

DARK NIGHT
of the SOUL

DEDICATION

*To those who bear their crosses
in the moon's dimmest light;
that their hearts may come to see*

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Edm. Canon Surmont,
Vicar General,
Westminster, 26th March 1916

DARK NIGHT *of the* SOUL

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

Translated by David Lewis

Edited and with an Introduction by Benedict Zimmerman, O.C.D.

With a new Preface by J. Conor Gallagher



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PREFACE

WHY should you read *Dark Night of the Soul*? Because it is about *your* spiritual journey. No matter what stage of spirituality you are experiencing, St. John of the Cross understands where you are and where you are going, and, through these pages, reaches out his hand to help you along. Are you a father of two, a mother of five, or a lonely widow? Are you a teacher or a student or a person in the business world? Are you a novice to spiritual studies or one who has sought the inner pilgrim's path for a long time? Are you a healthy skeptic or an open believer? It matters not. This Catholic classic applies to each and every moment of your unique and individual life.

With the revelation of Mother Teresa's 49-year-long dark night, there has been a revitalized interest in this great spiritual classic. What is a dark night? Is it a crisis of faith? Is it evidence that the Faith is a fraud, as is the claim of the renowned atheist writer, Christopher Hitchens? Why give yourself to God if misery is all that is returned? But critics such as Hitchens, and even little parts of you and me, forget that nothing great comes without sacrifice.

We all suffer. Yet few of us suffer in the way of Job, St. John of the Cross, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Most of us do not experience a mystical dark night, but we experience the everyday, run-of-the-mill dark moment. This dark moment could be the feeling of loneliness, depression, or being unappreciated; it could be suffering from financial difficulty, discomfort at work, or simply not knowing how to parent a

rebellious child; it could be that awful experience of terminal illness, of a broken marriage, or even the death of a child.

About a year ago, my wife and I learned about a good Christian family whose two-year-old son, Jude, had fallen into a swimming pool and drowned. Jude was placed on life-support for nearly two weeks until the doctors assured the parents that Jude had become brain-dead due to lack of oxygen. His parents then allowed him to go home to his eternal reward. I do not know if Jude's parents are saintly people experiencing the *mystical* dark night of St. John of the Cross, but I do know that they experienced many *natural* dark nights during that time, and I imagine they will continue to have many, many more.

I believe that St. John of the Cross would agree that there is similarity between his dark night and a natural dark night, such as losing a child. As Catholics, we believe that grace builds upon nature, that the Creator of this natural world permeates each and every moment, presenting us with a million moments that can become sacramental. While people experience God in different ways, the similarity is that God Himself is being experienced. The question is not whether you experience Him in a mystical or more common way; the real question is how you respond to His presence, or His perceived absence, in your daily life. Do you allow the dark moments to smother your faith, or do you turn to God in prayer, begging for patience, for strength, and for a renewed faith? Is your faith so shallow as to love God only when you get something in return, or do you love Him despite the darkness that comes and goes? These are the questions the saints had to face during their dark nights, and these are the questions that you must ask yourself in your dark moments.

This Catholic classic has given comfort and hope to countless people for over 430 years. It will take you on a journey through the spiritual life of a person striving for holiness. The work is separated into two parts: Book One, *Of the Night of Sense*, and Book Two, *Of the Night of the Spirit*. Most of us will find the descriptions in Book One most applicable, for most of us are still struggling with overcoming spiritual dependence on our senses. But do not think that Book Two is only for the holiest of holy people; on

the contrary, it provides us with a preview of what is to come as we grow closer to our Lord.

The overriding theme of *Dark Night of the Soul* is that the suffering you endure, no matter what stage of life you are in, is an opportunity to purify yourself. Whether the purgation comes from the natural course of things, or whether it comes from a more supernatural experience, God is calling you forward to walk with discomfort, with pain, and with suffering, so that you learn to depend entirely on Him. No longer depend on yourself! No longer depend on the pleasant feelings received from Him! Love Him not for what you experience Him to be, but for Who He Is!

