

# Journey in the night

Lent 2020 - Online Retreat with St. John of the Cross

## *Gospel: Jesus, light of the world, heals a blind man (Jn 9)*

« As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. [...]

Jesus heard that [the Pharisees] had driven him out, and when he found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him. »



### 1. Meditation of the week: a blind trust

#### • « Night of the senses » and « night of the spirit »

Our journey to Carmel took a decisive turn with the meeting of the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. We discovered that this

journey is in fact an inner path towards the center of ourselves. And in order to enter into this interior journey, it is necessary to quiet and refocus our external sensitivities. John of the Cross calls this twofold movement of calming and conversion a « night ».





« We are using the expression «night» to signify a deprivation of the gratification of the soul's appetites in all things. Just as night is nothing but the privation of light and, consequently, of all objects visible by means of the light - darkness and emptiness, then, for the faculty of sight - the mortification of the appetites can be called a night for the soul. To deprive oneself of the gratification of the appetites in all things is like living in darkness and in a void. »

(Ascent of Mount Carmel I.3.1)

Lent is a privileged time to experience little nights of the senses: choosing to limit my hours online every day can produce emotional frustration. My emotions feel a kind of emptiness from what I'm giving up and it can feel like I'm losing my bearings. But by voluntarily placing my emotional state in the night, far from the light of the computer screen or my handheld device, I choose to illuminate myself with another light, a more interior one, even if my sensibility continues to demand its share of artificial light. **I understand that overcoming my feelings is necessary to grow and become freer in the spiritual life.** Without this "night of the senses," I will always remain in spiritual childishness! But perhaps I'll also have to experience a "night of the spirit," a deeper transformation of my intellect, my memory, and my will that will have to be illuminated by faith, hope, and love. God wants to transform me wholly, body and soul, or according to the vocabulary of John of the Cross, in "sense" and "spirit". I must therefore live the night of the senses and the night of the spirit in order to be more like Christ on the day when the light of Easter dawns.

### • Choosing to trust

This Sunday we meet a new character, also anonymous: a man born blind. This man has been experiencing the night since birth since an ability to see could never possibly be put to use. His sensitivity has therefore

developed through his other senses, especially his hearing, which allows him to enter into a relationship with Jesus. The fact of not seeing removes an obstacle to the encounter because it removes the prejudices linked to appearance. There were no grand formalities or long introductions needed to get to know each other: Jesus acts directly to heal this man using touch. But the most important thing will come into play through his hearing: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." This blind man may well ask himself what Rabbi Jesus wants and whether or not this is a way of humiliating him. There's a reason why the Law of Moses forbids causing the blind to fall (Lev 19:14): Meanness in human beings calls for caution on the part of fragile persons. Yet this man chooses to trust the unknown, and behold: his eyes open upon contact with the water from the pool of Siloam. This water imparted by the One who was sent—Jesus—evokes the grace of baptism: **the sacrament of baptism imparts faith, the ability to see as Jesus sees.** The blind man becomes a visionary. An initial act of trust in Jesus leads him on a path of faith that will be tested by the skepticism of the Pharisees. But the formerly-blind man's faith will be increasingly affirmed until the moment when he finally sees Jesus, the Son of Man, eye to eye and is able to bow down before him.

### • Faith beyond our reason

In order to walk toward holiness and unite our will to that of the Lord, it isn't enough to just transcend our feelings and therefore experience the night of the senses. It's also important to go deeper, beyond the presumption of our intelligence. **God is always beyond our feelings, but also beyond our understanding.**

« I affirm, then, that if people take faith as a good guide to this state, not only must they live in darkness in the sensory and lower part of their nature (concerning crea-



tures and temporal things), which we have already discussed, but they must also darken and blind themselves in that part of their nature that bears relation to God and spiritual things. (...) Attaining supernatural transformation manifestly demands a darkening of the soul and an elevation above all the sensory and rational parts of nature... » (Ascent II.4.2)

It's not a question of no longer thinking (since John of the Cross also values reason) but of **being careful that our rational faculties do not lock God into becoming a human idol**. This is the trap into which the Pharisees fell: "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath. (...) We know that this man is a sinner" (Jn 9:16,24). From their understanding of God's Law, they deduce that Jesus is an impostor and therefore a sinner. The situation is dramatic: those who were supposed to discern the identity of Jesus through their religious knowledge are blinded by their presumption and become blasphemers. **Their religious knowledge becomes an obstacle on their spiritual path because of their pride**. Hence the terrible ending of verses 39-40: those who claim to see through their knowledge are, in fact, the ones who are blind. But those who choose faith, like the man born blind, gain their sight. Those who pass through the night of the spirit are guided by faith which surpasses reason, without contradicting it, to reach the divine light.

### • The light of faith

In order to grow in faith, we have to accept that in a certain sense our intellect will be 'walking in the darkness'. **Of course, faith can never contradict reason, but rather it expands it**. It reveals unknown realities to us:

« If those born blind were told about the nature of the colors white or yellow, they

would understand absolutely nothing no matter how much instruction they received. Since they never saw these colors nor others like them, they would not have the means to form a judgment about them. Only the names of these colors would be grasped since the names are perceptible through hearing; but never their form or image, because these colors were never seen by those born blind. » (Ascent II.3.2)

As **faith gives us access to unheard-of knowledge**, it disorients our way of thinking. It's like a light that's too strong and dazzles our reason:

