

**Sacred Heart Advent Mission: Homily 3**  
**Saint John of the Cross**  
**December 14, 2011**

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

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

**3. 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.**

**4. 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.**

**5. 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.**

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

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

**8. 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.**

**We just heard the poem, *The Dark Night*, by Saint John of the  
Cross. It sounds similar to what one would read in the *Song of Songs* in  
the Bible! At least as far as I am concerned, when thinking about this**

great Saint, one thinks of blood, fire, and smoke...dark mysterious things of which we have little experience, a subject matter into which preachers dare not tread! St. John of the Cross is one of our greatest mystics, one who had a direct experience of God, not by intellectual processes, by thinking, but by a direct, “unifying love.” This is alien to the vast majority of Christians, but the life of St. John demonstrates that such an experience is possible by God’s grace if He chooses to grant it to a given soul.

St. John was born in 1542 into a very poor family. He worked in a hospital and in 1563 he entered the Carmelite order. He was so brilliant that while he was still a student, he was made the regent of studies, no small office in a religious order, which obliged him to teach courses. He was ordained priest in 1567 and in Medina, Spain where he went to offer his First Mass, he met St. Theresa of Avila, another of our greatest mystics. With her they began a reform of the Carmelite Order. As is often the case in Church history, this did not please all of the Carmelites. On the night of December 2, 1577, some of his brethren seized him, and when he refused to recant his position, they declared him a rebel and imprisoned him for nine months in a cell 6 feet wide and 10 feet long, with no other light than what came through a slit high

up in the wall. It was during this time that he wrote his great poems. He miraculously escaped and for the rest of his life served the Order. One description of the end of his life relates the following: "Toward the end of his life much physical suffering was his lot. Once when Christ asked him what reward he wanted for so many labors, he replied, 'Lord, to suffer and be despised for Your sake! At Ubeda [where he went because no one knew him] he fell grievously ill; five painful, festering sores on his leg he bore with great patience in order to quiet his desire for suffering.'" His last words were, "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit." His birthday into eternal life was today, December 14, 1591, at the age of 49. (NCE vol. 7, 1046; Parch, CYG, vol. 5, 378-9).

Many people with some erudition in these matters will say, "I'm going through a dark night of the soul." That experience is in fact exceedingly rare. Most of us suffer because of our sins; if we are habitually in the state of grace, beginners in the spiritual life may endure what St. John calls the dark night of the senses. Very few souls enter into the dark night of the soul. Please indulge me as I let the Saint speak for himself to explain the distinctions...

**“This night, which as we say is contemplation, causes two kinds of darkness or purgation in spiritual persons according to the two parts of the soul, the sensory and the spiritual. Hence one night of purgation is sensory, by which the senses are purged and accommodated to the spirit; and the other night or purgation is spiritual, by which the spirit is purged and denuded as well as accommodated and prepared for union with God through love. The sensory night is common and happens to many. These are the beginners of whom we will treat first. The spiritual night is the lot of very few, those who have been tried and are proficient, and of whom we will speak afterward.” (*The Dark Night of the Soul*, Book 1, Chapter 8).**

**This usually happens to recollected beginners sooner than to others since they are freer from occasions of backsliding and more quickly reform their appetites for worldly things. A reform of the appetites is the requirement for entering the happy night of the senses. Not much time ordinarily passes after the initial stages of their spiritual life before beginners start to enter this night of sense. And the majority of them do enter it because it is common to see them suffer these aridities.**

**We could adduce numerous passages from Sacred Scripture, for**

since this sensory purgation is so customary we find a great many references to it throughout, especially in the Psalms and the Prophets. But I do not want to spend time citing them, because the prevalence of the experience of this night should be enough for those who are unable to find the scriptural references to it.

Because these aridities may not proceed from the sensory night and purgation, but from sin and imperfection, or weakness and lukewarmness, or some bad humor or bodily indisposition, I will give some signs here for discerning whether the dryness is the result of this purgation or of one of these other defects. I find there are three principal signs for knowing this.

The first is that since these souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God, they do not get any from creatures either. Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, he does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything. 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, for when the appetite is allowed indulgence in

some imperfection, the soul immediately feels an inclination toward it, little or great in proportion to the degree of its satisfaction and attachment. Yet, because the want of satisfaction in earthly or heavenly things could be the product of some indisposition or melancholic humor, which frequently prevents one from being satisfied with anything, the second sign or condition is necessary.