Like a mother who takes small steps away from her child learning to walk, God also steps away, all the while calling you towards Him. He has not turned his back on you. Rather, He wants you to love Him and walk towards Him without constant dependence on your own standards of pleasure, peace, and happiness. Only then, when you are empty, can He fill you with His very own pleasure, peace, and happiness. And then you will wonder why you ever questioned Him, why you ever desired anything other than Him, and why you ever hesitated to endure the purgation required to become one with Him.

J. Conor Gallagher
Director of Publishing
Pentecost Sunday, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

THE *Dark Night*, though only a short treatise in comparison with the remaining works of St. John of the Cross, is perhaps from a practical point of view the most important of the whole series. Instructions for beginners may be found in abundance; even the *Night of the sense*, as St. John informs us,¹ has had numerous exponents; but in the *Night of the spirit* he breaks fresh ground. If it is one of God's ordinances that all spiritual life must be regulated by a director so that pitfalls may be avoided, a soul plunged into the *Night of the spirit* depends more than any other upon the intelligent guidance of an experienced director, partly on account of its natural reluctance to proceed along a path beset with so many difficulties, partly because the very fact of its being in darkness prevents it from seeing clearly with its own eyes. In the *Ascent* and the *Dark Night* St. John has traced the way with admirable lucidity and simplicity, but these books, especially the latter, are chiefly addressed to the director. It is impossible to read them without gaining the conviction that his is the absolutely safe way; there may be others, less straight, less rugged, but neither so safe nor so direct.

St. John, taking his position on the firm basis of the psychology and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, and guiding himself by the light of Holy Scripture, pitilessly dissects the soul and its operations, separating not only what is dangerous or unsound, but everything that is

1. *Dark Night*, Bk. I. Ch. VIII. §2.

not directly conducive to his ultimate aim, the union of the human will with the holy will of God. A work of this magnitude must be begun by God, and accomplished by Him. The beginning consists in the grace of vocation, the end in the beatific vision. Between these two there lies a vast distance which it takes a lifetime to cover, where the generous and intelligent co-operation of the soul is indispensable. This is partly active, and consists in the systematic denial of everything that could give satisfaction to body or soul, as explained in the *Ascent*; and partly passive (as shown in the *Dark Night*), where the soul assists God's operation by submitting to His chastising hand, like a patient under the knife of the surgeon.

The number of souls called to the contemplative life in its widest sense is even nowadays greater than is commonly supposed. They are not confined to Religious Orders, but are to be found in every station of life, and in every country, for "the spirit breatheth where it will." Many proceed no farther than the initial stages; few persevere as far as the spiritual night; while those who attain to perfection are but exceptions. "Many praise and bless Jesus as long as they receive some consolation from Him, but if He hide Himself and leave them for a little while, they fall either into complaining or into excessive dejection."² This general falling off may be partly attributed to a want of understanding and guidance which St. John in the book before us undertakes to remedy.

It may be useful for some readers of St. John's works to find here a short sketch of the experiences a soul generally makes on its journey through the realms of Mysticism. Let us suppose that it has been unexpectedly struck by a ray of divine grace. It may never really have been estranged from God since the day of baptism, or it may have strayed; no essential difference would result there from, because motion is determined not so much by the direction whence it proceeds but whither it tends. Such a soul, then, finds a delight, hitherto unknown, in spiri-

2. *Imitation*. II. xi.

