**St. John of the Cross' Spirituality: Love Transforms Suffering**

**I. Overview**

            Who can speak of spirituality? Like Isaiah, I need a seraph to cleanse my lips with a burning coal, Isa 6:6-7. Spirituality is the Word of God, manifest in Jesus, Jn 1:1-18. As Rev 19:13 shows, Jesus, the lamb who died for us, is the Word of God. Christ is revelation in the flesh, beyond all we can say. Still, God invites us all to share in these profound mysteries. He gives us His life, expres-sed in words, and we speak because He commands us to preach the Good News, Mt 28:20, Even we sinners speak of spirituality, as  St. John Climacus says: "Sinners should preach and teach because hearing their words they will be shamed to improve."

            In all truth (humility) then, we accept God's unlimited activity as mystery which us.  First we accept that God can do more than we can understand. Then we follow St. John of the Cross into mystical life. God's surpassing excellence mystifies us precisely in the way He made us to be mystified. He made us to be with Him. We cannot do without God. As St. Augustine says: we are *capax dei* = capacity for God, and "our souls are restless until they rest in Him�. Our deepest longing is mystical.

            St. John of the Cross is probably our best-known mystic. A mystic is a person whose knowledge and love of God lead him to seek God in all His creations, but particularly in other human beings. This mystical vision is common to almost all who are baptized in Christ. Most Chris�tians enjoy mystical experience. Jews and Muslims also have famous mystics whose inspir�ing lives encourage us all. Mystics are more prominent in monotheistic religions than in polytheistic religions. But God's love expands, so they too have mystics. Our own back yard is full of great Catholic mystics.

            Jesus is the perfect mystic, living life fully. As God Himself, He had a distinct advan�tage. All mystical experience aims at the perfect unity which Jesus experienced between his human and Divine acts. Coming as we all do from God, we are all echoes of His Word. We are all limited acts of His Infinite Activity. We are all natural-born mystics. To fully activate our birth potential, we follow Jesus. This is the surest way to unite with God. We are all God's children, so we are necessarily in His image and likeness, chips off the Old Block, sparks of the Eternal Flame. So acting as He acts is natural. Sin, original and personal, distracts us, but our destiny is mystical union with God.

            Christ's mother, Mary, is the next most perfect mystic. Conceived as she was without Original Sin, she also had a huge advantage. But because she had more talent, she had greater responsibilities, and lived up to them all. Because Jesus gave her to be our mother, she seems more approachable than Jesus. "Behold your mother, behold your son", Jn 19:26-7. As humans, we are ratio�nal, i.e. we take proportionate steps to our goals, so we naturally work from what is nearest to what is further along. Naturally, we work from God's human mother to God, revealed in Jesus, to God the Father. We especially need to go through Mary when we repent for our sins, since our mothers are more merciful than our brothers or fathers.

            Because God prepared him to care for Jesus, St. Joseph, His foster-father, is the next most perfect mystic. His union with God enabled him to husband Mary and foster-father Jesus. In all three members of the Holy Family we find the mystic's clear-eyed real�ism. They were not confused by distractions. They saw right through frauds. So we follow Jesus, supported by Mary and Joseph, as we strive to become realistic, or mystical. Mystical activity is the very most real of all we can do. It imitates on earth our perfect mystical acts in heaven. Therefore it is the most fulfilling.

            Beyond the Holy Family, we cannot rank mystics. Who can tell whether Paul was more one with God than Peter, or John the Beloved? Where does St. John of the Cross fit among them? Ranking is pointless, since saints don’t compete for holiest. None of them ever tried to be holier-than-thou. Instead, they sought God with all their might. They accepted God's love, and loved Him in return. Since God expressed Himself, Who is Love, most completely by taking on our flesh as Jesus, they followed Jesus wholeheartedly. All saints exist to help us get on with our mystical lives.

            So mystical life is uniting with God. It is living Christ's life.  It is following God's lead in the great dance of creation. God gives us His life in Jesus, and we respond by living it completely.  "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly", Jn 10:10. Jesus is God's Word to us, spoken intimately in our own flesh and blood. Jesus reveals God to us, so He is the Sacrament of God: He is what He signifies. St. John of the Cross realized this most important of all events, and strove to express it to us. St. John of the Cross indwelt this deepest of truths: he lived it completely. He realized the greatest reality: God loves us, even unto death. God wants us to love Him in return. That is his entire life simply said.

            At first, we may not see any connection between us and St. John, but Jordan Auman helps us realize that: "Real events, lived by real people, really uniting with God, make spirituality an experimental science of the saints", (Auman  30). God calls all of us to be saints, to be holy, as He says in Mt 5:48, Lk 1:17, Jn 17:23. We all come from God, and go back to Him. Therefore our real lives, lived by real people, really striving for God fits everybody. Because St. John of the Cross really lived his life, really united with God, he did what we strive to do, so he is downright relevant for us today.

            He is particularly relevant because he transformed suffering by love. Suffering is the most important human event. In spite of all our efforts to banish suffering, it remains. In spite of our total pursuit of happiness, suffering stays put. All our great wealth can�t buy off suffering. Wearing ourselves out pursuing pleasure illustrates how desperate we are to avoid suffering.

            Emotion is another cover for suffering. Excitement over sports, profit, or entertainment, tries to drown suffering out, to mask it, to pretend it�s not there. These examples show suffering all about us. They focus us on popular methods to deny suffering. Too many people are in denial.

            Why? Because nothing they do cures suffering. Because suffering is so agonizing that they flee from any hint of it. They try many remedies, but suffering remains. Denial is not helpful. It dawns upon us that we should acknowledge suffering. Then we can deal with it. St. John helps us focus on suffering, understand its function, and use it properly. Like St. John, we can transform suffering into joy by Christ�s love.

            Saints follow Christ. He models the transforming method. It is quite simple. In your own experience, you have invited many people to a party. Those who attend may not love, or even like, you. Perhaps it�s the food, or the drinks, or mutual friends that attract them. On the other hand, when you suffer illness, you discover who your real friends are. They love you enough to suffer with you. Their love transforms their suffering with you into more love for you. This love encourages you to face your suffering. Mutual love transforms mutual suffering.

            You can realize that those who love you share your suffering to grow in love. Because they become your suffering to unite with you, you both share the suffering. Because neither of you wants the other to suffer, between you, the suffering diminishes. You can�t trace all the steps of this mystery, but you experience it. You see why someone turned the phrase: �Love divides suffering and multiplies joy�. Without understanding every part of the process, you know that the process works.

            Jesus is the prime example of this process. He recognized our suffering, came to share it, lived out our suffering unto death, and thereby transformed it into our salvation. �Greater love than this no one has than to give his life for his beloved�, Jn 15:13. Love transforms suffering, even death, into more love. Jesus showed us how to overcome suffering with love. If we second His motion, then we accept His love, which transforms all that it activates, even suffering and death.

            Throughout his sufferings, from starving as a child, through imprisonment by his Carmelite brothers, to his agonizing death, St. John of the Cross lived out this transformation by love. Because he did it, and shows us how to do it, we can do it also. St. John was a major mystic, but we are minor mystics. Each of us has transcended mere matter frequently. All we have to do is coordinate these transcendent moments into more coherent living experiences. Then we can live mystical lives, as St. John did. His good example inspires us to keep going in our mystical direction. It is our destiny, after all. God made us to be complete mystics.

**II. John Speaks for Himself** (Kierien Kavanaugh, p 723)

A. Poem: Although By Night: Song of a soul delighting in God by Faith.

Space limitations require that I give this poem first in Spanish, and afterward in English. The preferable side-by-side translation will not fit here.

Que bien se' yo la fuente que mana y corre

              Aunque es de noche.

Aquella eterna fonte esta' escondida

Que bien se' yo do' tiene su manida

            Aunque es de noche.

Su origen no lo se', pues no lo tiene

Mas se' que todo origen de ella viene,

            Aunque es de noche.

Se' que no puede ser cosa tan bella

Y que cielos y tierra beben de ella

            Aunque es de noche.

Bien se' que suelo en ello no se halla

Y que ninguno puede vadealla,

            Aunque es de noche.

Su claridad nunca es oscurecida,

Y se' que toda luz de ella es venida,

            Aunque es de noche.

Se' ser tan caudalosas sus corrientes,

Que infiernos, cielos riegan, y las gentes,

            Aunque es de noche.

