THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ABSENCE OF GOD ACCORDING TO JOHN OF THE CROSS

Louis Roy

THROUGHOUT SACRED HISTORY, Jews and Christians have addressed the experience of 'the absence of God' or 'the silence of God' as they endured periods of adversity: the painful sense that God is absent or silent just at the time when believers most long for God's consolation. The words 'absence' and 'silence' seem negative, at least initially: they give rise to disappointment, scandal, perhaps even to revolt. They hint that God may not even exist. But there are many people who have maintained their relationship with God while daring to question God's incomprehensible silence. Their audacity is striking. The authors of the Psalms come to mind, along with Jeremiah, Job and other biblical figures. Beyond these, we think of John Tauler, John of the Cross, Madame Guyon, Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Teresa of Calcutta—and, above all, the Jewish victims of Nazi extermination camps during World War II.

Here I would like to focus on the sixteenth-century Carmelite John of the Cross (1542–1591), a great mystic and doctor of the Church who gave us poems that are among the treasures of Spanish literature and, formed by systematic theology, who teaches us the deepest principles of the mystical life. He experienced the absence of God in the most profound way and accepted this affliction. It was his acceptance that enabled him to grow in faith and love.

An Unwelcome Reformer

When he joined the Carmelites in 1563, John took the religious name 'John of Saint Matthias', but after meeting Teresa of Ávila and becoming involved in the movement for reform of his Order he adopted instead the name 'John of the Cross'. In so doing he was already preparing himself

The Way, 55/1 (January 2016), 89–98



St John of the Cross, *by Francisco de Zurburán, 1656*

to confront the sufferings that the struggle for reform would bring. His non-reformed Carmelite brothers violently opposed the movement and persecuted him, imprisoning him in a tiny cell without light or ventilation, hot in summer and freezing in winter, where he was whipped, starved, forced to wear filthy rags and to endure lice, kept in almost total isolation and deprived of books apart from his breviary. After eight-and-a-half months of such captivity he managed to escape.

It was in the context of this persecution that he lived the experience of the absence of God, and the following year he began to write his great poems. He used the phrase 'dark night' (*noche oscura*) in referring to this absence, and he subdivided the dark night into three phases: the 'night of the senses', the 'night of the spirit' and the 'night of pre-dawn'. The first of these three phases, which corresponds to the early hours of darkness, purifies the senses, the imagination and the understanding—by which John means the part of the understanding that depends on corporeal sense and imagination. The second night is utterly black: the

deep night, the heart of darkness. It purifies the spirit, which includes the understanding, the memory and the will. In the third night, the darkness is lessened by the first hints of dawn. To quote the saint himself:

> The third part, that period before dawn [*el antelucano*], approximates the light of day. The darkness is not like that of midnight, since in this period of the night we approach the illumination of day …. God supernaturally illumines the soul with the ray of his divine light. This light is the principle of the perfect union that follows after the third night.[1]

In this third (and final) night, the darkness is attenuated: dawn is near.

The Great Trial

John tells us that, even in the first night, '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'.[2] He adds:

> Spiritual persons suffer considerable affliction in this night, owing not so much to the aridities they undergo as to their fear of having gone astray. Since they do not find any support or satisfaction in good things, they believe there will be no more spiritual blessings for them and that God has abandoned them. (1.10.1)

The second night turns out to be even more painful than the first. John uses the most dramatic terms to convey what one experiences:

> [God] so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance—absorbing it in a profound darkness—that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death. It feels as if it were swallowed by a beast and being digested in the dark belly, and it suffers an anguish comparable to Jonah's in the belly of the whale. (2.6.1)

He explains: 'What the sorrowing soul feels most is the conviction that God has rejected [*desechado*] it, and with abhorrence cast it into darkness.

[1] 'The Ascent of Mount Carmel', 2.2.1, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. edn (Washington, DC: ICS, 1991). The translation has sometimes been modified here, after checking the Spanish text in San Juan de la Cruz, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Editorial Apostolado de la Prensa, 1966).

