who has neither image, nor form, nor figure. They will approach God more closely the more they withdraw from all imaginative forms, images, and figures” (A.3.13:1).
- John’s teaching concerning imaginative apprehensions raises an important question. Is there a proper esteem that we can have for spiritual experiences recorded in the memory? Can it be beneficial for a person to call to mind a spiritual experience recorded in the memory? John says, “yes.” He writes, “Only for the sake of moving the spirit to love should the soul at times recall the images and apprehensions that produce love. The effect produced by the remembrance of this communication is not as strong as the effect at the time the communication was received, yet when the communication is recalled there are a renewal of love and an elevation of the mind to God. This is especially true when the soul remembers some figures, images, or supernatural feelings. These are usually so imprinted on it that they last a long time; some are never erased from the soul. ... This is consequently a great grace, for those on whom God bestows it possess within themselves a mine of blessings” (A.3.13:6, emphasis added).
- The spiritual knowledge in the memory “may be remembered when it produces a good effect, not in order to retain it but to awaken the knowledge and love of God. But if the remembrance ... produces no good effect, the soul should never desire the memory of it” (A.3.14:2, emphasis added).
- “This passage [above] focuses on the different motives that a soul can have for calling to mind past spiritual experiences. ... If calling to mind a past event helps to strengthen your resolve against temptation, soften your judgments against your neighbor, or inspire you to love, then by all means do so. John’s criteria of what is permissible for us to call out of memory may be summed up by the Gospel criteria ‘You will know them by their fruits’ (Mt. 7:20). Or as John puts it, does ‘it produce a good effect?’ (A.3.14:2)” (*Reflections*, pg. 157-158).
- “John’s teaching on our relationship to spiritual experiences recorded in the memory is a further exposition of his main teaching that we have seen throughout *The Ascent*. All things are good and are meant to be means to lead us to God but can become obstacles if we take up the wrong relationship to them. If we call to mind a spiritual experience for

the sake of experiencing spiritual sweetness, it will become an obstacle to union with God because an attachment to spiritual sweetness will have been formed. However, calling to mind the same experience for the sake of growing in love of God and neighbor is not only permissible but also encouraged by John. ‘But for the knowledge of the Creator, I declare that a person should strive to remember it as often as possible because it will produce in the soul a notable effect’ (A.3.14:2; italics added)” (*Reflections*, pg. 158, emphasis added).

- John is not suggesting that we should simply forget everything in our memory. The problem is attachment to such things in the memory or being distracted by them. “Thus people are not required to stop recalling and thinking about what they must do and know, for, if they are not attached to the possession of these thoughts, they will not be harmed” (A.3.15:1).
- “We are not asserting, as they do, that there be no images or veneration of them; we are explaining the difference between these images and God, and how souls should use the painted image in such a way as not to suffer hindrance in their movement toward the living image, and how they should pay no more attention to images than is required for advancing to what is spiritual” (A.3.15:2).
- “The means are good and necessary for the attainment of the end, as are images for reminding us of God and the saints. ... There is no delusion or danger in the remembrance, veneration, and esteem of images that the Catholic Church proposes to us in a natural manner, ... The memory of these images will not fail to benefit a person, because this remembrance accompanied with love for whoever is represented. Images will always help individuals toward union with God, provided that no more attention is paid to them than necessary for this love, ...” (A.3.15:2).

Note: For deeper understanding, re-read and meditate on chapter 15.

For personal reflection: What past events, images, or ideas, when called to mind, awaken my love for God? (*Reflections*, pg. 158).

Purification of the Will

Purification of the will by the practice of charity, the third and final theological virtue.

Session One: Joy in temporal goods – the first emotion of the will

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 16-20.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 159-173.

Love Awakened by Love, the Liberating Ascent of Saint John of the Cross, pg. 112-125.

Explanatory note: “The final section of *The Ascent* deals with ‘the purification of the will through charity’ (A.3.16:1). John says that the goal is nothing less than the fulfillment of the great commandment to love God with our whole heart, soul, will, and strength. As in the previous two sections [intellect and memory], John will be dealing with the active night, that is, the choices that are necessary to ‘form and perfect the virtue of the charity of God’ (A.3.16:1). To achieve this goal, the will must ‘turn away from ... all that is not God’ (A.3.16:2)” (*Reflections*, pg. 159).

“The will plays a decisive role in the purification process in that it moves the other faculties [intellect and memory]. Because of the appetitive nature of the will, John speaks of emotions, appetites, and so on, instead of apprehensions” (A.3 ch. 16, footnote 1).

John says, “The strength of the soul ... is ruled by the will.” He observes that the “inordinate emotions are the source of unruly appetites, affections, and operations, and the basis for failure to preserve one’s strength for God” (A.3.16:2). Accordingly, his focus is on the purification of the will of all inordinate emotions. “There are four of these emotions or passions: **joy, hope, sorrow, and fear**” (A.3.16:2, emphasis added). “These four passions are so interlinked and brotherly that where one goes actually the others go virtually” (A.3.16:5). Consequently, one should keep in mind “that wherever one of these passions goes the entire soul (the will and the other faculties) will also go, and they will live as prisoners of this passion; and the other three passions will be alive in the one so as to afflict the soul with their chains and prevent it from soaring to the liberty and repose of sweet contemplation and union” (A.3.16:6). In chapters 17-45, John discusses these four passions as well as the appetites of the will. “The entire matter of reaching union with God consists in purging the will of its appetites and emotions so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical with the will of God” (A.3.16:3).

John provides a lengthy analysis of how the emotion of joy, when unwisely responding to things, can slow down one’s progress on the journey to God. John says that we commonly seek joy in six categories of goods: temporal, natural, sensory, moral, supernatural, and spiritual. Chapters 17-20 covers joy in temporal goods. John explains in these chapters:

- how we should direct our joy toward God.
- the harms that result from the failure to direct one’s joy to the honor and glory of God.
- the benefits that are derived from rejoicing in them (temporal goods) correctly.

*“... joy isn’t found in the material objects surrounding us but in the inner recesses of the soul.
One can possess joy in a prison cell as well as in a palace.”*
St. Thérèse of Lisieux – *Story of a Soul*

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John focuses on what he calls the “active joy” – the first passion of the will. “...[it] is nothing else than a delight of the will in an object esteemed and considered fitting. For the will never rejoices unless in something that is valuable and pleasing to it. We are speaking of active joy, which occurs when a person understands distinctly and clearly the object of its joy and has power either to rejoice or not” (A.3.17:1).
- “There is another joy, which is passive. In this kind of joy the will finds itself rejoicing without any clear and distinct understanding of the object of its joy, except at times. It has no power either to possess this joy or not possess it” (A.3.17:1). This joy comes from within. “It would be experienced as the fruit of divine action in the soul” (A.3 ch. 17, footnote 1).
- “The best way to analyze joy is to observe its activity in relation to the various kinds of goods from which it arises and receives nourishment. The six kinds (temporal, natural, sensory, moral, supernatural, and spiritual) give a sufficiently complete picture of the affective human situation. The first three refer to more exterior goods, the last three is more interior. The basic principle, that the true motive for rejoicing should be the honor and glory of God and the greatest honor we can pay him is to serve him according to evangelical perfection ...” (A.3, ch. 17, footnote 2).

Joy in temporal goods:

- “By temporal goods we mean: riches, status, positions, and other things claiming prestige; and children, relatives, marriages, and so on. All these are possible objects of joy for the will” (A.3.18:1). Temporal goods are God’s blessings. However, human hearts are prone to take too much joy in riches, status, and position, which ultimately puts them in the occasion and danger of forgetting God (see A.3.18:5).
- “As for children, there is no reason to rejoice in them because they are many, or rich, or endowed with natural talents and gifts, or because they are wealthy. One should rejoice in them if they are serving God. Beauty, riches, and lineage were of no help...” (A.3.18:4).
- “... it would also be vanity for a husband and wife to rejoice in their marriage when they are uncertain whether God is being better served by it” (A.3.18:6).
- “... nothing but what belongs to the service of God should be the object of our joy. Any other joy would be vain and worthless, for joy that is out of harmony with God is of no value to the soul” (A.3.18:6).

Side note: The underlying message of John’s teaching (joy in temporal goods) refers to the central idea that everything in the universe is temporary and subject to change, and that nothing lasts forever. The impermanence of life is the focal point of John’s teaching. All

throughout the chapters in *The Ascent*, he applies this concept to many aspects of life, including riches, status, positions, relationships, and so on.

- “How true this is. When ‘all things are smiling and succeeding prosperously,’ we rarely think of our ultimate end (A.3.18:5). However, when some great sorrow comes into our lives, our eyes are opened, and we begin to ponder the meaning of our existence. Fostering the habit of looking at the goods of this world from the vantage point of death seems to be what John is recommending. By doing so, we both combat ‘the danger of forgetting God’ and direct our joy in temporal things to God” (*Reflections*, pg. 163).

The harm caused from joy in temporal goods:

John points out, in detail, the considerable harm inflicted when one rejoices inappropriately in these temporal goods. He even notes that he “would run out of ink, paper, and time” (A.3.19:1) if he were to describe all the harm that happens to the distracted soul! He defines four degrees of harm.

- “The **first** degree of harm to spring from this [active] joy is backsliding: a blunting of the mind in relation to God, by which God’s goods become dark to it, just as a cloud darkens the air and prevents the sun from illumining it. By the very fact that spiritual persons rejoice in something and give reign to the appetite in frivolous things, their relationship with God is darkened and their intellect clouded” (A.3.19:3, emphasis added).
- The **second** degree of harm comes from the first. This blunting or dulling of the mind is the result of having inappropriate joy in passing things. John speaks of “a spreading out of the will in temporal things... [Consequently], this second degree causes one to withdraw from spiritual exercises and the things of God, to lack satisfaction in these exercises **because of the pleasure found in other things**, and to give oneself over to many imperfections, frivolities, joys and vain pleasures” (A.3.19:5, emphasis added). John further observes that “they are now extremely weak, lukewarm, and careless in knowing and practicing true judgment” (A.3.19:6).
- “The **third** degree of this privative harm is the complete abandoning of God. These individuals don’t care about observing God’s law, but attend to worldly goods and allow themselves to fall into mortal sins through covetousness [showing excessive desire for material possessions]... This degree includes all who are so engrossed in the things, riches, and affairs of this world that they care nothing about fulfilling the obligations of God’s law” (A.3.19:7, emphasis added).

Note: The great danger of this shift is that the person can live with the illusion that nothing has changed. The illusion is sustained by the fact that for many years, “through mere formality, force, or habit, rather than through love” (A.3.19:6), the person can continue to perform his or her spiritual exercises. However, over time, even these practices are gradually abandoned (see *Reflections*, pg. 169).

- The **fourth** degree: “Those who are in this **fourth** degree forget God and deliberately turn their heart ... to money, as though they had no other God” (A.3.19:8). “Today many belong in various ways to the category of this fourth degree... They are moved by money rather than by God, and they give first consideration to the temporal price and not to the divine value and reward” (A.3.19:9).

- John wants us to understand the harm caused by human indulgence in **small things**. He directs us to be always vigilant and to not put off correcting ourselves. “If they do not have the courage to uproot it when it is small and in its first stages, how do they think and presume they will have the ability to do so when it becomes greater and more deeply rooted?” (A.3.20:1).

Side note: In chapter 20, John discusses the benefits that one acquires through the withdrawal of inordinate joy from temporal things. Chapter 20 is an important chapter to understand that those who deny inordinate joy in temporal things will amazingly discover a greater joy in those things, as well as “liberty of spirit, clarity of reason, rest, tranquility, peaceful confidence in God...” (A.3.20:2). Read this chapter slowly and meditatively!

- “By liberating themselves from joy in temporal goods, they not only free themselves from the pestiferous kinds of harm we mentioned in the preceding chapters, but in addition acquire the virtue of liberality [generosity in behavior and temperament]. Liberality is one of God’s principal attributes and can in no way coexist with covetousness. Moreover, they acquire liberty of spirit, clarity of reason, rest, tranquility, peaceful confidence in God...” (A.3.20:2).
- “They obtain more joy and recreation in creatures through the [interior] dispossession of them. They cannot rejoice in them if they behold them with possessiveness... **In detachment from things, they acquire a clearer knowledge of them and a better understanding of both natural and supernatural truths concerning them.** Their joy, consequently, in these temporal goods is far different from the joy of one who is attached to them, and they receive great benefits and advantages from their joy” (A.3.20:2, emphasis added).
- Consequently, “at the first movement of joy toward things, the spiritual person ought to curb it, remembering the principle we are here following: There is nothing worthy of a person’s joy save the service of God and the procurement of his honor and glory in all things. One should seek this alone in the use of things, turning away from vanity and concern for one’s own delight and consolation” (A.3.20:3).
- “There is another exceptional and principal benefit of detachment from joy in creatures; **freedom of the heart for God** ... We should believe, therefore, that as often as we rejoice vainly, God is watching and planning some chastisement and bitter drink according to our merits; for at times the sadness redounding from the joy is a hundred times greater than the joy” (A.3.20:4, emphasis added).

Note: We should understand that God gives this “bitter drink” as a medicine for the soul, out of love and compassion, not anger and punishment.

Side note: John’s understanding is that the things of the world are for our use and enjoyment. However, he repeatedly reminds us not to engage in obsessive pursuit of temporal goods and lose our freedom. Hence, he sings out with joy: “Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth ... Christ is mine and all for me. What do you ask, then and seek, my soul? Yours is all of this, and all is for you. Do not engage yourself in anything less or pay heed to the crumbs that fall from your father’s table. Go forth and exalt in your Glory!” (Sayings of Light and Love, 27).

For personal reflection: Have I ever felt burdened by my possessions? When in my life have I experienced the relief that comes from letting go of an obsessive pursuit of a temporal good, be it a person, a career, or an object? (see *Reflections*, pg. 173).

Session Two: Natural goods: The vanity of willful joy in natural goods, and the method of directing oneself through them in God

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 21-23.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 174-181.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “By natural goods we mean: beauty, grace, elegance, bodily constitution, and other corporeal endowments; also, in the soul, good intelligence, discretion, and other talents belonging to the rational part of humans” (A.3.21:1).
- John points out “that human beings should rather have misgivings about these natural gifts since through them they can be easily distracted from the love of God and, being allured, fall into vanity and delusion. ... People should rejoice only if they serve God or others through it... These natural graces and gifts are such a provocation and occasion of sin both to the possessor and the beholder that there is scarcely a heart that escapes from this snare or birdlime” (A.3.21:1).
- Another piece of advice that John gives is to meditate on the transitory nature of one’s life. The spiritual seeker then, must bear in mind that “beauty and all other natural endowments are but earth, arising from the earth and returning to it; grace and elegance are but the smoke and air of this earth, and should be considered and valued as such for the sake of avoiding a lapse into vanity” (A.3.21:2).
- “Natural goods are transitory by nature. In time, they will all abandon us. ‘All will grow old and pass away’ (A.3.21:2). Our strength wanes, our health declines, our beauty fades, and our youth withers. The aging process is painful for all of us, but how much more miserable people become when they have invested their identity in natural goods” (*Reflections*, pg. 174).

Spiritual Harm

- Not only does investing one’s worth in natural goods inflict emotional misery, but it also causes spiritual harm and bodily harm.
- John discusses the spiritual and bodily harm under six different categories (A.3.22:2):
 - “The first is vainglory, presumption, pride, and disesteem of neighbor...”
 - “The second harm is inciting the senses to complacency, sensual delight, and lust.”
 - “The third kind of harm is that this joy induces flattery and vain praises involving deception and vanity...”
 - “The fourth kind of harm is general, for the reason and judgment of the spirit become very dull as in the case of joy over temporal goods. ... Since natural goods are more intimate to a person than temporal goods, joy in them produces its imprint more quickly... Thus, the reason and judgment do not remain free...”
 - “This gives rise to the fifth harm: distraction of the mind with creatures.”
 - The sixth harm is spiritual lukewarmness and weakness.
- John concludes that “as soon as the heart feels drawn by vain joy in natural goods, it should recall how dangerous and pernicious it is to rejoice in anything other than the

service of God... Therefore, take courage and use in time the remedy suggested by the poet [Ovid, *Remedia amoris*] for those beginning to grow attached to this joy: ‘Hurry now in the beginning to apply the remedy, for when evils have had time to increase in the heart, medicine and remedies arrive late’” (A.3.22:6).

Chapter 23 discusses the benefits the soul acquires from not rejoicing in natural goods.

- “Besides preparing the soul for the love of God and for other virtues, it directly paves the way for humility toward self and general charity toward one’s neighbor. By not becoming attached to anyone ... a person remains unencumbered and free to love all rationally and spiritually, which is the way God wants them to be loved” (A.3.23:1).
- “Another excellent benefit coming from the denial of this kind of joy is the fulfillment of the counsel our Lord gives in the Gospel of St. Matthew, that those who would follow him should deny themselves [Mt. 16:24]” (A.3.23:2).
- “Another notable benefit of the denial of this kind of joy is that such denial begets deep tranquility of soul, empties one of distractions, and brings recollection to the senses, especially to the eyes. By not wanting this joy, souls do not want to look at or occupy the other senses... By guarding the senses, the gates of the soul, one safeguards and increases one’s peace and purity of soul” (A.3.23:3).
- “...another benefit of no less importance...: Obscene objects and ideas do not cause in them the impression and impurity they do in those who still find this joy to their liking. Consequently, from the denial and mortification of this joy, spiritual purity of soul and body (of spirit and sense) arises; a person gradually acquires angelic harmony with God, and the soul and body become a worthy temple of the Holy Spirit” (A.3.23:4).
- Another general benefit is “freedom from countless vanities,” especially boasting about natural endowments and rejoicing in them whether they belong to oneself or others (see A.3.23:5).
- And lastly, “freedom of spirit by which the soul easily conquers temptations, passes through trials, and grows prosperously in virtue. This is an excellent good and very necessary in serving God” (A.3.23:6).

Summary: “People who have turned their hearts away from investing their joy in natural goods are like someone who has taken an exit off a busy highway and travels down a peaceful country road. ... In commenting upon the line in *The Spiritual Canticle* ‘I no longer tend the herd,’ John writes of the stress that a soul experiences when it follows the crowd. ‘She usually has desires to serve the appetites of others, which she does through ostentation, compliments, flattery, human respect, the effort to impress and please people by her actions, and many other useless things. In this fashion she strives to please people, employing for them all her care, desire, work and finally energy’ (SC.28:7). ... How different our lives become when we no longer participate in the maddening crowd’s ignoble strife. It ‘begets deep tranquility of soul’ (A.3.23:3). This is one of the most notable benefits that John says results from withdrawing our hearts from joy in natural goods” (*Reflections*, pg. 180-181).

For personal reflection: In what way do I use my natural gifts to either impress or please others? What are the consequences of this behavior? Have I ever experienced the relief that is derived from letting go of the need to use my natural gifts to impress and please people? (see *Reflections*, pg. 181).

Session Three: Purgation of sensory goods

The third kind of good in which the will can place the emotion of joy, and how the will should be directed to God through the purgation of this joy.

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 24-27.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 182-186.

Explanatory note: “I was once told about an astonishing level of chastity attained by someone. There was a man who, having looked on the body of a beautiful woman, at once gave praise to its Creator and after one look was stirred to love God and to weep copiously, so that it was marvelous how something that could have brought low one person managed to be the cause of a heavenly crown for another. This passage written by St. John Climacus [a seventh-century monk] reflects one of John’s essential teachings on sensual, or sensory, goods (pleasure derived through the five exterior senses and the imagination), namely, that they are meant to be a means to lead us to God and become so when the will is purified and transformed” (*Reflections*, pg. 182).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “It should be known that by sensory goods we mean here all the goods apprehensible to the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, and to the interior faculty of discursive imagination. They are goods pertinent to the exterior and interior senses” (A.3.24:1).
- John’s teaching is that these exterior and interior senses are meant to be a means to lead one to God. “For when the will, in becoming aware of the delight afforded by an object of sight, hearing, or touch, does not stop with this joy but immediately elevates itself to God, being moved and strengthened for this by that delight, it is doing something very good. The will, then, does not have to avoid such experiences when they produce this devotion and prayer, but it can profit by them, and even ought to for the sake of so holy an exercise. For there are souls who are greatly moved toward God by sensible objects” (A.3.24:4).
- John offers a norm of discerning when this gratification of the senses is beneficial and when it is not. “Whenever spiritual persons, on hearing music or other things, seeing agreeable objects, smelling sweet fragrance, or feeling the delight of certain tastes and delicate touches, immediately at the first movement direct their thought and the affection of their will to God, receiving more satisfaction in the thought of God than in the sensible object that caused it, and find no delight in the senses..., it is a sign that they are profiting by the senses and the sensory part is a help to the spirit” (A.3.24:5).
- John further clarifies that “those in whom these sensible objects cause this pure spiritual effect do not on that account have an appetite for them. They care for them hardly at all ... Thus they are not solicitous about these sensible goods; ... and when ... these goods are offered to them, the will immediately leaves them aside, passing on to God” (A.3.24:5).

- John further observes that the purified will has the “readiness to go to God in and through all things ... Yet anyone who does not feel this freedom of spirit in these objects and sensible delights, but finds that the will pauses in and feeds on them, suffers harm from them and ought to turn from their use” (A.3.24:6).

Side note: “The spiritual harm that ensues from an inordinate attachment to sensory pleasure is not always immediately evident but can manifest itself over time” (*Reflections*, pg. 183-184).

Chapter 25 discusses the harm caused by the desire for willful joy in sensory goods.

- The soul addicted to sensory delight quickly falls into a dissipated lifestyle: “vanity of spirit, mental distraction, inordinate covetousness, indecency, interior and exterior discomposure, impurity in thought, and envy.”
- Joy in hearing useless things gives direct rise to distraction of the imagination, gossiping, envy, uncertain judgments, and wandering thoughts.
- Joy in the delights of food leads directly to gluttony and drunkenness, anger, discord, and lack of charity toward one’s neighbor and the poor. [John emphasizes moderation in all things.]
- Inordinate affections and appetites leave the soul incapable of moral and spiritual blessings, as useless as a broken jar (see A.3.25:1-8).

Chapter 26 discusses the spiritual and temporal benefits resulting from the denial of inordinate joy in sensory goods.

- “They become recollected in God and conserve the spirit and virtues they had acquired. These virtues increase and the soul advances” (A.3.26:2).
- “...we can truthfully say that from being sensual they become spiritual, and from animal, rational, and even that from what is human in them they advance to the angelic, and from earthly and human they become heavenly and divine” (A.3.26:3).
- “Spiritual joy directed to God at the sight of all divine or profane things follows from the eye already purged of enjoyment in seeing things... The person whose sense is purged of sensible objects and ordered to reason procures from the first movements the delight of savory contemplation and awareness of God” (A.3.26:5).
- “But anyone who fails to conquer the joy of appetite will fail to experience the serenity of habitual joy in God by means of his creatures and works” (A.3.26:6).
- “If the soul through mortification of the animal life lives a spiritual life, it must obviously, without contradiction, go to God in all things, since all its spiritual actions and movements will flow from the spiritual life. Consequently this person, now of pure heart, finds in all things a joyful, pleasant, chaste, pure, spiritual, glad, and **loving knowledge of God**” (A.3.26:6, emphasis added).

Note: This loving knowledge is perceptible to souls who are free from particular ideas and concepts apprehensible by the senses. As previously noted, progression in prayer is the increase in knowledge and love of God.

For personal reflection: Do I have an inordinate attachment to a sensory good that dominates my life? Is there a sensory good (e.g., music, art, etc.) that nourishes my soul? (see *Reflections*, pg. 186).

Session Four: Purgation of Moral Goods

The fourth kind of good (various moral goods) in which the will can rejoice, and how the will should be directed to God through the purgation of this joy.

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 27-29;
The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections, pg. 187-195.

Essential Points to Discuss:

Chapter 27 discusses the various moral goods in which one can seek vain joy.

- “By moral goods we mean: the virtues and their habits insofar as they are moral; the exercise of any of the virtues; the practice of the works of mercy; the observance of God’s law; political prudence [one directs oneself in relation to the common good, footnote 1] and all the practices of good manners” (A.3.27:1).
- From a natural viewpoint, the practice of moral goods is very rewarding. “For they bring along with them peace, tranquility, a right and ordered use of reason, and actions resulting from mature deliberation. Humanly speaking, a person cannot have any nobler possession in this life” (A.3.27:2).
- However, John reminds us of those moral goods, like all other categories of goods, are good in themselves but become detrimental to spiritual progress if our relationship to them is inordinate. John’s observation is that “...the eyes of their soul did not go beyond the things of this mortal life.” He goes on to explain “that insofar as they perform these works for the love of God, these works procure eternal life for them. Thus, through their good customs and virtues they should fix their eyes only on the service and honor of God. Without this aspect the virtues are worth nothing in God’s sight” (A.3.27:4).
- “Christians, then, should rejoice not if they accomplish good works and abide by good customs, but if they do these things out of love for God alone, **without any other motive**” (A.3.27:4, emphasis added).
- “For the sake of directing their joy in moral goods to God, Christians should keep in mind that the value of their good works, fasts, alms, penances, and so on, is not based on quantity and quality so much as on the love of God practiced in them... They should not set their heart on the pleasure, comfort, savor, and other elements of self-interest these good works and practices usually entail, but recollect their joy in God and desire to serve him through these means” (A.3.27:5).
- “And through purgation and darkness as to this joy in moral goods they should desire in secret that only God be pleased and joyful over their works” (A.3.27:5).

Chapter 28 discusses the kinds of harm that result from inordinate joy of the will in moral goods.

- “The **first** is vanity, pride, vainglory, and presumption, for one is unable to rejoice over one’s works without esteeming them” (A.3.28:2).
- The self-evaluation of these prideful persons usually breeds the **second** harm: “It is that people make comparisons judging others to be evil and imperfect, supposing that the

deeds and works of others are not as good as their own. Interiorly they have less regard for others, and they sometimes manifest this exteriorly in word... Many today also do so when they boast: 'I am not like so and so, nor do I do anything similar to what this or that one does'" (A.3.28:3).