El corriente que nace de esta fuente,

Bien se' que es tan capaz y omnipotente,

            Aunque es de noche.

El corriente que de estas dos procede

Se' que ninguna de ellas le precede,

            Aunque es de noche.

Aquesta eterna fonte esta' escondida

En este vivo pan por darnos vida,

            Aunque es de noche.

Aqui se esta' llamando a las criaturas,

Y de esta agua se hartan, aunque a oscuras,

            Porque es de noche.

Aquesta viva fuente, que deseo,

En este pan de vida yo la veo,

            Aunque es de noche.

**Peers' English translation:**

How well I know the spring that brims & flows,

          Although by night.

This eternal spring is hidden deep,

How well I know the course its waters keep,

          Although by night.

It's source I do not know because it has none

And yet from this, I know, all sources come,

          Although by night.

I know that no created thing could be so fair

And that both earth & heaven drink from there,

          Although by night.

I know its depths possess no bed to fathom

And that none may ford across or sound them,

          Although by night.

Its radiance is never clouded, and in this

I know that all light has its genesis,

          Although by night.

I know its currents carry such abundance

They water hell & heaven & all nations,

          Although by night.

The current welling from this fountain's source

I know to be as mighty in its force,

          Although by night.

And from these two proceeds another stream.

I know that neither over this one reigns su�preme,

          Although by night.

This eternal fountain is concealed from sight

Within this living bread to give us life,

          Although by night.

And here is calling out to all the creatures,

These waters quench their thirst, although by darkness

            Because they lie in night.

I long for this, the living fountain-head,

I see it here within the living bread,

          Although by night.

**More literal translations: Kavanaugh's            Mine** (overflow in brackets [x])

That eternal spring is hidden,             Though this eternal spring is hidden fast,

For I know well where it has risen      How well I know its source at last,

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

I do not know its origin, for it hasn't one  I do not know its origin, since it has [none]

But I know that every origin has come from it.  Rather every origin has from it [come,]

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

I know that nothing else is so beautiful,    I know no other thing can be so fair,

And that the heavens & the earth drink there  And that heaven & earth drink [there,]

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

I know well that it is bottomless           How well I know this spring cannot end

And that no one is able to cross it         Nor can anyone limits round it bend

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

Its clarity is never darkened,             Nothing shades the rays with which it's lit

And I know that every light has come from it      And I know that every light [shines forth from it]

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

I know that its streams are so brimming          I know its flows are past all limit

They water the lands of hell, heavens & earth,  Watering hell, heaven, earth & [all in it]

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

I know well the stream that flows from this spring   The current born of this [spring]

Is mighty in compass and power,                 I well know overcomes everything,

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

I know that the stream proceeding from these two    The stream flowing from [these two sources]

Is preceded by neither of them,                    Equals them in all their forces

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

This eternal spring is hidden                          This eternal spring is ever hidden

In this living bread for our life's sake,             In living bread where life is given

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

It is here to call to creatures; and they              I know it is here to call us all

Are filled with this water, although in darkness      & quench our thirst, under a [pall,]

            Because it is night.                                   Because it is night.

This living spring which I long for,                This living fountain which I so need,

I see in this bread of life,                             I see in living bread on which I feed

            Although it is night.                                  Although by night.

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            Try your hand at translating or recasting this poem.  To assist you, I provide an interpreta�tion which relies upon Kieran Kavanaugh and Fr. Paul Murray, OP.

            B. Interpretations

                        1. Objective conditions

                                    a. John wrote this poem in prison. Carmelite authorities rejected his reform.  They did not like to go barefoot, or to fast, or to pray more frequently and fervently. So they imprisoned John, to eliminate his inspiration, which was catch�ing on. As John sat in the dark, he experienced emptiness, rejection, and near-despair. Prevented from living the Christ-event in Mass, John cast himself upon God entirely.

                                    b. His jailers insinuated that the Carmelite reform was dead, that even St. Theresa's nuns had abandoned their high standards. They tried to discourage John. They scourged him, restricted his food, and demanded that he reject reform.

                        2. Subjective conditions

                                    a. John relied more entirely upon God as he experienced the Dark Night of his soul. During this Darkness, John's mind was overwhelmed by God's radiance just as our bodily eyes are blinded by direct sunlight. God came closer to John, but John had not yet adjusted to God's brilliance, so everything looked dark. This is the primary theme: although by night. At night, we see, but obscurely, not as clearly as in the day.

                                    b. John relies upon God because his friends and religious family have abandoned him. Seemingly, because God is so close, God has abandoned him as well. So John experiences realities for which we have no words. Lacking words dedicated to these realities, John shifts gears into poetry. When common language fails, poetry finds some expression in rhythm, sound, and symbols. Thus poetry succeeds where standard language flops.

                                    c. John is thirsty, oppressed by the heat in a stone cell slightly larger than he. Naturally, he thinks of water, cool, refreshing, nourishing, revivifying. He remembers his early life, in the village of Fontevedros. The most riveting feature there is the fountain which flows out to irrigate the thirsty fields. John dreams about that fountain which he knows so well. This corporeal fountain merges in symbol with the spiritual fountain of life: God. God waters us more completely; He satisfies us more than water ever could.

                                    d. But God is infinite, so we cannot see Him. He is unlimited, so He has no surface to touch, nor does he make a sound to hear, nor odors to smell, nor flavors to taste. We are stumped until God provides faith. With faith, we apprehend God's existence and activity. Somehow we coincide with God, we harmonize with Him, we act along with Him, as if we fell into step with Him. Therefore, John subtitles this poem: The Song of the soul that delights in knowing God by faith. As St. Paul noted: �by faith we see, as through a glass, darkly�, 1 Cor 13:12.

                                    e. John left his more familiar sinful life so far behind during this prison experience, during this purification, that he was momentarily disoriented. He could not rely upon old familiar activities because He was acting more like God than like his old self. It was as if all familiar landmarks disappeared. Imagine moving to a new planet with two suns and 6 moons. Sun #1 rises, so you get up. Three hours later, sun #2 rises, and is nearer. Thirty hours later, sun #1 sets, and

three hours after, so does sun #2. Several of the moons rise and set in the day, and the rest do during the 33 hour night. This would stun us. John experiences even a more startling change, an improvement in spiritual life which can't be spoken. Faith alone gives a dim view: although by night.

                                    f. John, in faith, follows Jesus, Who overcame death by accepting it for love of God. As John accepted his own death, and the death of his reform, he followed Jesus through death into resurrection, on a spiritual level. "Unless the seed falling into the ground, dies,� Jn 12: 24. �Take up your cross daily", Lk 9: 23. John gave himself utterly to God in prison. John willed what God willed, even if it meant sure death. It was as like death as anything we can survive: John passed out from dehydration. His body digested parts of his muscles to obtain water and protein. He wasted away to mere skin and bones.

                                    g. But the spring of God's love brims and flows, transcending every barrier into John's open spirit. Then John realized that he had been immersed in these living waters all the time, but had not opened up to accept them. John recognizes the ebb and flow of his spiritual life to depend upon God's constant torrent of infinite spiritual act. John's inconstancy is his own fault, so he converts, or turns to God, with God, in God. This process advances gradually, so John refers to three pulses of progressive union.

                                    h. Poetically these pulses are: twilight, midnight, and the deepest dark before dawn. These pulses represent conversion from sensory distractions, mental conceits, and our partial images of God. During the first pulse, we reject sensations as silly. In the second, we comprehend that our thoughts do not get us to God. Throughout the third pulse, we allow God to shatter our concepts of Him as He moves closer to us. We must continually will God to approach. Why? Because He loves us to be as he made us: free. We progressively lose: senses, mind, and what we considered to be God. Why? Because God is "something else", and as He comes to us, we drop all these fake-goods for Good Himself.

                                    i. Throughout it all, the spring that brims and flows is God's life cascad�ing over us, washing us free of sinful grime. God's pulse, beating like a heart, enlivens John so much that without special grace he would have died. God's life is beyond community, but community resembles it better than any other creaturely experience. So Jesus reveals a Trinity of Divine Persons, and John accepted God's Community. Now, how can John express this tri-person in one nature? Water is fine way. It has source, fountain and flowing stream, which are all the same stuff. So, by faith, as if by night, John sings his delight of knowing God. The prologue refers to faith:  "How well I know the spring that brims and flows, Although by night."