[2] 'The Dark Night', 1.9.3, in *Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (subsequent references in the text).

The thought that God has abandoned [*dejado*] it is a piteous and heavy affliction for the soul.' (2.6.2)

We can observe here the theme of abandonment by God, with which that of emptiness is intertwined:

> The soul experiences an emptiness [*vacío*] and poverty in regard to three classes of goods (temporal, natural, and spiritual) which are directed toward pleasing it, and is conscious of being placed in the midst of the contrary evils (the miseries of imperfections, aridities and voids [*vacíos*] in the apprehensions of the faculties, and an abandonment of the spirit in darkness). (2.6.4)

John speaks of an 'oppressive undoing' (*grave deshacimiento*), and he asserts that 'the soul must, as it were, be annihilated and undone [*se aniquele y deshaga*]' (2.6.5). Readers with some knowledge of Buddhism will be struck by this language of the void, annihilation and undoing.

In the same chapter, John offers a reflection of extreme importance that touches on the role of other humans in the soul's conviction of being abandoned: 'Such persons also feel forsaken and despised by creatures, particularly by their friends' (2.6.3). The loss of the support and comfort of friends intensifies the soul's distress; I would insist even more than the saint does on rejection by other people as a factor either causing or accompanying that distress.

Does God Reject Anyone?

A tricky question poses itself: did John of the Cross actually believe that he was, in fact, rejected by God? If we examine his language closely, the answer to this question must be 'no'. He speaks of the *feeling* of being without God and of being rejected:

> When this purgative contemplation oppresses a soul, it feels very vividly indeed [*muy a lo vivo*] the shadow of death, the sighs of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of being without God [*sentirse sin Dios*], of being chastised and rejected [*arrojada*] by him, and of being unworthy of him, as well as the object of his anger. The soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems [*le parece*] that this affliction will last forever. (2.6.2)

What John talks about is a powerful *impression*, but not an *affirmation* of rejection. Such an affirmation would mean that John had lost his faith in a God who is wholly faithful. What he appears, rather, to have lived through was uncertainty, a piercing doubt accompanied by fear

that God had rejected him. He mentions 'doubts and fears' (*dudas y recelos*).[3] His faith was certainly shaken, but it did not fail. Elsewhere, John associates this direly tried faith with the second night, the darkest and most difficult—that of the spirit: 'Faith, the middle [*medio*] [of the night], is comparable to midnight'.[4] We find ourselves here face-to-face with a struggle of faith—but not with the loss of faith. John asked himself if God had rejected him; but there is no indication, in any of his descriptions of the dark night, that he wanted to teach that God had in fact done so.

This interpretation is corroborated by a passage where John stresses that God is offended by people who, through curiosity and presumption, seek to know the future by supernatural means. Speaking of 'those who were desirous of knowing what was naturally unattainable', he states:

> Provoked by this, God allowed [*dejó*] them to go astray and gave no enlightenment concerning this matter in which he did not want them to meddle. Thus Isaiah proclaims that by way of privation God commingled in their midst that spirit of dissension. Accordingly, God is the cause of that harm; that is, the privative cause [*causa privativa*] which consists in his withdrawing [*quitar*] his light and favor to such an extent that they necessarily fall into error.[5]

It is evident that the sin John exposes here is entirely different from the dark night, since in this case there is culpability on the part of the presumptuous seeker, whereas in the dark night the contemplative soul is innocent in face of the scourge that strikes and crushes it. In both cases John, always the student of Augustine and Thomas, remains convinced that God is never the direct cause of evil, but permits it—he uses the verb *dejar*, 'to allow'—in the hope that the person thus afflicted may profit from it. Further, towards the end of his life, probably in 1590, he wrote to a Carmelite nun:

> Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in these darknesses that God protects the soul. Cast your care on God, for he watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that he leaves you alone; that would be an affront to him.[6]

[3] 'Ascent of Mount Carmel', 2.11.6.
[4] 'Ascent of Mount Carmel', 2.2.1.
[5] 'Ascent of Mount Carmel', 2.21.11.
[6] Letter 20, to an unknown Carmelite nun, shortly before Pentecost, 1590, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*.

