



# New Life

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

## *Gospel: The Resurrection of Lazarus (Jn. 11)*

« Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” But when Jesus heard it, he said, “This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” [...]

Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” »



### 1. Meditation of the week: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”

Jesus’ encounter with the blind man helped us last Sunday to meditate on the mystery of faith. To believe is to put our trust in a God whom we have never seen but who makes Himself visible to us through the Church and the testimony of the apostles; it is to look at reality differ-

ently, with more height and depth. **The path of holiness that we imagined taking at the beginning may not be the one we encounter today following in the footsteps of Jesus.** We must submit to letting ourselves be led like blind people into the unknown... Only trust makes this



act of abandonment possible! But it can also happen that we are wrong in our assessment of things and that we dramatize the other person's condition. So Martha thinks that she will never see her brother again.

### • The happy sickness of love

Lazarus is sick and his sisters are worried enough to inform Jesus. But He assures them: *"This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* He poses another diagnosis on the state of Lazarus: this disease does not lead to the loss of Lazarus but offers the opportunity to manifest the glory of God who gives life. At first, it will be a disappointment for the sisters because Lazarus will die and be laid to rest. But Jesus will do what he said. And Martha and Mary will have to recognize the error of their assessment. It may thus happen that what we call "disease" is actually "health." For example, in the spiritual life, when someone begins to commit to living their faith and the Gospel, relatives may say to them: "You've become sick; you're not well!" Or like the family members who said about Jesus, "He's lost his mind." (Mk. 3:21) **According to the world, to follow Jesus is to succumb to illness** and to behave strangely! According to the Gospel, to follow Jesus is to recover spiritual health! But we can also picture it as the state of being in love. Thus John of the Cross says that to ascend to God, we must climb ten steps on a ladder of love, the first step consists in becoming sick, but sick with love... He then quotes a verse from our gospel:



*« We mentioned that there are ten successive steps on this ladder of love by which the soul ascends to God. The first step of love makes the soul sick in an advantageous way. The bride speaks of this*

*step of love when she says: "I conjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you encounter my Beloved, to tell him that I am lovesick." [Sg. 5:8]. Yet this sickness is not unto death but for the glory of God [Jn. 11:4], because in this sickness the soul's languor pertains to sin and to all the things that are not God. (...) As a sick person changes color and loses appetite for all foods, so on this step of love the soul changes the color of its past life and loses its appetite for all things. » (The Dark Night II.19.1)*

In his Spiritual Canticle, John of the Cross defines the scope of this lovesickness:

*« The reason lovesickness has no other remedy than the presence and the image of the beloved is that, since this sickness differs from others, its medicine also differs. (...) The reason for this is that love of God is the soul's health, and the soul does not have full health until love is complete. Sickness is nothing but the lack of health, and when the soul has not even a single degree of love she is dead. But when she possesses some degrees of love of God, no matter how few, she is then alive, yet very weak and infirm because of her little love. In the measure that love increases she will be healthier, and when love is perfect she will have full health. »*

*(Spiritual Canticle 11.11)*

Whoever approaches Jesus ceases to live as the person they were before; instead they are in a different state that seems odd to others, a little like one who is love-struck...

Nothing has appeal anymore except the presence of the beloved. That is because **faced with the love of Jesus, all other realities lose their attraction.** So this is a holy disease, this lovesickness for the Lord! It's one we aren't afraid to catch because it will make us walk much faster towards the summits of Mount Carmel!



## • Hope for divine life today

Jesus presents himself here as the One who is “the Resurrection and the Life.” With him there is no dead-end to the path. No painful situation lasts forever, not even death. But for that, we must believe and hope: hope beyond that which we can understand and imagine. Hope is a theological virtue as important as faith and charity. John of the Cross shows us how much **we lack hope because we imprison the future in our memory of the past.** We imagine what will happen based on what we have experienced, whether pleasant or unpleasant. If we have experienced painful things in life, we prefer not to build our hopes on the future, so as to avoid further suffering and disappointment. In the spiritual life, we are threatened by a lack of hope -- in other words, by our inability to be open to the unexpected. As if God were not powerful or free enough to dream up, with us, a future besides the one we could construct! So we find ourselves reading beautiful spiritual texts and thinking: “It’s beautiful, but it’s not for me; I can’t do it. Stop dreaming!” It is Martha’s temptation in the gospel when Jesus asks her, “*I am the resurrection and the life... everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*” Instead of saying, “Yes, Lord, I believe you can resurrect my brother today,” she makes a ‘minimal’ profession of faith: “*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.*” The same goes for us: God promises us eternal life today, and we say politely: “Thank you, but I’ll save that for after my death.” And so, we fail to make an act of hope. On this, John of the Cross says, “*in relation to God, the more a soul hopes, the more it attains.*” (Ascent III.7.2)

**We will receive from God as much as we hope for!**

It is therefore important to foster great desires for our spiritual life and a lively hope that is ready to receive the most unexpect-

ed gifts from God. We believe in the living God who can only give life and the things that are good, and he wants to do it right now through the sacraments and prayer. We can begin to experience a deep interior transformation as soon as we unite our wills to God, so that we almost spontaneously do his will: John of the Cross speaks of ‘spiritual marriage’ to symbolize this deep union of wills which corresponds to holiness. So there it is—our dignity and the meaning of our life—and John of the Cross challenges us:

*“O souls, created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing?”*  
(Canticle 39, 7)

## • Like burning wood

To describe this process of divinization (Gr. theosis) that God offers us, John of the Cross uses an image which he develops in *The Dark Night and The Living Flame of Love*: that of flaming wood.