                        3. Account of the poem itself: verses

                                    a. The first verse expresses how hidden God is; the source is not visible, not even if we dig into the mountain side. God's existence surpasses our comprehension. However, as verse 2 indicates, we know well that God is the source of everything else.

                                    b. Verse 3 sings God's beauty, and refers all lovely creatures to their source in God Him�self. John reflects Aquinas in this understanding that God's creation expresses Himself. So God's creation is what God is, though limited. Since God is Love, creation must be love, though limited to created love. Love is beautiful, so all creation sparkles with God's beauty. It shimmers with hints of God's beauty: �the heavens reveal the glory of God�, Ps 19: 1.

                                    c. Verse 4 expresses that the Trinity, symbolized by water is unfathomable, infinite. No man can plumb the depths of God's mys�tery. See the �Book of the First Monks�.

                                    d. Verse 5 shifts from water-symbol to light, since light shimmers and shines, refracts and reflects in water. But both water and light come from God.

                                    e. Verse 6 expresses that God's life, symbolized as water, nourishes all creation, has no limit, even supplying the existence of hell itself. Hell is a person�s condition, sustained in existence by God's love, but freely rejecting God, refusing to love. Heaven is a person�s condition of accepting and participating in God�s love. This love is the flowing stream Christ invites us to: "Jesus stood up and cried aloud (roared) if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me. If anyone believes in me let him drink, and streams of living water will spring up in him." Jn 7:37-9

                                    f. Verse 7 expounds the threeness (Trinity) of verse 6, showing Father as fountain source, and Son as current. Verse 8 adds Spirit as stream, and re�minds us that the three are equally God: three persons, but only one being. So, verses 6, 7, and 8 speak about the Trinity. In revealing Trinity, or inmost loving community, to us, Jesus treats us "not as servants, but as sons".

                                    g. The concluding verses: 9,10, and 11, refer to the Eucharist. Verse 9: though we cannot see the fountain, it is in the living bread = Eucharist, which nourishes us. This visible bread is the invisible body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus, Who is God. Therefore we get the whole thing when we receive Communion, although by night = faith.

                                    h. In the Eucharist, as verse 10 notes, Jesus calls all of us to drink fully of God's life, which is Jesus the living water. Jesus referred to himself as living water when he told the woman at the well that she should ask of him to drink, Jn 4: 9-13. But all this lies in darkness to the natural eye, being relatively clear only to faith.

                                    i. All men long for living water, flowing from Jesus Christ, and drink deep of it when they accept the living bread of Communion, where Jesus gives Himself entirely to us. He, the Person, the Being, is life, enlivening us as we freely accept Him. "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly", Jn 10:10.

                        4. Our own condition is always by night in this life.

                                    a At first our night is simple ignorance. We do not know that we are sinful, needing redemp�tion, nor that Jesus has saved us from sin. As we dispel this initial darkness by accepting Christ, the light of the world, we begin to enjoy His presence. This joy is divine consolation for our separation from God. We thrive on this experience of God's loving care. God rewards our efforts to accept Him with floods of light and pleasure in His presence. But we can become attached to consolation. We can prefer it to God Himself. If we pig-out on the consolation of God, we ignore the God of consolation. So it is not good for us to have this consolation alone. It keeps us from God.

                                    b. Besides keeping us from God, consolation becomes a base-line experi�ence. We become so familiar with consolation that we take it for granted. Then it no longer delights us. It is just the same old same-old. See Kavanaugh pp 122-125, where John refers to preferring consolation as a "spiritual sweet-tooth". We become spiritual sugar-freaks, seeking the "high" instead of God. We prefer feeling exalted over God to God Himself. This collapse into self-seeking is the enemy of the Cross of Christ, p 122. We might pursue consolation, striving to attain it by wild behavior. We need another dose of darkness to purge this selfish gimmie-pig approach to life. So the darkness descends, both because we need to be weaned from pleasure, and because we accommodate to consolation. Our eyes get used to the brilliant light of God, and we can hang up right there on that wonderful experience. But we need to seek further enlightenment.

                                    c. We progress in a personal rhythm which is not the same for any two people. God calls us to more profound experience of Himself. To progress all the way to God, we must get beyond superficial feelings. So St. John explains the dark night of the senses, 55-389. This is our personal experience of loss when our attachment to sensory delights dies. We can fight this passage, try to maintain our enjoyment of sensory input, but then we lose God. This is not a good trade because God is much more enjoyable than sensory experience. By agreeing to forsake sensory pleasure, we emerge from this dark night into brilliant day, overcoming another dark period. In our poem's metaphor, we pass through another dry spell into abundant water.

                                    d. But we get used to that brilliance and fountain also. It becomes pass� for us, since it is not yet God Himself. Only God suffices for us. We discover that our advance from sensory delights into intellectual ecstasies grows tiresome as well. Then we enter the dark night of the soul, 304-5, 343. It is good to advance, because we will not be happy with merely intellectual pleasures. But it is hard for us to forsake them for the eternal, infinite delights of God Himself. When we finish this struggle, we emerge into brighter light still, and more abundant fountains of living water. We advance step by step. There are always more steps to take, until we die. Death is the final step. Each step is from darkness to light and from dust to water.

                                    e. Once we emerge from the dark night of the soul, we firmly commit to God. We now unite with His infinite Goodness, and delight in Him alone. But we usually have an incomplete concept of God. After all, God is infinite, and we are finite. So our incomplete concept needs completion. But we love that partial concept, so he hate to give it up. Losing it is painful. This is the night of God. John is famous for saying "*nada*" = nothing. By comparison to creatures, God is so super-excellent that if creatures are something, then God is nothing. Rather God is the real something, next to which creatures are nothing. But as God approaches, He is so immense, so infinitely good, that we cannot fit Him into creation at all. God�s light looks like darkness to us. To accept His complete light, we must remove our limiting concepts. So God purifies us of false concepts of Him.

                                    f. As long as we are alive, we have not yet attained the perfection of love which God wants us to achieve. Therefore, if we agree, He continually purifies us until death, when we perfect our choice of God. St. John compresses all this experience into symbols in this poem. The entire process is by faith, through a glass darkly, as if by night. See 1 Cor 13:12

**III. John's Life: sketch**

            A. Now that we have heard from John, to get some sense of what he is all about, we can examine his life, followed by his chronology.

                        1. His father, Gonzalo, was a wealthy silk merchant. He met Catalina Alvarez, a poor silk-weaver, in Medina del Campo. Their love was unusually spiritual, surviving even Gonzalo's parents� disapproval. When they married in 1529, the rich parents disinherited Gonzalo, who then had to work hard at the weaver's trade. Poverty could not distract Gonzalo from his beloved Catalina, with whom he had three sons. Juan was the youngest, born in 1542, probably June 24. Catalina cared for Gonzalo during two years of painful illness, which was so expensive that they fell into debt. Gonzalo died anyway, leaving Catalina exhausted, with 3 little boys to raise. She requested assistance from Gonzalo's relatives, who sent her from one to another without any help. She courageously worked long hours to earn meager support for her sons. In poverty as deep as her love, the boys learned to rely upon God's infinite loving care. Unlike the bubbly St. Teresa of Avila, John said nothing about himself in his writings, so we rely upon his friends for this information about his early life. See Kavanaugh pp 15-33.

                        2. His mother sought help from his paternal relatives in Arevalo, Toledo, Torri�jos and Galvez. Unsuccessful, she settled in Medina del Campo to weave silk. John suffered malnutrition, so he failed to grow to full stature. For a few years, his mother sent him to a day orphanage where Augustinian nuns fed and catechized poor children. John�s fervor was outstanding, so the nuns selected him to be one of their altar boys, serving some 5-6 hours per day in clean-up, preparation, and at Mass itself. He also apprenticed in carpen�try. Evidently John was a very active child, since he also apprenticed at tailoring, painting and sculpture. Providential�ly, John could manage all the main jobs required to build and maintain monasteries. Later, he showed architectural talent as well, designing and con�structing bridges and buildings. But his main interest was contemplation = deep prayer, living in God's holy presence, and carrying on a continuous conversation with God.