Towards the End of the Night

The idea that God could abandon or reject someone was terrifying, and John lived through that painful experience during the second phase of the dark night. However, it was also the sign of a closely related phenomenon: an increase in light and love. This began with a supernatural illumination, received as a major insight: those who accept trials with joy are able to do so thanks to the discovery that, far from displeasing God, this suffering, fully accepted, pleases God, who uses it as an instrument for their spiritual progress (2.13.5). An increase in supernatural love follows: those who allow God to purify their motivation perceive that their natural desires cease to distract and divide their souls, leaving them free to focus their desire entirely on God, with an intense longing (2.11.3). God strips away every natural attachment from the soul, 'that they may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all' (2.9.1).



Sunrise in Winter, *by Ludwig Munthe, mid-nineteenth century*

But what does the third part of the dark night bring, when the first hint of dawn begins to break? John distinguishes between three states. The first state is called the purgative way; for the most part, it is described in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and in *The Dark Night*. The second state, which he calls the spiritual betrothal (*desposorio*), is obtained in 'the tranquil night at the time of the rising dawn'.[7] The third state is called the spiritual marriage (*matrimonio*). The

[7] 'The Spiritual Canticle', commentary on stanzas 14 and 15, n. 1, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*; see n. 2.

betrothal and marriage are described in *The Spiritual Canticle* and in *The Living Flame of Love*.

In *The Spiritual Canticle*, John shows us that the great affliction of the dark night opens into an overwhelmingly joyous love, filled with peace and light:

> She [the soul] does not say that the tranquil night is equivalent to a dark night, but rather that it is like the night that has reached the time of the rising dawn. This quietude and tranquility in God is not entirely obscure to the soul as is a dark night; but it is a tranquility and quietude in divine light, in the new knowledge of God, in which the spirit elevated to the divine light is in quiet.[8]

In *The Living Flame of Love*, the light is even brighter: 'The soul with its faculties is illumined within the splendors of God'.[9] Accordingly, Edith Stein comments: 'The union [marriage] seemed to be achieved in the night, indeed on the Cross. Only later, it seems, did the saint have the happy experience of just how wide heaven opens itself even in this life.'[10] She uses the verb 'to seem' twice, probably because John remained imprecise about that subject matter.

Two Objections

It could be asked whether, in dwelling on his afflictions, John of the Cross falls into masochism. Twentieth-century thinkers, under the influence of contemporary psychology, distrust any tendency to take pleasure in suffering. This danger was not, however, invented in our time. In a letter written in 1536, Ignatius of Loyola warns a Benedictine religious to be on her guard against this very temptation:

> When the enemy [the devil] has produced in us a fear through a semblance of humility (a humility that is spurious), and has gotten us not to speak even of things that are good, holy, and profitable, he then inspires an even worse fear, namely, that we are separated, estranged, and alienated from our Lord.[11]

[8] 'The Spiritual Canticle', commentary on stanzas 14 and 15, n. 23, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*.
[9] 'The Living Flame of Love', commentary on stanza 3, n. 10, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*.
[10] Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), *The Science of the Cross*, translated by Josephine Koeppel (Washington, DC: ICS, 2002), 217.
[11] Ignatius to Teresa Rejadell, 18 June 1536, in Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss (New York: Paulist, 1991), 335.

So there is a spiritual danger in every trial: it may turn us towards ourselves, in making us too focused on what is negative in our own lives. However, there is no evidence that John of the Cross desired to remain in darkness. Certainly, he accepted his tribulations, in union with the passion of Jesus; but he did not actively entertain morose thoughts. His balance and his deep joy are impressive.