- "This 'I never' attitude is a means of calling attention to one's moral superiority" (*Reflections*, pg. 188).
"Let us look at our own faults and leave aside those of others, for it is very characteristic of persons with such well-ordered lives to be shocked by everything. Perhaps we could truly learn from the one who shocks us what is most important, even though we may surpass him in external composure and our way of dealing with others.... So, it is better to carry out what our rule says, to strive to live always in silence and hope" (*Interior Castle*, III.2:13).
- As pride in moral goods takes root in the soul, the motivation for the soul to perform moral works becomes corrupted. This is the third harm. "... since they look for satisfaction in their works, they usually do not perform them unless they see that some gratification or praise will result from them" (A.3.28:4).
- "The **fourth** [harm] follows from this third; and it is that they will not find their reward in God since they wished to find, in this life, joy, comfort, honor, or some other thing from their works. ... The reason is that people are not detached from these human respects and interests" (A.3.28:5).
- "To avoid this kind of harm, then, these persons must hide their work so that only God might see it... Not only should they hide it from others, but even from themselves: They should desire neither the complacency of esteeming their work as if it had value, nor the procurement of satisfaction. This is the meaning of our Savior's words: *Let not the left hand know what the right hand is doing* [Mt. 6:3], which is like saying: Do not esteem with the temporal and carnal eye the spiritual work you do" (A.3.28:6).
- "The **fifth** kind of harm is failure to advance in the way of perfection. As a result of attachment to satisfaction and consolation in their works, some usually become discouraged and **lose the spirit of perseverance**. This ordinarily happens when God leads them on by giving them hard bread, the bread of the perfect, and takes away the infant's milk so as to prove their strength and purge their weak appetite so they may taste the substantial fare of adults" (A.3.28:7, emphasis added).
Note: "What John says here resembles what he says in discussing purgative contemplation (DN.1.12:1-2). Purgation deals also with one's works since spiritual sweetness and interior consolation come not only from prayer but from good works as well" (A.3 ch. 28, footnote 2).
- "To work with these people is frustrating. They are very enthusiastic about any venture at the outset but never follow through on anything. They are unreliable. You can't count on them to do their part. What they do or don't do all depends upon their feelings" (*Reflections*, pg. 190).
- The **sixth** harm is distortion of judgment. "... they are usually deluded by the thought that the exercises and works that give satisfaction are better than those that do not. ... Yet those works that usually require more mortification from a person (who is not

advanced in the way of perfection) are more acceptable and precious in God's sight because of the self-denial exercised in them, than are those from which one can derive consolation, which very easily leads to self-seeking" (A.3.28:8).

- The **seventh** kind of harm is that they are "incapable of taking counsel and receiving reasonable instructions about the works they ought to do... Such people become very slack in charity toward God and neighbor, for the self-love contained in their works makes them grow cold in charity" (A.3.28:9).

Side note: John references several scripture passages to illustrate his teachings. It is crucial for each participant to read and reflect on these scripture verses for a proper understanding of this chapter.

Chapter 29 discusses the benefits derived through the removal of joy from moral goods.

- "As for the **first**, the soul is freed from falling into many temptations and deceits of the devil concealed in the joy of these good works" (A.3.29:1).
- The **second** benefit is that the soul acquires the strength of perseverance because its good deeds are not dependent upon feelings. "A wise person is concerned about the substance and benefit of a work, not about the delight and satisfaction it yields. Thus such a one does not beat the air (1 Cor. 9:26), but procures from the work a stable [and peaceful] joy without paying the tribute of displeasure" (A.3.29:2).
- "The **third** is a divine benefit. It is that by extinguishing vain joy in these works a person becomes poor in spirit, which is one of the beatitudes the Son of God mentions: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* [Mt. 5:3]" (A.3.29:3).
- "The **fourth** benefit is that those who deny this joy will be meek, humble, and prudent in their work" (A.3.29:4). The soul will begin to experience a more peaceful way of living.
- "The **fifth** benefit is to become pleasing to both God and other human beings and free of spiritual avarice, gluttony, sloth, envy, and a thousand other vices" (A.3.29:5).

For personal reflection: Do I take pride in my virtues? Is it important that people regard me as virtuous? John writes that some people "want praise for their works; others, thanks; others [want people to] talk about [their works] and are pleased if this person or that or even the whole world knows about them" (A.3.28:5). Have I ever experienced the relief of not needing to be praised, thanked, or recognized for my good works? (see *Reflections*, pg. 195).

Session Five: Supernatural goods, the fifth kind of good in which the will can rejoice, and how joy in them must be directed to God through the purgation of this joy

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 30-32.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 196-199.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- Supernatural goods include "... the gifts of wisdom and knowledge given by God to Solomon [1 Kgs. 3:7-12] and the graces St. Paul enumerates: faith, the grace of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, knowledge and discernment of spirits, interpretation of words, and also the gift of tongues [1 Cor. 12:9-10]" (A.3.30:1).
- For one to understand the purgation of vain joy in supernatural goods, John notes two benefits: temporal and spiritual (see A.3.30:3).
- "The **temporal** includes healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, raising the dead, expelling devils, prophesying the future so people may be careful and other similar things... The **spiritual** and eternal benefit is the knowledge and love of God caused by these works either in those who perform them or in those in whom or before whom, they are accomplished" (A.3.30:3, emphasis added).
- "However, these temporal benefits, as spectacular as they may be, are of little or no importance when they are devoid of the eternal [spiritual] benefits that these gifts are meant to impart, namely '**the knowledge and love of God** caused by these works...'" (*Reflections*, pg. 196, emphasis added).
- "John is not diminishing the importance of the temporal aspect of supernatural goods; rather, he is saying that the temporal aspect of supernatural goods is the **occasion or vehicle through which the eternal benefits are communicated** to the soul and that supernatural goods should only be rejoiced in to the extent that God is loved and served through them" (*Reflections*, pg. 196, emphasis added).
Note: "There is a difference in their objects, since the object of the spiritual goods is only the Creator and the soul, whereas the object of the supernatural goods is the creature" (A.3.30:2).
- "People should rejoice, then, not in whether they possess and exercise these graces, but in whether they derive the second benefit from them, the spiritual: Serving God through them with true charity, for in charity lies the fruit of eternal life" (A.3.30:5).

Chapter 31 discusses the harm resulting from rejoicing in supernatural goods.

- Those possessing a supernatural gift are vulnerable to pride. They can be tempted to use their gift for the sake of self-gratification. John writes, "It is clear that in these cases those who were gifted were moved to perform their works at an inopportune time by some imperfect passion that was clothed in joy and esteem for these works" (A.3.31:3).
Note: For further understanding, read *Reflections*, pg. 197 concerning the charismatic prayer movement.
- John teaches that a supernatural gift should never be used indiscriminately or inappropriately. "Those, then, who have this supernatural gift should not desire or

rejoice in its use, nor should they care about exercising it. God, who grants the grace supernaturally for the usefulness of the Church or its members, will also move the gifted supernaturally as to the manner and time in which they should use their gift” (A.3.31:7).

Note: Anyone experiencing supernatural gifts is advised to consult with a knowledgeable spiritual director or with their confessor.

- The second harm proceeds from the first, namely less reliance on pure faith. “By giving importance to these miracles one loses the support of the substantial habit of faith, which is an obscure habit [of the soul]. Where signs and testimonies abound, there is less merit in believing. ... God never works these marvels except when they are a necessity for believing. ... Mary Magdalene was first shown the empty sepulcher, and afterward the angels told her about the resurrection so she would, by hearing, believe before seeing” (A.3.31:8). “Those, then, who love to rejoice in these supernatural works suffer a great loss in faith” (A.3.31:9).
- The third harm is that “through joy in these works one ordinarily falls into vainglory or some kind of vanity” (A.3.31:10).

Chapter 32 discusses the benefits that come from the negation of joy in supernatural goods.

- “The first refers to the praise and extolling of God; the second to the exaltation of the soul itself” (A.3.32:1).
- “God is exalted in the soul in two ways. First, the heart and willful joy are withdrawn from all that is not God and concentrated on him alone. ... *The human heart will reach high, and God will be exalted* [Ps. 64:6-7]” (A.3.32:1).
- “The more the soul believes in and serves God without testimonies and signs, the more it extols God, since it believes [through faith] more of him than signs and miracles can teach” (A.3.32:3).
- “The second benefit, the exaltation of the soul, owes its origin to a withdrawal of the will from all apparent testimonies and signs. Because of this, the soul is exalted in purest faith that God then infuses and augments much more abundantly. And, together with this, he increases the other two theological virtues (charity and hope). As a result the soul enjoys divine and lofty knowledge by means of the dark and naked habit of faith; and the admirable delight of love through charity, by which it rejoices in nothing else than the living God; and satisfaction in the memory by means of hope. All of this is a splendid benefit, essentially and directly required for the perfect union of the soul with God” (A.3.32:4).

For personal reflection: At the heart of John’s teaching is a question. What moves me to use my gifts? Is it God or a self-serving motive? This is an extremely important question in the spiritual life. Do I use my gifts, be they natural or supernatural, in the service of God or to please myself? (see *Reflections*, pg. 197-198).

Session Six: Purgation of joy in spiritual goods

The sixth kind of good in which the will can rejoice, and of how the will should be directed to God through the purgation of this joy.

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 33-37.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 200-215.

Explanatory note: Chapters 33 and 34 introduce the topic of attachment to external spiritual goods and how easy it is to delude ourselves in our enjoyment of their use.

By “spiritual goods” John refers to “all those that are an aid and motivating force in turning the soul to divine things and communion with God, as well as a help in God’s communications to the soul” (A.3.33:2).

“What objects help and motivate you to live a deeper spiritual life? Are they statues, images, special places for prayer, or ceremonies? John’s focus from chapters 35 through 45 is on the use of such objects. What is the purpose of these spiritual goods? How should they be used? When do they become obstacles to spiritual growth?

“What we see in this final section of *The Ascent* is a principle we have seen throughout the work. All things are good and are meant to lead us to God but can hinder spiritual progress if we develop an inordinate relationship to them. This principle is especially instructive regarding spiritual goods because of the common assumption that if an object is explicitly religious (e.g., a statue of a saint, a rosary, etc.), it poses no potential spiritual harm. John says just the opposite. ‘Perhaps these images are more dangerous, for in saying ‘they are holy objects’ these persons become more assured and do not fear natural possessiveness and attachment. Spiritual persons are thus at times seriously deluded by thinking they are filled with devotion because of their satisfaction in the use of these holy objects’ (A.3.38:1; italics added)” (*Reflections*, pg. 200).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- Motivating goods include statues, paintings of saints, oratories, and ceremonies. There can be vain joy in relation to statues and paintings. Although they are vital to divine worship and necessary to move the will to devotion, many rejoice more in the painting and ornamentation than in the person represented (see A.3.35:1-2).
- There are some people who pay more attention to the workmanship and value of the statue than to the object represented. And the interior devotion, which they should direct spiritually toward the invisible saint in immediate forgetfulness of the statue – since the purpose of the statue is to give motivation – is so taken up with the exterior artistry and ornamentation that the love and joy of the will dwell on that satisfaction (see A.3.35:3).
- Because of the delusion that holy objects can do no harm, people can become tragically ridiculous in their devotion. “... they adorn statues with the jewelry conceited people in the course of time invent to satisfy themselves in their pastimes and vanities, ... By this practice the authentic and sincere devotion of the soul ... is reduced to little more than

doll-dressing. Some use the statues for nothing more than idols upon which they center their joy. You will see some who never tire of adding statue on statue to their collection ...” (A.3.35:4).

- The same goes for rosaries. “You will hardly meet anyone who does not have some weakness in this matter. They want the rosary to be made in one style rather than another, or that it be of this color or that metal rather than another... [God’s] answer to the rosary prayer is not dependent on the kind of rosary used. The prayer he hears is that of a simple and pure heart that is concerned only about pleasing God ...” (A.3.35:7).
- “People who are truly devout direct their devotion mainly to the invisible object represented, have little need for many images, ... They seek the living image of Christ crucified within themselves” (A.3.35:5).
- “Even when the motives and means that bring the soul closer to God are taken from them, they remain calm. People are more perfect when they remain tranquil and joyous in the privation of these motives than when they possess them with desire and attachment” (A.3.35:5).
- “Individuals should be certain that the more they are attached with a possessive spirit to the image or motive, the less will their prayer and devotion ascend to God” (A.3.35:6).
- God may speak through an image, but the devil can also produce this effect in order to do harm (see A.3.36:5). It is safest to follow John’s advice regarding spiritual apprehensions (see A.3 ch. 7-13) which he reiterates in chapter 37.
- If God grants favor through holy places or holy images, it is not to draw attention to the place or the image, but to increase the devotion of those who receive these favors (see A.3.36:2-4).

Side note: “John might ask these people to reflect upon the primary purpose of the pilgrimage. Is it spiritual or recreational? ‘For many go on pilgrimage more for the sake of recreation than devotion’ (A.3.36:3). Or as the Imitation of Christ has it, ‘They who undertake many pilgrimages seldom become holy’” (*Reflections*, pg. 206).

Chapter 37 expands on the topic of supernatural phenomena (previously explained in A.3.36:5) and describes the proper use of images.

- “Since images serve as a motivating means toward invisible things, we should strive that the motivation, emotion, and joy of will derived from them be directed toward the living object they represent. The faithful should therefore take this precaution: On seeing the image they should not allow their senses to become absorbed in it... They should pay no attention to these accidents; they should not dwell in the image but immediately raise the mind to what is represented. They should prayerfully and devoutly center the satisfaction and joy of their will in God, or the saint being invoked...” (A.3.37:2).

Side note: “John is against not the use of images and sacramentals but their abuse and our attachment to them. He draws our attention to their importance in the spiritual life ‘The Church established the use of images for two principal reasons: the reverence given to the saints through them; and both the motivation of the will and the awakening of devotion to the saints by their means. Insofar as they serve this purpose their use is profitable and necessary’

(A.3.35.3). Unfortunately, some people become fixated on the window dressing, which ‘is a total obstacle to authentic spirituality’” (*Reflections*, pg. 202-203).

Session Seven: Joy in spiritual goods. Continues the discussion of motivating goods. Oratories and dedicated places of prayer.

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book Three, chapters 38-45.

Recommended Reading: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Reflections*, pg. 200-215.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “... to begin our discussion on the subject of oratories, some individuals never grow tired of adding images of one kind or another to their oratories, or taking delight in the arrangement and adornment of these images so the place of prayer will appear well decorated and attractive” (A.3.38:2).
- “Many of them in their desire and gratification grow so attached to their oratory and its decoration that all their energy, which should be employed in prayer and interior recollection, is expended on these things” (A.3.38:5).
- The focus should be on interior recollection and prayer. “Churches and quiet places are dedicated and suitable for prayer, for the church should be used for no other purpose. Nevertheless, in a matter of communion with God as interior as this, that place should be chosen **that least occupies and attracts the senses**” (A.3.39:2, emphasis added).
- “This is the interpretation we should give to Christ’s reply to the query of the Samaritan woman about the place best suited for prayer – the temple or the mountains. His answer was that true prayer is annexed neither to the temple nor to the mountain, but that the adorers who please the Father are those who adore him in spirit and truth [Jn. 4:20-24]” (A.3.39:2).
- John’s focus is on the purification of the will. “To purge the will of its desire and vain joy in these objects and direct it to God, you should strive in your prayer for a pure conscience, a will that is wholly with God, and a mind truly set on him” (A.3.40:2).
- John also observes the vainglory and distractions in the large varieties of ceremonies that many people use as a motivating means for prayer. As always, John is supportive of the ceremonies of the Church that motivate one to pray. However, he criticizes the way that some people carry out their devotions to satisfy their senses and feelings. Consequently, they put more trust in the methods than in the interior prayer and recollection. “For example, they demand that the Mass be said with a certain number of candles... or that it be celebrated at a particular hour... and that they be recited at certain times and with certain ceremonies... [or] the person performing ceremonies have certain endowments and characteristics. And they are of the opinion that nothing will be accomplished if one of these points is lacking” (A.3.43:2).
- “They are praying in this way because of their attachment to the desired object and their vain joy in it. It would be better to convert these prayers into practices of greater importance, such as purification of their consciences and serious concentration on matters pertinent to their salvation” (A.3.44:1).
- “The Lord has promised in the Gospel: seek first, and chiefly, the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these other things will be added unto you [Mt. 6:33]” (A.3.44:2).

- In the last chapter of *The Ascent*, John's focus is on provocative goods – a "... kind of distinct delightful goods in which the will can vainly rejoice comprises those that arouse or persuade one to serve God. We call these provocative goods. Preachers belong to this class, and we can speak of them in two ways: with reference to the preacher himself, and with reference to his hearers" (A.3.45:1).
- "As for the preacher, in order to benefit the people and avoid the impediment of vain joy and presumption, he should keep in mind that preaching is more a spiritual practice than a vocal one" (A.3.45:2).
Note: John's recommendation is to impart the spirit of God, and not to feed one's ego when preaching. For us Seculars, this advice is appropriate for formators, discussion moderators, and participants.
- John aims his concluding comments at those who sit in the pews. "... here he sets before us a question, 'When we listen to a sermon, what do we hope to gain?' Are we willing to change our lives as the result of the truth that we hear, or do we simply want to be entertained? As John puts it, 'The sensory adherence to the gratification provided by the doctrine hinders any effect the doctrine may have on the spirit, and people are left only with esteem for the mode and the accidents of the sermon. They praise the preacher and listen to him for these reasons more than for the motivation they receive to amend their lives' (A.3.45:5, italics added)" (*Reflections*, pg. 214).

*"When I came to you, I did not come
preaching with sublimity of doctrine
and wisdom; and my word and my preaching
were not in the rhetoric of human wisdom,
But in the manifestation of the spirit and of truth."
(1 Cor. 2:1-4)*

Conclusion: "... *The Ascent* is a series of variations on a single theme: all things are good and are meant to be means that will lead us to God. However, they can become obstacles if we choose to take up a possessive relationship to them. John puts before us both the misery that comes from a possessive heart and the joy that God grants to a soul that loves freely" (*Reflections*, pg. 217).

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THE DARK NIGHT LEADING TO GOD’S ACTION, an Introduction
(*The Dark Night* – Books One and Two)

“The way of perfection passes by way of the Cross. There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle. Spiritual progress entails the asceticism [self-denial] and mortification that gradually lead to living in the peace and joy of the Beatitudes.”
(CCC 2015)

“It remains to be said, then, that even though this happy night darkens the spirit, it does so only to impart light concerning all things; and even though it humbles individuals and reveals their miseries, it does so only to exalt them; and even though it impoverishes and empties them of all possessions and natural affection, it does so only that they may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all.”
(*The Dark Night*, 2.9:1)

The following introduction to *The Dark Night* was taken from *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, pg. 353-357. Courtesy ICS Publications.

“A work called *The Dark Night* has come down to us from John of the Cross in manuscripts separate from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Explaining the passive purifications of both the senses and the spirit, this work fulfills John’s several promises in *The Ascent* to treat of the passive nights... And a number of times as he moves through his material, he asserts that active purification alone [one’s own efforts] is insufficient for attainment of union. This work, *The Dark Night*, then, describes how God purifies the soul passively and brings the theological life to perfection delineated in *The Ascent*... Though different in literary style, this latter work furnishes a necessary complement to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

“... In the Night, turning to the poem once again, he states his intention to explain its stanzas. And this time the exposition of the subject matter follows the poem

more closely and is more influenced by it. ... He tells us in a brief prologue that the first two stanzas refer to the effects of the two kinds of purification, sensory and spiritual [that take place in a person]; and the last six [stanzas] speak of the effects, wonderful though ineffable, of illumination and union.

“... Thus the poem describes two fundamental conditions in the spiritual process: the painful passage through the night, and the unspeakable joy of encountering God.

“In his exposition, John does not present a program of detailed asceticism for attaining the poverty of spirit implied by the radical purification. His emphasis is on allowing God to lead, on accepting the Lord’s work with all its consequences. At the same time the teaching must be seen in relation to the main focus of *The Ascent*, as a prolongation and complement to it.

“... What is really at stake in the spiritual journey to union with God is an ongoing work of purification, a cleansing of all that is repugnant to God’s holiness. The purity implied is impossible without personal effort, but this effort, however intense, does not achieve the radical stripping demanded by the union. God’s own intervention is necessary through a purifying communication that works passively, beyond the realm of what human effort can achieve. Human effort does little more than dispose one for the divine action.

“The human work and the divine action are not perfectly successive; rather, they are parallel and simultaneous. It is the predominance of one over the other that permits the establishing of a certain relative succession, which of course means that in the final stage of the purification the divine is clearly prevalent.

“What the person undergoing the dark night experiences is a painful lack or privation: darkness in the intellect; aridity in the will regarding the exercise of love; emptiness of all possessions in the memory; and a general affliction and torment as a consequence. Such persons receive a vivid understanding of their own misery and think they will never escape from it.

“All these painful experiences as well as the beneficial fruits of the transformation are attributable to contemplation. This contemplation is an inpouring of God into the soul, a divine, loving knowledge that is general, without images or concepts, obscure and hidden from the one who receives it, a knowledge that both purifies and illumines. ...

“... The novelty of this knowledge does not lie in the information, but in a new sense of the presence of God through faith and love. The one who receives it is in a kind of passive activity. There are no adequate human controls; before God, only poverty, confidence, and abandonment remain.

“... But contemplation is not identifiable with dark night; it may be given in forms that produce effects different from these purifying ones. In addition, it is worth

saying that if this night darkens, it does so only to give light; if it humiliates, it does so only to exalt; if it impoverishes, it does so only to enrich.

“The point of arrival to which the night leads is the ‘new self,’ divinized in being and operation, living now a life of faith, hope, and love, fortified and pure.

“John’s exposition of the night may seem to disengage that experience from the rest of the life. But the night cannot occur apart from the external happenings of every day, nor can we forget, while reading, the event of John’s imprisonment in Toledo with all its social and material deprivations. Our horizons open to many possible forms in which we may experience a dark night, according to the grace, state in life, and historical or personal circumstances of the individual. John leaves to each reader and each age the task of making the suitable applications. What is essential is that the sufferings and privations bring about a growing response of faith, hope, and love; without this transforming theological life the night would fail to purify and produce fruit.”

THE DARK NIGHT – BOOK ONE

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*. This book is included in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, 1991.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, O.C.D. ICS Publications, 2018.

Session One: The Imperfections of Beginners

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book One, chapters 1-7.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, O.C.D. chapters 1-7.

Explanatory note: Chapters 1-7 cover the imperfections of beginners within the framework of the seven capital sins. “We should first mention here some characteristics of beginners, for the sake of a better explanation and understanding of the nature of this night and of God’s motive for placing the soul in it” (DN.1.1:1). According to John, beginners are those who have already taken the spiritual path of prayer and meditation. The benefits of the dark night will be explained in subsequent chapters, specifically how it cleanses and purifies the soul of all imperfections and accommodates the senses to the life in the spirit.

Essential Points to Discuss:

Chapter 1: Imperfections of Beginners

- Beginners in prayer are joyful but are so weak in the practice of the virtues that they are subject to many distractions and imperfections.
- “...they [beginners] conduct themselves in a very weak and imperfect manner. Since their motivation in their spiritual works and exercises is the consolation and satisfaction they experience in them, and since they have not been conditioned by the arduous struggle of practicing virtue, they possess many faults and imperfections in the discharge of their spiritual activities.” (DN.1.1:3).
- **Fr. Foley:** “The presence of God as consolation is meant to be an aid to spiritual advancement. Unfortunately, it often becomes an obstacle... What hinders spiritual advancement is not consolation per se but our relationship to it. We can become attached to the sensual experience of consolation; we can develop ‘a spiritual sweet tooth’ (A.2.7.5) and become addicted to the spiritual savor of grace. As a result, our capacity to embrace the cross is diminished. We can also misinterpret the significance of consolation. Many beginners believe that what they feel is an indication of their holiness; they think they are saints because they find great delight in their spiritual exercises. John deals with these two hindrances within the framework of the seven capital sins. ... It is important to keep in mind that even though John is dealing specifically with ‘beginners,’ the psychological and spiritual insights into the dynamics of the capital sins that are contained in these chapters can apply to all of us” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 6-7).

Chapter 2: Spiritual Pride

- Spiritual pride in beginners results in complacency because they do not have true self-knowledge.
- “These beginners feel so fervent and diligent in their spiritual exercises and undertakings that a certain kind of secret pride is generated in them that begets a complacency with themselves and their accomplishments. ... Then they develop a somewhat vain – at times very vain – desire to speak of spiritual things in others’ presence, and sometimes even to instruct rather than be instructed; in their hearts they condemn others who do not seem to have the kind of devotion they would like them to have,...” (DN.1.2:1).

Note: John mentions several other imperfections in detail. Read this chapter in its entirety for a proper understanding of the many imperfections of beginners.

- “But souls who are advancing in perfection at this time act in an entirely different manner and with a different quality of spirit. They receive great benefit from their humility, by which they not only place little importance on their deeds, but also take very little self-satisfaction from them” (DN.1.2:6).
- “Their charity and love make them want to do so much for God that what they actually do accomplish seems as nothing. This loving solicitude goads them, preoccupies them, and absorbs them to such an extent that they never notice what others do or do not accomplish...” (DN.1.2:6).

Chapter 3: Spiritual Avarice

- Spiritual avarice gets in the way of poverty of spirit. The result is that the soul blocks the spiritual purgation that God desires for it.
- “They hardly ever seem content with the spirit God gives them. They become unhappy and peevish because they don’t find the consolation they want in spiritual things” (DN.1.3:1).
- “Many never have enough of hearing counsels, or learning spiritual maxims, or keeping them and reading books about them. They spend more time in these than in striving after mortification and the perfection of the interior poverty to which they are obliged” (DN.1.3:1).
- “They are collectors of ideas and systems of thought that they can talk about with their friends but never apply to their own lives. They love to ingest information but do not have the capacity to do the hard and tedious work that is required to digest it” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 23).
- “Furthermore, they weigh themselves down with over-decorated images and rosaries. They now put these down, now take up others; at one moment they are exchanging, and at the next re-exchanging. Now they want this kind, now they want another... What I condemn in this is possessiveness of heart and attachment to the number, workmanship, and over-decoration of these objects” (DN.1.3:1).
- “Since true devotion comes from the heart and looks only to the truth and substance represented by spiritual objects, and since everything else is imperfect attachment and

possessiveness, any appetite for these things must be uprooted if some degree of perfection is to be reached” (DN.1.3:1).

For personal reflection: One of the core issues contained in this chapter is our purpose for acquiring knowledge. Do we want to know in order to increase our stockpile of information, or do we want to receive the wisdom “to know how to live for love of God and neighbor”? (DN.1.3:2) (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 28).