                        3. John's talent and hard work attracted Don Alonso Alvarez, who hired John to work at the hospital for plague-victims. John was so excellent at comprehending needs, and so quick to meet them, that Don Alonso paid his way to the Jesuit college, or high school, 1559-63. Here John learned linguistics and religion, becoming expert at Spanish and Latin under the direction of Fr. Juan Bonifacio, SJ, who employed the text of Nebrida, the foremost linguist of the time. John also learned Greek, with its additional nuances of meaning expressed in additional conjugations and declensions. This remarkable prepa�ration enabled John to write the most excellent poetry ever composed in Spanish. John�s way of expressing Spanish basically defined the Castilian language.

                        4. Don Alonzo wanted John to be a priest for the plague hospital, so he offered to pay for priestly studies. But John realized that his calling was to contemplative life, so he joined the Carmelites at the age of 20, in 1563. He took the religious name of John of St. Matthew. His experiences with the Cross, later, made him John of the Cross. His novitiate was uneventful, or at least unreported, so we find John next at Salamanca, in 1564. He lived at the Carmelite monastery of San Andres while attending classes at the university. See p 17 for some of his professors and course-work. He studied theology at the Carmelite College, with some courses from the university. So successful was John that he became prefect of students, teaching and publicly debating theological topics. Ordained a priest in 1567, he sang his first Mass at Medina del Campo some 3-4 months later. Perhaps this was his first public Mass, but it is hard to imagine him waiting so long.

                        5. A very private man, John was so much in love with God that he spoke of nothing else unless pressed to engage in practicalities. He wrote incidentally, either in prison or in response to requests. He lavished most of his time upon prayer. So he was a fabulous spiritual director. Between his own pursuit of God and assisting others in theirs, he had no time for other things. So John was never popular. People avoided him because he did not encourage their frivolities nor entertain them himself. He had only one friend at Salamanca: Fr. Pedro. Yet he was especially tender to everyone he met, in his gentle serene way. People knew that they could rely upon him to help them get to God, but most people were not ready to go to God. Though he was very amiable, he was very strict, and unrelenting in loving God. He was "overheated" by common standards, and best left alone. He was happy alone without humans because he was alone with God.

                        6. At Medina for his first Mass, John met St. Teresa. She immed-iately saw his holiness, and loved him deeply. Though he was some 25 years younger, St. Teresa wanted him to be her spiritual director. This fantastic arrangement indicates how holy he was: a freshly minted priest telling an accomplished contemplative how to live. St. Teresa showed her admiration: "I beg you to talk to this Fr. and help him, for though he is small of stature, I believe he is great with God. We will miss him...God leads him by the hand. ... Though I have been quite vexed with him, he had never showed the least imperfec�tion". She gushed: "You have John, a divine heavenly man. ... I have not found another in all of Castile. ... Great treasure: open your soul to him."

                        7. All who so opened their souls to him found him to be a fount of God's love and care. They naturally yielded to him, loved him, delighting in his love and knowledge of God. He was God�s unique gift to all. Especially helpful to distressed souls, he could penetrate their confusion, bringing peace to them. He was the "light of God" for souls mired in selfishness. He illuminated their darkness, consoled them, and encouraged them to pursue God. He never expressed his inner thoughts/feelings directly, still we know more about them than we do for any other saint. This is because he probed the depths of the human soul to help others. His writing for others reveals him in his depths. He is entirely open to God and to us. Though extraordinarily present to us, he mystifies us by his pres�ence. In this way, John is like his Creator, Whose approach consoles us while confound�ing us by His immensity. He is a clear channel of God. So he brings us closer to all those who love God. He helps us be friends with other saints on the way to being friends with God. From John we can get surprisingly close to the Trinity. God is our ground, our source, our very being. Sin, espe�cially Original Sin, distorts the simple unity of Creator with creature. So we must transcend layer after layer of sin to recognize God's presence to us.

            You can find much more in Kavanaugh, but this sketch will do for now. His spiritual development was profound, so he could assist others in their journey to God.

**Summary: Chronology of Juan de Yepes y Ibarra**:

1542   Born in Fonteveros, perhaps June 24.  Shortly after, his father died.

1548   Moved from Fontiveros to Arevalo.

1551   Moved from Arevalo to Medina del Campo.

1559-63  Studied Humanities with the Jesuits in Medina.

1563   Aged 21, he entered the Carmelites in Medina.

1564-68 Studied philosophy and theology at Salamanca

1567   Ordained priest in Salamanca; sang his first mass in Medina.

 "     Met St. Teresa (Sept-Oct), who recruited him for the Reformed Carmelites.

1568   Finished his Salamanca studies; returned to Medina

 "    Aug. 9 went with St. Tereas to Valladolid; remained until September's end.

 "          In October he founded the Carmel of Duruelo.

 "          Nov. 28 he began the reform of Carmelite men at Duruelo.

1568-71 Novice-master (trainer) at Duruelo, Mancera and Pastrana.

1571   Jan. 25 assisted St. Teresa in founding Alba de Tormes.

 "          April: became Rector of Alcala', the first discalced college.

1572-77 Confessor and vicar of the Incarnation convent in Avila.

1574   March 19 assisted St. Teresa in founding the convent at Segovia.

1577 Dec. 2:unreformed Carmelites kidnapped John; imprisoned him in Toledo.

1578   August: John escaped from prison, and left Toledo.

 "         October: leaders named John prior of the Carmelite monastery: in Jaen.

1579   June 14 he founded the college at Baeza, and became its first Rector.

1581   March: participated in the Chapter in Alcala'; elected a major leader.

1582   Jan 20 established a monastery in Granada; became its first prior.

1583   May: reelected Prior of Granada.

1585   Feb. 17 founded a monastery in Malaga.

 "        May: elected 2nd in command of Spain, & provincal of Andal�ucia.

1586   May 18 founded a monastery in Cordoba.

 "          August: founded a monstery in Madrid; served there as chief.

 "          Oct. 12 founded a monastery in Manchuela, near Jaen.

            Dec. 18 founded a monastery in Caravaca, near Murcia.

1587   Jan. or Feb.: transferred a monastery to Bujalance

 "          April: Chapter of Valladolid: finished serving as assistant for Spain; prior of Granada again.

1588   June: Madrid Chapter elected him 1st in command and Prior of Segovia.

1591   June: Madrid Chapter accepted his resignation of administrative duties.

 "          Aug. 10 the Prior asked John to be sub-prior in La Penuela, near Jaen.

 "          Sep. 28 John became too sick to remain; carried to Ubeda, near Jaen.

 "          Dec. 14 John died in Ubeda at midnight, aged 49.

1593   May: his body brought from Ubeda to Segovia.

1618   His complete writings were published in Alcala.

1675   Jan. 25: Clement X beatified him.

1726   Dec. 27: Benedict XIII canonized him.

1738   His feastday became common throughout the universal church.

1926   Aug. 24: Pius XI declared him Doctor of the Church.

1927   Oct. 11: his incorrupt body was found in his sepulcher.

1952   March 21: Spain proclaimed him Patron of Spanish Poets.

             B. John's Writings are primarily poems, and commentary, though he wrote a few instruc�tions. Many of his friends burned his letters because his enemies tried to denounce him with them.

            Major works: Ascent of Mount Carmel; Dark Night; Spiritual Canticle; Living Flame of Love.

            Minor works: The Precautions; Counsels to a Religious on How to Teach Perfection; Sayings of Light and Love; Maxims and Counsels; Censure and Opinion on the Spirit and the Attitude in Prayer of a Discalced Carme�lite Nun; Letters.

            Poems: The Dark Night; The Spiritual Canticle; The living Flame of Love; Stanzas Concerning an Ecstasy Experienced in High Contemplation; Stanzas of the Soul that Suffers with Longing to See God; More Stanzas Applied to Spiritual Things; More Stanzas Applied to Spiritual Things of Christ and the Soul; Song of the Soul that Rejoices in Knowing God Through Faith; Romances: On The Gospel; On the Communion Between the Three Persons; On Creation (4 poems); The Incarnation (2 poems); The Birth; A Romance on the Psalm "By the Waters of Babylon"; Commentary Applied to Spiritual Things "Without Support and With Support"; Commentary Applied to Spiritual Things "Not for all of Beauty"; Del Verbo Divino; the Sum of Perfection.

            C. Sources to Consult

                        1. The standard work in English is E. Allison Peers, ed; Complete Works. But Keran Kavanaugh; The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross; Institute of Carmelite Studies; 1979 is more readable for us. These are reliable complete translated collections.