tual matters; a new chord has been touched and set vibrating, the whole world seems transfigured, God's work becomes visible and palpable in every blade of grass, His interests absorb all earthly pursuits; the human heart has found and holds fast a treasure of incomparable value; heaven has descended upon earth. "This is he that heareth the word and immediately receiveth it with joy." Such an experience is indeed a great grace, but it does not last. True spirituality consists not in sentiments but in the exercise of virtue. The first impulse is not strong enough to carry the soul very far in its flight heavenwards. The question arises how best to utilize this initial motive power? St. John gives the answer in the *Ascent*. Almost ruthlessly he tears off the brilliant surface so as to save the substance. The first ray has indeed transfigured the heart but has not transformed it. There remain many dangerous germs, the weaknesses and shortcomings of human nature. The very warmth of paradise, the dew descending abundantly upon a tender heart, might develop these so that "the last state of that man is made worse than the first." They must, therefore, be destroyed by a long process of self-denial. St. John teaches the beginner how to mortify his senses and faculties, sacrificing even much that in itself is good, in order to strengthen the soul by the simple exercise of Faith, Hope, and Charity, and the four cardinal virtues. This is the active purification.

But this represents only the smaller portion of the work to be done. However, it prepares the way for Him who "searcheth the reins and hearts." The passive purification follows closely upon, and sometimes accompanies the former. The passive purification of the sense is not merely a reaction from the exultation of the first awakening to spiritual life, it cuts far deeper. Were it only a reaction it would end in lukewarmness, but he who is being tried by God, so far from growing indifferent, becomes the more diligent in seeking God, the more God appears to hide Himself, for he feels His absence keenly. "It is a great thing," says the author of the *Imitation*, forestalling St. John of the Cross, "a very great thing to be able to do without all solace, both human and divine, and to be willing to bear this exile of the heart for the honor of God, and

in nothing seek self, and not to have regard to one's own merit. What great thing is it to be cheerful and devout when grace comes to thee? This is an hour desirable to all."³

This purgation of the sense comes in different ways, such as reverses of fortune, loss of friendship, loss of one's reputation, ill success in one's undertakings, illness, and the whole train of temporal misfortunes. It is always accompanied by the loss of sensible devotion. To keep still under the chastising hand of God elevates the soul to the plane where the holy man Job stood. If we have received good things at the hand of God, why should we not receive evil? The active purgation through which the soul has passed under the guidance of St. John of the Cross is the best preparation for this passive purgation of sense, for there it has learnt to utterly despise all comfort.

Far more terrible, as our author tells us, is the passive purgation of the spirit which reaches "unto the division of the soul and the spirit, of the joints also and the marrow." Of course there are different degrees, all souls are not tried to the same extent, and St. John takes rather an extreme case. In the most acute form, then, positive Satanic interference adds to the distress of a soul already weighed down by a feeling of the loss of God. Sometimes it takes the shape of a spirit of blasphemy, or of uncleanness or despair. The lives of the Saints furnish some remarkable instances of such trials. St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi was subject to them for five years. St. Francis de Sales was; for a long time, haunted by the thought that he should be finally lost. The effect it had upon him was to render him extremely conscientious so that he should offend God not even in small matters, and that his loss should not come through his own fault. "Although He should kill me I will trust Him; but yet I will reprove my ways in His sight."

It stands to reason that a soul under such trials is absolutely dependent upon the guidance of a learned and experienced director. Otherwise the result might be fatal. In fact there is reason to think that some of the appalling falls from spiritual height to utter perversion should be attributed to

3. *Imitation*. II. ix.

the absence of proper direction during this most dangerous period.

The purpose of these trials is, however, not to throw the soul into despair but to wean it from all comfort so as to leave it with no other support than God Himself, as St. John says in one of his poems:

My soul is detached
From every thing created,
And raised above itself
Into a life delicious,
Of God alone supported.
And therefore I will say,
That what I most esteem
Is that my soul is now
Without support, and with support.⁴

Or, as it is expressed in some verses attributed to him:

On Mount Carmel God alone and I.
God alone in my spirit to enlighten it,
God alone in my acts to sanctify them,
God alone in my heart to possess it.