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. There is, consequently, a notable difference between dryness and lukewarmness. The lukewarm are very lax and remiss in their will and spirit, and have no solicitude about serving God. Those suffering from the purgative dryness are ordinarily solicitous, concerned, and pained about not serving God. Even though the dryness may be furthered by melancholia or some other humor - as it often is - it does not thereby fail to produce its purgative effect in the appetite, for the soul will be deprived of every satisfaction and concerned only about

**God. If this humor is the entire cause, everything ends in displeasure and does harm to one's nature, and there are none of these desires to serve God that accompany the purgative dryness. Even though in this purgative dryness the sensory part of the soul is very cast down, slack, and feeble in its actions because of the little satisfaction it finds, the spirit is ready and strong**

**From the third sign it can be deduced that this dissatisfaction of the faculties is not the fruit of any bad humor. If it were, people would be able with a little care to return to their former exercises and find support for their faculties when that humor passed away, for it is by its nature changeable. In the purgation of the appetite this return is not possible, because on entering it the powerlessness to meditate always continues. It is true, though, that at times in the beginning the purgation of some souls is not continuous in such a way that they are always deprived of sensory satisfaction and the ability to meditate. Perhaps, because of their weakness, they cannot be weaned all at once.**

**Nevertheless, if they are to advance, they will ever enter further into the purgation and leave further behind their work of the senses. Those who do not walk the road of contemplation act very differently. This night of the aridity of the senses is not so continuous in them, for sometimes they**

experience the aridities and at other times not, and sometimes they can meditate and at other times they cannot. God places them in this night solely to exercise and humble them, and reform their appetite lest in their spiritual life they foster a harmful attraction toward sweetness. But he does not do so in order to lead them to the life of the spirit, which is contemplation. For God does not bring to contemplation all those who purposely exercise themselves in the way of the spirit, nor even half. Why? He best knows. As a result he never completely weans their senses from the breasts of considerations and discursive meditations, except for some short periods and at certain seasons, as we said.

This glad night and purgation causes many benefits even though to the soul it seemingly deprives it of them. So numerous are these benefits that, just as Abraham made a great feast on the day of his son Isaac's weaning [*Gn. 21:8*], there is rejoicing in heaven that God has now taken from this soul its swaddling clothes; that he has put it down from his arms and is making it walk alone; that he is weaning it from the delicate and sweet food of infants and making it eat bread with crust; and that the soul is beginning to taste the food of the strong (the infused contemplation of which we have spoken), which in these sensory aridities and darkneses is given to the spirit that is dry and empty of

the satisfactions of sense.” ([http://www.karmel.at/ics/john/dn\\_13.html](http://www.karmel.at/ics/john/dn_13.html)

Accessed 16 December, 2011).

St. John speaks of “the bread of the strong,” the infused gift of prayer that only the Lord can give. Another meaning of “the bread of the strong” is the Lord himself in the Holy Eucharist.

In the Sacred Liturgy, St. John inserted himself into the mysterious dialogue between the Lover and the Beloved, the Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus, and the Church, His Bride, which he so beautifully described in his poem. In doing so, he was able to stretch his heart, or, rather, he allowed the Holy Spirit to stretch it and make it, as the Church Fathers would say, “capax Dei,” capable of God.

The poem, *The Dark Night* reminiscent as it is of the experience of the author of the *Song of Songs*, also reminds one of chapter two, verse nine of that book: “My lover stands behind our wall...peering through the lattice.” This is mysticism: Someone partially hidden and partially revealed. Christ, our Lover, peers through the lattice of the written word of Sacred Scripture, the teachings of the Church, and the prayers of the Sacred Liturgy. He is here, if we have hearts pure enough to see Him!

After communion this evening we shall pray, “that, drawing

**strength from this sacrifice, we may cling faithfully to Christ and labor in the Church for the salvation of all.” St. John of the Cross faithfully imitated the mysteries of the Lord’s passion, His suffering, which he celebrated in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. May his intercession enable us to do the same and allow the Lord to stretch our hearts, making them ready for the gifts our Lord wishes to grant to each one of us! Amen.**