                        2. In Spanish, Frederico Louis Salvador; Vida y Obra is very good. There are several in Spanish, including the B.A.C. edition: Vida y Obras de San Juan de la Cruz; Criso�gono de Jesus, Mattias del Nino Jesus, & Lucinio del SS Sacramento.

                        3. Selected works include those of the Paulist Press. Roy Campbel provides inspired translations of several poems. Each major work has been published separately.

                        4. Bibliographies can be sugary: Crisogono de Jesus Sacramentario, translated by Pond: Life of St. John of the Cross; 1958; and Bruno de Jesus Maria; Life of St. John of the Cross; 1932. To correct this tendency, Richard P. Hardy does a life which is perhaps under-inspiring and too factual. Gerard Brennan; St John of the Cross, His Life and Poetry; 1973, is a better balance. Ross Collings; John of the Cross; Liturgical Press is demanding but good. Federico Ruiz; Mystico y Magister is good, but in Spanish. A summary of this longer book, translated into English, is St. John of the Cross, His Poetry & Teaching. Ruth Bur�rows, who is a contemporary mystic herself, wrote Ascent of Love, the Spiritual Teaching of St. John of the Cross; London: Dartmond, Ladon & Todd; 1989

            D. John's "O Flame of Love" Space limitations require consecutive instead of side-by-side translations. I skipped the French translation entirely.

                        1. Poem: Stanzas of the Soul in Intimate Communication of Union of the Love of God

                        Llama de amor viva

            !Oh llama de amor viva

            Que tierrnamente hieres

            De mi alma el mas profundo centro!

            Pues ya no eres esquiva,

            Acaba ya, si quieres.

            Rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro.

            !Oh cauterio suave!

            !Oh regalada llaga!

            !Oh mano blanda!  !Oh toque delicado,

            Que a vida eterna sabe

            Y toda deuda paga!

            Matando, muerte en vida la has trocado.

              !Oh lamparas de fuego,

              En cuyos resplandores

              Las profundas cavernas del sentido,

              Que estaba obscuro y ciego,

              Con extranas primores

            Calor y luz dan junto a su querido!

              !Cuan manso y amoroso

              Recuerdas en mi seno,

              Donde secretamente solo moras;

              Y en tu aspirar sabroso,

              De bien y gloria lleno,

            Cuan delicadamente me enamoras!

**Oh, Living Flame of Love**, Translated by Peers:

                        Oh, living flame of love That tenderly woundest my soul in

                                    its deepest centre,

                        Since thou art no longer oppressive, perfect me now if it be

                                    thy will,  Break the web of this sweet encounter.

                        Oh, sweet burn!  Oh, delectable wound!  Oh, soft hand!

                                    Oh delicate touch

                        That savors of eternal life and pays every debt!  In slaying,

                                    thou hast changed death into life.

                        Oh, Lamps of fire, In whose splendors the deep caverns of

                                    sense which were dark and blind

                        With strange brightness Give heat and light together to their

                                    Beloved!

                        How gently and lovingly thou awakenest in my bosom, Where

                                    thou dwellest secretly and alone!

                        And in thy sweet breathing, full of blessing and glory, How

                                    delicately thou inspirest my love!

**Peer's version in the Appendix:                         My try: O Love-life's Flame**

O living flame of love                                                    O love-life's flame

That, burning, dost assail                                             Whose tender wound

My inmost soul with tenderness untold,                       Ignites my soul

Since thou dost freely move                                         Scorn me no more,

Deign to consume the veil                                            But if You please,

Which sunders this sweet converse that we hold      Pierce through the web of [Your sweet love.]

O burn that searest never!                                         O sweetest sear!

O wound of deep delight!                                           O sumptuous scorch!

O gentle hand! O touch of love supernal                    O tender touch!

That quick'nest life for ever,                                        Eternal life

Put'st all my woes to flight,                                         Which pays my debts!

And, slaying, changest death to life eternal!    And loves all death to life above.

And, O, ye lamps of fire,                                              O lamps of fire

In whose resplendent light                                         Whose splendors hide

The deepest caverns where the senses meet,           Deep caves of sense

Erst steep'd in darkness dire,                                     All blind and dark,

Blaze with new glories bright                                      Surprised by dawn

And to the lov'd one give both light and heat!       With warmth and light for my [Beloved.]

How tender is the love                                                How loving-mild

Thou wak'nest in my breast                                        Heart's memory

When thou, alone and secretly, art there!                  Alone You hide

Whispering of things above,                                       Sav'ring your breath

Most glorious and most blest,                                     With glory filled,

How delicate the love thou mak'st me bear!        Inspiring me by del'cate Love.

             My translation scans like John's, and imitates his passion. Though I haven't John�s mystical depths, I hope to convey his meaning as well as his fire. I resisted referring to God as "O tender torch", though I believe He is just that. Words are, as John told Ana de Penalo�sa, inade�quate to the experience of transforming union with God. Yet they help us grope for images and inspira�tion as we move past words, rhyme, reason and symbols, to God. John called Him *Nada* precisely because God is so different, so much truer, better, and more beautiful than His creatures. Trained Thomist that he was, John knew that knowing is intentional identity with the known. So, in the intentional order of being, there is no differ�ence between knower and known. Similarly, love is intentional identity of the will. Knowing and love are not actually separate, but only virtual�ly distinct. Therefore real human activity is one know�ing/loving union. Everyone intensely experi�ences this union. But it is so personal that we can�t express it. It is invisible, beyond sensation. So we have no words for it. Instead, we talk about what we can see every day: burning wood. At first, fire makes wood smoke, and give off steam. Once fire drives off enough water, wood bursts into flame. Flame further reduces wood, until all dross is consumed. Then the coals and the fire are one.

**Commentary from John of the Cross**, translated by Peers, vol 3, p 19-21.

            At last the soul feels itself to be entirely enkindled in Divine union. Spiritual senses fill up with God, their object, so all spiritual feelings are at their peak. Spiritual vision is flooded with light, hearing with sound, smelling with odors, tasting with flavors, and touch with tactile and warmth spiritual sensations. As these spiritual effects cascade over the soul, it experiences more relief and joy than a parched man plunged into torrents of fresh, cold, sweet water. God is so much better than water, and all other creatures, that comparisons fade to insignificance. The inner man, or soul is overwhelmed by torrents of spiritual satis�faction which far surpass sensation, but are like sensation because they vehe�mently absorb and transform us. Sufferings disappear into Divine union. Friends noted that St. John seemed unaware of suffering that would stun anyone else. As he suffered, he became more like Christ, Whose suffering expressed His infinite love.

            We are so close to bliss, or Beatific Vision, that we can almost break through, or let God break through our limits. Yet something hinders us; there is a veil which John calls a gossamer web, more airy than any spider could weave. It is vanishingly slight, yet sufficient to prevent us from attaining our infinite desire. Almost one with God, we languish, and groan to the love-flame Who is the Holy Spirit, yearning for Him to break the web which keeps us from Him. Though more violent than storm, quake and volcanic eruption, He Who is Love is also more gentle than any breeze, whisper and spark, I Kings 19:9-16. So we make bold to address Him: O love-life's flame

            �O� signifies awed surprise, an utterance forced from us by greatness surpassing our compre�hension, yet so loving that we must respond with affectionate exultation. We have no words for what the soul experiences as deep yearning and earnest supplication that Love will set the soul free of the web which separates it from Him Who kindles love-fire in the soul. That �O� is worth more than any spate of words or even deeds, more than all the soul has done in love apart from this transformation into Love, Who is God. As the habit surpass�es the act, and as the coal exceeds the flame, so does this �O� excel not-yet-transformed love. The Spirit Himself loves the Trinity by the soul in this transformation. God deifies man, making him into Love Himself.