Chapter 4: Spiritual lust

Explanatory note: “Lust” in the old meaning of the word signified an inordinate desire for sensual gratification. *In this context, we are not speaking of sexual gratification, but rather the gratification of the senses and emotions.*

- Lustful thoughts and feelings often seek spiritual and sensory gratification in spiritual exercises. It allows the soul to be distracted by impurities of the sensory nature. Engaging in distractions and seeking inordinate pleasures rather than entering into the dark night (God’s calling) is a natural tendency that the soul must overcome. Spiritual friendships come under this category.
- “... spiritual persons have numerous imperfections, many of which can be called spiritual lust, not because the lust is spiritual but because it proceeds from spiritual things” (DN.1.4:1).
- “Some spiritually acquire a liking for other individuals that often arises from lust rather than from the spirit. This lustful origin will be recognized if, on recalling the affection, there is **remorse of conscience**, and not an increase in the remembrance and love of God” (DN.1.4:7, emphasis added).
- “The affection is purely spiritual if the love of God grows when it grows, or if the love of God is remembered as often as the affection is remembered, or if the affection gives the soul a desire for God – if by growing in one the soul grows also in the other. For this is a trait of God’s spirit” (DN.1.4:7).

For personal reflection: Have you ever been in a relationship in which you asked yourself the question, “Where is this going; where will this end?” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 38).

Chapter 5: Spiritual anger

- “Because of the strong desire of many beginners for spiritual gratification, they usually have many imperfections of anger” (DN.1.5:1). Anger results from three things:
 - The soul encounters dryness when it desires delight (see DN.1.5:1).
 - The soul sees that others fail to measure up to its spiritual standards. “Through a certain indiscreet zeal they become angry over the sins of others, reprove these others, and sometimes even feel the impulse to do so angrily, which in fact they occasionally do, setting themselves up as lords of virtue. All such conduct is contrary to spiritual meekness” (DN.1.5:2).
 - The soul wants to speed up perfection in its own time and is not content to wait on God’s time. “Others, in becoming aware of their own imperfections, grow angry with themselves in an unhumble impatience. So impatient are they about these imperfections that they want to become saints in a day... They do not have the

patience to wait until God gives them what they need, when he so desires. Their attitude is contrary to spiritual meekness and can only be remedied by the purgation of the dark night” (DN.1.5:3).

For personal reflection: To what extent do you keep watch over the conduct of others, ready to punish the sins that you find? (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 48).

Chapter 6: Spiritual gluttony

- Spiritual gluttony is the inordinate desire for spiritual satisfaction instead of God. Spiritual satisfaction can be sought through excessive penance, consolations, or through over-valuing personal experiences as one undertakes the long and winding spiritual journey to God.
- “Some, attracted by the delight they feel in their spiritual exercises, kill themselves with penances, and others weaken themselves by fasts and, without the counsel or command of another...” (DN.1.6:1).
- “Since all extremes are vicious and since by such behavior these persons doing their own will, they grow in vice rather than in virtue. For through this conduct, they at least become spiritually gluttonous and proud, since they do not tread the path of obedience” (DN.1.6:2).
- Spiritual sweetness is also craved in prayer, and when the feelings are not achieved, prayer is abandoned. “Once they do not find delight in prayer, or in any other spiritual exercise, they feel extreme reluctance and repugnance in returning to it and sometimes even give it up. ... they are like children who are prompted to act not by reason but by pleasure” (DN.1.6:6).
- “All their time is spent looking for satisfaction and spiritual consolation; they can never read enough spiritual books, and one minute they are meditating on one subject and the next on another, always hunting for some gratification in the things of God” (DN.1.6:6).
- “Those who are inclined toward these delights have also another serious imperfection, which is that they are weak and remiss in treading the rough way of the cross. A soul given up to pleasure naturally feels aversion toward the bitterness of self-denial” (DN.1.6:7).
- “These people incur many other imperfections because of this spiritual gluttony, of which the Lord in time will cure them through temptations, aridities, and other trials, which are all a part of the dark night. ... Individuals thereby become aware that the perfection and value of their works do not depend on quantity or the satisfaction found in them but on knowing how to practice self-denial in them” (DN.1.6:8).

Side note: “Throughout these chapters, describing the situation of beginners in regard to each capital vice, John repeatedly points out their need for the purification of the dark night, which he begins to treat in ch. 8” (footnote #2, DN.1.6:6).

Chapter 7: Spiritual envy and sloth

- The imperfection of spiritual envy occurs when the spiritual good of others causes the soul grief and resentment. “In regard to envy, many of them feel sad about the spiritual

good of others and experience sensible grief in noting that their neighbor is ahead of them on the road to perfection, and they do not want to hear others praised... All of this is contrary to charity” (DN.1.7:1).

- Spiritual sloth is a lack of fortitude and causes the soul to become weary of aridity and fall away from prayer. These souls so prefer their own will to God’s that they begin to perceive their own will as God’s will. “Many of these beginners want God to desire what they want, and they become sad if they have to desire God’s will. They feel an aversion toward adapting their will to God’s” (DN.1.7:3). Read this chapter in its entirety (twice!).

Summary explanation At the end of chapter 7, John gives a summary explaining the need for further purification from the beginner’s state to proficient. Thus, he begins to explain the **passive night** of sense and spirit. “It is enough to have referred to the many imperfections of those who live in this beginner’s state to see their need for God to put them into the state of proficients. He does this by introducing them into the dark night, of which we will now speak. There, through pure dryness and interior darkness, he weans them from the breasts of these gratifications and delights, takes away all these trivialities and childish ways, and makes them acquire the virtues **by very different means**. No matter how earnestly beginners in all their actions and passions practice the mortification of self, they will never be able to do so entirely – far from it – until God accomplishes it in them **passively** by means of the purgation of this night” (DN.1.7:5, emphasis added).

Session Two: Beginning of the exposition of *The Dark Night*. Signs of Passive Night and Purgation.

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book One, chapters 8-10.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, chapters 8-10 (pg. 79-93).

Explanatory note:

As John goes on, he makes it clearer that his explanation of the nights coincides with that mentioned in *The Ascent* (see A.1.1:2-3). John is not repeating himself; rather, he is re-enforcing and recalling his teaching in *The Ascent* for a better understanding of God's action along the passive nights. Readers should not dismiss John's method/style as mere repetition.

This dark night of contemplation is composed of two purgations that correspond to the two levels of **raising awareness** in the sensory and spiritual parts of the soul. This passive night of the senses marks a transition from the stage of beginners to that of proficient. The passive night of the spirit is the transition from the stage of proficient to that of the perfect (see footnote 2, DN.1.8:1).

"Hence one night of purgation is sensory, by which the senses are purged and **accommodated to the spirit**; and the other night of purgation is spiritual, by which spirit is purged and denuded as well as accommodated and prepared for **union with God through love**" (DN.1.8:1, emphasis added).

Note: Passive purgation of the senses **accommodates** the senses to the spirit and the passive purification of the spiritual faculties **prepares** the soul for **union** with God. This clarification of these two purgative nights is crucial to the understanding of John's entire work of the passive night.

John further observes that the sensory night "is a more common occurrence, so one finds more written on it." But of the spiritual night "hardly anything has been said of it in sermons or in writing; and even experience of it is rare" (DN.1.8:2).

Chapter 8: "One Dark Night"

Note: Chapter 8 is an important chapter. It summarizes God's action in preparing the soul to face the intense purification described in *The Dark Night* Book Two. Read this chapter in its entirety.

Chapter 9: This chapter describes the signs for discerning whether a spiritual person is treading the path of this sensory night and purgation. Three signs are in place to understand if the night is indeed God's presence, rather than the product of one's imagination or imperfection.

"**The first [sign]** is that since these souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God, they do not get any from creatures either...Through this sign it can in all likelihood be inferred that this dryness and distaste is not the outcome of newly committed sins and imperfections. If this were so, some inclination or propensity to look for satisfaction in something other than the things of God would be felt in the sensory part..." (DN.1.9:2, emphasis added).

“The second sign for the discernment of this purgation is that the memory ordinarily turns to God solicitously and with painful care, and the soul thinks it is not serving God but turning back, because it is aware of this distaste for the things of God. **Hence it is obvious that this aversion and dryness is not the fruit of laxity and tepidity**, for lukewarm people do not care much for the things of God nor are they inwardly solicitous about them” (DN.1.9:3, emphasis added).

“The reason for this dryness is that God transfers his goods and strength from sense to spirit. Since the sensory part of the soul is incapable of the goods of spirit, it remains deprived, dry, and empty. Thus, while the spirit is tasting, the flesh tastes nothing at all and becomes weak in its work. But through this nourishment the spirit grows stronger and more alert, and becomes more solicitous than before about not failing God” (DN.1.9:4).

John’s observation is that the soul will continue to feel this dryness until the senses are purified and accommodated to the spirit by means of the dark and obscure night (see DN.1.9:4).

He further notes that this transition period is the beginning of contemplation that is dark and dry to the senses. “... when these aridities are the outcome of the purgative way of the sensory appetite, the spirit feels the strength and energy to work, which is obtained from the substance of that interior food... This food is the beginning of a contemplation that is dark and dry to the senses. Ordinarily this contemplation, which is secret and hidden from the very one who receives it, imparts to the soul, together with the dryness and emptiness it produces in the senses, an inclination to remain alone and in quietude” (DN.1.9:6).

“God conducts the soul along so different a path, ... that a desire to work with the faculties would hinder rather than help his work; whereas in the beginning of the spiritual life everything was quite the contrary. The reason is that now in this state of contemplation, when the soul leaves discursive meditation and enters the state of proficients, **it is God who works in it**. ... At this time a person’s own efforts are of no avail, but are an obstacle to the interior peace and work God is producing in the spirit **through that dryness of sense**” (DN.1.9:7, emphasis added).

Note: The faculties will continue to feel the dryness until the senses are purified and accommodated to the spirit by the interior food of contemplation. There is no darkness or dryness in the prayer of contemplation.

“The third sign for the discernment of this purgation of the senses is the powerlessness, in spite of one’s efforts, to meditate and make use of the imagination, the interior sense, as was one’s previous custom. At this time God does not communicate himself through the senses as he did before, by means of discursive analysis and synthesis of ideas, but begins to communicate himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation in which there is no discursive succession of thought” (DN.1.9:8).

Note: “Of these three signs two are negative (lack of satisfaction, inability to practice discursive meditation) and one positive (solicitude about not failing God). The positive sign is the best indicator of God’s communication (faith, hope, and love). These signs coincide with those explained in A.2, ch. 13, except that here the positive sign represents an earlier phase of the transition to contemplation” (DN.1, ch. 9, footnote 2).

“The three signs may be summarized as a threefold experience. I can’t meditate. I don’t want to meditate. All I want to do is to rest gently in an awareness of God’s presence” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 91).

Chapter 10: For the sake of further clarification, John confirms that now is the time for God to work. The efforts of the soul will bear no fruit because the soul has only been in the sensory night. It has no knowledge or understanding of the way of the spirit, which is the new way God is leading it.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- God makes this transition “... by withdrawing the soul from the life of the senses and placing it in that of spirit – that is, he brings it from meditation to contemplation – where the soul no longer has the power to work or meditate with its faculties on the things of God. Spiritual persons suffer considerable affliction in this night, owing not so much to the aridities they undergo **as to their fear of having gone astray**. Since they do not find any support or satisfaction in good things, they believe there will be no more spiritual blessings for them and that God has abandoned them” (DN.1.10:1, emphasis added).
- As a result, they redouble their efforts to meditate but to no avail. “They consequently impair God’s work and do not profit by their own. In searching for spirit, they lose the spirit that was the source of their tranquility and peace. They are like ... one who leaves a city only to re-enter it, or they are like a hunter who abandons the prey in order to go hunting again. It is useless, then, for the soul to try to meditate because it will no longer profit by this exercise” (DN.1.10:1).
- “Meditation is now useless for them because God is conducting them along another road, which is contemplation and is very different from the first, for the one road belongs to discursive meditation and the other is beyond the range of the imagination and discursive reflection” (DN.1.10:2).
- Since the mode of God’s presence has changed, we too must change our manner of prayer. We must learn to sit quietly without thinking much.
- “They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him. All these desires disquiet the soul and distract it from the peaceful, quiet, and sweet idleness of the contemplation that is being communicated to it” (DN.1.10:4).
- “... going to prayer means remaining in ease and freedom of spirit. If individuals were to desire to do something themselves with their interior faculties, they would hinder and lose the goods that God engraves on their souls through that peace and idleness” (DN.1.10:5).
- John asks the spiritual seeker to remain peaceful and pose “... no obstacle to the operation of the infused contemplation God is bestowing, ... For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love, as is brought out in the following verse: *Fired with love’s urgent longings*” (DN.1.10:6, emphasis added).

Note: The reason for this transition from meditation to contemplation is that the

knowledge and love that the soul was gradually acquiring through the labor of meditating on particular ideas has now been converted into habitual and substantial general loving knowledge “The moment it [the soul] recollects itself in the presence of God it enters into an act of general, loving, peaceful, and tranquil knowledge, drinking wisdom and love and delight” (*Ascent* 2.14:2).

For personal reflection: When you are praying, have you ever felt that God is drawing you into the silence of your heart? When this happens, are you able to “be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him?” (DN.1.10:4) (see *Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 93).

Session Three: “Fired with love’s urgent longings – ah, the sheer grace! I went out unseen.”

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book One, chapters 11-14.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, chapters 11-14, pg. 94-128.

Essential Points to Discuss:

Chapter 11: This chapter describes the joy of the soul who is free of sensory considerations.

- **Fired with love’s urgent longings**, “In the measure that the fire [of love] increases, the soul becomes aware of being attracted by the love of God and enkindled in it, without knowing how or where this attraction and love originates” (DN.1.11:1).
Note: In the beginning, individuals do not perceive this love; rather, they experience dryness and void. This dryness is accompanied by a habitual care and solicitude for God (see DN.1.11:2).
- **I went out unseen:** “This night frees the soul from all these vices [the seven-capital sins] by quenching all its earthly and heavenly satisfactions, ... These blessings are attained when by means of this night the soul departs from all created things, in its affections and operations, and walks on toward eternal things” (DN.1.11:4).
- “The desire that is enkindled is the work of God; it is the passive aspect of the dark night. The active part of the dark night is our response... Since in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, John’s primary focus is on the passive aspect of transformation, it is important to remember that the passive aspect of the dark night (what God does) cannot be separated from its active dimension (our response). To do so is to risk misunderstanding John’s teaching. For example, in the next two chapters, John enumerates the various benefits of the arid night of sense. Unless we realize that these benefits are inseparable from our cooperation, it is easy to derive the erroneous impression that they occur simply as a result of experiencing the inflow of ‘this dry contemplation’ (DN.1.13:10)” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 99-100).

Side note: St. Teresa explains in *The Interior Castle* (IC.IV.3:2), that instead of seeking God in external things, the soul begins to seek God within. Like a good shepherd with a whistle so gentle, God calls the soul to make this inward journey (passive aspect), and the soul **recognizes** the Beloved’s voice and follows (our response). “... it is a great help to seek God within, where He is found more easily and in a way more beneficial to us than when sought in creatures...” (IC.IV.3:3).

This inward searching takes the form of “... a gentle drawing inward, ... [like] a turtle drawing into a shell ... so that the soul, instead of striving to engage in discourse, strives to remain attentive and aware of what the Lord is working in it” (IC.IV.3:3-4).

Chapter 12: This chapter explains the benefits this night causes in the soul: self-knowledge and knowledge of God’s majesty, leading to humility and charity toward others.

- “The first and chief benefit this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one’s own misery. ... As a result the soul recognizes the truth

about its misery, of which it was formerly ignorant. When it was walking in festivity, gratification, consolation, and support in God, it is more content, believing that it was serving God in some way. ... Now that the soul is clothed in these other garments of labor, dryness, and desolation, and its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic lights in this most excellent and necessary virtue of self-knowledge” (DN.1.12:2).

- The soul enjoys a deeper, more profound respect for God (see DN.1.12:3).
- Another benefit resulting from this night is that “... God will give illumination by bestowing on the soul not only knowledge of its own misery and lowliness but also knowledge of his grandeur and majesty. When the sensory appetites, gratifications, and supports are quenched, the intellect is left clean and free to understand the truth, ... Similarly, anguish and dryness of senses illumine and quicken the intellect, as Isaiah affirms: *Vexation makes one understand* [Is. 28:19]” (DN.1.12:4).
- “But God also, by means of this dark and dry night of contemplation, supernaturally instructs in his divine wisdom the soul that is empty and unhindered (which is the requirement for his divine inpouring), which he did not do through the former satisfactions and pleasures” (DN.1.12:4).
- “We conclude that self-knowledge flows first from this dry night, and that from this knowledge as from its source proceeds the other knowledge of God. Hence St. Augustine said to God: *Let me know myself, Lord, and I will know you*” (DN.1.12:5).
- “Hence the dark night with its aridities and voids is the means to the knowledge of both God and self” (DN.1.12:6).
- In this night, humility replaces spiritual pride. Individuals become submissive and obedient in their spiritual journey. They not only listen to the teaching of others but even desire to be directed. The affective presumption they sometimes displayed in their prosperity melts away, and as they proceed on this journey, all the other imperfections, including spiritual pride, are swept away (see DN.1.12:8).
- “From this humility stems love of neighbor, for they esteem them and do not judge them as they did before when they were aware that they enjoyed an intense fervor while others did not. These persons know only their own misery and keep it so much in sight that they have no opportunity to watch anyone else’s conduct” (DN.1.12:8).

“In short, as we experience our moral and spiritual weakness, we are less apt to judge harshly the weaknesses of others. ... If this truth becomes an abiding part of our consciousness, it will arguably be the most important aspect of our spiritual life, for it will simultaneously keep us humble before God and forgiving and compassionate toward our neighbor” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 106).

Note: Chapter 12 is an important chapter for a deeper understanding of the virtue of self-knowledge. Read this chapter in its entirety.

For personal reflection: Have you ever experienced a reduction or cessation of judging your neighbor as a consequence of growing in self-knowledge of your own sinfulness? (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 107).

Chapter 13: Other benefits of the passive night of the senses.

- All appetites fade away and “... the soul dwells in spiritual peace and tranquility” (DN.1.13:3).
- “... the soul bears a habitual remembrance of God...” (DN.1.13:4).
- Another great benefit for the soul in this night of aridity and darkness is that it practices all the virtues together: theological (faith, hope, charity) as well as cardinal (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance) and moral (chastity, meekness, obedience, humility, honesty, perseverance) (see DN.1.13:5).
- “In the **patience and forbearance** practiced in these voids and aridities, and through **perseverance** in its spiritual exercises without consolation or satisfaction, the soul practices the **love of God**, since it is no longer motivated by the attractive and savory gratification it finds in its work, but only by God” (DN.1.13:5, emphasis added).
- “It also practices the virtue of **fortitude**, because it draws strength from weakness in the difficulties and aversions experienced in its work, and thus becomes strong” (DN.1.13:5, emphasis added).
- Anger is replaced by **meekness**. “...individuals become **meek toward God** and themselves and also toward their neighbor. As a result they no longer become impatiently angry with themselves and their faults or with their neighbor’s; neither are they displeased or disrespectfully querulous with God for not making them perfect quickly” (DN.1.13:7, emphasis added).
- Envy is replaced by **charity**. “... these individuals also become charitable toward others... The envy they have – if they do have any – is holy envy that desires to imitate others, which indicates solid virtue” (DN.1.13:8).
- An increase in **perseverance**: “The sloth and tedium they feel in spiritual things is not vicious as before. Previously this sloth was the outcome of the spiritual gratification they either enjoyed or tried to obtain when not experienced ... for in this purgation of the appetite God takes from the soul all its satisfaction” (DN.1.13:9).
- “Besides these benefits, innumerable others flow from this dry contemplation. In the midst of these aridities and straits, God frequently communicates to the soul, when it least expects, spiritual sweetness, a very **pure love**, and **spiritual knowledge** [loving knowledge] that is sometimes most delicate. Each of these communications is more valuable than all the soul previously sought. Yet in the beginning one will not think so because the spiritual inflow is very delicate and the senses do not perceive it” (DN.1.13:10).
- “Finally, insofar as these persons are purged of their sensory affections and appetites, they obtain **freedom of spirit** in which they acquire the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit” [charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity] (DN.1.13:11).
- “Since the soul knows that, from this dry purgation through which it passed, it procured so many and such precious benefits, as are referred to here, the verse of this stanza is no exaggeration: ‘– Ah, the sheer grace! – I went out unseen.’ That is, I went forth from subjection to my sensory appetites and affections unseen, so that the three enemies were unable to stop me” [the world, the self, and the devil] (DN.1.13:14).

Note: John observes that all these virtues are practiced during the time the soul was experiencing voids, aridities, and dryness in prayer. “These aridities, then, make people walk with purity in the love of God” (DN.1.13:12). Hence, this dark night is a happy night and a sheer grace for the soul.

Chapter 14: “My house being now all stilled.”

- “When this house of the senses was stilled (that is, mortified), its passions quenched, and its appetites calmed and put to sleep through this happy night of the purgation of the senses, the soul went out in order to begin its journey along the road of the spirit, which is that of proficient and which by another terminology is referred to as the illuminative way or the way of infused contemplation. On this road God himself pastures and refreshes the soul without any of its own discursive meditation or active help” (DN.1.14:1).
- In this short chapter, John sets a stage for a deeper process of purification and transformation. God directs the length and depth of the trials according to the needs and strength of the individual. “... this night is ordinarily accompanied by burdensome trials and sensory temptations that last a long time, and with some longer than with the others” (DN.1.14:1).
- The temptations include: a spirit of fornication; a blasphemous spirit, and a loathsome spirit – “... filled with a thousand scruples and perplexities...” (DN.1.14:1-3).
Note: “John mentions three kinds of temptations, but there can be many others, and the degree of intensity will also differ” (DN.1, ch. 14, footnote 1).
- These trials continue in the other night, the passive night – *The Dark Night*, Book Two (see DN.1.14:4).
- “By these trials it [the soul] is truly humbled in preparation for its coming exaltation” (DN.1.14:4).
- “In the measure of the degree of love to which God wishes to raise a soul, he humbles it with greater or lesser intensity, or for a longer or shorter period of time” (DN.1.14:5).
- According to John, the purpose of the continuous purgation in this passive night is to prepare the soul “... **for the union with wisdom** ... For if a soul is not tempted, tried, and proved through temptations and trials, its senses will not be strengthened in preparation for wisdom. ... Jeremiah gives good testimony of this truth: *You have chastised me, Lord, and I was instructed* [Jer. 31:18]” (DN.1.14:4, emphasis added).
- John notes here that “It is time to begin our treatise on the second night” (DN.1.14:6).

For personal reflection: John has helped us to see that the trials and temptations the dark night brings into our lives are not for our downfall but for our sanctification. How can this perspective help you to understand your struggles in the spiritual [daily] life? (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 128).

THE DARK NIGHT – BOOK TWO

Session One: “The One Dark Night”

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 1-3.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, chapters 1-3, pg. 131-134.

Explanatory note from Fr. Foley:

“In the opening chapters of book two of *The Dark Night*, John underscores the seamless nature of the *one* dark night. He reminds us that the human person, composed of sense and spirit ‘form[s] only one *suppositum*’ (DN.2.1:1). We are unified creatures of two interrelated parts. Thus, we can think of the dark night as a single process of purgation that takes place on **different levels** of our being.

“John symbolizes the unity of this process by means of two images. First, ‘the difference between the two purgations is like the difference between pulling up roots or cutting off a branch’ (DN.2.2:1). The night of sense prunes the behavioral branches of our inordinate appetites. The night of the spirit digs out the psychic roots of our inordinate appetites from which the branches derive their strength. Second, it is the difference between ‘rubbing out a fresh stain or an old, deeply embedded one’ (DN.2.2:1). The night of the sense cleanses a stain from the surface of a piece of wood, whereas the night of the spirit lifts out the stain that is deeply embedded in the grain. Both images connote a single process of purification that **takes place on deeper and deeper levels** of our being. So what is the difference between the passive night of sense and the passive night of the spirit, and how do those two differ from this interval ‘between’ the two nights? In one sense, there is no difference; **the purgation is a difference of degree and intensification and not of kind**. There is only one night, and in the night of the spirit ‘both parts are jointly purified’ (DN.2.3:1)” (*Dark Night*, Foley pg. 133, emphasis added).

Note: The purgation of the senses is only the gate to, and beginning of, contemplation that leads to the purgation of the spirit. The purgation of the senses serves more for the accommodation of the senses to the spirit than for the union of the spirit with God. Whereas the purgation of the spirit leads to transformation and union in God (see DN.2.2:1).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- In Book One of *The Dark Night*, John speaks of the imperfections of beginners and their need for purification. In Book Two, his focus is on proficients. He observes: “In this new state, as one liberated from a cramped prison cell, it goes about the things of God with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more abundant interior delight than it did in the beginning before entering the night of sense. Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation and spiritual solicitude, as was their custom. The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight. **Nonetheless, the purgation of the**

soul is not complete. The purgation of the principal part, that of the spirit, is lacking, and without it the sensory purgation, however strong it may have been, is incomplete because of a communication existing between the two parts [level of awareness] of the soul that form only one suppositum [substance]. As a result, certain needs, aridities, darknesses, and conflicts are felt” (DN.2.1:1, emphasis added).

- “The imperfections in these proficientes are of two kinds: habitual and actual. The habitual are the imperfect affections and habits still remaining like roots in the spirit, for the sensory purgation could not reach the spirit” (DN.2.2:1). Actual imperfections, according to John, are of many kinds. “Not all these proficientes fall into actual imperfections in the same way” (DN.2.2:3). John lists in the subsequent paragraphs some of the imperfections of the proficientes.
- “These proficientes also have the *hebetudo mentis*, the natural dullness everyone contracts through sin, and a distracted and inattentive spirit” (DN.2.2:2). “An important factor in John’s anthropology is that sin lies at the root of all the defects mentioned both here and in the first book” (DN.2, ch. 2, footnote 2).
- “This is the stage in which the devil induces many into believing vain visions and false prophecies. He strives to make them presume that God and the saints speak with them, and frequently they believe their phantasy. It is here that the devil customarily fills them with presumption and pride. Drawn by vanity and arrogance, they allow themselves to be seen in exterior acts of apparent holiness, such as raptures and other exhibitions” (DN.2.2:3).

Note: Examples of imperfections in a person’s spiritual life include struggling with pride, harboring resentment, being overly judgmental, lacking compassion, neglecting spiritual practices, and so on.

- “So much could be said about the imperfection of these proficientes, and of how irremediable they are – since proficientes think their blessings are more spiritual than formerly – that I desire to pass over the matter. I only assert, in order to establish the necessity of the spiritual night (the purgation) for anyone who is to advance, that no proficientes, however strenuous their efforts, will avoid many of these natural affections and imperfect habits. These must be purified before one may pass on to divine union” (DN.2.2:4).
- “The real purgation of the senses begins with the spirit. ... The reason is that all the imperfections and disorders of the sensory part are rooted in the spirit and from it receive their strength. All good and evil habits reside in the spirit and until these habits are purged, the senses cannot be completely purified of their rebellions and vices” (DN.2.3:1).
- “In this night that follows both parts are jointly purified” (DN.2.3:2).
- “He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings. For this privation is one of the conditions required that the spiritual form, which is the union of love, may be introduced into the spirit and united with it [the soul]. The Lord works all of this in the soul by means of a pure and dark contemplation...” (DN.2.3:3).

