

“SAINT JOHN of THE CROSS”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

The life of St. John of the Cross

Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) is probably the most distinguished of all the Christian mystics. He was born *Juan de Yepes* in Fontiveros, near Avila in Spain... the youngest child of two poor silk weavers, *Gonzalode Yepes* and *Catherine Alvarez*. So Juan (John) knew from his earliest years the hardships of life. His father came from a well established family who disinherited him on account of his marriage to someone of lower rank — his father gave up wealth, status, and comfort when he married a weaver’s daughter and was disowned by his noble family; he died as a young man in the prime of life when John was just a little boy. The widow, assisted by her eldest son, was scarcely able to provide the bare necessities. So John learned the importance of *self-sacrificing love* from his parents. After his father died, his mother kept the destitute family together as they wandered homeless in search of work. These were the examples of sacrifice that John followed with his own great love — God. When the family finally found work, John still went hungry in the middle of the wealthiest city in Spain. He was sent to the poor school at Medina, where his family lived, and proved to be an attentive and diligent student. At the age of fourteen in 1556, the governor of the hospital of Medina took John into his service, and for seven years John cared for hospital patients who suffered from incurable diseases and madness (1556-1563). It was out of this poverty and suffering, that John learned to search for beauty and happiness not in the world, but in God. It was also during this time that he frequented a school established by the Jesuits. Anxious about his future life, he was told in prayer that he was to serve God.

In 1563 while still serving in Medina, he was clothed in the Carmelite habit, and after a year as an apprentice, was given permission to follow the unmitigated Carmelite Rule. He was sent to Salamanca for higher studies, and was ordained a priest in 1567. *Carmelites* placed special emphasis on the contemplative life — this order was originally founded in 1154 by Berthold on Mt. Carmel in Palestine. But John, shrinking back from the responsibilities of the priesthood, determined to join the *Carthusians* instead — this was an order of contemplative monks who lived a rigorous and austere life, and who devoted themselves to several hours of prayer every day. Before taking the step, however, John made the acquaintance of *St. Teresa of Avila*, who had come to Medina to found a convent of nuns, and persuaded him to remain in the Carmelite Order and assist her in the establishment of a “*monastery of friars*” carrying out the primitive rule that he so much desired. In the 1500s in Europe (the period of the *Reformation*) discipline among the monks and nuns had deteriorated, and St. Teresa resolved to revive the old rule and follow the contemplative life. This movement became known as the *Discalced*. The idea of the contemplative life had attracted many followers, including St. John. After he joined the Carmelite order, Teresa asked him to “*help her reform movement*,” he supported her belief that the order should return to its “*life of prayer*.” A small house having been offered to him, he resolved to try at once the new form of life, although St. Teresa did not think anyone could bear the discomforts of the little dilapidated hovel. He was joined by two companions and together they inaugurated the reform among the friars. *John of the Cross*, as he now called himself,

became the first master of novices. He filled various posts in different places until St. Teresa called him to Avila as director and confessor of the *Convent of the Incarnation*, and remained there for about five years (1572-1577).

Meanwhile, the reform spread rapidly, but due to some confusion caused by contradictory orders that were issued by two different generals, as well as through human passion which sometimes ran high, its existence became seriously endangered. Saint John was ordered by his provincial superior to return to the house of his profession in Medina, but he refused to do so, owing to the fact that he held his office from the Apostolic delegate (his immediate superior). He was *taken prisoner* in 1577, and carried off to the Carmelite house in Toledo, where he suffered hellish imprisonment for more than nine months. The sixteenth century friars locked St. John in a lice-infested cell six feet by ten feet — it was so cold during the winter that the skin of his toes came off from frostbite... he slept on boards on the floor... he suffered dysentery from the stale scraps of sardines and bread... and had to endure vomit-inducing stench due to the fact that his hateful jailer would only change his waste bucket after several days. He was administered the periodic “*circular discipline*,” so called because each of the eighty members of the community took turns in lashing his bare back — he bore through life the scars of this brutal punishment. Not the least was the constant humiliation and frequent torture from fellow friars, who took him out a few times each week into the rectory at mealtimes, where he was made to kneel like a dog and endure much verbal scorn and bodily flogging. The period was particularly hard on him because his own great humility made him begin to seriously doubt himself; perhaps he was only a stubborn rebel, sinfully proud in helping Teresa. Such thinking only increased his anguished sense of isolation. *People like Saint John of the Cross throughout the history of the Church, are living testaments as to what happens when “strict religion” displaces “true spirituality.”* We saw it in the *Inquisition* and the *Crusades* and the *Reformation*... and we have seen it countless other times down through the centuries. Strict religion is “*fleshly*” in its orientation, be it that of the Pope, Preachers or the common man; whereas true spirituality is of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, these strict religionists thought they were doing right, but they were simply doing the destructive work of the devil. That’s the flesh! All of us as believers experience the diabolical nature of our flesh when we fail to walk according to the Spirit. Again, it doesn’t make any difference whether we are a Pope, a Preacher, or a Sunday School Teacher... we have to dethrone self (flesh) and enthrone Christ (the Spirit)!

There was only one tiny window high up near the ceiling of St. John’s cell... yet in that unbearable dark, cold, desolate cell, his love and faith were like fire and light — he had nothing left but God, and God brought him his greatest joys in such deplorable conditions. In the midst of his sufferings in prison and this *Dark Night of the Soul* (St. John is the one who apparently coined the phrase), where he was stripped of all material and social consolations, he was visited with heavenly consolations and composed many of his poems for which, later on, he wrote commentaries for his celebrated spiritual masterpieces. After six months of imprisonment, a new jailer came and gave John a fresh tunic, a pen, ink and a small notebook for “composing a few things profitable to devotion.” St. John fell into ecstasy one day contemplating the deeper spiritual significance of a love song he heard a young man singing out in the street: “*I am Dying of Love, Dearest; What shall I do? Die?*” The first part of his *Spiritual Canticle* poem and other verses soon followed — its entire work was derived from this experience. Poetry for John was not an art-form but a vehicle to express his love for his personal Lord, and the blazing power of the

Holy Spirit, which had stoked a profound fire in him, overcoming the interior and exterior darkness of his dire situation.