                        2. John's commentary on �The Living Flame of Love�, Kavanaugh pp 569-649

                                    a. John calls the love he speaks of in this poem "of deeper quality and more perfect" than the love he addressed in previous poems. "As If By Night" is a poetical over�view of John's universe in simple poetry. This "Living Flame of Love" is the epitome of his poetical expression of love. Because it is short, we can deal with it efficiently, though we cannot comprehend all its meaning. Moreover, it is a fine preparation for his longer poems. Here John sings of total transformation, of God coming to the soul because the soul freely accepts God. In this freedom, God transforms the soul into God by acting there as God acts: praying. This is the ultimate in being real; the activity of God. When God prays to God in John's soul, John's soul become this prayer of God, therefore becomes God. This is the transformed state of spiritual marriage, p 569. John puts it this way, in Spiritual Canticle: "This spiritual mar�riage...is a total transfor�mation in the Beloved... It is accordingly the highest state attainable in this life," 22, 5. It is the point of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel, 2,5: the union of like�ness. What is happening here? His core experience is expressed in steps:

                                                1. As a thing is so does it act. God is acting in the soul as God acts. So the soul is acting as God. So the soul is God. The Logic is indubitable. However we obscure it by insisting on knowing how it happens. The poem is more accessible, but not entirely. Unless we allow God to act in us repeatedly, we do not have personal experience to back up John's experience. Therefore, what he says remains obscure. Whatever our present state, we desperately want God to divinize us. We are impatient for God to fill our infinite need. We yearn for Him, groan, as Paul says, Rom 6:22.

                                                2. God divinizes us by expanding our powers. He does not replace our powers. Therefore, we continue to breathe, digest lunch, and accomplish the regular round of physiological activities. John: "God now possesses the faculties as their complete Lord, because of their transformation in Him. And consequently it is He Who divinely moves and commands them according to His spirit and will. As a result the opera�tions are not different from those of God, but those the soul performs are of God and are divine opera�tions. Since he who is united with God is one spirit with Him, as St. Paul says [1Cor 6:7], the operations of the soul united with God are of the divine Spirit and are divine", p 570. This satisfaction submerges suffering. All becomes Love.

                                                3. God is entirely integrated, totally One. So His acts are Himself. There is no room in this transformed state for the soul to hang-up on creatures; to fall short of God Himself. There must be consistent will and determination to go beyond creatures to God before God will transform the soul into Himself. Without our free consent, God will not divinize us. But when we go for God, John says: "The intellect, will, and memory go out immediately toward God, and the affections, senses, desires, appetites, hope, joy, and all the energy from the first instant incline toward God, although ... the soul may not advert to the fact that she is working for Him", p 571.

                                                4. The only attachment which prevents the soul from perfect union with God is its connection to the body. Once loosed from the body, the soul in this trans�formed state goes directly to God. The web, or veil which John wanted to break in this poem, has three layers. Between freely accepting God's help and God's grace, two of them are broken by this transformation. Death rips the final separation, 571. Death is the ultimate suffering, but seen this way, suffering gets us to God, our Beloved, Who has pursued us from creating us, and now takes us to Himself.

                                                5. The transformed soul experiences this union continuously in its depths, but only momentarily in consciousness. John: "Thus in this soul in which neither any appe�tite nor other images or forms, nor any affections for created things, dwell, the Beloved dwells secretly with an embrace so much the closer, more intimate, and interior, the purer and more alone the soul is to everything other than God... Yet it is not secret to the soul itself that has attained this perfection, for within itself it has the experience of this intimate embrace. It does not, however, always experience these awakenings, for when the Beloved produces them, it seems to the soul that He is awakening in its heart, where before He remained as though asleep... He is usually there, in the embrace with His bride, as though asleep in the substance of the soul. And it is very well aware of Him and ordinarily enjoys Him. Were He always awake within it, communicating knowledge and love, it would already be in glory. For if, when He does waken, scarcely opening His eyes, He has such an effect on the soul, what would it be like were He ordinarily in it fully awake?" 572. John notes that the activity is the same, but here on earth the activity is like an act, momentary, rather than like a habit, constant. We aren�t familiar with habits, so John compares them to something more common: "The same difference between a habit and an act is between the transformation in love and the flame of love; it is like the difference between the wood that is on fire and the flame that leaps up from it, for flame is the effect of the fire that is present there. Hence we can compare the soul in its ordinary condition in this state of transformation of love to the log of wood that is ever immersed in fire, & the acts of this soul to the flame that blazes up from the fire of love", 572.

                                                            a. When we begin to catch the Living Flame of Love, we are like unseasoned wood: we sputter, sweat, and steam. Often our juices put out the fire. Then we must just dry up a bit before we can fire up again. This is our on-again - off-again stage.

                                                            b. When we are sufficiently seasoned, purged of water and sap, and more entirely wood, we can keep burning longer, like logs in fire. We need other logs to maintain that fire. Separate the logs, and they go out. This is our continuous love-with-group-help stage.

                                                            c. When we commit ourselves to accepting God's love, we become fire more completely. We no longer give off smoke, or flame, but we quiet down into a stage of integrity where the flame is more and more the wood. Finally, when the wood becomes coals, the flame and the wood are one. This is our integral or transformed stage.

                                                            d. John describes this stage: "...the soul is so inwardly trans�formed in the fire of love, and has received such quality from it that it is not merely united to this fire but produces within it a living flame...as the fire grows hotter and continues to burn, the wood becomes more incandescent and inflamed, even to the point of flaring up and shooting out flames from itself", 573. This flaring of the flame amounts to an actual union, very intense and deep in quality; the habitual state of the soul in this transformation resem�bles that of "glowing embers", and when the union becomes actual, the embers not merely glow but shoot forth a living flame. Coals are hotter than flame, shooting forth a "living" flame, which is more integrally flame than the visible ones. They are more of what fire is all about. By placing our hand near flames and coals, we feel that coals are hotter. This is the main reason for barbequing over coals.

                                                            e. God is Trinity, a loving community. So when God enters the soul, all three persons dwell there. God transforms us into Himself, so He transforms us into Trinity. John: the Trinity "inhabits the soul by divinely illumining its intellect with the wisdom of the Son, delighting its will in the Holy Spirit, and absorbing it powerfully and mightily in the delightful embrace of the Father's sweetness", 573. Throughout all this, we transform suffering by love.

                                    b. Stanza by stanza:

                                                1. So in love is the soul, that it pleads with God to rip the final veil so that the soul can be directly united with God. The soul longs for perfect glory.

                                                2. The soul glorifies the three Persons for their blessings, which are so much more valuable than the trials and tribulation of this life.

                                                3. The soul exalts in thanksgiving for God's revealing what He is like: lamps of fire providing both heat and light for the freezing and blind soul. God's gifts are worthy of God, so the soul can return them to God, like the child who uses money from dad to buy dad a present. God lifts us up to Himself by making us into Himself. This is how we become worthy of God.

                                                4. God's delicate love breathes in the soul, reviving it from the death of sin. God becomes continually at home in the soul, but only occasionally noticeable.

                                    c. Written for Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa, a widow in Granada, this poem aroused her interest so much that she asked him to explain it in detail. He did. The commentary is long. Do you want to investigate it?  Read Kavanaugh, 577-649.

                        E. John's poem: "**Dark Night**"

En una Noche oscura                                       One dark night

Con ansias en amores inflamada                     Fired with love's urgent longings

- !Oh dichosa ventura!-                                    - Ah, the sheer grace!-

Sali' sin ser notada,                                         I went out unseen,

Estando ya me casa sosegada.                       My house being now all stilled.

A oscuras, y segura                                         In darkness, and secure,

Por la secreta escala disfrazada                      By the secret ladder, disguised,

-Oh dichosa ventura!-                                      - Ah, the sheer grace!-

A oscuras y en celada,                                     In darkness and concealment,

Estando ya me casa sosegada.                       My house being now all stilled.

En la noche dichosa                                         On that glad night,

En secreto, que nadie me veia,                        In secret, for no one saw me,

Ni yo miraba cosa,                                            Nor did I look at anything,

Sin otra luz y guia                                             With no other light or guide

Sino la que en el corazon ardia.              Than the one that burned in my heart.

Aquesta me guiaba                                          This guided me

Mas cierto que la luz del mediodia,                More surely than the light of noon

A donde me esperaba                                      To where he waited for me

-Quien yo bien me sabia-                                 -Him I knew so well-

En parte donde nadie parecia.             In a place where no one else appeared.

!O noche que guiaste!                                     O guiding night!

!Oh noche amable mas que el alborada!     O night more lovely than the dawn!

Oh noche que juntaste                                    O night that has united

Amado con amada,                                          The Lover with His beloved,

Amada en el amado transformada.         Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

En me pecho florido,                                       Upon my flowering breast.