Session Two: Contemplative Purgation

(May take multiple sessions as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 4-7.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, chapters 4-7, pg. 135-151.

Explanatory note:

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

“Understanding this stanza now to refer to contemplative purgation or nakedness and poverty of spirit (which are all about the same), we can thus explain it, as though the soul says: ... I departed from my low manner of understanding, and my feeble way of loving, and my poor and limited method of finding satisfaction in God. I did this unhindered by either the flesh or the devil” (DN.2.4:1).

“... I went out from my human operation and way of acting to God’s operation and way of acting. That is:

“My **intellect** departed from itself, changing from human and natural to divine. For united with God through this purgation, it no longer understands by means of its natural vigor and light, but by means of the divine wisdom to which it was united.

“And my **will** departed from itself and became divine. United with the divine love, it no longer loves in a lowly manner, with its natural strength, but with the strength and purity of the Holy Spirit; and thus the will does not operate humanly in relation to God. The **memory**, too, was changed into eternal apprehensions of glory” (DN.2.4:2, emphasis added).

Note: John’s theological anthropology relating to the intellect, memory and will is a key concept in understanding the transformation and union with God. According to John, the faculties of the soul have an infinite capacity to receive the grace of God. John explains this first stanza three times, each time from a different perspective (A.1; DN.1; DN.2). The above stanza mainly refers to the passive night of the spirit (see DN.2, ch. 3, footnote 1).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology. Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its [the soul] doing anything or understanding how this happens” (DN.2.5:1).
- “Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love. Hence the same loving wisdom that purges and illumines the blessed spirits purges and illumines the soul here on earth” (DN.2.5:1).

- “... Why, if it is a divine light (for it illumines souls and purges them of their ignorance), does the soul call it a dark night? In answer to this, there are two reasons... First, because of the height of the divine wisdom that exceeds the abilities of the soul; and on this account the wisdom is dark for the soul. **Second**, because of the soul’s baseness and impurity; and on this account the wisdom is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul” (DN.2.5:2). In many instances, the soul is unaware of its condition.
- **From Fr. Foley:** “One might think that because ‘contemplation is the loving wisdom of God’ (DN.2.5:1) that the divine inflow would ravish us with delight. However, the opposite is often true; we often experience ‘affliction and torment’ (DN.2.5:2). This is because we see not the light but **only what the light discloses** [our baseness and impurity]” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 140, emphasis added).
- The Divine Wisdom instructs and challenges one’s limitations, deeply held beliefs, and consolation. St. Thérèse aptly describes her condition in *Story of a Soul*: “At this time I was enjoying such a living faith, such a clear *faith*, the thought of heaven made up all my happiness... During those very joyful days of the Easter season... He [Jesus] 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. This trial was to last not a few days or a few weeks, it was not to be extinguished until the hour set by God Himself and this hour has not yet come” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, ch. X, pg. 333).
- As she was going through the interior darkness, Thérèse made an important observation of herself: “...He [God] did not send me this trial until the moment I was capable of bearing it. A little earlier I believe it would have plunged me into a state of discouragement. Now it is taking away everything that could be a natural satisfaction in my desire for heaven. Dear Mother, it seems to be now that nothing could prevent me from flying away, for I no longer have any great desires except that of loving to the point of dying of love” (Ibid., pg. 336-337).

Side note: Thus, in the midst of her interior darkness, Thérèse was illumined by grace and gained freedom of spirit. “Thérèse’s doubt of faith was not antithetical [contrary] to faith but the context in which her faith matured” (*The Context of Holiness*, Marc Foley, pg. 137, 2008 Edition).

- “How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul be so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh on the soul, but only touches it; and this mercifully, for God’s aim is to grant it favors and not to chastise it” (DN.2.5:7).
- “The two extremes, divine and human, which are joined here... The divine extreme is the purgative contemplation, and the human extreme is the soul, the receiver of this contemplation. Since the divine extreme strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it ... the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death” (DN.2.6:1).
- **Fr. Foley:** “Just as self-knowledge is painful, so too is change. And the change native to the dark night is excruciatingly painful because it involves modifying or eradicating deeply ingrained habits that have taken root within us over a lifetime. ‘This

contemplation annihilates, empties, and consumes all the affections and imperfect habits the soul contracted throughout its life' (DN.2.6:5)" (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 143).

- **Fr. Foley:** "In short, John is describing the struggles and trials of daily life that we all experience. However, those who are gifted with contemplation relate to these realities from a spiritual perspective. ... For example, they keep a vigilant guard over their sensual appetites and struggle to remain faithful to their religious obligation during times of aridity" (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 132).
- As Thérèse writes, "Ah! may Jesus pardon me if I have caused Him any pain, but He knows very well that while I do not have *the joy of faith*, I am trying to carry out its works at least. I believe I have made more acts of faith in this past year than all through my whole life. At each new occasion of combat, when my enemies provoke me, I conduct myself bravely. Knowing it is cowardly to enter into a duel, I turn my back on my adversaries without deigning to look them in the face; but I run toward my Jesus" (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, ch. X, pg. 335).

Session Three: Impact of Contemplation

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 8-10.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, chapters 8-10, pg. 152-171.

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John continues to discuss other afflictions that trouble the soul in this state. One feels that their spiritual life has lost a sense of purpose and finds it extremely difficult to pray or attend to temporal affairs or spiritual matters.
- When we find ourselves in this state, John advises not to force ourselves to pray but to accept our condition patiently. “Indeed, this is not the time to speak with God, but the time to put one’s mouth in the dust, as Jeremiah says, that perhaps there might come some actual hope [Lam. 3:29] and the time to suffer this purgation patiently. God it is who is working now in the soul, and for this reason the soul can do nothing” (DN.2.8:1).
- “What does it mean to suffer purgation patiently? It means to go on living while suffering a great loss. It is comparable to going back to work after the death of a loved one. While you are inwardly absorbed in your loss, you are required to attend to the outward details of life. The only difference is that you don’t feel you have the emotional resources to deal with them. In the dark night, God provides us with the strength to carry on and even to will, though it knows not how, to accept God’s grace and ‘to suffer this purgation patiently’ (DN.2.8:1)” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 153).
- “It remains to be said, then, that even though this happy night darkens the spirit, it does so only to impart light concerning all things; and even though it humbles individuals and reveals their miseries, it does so only to exalt them; and even though it impoverishes and empties them of all possessions and natural affection, it does so only that they may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all” (DN.2.9:1).
- “... the soul must first be set in emptiness and poverty of spirit and purged of every natural support, consolation, and apprehension, earthly and heavenly. Thus empty, it is truly poor in spirit and stripped of the old self, and thereby able to live that new and blessed life which is the state of union with God attained by means of this night” (DN.2.9:4).
- “This night withdraws the spirit from its customary manner of experience to bring it to the divine experience that is foreign to every human way” (DN.2.9:5).
- “Moreover, the soul should leave aside all its former peace, because it is prepared by means of this contemplative night to attain inner peace, which is of such a quality and so delightful that, as the Church says, it surpasses all understanding [Phil. 4:7]. That [former] peace was not truly peace, because it was clothed with many imperfections, although to the soul walking in delight it seemed to be peace” (DN.2.9:6).
- “This sensory and spiritual peace, since it is still imperfect, must first be purged; the soul’s peace must be disturbed and taken away. ... Jeremiah felt disturbed and wept

over his loss of peace: *My soul is withdrawn and removed from peace* [Lam. 3:17]" (DN.2.9:6).

- There is a question as to "... why this light of contemplation, which is so gentle and agreeable ... produces such painful and disagreeable effects in these initial stages it shines upon the soul" (DN.2.9:10).
- The answer is that "There is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow that of itself can give pain; contemplation rather bestows sweetness and delight ... The cause for not experiencing these agreeable effects is the soul's weakness and imperfection at the time, its inadequate preparation, and the qualities it possesses that are contrary to this light. Because of these the soul has to suffer when the divine light shines upon it" (DN.2.9:11).
- Here John introduces the telling image of a burning log. "The soul is purged and prepared for union with divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire" (DN.2.10:1).
- "Though God brings to light the unconverted parts of our souls, we should not think that he does so apart from the events of daily life. ... John writes that the dark night 'stirs up [*removiendo*] all the foul and vicious humors of which the soul was never before aware' (DN.2.10:2). ... God uses the events of our lives as a catalyst that stirs up, ferments, and agitates the soul and makes it conscious of its own misery" (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 164-165).
- John's teachings clearly demonstrate that even within the advanced stages of one's spiritual journey, there is an ongoing growth and deeper purification through dark nights of suffering. St. Thérèse's description of suffering, temptation, and the depth of darkness reminds us of John's classic description of the "passive night of the spirit." God was working a deeper purification in Thérèse through her trials and temptations. Her story demonstrates another important role of Divine Wisdom: "He [God] did not send me this trial until the moment I was capable of bearing it. A little earlier I believe it would have plunged me into a state of discouragement." John, quoting the Book of Wisdom (8:1), explains that the Wisdom of God, disposes all things gently and moves the soul **according to its mode** [Wis. 8:1] (see A.2.17:2).
- "These imperfections are the fuel that catches on fire, and once they are gone there is nothing left to burn. So it is here on earth; when the imperfections are gone, the soul's suffering terminates, and joy remains" (DN.2.10:5).
- In this passive night "... the shadows of our mind upon which we construct our identities and personal fictions, and upon which we depend to make sense out of our lives, begin to crumble into uncertainty. We feel a fearful estrangement from ourselves as we lose hold of our old world of understanding. However, in the process, we gradually become enchanted as our eyes adjust to seeing a new world. ... The dark night is the seed of grace germinating into glory. This is why people who are experiencing transformation 'belong more to the next life than to this' (DN.2.9:5)" (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 156-157).

Side note: John precisely observes that when we lose hold of our old way of understanding, Wisdom of God comes to our aid and imparts new knowledge and understanding to see the world from a different perspective. "The soul will be clothed in a new understanding of God in

God (through removal of the old understanding) and in a new love of God in God, once the will is stripped of all the old cravings and satisfactions. And God will vest the soul with new knowledge when the other old ideas and images are cast aside [Col. 3:9] ... As a result, one's activities, once human, now become divine. This is achieved in the state of union..." (A.1.5:7).

- John concludes his teachings on verse 1 of the first stanza (one dark night) and proceeds to discuss the benefits of this passive night. "... it will be a good thing to leave these sad experiences and begin now to discuss the fruit of the soul's tears and the happy traits about which it begins to sing in this second verse: *fired with love's urgent longings*" (DN.2.10:10).

Session Four: “Fired with love’s urgent longings”

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 11-14.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, chapters 11-14, pg. 172-182.

Explanatory note from Fr. Foley: John begins to explain the second verse of the first stanza of the dark night poem “*Fired with love’s urgent longings*”:

“John writes of two enkindlings of our desire for God. The first is the result of consolation given to beginners, which starts to detach them from the things of this world [disordered desires] and helps them find their joy in the things of God. ‘The soul finds its joy in spending lengthy periods at prayer, perhaps even entire nights; its penances are pleasures; its fasts happiness and the sacraments and spiritual conversations are its consolations’ (DN.1.1.3). This joy, though it has its origin in God, is more sensual than spiritual. It moves the emotions but has little effect upon the will.

“The second enkindling is the result of God’s presence as contemplation, which engenders a deep spiritual love in the will, which is qualitatively different from the love that is imparted by consolation. ‘Although this enkindling of love ... is in some way similar to what occurs in the sensory part of the soul, it is as different from it ... as is the soul from the body or the spiritual part from the sensory part. For this enkindling of love occurs in the spirit. ... [The soul is] wounded by a strong divine love, and it has a certain feeling and foretaste of God’ (DN.2.11:1)” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 172).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John observes that “... the soul in the midst of these dark conflicts feels vividly and keenly that it is being wounded by a strong divine love, and it has a certain feeling and foretaste of God. Yet it understands nothing in particular, for as we said the intellect is in darkness” (DN.2.11:1).
- “The spirit herein experiences an impassioned and intense love ... 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” (DN.2.11:2).
Note: This is not a complete union – a state of total oneness with God as described in *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*. Rather, God’s presence is more clearly felt and illumines the faculties with joy and tranquility.
- “God gathers together all the strength, faculties, and appetites of the soul, spiritual and sensory alike, so the energy and power of this whole harmonious composite may be employed in this love” (DN.2.11:4).
- “... in the midst of these dark and loving afflictions, the soul feels a certain companionship and interior strength ...” (DN.2.11:7).

- John observes the difference between the purgation in this life and the next life (purgatory): “Souls are cleansed in the other life by fire, but here on earth they are cleansed and illumined only by love” (DN.2.12:1).
Note: “... purgatory is not an arbitrary punishment imposed from without, like a judge passing down a sentence upon a criminal. It is a process that lasts as long as it is needed for a person to be purified” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 169).
- John also points out that the loving knowledge or wisdom plays an important role in instructing and transforming the soul in this dark night: “Jeremiah shows clearly that the soul is purged by the illumination of this fire of loving wisdom (for God never bestows mystical wisdom without love, since love itself infuses it) where he says: *He sent fire into my bones and instructed me* [Lam. 1.13]” (DN.2.12:2).
Note: As mentioned previously in our introduction, the source of this loving knowledge is Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.
- “... this dark night of contemplation consists of divine light and love – just as fire gives off both light and heat ...” (DN.2.12:7).
- “When the fire now inflames the soul ... individuals usually acquire such strength, courage, and longings relative to God ... that with singular boldness they do strange things, in whatever way necessary, in order to encounter him whom they love” (DN.2.13:5).
- John gives an example “Mary Magdalene, in spite of her past, paid no heed to the crowds of people ... at the banquet. She did not consider the propriety of weeping and shedding tears in the presence of our Lord’s guests. Her only concern was to reach him for whom her soul was already wounded and on fire, without any delay and without waiting for another more appropriate time [Lk. 7:37-38]” (DN.2.13:6).

Side note: St. Teresa’s boldness in founding her first monastery in deep secrecy, and St. Thérèse’s courage in asking the Pope to enter Carmel at age fifteen are two other examples.

For personal reflection: Can you remember a time when God’s grace imparted to you a “singular boldness” (DN.2.13:5) that gave you the strength to act with the “courage of love” (DN.2.13:6) (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 181).

- The soul “possesses an energy bold enough to go out to be joined with God. The reason is that since love now imparts a force by which the soul loves authentically, and since it is the nature of love to seek to be united, joined, equaled, and assimilated to the loved object in order to be perfected in the good of love, the soul hungers and thirsts for this union or perfection of love still unattained” (DN.2.13:9).
- John repeats his teaching to remind the reader that “From the beginning the divine light illumines the soul; yet at the outset it can only see through this light what is nearest – or rather within – itself, namely, its own darkness and miseries. It sees these by the mercy of God, and it did not see them before because this supernatural light did not shine in it. Accordingly, it only feels darknesses and evils at the outset” (DN.2.13:10).
- “After being **purged through the knowledge** and feeling of these darknesses and evils, it will have eyes capable of seeing the goods of the divine light. Once all these darknesses and imperfections are expelled, it seems that the immense benefits and goods the soul

is acquiring in this happy night of contemplation begin to appear” (DN.2.13:10, emphasis added).

- “It is clear, consequently, how God grants the soul a favor by cleansing and curing it” (DN.2.13:11).
- “A person would never have been able to accomplish this work alone ... Accordingly, 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. ... This renovation illumines the human intellect with supernatural light so it becomes divine, united with the divine; informs the will with love of God so it is no longer less than divine and loves in no other way than divinely, united and made one with the divine will and love; and is also a divine conversion and changing of the memory, the affections, and the appetites according to God. And thus this soul will be a soul of heaven, heavenly and more divine than human” (DN.2.13:11).
- “As we have gradually seen, God accomplishes all this work in the soul by illumining it and firing it divinely with urgent longings for God alone. Rightly and reasonably does the soul add the third verse of the stanza: – *Ah, the sheer grace!* –” (DN.2.13:11).
- “This sheer grace resulted from what is expressed in the following verses:
- I went out unseen, my house being now all stilled” (DN.2.14:1).
- “All the soul’s natural activity hinders rather than helps it to receive the spiritual goods of the union of love. All natural ability is insufficient to produce the supernatural goods that God alone infuses in the soul passively, secretly, and in silence” (DN.2.14:1).
- “All the faculties must receive this infusion, and in order to do so they must be passive and not interfere through their own lowly activity and vile inclinations” (DN.2.14:1).
- “Oh, what a sheer grace it is for the soul to be freed from the house of its senses! This good fortune, in my opinion, can only be understood by the ones who have tasted it. For then such persons will become clearly aware of the wretched servitude and the many miseries they suffered when they were subject to the activity of their faculties and appetites. They will understand how the life of the spirit is true freedom and wealth and embodies inestimable goods” (DN.2.14:3).

Note: “John’s escape at night from prison seems to have influenced the poem” (DN.2, ch. 14, footnote 1).

Fr. Foley’s summary:

“A person in union with God becomes a sacrament of the divine. Transformed by grace, he or she becomes a transforming presence to others. Or as John writes, ‘Once transformed, the wood...possesses the properties and performs the actions of the fire... It is hot and it gives off heat; it is brilliant and it illumines’ (DN.2.10:1).

“What this means is that people who are in the state of union share the nature of God by grace; they possess the power to enkindle and awaken the love of God in others. St. Teresa, writing to her sisters, says, ‘This fire of love in you enkindles their souls and with every other virtue you will be always awakening them. Such service will not be small but very great and very pleasing to the Lord’ (IC.7.4.14). Can there be a life that is more generative?” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 168-169).

Session Five: The deepening of transformation

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 15-20.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, pg. 183-212.

*In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
– ah, the sheer grace! –
in darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled.
Second Stanza (DN.2.15)*

Explanatory note from Fr. Foley:

“From chapter 15 through chapter 24, John comments upon the second stanza of his poem. Chapter 15 consists of only one paragraph. Its main purpose is to prevent a misunderstanding, namely, that even though John will be commenting upon a new stanza, he will not be dealing with different material; rather, his commentary on stanza 2 will be a continuation of what he has already said in his explication of stanza 1. ‘The soul in its song continues to recount some of the properties of the darkness of this night and mentions again the happiness resulting from them’ (DN.2.15.1).

“Keeping this perspective in mind will prevent some unnecessary confusion, for readers are likely to ask, ‘How is what John is saying in these chapters any different from what he has already said?’ There is a difference, **but the difference is in degree not in kind**” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 183-184, emphasis added).

Consequently, when addressing the “dark night” in its initial stages, John mainly speaks of the purification process of the soul during its long and painful journey to union; whereas in the subsequent chapters of *The Dark Night*, Book Two, **the soul sees and marvels at its own transformation**.

In addition, John gives a detailed description of secret wisdom – the loving knowledge of God (chapters 17-20) and its enduring presence in this passive night of the soul.

Essential Points to Discuss:

In darkness, and secure

- John observes that the soul walks securely and never drifts away except through its appetites, its gratifications, or its inordinate inclinations. This night “... puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep, deadens them, and deprives them of the ability to find pleasure in anything. ... As a result the soul asserts that in darkness it **walks securely**” (DN.2.16:1, emphasis added).

- “Once all these operations and movements are impeded, individuals are obviously freed from error in them, because they are not only liberated from themselves but also from their other enemies, the world and the devil” (DN.2.16:2).
- John further notes: “If they observe closely at the time of these darkesses, individuals will see clearly how little the appetites and faculties are distracted with useless and harmful things and how secure they are from vainglory, from pride and presumption, from an empty and false joy, and from many other evils” (DN.2.16:3). Consequently, John strongly encourages us to become aware of everything that we are experiencing, not only the emotional effect of the dark night but also the spiritual benefits while walking securely.
- John further motivates individuals to “... take these new and unknown roads and abandon those familiar ones. ... If they refuse to lay aside their former knowledge, they will never make any further progress” (DN.2.16:8).
- “There is another reason the soul walks securely in these darkesses: It advances by suffering. Suffering is a surer and even more advantageous road than that of joy and action. First, in suffering, strength is given to the soul by God. ... Second, in suffering, virtues are practiced and acquired, and the soul is purified and made wiser and more cautious” (DN.2.16:9).
- “Another more basic reason the soul walks securely in darkness is that this light, or obscure wisdom, so absorbs and engulfs the soul in the dark night of contemplation and brings it so near God that it is protected and freed from all that is not God. Since the soul, as it were, is undergoing a cure to regain its health, which is God himself ...” (DN.2.16:10).

Side note from Fr. Foley:

“The implication is that when we feel that the whole of our spiritual quest is empty and void; when we have lost the motive of action; and when prayer, works of charity, and ministry seem meaningless, we advance rapidly in virtue, and a great transformation is being accomplished, if we choose to continue to put one wearied foot in front of the other.

“As we have seen, John places before us the fact that our interpretation of our experience is often at odds with reality. We feel we are wandering aimlessly in a desert, as we progress toward the Promised Land. We think we are ‘getting lost rather than marching on successfully and profitably’ (DN.2.16:8). We feel we have lost sight of God when we are ‘engulf[ed] in the dark night’ (DN.2.16:10) ... From an emotional perspective, it is the worst of times, but from a spiritual perspective, it is the best of times” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 187-188).

- “Oh, then, spiritual soul, when you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constrained, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted; think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity. ... God takes you by the hand and guides you in darkness, as

though you were blind, along a way and to a place you know not. You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes and your feet (DN.2.16:7).

Side note: The role of loving wisdom in a human soul is central to John's teachings; as such, he delves deeply into explaining the ways of this secret wisdom of God in chapters 17-20.

*In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
(Dark Night, stanza 2)*

- In the above verse, John introduces three different terms (secret, ladder and disguised). Two of them, "secret" and "ladder" pertain to the dark night of contemplation. They refer to what God accomplishes within the soul. "... the third, 'disguised,' refers to the soul and the way it conducts itself in this night" (DN.2.17:1).
- There are two reasons for the wisdom, that dark contemplation is "secret" to the soul. The first is the soul's inability to understand; its origin cannot be comprehended, for it arises out of the depths of the soul. In consequence, "the soul neither knows nor understands how this [wisdom] comes to pass and thus calls it secret." (DN.2.17:2). The reason is that this wisdom is **not acquired** by reasoning or thinking. Rather, "... **the Holy Spirit infuses it** and puts it in order in the soul" (DN.2.17:2, emphasis added).
- "Since this interior wisdom is so simple, general, and spiritual that in entering the intellect it is not clothed in any sensory species or image, the imaginative faculty cannot form an idea or picture of it in order to speak of it. This wisdom did not enter through these faculties ... Yet the soul is clearly aware that it understands and tastes that delightful and wondrous wisdom" (DN.2.17:3).
- The second reason this wisdom is secret is that it cannot be expressed in words; but in the process of transformation, the soul becomes **aware** of it. "Since the wisdom of this contemplation is the language of God to the soul, of Pure Spirit to pure spirit, all that is less than spirit, such as the sensory, fails to perceive it. Consequently this wisdom is secret to the senses; they have neither the knowledge nor the ability to speak of it, nor do they even desire to do so because it is beyond words" (DN.2.17:4).
- "Souls are so elevated and exalted by this abyss of wisdom, which leads them into the heart of the **science of love**, that they realize that all the conditions of creatures in relation to this **supreme knowing** and divine experience are very base, and they perceive the lowliness, deficiency, and inadequacy of all the terms and words used in this life to deal with divine things" (DN.2.17:6, emphasis added).

Side note: St. Paul, in the wake of this supreme knowledge of God, cries out in gratitude: "... those things I used to consider gain I have now reappraised as loss in the light of Christ. I have come to rate all as loss in the light of the surpassing knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. For his sake I have forfeited everything; I have accounted all else rubbish so that Christ may be my wealth, and I may be in him" (Phil. 3:7-9).

- "The traces and footsteps God leaves in those whom he desires to bring to himself, by making them great in the union with his wisdom, are unrecognizable ... God exalts souls

... and perfects them in his wisdom. Consequently, this contemplation that is guiding the soul to God is secret wisdom” (DN.2.17:8).

- John goes on to explain how this secret wisdom is also a ladder of contemplation. “First ... by this secret contemplation, the soul ascends in order to plunder, know, and possess the goods and treasures of heaven” (DN.2.18:1).
- The second reason this secret wisdom is called a ladder is “... because as the same steps of a ladder are used for both ascent and descent ...” (DN.2.18:2).
- Ups and downs of contemplation “... exalt and humble the soul. For on this road, to descend is to ascend and to ascend is to descend ...” (DN.2.18:2).
- “When we choose to practice humility, we feel we are descending, but in reality we are being exalted. This is due to the fact that God’s grace is purifying us of pride and helping us to grow in humility. Conversely, when we feel elated by an inordinate opinion of ourselves, we are descending into pride. These are examples of how we misinterpret our own experience and how John ... discloses to us the spiritual reality beneath our erroneous, emotional interpretation” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 201).
- “The soul never remains in one state, but everything is ascent and descent” (DN.2.18:3). “The reason is that since the state of perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and contempt of self, cannot exist without knowledge **of God and of self**, the soul necessarily must first be exercised in both (DN.2.18:4, emphasis added).
- “We conclude that self-knowledge flows first from this dry night, and that from this knowledge as from its source proceeds the other knowledge of God. Hence St. Augustine said to God: ‘*Let me know myself, Lord, and I will know you*’” (DN.1.12:5).
- On this road the soul suffers many ups and downs “... until the ascent and descent cease through the acquiring of the perfect habits. For the soul will then have reached God and united itself with him. He is at the end of the ladder and it is in him that the ladder rests” (DN.2.18:4).
- John reminds the reader that it is the loving knowledge that purifies, transforms, and unites the soul to God. “Speaking now somewhat more particularly of this ladder of secret contemplation, we declare that the principal property involved in calling contemplation a ‘ladder’ is its being a **science of love**, which as we said is an infused **loving knowledge** that both illumines and enamors the soul, elevating it step by step to God, its Creator. For it is only love that unites and joins the soul to God” (DN.2.18.5, emphasis added).