« ...the excessive light of faith bestowed on a soul is darkness for it; a brighter light will eclipse and suppress a dimmer one. The sun so obscures all other lights that they do not seem to be lights at all when it is shining, and instead of affording vision to the eyes, it overwhelms, blinds, and deprives them of vision since its light is excessive and unproportioned to the visual faculty. Similarly, the light of faith in its abundance suppresses and overwhelms that of the intellect. For the intellect, by its own power, extends only to natural knowledge, though it has the potency to be raised to a supernatural act whenever our Lord wishes. (...) Faith, manifestly, is a dark night for souls, but in this way it gives them light. The more darkness it brings on them, the more light it sheds. For by blinding, it illumines them, (...) David clearly informs us [Ps. 139] of the darkness demanded on this road if a soul is to receive light. » (Ascent II.3.1,4,6)

Here's a paradox: the safest light is found in the darkness of faith! In fact, the most suitable means for our journey toward God is neither our feelings, nor our capacity to analyze, nor our strength of will, but it's our faith, linked to the other two theological virtues, hope and charity. **Faith touches God right in his heart and is therefore the most reliable source of light**. Certainly it disorients my sensibilities and my way of





thinking, but this is so that they may be converted. Concretely, this means that in my prayer life I must accept the fact that I don't immediately feel and understand the paths through which the Lord leads me, even if I find them painful and long. My only weapon is to believe, like someone who is blind, that God is leading me on the right path, while discerning with a spiritual guide the God's calling and what my sensibility and reason are experiencing.

### • Faith as a guide

« In this way, in obscurity, souls approach union swiftly by means of faith, which is also dark. And in this way faith gives them wondrous light. (...) By blinding one's faculties along this road, one will see light, as the Savior proclaims in the Gospel: *In iudicium veni in hunc mundum: ut qui non vident videant, et qui vident caeci fiant* (I have come into this world for judgment, that they who see not, may see, and that they who see may become blind) [Jn. 9:39]. In reference to the spiritual road, these words should be understood literally, that is: Those who both live in darkness and blind themselves to all their natural lights will have supernatural vision, and those who want to lean on some light of their own will become blind and be held back on this road leading to union. » (Ascent II.4.7)

**Refusing to go beyond our ideas and impressions about God keeps us in spiritual stagnation.** Pretending to see the way for ourselves is to take God's place and to stray far from the summit of Carmel...:

« Faith lies beyond all this understanding, taste, feeling, and imagining. If [people] do not blind themselves in these things and abide in total darkness, they will not reach what is greater: the teaching of faith. Those who are not yet entirely blind will not allow a good guide to lead them. Still able to perceive a little, they think that the road they see is the best, for they are unable to see other and better ones. And because these individuals themselves are the ones giving the orders, they will consequently lead astray their young guide who has better vision. Similarly, if the soul in traveling this road leans on any elements of its own knowledge or of its experience or knowledge of God, it will easily go astray or be detained because it did not desire to abide in complete blindness, in the faith that is its guide. » (Ascent II.4.2-3)

Thus, we discover in our journey that our best guide is not outside ourselves. It's within us: it's our faith in Jesus. This faith, which is a gift from God received at our baptism, is an interior strength to which we must have recourse every day in order to advance on our life's journey. Of course, this faith isn't magical: it needs to be nourished by the Word of God and by the sacraments; it must be put into practice in our daily life because it's not just a matter of our interior selves. But it is our most intimate and precious possession. Let's take care of it and "let's have faith in our faith" as Blessed Marie-Eugène of the Child Jesus says.

fr. Jean-Alexandre of the Lamb,  
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### Three spiritual practices for this week

1. Do I regularly thank the Lord for the gift of faith and baptism?
2. I can call to mind times when the pride of knowledge kept me away from the Lord.
3. Do I begin each of my moments of prayer with an act of faith in the presence and secret action of God, beyond what I feel and understand?

## Monday, March 23: faith above all

« Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe'. » (Jn 4, 48)

« Faith lies beyond all this understanding, taste, feeling, and imagining. » Ascent II.4.2)

In the footsteps of all those who have sought God, I ask him:

« Lord, increase my faith! »



## Tuesday, March 24: desiring that which is truly good

« Do you want to be made well? » (Jn 5, 6)

« More is gained in one hour from God's good things than in a whole lifetime from your own. » (Sayings of Light and Love 134)

Am I convinced that, in an instant, God can give me more than the fruit of all the efforts of my existence? If yes, I am learning to ask God for what I really need.

## Wednesday, March 25: celebrating the Annunciation of the Lord

« Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. » (Lk 1,38)

« Then he called the archangel Gabriel and sent him to the virgin Mary, at whose consent the mystery was wrought, in whom the Trinity clothed the Word with flesh. and though Three work this, it is wrought in the One; and the Word lived incarnate in the womb of Mary. » (Romances 8)

I'm turning toward the Virgin Mary and with her I'm saying my 'yes' to God.



« La Vierge de l'Impannata » Raphaël, 1513-1514



## Thursday, March 26: search the Scriptures

« You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. » (Jn 5, 39)

« Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation. » (Sayings 158)

How much time do I devote to reading and meditating on the Word of God?

## Friday, March 27: walking with Jesus on the way of the cross

« If the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. » (Wis 2, 18)

« In tribulation, immediately draw near to God with trust, and you will receive strength, enlightenment, and instruction. » (Sayings 66)

On this Friday of Lent, I am experiencing the Way of the Cross with Jesus; I am particularly attentive to his attitude before his judges: He entrusts himself to the Father.



« Le Christ à la colonne » Caravage, 1606-1607



## Saturday, March 28: God-given dignity

« Never has anyone spoken like this! » (Jn 7,46)

« One human thought alone is worth more than the entire world, hence God alone is worthy of it. » (Sayings 35)

I seek to become more aware of my dignity and that of every person.