



Ascent to the summit

Lent 2020 with Saint John of the Cross



1. The life of Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591)

Juan de Yepes was born in 1542 in Castille in a family of poor weavers. After the death of Juan’s father, the family moved to Medina del Campo to get out of poverty. Juan entered the Carmelite Order there at the age of 21 under the name of Fray Juan de San Matías (Brother John of Saint Matthias). Afterward, he studied theology in Salamanca where he was ordained a priest in 1567. On his return to Medina del Campo, he met Teresa of Jesus, who had just founded a second monastery of Discalced Carmelites there, after she had established the one in Avila. In this **young religious, imbued with a great spiritual desire**, she recognized the man whom the Lord is providentially sending to her in order to bring about in the male branch of Carmel a renewal similar to that which she had initiated among the Carmelite nuns. Thus, on November 28, 1568, in Duruelo, John and his companions founded the first convent of the Discalced Carmelite friars. From then on he called himself friar John of the Cross.

In 1572, Teresa called John to Ávila as confessor for the Carmelite nuns at the Monastery of the Incarnation. Unfortuna-

tely, violent opposition arose and was unleashed against Saint Teresa and her work. In this difficult context, John was kidnapped and held for nine months in the Carmelite convent in Toledo in terrible conditions. Yet **this moment of abandonment is for him the crucible of a mystical experience that becomes a resource**: while he is stripped of everything, John realizes that the crucified and risen Christ has become his Everything. In August 1578, he managed to escape. He quickly reached Andalusia, where he lived ten fruitful years in missions, apostolate and spiritual writing.

At the age of 46, John is sent to Segovia with great responsibilities. But rivalries emerge in the discalced Carmel and he is stripped of all authority. John asks to retire in solitude. An infection takes his life in a few months. In Ubeda, on December 14, 1591, he leaves this world. Canonized in 1726, he was declared Doctor of the Church in 1926. This great poet wrote four treatises: *The Spiritual Canticle*, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night* and *The Living Flame of Love*. The «Mystical Doctor» teaches us how to **let ourselves be set ablaze with the fire of the Holy Spirit in order to participate in the divine life**; he guides us through our dark nights until we reach the loving union of the Trinity.



2. The Dynamics of the Retreat: Toward Union with God

John of the Cross will help us during Lent to refocus on the essential. Because deep down, there is only one essential thing: **to understand the purpose of our lives and how to achieve that purpose.** For a Christian, this goal should be clear: to unite ourselves with God, from whom we come and to whom we are going. We are created by God and destined to share the life of love that flows between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But this goal isn't found after death, as if our life had little to do with eternal life. John of the Cross tells us that **union with God is possible here and now.** He even describes what this experience can be: "[The soul] has become God through participation in God" (*Living Flame of Love* 2:34). The happiness of this divine intimacy is a gift that God already has offered us. Why do we deprive ourselves of this gift?

So, how do we go about achieving this "spiritual marriage", this union of our will with that of the Lord, how do we go about achieving sanctity? **How do we become holy?** It is here that John of the Cross makes a painful observation: *"I am confident that the Lord will help me explain this matter because it is extremely necessary to so many souls. 1 Even though these souls have begun to walk along the road of virtue, and our Lord desires to place them in the dark night that they may move on to the divine union, they do not advance. The reason for this may be that sometimes they do not want to enter the dark night or allow themselves to be placed in it, or that sometimes they misunderstand themselves and are without*

suitable and alert directors who will show them the way to the summit" (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel Prologue* 3).²

John knows from experience that **the path to God is bound to be unsettling and obscure.** The spiritual life goes through moments when we no longer know where we stand. John expresses this through the symbol of the night, which is so rich in meaning. At night, we lose all the usual landmarks of our sight and we may wonder where we are and where God went. **If someone offers us his hand to guide us in the dark, are we going to trust that person?** It's God who extends his hand to us; better still, he's ready to carry us, John says, to lead us to the light. But many *"do not accept his guidance. (...) They resemble children who kick and cry and struggle to walk by themselves when their mothers want to carry them; in walking by themselves they make no headway, or if they do, it is at a child's pace."* (*Ascent Prol.* 3) We make little progress in our journey toward holiness because **we really don't let the Lord act in our lives.** What's more, we lack those *"alert directors who will show [us] the way to the summit."* That's why John of the Cross wrote *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the work that we will study primarily during this Lenten retreat. It will help us to better understand how to let God work in our lives. We who spend so much time experiencing life on the exterior level need to close our eyes to experience our "Father who sees in secret" and works secretly in the depths of our hearts: only faith discerns this secret inner presence. Therefore, in this Lenten season, let's pay attention before all else to our interior life for prayer, fasting, and service. May everything be centered starting from our heart, from our deepest intentions.