Side note: John goes on to explain in chapters 19 and 20 the characteristics of this “ladder” (secret wisdom) by listing ten successive steps or degrees of transformation. These ten steps represent an outline of the entire spiritual journey from consolation in prayer to the clear vision of God, wherein “... love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God that a person possesses at once on reaching it. After arriving at the ninth step in this life, the soul departs from the body. Since these souls – few that there be – are already extremely purged through love, they do not enter purgatory. ... As we mentioned, this vision is the cause of the soul’s complete likeness to God. St. John says: We know that we shall be like him [1Jn. 3:2], not because the soul will have as much capacity as God – this is impossible – but because

all it is will become like God. Thus it [the soul] will be called, and shall be, God through participation” (DN.2.20:5).

Note: For further understanding of these ten steps of wisdom, please read chapters 19 and 20 meditatively along with Fr. Marc Foley’s *The Dark Night*, pg. 204-212, The Ladder of Love.

Session Six: Departing in “disguise” – “in darkness and concealment, my house being now all stilled”

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Required Reading: *The Dark Night*, Book Two, chapters 21-25.

Recommended Reading: *The Dark Night*, Marc Foley, pg. 213-234.

Note: John observes that the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are three modes of God’s self-communication that transform and unite the soul with God.

Explanatory note from Fr. Foley:

“The purpose of John’s symbolism is to draw our attention to one aspect of the theological virtues: their protective quality. The inner white tunic of faith protects the intellect from the devil’s wiles; the green mail coat of hope defends memory from the temptations of the world; and the outer red toga of charity conceals the will from the allurements of the flesh. As we deal with the three vestures of the soul individually, we must keep in mind their intrinsic unity. Just as the faculties of intellect, memory, and will are dependent upon one another for their operation, so too the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love grow in unison” (A.3.1:1) (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 213-214).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “The soul, then, touched with love for Christ, her Spouse, and aspiring to win his favor and friendship, departs in the disguise that more vividly represents the affections of her spirit. Her advance in this disguise makes her more secure against her adversaries: the devil, the world, and the flesh. The livery she thus wears is of three principal colors: white, green, and red. These three colors stand for the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity, by which she not only gains the favor and good will of her Beloved but also advances very safely, fortified against her three enemies” (DN.2.21:3).
Note: For further understanding of these three colors and the corresponding virtues, read and meditate on chapter 21 in its entirety.
- “In having reached the happy freedom of spirit desired by all, the soul went from the lowly to the sublime; being earthly, she became heavenly; and being human, she became divine, and arrived at having her conversation in heaven [Phil. 3:20], as is proper to this state of perfection...” (DN.2.22:1).
- “Persons who refuse to go out at night in search for the Beloved and to divest and mortify their will, but rather seek the beloved in their own bed and comfort, as did the bride [Sg. 3:1], will not succeed in finding him. As this soul declares, she found him when she departed in darkness and with longings of love” (DN.2.24:4).
- John quotes the third stanza of the poem (DN.2.25) as he comes to the end of his work:

*On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,*

*with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.*

- “... although the soul in her progress does not have the support of any particular interior light of the intellect, or of any exterior guide that may give her satisfaction on this lofty path – since these dense darknesses have deprived her of all satisfaction – **love alone**, which at this period burns by soliciting the heart for the Beloved, is what guides and moves her, and makes her soar to God in an unknown way along the road of solitude” (DN.2.25:4, emphasis added).
- “The road of solitude does not isolate us from others but leads us to serve the community... ‘Prayer [is] not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have this strength to serve’ (IC 7.4:12)” (*Dark Night*, Foley, pg. 234).

Summary explanation

As a concluding remark, John explains the reason for undertaking this most important work of the “dark night.” “What was more important and the reason I undertook this task was to explain this night to many souls who in passing through it **do not understand it** ... The nature of this night has been explained to some extent. We have also discussed the many blessings this night brings to the soul – though in a way that makes them seem less than what they in fact are – and how great a grace it is for one who passes through it. We have written of these blessings so that when the soul becomes frightened by the horror of so many trials they might take courage in the sure hope of the many advantageous blessings obtained from God through these trials” (DN.2.22:2, emphasis added).

As previously noted in the introduction, “John’s exposition of the night may seem to disengage that experience from the rest of life. But the night cannot occur apart from the external **happenings of every day**, nor can we forget, while reading, the event of John’s imprisonment in Toledo with all its social and material deprivations. Our horizons open to many possible forms in which we may experience a dark night, according to the grace, state in life, and historical or personal circumstances of the individual. John leaves to each reader and each age the task of making suitable applications. What is essential is that the sufferings and privations bring about a growing response of faith, hope, and love; without this transforming theological life the night would fail to purify and produce fruit” (DN.1, Introduction, emphasis added).

Prayer of St. John of the Cross

*In all our necessities, trials, and difficulties, no better or safer aid exists for us
than prayer and hope that God will provide for us by the means he desires. ...
(When means are lacking and reason cannot find a way of providing for our necessities,
we have only to raise our eyes to you
that you may provide in the manner most pleasing to you)
(Ascent 2.21:5).*

Prayer

*Almighty Father, when the path before me is unknown and uncertain;
through the intercession of St. John of the Cross,
grant me the humility of heart to praise You
and let You be my Guide and Lord of my life.
St. John of the Cross, pray for us!*

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GLORIFICATION —

Understanding the concepts of Transformation and Union

Introduction

Trials, temptations, and sufferings that lead to one's purification are not an end in themselves. Both Teresa and John understood that they are the means to a glorious transformation and union with God. As Saint John Paul II observes:

“It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the “dark night”). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as ‘nuptial union.’ How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila?” (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Art. 33).

The dominant themes found in *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love* are used as a case study to understand fully the beauty and depth of human transformation and union (The Unitive Way). This is a new country to which John brings us, and now he speaks more of glorification than purification. It is the habitual and intimate union with God in Jesus Christ (loving Wisdom) through perseverance motivated by a deep love of God.

When explaining the fruits of the union, John first gives a summary of the soul's journey along the way of spiritual purgation and transformation:

“To offer a more lucid explanation of the order of these stanzas and of what the soul usually passes through before reaching this state of spiritual marriage, which is the highest, ... it should be noted that before the soul reaches this state she first exercises herself in the trials and bitterness of mortification and in meditation on spiritual things. ... Afterward she enters the contemplative way. Here she passes through the paths and straits of love ... where the spiritual betrothal is wrought. Then she advances along the unitive way, in which she receives many remarkable communications ... from her Bridegroom, ... and becomes perfect in loving him. ... ‘The bride has entered,’ where the spiritual marriage between this soul and the Son of God is effected” (SC.22:3).

This process of identifying and explaining the “past” and “present” state of the soul is the focus of John's teaching throughout *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*.

The fruits of union are the predominant theme of these two major works of St. John of the Cross. However, it's important to note that the fruits of this glorious union do not appear suddenly in this unitive state. The benefits and fruits of purification have been growing all along the soul's journey. Consequently, in this final state of “unitive life,” virtues blossom into deeper union and action. Throughout his work, John masterfully describes the fruits of such union that are incredible indeed. “We can therefore assert truly that this soul is here clothed with God and bathed in divinity, not as though on the surface, **but in the interior of her spirit**, super-abounding in divine delights” (SC.26:1, emphasis added).

“Thus all new joys and satisfactions serve more to awaken the soul to a delight in what she already possesses and experiences within herself than to new delights, ... The soul that has

attained this fulfillment, which is transformation, in which she has reached full stature, does not grow through these new spiritual things as do others who have not arrived. ... Although the soul receives no new delights, it always seems to her that she receives them anew ... The reason is that she ever takes pleasure in them anew, since they are her good that is ever new. Thus it seems to her that she is always receiving new things without need” (SC.20:12-13).

John’s exuberant description of this unitive state should not give the impression that the soul is now living in a world of fantasy. “It is not that we begin to live in some kind of dream world, taking no interest in the people and things around us; it is rather that the joys and sorrows of life simply do not affect us as before. There is one great joy in life – God. Having found Him, nothing else really matters; everything that happens is seen and judged in a new light; God is always a point of reference in every new situation. ‘Let nothing disturb you’ is not an ideal but a way of life” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version with Notes*, John Venard, O.C.D., pg. 155).

Likewise, Our Holy Mother St. Teresa immediately corrects any wrong impression that a reader might perceive in this delightful state of union: “You may think that as a result the soul will be outside itself and so absorbed that it will be unable to be occupied with anything else. On the contrary, the soul is much more occupied than before with everything pertaining to the service of God; and once its duties are over it remains with that enjoyable company” (*Interior Castle*, VII.1:8).

Teresa further observes that the soul is always at peace in that center (the state of union) even though there are trials and sufferings all around it. “The King is in his palace and there are many wars in his kingdom and many painful things going on, but not on that account does he fail to be at his post. ... Even though they cause it [the soul] some pain, the suffering is not such as to disturb it and take away its peace” (IC.VII.2:11).

As we begin our next section of the study, let us open our hearts and minds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit,

*Let your divinity shine on my intellect
by giving it divine knowledge,
and on my will by imparting to it divine love,
and on my memory with the divine
possession of glory.
(SC.19:4)*



THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE

Required Reading: *The Spiritual Canticle*. This book is included in *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, ICS.

Session One: Stanzas 1-21

Early stages of the soul's journey

(May take multiple sessions as needed for in-depth discussion and understanding.)

Explanatory note:

In *The Ascent*, John presents the purification process of the senses and faculties from the perspective of human behavior, both cognitive and emotional, offering moral discipline for spiritual growth; conversely, in *The Spiritual Canticle*, John presents the purification process from the perspective of self-knowledge, leading to an increasing awareness of the presence of God. The concept of everything that leads to knowledge is enfolded in the idea that all experience in life, even the simple observation of the natural world, can be a source of learning and enlightenment. Stanzas 1-21 outline the process of purification that leads to spiritual espousal and prepares the soul for perfect union.

Participants are asked to read and reflect on the progression of the soul's journey explained in stanzas 1-21 before proceeding to the next level of spiritual transformation and union (unitive life); that is explained in subsequent sessions, beginning with Session Two.

Essential Points to Discuss:

Dominant themes in the early stages

- **The shortness of life, realizing one's obligations and the practice of self-knowledge:**
The soul at the beginning of her journey has grown aware of her obligations and observed that life is short, the path leading to eternal life is narrow, that all comes to an end and fails like falling water. Realizing God's goodness, his creation, and one's obligation to respond in love, the soul calls out to him: "Where have you hidden?" (see SC, stanza 1, Introduction). "The soul has made known the manner of preparing oneself to begin this journey: to pursue delights and satisfaction no longer, and to overcome

temptations and difficulties through fortitude. This is the practice of self-knowledge, the first requirement of advancing to the knowledge of God. Now ... she begins to walk along the way of the knowledge and consideration of creatures that leads to the knowledge of her Beloved, the Creator” (SC, Stanza 4:1, pg. 494).

- **The beauty of the external world and other intermediaries:** Our senses first see the external world. Naturally, the beauty of nature captivates the attention of the soul that embarks on its spiritual journey. “... God created all things with remarkable ease and brevity, and in them he left some trace of who he is ...” (SC.5:1). “Through them one can track down his grandeur, might, wisdom, and other divine attributes” (SC.5:3). This reflection on plants, animals, the diversity of birds, the sun, moon and the starlit sky, this observation and meditation that they are things made by the very hand of God strongly awakens the soul to love him (see SC.4:3).
- These external manifestations and knowledge of them, however, fail to satisfy the human mind. “The soul is aware that neither her sighs and prayers nor the help of good intermediaries, ... are sufficient for her to find her Beloved” (SC.3:1).
- John goes on to explain that “any soul with authentic love cannot be satisfied until it really possesses God. Everything else not only fails to satisfy it but, ... increases the hunger and appetite to see him as he is” (SC.6:4).
- As the soul travels in search of her beloved, she is wounded by another higher knowledge that she receives through rational creatures – angels and humans (see SC.7:1). “Through these rational creatures the soul acquires a more vivid knowledge of God ...” (SC.7:6).
- As noted in these stanzas, the soul is moving from lower to higher knowledge of God. As John explains, “All the knowledge of God possible in this life, however extensive it may be, is inadequate, for it is only partial knowledge and very remote. Essential knowledge of him is the real knowledge for which the soul asks here, unsatisfied by these other communications. She says next: ‘Do not send me any more messengers...’” (SC.6:5). The soul desires complete knowledge of God. “Thus, ‘they cannot tell me what I must hear’” (SC.6:7).

Side note: As previously noted, progression in prayer is this increase in knowledge and love, from lower to higher and external to more interior. This increase in knowledge does not come from reading many books or meditating on abstract ideas; rather by imitation of Jesus Christ who is the Knowledge and Wisdom of God. What we seek is something beyond our earthly experiences. What we seek is God.

- **The nearness of God:** As the heavenly messengers and creation fail to satisfy the soul, its question and reflection gradually turn inward. One of the highlights of John’s teaching is the presence of God in the soul and its willing participation by practicing interior recollection. The ultimate message of John is that God is hidden, and we must always seek Him within.
- “It should be known that the Word, the Son of God, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is hidden by his essence and his presence in the innermost being of the soul. Individuals who want to find him should leave all things through affection and will, enter within themselves in deepest recollection ... St. Augustine, addressing God in the

Soliloquies, said: *I did not find you without, Lord, because I wrongly sought you without, who were within*. God, then, is hidden in the soul, and there the good contemplative must seek him with love, exclaiming: ‘Where have you hidden?’” (SC.1:6).

- “Oh, then, soul, most beautiful among all creatures, so anxious to know the dwelling place of your Beloved so you may go in search of him and be united with him, now we are telling you that you yourself are his dwelling and his secret inner room and hiding place. There is reason for you to be elated and joyful in seeing that all your good and hope is so close as to be within you, or better, that you cannot be without him. Behold, exclaims the Bridegroom, *the kingdom of God is within you* [Lk. 17:21]. And his servant, the apostle St. Paul, declares: *You are the temple of God* [2 Cor. 6:16]” (SC.1:7).
- “What more do you want, O soul! And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess your riches, delights, satisfaction, fullness, and kingdom – your Beloved whom you desire and seek? Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection with him, for you have him so close to you. Desire him there, adore him there. Do not go in pursuit of him outside yourself. You will only become distracted and wearied thereby, and you shall not find him, or enjoy him more securely, or sooner, or more intimately than by seeking him within you” (SC.1:8).
- Our faithful participation in God within will gradually enable us to seek and find God’s presence in our everyday world of responsibilities, demands, and pressures.

Side note: Reading and reflecting on Stanzas/commentaries from 1-21, allow the participants to hear the “infinite voice” of God himself. “Hence it should be known that God is an infinite voice, and by communicating himself to the soul in this way he produces the effect of an immense voice. ... it is God himself who communicates himself by producing this voice in the soul” (SC.14&15:9,11).

Session Two: Stanzas 22-25

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Essential Points to Discuss:

Stanza 22:

- The “total transformation in the beloved” has begun. John uses two scripture passages to convey the ineffable joy of this unitive stage. “Like the good shepherd rejoicing and holding on his shoulders the lost sheep for which he had searched along many winding paths [Lk. 15:4-5] and like the woman who, having lit the candle and hunted through her whole house for the lost drachma [coin], holding it up in her hands with gladness and calling her friends and neighbors to come and celebrate, saying, rejoice with me ...” [Lk. 15:8-9] (SC.22:1).
- In this transformation and rejoicing, John explains: “The soul thereby becomes divine, God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life” (SC.22:3).
- “The union wrought between two natures and the communication of the divine to the human in this state is such that even though neither changes its being, both appear to be God” (SC.22:4).

Side note: “God alone is Divine by nature; Christ, the Word made flesh, is Divine by nature. We never become Divine by nature but by participation in the Divine nature. Raised to the heights of Spiritual Marriage, we still remain ourselves, still remain human in the fullest sense; indeed, now we are truly human, truly persons, truly mature; for only in God is true maturity found. ... God makes us ‘sharers in the divine nature, calling us His own glory and excellence’ [2Peter 1:3].” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, pg. 163, John Venard, O.C.D.).

Stanza 23:

- One of the fruits that John identifies in this high state of union is that the mystery of his Incarnation is revealed to the soul. “He mainly communicates to her sweet mysteries of his Incarnation and the ways of the redemption of humankind, one of the loftiest of his works and thus more delightful to the soul” (SC.23:1).
- Just as human nature was corrupted by means of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Paradise, so on the tree of the Cross it was redeemed and restored through His passion and death. “Beneath the apple tree” of the Cross, not only mankind but each soul was espoused to Him. In such a way God manifests His wisdom, drawing good from evil. (see SC.23:2-5).
- “The espousal made on the cross is not the one we now speak of. For that espousal is accomplished immediately when God gives the first grace that is bestowed on each one at baptism. The espousal of which we speak bears reference to perfection and is not achieved save gradually and by stages. For though it is all one espousal, there is a difference in that one is attained at the soul’s pace, and thus little by little, and the other at God’s pace, and thus immediately” (SC.23:6).

Note: Espousal to Christ signifies a profound transformation through a spiritual union. John explains this union through the words of Ezekiel 16:5-14 in *The Spiritual Canticle*

23:6. Read the entire bible verse meditatively for a better understanding of becoming more like Christ.

Stanza 24:

- **“Our bed is in flower”** — “...the virtues of the soul in this state are now perfect and heroic. This, though, could not have come about until the bed [of the soul] was in flower in the perfect union with God” (SC.24:3).
- **“bound round with linking dens of lions”** — The soul in this union is safe and well protected. “Thus when the soul possesses perfect virtues, each of them is like a den of lions in which Christ, the Bridegroom, united with the soul in that virtue and each of the others, dwells and assists like a strong lion. And the soul herself, united with him in these same virtues, is also like a strong lion because she thereby receives the properties of God” (SC.24:4).
- She is also well protected from the devil. “The devil has an extraordinary fear of the perfect soul” (SC.24:4). “... in this state the virtues are bound together, united, and fortified ... They are so fastened that not only does the devil fail to find entry, but nothing in the world, high or low, can disquiet, molest, or even move the soul. Liberated from all the disturbances of the natural passions, and estranged from and stripped of the torment and variety of temporal cares, she enjoys in security and quietude the participation of God” (SC.24:5).

Side note: “The word ‘security’ (‘seguridad’): St. John uses it in the Latin sense of ‘securus,’ meaning ‘free from care or anxiety,’ not in the sense that we have absolute security about our eternal salvation. St. Teresa reminds us that even in this exalted state ‘the soul may seem to give the impression that it is sure of salvation ... this is not so ... it is sure of itself only insofar as it knows God is holding it by the hand’ (IC.VII.2:9). This is the perfection of the virtue of hope; its meaning: no hope in ourselves, complete hope in God.” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, pg. 175, John Venard, O.C.D.).

- **Kieran Kavanaugh’s translation:** “It seems I’m saying that when the soul reaches this state in which God grants it this favor, it is sure of its salvation and safe from falling again. I do not say such a thing, and wherever I so speak that it seems the soul is secure, this should be taken to mean as long as the divine Majesty keeps it in his hand and it does not offend him. At least I know certainly that the soul doesn’t consider itself safe even though it sees itself in this state and the state has lasted for some years. But it goes about with much greater fear than before, guarding itself from any small offence against God and with the strongest desires to serve him ...” (IC.VII.2:9).
- John observes that the flowers of virtues within the soul are hidden from the eyes of the world. Nevertheless, it does happen through the grace of the Holy Spirit, we catch occasional glimpses of one’s true holiness. It is like the opening of a flower, diffusing its fragrance. “We can say that in this life they are present in the soul as flower buds in a garden. It is sometimes a wonderful thing to see them all open through the Holy Spirit and diffuse a marvelous variety of fragrance” (SC.24:6).

- According to John, the fragrance refers to “the strange knowledge of God” (SC.24:6). This “loving knowledge” is one of the fruits of the unitive life of souls living in perfect love (charity).

Side note: Similar thoughts were expressed in one of Edith Stein’s essays, “The Hidden Life and Epiphany.” She observes that the hidden souls are part of the invisible Church:

“But for the most part the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Certainly, the decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out about those souls whom we owe the decisive turning points in our personal lives on the day when all that is hidden is revealed.

“Because hidden souls do not live in isolation, but are a part of the living nexus and have a position in a great divine order, we speak of an invisible church. Their impact and affinity can remain hidden from themselves and others for their entire earthly lives. But it is also possible for some of this to become visible in the external world. This is how it was with the persons and events intertwined in the mystery of the Incarnation. Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds and kings, Simeon and Anna – all of these had behind them a solitary life with God and were prepared for their special tasks before they found themselves together in those awesome encounters and events and, in retrospect, could understand how the paths left behind led to this climax” (The Collected Works of Edith Stein: The Hidden Life, pg. 110).

- **“Built up in peace.”** From the perfect love comes perfect peace of the soul. The soul is peaceful, meek and strong. “And the virtues keep the soul so tranquil and safe that to her it seems she is built up in peace” (SC.24:8).

Stanza 25:

*Following your footprints
maidens run along the way;
the touch of a spark,
the spiced wine,
cause flowings in them from the balsam of God.*

Explanatory note: This stanza refers to the ecclesial value of prayer and union. John observes: “The soul that has reached this state of perfection is not content with extolling and praising the excellence of her Beloved, the Son of God ... for she makes references also to those he bestows on other souls. In this blessed union of love she is aware of both.” (SC.25:1).

- “A footprint is a trace by which we can track the one to whom it belongs. God’s sweetness and knowledge, given to the soul seeking him, is a trace by which she goes on knowing and searching for him” (SC.25:3).

Side note: Those who receive this special knowledge of God are moved and attracted to run along the way of perfection. St. Thérèse of Lisieux referred to this stanza when explaining her spiritual bond with her sister, Celine:

“Jesus, wanting to have us advance together, formed bonds in our hearts stronger than blood. He made us become *spiritual sisters*, and in us were realized the words of St. John of the Cross’ Canticle ...:

“‘Following Your footprints/Maidens run lightly along the way/The touch of a spark/The special wine/ Cause flowings in them from the balsam of God.’

“Yes, it was very *lightly* we followed in Jesus’ footprints. The sparks of love He sowed so generously in our souls, and the delicious and strong wine He gave us to drink made all passing things disappear before our eyes, and from our lips came aspirations of love inspired only by Him” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, chapter V, pg. 158).

- John goes on to explain, “They [devout souls] run along the way of eternal life, the way of evangelical perfection, by which they encounter the Beloved in union of love ... the soul does **very little or nothing** of her own in order to advance on this road; rather, she is moved and attracted by the divine footprints [loving knowledge of God], not only to go out, but even to run along this road in many ways ...” (SC.25:4, emphasis added).
- John quotes two different scripture passages to confirm his teaching: “Draw me, and we shall run after you in the fragrance of your ointments (Sg. 1:3-4) ... I have run the way of your commandments when you enlarged my heart (Ps. 119:32)” (SC.25:4).

Side note: Again, St. Thérèse, at the end of her life, appropriates John’s thoughts to explain her mission of inspiring and drawing souls without going into grandiose plans and complicated ways.

“He made me understand these words of the Canticle of Canticles: ‘DRAW ME, WE SHALL RUN *after you in the odor of your ointments* ...’ This simple statement: ‘Draw me’ suffices; I understand, Lord, that when a soul allows herself to be captivated by *the odor of your ointments*, she cannot run alone, all the souls whom she loves follow in her train; this is done without constraint, without effort, it is a natural consequence of her attraction for You” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, chapter XI, pg. 398-399).

- “*The spiced wine.*” New lovers or beginners in the spiritual life, like new wine, are not yet tested; they tend to seek gratification and spiritual consolations. Those who have made solid progress, however, are not carried away by such consolations. They are given the taste of “the spiced wine.” “This spiced wine is another much greater favor that God sometimes grants to advanced souls, in which he inebriates them in the Holy Spirit with a wine of sweet, delightful, and fortified love ...” (SC.25:7). Consequently, “... the will is enkindled in loving, desiring, praising, and thanking God, and reverencing, esteeming, and praying to him in the savor of love” (SC.25:5).

Note: For further understanding of these two terms, “new wine” and “fermented wine,” read Stanza 25:9-11.

Session Three: Stanzas 26-30

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Essential Points to Discuss:

Stanza 26: “In the inner wine cellar”

- “This wine cellar is the last and most intimate degree of love in which the soul can be placed in this life. Accordingly she calls this degree of love ‘the inner wine cellar,’ that is, the most interior” (SC.26:3).
- “What God communicates to the soul in this intimate union is totally beyond words... For in the transformation of the soul in God, it is God who communicates himself with admirable glory; the two become one, as we would say of the window united with the ray of sunlight, or the coal with the fire, or the starlight with the light of the sun. But this union is not as essential and perfect as in the next life” (SC.26:4).
- “In this transformation she drinks of God in her substance and in her spiritual faculties. With the intellect she **drinks wisdom and knowledge**; with the will, sweetest love; and with the memory she drinks refreshment and delight in the remembrance and the feeling of glory” (SC.26:5, emphasis added).
Note: According to John, these faculties are not just external functions but are inherent and essential aspects of one’s being, forming the essence of their spiritual life.
- **“I no longer knew anything”:** “The reason is that the drink of highest wisdom makes her forget all worldly things. And it seems that her previous knowledge, and even all the knowledge of the world, is pure ignorance in comparison with this knowledge ... [because] she is being informed with **supernatural knowledge**, in the presence of which all natural and political knowledge of the world is ignorance rather than knowledge ... She declares the truth of the Apostle’s words, that what is greater wisdom in the sight of humans is foolishness before God [1Cor. 3:19]” (SC.26:13, emphasis added).
- “Hence the wise people of God and the wise people of the world are foolish in the eyes of each other; one group cannot perceive the wisdom and knowledge of God, and the other cannot perceive the wisdom and knowledge of the world. The wisdom of the world is ignorance to the wisdom of God, and the wisdom of God is ignorance to the wisdom of the world” (SC.26.13).
Note: In this journey towards union, the central message of John of the Cross is that we seek God as an object of knowledge and love, and the source of this knowledge is our Lord, Jesus.
- John, however, makes one point of clarification, that in no way is our natural knowledge lessened or weakened by the supernatural knowledge of God. Rather, the natural knowledge that one acquired in his or her lifetime is purified and perfected. “It should not be thought that because she remains in this unknowing she loses there her acquired knowledge of the sciences; rather, these habits are perfected by the more perfect habit of supernatural knowledge infused in her. ... For in this union with divine wisdom these habits are joined to the superior wisdom of God” (SC.26:16).
Note: This implies seeking God’s Wisdom and direction in all aspects of life and allowing

His light to illuminate one's path. Everything is seen and practiced in the light of God's principles and truth.