After nine months of imprisonment, Saint John escaped by unscrewing the lock on his door and creeping past the guard. Taking only the mystical poetry he had written with him, he climbed out a window using a rope made of strips of blankets. He hid from pursuers in a convent infirmary where he read his poetry to the nuns. From then on his life was devoted to sharing and explaining his experience of God's love. During the next few years John was chiefly occupied with the foundation and government of monasteries at Baeza, Granada, Cordova, Segovia, and elsewhere. He was rector of the college at Baeza (1579-1581). In 1581, at the age of 39, he went to Granada and became acquainted with the Arabian mystics. Writing out of personal experience and as a student of Scripture and Thomism (the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas), he wrote three poems and commentaries: *The Dark Night of the Soul*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love* — in this order is spiritual progression. After the death of St. Teresa in 1582, when the two parties of the *Moderates* (under Jerome Gratian) and *Zelanti* (under Nicholas Doria) struggled for the upper hand, St. John supported the former and shared his fate. For some time he filled the post of *vicar provincial* of Andalusia, but when Doria changed the government of the order, concentrating all power in the hands of a permanent committee, St. John resisted (supporting the nuns in their endeavor), and drew upon himself the displeasure of his superior, who deprived him of his offices and relegated him to one of the poorest monasteries, where he became seriously ill. As his illness increased he was moved to the monastery of Ubeda, where he at first was treated very unkindly... his constant prayer, "to suffer and to be despised," was literally fulfilled almost to the end of his life. But at last even his adversaries came to acknowledge his sanctity, and his funeral was the occasion of a great outburst of enthusiasm. St. John bore all his trials as a saint and died in 1591 in Ubeda at the age of 49. He was *Beatified* by Pope Clement X some 85 years later in 1675 (beatification meant he was declared to have obtained the blessedness of heaven; thus authorizing the title "Blessed")... and 50 years after that was *Canonized* (recognized as a "Saint") by Pope Benedict in 1726... and then more recently was proclaimed a *Doctor of the Church* by Pope Pius XI in 1926.

His life of poverty and persecution could have produced a bitter cynic; instead it gave birth to a compassionate mystic, who lived by the beliefs that "Who has ever seen people persuaded to love God by harshness?" and "Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love." Those are two extremely powerful axioms — carefully reflect on them. St. John left us many books of practical advice on spiritual growth and prayer that are just as relevant today as they were then. They include: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*... *The Dark Night of the Soul*... and *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*. Though St. John was not what one would term a scholar, he was intimately acquainted with the "*Summa Theologica*" (Summary) of *St. Thomas Aquinas*, as almost every page of his works proves. He seems to have known the Holy Scriptures by heart, and he evidently obtained his knowledge more by personal reflection and meditation than in the lecture room. The few quotations from patristic works are easily traced to the "*Breviary*" (the Liturgical book of the Roman Catholic Church) or the "*Summa Theologica*." He represents the idea of one who has passed through the career of the spiritual life, through its struggles and its victories.

When we compare the amount of information available about the person of St. John of the Cross with most of the other saints, we know more about John in probably the most important way —

we know his deepest self... his inner life... the inner depths of his being. In this John is incomparable. There are few men or women in history who have combined in their persons *the loftiest sublimity of love experiences* with an extraordinary talent for describing them. His teaching is the “*unvarnished Gospel*” as it is applied to the concrete circumstances of daily life, without exaggeration or diminution. *His mode of life is likewise a silent but eloquent testimony of what is indispensable for deep prayer to be given and received.* What kind of man was this St. John who is so seldom understood? It has been said that he was gentle, plain, serene, and simple... at peace in his own personal life even under harsh, cruel persecution... fearless of enemies but gentle toward everyone... intelligent and logical... outspoken but soft spoken... powerfully resolute and completely honest... moderate but by no means mediocre... uncompromising with principles but compassionate with human failings... poetically brilliant but no weaver of euphemisms... hard on himself but tender with others. John never retaliated or dealt brusquely or rudely with others. He even gave us a portrait of his own manner when he sketched out his counsels on how all of us are to behave under duress: “*A soul enkindled with love is a gentle, meek, humble, and patient soul,*” he observed; conversely, “*A soul that is hard because of its self-love grows harder.*” It should be known, he said, that God nurtures and caresses the soul, after it has been resolutely converted to His service, like a loving mother who warms and nourishes and cares for her own child. Disclaiming holiness in himself, St. John remarked, “*the holier the confessor, the gentler he is, and the less he is scandalized by other people’s faults, because he understands man’s weak condition better.*” It has been said of John that he lived throughout his life “*the title*” he bore (John of the Cross) and the doctrine he taught. During and after his nine months of dark solitude and torture, he never uttered a single complaint and bore no resentment toward his captors.

Writer and critic, E. Allison Peers, who translated St. John’s works into English in 1953, said his transformation into the divine (not in a pantheistic sense) showed itself in *his active caring for others*. The dire poverty of the nuns at the *Incarnation Convent* while he was their confessor, so touched his heart that he went out to beg alms for them, and he made a point of seeking delicacies for the ill. When his own friars were sick, John would give them exquisite care. He would rise at night to check on the welfare of an ill confrere even when another friar had volunteered or been appointed to watch at the bedside. He spoke of the nuns as “*my beloved daughters in Christ.*” It is worthy of notice that John was first among the friars to do the menial tasks such as washing dishes... he chose the narrowest and poorest cell in the monastery as his dwelling... and used bare boards as his bed. St. Teresa’s judgment of St. John is as follows — “Of Friar Juan (John) de la Cruz, he is a divine, heavenly man.... He is indeed the father of my soul.... People look upon him as a saint, which, in my opinion he is and has been all his life.”

St. John so loved nature that Allison Peers, called it his dominant interest on the natural plane. He enjoyed going outdoors and praying immediately from the “*book of creation*” (i.e., creation itself) lying before his eyes. It is said of him that he would be found in his cell with elbows on the windowsill, gazing in absorbed prayer, upon the flowers during the day or the stars at night. That nature sparked a burning love for God in John is shown likewise by the inspired imagery we find in his works. He had an exceptionally affirmative, optimistic vision of both the human person and the divine plan. He portrays all creation as a resplendent bride given by the Father to the Son in *The Spiritual Canticle*: “I will hold her in My arms and she will burn with Your love, and with eternal delight she will exalt Your goodness.... By these words the world was created, a palace for the bride.” It would be difficult to find in all of literature a more jubilant or positive-

ly ecstatic outlook on creation and the human person within it. Optimism is found everywhere in John's writings, even in the most stark sections on detachment and self-denial. He always invites the reader to an entire enthrallment, an abiding joy beyond imagining. Though St. John did not speak much to large groups of people, he had a wonderful gift of relating to individuals and small groups. *His charisma, together with his uncommon grasp of the interior life*, readily explains his popularity as a spiritual director. He was much sought after in this capacity by all sorts of people — laymen and laywomen, nuns, university students and their professors. His insights into Scripture were so well known and appreciated that professors at the university in Baeza consulted him to learn his understandings and explanations of the biblical word.