This is one of the objects of the passive purgation. Sooner or later every soul must pass through it. All that is of earth earthly will have to be left on one side before that which is of heaven heavenly shall appear. The process is under all circumstances a painful one, but it is unavoidable. St. John assists the soul in stripping itself, and allowing itself to be stripped here below. He calls this a purgatory, but a very different one from what awaits the soul after death, inasmuch as there the soul is cleansed by fire, and here by love. Moreover, the perfect purgation of the soul in the present life leaves it free to act with infinitely greater power, and therefore to gain innumerable merits, whereas after death the account is closed before even the soul enters purgatory. No power

4. *Living Flame* (ed. 1912), 270.

on earth could resist a thoroughly detached soul—it might almost be said to participate in God’s omnipotence. Here lies the secret of the marvelous deeds of so many Saints.

There is one other reason why the soul should pass through the trials of the Dark Night. Its ultimate destiny is union with God. Now the soul is finite, and God is infinite. The disproportion between the two is so enormous (being, in fact, infinite in itself) that the mere comparison must have a crushing effect upon the finite being. Every soul will have to pass through this experience, the minority already in this life in the dark Night of contemplation, the vast majority on leaving this life, when they will suddenly find themselves encompassed by the infinite Majesty and Power of the Godhead. When the finite comes into contact with the infinite it realizes its utter nothingness; it is humbled to the ground. The contrast causes it the most intense pain. This thorough humiliation makes it possible for the infinitesimal to be united to the infinite, for, as Christ says, “he who humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

An important point clearly established by St. John is the length of the trial. This depends, no doubt, on many circumstances—on the thoroughness of the purgation, on the amount of co-operation on the part of the soul, probably also on the kind of imperfections to be removed; the more subtle these are the more difficult are they to eradicate. But on the whole it is not probable that a soul would remain plunged in deep darkness for many weeks together, without being comforted and strengthened by at least some passing rays of light, some consolation to give it courage. Perhaps a very strong soul would require but few interruptions of this kind, but, excepting some highly favored souls, an alternation of glimpses of light and deep shadows seems to be the more usual experience. On this condition the Dark Night may continue for several years, and may even be repeated in different degrees of intensity. It is necessary to bear this in mind, for the study of mystical works sometimes leaves the impression that the various experiences follow each other in regular and rapid succession, and that there can be no turning back unless it be a falling away.

As the soul enters the Dark Night gradually so it emerges from it by degrees. Both in the *Ascent* and in the work before us St. John proceeds so far as the dawn of a new and glorious day. Of the full noonday he treats in the *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love*. There the will is firmly united with the Will of God, the only kind of permanent union between man and God possible in this life. It is the height of perfection and so far above ordinary human experience that mystical writers, St. John included, have found it necessary to use expressions of oriental exuberance, the ordinary language being quite inadequate to describe the happy condition of a soul arrived at this state. It stands in marked contrast with the almost grim sobriety of the expositions in the *Ascent* and the *Dark Night*. Those who wish to form an opinion of the character of St. John should study both categories of his writings, otherwise he would appear to some as a stern, morose taskmaster, with never a smile on his lips, and to others as a dreamer of phantastic dreams, whereas he was a Saint with a wide heart and intense love, a most passionate love of his God, and, for God's sake, of his neighbor; and, with all that, a man of practical work and common sense.

It is hardly necessary to say much on the charge of Quietism brought sometimes against St. John of the Cross. The matter was fully investigated at the time of his beatification and canonization. Had there been the slightest foundation for it the process would have been allowed to drop; but as the charge has been repeated by some writers, a word in reply may not be superfluous. According to St. John, the soul while plunged into the Dark Night can do nothing, but must leave God free to act. It is passive, but not inert; by submitting to the Divine operation it co-operates in the measure of its power. But in all other states, notably in the active purgation of the *Ascent*, the soul concentrates the utmost energy of all its powers on the one great work. We have seen there how St. John expects it to leave no recess of the heart or mind unexplored and undisturbed. Considering that it costs us infinitely more to free ourselves from those things for which we have, sometimes unconsciously, an attraction, than from what is alien to our nature, it