Que entero para el solo se guardaba,           Which I kept wholly for Him alone,

Alli quedo' dormido,                                        There He lay sleeping,

Y Yo le regalaba,                                             And I caressing Him

Y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.    There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

El aire de la almena,                                When the breeze blew from the turret

Cuando ya sus cabellos esparcia,                    Parting His hair,

Con su mano serena                                        He wounded my neck

En mi cuello heria,                                            With his gentle hand,

Y todos mis sentidos suspendia.                      Suspending all my senses.

Quedeme y olvideme,                                   I abandoned and forgot myself,

El rostro recline' sobre el Amado,                  Laying my face on my Beloved;

Ceso' todo, y dejeme,                        All things ceased; I went out from myself,

Dejando me cuidado,                                     Leaving my cares

Entre las azucenas olvidado.                         Forgotten among the lilies.

**F. Commentary**

                        1. Summary: our expansion of John's poems from "Although by Night" to "The Living Flame" brings us naturally to the "Dark Night" of love's anguished advance. Suffering is central.

                                    a. Probably "Dark Night" is an integral part of the Ascent of Mt. Carmel, since it is the purification without which we cannot reach the summit.  Kava�naugh, 55.

                                    b. What is happening? Purification. God eliminates our distractions and anxieties, our wild longings for inadequate creatures, and our rebellion against Him. So we suffer.

                                    c. This love-poem expresses how God begins to supply our desperate need for Him by calming us down when we need it, and exhorting us on when we need to move.

                        2. Purification of every one of our abilities enables us to activate these abilities fully by focusing them upon God. Every sense, external and internal, our intellects and wills are faculties which God made for us to apply to Him. The residue of Original Sin sits upon these activities like soot to be cleaned out. Since we cling to this soot, we suffer as God cleanses us of it.

                        3. Standard operating equipment for humans includes receiving and responding. You can connect these two acts with a bracket (not supplied). Receiving includes appearances and meanings (use another bracket). Appearances can be external or internal (bracket). External appearances are the five familiar senses (bracket). Internal appearances are: memory, imagination, unifying sense, and evaluating sense (bracket). Similar barackets apply to responses to appearances and meanings.

St. John understood all these acts, and notes that we need them, but need to purify them. His poems and the main commentary called Ascent of Mount Carmel recount how to give these acts to God, Who purifies them, and returns them to us for improved use.

seeing

hearing

external

smelling

                                                              tasting

                       appearances: senses                     touching

                                                     memory

         receive                            internal       imagination

                                                            unifying

                                                             evaluating

our acts               meaning: intellect

                     appearances: emotions

          respond

                     meaning: will

                      4. We show our determination by actively purifying our faculties. Then God can perfect this purification by taking us where we would not go on our own. If we accept this divine purifi�cation, then God tunes it to our needs.  He is the Physician who prescribes for us exactly what we need.  As we pray, God heals our disunity, our wounds, and we enter more completely into prayer.  We progress to genuine contemplation, though suffering. Suffering advances us to God, if accepted.

                        5. In contemplation, we gradually recognize how pure God is. To be like Him, we must become increasingly pure. This purity is spiritual, so it�s all about knowing and loving. To know is to be identical with, so we strive to be more like God by understanding Him better. God is infinite Truth, so we can strive for all eternity, advancing all the while. This is one aspect of heavenly bliss: our infinite increase of knowledge of infinite Truth. Similarly, loving is identifying, and God's infinite Goodness can keep us loving at full blast for all eternity. No one can be bored in this heavenly process of continual identification with God. But separation from creatures is painful.

                        6. Here below, while separated from God, we begin this unifying activity by leaving creatures to pursue God. We trade in the poor imitations for the real thing. When we concentrate upon this profitable exchange, we proceed rapidly. But we tend to lose track of what we are doing, to prefer the creature right here to the Creator far away. Then we cause ourselves tremendous pain by clinging to creatures. This is the agony of the Dark Night. We split our wills, we split ourselves, by trying to have immediate satisfaction of lower desires. We discourage ourselves. We paralyze ourselves, as John remarks: "like one imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move, nor see, nor feel any favor from heaven or earth", p 57.

                        7. If we hang on to creatures, we can�t advance to God. If God provides purgation, and we gladly accept it, we do advance. But "God so weans and recollects the appetites that they cannot find satisfaction in any of their objects. God proceeds thus so that by withdrawing the appetites from other objects and recollecting them in Himself, He strength�ens the soul and gives it capacity for this strong union of love, which He begins to accord by means of this purgation", 58.

                        8. John explicitly writes for all people, contemplatives or active: "Our goal will be, with God's help, to explain all these points, so that everyone who reads this book will in some way discover the road that he is walking along, and the one he ought to follow if he wants to reach the summit of this mount... But if some people still find difficulty in understanding this doctrine, it will be due to my deficient knowledge and awk�ward style, for the doctrine itself is good and very necessary", p 59.

                        9. The Ascent of Mt. Carmel is a commentary on the "Dark Night". John develops three processes: 1. killing our disordered desires; 2. our faith-journey; 3. God's purification of our souls by giving Himself. His goodness fills up our need for goodness.

                        10. John knows well that evil is the absence of good. Evil is not something to be fought. It can't be eliminated by removing something. Whatever is, is good. Evil is our ache for the good which belongs in us. Our most fundamental ache is for God Himself. Our major evil is that we are without Him. We are without control of our senses, exterior and interior, so we must purge them of defects, purify them, or fill them with the absent good�ness. We can't overemphasize this difference, because we confuse good and evil. When we attempt to eliminate evil we usually eliminate good instead. The final condition is worse than the first. Many of our first attempts fail.

                        11. Line-by-line: 289-389 St. John of the Cross� commentary in Ascent of Mt. Carmel:

                                    a. "One dark night" refers to the darkness of faith in which we stumble around searching for God, our beloved. However much we see, we never see enough until we are completely united with God. So, in life, it is always night.

                                    b. "Fired with love's urgent long�ings" means that our motivation is pas�sionate love for God. We do not identify our urges properly. Instead, we think we must have this creature. When we get it, it disappoints us, even disgusts us, as it is not what we really want. Nothing but God will do. Only God satisfies us. Only God�s love for us, and ours for God, works.

                                    c. "Ah, the sheer grace" accounts for the source of this love: God alone. There is no actual movement in us which is not His gift. Our entire being is God's gift to us. Everything is grace. Until we accept the reality of God's gifts, we totally miss the point of life.

                                    d. Following grace, cooperating with God, we advance from our lumpen, sodden, hang-up in the body. "I went out unseen" expresses our going out of mere bodily interests. We no longer let the body monopolize our attention. We escape corporeal tyranny. It�s painful, but good.

                                    e. "My house being now all stilled" expresses control over our body. We have stilled our demanding appetites, which scream for things they do not really want, like kids consuming junk food constantly without nourishment. When we quiet them, peace floods us.

                                    f. "In the darkness and secure" means that faith is a reliable guide.

                                    g. "By the secret ladder, disguised" calls to mind that the ascent of faith is secret to most people; it is the ladder we use to emerge from our clamorous body into peace beyond its nagging gripes and never-ending desires. But we go disguised because no one recognizes the new "me" who emerges from the madness of corporeal confusion. I am no longer the disheveled scrap of a man I was. The new me is calm, in control, clothed in divine robes which hide my old self. But the change is interior: I am really renewed. It�s a struggle, but by suffering we advance.

                                    h. "Sheer grace" is God's freely delivered gift, not mine.

                                    i. "In darkness and concealment" hides this inner change from the bodily eye. Our neighbors do not notice any difference. We are not taller, stronger, more graceful in appearance; only in reality. Nor can the devil see our improvement; thank God.

                                    j. "Stilled" reiterates that we have filled up what was wanting in our clamorous senses; we have focused upon God, cured our inner hunger, so our appetites quiet.

                                    k. "On that glad night" sings the soul's joy in God.

                                    l. "In secret..." expresses how inner this change is.

                                    m. "Nor did I look at anything": focus upon God.

                                    n. "With no other light or guide" affirms faith alone.

                                    o. "Than the one that burned in my heart": God's love transforming.

                                    p. "Guided me more surely than light of noon": no missteps.

                                    q. "To where he waited for me": guided me to God: to His context, or place.

                                    r. "Him I knew so well": God is more than we can comprehend, but we know God best of all our knowledge. Thus the core self-hatred of an atheist is self-cancelling.

                                    s. "In a place...no one else...": at bottom, alone with God. This expresses the dark night of the soul, when creatures no longer distract us from God: clean our minds.