On the natural level it appears that John's greatest talent was his *poetic genius*. The Spanish scholars are agreed that he is probably the greatest poet in the Spanish language. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez write that the saint is known as "*the loftiest poet of Spain*." E. Allison Peers notes the saint's extraordinary achievement of attaining to "the very highest rank of European poets." That this friar knew what love is all about can be witnessed even from the secular world, and is considered "*a poet's poet*." Furthermore, the saint's literary genius was not confined to his poetry — St. John was also a poet in his prose, and the very abundance of his talent in this respect throws into sharper relief the austerity of his doctrine. The sum total of his merits as a writer of prose, of which its poetical quality is of course only one, constitutes a very remarkable achievement. Up to John's time there had, in fact, been very little mystical prose at all, and that little had mainly been concerned with one aspect of mystical experience — the Prayer of Quiet. Hence St. John of the Cross had to invent phrases in order to express ideas which previously had had no outlet in Spanish.

St. John's axiom is that "*the soul must empty itself of self in order to be filled with God*," that it must be purified of the last traces of earthly dross before it is fit to become united with God. In the application of this simple maxim he shows the most uncompromising logic. Supposing the soul with which he deals to be habitually in the state of grace and pushing forward to better things, he overtakes it on the very road leading it, in its opinion to God, and lays open before its eyes *a number of sores* of which it was altogether ignorant — that is to say what he terms the *spiritual capital sins*. Not until these are removed (a most formidable task) is it fit to be admitted to what he calls the "*Dark Night*", which consists in the passive purgation (purging), where God by heavy trials, particularly interior ones, perfects and completes what the soul had begun of its own accord. It is now passive, but not inert or deficient in commitment, for by submitting to the Divine operation it co-operates in the measure of its power. Here lies one of the essential differences between St. John's mysticism and a false quietism — a quietism with a faithful consent of the will to the work of God. The perfect *purgation (purging) of the soul* in the present life leaves it free to act with wonderful energy — in fact it might almost be said to obtain a share in God's omnipotence, as is shown in the marvelous deeds of so many saints. As the soul emerges from the Dark Night it enters into the full noonlight described in the "*Spiritual Canticle*" and the "*Living Flame of Love*." St. John leads it to the highest heights, where it becomes a "*partaker of the Divine Nature*". It is here that the necessity of the previous cleansing is clearly perceived "*the pain of the mortification of all the senses*" and "*the powers and faculties of the soul being amply repaid by the glory which is now being revealed in it*."

St. John has often been represented as a grim character, but nothing could be more untrue. He was indeed austere in the extreme with himself, and, to some extent, also with others, but both

from his writings and from the depositions of those who knew him, we see in him a man overflowing with charity and kindness, a poetical mind deeply influenced by all that is beautiful and attractive. He communicated his spirituality essentially by word of mouth and it was only written down as a result of persistent requests. The central theme of his teaching, which has made him renowned both within and outside the Catholic Church, concerned the union of man with God through the grace of Jesus Christ. He described a spiritual journey from the very beginning up to the most sublime level, which consists of the stages of the purgative (purging) way, the illuminative way and the way that produces union — in other words, the stages for beginners, for the proficient, and for those who are close to perfection (true maturity). As St. John said, in order to arrive at the All which is God, it is necessary that man should give all of himself, not like a slave but inspired by love. Saint John's two most celebrated aphorisms were these: "*In the evening of your life you will be judged by your love*" and (again), "*Where there is no love, put love, and then you will find love.*" Due to the confusion that exists today in the Christian world regarding "*spiritual mysticism*," let's examine the concept more fully.

The Essence of Spiritual Mysticism

St. John of the Cross is known throughout the Christian world as being one of the leading teachers of Christian contemplation *or* Christian mysticism. *A "Christian mystic" attributes an unmediated spiritual experience of knowing God in a deeper capacity — directly to God.* It is a spiritual experience that leaves a person with a new and profound sense of awareness or understanding regarding the truths of God... "*a level of special enlightenment*" in the soul of someone who has truly humbled himself before God, and of whom Christ alone is his or her life. To such a person, it is not an alien, strange, ethereal experience, but simply a deep, inner conviction of the truth that God has poured into his soul. Remember, *genuine truth in the soul is always the inspired work of the Holy Spirit*; it is not the resultant effect of our own thinking (cf. Jn 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 2:14). It is important to note that Christian mysticism has *nothing* to do with magic, clairvoyance, parapsychology, physiological sensations, visions or new revelations — it is a genuine "*spiritual*" experience. As Paul stated — "*We walk by faith, not by sight*" (2 Cor 5:7); so insisting on a "non-faith experience" is contrary to biblical Christianity. My thinking is, genuine mystical experiences are probably not nearly as uncommon in the minds and hearts of highly committed servants of Christ as some believe. Protestants generally mistrust mystical experiences, and accept only a "*rational theology*" that comes about through the teaching of Scripture; which indeed does need to be the "*foundation*" of what we believe (i.e., our theology). So Protestants prefer "*prophetic spirituality*" to mystical contemplation. Obviously, if the resultant effect of a "*mystical experience*" is outside the bounds of Scripture (i.e., an *extra-biblical revelation*), then such an experience is clearly not of God and is to be rejected (read Acts 17:11; 1 Tim 3:15-16; 1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:10; 2 Pet 1:3; 1 Jn 4:1); it is here where I have a problem with so many "*Christian mystics*" in our world today — they "*make claims*" that cannot be supported with Scripture, and then they expect people to "*take their word for it*," which in itself is a complete contradiction of Scripture (cf. Acts 17:11; 1 Jn 4:1). Such unbiblical mystical experiences are exactly the way "*cults*" evolve.