will be seen that so far from tending to Quietism St. John's teaching exacts an amount of co-operation on the part of man that will probably surprise most readers. If, as it seems reasonable to think, the active purgation goes hand in hand with the passive purgation, and should continue not only while the latter lasts, but to the end of life, there can be no question of a passive repose of the soul on the plea that God is working in the interior. Moreover, the state of perfection admits of no relaxation from work; besides the good works which will follow necessarily from the union of the human with the Divine Will, the highest contemplation is in itself an unfolding of all the powers of the soul, just as the Beatific vision is not a passive enjoyment but an operation of a soul lifted far above itself by the light of glory in the intellect and a new capacity for love in the will.

*Fr. Benedict Zimmerman, O.C.D.
St. Luke's Priory, Wincanton, Somerset.
May 1, 1907*

THE DARK NIGHT
OF THE SOUL

With an explanation of the stanzas comprising the way of the perfect union of love with God, such as is possible in this life; and the admirable endowments of the soul which has attained to it

Argument

THE stanzas to be explained are set forth at the beginning of this book, then an explanation of each severally, the stanza being placed before it. After that an explanation of each line, which is also set before the explanation. The first two stanzas explain the two spiritual purgations of the sensual and spiritual part of man, and the other six the various and admirable effects of the spiritual enlightenment and union of love with God.

Stanzas

I.

In a dark night,
With anxious love inflamed,
O, happy lot!
Forth unobserved I went,
My house being now at rest.

II.

In darkness and in safety,
By the secret ladder, disguised,
O, happy lot!
In darkness and concealment,
My house being now at rest,

III.

In that happy night,
In secret, seen of none,
Seeing nought myself,
Without other light or guide
Save that which in my heart was burning.

IV.

That light guided me
More surely than the noonday sun
To the place where He was waiting for me,
Whom I knew well, And where none appeared.

V.

O, guiding night;
O, night more lovely than the dawn;
O, night that hast united
The lover with His beloved,
And changed her into her love.

VI.

On my flowery bosom,
Kept whole for Him alone,
There He reposed and slept;
And I cherished Him, and the waving
Of the cedars fanned Him.

VII.

As His hair floated in the breeze⁵
That from the turret blew,
He struck me on the neck
With His gentle hand,
And all sensation left me.

VIII.

I continued in oblivion lost,
My head was resting on my love;
Lost to all things and myself,
And, amid the lilies forgotten,
Threw all my cares away.

Explanation of the Stanzas

BEFORE we enter on an explanation of these, it is right we should understand that they are the words of the soul already in the state of perfection, which is the union of love with God, when it has gone through the straits, tribulations and severities, by means of the spiritual training, of the strait way of everlasting life, by which ordinarily the

5. St. John of the Cross wrote: "As I scattered His hair in the breeze." Cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía.

soul attains to this high and divine union with God. Of it our Savior says in the Gospel,⁶ “How narrow is the gate and strait is the way that leadeth to life, and few there are that find it.” This road being so strait, and they who find it being so few, the soul regards it as a great and joyful blessing that it has journeyed on it to the perfection of love, as it sings in the first stanza, very rightly calling the strait road a dark night, as may be seen further on in the words of the stanza. The soul, therefore, rejoicing in that it has traveled on this strait road whereby so great a blessing has come to it, sings as follows.