- John goes on to give a telling image to describe the effects of God wisdom upon the natural/acquired knowledge of a person. "When a faint light is mingled with a bright one, the bright light prevails and is what illumines. Yet the faint light is not lost; rather, it is perfected even though it is not the light that illumines principally" (SC.26:16).

Side note: John's clarification of God's wisdom is essential to the overall understanding of acquired knowledge and supernatural knowledge. He is not advocating the suppression of our acquired knowledge; instead, he stresses the importance of acquired knowledge to serve God and further His purpose in the world. John's understanding is that acquired knowledge is purified and perfected in this union and one's life is now directed by the wisdom of God; it is a matter of using one's natural knowledge to serve the Kingdom of God.

- Another benefit that comes from this union is that "... the soul in this state resembles Adam in the state of innocence, who did not know evil. For she is so innocent that she does not understand evil, nor does she judge anything in a bad light" (SC.26:14).
- "This is the characteristic of God's spirit in the soul: He gives her an immediate inclination toward ignoring and not desiring knowledge of the affairs of others, especially that which brings her no benefit ... Thus she remains in an unknowing, in the manner she was accustomed to" (SC.26:15).
- "... transformation in God makes her [the soul] so consonant with the simplicity and purity of God, in which there is no form or imaginative figure, that it leaves her clean, pure, and empty of all forms or figures, purged and radiant in simple contemplation. The effect of this contemplation is like that of the sun on a window" (SC.26:17).
- John reminds the reader that even in the advanced stage of this spiritual journey there always remain, to one degree or another, various attachments and preferences. The soul is not freed from these attachments until one reaches the state of perfection.
- "These may involve temporal things, such as some little possession, or the attachment to one object more than to another, or some presumption, judgment, punctilios and other small things having a worldly savor or tinge. These latter may concern natural things, such as eating, drinking, finding more gratification in this than in that, choosing and desiring the best. Or they may concern spiritual things, such as desire for spiritual satisfactions or other trifles we would never finish listing that are characteristic of spiritual persons who are not yet perfect. In the memory there are usually many wanderings, cares, and useless imaginings after which she follows" (SC.26:18).
- However, John promises that these frivolous and numerous "herds" of imperfections will come to an end when God places the soul in the interior wine cellar. "Thus the soul now [in the state of spiritual marriage] feels free of all the childish likes and trifles she perused; and she can say: 'And lost the herd which I was following'" (SC.26:19).

Side note: St. Thérèse refers to stanzas 26 & 28 to explain her anxiety and imperfection amid her sister Celine's entrance to Carmel and her father's passing. Eventually, with the help of John's guidance, she realizes that God alone suffices.

“When the difficulties seemed insurmountable one day, I said to Jesus during the act of thanksgiving: ‘You know, my God, how much I want to know whether Papa went *straight to heaven*; I am not asking you to speak to me, but give me a sign. If Sister A. of J. consents to Celine’s entrance or places no obstacle to it, this will be an answer that Papa went straight to You” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, chapter VIII, pg. 274).

By the grace of God, Celine did enter Carmel after her father’s passing. Consequently, all of Thérèse’s desires were fulfilled. However, Thérèse quickly realized that these were “childish desires” and what is important in life is “to love Jesus unto folly.”

“Ah! How many things I have to thank Jesus for; He answers all my requests! And now I have no other desire except to love Jesus unto folly. My childish desires have all flown away. ... Neither do I desire any longer suffering or death, and still I love them both; it is *love* alone that attracts me, however. ... Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervor except the accomplishment of God’s will in my soul without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way. I can speak these words of *The Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross:

*‘In the inner wine cellar
I drank of my Beloved, and, when I went abroad
through all this valley
I no longer knew anything,
and lost the herd that I was following

‘Now I occupy my soul
and all my energy in his service;
I no longer tend the herd,
nor have I any other work
now that my every act is LOVE’*

“Or rather:

*‘After I have known it
LOVE works so in me
that whether things go well or badly
love turns them to one sweetness
transforming the soul in ITSELF.’” **

(*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, chapter VIII, pg. 274-275).

(*Footnote: “Without support yet with support,” *The Poetry*, 11, Stanza 3. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, pg. 70.)

Thérèse goes on to explain the transformative power of love; the idea that love can cause change and help people to grow. “How sweet is the way of love, dear Mother. True, one can fall or commit infidelities, but, knowing *how to draw profit from everything*, love quickly consumes

everything that can be displeasing to Jesus; it leaves nothing but a humble and profound peace in the depths of the heart” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, chapter VIII, pg. 276).

Note: These thoughts of Thérèse highlight her profound understanding of St. John of the Cross’ teaching on love and transformation. Her striving for holiness in everyday life reflects a practical application of John’s core message.

Stanza 27:

- The mutual surrender between the soul and God is another benefit of this unitive life. John makes a bold statement to describe this mutual surrender: “The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favors and exalts this humble and loving soul reaches such a degree – O wonderful thing, worthy of all our awe and admiration! – that the Father himself becomes subject to her exaltation, as though he were her servant and she his lord. And he is as solicitous in favoring her as he would be if he were her slave and she his god. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God!” (SC.27:1).
- In this mutual surrender, God imparts “a sweet and living knowledge.” John notes this secret knowledge of God is indeed the prayer of contemplation. “The sweet and living knowledge that she says he taught her is mystical theology, the secret knowledge of God that spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is a knowledge through love. Love is the master of this knowledge and what makes it wholly agreeable” (SC.27:5).

Note: Throughout his writings, John’s focus is to lead the soul to this “loving knowledge” of God himself. This is the highest wisdom attainable in this life. As John points out further down in the stanza, we must then enter deeply into Christ. As the Apostle Paul said of Christ: In him are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God [Col. 2:3].

- Another important benefit of this transformation is that the soul “does not even suffer the **first movements** contrary to God’s will. As an imperfect soul is ordinarily inclined toward evil, at least in the first movements of its will, intellect, memory, and appetites, and as it has imperfections, so conversely the soul in this state ordinarily inclines and moves toward God in the first movements of its intellect, memory, will, and appetites, because of the great help and stability it has in God and its perfect conversion toward him. ... [The] soul is set firmly in God and united to him, it will no longer suffer any movement contrary to God” (SC.27:7, emphasis added).

Side note: As explained in *The Ascent* “... **the first movements**, [are] those stirrings in which the rational will does not take part either before or after. To eradicate the natural appetites, that is, to mortify them entirely, is impossible in this life. Even though they are not entirely mortified, as I say, they are not such a hindrance as to prevent one from attaining divine union” (A.1.11:2, emphasis added). On the other hand, “... in the state of divine union a person’s will is so completely transformed into God’s will that it excludes everything contrary to God’s will, and in all and through all is motivated by the will of God” (A.1.11:2). Accordingly, in this state of perfect union, the soul habitually moves toward God in its first movements. This inclination toward God is the fruit of this unitive life.

- In this state of union, “She [the soul] employs all her faculties and possessions in loving, in giving up everything like the wise merchant (Mt. 13:44), for this treasure of love has been found by her, hidden in God. ... Thus everything leads her to love. And being informed and fortified as she is with love, she neither feels nor tastes nor knows the things that happen to her, whether delightful or bitter, since as we said the soul knows nothing else but love. And her pleasure in all things and in all transactions is always the delight of loving God” (SC.27:8).
- “Only love matters now; therefore, the passing things of life cannot disturb us anymore. In the whole context of the Saint’s [John’s] thought, it must be said that he cannot really mean that suffering is not ‘felt’, of course it is, but our reaction to it is one of detachment, even joyful acceptance, insofar as we see the hand of God in every trial, every vexation, every joy, every satisfaction” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, John Venard, O.C.D., pg. 207). This stage is indeed a perfect prayer of contemplation.

Side note: The teachings of John were realized in Thérèse when she made her marvelous discovery of her vocation that overflows from the touch of a contemplative fervor of love.

“Charity gave me the key to my vocation. ... I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES.... IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love.... my vocation, at last I have found it.... MY VOCATION IS LOVE!” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, pg. 302).

Stanza 28:

- John goes on to explain that in the past the soul engaged in “unprofitable occupations.” “She usually has desires to serve the appetites of others, which she does through ostentation, compliments, flattery, human respect, the effort to impress and please people by her actions, and many other useless things. In this fashion she strives to please people, employing for them all her care, desires, work, and finally energy” (SC.28:7).
- However, in this state of union, all her actions are “... directed to the practice of love of God, that is: All the ability of my soul and body (memory, intellect, and will, interior and exterior senses, appetites of the sensory and spiritual parts) move in love and because of love. Everything I do I do with love, and everything I suffer I suffer with the delight of love. ... Hence whether her work is temporal or spiritual, this soul can always say ‘Now that my every act is love’” (SC.28:8-9).
- As John observes, “... everything is now the substance of love ...” (SC.28:10). In other words, one has arrived at the point of spiritual maturity!

Stanza 29:

- Apostolic fruitfulness is another enduring benefit of this union in love. “For 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” (SC.29:2). John reminds the reader in unequivocal terms: “After all, this love is the end for which we were created” (SC.29:3).

- He then gives a very practical exhortation to those who engage in exterior works while ignoring the life of prayer:
- “Let those, then, who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they might not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm. ... However much they may appear to achieve externally, they will in substance be accomplishing nothing; it is beyond doubt that good works can be performed only by the power of God” (SC.29:3).

Note: John here highlights the Discalced Carmelite charism of prayer. In the tradition of Carmel, the apostolate flows from the interior life; the two cannot be separated. It’s not one or the other; they are two sides of the same coin.

- In this union of love, John says that the soul “... has reached such a point that she has lost all roads and natural methods in her communion with God, and no longer seeks him by reflections or forms or feelings or by any other way of creatures and the senses, but has advanced beyond them all and beyond all modes and manners, and enjoys communion with God in faith and love, then it is said that God is her gain, because she has certainly lost all that is not God” (SC.29:11).

Stanza 30:

- **“Chosen on cool mornings”** (SC.30:1). John, in this stanza, reflects on the virtues practiced by the determined souls during the dark hours (“cool mornings”) of their lives, and the great merit of a life lived entirely for God. Many good people give up prayer altogether because they seem to experience nothing but aridity, dryness, and difficulty in prayer. But John states that “... virtue takes root in dryness, difficulty, and labor, as God says to St. Paul: *Virtue is made perfect in weakness* [2Cor .12:9].” (SC.30:5).
- **“We shall weave garlands”** (SC.30:1). “This verse most appropriately refers to the Church and Christ ...” (SC.30:7). Consequently, in this state of union, “Each holy soul [who went through aridity and difficulties] is like a garland adorned with the flowers of virtues and gifts, and all of them together form a garland for the head of Christ, the Bridegroom” (SC.30:7).
- “It is inevitable that being so closely united with Christ, the Bridegroom, we should have a heightened sense of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. As our love for Christ deepens, so does our awareness of the Church – that is, of our ‘oneness’ with all others who, like us, are integrated into and are one with the glorified Body of the Risen Christ, which is the Church” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, John Venard, O.C.D. pg. 225).

Session Four: Stanzas 31-35

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Essential Points to Discuss:

- The power of prayer is so great that John again gives a bold description of the divine union of love between the soul and God. “This thread of love joins and binds God and the soul so strongly that it unites and transforms them. So great is this union that even though they differ in substance, in glory and appearance the soul seems to be God and God seems to be the soul” (SC.31:1).
Note: In John’s writings, readers will notice exaggerations, also known as hyperbole, that use obvious and extreme overstatements to emphasize a point, create a specific image, or evoke a strong emotional response in the reader. Hyperbole is a form of figurative language and is not meant to be taken literally.
- In this union “the power and the tenacity of love is great, for love captures and binds God himself. Happy is the loving soul, since she possesses God for her prisoner, and he is surrendered to all her desires. God is such that those who act with love and friendship toward him will make him do all they desire ...” (SC.32:1).
- “It is the property of perfect love to be unwilling to take anything for self, nor does it attribute anything to self, but all to the beloved” (SC.32:2).
- John’s observation is that God “... bears no love for anything lower than the love he has for himself. He loves all things for himself; thus love becomes the purpose for which he loves. He therefore does not love things because of what they are in themselves. With God, to love the soul is to put her somehow in himself and make her his equal. Thus he loves the soul within himself, with himself, that is, with the very love by which he loves himself. This is why the soul merits the love of God in all her works insofar as she does them in God. Placed in this height, this grace, she merits God himself in every work” (SC.32:6).
- John uses a biblical allusion to describe the soul’s union with God. “The small white dove/has returned to the ark with an olive branch...” (SC.34:1).
- Here John compares the soul to the dove of Noah’s ark. “Similarly this soul that left the ark of God’s omnipotence when he created her passed through the waters of sin and imperfection and, finding no place for her appetite to rest, flew back and forth through the air of anxieties of love from the ark of the Creator’s breast. And he did not take her in until he made the waters of all the imperfections on the land of the soul to cease, and she returned with the olive branch (which denotes her victory over all things through the clemency and mercy of God) ... Thus the small dove, the soul, not only returns to the ark of her God as clean and white as when he created her before her departure, but also carries in addition the olive branch that signifies the reward and peace obtained in her victory over self” (SC.34:4).

Side note: St. Teresa uses the same imagery to convey a soul’s victory over the imperfections and tempests of this world: “Here the dove Noah sent out to see if the storm was over finds the olive branch as a sign of firm ground discovered amid the floods and tempests of this world. O

Jesus! Who would know the many things there must be in Scripture to explain this peace of soul!” (IC.VII.3:13). This firm ground is the presence of God that the soul has found within.

- Again, we are reminded that practicing daily virtues cannot be neglected. We must continue to practice everyday virtues. “For she must advance with such love and solicitude as not to set the foot of her appetite on the green branch of any delight, or drink the clear water of any worldly honor and glory...” (SC.34:5).
- In this union of love, John says God is the only guide for the soul. It is God who guides her into solitude. “When the soul has become established in the quietude of solitary love of her Bridegroom, ... she is settled in God, and God in her, with so much delight that she has no need of other masters or means to direct her to him, for now God is her guide and her light” (SC.35:1).

*She lived in solitude,
and now in solitude has built her nest;
and in solitude he guides her,
he alone, who also bears
in solitude the wound of love.
(Stanza 35)*

- The soul continues to experience “... perfect solitude in which she reaches union with the Word. ... She formally practiced this solitude, in which she lived, in trial and anguish because she was imperfect, but now she has built her nest in it and has found refreshment and repose in having acquired it perfectly in God” (SC.35:4).
Note: “This authentic solitude is not necessarily physical but a solitude of detachment, or poverty of spirit, for the sake of the Bridegroom” (SC, stanza 35, footnote 1).
- “The meaning of this is not only that he [God] guided her in her solitude, but it is he alone who works in her without any means. This is a characteristic of the union of the soul with God in spiritual marriage: God works in and communicates himself to her through himself alone, without using as means the angels or natural ability, for the exterior and interior sense and all creatures, and even the soul herself do very little toward the reception of the remarkable supernatural favors that God grants in this state” (SC.35:6).
- “In this solitude, away from all things, the soul is alone with God and he guides, moves, and raises her to divine things. That is: he elevates her **intellect** to divine understanding, because it is alone and divested of other contrary and alien knowledge; he moves her **will** freely to the love of God, because it is alone and freed from other affections; and he fills her **memory** with divine knowledge, because it is now alone and empty of other images and phantasies” (SC.35:5, emphasis added).
Note: In St. John of the Cross's teachings, the intellect, memory, and will play a crucial role in the soul's transformation towards divine union. These three spiritual faculties, when purified and aligned with God's will, become instruments of spiritual growth and, ultimately, union with the loving God Himself.

Session Five: Stanzas 36-40

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

*Let us rejoice, Beloved,
and let us go forth to behold ourselves
in your beauty
to the mountain and to the hill,
to where the pure water flows,
and further, deep into the thicket.
(Stanza 36)*

Explanatory note: In the final five stanzas of *The Spiritual Canticle*, (36, 37, 38, 39, 40), John's focus is on the mystical knowledge of contemplation (loving knowledge). In John's writings, this loving knowledge (wisdom) is a central concept to the understanding of human transformation and union. For John of the Cross, love of God is the ultimate purpose and fulfillment of the soul. Love is God's essence, the source of life, uniting and nurturing all creation.

John emphasizes that knowledge of God is essential for a soul's spiritual progress. His understanding is that in the absence of divine wisdom, love could remain merely a feeling. Divine love fosters goodness and compassion, while wisdom offers clarity, order, and truth. John sees that divine love and wisdom are inseparable forces, bound together like the warmth (love) and light (knowledge) of fire. The optimal approach is to achieve a harmonious balance between these two forces, where love guides wisdom and wisdom refines love, resulting in a loving and discerning approach to life. In John's works, love is not just a feeling, but an act of the will, a choice to give oneself completely to God. A total detachment from self and inordinate desires, a willingness to sacrifice everything for God's sake.

Such "loving knowledge" is not based on facts or information, as it conveys the idea of something being impossible to fully understand or explain. In essence, it is indescribable by human words but can be experienced within the human soul. As John explains it: "It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding, like these stanzas, are fully explainable. The Spirit of the Lord, who abides in us and aids our weakness, as St. Paul says [Rom. 8:26], pleads for us with unspeakable groanings in order to manifest what we can neither fully understand nor comprehend" (SC Prologue, para #1). By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, John tries to explain the unexplainable.

"In these final stanzas the focus shifts from the state of spiritual marriage to prayer for the beatific vision" (Stanza 36, footnote #1).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- This union of love overflows exteriorly in works directed to the service of God. "It makes one always desire to taste the joys and sweetnesses of love in the inward and outward exercise of love" (SC.36:4).

Note: "She [the soul] wants to rejoice in the love expressed not only in contemplation but also in action." (SC, stanza 36, footnote 2). The Carmelite charism of prayer has an

apostolic dimension and overflows with missionary fervor based on a fervent interior life.

- The soul in this state expresses her desire to become like the Beloved, and she asks for this in stating, “Let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty” (SC.36:4). John tries to explain the inexplainable beauty of transformation and union in the most celebrated paragraph of *The Spiritual Canticle*, stanza 36:5. “That is: That I be so transformed in your beauty that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold ourselves in your beauty, possessing then your very beauty; ...” (Read the entire paragraph meditatively to understand and experience the full effect of this prayer).

Side note: “John expresses here his mystical experience of the beauty of God not through a mere description but rather through a kind of intense prayer in which he forgets the reader in concentration on his Beloved. In this outpouring of his heart the word ‘beauty’ appears 23 times” (SC, stanza 36, footnote #3).

- “Transform me into the beauty of divine Wisdom and make me resemble that which is the Word, the Son of God” (SC.36:7).
- **“To the mountain and to the hill.”** In this stanza 36, John describes two types of knowledge: “That is: to the **morning and essential knowledge** of God, which is knowledge in the divine Word, who in his height is signified here by the mountain. ... ‘And to the hill,’ that is, to the **evening knowledge** of God, which is God’s wisdom in his creatures, works, and wondrous decrees. The hill suggests this wisdom because it is not as high as the morning wisdom [essential]. Yet the soul asks for both the evening and the morning wisdom when she says: ‘To the mountain and to the hill’” (SC.36:6, emphasis added). The higher knowledge concerns the divine, the lower knowledge concerns nature. Both are important.
- “The soul cannot see herself in the beauty of God unless she is transformed into the wisdom of God, in which she sees herself in possession of **earthly and heavenly things**” (SC.36:8, emphasis added).

Note: Both types of knowledge are essential to the understanding of divine union. The essential knowledge of God (higher knowledge), which is the experience of being one with God through participation, and the evening knowledge of God, which is to experience God’s presence of Wisdom in his creatures (lower knowledge) – that is to understand and respect the phenomenal world in which we live. John refers to the higher knowledge of God as “the clear vision of God.” “The mountain of myrrh refers to the clear vision of God and the hill of incense to the knowledge of creatures, for the myrrh on the mountain is more choice than the incense on the hill” (SC.36:8).

Side note: Pope Benedict XVI observes that this “knowledge” that arises from the beauty of Christ is the real knowledge that needs to be rediscovered in our time. “Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction. Of course, we must not underrate the importance of theological reflection, of exact and precise theological thought; it remains absolutely necessary. But to move from here to disdain or to reject the impact produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and our theology.

We must rediscover this form of knowledge. It is a pressing need of our time” (*The Essential Pope Benedict, XVI: His central writings and speeches*, Ch. 9, The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty).

- In this transformation, John points out the soul’s desire to go “... further, deep into the thicket” to know God “further within.” As love increases, so does the desire to search for deeper knowledge of God. “The soul always possesses this desire to have clear and pure understanding of the divine truths; and the greater her love, the more she longs to enter further into these truths” (SC.36:9).
- “This thicket of God’s wisdom and knowledge is so deep and immense that no matter how much the soul knows, she can always enter it further; it is vast and its riches incomprehensible, as St Paul exclaims: *O height of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how incomprehensible are his judgments and unsearchable his ways* [Rom. 11:33]” (SC.36:10).
- “And, in exchange, it will be a singular comfort and happiness for her to enter all the afflictions and trials of the world and everything, however difficult and painful, that might be a means to this knowledge, even the anguish and agony of death, all in order to see herself further within her God” (SC.36:11). John is firmly convinced that suffering brings the soul to the most intimate and purest knowledge.
- Pain, suffering, and trials in this state will not affect the soul as it did before this union. She sees all in the light of God himself. “Suffering is the means of her penetrating further, deep into the thicket of the delectable wisdom of God. The purest suffering brings with it the purest and most intimate knowing, and consequently the purest and highest joy, because it is a knowing from further within” (SC.36:12).

Note: The phrase “and further, deep into the thicket” emphasizes the deeper or more interior aspect of contemplation. It captures the essence of contemplative prayer.

*Stanza 37: Incarnation
And then we will go on
to the high caverns in the rock
which are so well concealed;
there we shall enter
and taste the fresh juice of
the pomegranates.
(SC Stanza 37)*

- “One of the reasons urging the soul most to enter this thicket of God’s wisdom and to know its beauty from further within is her wish to unite her intellect and God in the knowledge and the mysteries of the Incarnation, in which is contained the highest and most savory wisdom of all his works. ... These mysteries are exalted in wisdom, and the soul enters the knowledge of them, engulfing and immersing herself in them” (SC.37:2).
- In John’s writings, the mysteries of the Incarnation are closely connected to “... the salvation of the human race. These mysteries are so profound that she very appropriately calls them high caverns: high, because of the height of the sublime mysteries; and caverns, because of the depth of God’s wisdom in them” (SC.37.3).

Side note: “‘The high caverns in the rock; the rock is Christ’ (1 Cor. 10:4). The greatest mystery of all is the Hypostatic Union [see SC.37:3], God becoming man. St. John’s remarkable devotion to the Divine Infant was not based on sentiment, but on his profound understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation. It is not surprising that we find the same emphasis in St. Teresa; in her writings she is continually recalling us to the Sacred Humanity of Christ. The person of Jesus was everything to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and it could well be that she drew inspiration for the meditation and teaching on the merciful love of God from passages such as this in *The Spiritual Canticle*. Most of the quotations from St. John of the Cross in her writings are from *The Spiritual Canticle*; she knew it thoroughly” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, John Venard, O.C.D. pg. 263).

- “There is much to fathom in Christ, for he is like an abundant mine with many recesses of treasures, so that however deep individuals may go they never reach the end or bottom, but rather in every recess find new veins with new riches everywhere. On this account St. Paul said of Christ: *In Christ dwell hidden all treasures and wisdom* [Col. 2:3]” (SC.37:4).
- John reminds the reader that no one can know or understand the sublime mysteries of God without first having undergone much suffering, trials and purification. “For one cannot reach in this life what is attainable of these mysteries of Christ without having suffered much and without having received numerous intellectual and sensible favors from God, and without having undergone much spiritual activity; for all these favors are inferior to the wisdom of the mysteries of Christ in that they serve as preparations for coming to this wisdom” (SC.37:4).
- “Furthermore, since the soul and God are now united in this state of spiritual marriage that we are discussing, the soul performs no work without God” (SC.37:6).
- By using the image of pomegranates, John conveys the attributes of God and their effects in the soul:
“The pomegranates stand for the mysteries of Christ, the judgments of the wisdom of God, and the virtues and attributes uncovered in the knowledge of these innumerable mysteries and judgments. Just as pomegranates have many little seeds formed and sustained within the circular shell, so each of the attributes, mysteries, judgments, and virtues of God, like a round shell of power and mystery, holds and sustains a multitude of marvelous decrees and wondrous effects” (SC.37:7).
- “The juice from these pomegranates [the divine knowledge] that the bride and the Bridegroom will taste is the fruition and delight of the love of God overflowing from the knowledge of his attributes” (SC.37:8). John teaches that the pinnacle of this transformation and union is to taste and experience this lofty knowledge of God. It is a pure gift from God to the soul.

Stanza 38: Perfect love. “There you will show me/what my soul has been seeking...”

- “The soul’s aim is a love equal to God’s. She always desired this equality, naturally and supernaturally... Just as the soul, according to St. Paul, will know them as she is known by God [1 Cor. 13:12], so she will also love God as she is loved by him. As her intellect will be the intellect of God, her will then will be God’s will, and thus her love will be

God's love. The soul's will is not destroyed there, but is so firmly united with the strength of God's will, with which he loves her, that her love for him is as strong and perfect as his love for her; for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God's" (SC.38:3).

- John further explains, citing the Scripture passage that in this stage of transformation and union, God gives the soul a new name. *"And I will write upon this one the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and also my new name [Rv. 3:12]"* (SC.38:8).

Side note: "We should read this [passage] against the background of the Biblical notion of 'name'; the tremendous significance of 'writing on him the name of my God' points to a complete change of status, so that something in the person undergoes a radical and profound change; an elevation to the Godhead itself. The radical change or renewal of the person is effected; 'I will write upon him ... my new name.' We recall the great significance of Jesus' changing Simon's name to Peter; it implied and actually effected a complete change in the person of Peter, imparting to him qualities which naturally he lacked; Simon did become 'the Rock' after Pentecost; strong, courageous and reliable, by the action of the Holy Spirit" (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, John Venard, O.C.D., pg. 279).

Stanza 39: "The breathing of the air" – communication of the Holy Spirit and the Trinitarian Life

*the breathing of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
the grove and its living beauty
in the serene night,
with a flame that is consuming and painless.*

- In paragraph 2 of stanza 39, John goes on to describe the bestowing of different gifts to the soul in perfect love:
 - **First**, is the breath or the spiration of the Holy Spirit from God to her from her to God.
 - **Second**, jubilation in the fruition of God.
 - **Third**, the knowledge of creatures and of their orderly arrangement.
 - **Fourth**, pure and clear contemplation of the divine essence.
 - **Fifth**, a total transformation in the immense love of God.
- The whole stanza is an elaborate explanation of the themes above. "This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit himself, 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" (SC.39:3).
- Speaking with the authority of one who knows from experience, John boldly states "... that God favors her [the soul] by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which she become deiform and God through participation, ... This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this

transformation. He created her in his image and likeness that she might attain such resemblance” (SC.39:4).