Does that mean that God cannot mystically communicate in some way to the heart of an individual? No, not at all. God is *GOD*, and it is His divine prerogative to do as He so chooses... but such communication [admittedly] is clearly *not the norm* (which could be due in part to the

fact that few Christians diligently seek God through genuine periods of solitude and reflection). One of the problems in the Christian world today is that we have a tendency, spiritually speaking, *“to throw out the baby out with the bath water;”* that is, we reject something entirely when it does not completely align with our thinking. When we don’t understand something, or it conflicts with what we have been come to believe, we are inclined to distance ourselves from it altogether. We have a tendency to do this politically, culturally and theologically. For example, when a particular denomination is not *“doctrinally compatible”* with what we believe, that doesn’t mean that everyone associated with that denomination is an unbeliever and bound for hell... yet this was a very common deduction that many in the Christian World made in the middle of the twentieth century; those we didn’t agree with doctrinally, we simply labeled *“apostate”* and disassociated ourselves from them. By way of application, just because there are *“spiritual mystics”* out their in the world today with whom we totally disagree, doesn’t invalidate the integrity of all *“spiritual mysticism.”* *What is critical regarding the matter of mysticism is the need to “confirm with Scripture” any revelation or insight that one might receive or that one might be taught,” because above everything else, including every spiritual leader in the ecclesiastical world, Scripture is the “final authority” to the Christian community regarding all matters of spirituality and truth* (cf. Acts 17: 11; 1 Jn 4:1).

In the Christian tradition a spiritual experience is a phenomenon that in some sense remains understandably controversial. Spiritual experiences that refer to the personalization of one’s faith in Christ is not believed to be normal by the majority of Christians (cf. Mt 28-19). From my perspective, the reason most believers reject mystical experiences is due in large part to a misunderstanding of the very nature of a genuine Christian spiritual experience. *Genuine spiritual experiences have the element of “supernatural intervention by the Holy Spirit” in the mind and heart of the believer, that produces a clear inner realization of “the truth.”* My own personal experience tells me that *“when you spend significant time in solitude before the Lord, hungering after the things/truths of God, He reveals precious insights and truths to the soul;”* thus confirming the word of the Lord to Jeremiah: *“You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart”* (cf. Jer 29:13; Deut 4:29). The Lord told David, *“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you”* (cf. Ps 32:8; 25:8; 33: 18; 86:11; 143:8). Likewise, Jesus said to His disciples, *“The Holy Spirit will teach you all things... and guide you into all truth”* (cf. Jn 14:26; 16:13). The apostle John said, *“You have no need for anyone to teach you, because His anointing (the Holy Spirit) teaches you about all things”* (cf. 1 Jn 2: 27; 2:20). Similarly said Paul, *“We have received the Spirit that we might know the things freely given to us by God”* (cf. 1 Cor 2:12; 1 Th 4:9). When we *humble ourselves* before the Lord, and *seek Him above all things,* the Holy Spirit will open our heart to understand His ways and precious truths (cf. Acts 17:11), and affirm them as indeed being true (cf. Jer 29:13)... be it through the spoken word, the written word, or by meditating upon biblical truths we have already learned. The Holy Spirit can build upon the thoughts and teachings that fill our hearts and minds, or He can even instill completely new thoughts in us.

Our responsibility as believers is to “study His Word” (cf. Rom 12:2; 1 Pet 2:2)... *“grow in the faith and knowledge of Christ”* (cf. 2 Pet 3:18; Jn 17:3; Rom 10:17)... and *“delight ourselves in the Word of God and meditate upon it day and night”* (cf. Ps 1:2; Phil 4:8; Col 3:16). In doing so, God discloses divine truth to our souls, and ministers the reality of those truths to our hearts & minds. Essentially, what you are reading here in this study is a product of sincere devotion, meditation and divine inspiration (God’s Word) – is it *“absolutely true?”* It might be; but it might not be. I am

a “*fallen human instrument*” (just like you) whom God has chosen (that’s the conviction of my heart) to do some spiritual work through as one of His servants — Lord willing, everything I write and teach is a genuine reflection of the leading of His Spirit. Whatever the case may be, however, I am still a “*fallible instrument*” like every other believer. That’s why Scripture exhorts all of us as believers (including popes, theologians, teachers and lay people) to “examine the Scriptures to see whether these things are indeed true” (cf. Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 2:15). The object of my faith is *GOD alone*, and *my prayer is that He will honor my efforts to communicate divine truth and keep me from falsehood* — though it may not need to be said, I want to be very clear: *my faith is not in me*. The last thing in the world I want to do is “*lead someone astray*.” I’m well aware of James’ injunction to the believing world, “Let not many of you become teachers, because you are going to incur a *stricter judgment*” (cf. Jam 3:1) — that’s a very sobering reality to me. I don’t teach things just because I “like” the dialectical arguments, I teach things because it sheds light on the truth of God’s Word, and helps address the questions that believers have regarding what really is true.

When we fail to “*commune with God*,” and the taxing circumstances of life get the better of us, then “*hell’s fury*” (i.e., the flesh) ignites in our soul! That is simply the reality of the presence of indwelling sin (flesh) in our lives — that’s the way it was for the Apostle Paul, Saint John of the Cross, and every other saint in history. *Just because we are ‘saints’ and experience significant, jubilant, spiritual moments of splendor when we are communing with God in solitude, does not mean we forever walk on clouds and no longer have a problem with the flesh*. Remember, we are “*made saints*” by the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, not because of *anything* we did; and we will “*remain saints*” because of the work of Christ and not anything we do. Sainthood is not some meritorious achievement on our part. When St. John was approached by a devout laywoman whom he had directed years earlier named *Ana de Penalosa*, who asked him to compose a commentary on one of the magnificent stanzas he had written for her... he hesitated to respond to her pleadings because of the difficulty he had in speaking on matters that pertained to the “*intimate depths of his being when he originally wrote it*,” hence, he waited for a spirit of recollection and fervor to descend on him before doing so. E. Allison Peers said the recollection he required of himself “*dealt with the interior quality of his life*.” So a profound, mystical spiritual experience is not a condition that we enter and from which we never exit; such thinking would be completely contrary to the teaching of Scripture (cf. Mt 6:12; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10) — we all have spiritual highs and spiritual lows... spiritual victories and spiritual struggles... spiritual joys and spiritual pains. That is the spiritual reality of every saint, be it the apostles, St. John of the Cross, you or me. Remember, as “*saved human beings*” we all still inhabit “*sinful flesh*” — and it is this reality that gives definition to our assignment in life: we are to “*die to self*” (our unredeemed humanness, our flesh) and “*live for Christ*,” which essentially means being an active participant in the “*cosmic battle between good and evil*.” For a greater understanding of this concept, read my study on “*Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose*” — www.thetransformedsoul.com