The second objection applies directly to John's teaching that the dark night is something temporary, and is followed by the light of dawn. In contrast to Thérèse of Lisieux and Mother Teresa, who entered the dark night and remained there for the remainder of their lives, John lets it be understood that it is normal to emerge from it. Is their experience, therefore, inconsistent with his?

Consider the last months of John's life. With Teresa of Ávila, he had been the soul of the Carmelite reform movement, and he was removed from any responsibility within it. Given his acute sensitivity, he suffered greatly, both psychologically and spiritually. Marginalised and calumniated, he felt abandoned by his own; he was incurably ill, and was to die of erysipelas, an infectious skin condition. Consequently, he experienced a second great trial: at the beginning of his religious life, John was rejected by the non-reformed Carmelites; but at the end of his life he was rejected by his own reformed brethren. What a devastating disappointment this must have been!

Is it not possible that, during the last months of his life, as he was set aside by his reformed Carmelite brothers and had become a prey to a painful illness, John underwent once more certain aspects of the dark night? In fact, four months before his death, he confessed to his confidante, Doña Ana: 'The soul [my soul] fares very poorly. The Lord must be desiring that it have its spiritual desert.'[12] We can say, nevertheless, that this 'spiritual desert' is compatible with the deep peace brought by the third night, at the coming of dawn. His acceptance of the will of God is further illustrated in a letter to a Carmelite nun, where he wrote:

> Do not let what is happening to me, daughter, cause you any grief, for it does not cause me any. What greatly grieves me is that the one who is not at fault [a reforming Carmelite friar, Jerónimo Gracián] is blamed. Men do not do these things, but God, who knows what is

[12] Letter 28, to Doña Ana del Mercado y Peñalosa, 19 August 1591, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*.

> suitable for us and arranges things for our good. Think nothing else but that God ordains all, and where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love.[13]

Complete acceptance of what God wills here coincides with lasting peace and love for one's enemies.

The Trial of Faith

In conclusion, I propose three observations.

First, as a man of the Renaissance, John concentrated on the individual. He does not refer to the collective tragedies of the Spain of his day—for example, Philip II's repression of Protestants in Flanders, or the oppression of indigenous peoples by the Conquistadors, which was denounced by Bartolomé de las Casas. There were certainly many instances of spiritual darkness in those situations.

Secondly, from this brief discussion, we can extrapolate some characteristics of the experience of God's silence. In the beginning, it is triggered by a negative event: adversity assails us. The trial also takes us by surprise, so that we lose our normal means of coping with adversity. Then comes acceptance of the idea that God alone can enable us to overcome the trial. Finally, we discover the peace and the joy of being united to the passion and death of Jesus, who also lost everything to find everything. So the silence of God is lived in four stages: the encounter with misfortune; disarray as an initial reaction; the complete giving over of the self to God; and resurrection with Christ. These stages can overlap: they are not always sequential.

My third observation is more general. John of the Cross took it for granted that the experience of the absence of God was typical of mystics. However, if by 'mystics' we mean those who cultivate, on a daily basis, the continual or almost continual presence of God, we have to distinguish mysticism from the sense of God's absence, which touches anyone who must live through an experience of faith that comes up against wrenching questioning. In my view, we can be holy without being mystics, but we cannot be holy without experiencing, because of painful events, the trials of faith that involve anxious questioning with respect to the silence of

We cannot be holy without experiencing … the trials of faith

[13] Letter 26, to María de la Encarnación, 6 July 1591, in *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*.

God. This leads me to my final conclusion: this terrible—and beautiful—challenge of faith is addressed, not just to mystics, but to all believers.

Louis Roy OP holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge. After teaching for twenty years at the Jesuit university of Boston College, he is now professor of theology at the Dominican University College in Ottawa. He has published books in English, French and Spanish. He is interested in intellectual, affective and mystical approaches to God, in religious experience and revelation, and in interreligious dialogue.

translated by Jeremiah Bartram, with a few changes and additions by the author and by the editors of The Way

Copyright of Way is the property of Way and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.