- “Accordingly, souls possess the same goods by participation that the Son possesses by nature. As a result they are truly gods by participation, equals and companions of God” (SC.39:6).
- “Although this participation will be perfectly accomplished in the next life, still in this life when the soul has reached the state of perfection, as has the soul we are here discussing, she obtains a foretaste and noticeable trace of it in the way we are describing, although as we said it is indescribable” (SC.39:6).

For personal reflection: “O souls, created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing? How are you spending your time?” (SC.39:7).

- Commenting on the second theme (“jubilation in the fruition of God”), John explains that the soul “... like the sweet nightingale, sings a new and jubilant song together with God, who moves her to do this. He gives his voice to her that so united with him, she may give it together with him to God. ... Since the soul rejoices in and praises God with God himself in this union ... it is a praise highly perfect and pleasing to God, for a soul in this state of perfection performs very perfect works” (SC.39:9).
- **“The grove and its living beauty”** (stanza 39). When explaining the third theme (“the knowledge of creatures and of their orderly arrangement”), John gives prominence to the knowledge of creatures and creation. God bestows on the soul a certain knowledge that “... he nurtures and gives being to all creatures rooted and living in him. Through this gift God shows himself to her and reveals himself as Creator. ... that every earthly and heavenly creature not only has from God but also manifests in its wise, well ordered, gracious, and harmonious relationship to other creatures. We find this accord among the lower creatures and among the higher, and we find it as well in the relationships between the higher and lower. The knowledge of this harmony fascinates and delights the soul” (SC.39:11).

“In the serene night” — the night of contemplation

- God moves the soul to the contemplation of all things. Paragraph 12 of stanza 39 is perhaps the most comprehensive and instructive passage of John’s teaching on contemplation.
“Because of its obscurity, she [the soul] calls contemplation night. On this account contemplation is also termed mystical theology, meaning the secret or hidden knowledge of God. 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. Some spiritual persons call this contemplation knowing by unknowing. For this knowledge is not produced by the intellect that the philosophers call the agent intellect, which works on the forms, phantasies, and apprehensions of the corporal faculties; rather it is produced in the possible or passive intellect. This possible intellect, without the reception of these forms, and so on, receives passively only substantial knowledge,

which is divested of images and given without any work or active function of the intellect” (SC.39:12).

Side note: “It is ‘night’; in darkness, yet it is luminous; it is obscure, yet it is a knowledge of the deepest things of God – a knowledge which comes from God himself, quietly, secretly, without the soul’s knowing how. It is not to be confused with knowledge in the ordinary sense of that word, for in contemplation all natural means of knowing and understanding cease. ... Natural knowledge comes through images, concepts, ideas; this knowledge needs none of these intermediaries. The intellect simply does not function in the ordinary way; it simply receives passively (‘in the passive intellect’); we understand, not knowing how. And if we could explain how we know and indeed, what we know, adequately, this would not be contemplation” (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, John Venard, O.C.D. SC, pg. 289).

- John reminds the reader: “Yet however sublime this knowledge may be, it is still a dark night when compared with the beatific knowledge she asks for here. ... that is, in beatific and clear contemplation, the night of the dark contemplation of this earth changing into the contemplation of the clear and serene vision of God in heaven” (SC.39:13).
- **“With a flame that is consuming and painless”** (stanza 39). The fifth theme is a total transformation in the immense love of God. The flame “must consummate and transform the soul in God; and the inflammation and transformation engendered by this flame must give no pain to the soul ...” (SC.39:14).
- At the end of stanza 39, John asserts that knowledge and love must go together complementing and fulfilling each other. “Since in the preceding stanzas as well as in this one the bride sought from God immense communications and knowledge for which she needs the strongest and highest love, **a love commensurate with the greatness and height of this knowledge**, she asks that this knowledge be communicated in consummated, perfect, and strong love” (SC.39:15, emphasis added).
- In the final stanza, John mentions five blessings and a brief summary in retrospect of the spiritual journey:
 - “First, her soul is detached and withdrawn from all things.
 - Second, the devil is conquered and put to flight.
 - Third, the passions are subjected and the natural appetites mortified.
 - Fourth and fifth, the sensory and lower part is reformed, purified, and brought into conformity with the spiritual part” (SC.40:1).
 - The soul’s desires are fulfilled and “it has entered so deeply into interior recollection...” (SC.40:2).

Essential points to discuss in conclusion:

- For Seculars, union with God through participation is lived amid life’s daily challenges and informs their attitudes and actions.
- This union is not a one-time event but a lifelong process of growth and transformation.
- The virtue of self-denial is a form of love and union with God. Love is the very essence of detachment and self-denial. “... fired with love’s urgent longings” — “A more intense

enkindling of another, better love (love of the soul's Bridegroom) is necessary for the vanquishing of the appetites and the denial of this pleasure" (A.1.14:2).

- Genuine love is not a romantic, self-gratifying experience. Rather, it involves a process of conversion, of transcending one's ego, of giving one's life for the Beloved. Love is a self-disciplining process. "... to love is to labor to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God" (A.2.5:7).
- In the absence of divine wisdom, love could remain merely a feeling. The knowledge of God and love are essential for the soul's spiritual progress. John refers to it as "loving knowledge."
- The fruits of detachment and self-denial include:
 - increased knowledge of God and of self;
 - growth in humility and in understanding and empathy toward others;
 - freedom from slavery to desires and attachments;
 - the experience of a sense of God's mercy.
- A single-minded, single-hearted choice for love of God develops a habit of seeing everything as secondary to the quest for God's love. "All the world's wisdom and human ability compared to the infinite wisdom of God is pure and utter ignorance" (A.1:4.4).
- Transformation and union with God are not about the individual only. God gives His gifts to individuals for the good of the Church and the World.

Conclusion:

"Always, we are reminded, 'Christ's by essence, ours by participation;'... Lest we should forget that it is only in and through the Church and as 'members of His Body, which is the Church' that all these graces come to us. St. John of the Cross places the mystical experience of the Spiritual Marriage firmly within the context of the Church. It is not, and can never be, simply a private, individual experience. This would be to overlook the mysterious, mystical, but real identity between Christ and His mystical Body, the Church, and every member of it. Mysticism adds to the institutional and sacramental aspects of the Church, an enrichment which makes for fullness and completion, which will be realized when we, the Church, 'share the beauty of the Spouse when we see God face to face'" (*The Spiritual Canticle, Simplified Version*, John Venard, O.C.D., pg. 255).

"I am a daughter of the Church."

St. Teresa of Jesus

"I want to be a daughter of the Church as our Holy Mother St. Teresa was."

"Yes, I have found my place in the Church, and it is You, O my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be love."

St. Thérèse of Lisieux

“The Carmelite Secular is called to live and witness the charism of the Teresian Carmel in the local Church, that portion of the People of God in which the Church of Christ is truly present and acts”
(OCDS Const. #27).

Prayer

*May grace and peace be accomplished and perfect
in you in the knowledge of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ,
as all things of his divine power that pertain to life and
piety are given us through the knowledge of him
who called us with his own glory and power,
by whom he has given us very great and
precious promises, that by these
we may be made partakers of the divine nature*
(2 Pt. 1:2-4; SC.39:6).

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Hornton, John and Varenne, Susan. *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI, His Central Writings and Speeches*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, Prepared by Marc Foley, O.C.D. ICS Publications, 2005.



THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE

Required Reading: St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*: Study Edition. Translated and prepared by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. ICS publications. **(Please note: If participants already own *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, they should not be required to purchase the Study Edition.)**

Additional resources: YouTube sessions, CarmelCast – Season 8, “*The Living Flame of Love* by St. John of the Cross.” Episodes 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56. **Note:** These episodes cover all four stanzas of *The Living Flame of Love*.

Introduction

Required Reading: Prologue and Introduction to *The Living Flame of Love*.

St. John of the Cross, in his commentaries on *The Spiritual Canticle*, explained in detail the highest degree of perfection attainable in this life. John didn’t stop there; he went on to compose another poem, *The Living Flame of Love*. He wrote a commentary on the poem for Doña Ana de Peñalosa, a widow who went to him for spiritual direction while he was in Granada.

One may pose a question as to the difference between the two poems. Are there any differences? John, in his prologue to *The Living Flame*, gives us some understanding:

“Although in the stanzas [of *The Spiritual Canticle*] we have already commented on, we speak of the highest degree of perfection one can reach in this life (transformation in God), these stanzas [*The Living Flame*] treat of a love deeper in quality and more perfect within this very state of transformation. Even though it is true that what these and the other stanzas describe is all one state of transformation, and as such one cannot pass beyond it; yet, with time and practice, **love can grow deeper in quality**, as I say, and become more ardent. We have an example of this in the activity of fire: Although the fire has penetrated the wood, transformed it, and united it with itself, yet as this fire grows hotter and continues to burn, so the wood becomes much more incandescent and inflamed, even to the point of flaring up and shooting out flames from itself” (LF Prologue, para. 3, emphasis added).

“It should be understood that the soul now speaking has reached this enkindled degree, and is so inwardly transformed in the fire of love and elevated by it **that it is not merely united to this fire but produces within it a living flame**. The soul feels this and speaks of it thus in these stanzas with intimate and delicate sweetness of love, burning in love’s flame, and stressing in these stanzas some of the effects of this love” (LF Prologue, para. 4, emphasis added).

The compelling image of flame, working on the wood, dispelling the moisture, turning it black, then giving it the qualities of fire, appeared first in *The Dark Night*, Book 2 ch. 10 and 11, to explain the purification process from senses to spirit and beyond. In *The Spiritual Canticle* it turns up again in the serene night toward the end of the poem, a flame that is painless, comforting and conformed to God. “In the serene night/with a flame that is consuming and painless” (SC. stanza 39). John tells us this burning flame is the love of the Holy Spirit. Now, having grown hotter and sometimes flaring up, it impels John to write more verses about the sublime communion taking place in the deepest center of this soul (see Introduction to LF, first para., *Collected Works*).

In his introduction, Fr. Kavanaugh states it is important to note that the experiences John describes in *The Living Flame* point to the present moment. “There is no progressive movement from stage to stage. The focus is on the present, on what is taking place now.” However, John did not fail to look back on the previous suffering and dark night moments that led him to this marvelous union. “Once obscure and blind/now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely/both warmth and light to their Beloved.” Apparently, John begins *The Living Flame of Love* where he left off in *The Spiritual Canticle*. “This is a new country to which he brings us. Now he speaks more of glorification than of purification.”

“It seems, because it is so forcefully transformed in God, so sublimely possessed by him, and arrayed with such rich gifts and virtues, that it is singularly close to beatitude – so close that only a thin veil separates it” (LF.1:1, note: pg. 641, *Collected Works*).

Consequently, the soul is not merely united to the fire (God) but produces within itself a living flame that overflows and touches the whole world in the service of humanity. “... love is never idle, but in continual motion, it is always emitting flames everywhere like a blazing fire ...” (LF.1:8).

“Thus in this state the soul cannot make acts because the Holy Spirit makes them all and moves it toward them. As a result all the acts of the soul are divine, since both the movement to these acts and their execution stem from God” (LF.1:4). The ecclesial value of the Carmelite charism of prayer is felt in this union. St. John of the Cross burned with the desire to spread *The Living Flame of Love* to the people of God. He sings his heart out in the joy of spreading the good news of the Gospel:

*I will go and tell the world,
spreading the word
of your beauty and sweetness
and of your sovereignty.
Poetry: Romances 9. Incarnation: 7.*

“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”
Mark. 16:15

*“Taking into account the origins of Carmel and the Teresian charism,
[one of] the fundamental elements of the vocation of Teresian
Secular Carmelites [is] ‘to seek mysterious union with God’
by way of contemplation and apostolic activity,
indissolubly joined together, for service to the Church.”*
OCDS Constitutions, 9

Session One: Stanza 1 commentary 1-17

(May take multiple sessions, as needed.)

Essential Points to Discuss:

- The Holy Spirit plays a dominant role in the transformed soul. “This flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, who is the Holy Spirit. The soul feels him within itself not only as a fire that has consumed and transformed it but as a fire that burns and flares within it, ... And that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life. Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love” (LF.1:3).
- “The interior acts he produces shoot up flames, for they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely. Thus these acts of love are most precious; one of them is more meritorious and valuable than all the deeds a person may have performed in the whole of life without this transformation, however great they may have been” (LF.1:3).
- “Thus in this state the soul cannot make acts because the Holy Spirit makes them all and moves it toward them. As a result all the acts of the soul are divine, since both the movement to these acts and their execution stem from God” (LF.1:4).
Note: “In this respect, John speaks of ‘our Lady, the most glorious Virgin’ as the supreme example; see A.3.2.8-10” (LF.1, footnote 1).
- “It seems to such persons that every time this flame shoots up, making them love with delight and divine quality, it is giving them eternal life, since it raises them up to the activity of God in God” (LF.1:4).

Side note: Toward the end of her life, St. Thérèse of Lisieux experienced that it was not her, but God who was working in every act of her charitable deeds: “Yes, I feel it, when I am charitable, it is Jesus alone who is acting in me, and the more united I am to Him, the more also do I love my Sisters” (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, Manuscript C, pg. 344).

- “Since this soul is so close to God that it is transformed into a flame of love in which **the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit** are communicated to it, how can it be thought incredible that it enjoy a foretaste of eternal life?” (LF.1:6, emphasis added).
Note: By using different terminologies, John emphasizes that the transformed person, here and now, truly lives a “divine life,” “God’s life,” “eternal life.” And this flame of love, this divine life, has an apostolic dimension to it.
- “Yet it does not enjoy eternal life perfectly since the conditions of this life do not allow it” (LF.1:6).
- Nevertheless, “... the delight and joy of the soul is so much more intense because God is the doer of all without the soul’s doing anything. ... its sole occupation now is to receive from God, who alone can move the soul and do his work in its depths. Thus all the movements of this soul are divine” (LF.1:9).
- John uses the analogy of a rock to describe the soul’s capacity to reach the “deepest center.” “... the rock always possesses the power, strength, and inclination to go deeper and reach the ultimate and deepest center; and this it would do if the hindrance were

removed. When once it arrives and no longer has any power or inclination toward further movement, we declare that it is in its deepest center. The soul's center is God" (LF.1:11-12).

Note: "In this stanza and generally throughout Flame the term 'substance of the soul' stands for the deepest and most intimate part of one's being" (LF.1, footnote 2, *Collected Works*).

"It is noteworthy, then, that love is the inclination, strength, and power for the soul in making its way to God, for love unites it with God. The more degrees of love it has, the more deeply it enters into God and centers itself in him" (LF.1:13).

- According to John, there are different degrees and levels of the soul's deepest center. "Hence, for the soul to be in its center – which is God, as we have said – it is sufficient for it [the soul] to possess one degree of love, for by one degree alone it is united with him through grace. Should it have two degrees, it becomes united and concentrated in God in another, deeper center. Should it reach three, it centers itself in a third. But once it has attained the final degree, God's love has arrived at wounding the soul in its ultimate and deepest center, which is to illuminate and transform it in its whole being, power, and strength, and according to its capacity, until it appears to be God" (LF.1:13). **Note:** However, John reminds the reader that the soul cannot reach the perfect state of glory in this mortal life.
- Some people, not understanding God's mercy and love, may believe John is grossly exaggerating! But John affirms God's generosity that makes such experience possible: "Yet I reply to all these persons that the Father of lights [Jas. 1:17], who is not closefisted but diffuses himself abundantly **as the sun does its rays**, without being a respecter of persons [Acts 10:34], wherever there is room – always showing himself gladly along the highways and byways – does not hesitate or consider it of little import to find his delights with the children of the earth at a common table in the world [Prov. 8:31]" (LF.1:15, emphasis added).

Side note: St. Thérèse in her *Story of a Soul* confirms John's teaching when she writes: "I understood, too, that Our Lord's love is revealed as perfectly in the most simple soul who resists His grace in nothing as in the most excellent soul... These are the wildflowers whose simplicity attracts Him. When coming down in this way, God manifests His infinite grandeur.

Just as the sun shines simultaneously on the tall cedars and on each little flower as though it were alone on the earth, so Our Lord is occupied particularly with each soul as though there were no others like it. And just as in nature all the seasons are arranged in such a way as to make the humblest daisy bloom on a set day, in the same way, everything works out for the good of each soul" (*Story of a Soul*, Study Edition, page 15, emphasis added).

- John goes on to state: "It should not be held as incredible in a soul now examined, purged, and tried in the fire of tribulations, trials, and many kinds of temptations, and found faithful in love, that the promise of the Son of God be fulfilled, the promise that the Most Blessed Trinity will come and dwell in anyone who loves him [Jn 14:23]" (LF.1:15).

- “The Blessed Trinity inhabits the soul by divinely illuminating its intellect with the wisdom of the Son, delighting its will in the Holy Spirit, and absorbing it powerfully and mightily in the unfathomed embrace of the Father’s sweetness” (LF.1:15).

Session Two: Stanza 1 commentary 18-36

Explanatory note: Participants are asked to read and reflect on the purifying nature of the flame described in LF.1.18-26. "... you no longer afflict or distress or weary me as you did before" (LF.1:18). The flame is the central image of the poem. Before continuing the discussion regarding the gentle flame in the state of union, John believes it is necessary to look back at what the soul has undergone in order to reach this high state. John covers this briefly in his commentary LF.1.18-26. The purifying action of the Holy Spirit is discussed at greater length in *The Dark Night* (see *The Living Flame* Study Edition Interpretive Notes, pg. 54).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- A central teaching of John is that this fire, described as glorifying the soul, is the same fire that previously played a crucial role in purging the soul and causing it great suffering. "The very fire of love that afterward is united with the soul, glorifying it, is what previously assailed it by purging it, just as the fire that penetrates a log of wood is **the same [fire]** that first makes an assault on the wood, wounding it with the flame, drying it out, and stripping it of its unsightly qualities until it is so disposed that it can be penetrated and transformed into the fire" (LF.1:19, emphasis added).
- "In this preparatory purgation the flame is not bright for a person but dark. If it does shed some light, the only reason is so the soul may see its miseries and defects. It is not gentle but afflictive. Even though it sometimes imparts the warmth of love, it does so with torment and pain. And it is not delightful, but dry" (LF.1.19).
- "Neither is the flame refreshing and peaceful, but it is consuming and contentious, making a person faint and suffer with **self-knowledge**" (LF.1:19, emphasis added).
- "Since in this fashion God mediates and heals the soul of its many infirmities, bringing it to health, it must necessarily suffer from this purge and cure according to its sickness. ... All the soul's infirmities are brought to light; they are set before its eyes to be felt and healed" (LF.1:21). Whatever is holding a person from union with God must go.

John reminds the reader again that "It is easy to reach God when all the impediments are removed and the veils that separate the soul from union with him are torn" (LF.1:29).

Session Three: Stanza 2 commentary 1-15

*O sweet cautery, O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
that tastes of eternal life and pays every debt!
in killing you changed death to life.*

Explanatory note: In this stanza, John explains the dominant role of the Holy Trinity and the effect each of the Persons produces: “The cautery is the Holy Spirit, the hand is the Father, and the touch is the Son. The soul here magnifies the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, stressing the three admirable favors and blessings they produce in it, having changed its death to life, transforming it in the Trinity” (LF.2:1).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John observes that the Holy Spirit produces the delightful wound (love); the Son gives the taste of eternal life; and the Father transforms the soul with the touch of His gentle hand (see LF.2.1).
- “Although it names the three according to the properties of their effects, it speaks only to one, saying ‘You changed death to life,’ because all of them work together; and accordingly it attributes everything to one, and everything to all” (LF.2:1).
- John describes this state as “an infinite fire of love.” “Because the soul in this case is entirely transformed by the divine flame, it not only feels a cautery, but has become a cautery of blazing fire” (LF.2:2).
- “... it does not consume and destroy the soul in which it so burns. And it does not afflict it; rather, commensurate with the strength of the love, it divinizes and delights it, burning gently within it” (LF.2:3).
- John observes: “The happy soul that by great fortune reaches this cautery knows all things, tastes all things, does all it wishes, and prospers; no one prevails before it and nothing touches it. This is the soul of which the Apostle speaks: *The spiritual person judges all things and is judged by no one* [1 Cor. 2:15]. And again: *The spirit searches out all things, even the deep things of God* [1Cor. 2:10]” (LF.2:4).
- “There is nothing else to say about the soul’s enjoyment here except that it realizes how appropriately the kingdom of heaven was compared in the Gospel to a grain of mustard seed that, by reason of its intense heat grows into a large tree, despite its being so small [Mt. 13:31-32]. For the soul beholds itself converted into the immense fire of love that emanates from that enkindled point at the heart of the spirit” (LF.2:11).
- “One does not attain to this peak without surpassing and leaving aside the activity of the senses” (LF.2:14). However, John notes that sometimes the effect of the spirit is felt in the senses, although it is not the activity of the senses. “Yet it is sometimes quite different when an effect of the spirit overflows into the senses. When this is true, the effect in the senses proceeds from an abundance of spirit, as in the event of the wounds that proceed from the inner strength and appear outwardly. This happened with St. Paul, whose immense compassion for the sufferings of Christ redounded in the body, as he explains to the Galatians: *I bear the wounds of the Lord Jesus in my body* [Gal. 6:17]” (LF.2:14).

Session Four: Stanza 2 commentary 16-20

Participants are asked to contribute two or three discussion points. These can be something from the reading they have questions about or that spoke to them personally.

Fr. Donald Kinney, O.C.D., suggests questions that are especially appropriate:

- **What did I read that had something for me to learn?**
- **What, if anything, does the Holy Spirit want me to share with the other members?**
- **What can I take from what I read to incorporate into my daily Carmel life?**

Explanatory note: In his commentaries from 2.16-20, John's focus is on the verse "O gentle hand! O delicate touch." Having been touched by the gentle hand of the Father, John uses interjectory words such as "O" and "Oh" to express his feelings and gratitude. At times his expression overflows into prayers of transformation and union:

"For you, O divine life, never kill unless to give life, never wound unless to heal... You have wounded me in order to cure me, O divine hand, and you have put to death in me what made me lifeless, what deprived me of God's life in which I now see myself live... O you, then, delicate touch, the Word, the Son of God, through the delicacy of your divine being, you subtly penetrate the substance of my soul and, lightly touching it all, absorb it entirely in yourself in divine modes of delights and sweetnesses unheard of in the land of Canaan and never before seen in Teman [Bar. 3:22]" (LF.2.16-17).

"This work of the Trinity in the deeper center of the soul does not seek thoughts and ideas but glorification and praise; all dogma must lead to praise" (LF Study Edition, Interpretive Notes, para. 1, pg. 82).

Note: Read LF.2.16-20 slowly and meditatively for a better understanding of John's perception of transformation and union. They are prayers of gratitude and praise.

Session Five: Stanza 2 commentary 21-36

Explanatory note: John goes on to answer the question of why so few people reach this high state of perfect union with God: “It should be known that the reason is not that God wishes only a few of these spirits to be so elevated; he would rather want all to be perfect, but he finds few vessels that will endure so lofty and sublime a work. Since he tries them in little things and finds them so weak that they immediately flee from work, unwilling to be subject to the least discomfort and mortification... As a result he proceeds no further in purifying them and raising them from the dust of the earth through the toil of mortification” (LF.2:27).

The major hindrance that John observes is that they “seek the broad road of their own consolation... They do not want to be guided by the path of trials that leads to it” (LF.2:27).

“The vessel must be a strong one in order to hold a full measure of God’s self-communication. God wants to give more; humans tend to balk at the strengthening process. The strengthening comes not through the trials in themselves but through the growth of the theological virtues” (LF.2, footnote 10, *Collected Works*, emphasis added).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “... the soul knows in this state that everything has ended well... For God repays the interior and exterior trials very well with divine goods for the soul and body, so there is not a trial that does not have a corresponding and considerable reward” (LF.2:31).
- John goes on to describes the complete transformation of the human faculties: “The **intellect**, which before this union understood naturally by the vigor of its natural light by means of the natural senses, is now moved and informed by another higher principle of supernatural divine light... Accordingly, the intellect becomes divine, because through its union with God’s intellect both become one” (LF.2:34, emphasis added).
- “And the **will**, which previously loved in a base and deadly way with only its natural affection, is now changed into the life of divine love... By means of this union God’s will and the soul’s will are now one” (LF.2:34, emphasis added).
- “And the **memory**, which by itself perceived only the figures and phantasms of creatures, is changed through this union so as to have in its mind the eternal years mentioned by David [Ps. 77:5]” (LF.2:34, emphasis added).
- The soul is now “... moved and satisfied by another principle: the delight of God, in which it is more alive. And because it is united with him, it is no longer anything else than the appetite of God” (LF.2:34).
- “Finally all the movements, operations, and inclinations the soul had previously from the principle and strength of its natural life are now in this union dead to what they formerly were, changed into divine movements, and alive to God. For the soul, like a true daughter of God, is moved in all by the Spirit of God, as St. Paul teaches in saying that those who are moved by the Spirit of God are children of God himself [Rom. 8:14]” (LF.2:34).

Note: “... John identifies the ‘children of God’ with those who are transformed in God and united to him, and explains how they are habitually moved by God and not by themselves in their operations” (LF 2. Footnote 16, *Collected Works*).

- “Accordingly, the intellect of this soul is God’s intellect; its will is God’s will; its memory is the eternal memory of God; and its delight is God’s delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into him, it has become God through participation in God, being united to and absorbed in him, as it is in this state” (LF.2:34).
- “The soul can well repeat the words of St. Paul: *I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me* [Gal. 2:20]. The death of this soul is changed to the life of God” (LF.2:34).
- “Speaking of itself, the soul declares in this verse: ‘In killing you changed death to life’” (LF.2:34).

Side note: Teresa has a similar teaching in the seventh dwelling places of the *Interior Castle*. She refers to the metaphor of the butterfly (soul), and describes how after the waves of trials, it has now found repose in Christ. “... His Majesty has brought the soul to it through union. And he also says: ‘For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain’ [Phil. 1:21]. The soul as well, I think, can say these words now because this state is the place where the little butterfly we mentioned dies, and with the greatest joy because its life is now Christ” (IC.VII.2:5).

- “In this state of life so perfect, the soul always walks in festivity, inwardly and outwardly, and it frequently bears on its spiritual tongue a new song of great jubilation in God, a song always new, enfolded in a gladness and love arising from the knowledge the soul has of its happy state” (LF.2:36).