The truth is we are all “*sinful human beings*” — the difference between you & me and unbelievers is that we are “*saved human beings*” who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but sinners nonetheless. Due to the fact our “*sinful nature*” (our flesh) now has to share residence with the “*Holy Spirit*,” there is “*a continual war going on inside of us!*” (read Gal 5:17). I am expanding on this subject because many Christians think that “*highly committed believers*” don’t struggle with their flesh the way they do, that the Christian life is somehow easier for spiritual giants — that’s nonsense! If anything, it is actually “*harder*” for the super-committed believer, because he’s got a much bigger target on his back, and Satan does every he can to cause him to fall! (Lk 22:31). Read my

studies *“The Jesus Few Believers Know”* and *“Peter’s Spiritual Journey”* — you’ll rethink your position if that has been your assumption. No matter who we are as Christians, in every situation of life *“the flesh will **always insist** on presenting its case in the court of our mind!”* — being a highly committed believer does not make the flesh some crippled, impotent foe; it actually causes it to fight for its very life even more intensely! And fight it does! (cf. Gal 5:17). And therein is the *“**spiritual war**”* that every believer must fight! Though we all stumble far more than any of us care to admit, the incredibly good news is, God accompanies us on our entire journey (cf. Mt 28:20; by the way, *Emmanuel* means “God with us!” — Mt 1:23), and promises to see us through to the end (cf. Rom 8:28-31; Phil 1:6; Jn 6:37-39). Thus the apostle Paul said, “Beloved, work out your salvation with fear and trembling... **but** work with the realization that you work not alone... **God** is also at work in you both to will and do His good pleasure!” (Phil 2:12-13; Phil 1:6; Rom 8:31; 1 Th 5:24). The reality is simply this: if God did not do *“His part”* in us, none of us would make it to glory! So no one can walk through life “patting himself on the back” because he’s some spiritual giant! The apostle Paul himself said, *“I boast in **nothing** except the cross of Christ!”* (cf. Gal 6:14) — “Let him who boasts, *boast in the Lord!*” (2 Cor 10:17). *Beloved, all glory belongs to Christ!* (cf. Is 42:8; Rom 11:36; Gal 1:3-5; Eph 3:20-21; 2 Tim 4:18). Not one ounce to us! Life is not about *“feeling good about ourselves”* (cf. Rom 7:18; Lk 18:19); it is about *“feeling good about God!”* Read that last statement again... if it is a questionable reality to you, read my study *“The Game Changer!”* Remember, unless **“CHRIST”** is your reason for living and your focus in life (cf. Mt 16:24; Heb 12:2), your life will end up being a miserable experience because of the controlling influence of your unredeemed humanness; i.e., of your flesh. If your focus is on **“YOU,”** you are focusing on *“your performance,”* and that is very debilitating... because we don’t *“stand”* by our performance! (cf. Gal 1:6; 3:2; 4:9; 5:1, 9; 6:14). *Learn to embrace the grace of God and His purpose for your life as one of His children!* (cf. Mt 16:24-25; Rom 11:36; Col 1:18). Yes, it is a *“learning process,”* but that doesn’t mean it is outside your reach — because **“GOD”** is at work in you! Once you learn to walk with Christ and trust Him because *He loves you* (make no mistake about it, that is the bottom line!), your life will become a fruit-bearing branch because it abides in the life of the Vine! (cf. Jn 15:5).

So a spiritual experience is understood to be a “spiritual encounter” with the living God of the Bible, with the understanding that all such interventions are *“completely initiated by God”* (not by us as believers). God is the one who is ever at work in our hearts, coaxing & urging us along in the Christian life (cf. Ezek 36:26-27; Phil 1:6; 2:13). We may plant and water (according to God’s dictates), but He is the one who causes the growth (cf. 1 Cor 3:6), and works all things after the counsel of His will (cf. Eph 1:11); it is here where many so-called “mystics” in the Christian world mislead God’s flock. The reality is, *there is a significant danger of becoming so absorbed by “experiences” that one’s life revolves around experiences rather than around God* — when *“spiritual experiences,”* rather than God, become our focus in life, spiritually speaking *“we have placed the cart before the horse,”* and our spirituality becomes more delusional than authentic. Another error regarding spiritual experiences is to conclude that some *“emotional episode”* without any spiritual depth or lasting substance is indeed a genuine divine experience. Hence, *“biblical discernment”* is absolutely essential with regard to any matter pertaining to a spiritual experience. It should be noted, if one fails to understand all of the foregoing, one can completely misconstrue what an authentic spiritual experience is all about. If you are struggling with the issue of genuine spiritual mysticism (i.e., a divine spiritual experience), let me encourage you to read this section again to make sure you understand the difference between true and false mysticism. Before presenting *“The works of St. John,”* let’s first look at some of the revered quotes and spiritual maxims of John that have become so popular down through the centuries.

Carefully reflect upon each of them. Incidentally, many of them would make good small group discussion questions.

Quotes of Saint John of the Cross

- *No man of himself can succeed* in voiding himself of all his desires in order to come to God. (the first 7 quotes are from Book 1 of "Ascent of Mt. Carmel" – the last 12 quotes are from St. John's other 15 books).
- *The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.* [Thus] the soul has to avoid... strip... and purify the soul of every desire. God will give to the soul a new understanding of God in God, the old human understanding being cast aside — and a new love of God in God. (also from Book 1).
- *The soul is wearied and fatigued by its desires...* the (desires) disturb it, allowing it not to rest in any place or in any thing soever... the desires and indulgence in them all cause it greater emptiness and hunger. (also from Book 1).
- *The soul that is clouded by the desires is darkened in the understanding* and allows neither the sun of natural reason nor that of the supernatural Wisdom of God to shine upon it and illumine it clearly. At the same time, when the soul is darkened in the understanding, it is benumbed also in the will, and the memory becomes dull and disordered in its dire operation. The intellect cannot get the illumination of God's wisdom, the will cannot get the love of god, and the memory cannot get God's image. Darkness and coarseness will always be with a soul until its appetites are extinguished. The appetites are like a cataract on the eye or specks of dust in it; until removed they obstruct vision. The affections and appetites deprive them of a treasure of divine light. Any appetite, even one that is but slightly imperfect, stains and defiles. The unmortified appetites result in killing a man in his relationship with God. (Chapter 8 of Book 1).
- *An attachment* [to something outside of God] can empty you of both holy solitude and the spirit and joy of God. (also from Book 1).
- *Desire to imitate Christ...* and study His life. (also from Book 1).
- *Do the most difficult...* the less pleasant... the lowest and most despised... want nothing... look for the worst. (also from Book 1).
- *Whoever flees prayer flees all that is good.* (the following 12 quotes are from St. John's other 15 books).
- *Strive to preserve your heart in peace;* let no event of this world disturb it; reflect that all must come to an end.
- *The soul that desires God...* must surrender itself entirely to Him without keeping anything for itself.
- *Souls are not able to reach perfection* which do not strive to be content with having nothing, in such fashion that their natural and spiritual desire is satisfied with emptiness; for this is necessary in order to reach the highest tranquility and peace of spirit. Hence the love of God in the pure and simple soul is almost continually in act.
- *The very pure spirit does not bother about the regard of others or human respect,* but communes inwardly with God, alone and in solitude as to all forms, and with delightful tranquility, for the knowledge of God is received in divine silence.