*In a dark night,
With anxious love inflamed,
O, happy lot!
Forth unobserved I went,
My house being now at rest.*

IN THE first stanza the soul sings of the way and manner of its going forth, as to its affections, from self and all created things, dying thereto by real mortification, that it may live the life of love, sweet and delicious in God. It went forth, from itself and from all things, in a dark night, by which is meant here purgative contemplation—as I shall hereinafter explain⁷—which causes in the soul passive denial of self⁸ and of all besides. This departure, it says, it was able to accomplish in the strength and fervor which the love of the Bridegroom supplied, in the obscure contemplation for that end. The soul magnifies its own happiness in having journeyed Godwards in that night so successfully as to escape all hindrance on the part of its three enemies—the world, the devil, and the flesh—which are always found infesting this road; for the night of purgative contemplation had lulled to sleep and mortified, in the house of sensuality, all passions and desires, in their rebellious movements.

6. St. Matt. 7:14.

7. Ch. VIII.

8. La cual pasivamente causa en el alma la negación de sí misma, etc.

BOOK ONE

Of the Night of Sense



CHAPTER ONE

Begins with the First Stanza and Treats of the Imperfections of Beginners

-
- 1. Three states: beginners, proficient and perfect. 2. Beginners encouraged
by sweetness. 3. Continuation. 4. Selfish spirituality of beginners.
Work proportioned to habit. 5. Imperfections.*

In a Dark Night

SOULS begin to enter the dark night when God is drawing them out of the state of beginners, which is that of those who meditate on the spiritual road, and is leading them into that of proficient, the state of contemplatives, that, having passed through it, they may arrive at the state of the perfect, which is that of the divine union with God. That we may the better understand and explain the nature of this night through which the soul has to pass, and why God leads men into it, it may be well to touch first upon certain peculiarities of beginners, which, though treated in the briefest possible way, it is well for them to know,¹ that they may perceive the weakness of the state they are in, take courage, and desire to be led of God into this night, where the soul is established in virtue and made strong for the inestimable

1. Lo cual, aunque será con, la brevedad que pudiere, no dejará de servir también á los mismos principiantes.

delights of His love. Though I shall dwell at some length upon this point, I shall do so no longer than suffices for the immediate discussion of this dark night.

2. We are to keep in mind that a soul, when seriously converted to the service of God, is, in general, spiritually nursed and caressed, as an infant by its loving mother, who warms it in her bosom, nourishes it with her own sweet milk, feeds it with tender and delicate food, carries it in her arms, and fondles it. But as the child grows up the mother withholds her caresses, hides her breasts, and anoints them with the juice of bitter aloes; she carries the infant in her arms no longer, but makes it walk on the ground, so that, losing the habits of an infant, it may apply itself to greater and more substantial pursuits.

3. The grace of God,² like a loving mother, as soon as the soul is regenerated in the new fire and fervor of His service, treats it in the same way; for it enables it, without labor on its own part, to find its spiritual milk, sweet and delicious, in all the things of God, and in devotional exercises great sweetness; God giving it the breasts of His own tender love, as to a tender babe. Such souls, therefore, delight to spend many hours, and perhaps whole nights, in prayer; their pleasures are penances, their joy is fasting, and their consolations lie in the use of the sacraments and in speaking of divine things.

4. Now spiritual men generally, speaking spiritually, are extremely weak and imperfect here, though they apply themselves to devotion, and practice it with great resolution, earnestness, and care. For being drawn to these things and to their spiritual exercises by the comfort and satisfaction they find therein, and not yet confirmed in virtue by the struggle it demands, they fall into many errors and imperfections in their spiritual life; for every man's work corresponds to the habit of perfection which he has acquired. These souls, therefore, not having had time to acquire those habits of vigor, must, of necessity, perform their acts, like children, weakly.

2. *Wisdom* 16:25. In omnia transfigurata omnium nutrici gratæ tuæ deserviebat.

5. To make this more clear, and to show how weak are beginners in virtue in those good works which they perform with so much ease and pleasure, I proceed to explain by reference to the seven capital sins, pointing out some of the imperfections into which beginners fall in the matter of each of them. This will show us plainly how like children they are in all they do, and also how great are the blessings of this dark night of which I am about to speak;³ seeing that it cleanses and purifies the soul from all these imperfections.

3. Ch. XII. 2.