Only then will we be able to live a true reconciliation with God and with ourselves. **Let's be careful when it comes to those famous "what-are-you-giving-up-for-Lent"**

1. When John of the Cross speaks of the soul, as he does here, he does so not to distinguish it from the body but to consider the person in his spiritual dimension. The soul is the believer in his relationship with God.

2. Throughout the course of this online retreat our only source for citations from St. John of the Cross will be the 1991 edition of the *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated from the Spanish by Fathers Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, revised and edited by Fr. Kavanaugh, published by ICS Publications, Washington DC (ISBN: 978-0-935216-14-1).



resolutions that sometimes focus more on the image of ourselves (proving to myself that I can do it) than on the search for God. Let's perhaps choose to do less, but let's do it with profound, determined commitment. John of the Cross invites us to a 'blessed adventure'. **We're setting off on a mountain hike.** It's time to leave behind our comfortable, 'sweetness-and-ease' spirituality and put on the spirituality of the crampons (cf. Pope Francis, Final Homily of WYD 2016 in Krakow)! What should we put in our backpacks for this journey into the unknown? The important thing, John tells us, is to have

"urgent longings" and to be inflamed and wounded with love for the Lord. It's only from this powerful love that we will draw the "courage and constancy to readily deny all other appetites" (Ascent 1.14.2) and not get lost along the way. The whole issue is, therefore, in the movement, **in this dynamic of love that takes us out of ourselves,** in the middle of the night, for a fabulous adventure with Christ. So let's ask for the grace that the Holy Spirit may come to renew our hearts and awaken the love of God in us. Only this powerful love can give us the impetus to set out on our journey.



To help us awaken love, John of the Cross places at the beginning of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* the poem *The Dark Night*, of which this book is a commentary:

Songs of the soul that rejoices in having reached the high state of perfection, which is union with God, by the path of spiritual negation.

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

II. In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- ah, the sheer grace! -
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.

III. 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.

IV. This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared.

V. 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.

VI. Upon my flowering breast,
which I kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay sleeping,
and I caressing him
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

VII. When the breeze blew from the turret,
as I parted his hair,
it wounded my neck
with its gentle hand,
suspending all my senses.

VIII. I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.



During Lent, it will be good to return to this poem on a regular basis, which is a little literary and mystical masterpiece.

3. The retreat program

Throughout the weeks of Lent, John of the Cross will lead us on some amazing paths to prepare us to experience the great night of Easter when darkness gives way to divine light:

- 1st Week: The obstacle within us
- 2nd Week: Only Jesus
- 3rd Week: Straight to the heart
- 4th Week: Journey in the night
- 5th Week: New life
- Holy Week: "The true spiritual person"
- Easter: "On that glad night"

4. Practical guidelines

Every Friday during Lent you will receive an email with a 4-5 page downloadable document:

- a meditation based on the Sunday Gospel and the works of John of the Cross
- 3 ways to put it into practice
- short quotations from Scripture and John of the Cross with ideas for daily living during Lent

**May the Holy Spirit lead you throughout this Lent;
may he lead you in following Jesus to the heights of Carmel!
Prayers for a blessed Lent!**

fr. Jean-Alexandre of the Lamb, ocd (Avon Convent)



Thursday after Ash Wednesday, 27 February: Clinging to the Lord

"Therefore choose life, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him." (Dt 30:19)

"O Lord, my God, who will seek you with simple and pure love, and not find that you are all one can desire, for you show yourself first and go out to meet those who seek you?" (Sayings of Light and Love 2)

What concrete effort, even if it's very small, will I make to turn to God in the secret place of my heart?



Friday after Ash Wednesday, 28 February: Fasting, yes; but from what?

"The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." (Mt 9, 15)

"Blessed are they who, setting aside their own pleasure and inclination, consider things according to reason and justice before doing them."

(Sayings of Light and Love 45)

I'm choosing to offer the Lord some thing or activity that occupies too much space in my life. How can I keep this kind of a fast during Lent?



Saturday after Ash Wednesday, 29 February: Following Him wherever He goes

"And he got up, left everything, and followed him." (Lk 5:28)

"Going everywhere, my God, with you, everywhere things will happen as I desire for you." (Sayings 53)

Am I really ready to follow Jesus during Lent this year?
Just how far am I willing to go?