This image is certainly the one which best accounts for the teaching of the Mystical Doctor on God’s methods of instruction. Human beings are like a piece of wood. They are intended to participate in the life of God symbolized by fire. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit is to transform the wood of our humanity into divine fire and this happens through different stages, more or less pleasant, more or less clear:

*« ...this purgative and divine knowledge, or divine light we are speaking of, has the same effect on a soul that fire has on a log of wood. The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the*



wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself.

Once transformed, the wood no longer has any activity or passivity of its own, except for its weight and its quantity that is denser than the fire. It possesses the properties and performs the actions of fire: It is dry and it dries; it is hot and it gives off heat; it is brilliant and it illumines; it is also much lighter in weight than before. It is the fire that produces all these properties in the wood.

Similarly, we should philosophize about this divine, loving fire of contemplation. Before transforming the soul, it purges it of all contrary qualities. It produces blackness and darkness and brings to the fore the soul's ugliness; thus *one seems worse than before and unsightly and abominable*. This divine purge stirs up all the foul and vicious humors of which the soul was never before aware; *never did it realize there was so much evil in itself, since these humors were so deeply rooted*. And now that they may be expelled and annihilated they are brought to light and seen clearly through the illumination of this dark light of divine contemplation. *Although the soul is no worse than before, either in itself or in its relationship with God, it feels clearly that it is so bad as to be not only unworthy that God see it but deserving of his abhorrence. In fact, it feels that God now does abhor it.*"

*[By] this comparison, ... we can understand that the very loving light and wisdom into which the soul will be transformed is what in the beginning purges and prepares it, just as the fire that transforms the wood by incorporating it into itself is what first prepares it for this transformation. » (Night II.10.1-3)*

Our way of life therefore consists of an interior transformation that is sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful, which conforms us to Jesus even in his deepest feelings. At the beginning, the Lord seduces us with sensible graces in prayer, as fire warms the wood and caresses it. Then comes a deeper, inner work that sometimes resembles surgery: killing our old self and bringing the new self to life. God does most of the work, but we have to consent to it and collaborate with it as best we can.

**To live life to the full is to let God transform us and give us life again like Lazarus.** It's not yet the resurrection but a foretaste.

Besides, let there be no mistake: Jesus does not 'resuscitate' Lazarus because Lazarus will die later, like us. But it is a sign that announces his future resurrection, and ours as well! So, let's offer this week to the flame of the Holy Spirit who will enliven us!

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

### Three spiritual practices for this week

1. I pray with greater fervor for those affected by the Coronavirus and their caregivers.
2. What act of hope could I make this week?
3. I could try to pray in front of a fire or with an image of burning logs...



**Monday, March 30: hope against all odds**

« Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. » (Dan 13 : 60)

« ...in relation to God, the more a soul hopes the more it attains. » (Ascent III.7.2)

Am I implementing the theological virtue of hope enough in the little things of my daily life?



**Tuesday, March 31: welcome God as my Father**

« I speak these things as the Father instructed me. » (Jn 8 : 28)

« With what procrastinations do you wait, since from this very moment you can love God in your heart? » (Sayings of Light and Love, 26)

What is my personal relationship with God our Father today?

**Wednesday, April 1: give to God what He waits for**

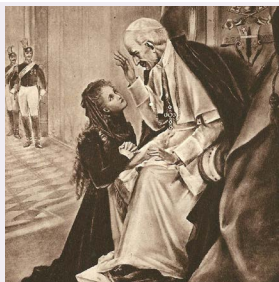
« They disobeyed their king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. » (Dan 3 : 95)

« What does it profit you to give God one thing if he asks of you another? Consider what it is God wants, and then do it. You will as a result satisfy your heart better than with something toward which you yourself are inclined. » (Sayings, 73)

Are there still false gods or idols that haunt my life (tobacco, smartphone, ...)? With the grace of God, I choose to put them in their place.



« L'Arrestation du Christ » Caravage,1602



« Thérèse aux pieds de Léon XIII » Céline Martin

**Thursday, April 2: the experience of mercy**

« Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death. » (Jn 8 : 51)

« ... this sickness (love) is not unto death but for the glory of God, because in this sickness the soul's languor pertains to sin and to all the things that are not God. » (Dark Night II.19.1)

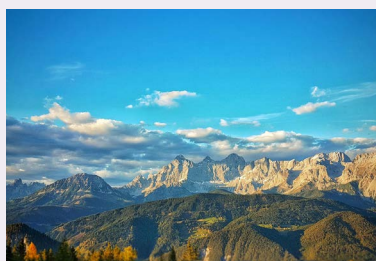
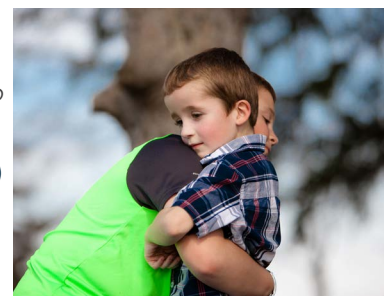
Sin leads to spiritual death. To live in love, I make an examination of conscience and beg God's pardon for my sins. If I can, I go and receive the sacrament of reconciliation. I have confidence in Divine Mercy.

**Friday, April 3: universal reconciliation**

« Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. » (Jn 11:51-52)

« And by it [the Cross] he accomplished the most marvelous work of his whole life (...) That is, he brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace » (Ascent II.7.11)

Did I experience a process of forgiveness or reconciliation with another person during this Lent? There is still time...



**Saturday, April 4: an interior presence**

« My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. » (Ez 37 : 27)

« For he declared that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit would take up their abode in those who love him by making them live the life of God and dwell in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. » (Living Flame, Prologue 2, citing John 14 : 23)

Do I acknowledge the Presence of God in me? It gives me life, and yet it is also, for God, His joy.