- To be taken with love for a soul, God does not look on its greatness, but the greatness of its humility.
- Although you perform many works, if you do not deny your will and submit yourself, losing all solicitude about yourself and your affairs, you will not make progress.
- Abide in peace, banish cares, take no account of all that happens, and you will serve God according to His good pleasure and rest in Him.
- If you purify your soul of attachment to and desire for things, you will understand them spiritually. If you deny your appetite for them, you will enjoy their truth, understanding what is certain in them.
- At the end of our life, we shall all be judged by charity.
- In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone.
- Love consists not in feeling great things, but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved.

Eight Spiritual Maxims from Saint John of the Cross

1. The way of faith is sound and safe, and along this [path] souls must journey on from virtue to virtue, shutting their eyes against every object of sense and a clear and particular perception.
2. When the inspirations are from God they are always in the order of the motives of his law, and of the faith, in the perfection of which the soul should ever draw nearer and nearer to God.
3. The soul that travels in the light and verities of the faith is secured against error, for error proceeds ordinarily from our own proper desires, tastes, reflections, and understanding; wherein there is generally too much or too little; and hence the inclination to that which is not seemly.
4. By the faith the soul travels protected against the devil, its strongest and craftiest foe — St. Peter knew of no stronger defense against him than this: “Resist him, strong in faith.”
5. The soul that would draw near unto God and unite itself with Him, must do so by not comprehending rather than by comprehending, in utter forgetfulness of created things; because it must change the mutable and comprehensible for the immutable and the incomprehensible, Who is God.
6. Outward light enables us to see that we may not fall; it is otherwise in the things of God, for there it is better not to see, and the soul is in greater security.
7. In this life we know God better “by what He is not” than “by what He is,” it is necessary, if we are to draw near unto Him, that the soul must deny, to the uttermost, all that may be denied of its apprehensions, both natural and supernatural.
8. All apprehension and knowledge of supernatural things cannot help us to love God so much as the least act of living faith and hope made in detachment from all things.

The Works of Saint John of the Cross

The three most noted poems of St. John follow below. First is "*The Dark Night of the Soul*," which is about the experience of spiritual desolation, of feeling abandoned and rejected by God, and why this is for some Christians a means by which God increases our faith in Him, and about the Christian walk, the life of prayer and contemplation, and growing in love and grace. Second is "*The Spiritual Canticle*," which is about the love that exists between the Christian and Christ as symbolized by the love between bride and groom; it draws heavily upon the imagery of the Song of Solomon. And third is "*The Living Flame of Love*," which is about the soul that is transformed by grace. Following are all three of the poems (the second only contains excerpts), and the corresponding commentary on each one by St. John himself.

The Dark Night of the Soul

*On a dark night,
Kindled in love with yearnings – oh, happy chance! –
I went forth without being observed,
My house being now at rest.*

*In darkness and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised – on, happy chance! –
In darkness and in concealment,
My house being now at rest.*

*In the happy night,
In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught,
Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.*

*This light guided me
More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me –
A place where none appeared.*

*Oh, night that guided me,
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover,
Lover transformed in the Beloved!*

*Upon my flowery breast,
Kept wholly for himself alone,
There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him,
And the fanning of the cedars made a breeze.*

*The breeze blew from the turret
As I parted his locks;
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck
And caused all my senses to be suspended.*

*I remained, lost in oblivion;
My face I reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased and I abandoned myself,
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.*

Commentary on the Dark Night of the Soul

The Dark Night of the Soul is a spiritually moving and mystical book. In it, St. John continues his description of the soul's journey: "the dark night" to "the divine union of the love of God." A poet at heart, St. John describes the journey and the union with beautifully rich and deeply symbolic language. However he does not simply describe the journey, he seems at times to be offering encouragement & comfort directly to readers as they too struggle with the excruciating dark night. Offering hope to the downtrodden and discouraged, the *Dark Night of the Soul* is one of the most difficult books a person can read (it requires attentive, serious reflection), but its difficulty is surpassed by its reward. One of the most profound works of Christian mysticism, this book is highly recommended by theologians for those seeking intimate union with God. As St. John put it — "He soars on the wings of Divine love." In the words of literary critics — It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the verse and prose of St. John of the Cross form the most grandiose and the most melodious spiritual canticle to which any one man has ever given utterance. The most sublime of all the Spanish mystics, John soars aloft on the wings of Divine love to heights known to hardly any of them. True to the character of his thought, St. John's style is always forceful and energetic. When we study his treatises — principally that great composite work known as *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* (two very similar poems) — we have the impression of a mastermind that has scaled the heights of mystical science; and from there looks down upon and dominates the plain below and the paths leading upward. Nowhere else is he quite so appealingly human; for, though he is human even in his loftiest and sublimest passages, his intermingling of philosophy with mystical theology makes him seem particularly so. These treatises are a wonderful illustration of the theological truth that grace, far from destroying nature, ennobles and dignifies it, and of the agreement always found between the natural and the supernatural — between the principles of sound reason and the sublimest manifestations of Divine grace.