Note: Such a union is possible in this perfect state of spiritual life, yet not as perfectly as in the next life (see LF.2:34).

Session Six: Stanza 3 commentary 1-17

*O lamps of fire!
in whose splendors
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.*

Explanatory note: Throughout his teaching, John reminds the reader that purification of human faculties leads to growth in self-knowledge, which in turn leads to truer knowledge of God. “The soul will be clothed in a new understanding of God in God (through removal of the old understanding) and in a new love of God in God, once the will is stripped of all the old cravings and satisfactions. And God will vest the soul with **new knowledge** when the other old ideas and images are cast aside [Col. 3:9]. ... As a result, one’s activities, once human, now become divine. This is achieved in the state of union when the soul, in which God alone dwells, has no other function than that of an altar on which God is adored in praise and love” (A.1.5:7, emphasis added).

John asserts that this union with the knowledge and love of God is the shortest prayer that is independent of time. “Although, as we asserted, the prayer lasts a long while, it seems of short duration to these souls since they have been united with pure knowledge, which is independent of time. This is the short prayer that, it is said, pierces the heavens [Ecclus. (aka. Sirach) 35:17]. It is short because it is not in time, and it pierces the heavens because the soul is united with heavenly knowledge. When these persons return to themselves they observe the effects this knowledge produced in them without their having been aware of it. These effects are: an elevation of the mind to heavenly knowledge and a withdrawal and abstraction from all objects, forms, and figures and from the remembrance of them” (A.2.14:11).

John further explains in the commentaries of *The Living Flame* that the heavenly knowledge (loving knowledge) contains all the attributes of God Himself. In this union, the soul receives the pure knowledge of God that encompasses the full spectrum of qualities attributed to the divine Wisdom: “omnipotence, wisdom, goodness, mercy, and so on” (LF.3:2).

In the end, John proclaims that God leads the soul to a deeper kind of knowing — knowing from the center of the soul as opposed to the shallow and superficial knowledge of God (such as that which comes from natural reasoning, reading, visions, locutions, etc.). As a result, the soul sees and does everything in light of this loving knowledge of God. “One’s activities, once human, now become divine” (A.1.5:7).

Essential Points to Discuss:

“O lamps of fire!”

- John, by using the symbolic language “O lamps of fire!” begins to explain “... that lamps possess two properties: They transmit light [knowledge] and give off warmth [love]” (LF.3:2).

- He goes on to describe the attributes that are unique to God: “He is almighty, wise, and good; and he is merciful, just, powerful, loving, and so on. ... Since each of these attributes is the very being of God in his one and only suppositum [substance], which is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit... Each of these attributes is a lamp that enlightens the soul and gives off the warmth of love” (LF.3:2).
- “It [the soul] states that by means of this union it receives abundant and **lofty knowledge of God**, which is all loving and communicates light and love to its faculties and feeling” (LF.3:1, emphasis added).
Note: John tells us that the true gifts from God encompass a deeper spiritual richness. God is sharing the very attributes of Himself, that is, wisdom — the clear knowledge of God Himself. Through this knowledge, the soul is inflamed in love (see LF.3:3).
- “In this communication and manifestation of himself to the soul, which in my opinion is the greatest possible in this life, he is to it [the soul] innumerable lamps giving forth knowledge and love of himself” (LF.3:3).
- Citing Exodus 34:6-8, John explains Moses receiving the lofty knowledge of God Himself: “In this passage it is clear that the greatest attributes and powers that Moses knew there in God were those of God’s omnipotence, dominion, deity, mercy, justice, truth, and righteousness; this was the highest knowledge of God. Because love was communicated to him in accord with the knowledge, the delight of love and the fruition he enjoyed there were most sublime” (LF.3:4).
- “All these lamps of the knowledge of God illumine you in a friendly and loving way, ... God communicates himself to your faculties according to his attributes and powers! When individuals love and do good to others, they love and do good to them in the measure of their own nature and properties” (LF.3:6).
Note: John draws our attention to the ecclesial value of a soul’s transformation and union in God. Participation of the soul in God extends even to sharing the very attributes of God with others. As it receives, so it gives. All the attributes of God (love, wisdom, mercy, humility, and so on) that the soul receives are shared and communicated to others.
- “Thus the spirit of God, insofar as it is hidden in the veins of the soul, is like soft refreshing water that satisfies the thirst of the spirit; insofar as it is exercised in the sacrifice of loving God, it is like the living flames of fire. ... **The soul calls them flames here because it not only tastes them like water within itself, but also makes them active, like flames, in the love of God.** Since in the communication of the spirit of these lamps, the soul is inflamed and placed in the activity of love, in the act of love, it calls them lamps rather than waters, saying: ‘O lamps of fire!’” (LF.3:8, emphasis added).
- “All that can be said of this stanza is less than the reality, for the transformation of the soul in God is indescribable. Everything can be expressed in this statement: The soul becomes God from God through participation in him and in his attributes, which it terms the ‘lamps of fire’” (LF.3:8).
- In a moment of joy, John marvels at the beauty of a transformed soul: “All these lamps of the knowledge of God illumine you in a friendly and loving way, O enriched soul; how much light and happiness of love will they beget in you, ... How remarkable, how

advantageous, and how multifaceted will be your delight; in all and from all you receive fruition and love, since God communicates himself to your faculties according to his attributes and powers!” (LF.3:6).

- **“In whose splendors.”** “To understand what these splendors of the lamps are and how the soul is resplendent in them, it should be known that they are the **loving knowledge** that the lamps of God’s attributes give forth from themselves to the soul. United with them in its faculties, the soul is also resplendent like them, transformed in loving splendors” (LF.3:9, emphasis added).
- John goes on to explain that the flickering and flaring up of flames are not produced by the soul alone, but they are the work of both the soul and God. “Thus these movements of both God and the soul are not only splendors, but also glorifications of the soul. These flames and their activity are the happy festivals and games that the Holy Spirit inspires in the soul...” (LF.3.10).
- John assures us that eternal life is guaranteed in this transformation, and it’s happening here and now. “It seems in these that he is always wanting to bestow eternal life and transport it completely to perfect glory by bringing it into himself. All the gifts, first and last, great and small, that God grants to the soul, he always grants in order to lead it to eternal life” (LF.3:10).
- Having felt the perfect glory in eternity, John bursts into prayer: “By your purity, O divine Wisdom, many things are beheld in you through one. For you are the deposit of the Father’s treasures, the splendor of the eternal light, the unspotted mirror and image of his goodness [Wis. 7:26], in whose splendors —

the deep caverns of feeling” (LF.3:17).

Session Seven: Stanza 3 commentary 17-29

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John goes on to explain the line *the deep caverns of feeling*. “These caverns are the soul’s faculties: memory, intellect, and will. They are as deep as the boundless goods of which they are capable since anything less than the infinite fails to fill them” (LF.3:18).
- “In regard to the first cavern — the intellect — its void is a thirst for God ... This thirst is for the waters of God’s wisdom, the object of the intellect” (LF.3:19).
- “The second cavern is the will, and its void is a hunger for God ... This hunger is for the perfection of love after which the soul aims” (LF.3:20).
- “The third cavern is the memory, and its void is a yearning and melting away of the soul for the possession of God ...” (LF.3:21).
- “The capacity of these caverns is deep because the object of this capacity, namely God, is profound and infinite” (LF.3:22).
- “In this matter it is worth noting the difference between the possession of God through grace in itself and the possession of him through union, for one lies in loving and the other lies also in communicating. The difference resembles that between betrothal and marriage” (LF.3:24).

Note: John reminds us that the process is gradual. “This preparation takes time, for some more than for others, since God carries out this work according to the mode of the soul” (LF.3:25).

- John further observes: “In the first place it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more” (LF.3:28).
- In addition, John explains the conduct that is necessary for the soul to progress in prayer: “The soul, then, should advert that God is the principal agent in this matter. He acts as guide of the blind, leading it by the hand to the place it knows not how to reach (to supernatural things of which neither its intellect nor will nor memory can know the nature). It should use all its principal care in watching so as not to place any obstacle in the way of God, its guide on this road ordained for it by him according to the perfection of his law and of the faith, as we said” (LF.3:29).

Side note: John comments in detail on the **three blind guides** that are major impediments to one’s progression in prayer, transformation, and union: a misguided spiritual director, the devil, and the soul itself.

John warns about the first blind guide, misguided spiritual directors (LF.3:29-62). He goes on to expose the second blind guide, the devil (LF.3:63-65). The third blind guide is the soul itself (LF.3:66-67).

Participants are asked to read, reflect, and make these blind guides part of their discussion.

Session Eight continues to focus on transformation, union, and the effects of such perfection in one’s life and the world.

Session Eight: Stanza 3 commentary 30-50

Explanatory note: In stanza 3:32, John gives an excellent summary of one's spiritual progress from senses to spirit: "For a better understanding of this beginner's stage, it should be known that the practice of beginners is to meditate and make acts and discursive reflections with the imagination. Individuals in this state should be given matter for meditation and discursive reflection, and they should by themselves make interior acts and profit in spiritual things from the delight and satisfaction of the senses. For by being fed with the relish of spiritual things, the appetite is torn away from sensual things and weakened in regard to the things of the world [inordinate affections and appetites]."

"But when the appetite has been fed somewhat and has become in a certain fashion accustomed to spiritual things and acquired some fortitude and constancy, God begins to wean the soul, as they say, and place it in the state of contemplation. This occurs in some persons after a very short time, especially with religious; in denying the things of the world more quickly, they accommodate their senses and appetites to God and pass on to the spirit in their activity, God thus working in them. They accommodate their senses and appetites to God and pass on to the spirit in their activity, God thus working in them. This happens when the soul's discursive acts and meditations cease, as well as its initial sensible satisfaction and fervor, and it is unable to practice discursive meditation as before or find any support for the senses. The sensory part is left in dryness because its riches are transferred to the spirit, which does not pertain to the senses.

"Since the soul cannot function naturally except by means of the senses, it is God who in this state is the agent; the soul is the receiver. The soul conducts itself only as the receiver and as one in whom something is being done; God is the giver and the one who works in it, by according spiritual goods in contemplation (**which is knowledge and love together, that is, loving knowledge**), without the soul's natural acts and discursive reflections, for it can no longer engage in these acts as before" (LF.3:32, emphasis added).

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John goes on to explain: "Therefore directors should not impose meditation on persons in this state, nor should they oblige them to make acts or strive for satisfaction and fervor. Such activity would place an obstacle in the path of the principal agent who, as I say, is God, who secretly and quietly inserts in the soul loving wisdom and knowledge, without specified acts; ... individuals also should proceed only with a loving attention to God, without making specific acts. They should conduct themselves passively, as we have said, without efforts of their own but with the simple, loving awareness, as when opening one's eyes with loving attention" (LF.3:33).
- "Since God, then, as the giver communes with individuals through a simple, loving knowledge, they also, as the receivers, commune with God through a simple and loving knowledge or attention, so knowledge is thus joined with knowledge and love with love" (LF.3:34).

Note: According to John, it is this loving knowledge that guides the soul throughout the spiritual journey. In every phase of the journey, God imparts this loving knowledge to the soul: "This loving knowledge is communicated in the beginning through the exercise

of interior purgation, in which the individual suffers, as we said, and afterward in the delight of love” (LF.3:34).

- John goes on to explain that any discursive reflection at this stage “... would impede and disquiet them and make noise in the profound silence of their senses and their spirit, which they possess for the sake of this deep and delicate listening. God speaks to the heart in this solitude, which he mentioned in Hosea [Hos. 2:14], in supreme peace and tranquility while the soul listens...” (LF.3:34).
- John goes even further, and clarifies that the soul will eventually need to forget the practice of loving attention and come to the state of active listening: “When it happens, therefore, that souls are conscious in this manner of being placed in solitude and in the state of listening, they should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness I mentioned so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of them. They should make use of that loving awareness only when they do not feel themselves placed in this solitude or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening. So they may recognize it, it always comes to pass with a certain peace and calm and inward absorption” (LF.3:35).
- “It is impossible for this highest wisdom and language of God, which is contemplation, to be received in anything less than a spirit that is silent and detached from discursive knowledge and gratification. Isaiah speaks of it in these words: *Whom will he teach knowledge and whom will God make understand the hearing?* And Isaiah replies: *Those that are weaned from the milk* (that is from satisfaction) *and drawn away from the breasts* (from particular knowledge and apprehensions) [Is. 28:9]” (LF.3:37).
- “... for the more solitude it obtains and the nearer it approaches this idle tranquility the more abundantly will the spirit of divine wisdom be infused into its soul. This wisdom is loving, tranquil, solitary, peaceful, mild, and an inebriator of the spirit, by which the soul feels tenderly and gently wounded and carried away, without knowing by whom or from where or how. The reason is that this wisdom is communicated without the soul’s own activity” (LF.3:38).
- John dramatizes his thoughts and feelings with an interjection: “Wipe away, O spiritual soul, the dust, hairs, and stains, and cleanse your eye; and the bright sun will illumine you, and you will see clearly ... O Spiritual master, guide it to the land of promise flowing with milk and honey [Ex. 3:8,17]” (LF.3:38).
- John further observes that at this stage “The soul has already reached the negation and silence of the senses and of meditation, and has come to the way of the spirit that is contemplation. In contemplation the activity of the senses and of discursive reflection terminates, and God alone is the agent who then speaks secretly to the solitary and silent soul” (LF.3:44).
- “There is as much difference between what the soul does itself and what it receives from God as there is between a human work and a divine work, between the natural and the supernatural. In one, God works supernaturally in the soul; in the other, only the soul works naturally. What is worse is that by the activity of their natural operations individuals lose inner solitude and recollection and, consequently, the sublime image God was painting within them” (LF.3:45).

- John explains that a person will not advance if he retains even one particular knowledge about something that he cherishes. For example: visions, ideas and images, heavenly pleasures, affections, and so on. "... it should avoid busying itself with particular knowledge, for it cannot reach God through this knowledge, which would rather hinder it in its advance toward him" (LF.3:48).
- John's focus is on contemplative prayer. "But in the contemplation we are discussing (by which God infuses himself into the soul), particular knowledge as well as acts made by the soul are unnecessary. The reason for this is that God in one act is communicating light and love together, which is **loving supernatural knowledge**... Love is therefore present in the will in the manner that knowledge is present in the intellect" (LF.3:49, emphasis added).
- This knowledge, John observes, is dark to the intellect because it is contemplative knowledge, which is a ray of darkness for the intellect. "Since God is unintelligible in this life, knowledge of him is dark, as I say, and the love present in the will is fashioned after this knowledge" (LF.3:49).

Session Nine: Stanza 3 commentary 67-85

Essential Points to Discuss:

- John's teaching on "loving knowledge" in relation to the three spiritual faculties continues to play an important role in transformation and union. "... through these faculties a person tastes the wisdom and love and communication of God. The soul here calls these three faculties (memory, intellect, and will) 'the deep caverns of feeling' because through them and in them it deeply experiences and enjoys the grandeurs of God's wisdom and excellence" (LF.3:69).
- "In this transformation the eye of the soul's feeling is so illumined and agreeable to God that we can say God's light and that of the soul are one. The natural light of the soul is united with the supernatural light of God so that only the supernatural light is shining; just as the light God created was united to the light of the sun and now only the sun shines even though the other light is not lacking [Gen. 1:14-18]" (LF.3:71).
- "Having been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation. Although it is not God as perfectly as it will be in the next life, it is like the shadow of God. Being the shadow of God through this substantial transformation, it performs in this measure in God through God what he through himself does in it. For the will of the two is one will, and thus God's operation and the soul's are one" (LF.3:78).
Note: All along, John's teaching is that the soul's identity is not lost in this transformation but perfected.
- The soul in this transformation is aware of its status as the adopted child of God. "It is conscious there that God is indeed its own and that it possesses him by inheritance, with the right of ownership, as his adopted child through the grace of his gift of himself" (LF.3:78).
- "A reciprocal love is thus actually formed between God and the soul..." (LF.3:79).
- John goes on to describe the three exquisite qualities of love:
 - "The **first** is that the soul here loves God, not through itself but through him."
 - "The **second** exquisite quality is to love God in God, for in this union the soul is ardently absorbed in love of God, and God in great ardor surrenders himself to the soul."
 - "The **third** exquisite quality of love is to love him on account of who he is. The soul does not love him only because he is generous, good, glorious, and so on, to it; but with greater intensity it loves him because he is all this in himself essentially" (LF.3:82, emphasis added).

Session Ten: Stanza 4 commentary 1-17

*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.*

Explanatory note: In his final stanza 4, John describes in greater detail the state and effect of the divine transformation of the soul in God. The first effect is an awakening of God in the soul. “... this awakening is the communication of God’s excellence to the substance of the soul” (LF.4:10). The divine life and harmony of every creature are revealed to the soul in an entirely new way. John describes this awakening as a movement from natural, human ways of knowing and relating to God to supernatural vision of contemplation. The flame of love catches fire and awakens the soul to a new life – allowing the loving wisdom of God to enter the world.

Ultimately, it teaches humanity to seek the common good in all things. As explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the common good concerns the life of all. It is always oriented towards the progress of people of all walks of life. The common good requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. This order is founded on truth, built in justice, and animated by love (see CCC 1905-1912).

The divine life of contemplation in the writings of St. John of the Cross is an invitation to recognize and rejoice in the interconnectedness of every living thing in our world. This awareness can inspire a more conscious and compassionate way of living. Carmel has never separated the apostolic from the contemplative life. John sings his heart out in the joy of spreading the living flame of love to the whole nation:

*I will go and tell the world,
spreading the word
of your beauty and sweetness
and of your sovereignty.
Poetry, Romances 9,7.*

Essential Points to Discuss:

- “The first effect is an awakening of God in the soul, brought about in gentleness and love. The second is the breathing of God within it, and this is brought about through the good and glory communicated to it in this breathing” (LF.4:2).
- “For this awakening is a movement of the Word in the substance of the soul, containing such grandeur, dominion, glory, and intimate sweetness that it seems to the soul that all the balsams and fragrant spices and flowers of the world are commingled, stirred, and shaken so as to yield their sweet odor, and all the kingdoms and dominions of the world and all the powers and virtues of heaven are moved; not only this, but it also seems that all the virtues and substances and perfections and graces of every created thing glow and make the same movement all at once” (LF.4:4).

- “Since, as St. John says, all things in him are life [Jn. 1:3-4], and in him they live and are and move, as the Apostle declares [Acts 17:28], it follows that when, within the soul, this great Emperor moves all things seem to move in unison” (LF.4:4).
- “Even this comparison is most inadequate; for in this awakening they not only seem to move, but they all likewise disclose the beauties of their being, power, loveliness, and graces, and the root of their duration and life. For the soul is conscious of how all creatures, earthly and heavenly, have their life, duration, and strength in him ... Although it is indeed aware that these things are distinct from God, insofar as they have created being, nonetheless what it understands of God, by his being all these things with infinite eminence, is such that **it knows these things better in God’s being than in themselves**” (LF.4:5, emphasis added).
- In this remarkable awakening: “The soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures” (LF.4:5).
- The divine life and harmony of every creature with this awakening in God are revealed to the soul in an entirely new way. There is a movement and awakening of the soul from the natural vision to supernatural vision of contemplation. “... in this movement it is the soul that is moved and awakened from the sleep of natural vision to supernatural vision. Hence it adequately uses the term ‘awakening’” (LF.4:6).
- “... God in His infinite goodness has ordained man for a supernatural end, to participation, namely, in the divine goods which altogether surpass the understanding of the human mind, since ‘eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love Him’ [1 Cor. 2:9]” (Chapter 2 of The Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (Dei Filius); the First Vatican Council, 1870 by Pope Pius IX).
- “Yet, since everything in human beings comes from God, and they of themselves can do nothing good [Jas. 1:17], it is rightly asserted that our awakening is an awakening of God and our rising is God’s rising” (LF.4:9). Only God could open our eyes and bestow on us this awakening and communicating knowledge and love (see LF.4:15). Hence, we pray with Our Holy Father John:

*Awaken and enlighten us, my Lord,
so we might know and love the blessings that you ever propose to us,
and we might understand that you have moved to bestow favors
on us and have remembered us.
(LF.4:9)*

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Appendix

Summary explanation

- St. John of the Cross, Doctor of the Church, is often referred to as the “Mystical Doctor” due to his profound writings on mystical theology. He is renowned for his deep understanding and explanation of the spiritual journey towards union with God.
- The growth in prayer and the living witness to the Discalced Carmelite charism is a journey or path in the right direction. However, John does not lay out methods of prayer or offer a devotional treatise on prayer. Rather, his teachings involve how to behave as one embarks on a lifelong journey of love and transformation.
- The process of purification and our behavioral changes in each stage of our spiritual journey constitute a form of prayer from meditation to contemplation and on to union. The entire spiritual journey is purifying, comprising God’s communication and the human person’s effort to respond through prayer.
- Following the tradition of Discalced Carmelite spirituality, walking in silence and solitude, without imposing techniques and methods, is uniquely characteristic of John’s teaching. What John means by solitude is *singleness of heart*.
- One of John’s central teachings is about the nature of one’s union with God. He describes both the substantial union (natural union) and the union of likeness (active participation). This “union of likeness” does not exist except where there is a likeness of love by active participation. The whole process of transformation requires our willing participation in the hidden action of the Holy Spirit.
- According to John, progression in prayer is the increase in knowledge and love from lower to higher and from external to more interior. This increase in knowledge does not come from reading many books or meditating on abstract ideas; rather by imitation of Jesus Christ who is the knowledge and wisdom of God.
- Grace increases one’s capacity to see the beauty that was always present. This increase of sight we call faith (or contemplation), which is the conscious awareness of the soul’s pre-reflective and pre-conscious knowledge of God. For John, there is an interface and interaction between knowing and loving. They are inseparable.
- The kind of knowledge that is born of faith (contemplation) knows the difference between the shallow empirical knowing and contemplative knowing – a deeper kind of truth. As a result, one’s life is always directed by the wisdom of God, and it is a matter of seeing ordinary, everyday life as a place of God’s presence and action.
- [Infused] Contemplation is the highest knowledge of God.
- John’s teaching is about this great journey from slavery to liberty to divine union here and now in this earthly life. Union with God implies a new life, one that involves living the life of God while remaining different from God in its nature. The human person is transformed in God, and not vice versa.
- John’s theological anthropology relating to the intellect, memory, and will is a key concept in understanding the transformation and union with God. According to John, the faculties of the soul have an infinite capacity for “knowing” and receiving the loving knowledge of God.

- When John speaks in terms of purifying human faculties, he is really concerned with the total person being purified, transformed, and united with Wisdom.
- As John points out, the purpose of the continuous purgation from active to passive night is to prepare the soul for the union with Wisdom. For if a soul is not tempted, tried, and proved through temptations and trials, its senses will not be strengthened in preparation for Wisdom.
- An important aspect of the purification process is that God acts in a well-ordered manner, always gentle, respecting our normal human growth. A human person undergoes transformation through a gradual process, taking small, consistent steps often requiring strength and support through setbacks along the way. As John observes: “In order that God lift the soul from the extreme of its low state to the other extreme of the high state of divine union, he must obviously ... do so with order, gently, and according to the mode of the soul” (*Ascent* 2.17:3).
- John goes on to make an important statement about the concept of “knowing” in the process of transformation: “Since the order followed in the process of knowing involves the forms and images of created things, and since knowledge is acquired through the senses, God, to achieve his work gently and to lift the soul to supreme knowledge, must begin by touching the low state and extreme of the senses. And from there he must gradually bring the soul after its own manner to the other end, spiritual wisdom ...” (*Ascent* 2.17:3).
- Accordingly, meditation is an important part of the process of transformation.
- John explains that it is loving wisdom that accomplishes this transformation by imparting knowledge and love to human faculties. The wisdom of God illumines the human intellect with supernatural light, informs the will with love of God, and the memory is changed into eternal apprehension (a deep spiritual understanding) of glory.
- John tells us how those who are transformed in God actually become God through participation. Thus, seeking God is a process of re-discovering our spiritual heritage and a realization that we are made in the image of God.
- The whole person is now living their daily life with a redemptive sense of passion and freedom.
- “Consequently this person, now of pure heart, finds in all things a joyful, pleasant, chaste, pure, spiritual, glad, and loving knowledge of God” (*Ascent* 3.26:6).
- This loving knowledge is perceptible to souls who are free from particular ideas and concepts impressed on the senses. As we noted, progression in prayer consists of an increasing knowledge and love of God.
- A transformed person discovers that everything in the world exists in God, and all is **now known through God** and not through creatures.
- This person also sees and marvels at the harmonious unity in creation. They are aware (conscious) of themselves and their place in this immense universe.
- In the final stages, John of the Cross sees the person being taken into the very life of the Holy Trinity through the activity of the Holy Spirit. “The Blessed Trinity inhabits the soul by divinely illumining its intellect with the wisdom of the Son, delighting its will in the Holy Spirit, and absorbing it powerfully and mightily in the unfathomed embrace of the

Father's sweetness" (LF.1:15). Here the human person is transformed into the very Wisdom of God.

As can be seen, the process of transformation develops gradually, over a lifetime, within the context of one's daily life and circumstances. Our Holy Father John points out, radical change in our attitudes and behavior is crucial to the process of transformation and union.

John of the Cross has a message to those who claim his description of transformative union is exaggerated or that such a union in this life is impossible. His response is that God "... diffuses himself abundantly as the sun does its rays, without being a respecter of persons, wherever there is room — always showing himself gladly along the highways and byways — does not hesitate or consider it of little import to find his delights with the children of the earth at a common table in the world" (LF.1:15). Accordingly, no one is excluded. One's willing participation is the key to this process of transformation and union.

John sings passionately about how the transformed person becomes a living flame of love, giving life to the whole world. It seems the entire universe is a sea of love in which one is engulfed and feels the love within oneself. It is vast and beyond comprehension.

*You are the light of the world.
Let your light shine before all,
that they may see your good deeds
and give glory to God.
Mt. 5:14*

Task Force Completion and Appreciation

“In Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The project that was entrusted to us has come to completion.

We are thankful for the overwhelming support and positive feedback from our OCDS communities in all three provinces.

We thank all former members of the Task Force for their hard work and dedication and for their prayers.

We thank the superiors of the Order for their unwavering support and guidance to successfully meet the objectives of the formation program.

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We extend our deepest appreciation to all communities for their participation and support.

May the joy of Carmel fill your hearts with love and gladness.

Faternally in Carmel,

The members of the US Formation Task Force
California-Arizona Province of St. Joseph
Oklahoma - Semi-Province of St. Thérèse
Washington Province of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

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