In an early book John wrote on the *Active Night*... in this book he deals with the *Passive Night*. Whereas he already taught us how we are to deny and purify ourselves with the ordinary help of grace, in order to prepare our senses and faculties for union with God through love... he now proceeds to explain how these same senses and faculties are purged and purified by God with a view to the same end — that of union. The combined description of the two nights completes the presentation of active and passive purgation (purging), to which St. John limits himself in these treatises, although the subject of the stanzas comprise the whole of the mystical life and end only with Divine embraces of the soul transformed in God through love. St. John postulates a principle of dogmatic theology — that by himself, man (with the ordinary aid of grace) cannot attain to that degree of purgation which is essential to his transformation in God. He needs a greater abundance of Divine aid. "However greatly the soul itself labors," writes John, "it cannot actively purify itself so as to be in the least degree prepared for the Divine union of perfection of love, if God takes not its hand and purges it not in that dark fire." The passive nights, in which it is God who accomplishes the purgation, are based upon this incapacity. Souls "begin to enter

this dark night” when God draws them forth from the state of beginners (which is the state of those who meditate on the spiritual road), and begins to set them in the state of progressives (which is that of those who are already contemplatives)... to the end that, after passing through it, they may arrive at the state of the perfect (truly mature in Christ), which is that of the Divine union of the soul with God. It is during this Passive Night where certain imperfections in the soul (namely, the seven deadly sins and lukewarmness of spirit) are removed by the process of purification. The Passive Night, writes St. John, is common and comes to many... whereas the fullness of the Spirit is the portion of very few. He goes on to describe the *discipline* which the soul in the Dark Night must impose upon itself, allowing the soul to remain lovingly attentive toward God. Before long it will experience the enkindlings of love which will serve to purify its sins and imperfections and draw it gradually nearer to God. There are many stages of the ascent of the Mount on whose summit the soul attains transforming union.

At another point, John makes the comparison between spiritual purification and a “*log of wood*” which gradually becomes transformed through being immersed in fire and at last takes on the fire’s own properties. Marvelous, indeed, are its effects — the kindling of spiritual love in the soul, which feels itself to be keenly and sharply wounded in strong Divine love, and a certain realization and foretaste of God. No less wonderful are the effects of the powerful Divine illumination which from time to time enfolds the soul in the splendors of glory. When the effects of the light that wounds and yet illumines are combined with those of the enkindlement that melts the soul with its heat, the delights experienced are so great as to be ineffable and indescribable. St. John goes on to describe the soul’s security in the Dark Night, due, among other reasons, to its being freed from its enemies both without and within — “not only from itself, but likewise from its other enemies, which are the world and the devil.” As John says, “*happy chance*” led it to journey in “*darkness and concealment*” from its enemies, and in the last line of the second stanza he says, “*My house being now at rest*” — both the higher and the lower portions of the soul are now tranquillized and prepared for the desired union with the Spouse. Following are selected excerpts (not all forty stanzas) from St. John’s *Spiritual Canticle* —

The Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom of Christ

*Whither hast vanished
Beloved, and hast left me full of woe,
And like the hart has sped,
Wounding, ere thou didst go,
Thy love, who follow’d, crying high and low?...
Oh that my griefs would end!
Come, grant me thy fruition full and free!
And henceforth do thou send
No messenger to me,
For none but thou my comforter can be....
My love is as the hills,
The lonely valleys clad with forest-trees,
The rushing, sounding rills,
Strange isles in distant seas,
Lover-like whisperings, murmurs of the breeze.*

*My love is hush-of-night,
 Is dawn's first breathings in the heav'n above,
 Still music veiled from sight,
 Calm that can echoes move,
 The feast that brings new strength – the feast of love...
 Rare gifts he scattered
 As though these woods and groves he pass'd apace
 Turning, as on he sped,
 And clothing every place
 With loveliest reflection of his face....
 The creatures, all around,
 Speak of thy graces as I pass them by.
 Each deals a deeper wound
 And something in their cry
 Leaves me so raptur'd that I fain would die.*

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle

The Spiritual Canticle was composed during the imprisonment he underwent at Toledo. Being one of the principal supporters of the *Reform of St. Teresa*, John was also one of the victims of the war waged against her work by the Superiors of the old branch of the Order. Having for many years meditated on every word of Holy Scripture, the Word of God was deeply written in his heart, supplying him with abundant food for conversation with God during the whole period of his imprisonment. From time to time he poured forth his soul in poetry. As has been noted by various biblical scholars, the whole of the teaching of St. John is directly derived from the Holy Scripture and from the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Incidentally, there is no trace to be found in the influence of the *Mystics of the Middle Ages* (whom the Church identifies as “false mystics”), with whose writings St. John does not appear to have been acquainted. Throughout this particular treatise, there are many obvious allusions to the writings of St. Teresa. One of the poetical works of John that was the fruit of his imprisonment, was “*The Spiritual Canticle*,” wherein are described, under the image of *passionate love*, the *mystical sufferings and longings of a soul enamored with God*. This poem is about the love between the Christian and Christ as symbolized by the love between bride and groom. It draws heavily upon the imagery of the *Song of Solomon*. *The Dark Night of the Soul* dealt with the cleansing of the soul, the renunciation and mortification of the senses and the faculties and powers of the soul, the unremitting war against even the smallest imperfections standing in the way of union with God; imperfections which must be removed, partly by strict self-discipline, partly by the direct intervention of God, who, searching the heart by means of heavy interior and exterior trials, purges away whatever is displeasing to Him. John had learned that in proportion as the human heart is emptied of Self, after having been emptied of all created things, it is open to the influx of Divine grace. This John teaches in the *Spiritual Canticle*. To be made “*partakers of the Divine Nature*,” as St. Peter says (cf. 2 Pet 1:4), human nature must undergo a radical transformation. Those who earnestly study the teachings of St. John will begin to understand how it is that the sufferings of this time (whether voluntary or involuntary) “are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that shall be revealed to us” (cf. Rom 8:18). The chief object of the *Spiritual Canticle* is to picture under the

biblical simile of espousals and matrimony the blessedness of a soul that has arrived at union with God.

The Spiritual Canticle is a poem of forty stanzas that tell the story of the soul's search for Christ. In it, the soul is portrayed as a bride searching for her bridegroom after having become separated from him. Overall, the poem loosely follows the narrative of Solomon's "*Song of Songs*" and can serve as an allegorical reading thereof in light of the Gospel. This poem does not claim to be a translation, but rather a literary interpretation. The poem essentially gives an introduction... refers to the contemplative life in its earlier stages... deals with what John calls the Espousals, appertain to the Unitive way, where the soul is frequently, but not habitually, admitted to a transient union with God... and describes what he calls Matrimony, the highest perfection a soul can attain this side of heaven and the grave. In the *Spiritual Canticle*, St. John rises to the highest heights, touching on a subject that only one who experienced it can comment on, and which the reader, were he himself a saint, will do well to treat cautiously — the partaking by the human soul of the Divine Nature (2 Pet 1:4), or as St. John calls it, "the Deification of the soul." Catholic theologians comment that this is a region where John does not shrink from lifting the veil more completely than any Catholic writer on mystical theology has done. To pass in silence the last wonders of God's love for fear of being misunderstood, would have been tantamount to ignoring the very end for which souls are led along the way of perfection; to reveal these mysteries in human language, and say all that can be said with not a word too much, not an uncertain or misleading line in the picture — this could only have been accomplished by one whom the Church has already declared to have been taught by God Himself (*divinitus instructus*), and whose books it says are filled with heavenly wisdom. Let me remind you at this point: this is the formal position the Catholic Church takes on Saint John of the Cross, not necessarily all of Christendom.

A witness who lived with John at *La Penuela* told of how in the early morning John used to withdraw into the garden for prayer and remain there until, coaxed by the heat of the sun, he returned to his monastery cell where he spent his time writing on certain stanzas of poetry. Following is St. John's poem, "*The Living Flame of Love.*" The stanzas sing of an elevated union within the intimate depths of the spirit. The image of "flame," working on the wood, dispelling the moisture, turning it black, then giving it the qualities of "fire," appeared first in the *Dark Night*. It also turned up again in the *Spiritual Canticle* in the serene night toward the end of the poem, a flame that is painless, comforting, and conformed to God. John tells us there that this flame is the love of the Holy Spirit. Now, having grown hotter and sometimes flaring up, it impels John to write more verses about the sublime communion taking place in his deepest center. At this depth he lives in both stable serenity and exalted activity. St. John composed these stanzas burning in love's flame, with the intimate and delicate sweetness of love. Not being a poet at heart, I personally found some of John's poetic expressions difficult to fully decipher. Some of you may identify with them far more readily than I was able to do. Following is St. John's poem titled *The Living Flame of Love* —

The Living Flame of Love

*O Living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest center!
Since you no longer evade me,
Consummate now if it be your will:
Rend the veil of this sweet encounter!*

*O sweet cautery [a hot iron used to destroy tissue],
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
That tastes of eternal life
And cancels every debt!
In killing you changed death to life!*

*O lamps of fire!
In whose splendors
The deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscure and blind,
Now gives forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
Both warmth and light with lover's caresses!*

*How gently and lovingly
You wake in my heart,
Where in secret you dwell alone;
And in your sweet breathing,
Filled with goodness and grace,
How tenderly you swell my heart with love!*

Commentary on Living Flame of Love

John's commentary on the *Flame* is more prolonged than that of the *Spiritual Canticle* (even though the Canticle has some forty stanzas), but not as extended as the *Dark Night*. At times he heeds the call to be a spiritual teacher and enters into digressions that enlarge the commentary. He explains how souls must watch what they are doing and into whose hands they commit themselves, so as not to impede God's work and thereby stumble and slip back on their journey. John also teaches about some other topics that lie outside the immediate scope of the poem — the soul's purgation wrought previously by the flame... the cause and mode of death of those who have reached the state of transformation... transpiercing of the soul and impression of the wounds left by the crucified Christ... the necessity of suffering in order to reach transformation in God... the thirst, hunger, and longing of the spiritual faculties experienced toward the end of purification and illumination.

John begins where he left off in the *Spiritual Canticle*, with the highest degree of perfection attainable in this life, transformation in God, called also "*spiritual marriage*." Within this state love can become hotter and more ardent, and the wood more incandescent and inflamed; in other

words, the love is deeper in quality and more perfect within this state of transformation. What this means is that there is greater likelihood for habitual union to become actual, for the fire to burst into flame. The activity of the Holy Spirit is now more powerful, the experiences are on the borderline between faith and eternal glory. John goes on to explain how there are two different aspects of union with God and the total union experienced in the substance and faculties of the soul may be either *habitual* or *actual*. The actual union, always a passing phenomenon, never becomes permanent on this earth. The habitual union of love is compatible with everyday life, less intense in form. Here John is speaking of those moments in which God's special self-communication is more alive and intense. He refers to these symbolically as *living flames*, *delightful wounds*, *splendors from the lamps of fire*, and *awakenings of the Beloved*. The dominant theme is the wonderful work of the Triune God illuminating and delighting and absorbing the soul in the embrace of love. John describes and gives witness to this mystical experience taking place in his deepest center, in the profound caverns of his being.

He now speaks more of glorification than purification. The heightened periods of sublime union are like glimpses of glory offered to the spirit. It is as though the Holy Spirit were summoning a person to the next life by the immense glory He marvelously and with gentle affection places before its eyes. This is made possible by a highly illumined faith, the veil being now so thin that it no longer cloaks the light with darkness but allows it to begin to seep through. Absorbed in God, enlivened by His loving presence and communication, it receives a foretaste of eternal life. John senses that people may either think he is exaggerating or not believe him at all; in fact, what he says seems to him to be as far short of the reality as a painting is from the living object. He notes in such human skepticism a failure to understand who God really is, that the Lord delights in being with the child of this earth. Why should we marvel that He wants to be so prodigal in giving? John points out that "*lovers love and do good to others*" in the measure of their own nature and properties. Because God is liberal, He loves and favors and does good to us liberally. Those who are cleansed and enkindled with love are in the position to taste and relish this language of God; others without this preparation may find the words uninteresting, bitter, or incredible.

The Living Flame of Love may be divided this way: **Stanza 1** — The nature and work of the flame. In the deepest center. A flame that previously purged. The desire for glory. The veils of separation. The death of love. **Stanza 2** — The work of the three divine Persons in the soul's substance. The blazing, wounding fire of the Holy Spirit. The powerful, bounteous hand of the Father. The delicate, delightful touch of the Word. And the hundredfold reward. **Stanza 3** — The splendors produced by the lamps of fire. The work of both the soul and the Holy Spirit. The deep capacities of the caverns of the soul. Cautions against three blind guides. Blindness caused by the appetites. And the soul's gift to God. **Stanza 4** — Awakening of the Word and knowledge of creation in him. The secret indwelling of God in the soul's substance. And participation in the breathing of the Holy Spirit. Let me close this study by restating the following two aphorisms by St. John —

"In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone." (cf. Mt 25:31-46)

"Where there is no love, put love, and then you will find love."