                                    t. "O guiding night!": God's love, shining so bright that we cannot see, guides us into closer union with Him. As God's love fills up what is wanting in us, we improve.

                                    u. "O night more lovely than the dawn" means that it is really more light.

                                    v. "O night that had united L & B": God unites by what seems to separate.

                                    w. "Transforming beloved into Lover": God transforms us into Him.

                                    x. "Upon my flowering breast": my developing person: like a pubescent girl.

                                    y. "Kept for Him alone": faithful unto the only one Who satisfies.

                                    z. "There He lay sleeping": God is our inmost being, but less active.

                                    a. "I caressing Him": responding to His love; cooperating; making love.

                                    b. "In breeze from fanning cedars": all creation assists; makes love.

                                    c. "Breeze blew from turret": from all sides, all-encompassing; fresh, creative.

                                    d. "Parting His hair": serving to enhance God; show His glory; praise Him.

                                    e. "He wounded my neck": He opened me up; thrilled me; made me His.

                                    f. "With gentle hand": in the tenderest way.

                                    g. "Suspending all my senses": rapturing me, carrying me away.

                                    h. "I abandoned and forgot myself": out of body and self, into God alone.

                                    i. "Face on Beloved": nothing else matters: have my destiny; achieved.

                                    j. "All things ceased: went out from self": no more distraction; reality.

                                    k. "Leaving my cares": abandoning all false objectives, needs, wants...

                                    l. "Forgotten among the lilies": lost like aches & pains when in love.

            G. John's Ascent of Mt. Carmel expands the "Dark Night".

                        1. It�s a helpful summary, so it will be last in this text, to crown our survey of John's spirituality.

                        2. Ascent is John's doctrine in its most complete form. He answers questions from his spiritual children. He develops specifics of accepting God's unfailing love. We can�t examine its details, but recommend that you read it after you have mastered the outline John presents in poems.

            H. John's Poem: "Stanzas of the Soul That Suffers with Longing to See God", trans. by Peers

            Vivo sin vivir en me,                                I live, but not in myself,

            Y de tal manera espero,                         And I have such hope

            Que muero porque no muero.                That I die because I do not die.

1. en mi yo no vivo ya,                        1. I no longer live within myself

Y sin Dios vivir no puedo;                        And I cannot live without God,

Pues sin el y sin me quedo,                     For if I have neither Him nor myself

Este vivir que's sera?                               What will life be?

Mil muertes se me hara',                          It will be a thousand deaths,

Muriendo porque no muero.                     And dying because I do not die.

            2. Esta vida que yo vivo                          2. This life that I live

            Es privacion de vivir;                                    Is no life at all,

            Y asi, es continuo morir                                And so I die continually

            Hasta que viva contigo.                                Until I live with You;

            Oye, me Dios, lo que digo,                            Hear me, my God;

            Que esta vida no la quiero;                          I do not desire this life,

            Que muero porque no muero.              I am dying because I do not die.

3. Estando absente de ti,                       3. When I am not with You

Que vida puedo tener,                            What life can I have

Sino muerte padescer,                            Except to endure

La mayor que nunca vi?                          The bitterest death known?

Lastima tengo de mi,                               I pity myself

Pues de suerte persevero,                      For I go on and on living,

Que muero porque no muero.                 Dying because I do not die.

            4. El pez que del agua sale,                     4. A fish that leaves the water

            Aun de alivio no carece,                               Has this relief:

            Que en la muerte que padece,                    The dying it endures

            A fin la muerte le vale,                                 Ends at last in death.

            Que muerte habra' que se iguale                 What death can equal

            A mi vivir lastimero,                                       My pitiable life?

            Pues si mas vivo mas muero? For the longer I live, the longer my dying.

5. Cuando me pienso aliviar                      5. When I try to find relief

De verte en el Sacramento,                         Beholding You in the Sacrament

Haceme mas sentimiento                            I find this greater sorrow:

El no poderte gozar.                                   I cannot enjoy You wholly.

Todo es para mas penar,                            All things are affliction

Por no verte como quiero                           Since I do not see You as I desire,

Y muero porque no muero.                         And I die because I do not die.

            6. Y si me gozo, Senor,                             6. And if I rejoice, Lord,

            Con esperanza de verte,                           In the hope of seeing You,

            En ver que puedo perderte                        Yet seeing I can lose You

            Se me dobla mi dolor;                                 Doubles my sorrow.

            Viviendo en tanto pavor                              Living in such fear

            Y esperando como espero,                         And hoping as I hope,

            Muerome puourque no muero.                   I die because I do not die.

7.Sacame de aquesta muerte                     7. Lift me from this death,

Mi Dios, y dame la vida;                                  My God, and give me life;

No me tengas impedida                                  Do not hold me bound

En este lazo tan fuerte;                                 With these so strong bonds;

Y mi mal es tan entero                                   I am so wholly miserable

Que muero porque no muero.                       That I die because I do not die.

            8. Llorare mi muerte ya,                               8. I will cry out for death

            Y lamentare' me vida                                       And mourn my living

            En tanto que detenida                                    While I am held here

            Pour mis pecados esta'                                    For my sins.

            Oh mi Dios, quando sera'                                 O my God, when will it be

            Cuando yo diga de vero:                                  That I can truly say:

            Vivo ya pourque no muero?                  Now I live because I do not die?

            Among the many ways we can express suffering, it�s hard to surpass: �I die because I do not die�. St. John says that he suffers intense longing for God. He is so eager for God, so in love with Him, so responsive to His love, that he cannot wait to be one with Him. But this union comes only through death. Death has not yet happened. So he�s dying to die, and be united. So great is his love that he must fulfill it as soon as possible. He compares dying, our greatest suffering, to death, our passage to God. He�s so eager to be with God, that it kills him that he has not yet died. This puzzles us. We have to wonder about it for a while to comprehend it. When we do, we marvel at its perfection. Given how limited words are, we can hardly improve on this expression.

            Throughout our journey to God, we make ourselves miserable. Sin is our greatest misery because it is self-imposed suffering, with no benefits at all. It completely misses the mark we set for it to attain. A simple example is a lie. A good job requires a college degree. If Ed does not have the required degree, he cannot have that job. If he lies that he has the degree, he gets the job. Then he discovers that he can�t do the required work. He worries that someone will discover that he can�t do the work. Making himself miserable in this way horrifies him. He also worry that someone will discover his lie. He made himself a liar to attain that job. But he failed to really get it. For a while, he has the external shell of that job. His lie made everything worse for him, and he agonizes over what will happen next. Before he collects his first paycheck, he pays more in psychological distress than any money could repay.

            From this simple example, we see the common dynamic of all sin. It all fails to gain what we wanted to gain, and leaves us less than we were before the sin. Sin does not work. Before long, we realize that we should reject sin, in all its forms. But we are afraid to do that. In the case of lying to get the job, if we reject the lie, we lose the job. Along with this loss, we lose respect, reputation, and future opportunities. The cost of this lie far exceeds any benefits we might have gained.

            Therefore, we see we suffer when rejecting sin. But great benefits follow this rejection. As we reject sin, we accept God. This is a good trade. Athletes express a similar trade as: �No pain, no gain�. Their gain is small and short. Their athletic prowess lasts only a few years. Our gain in accepting God is eternal. Moreover, suffering that produces results inspires us. You have seen that when you sweated out solutions to serious problems. All that pain/effort was worth it. True, you do not attain God immediately, but you take steps toward Him. These steps are more delightful than any sin. Moreover, you are a better person for each rejection of sin. So you gain your improvement immediately, and gain God ultimately. This realization diminished suffering. It�s the first step that St. John recommends.

            But rejection alone is not enough. You must target the right things to reject. You reject many painful things. Sometimes this is the right thing to do, and advances you to God. But rejecting the wrong pain is often more suffering for you than the pain itself. Your rejection multiplies the suffering. You notice that we humans add to our pain and suffering by willing against the pain. Many folks find this additional suffering unbearable. It adds to life�s inevitable pain. It provides another layer of misery that would not be there if we did not fight the pain.

            This willful rejection emphasizes our sinful condition. It is like banging our heads against the wall. Since we add this suffering ourselves, we are totally responsible for it. Then we make things worse by attacking ourselves for adding this suffering. This downward spiral can continue for years. Each decision to hate ourselves for hating ourselves makes everything worse.

            We get so discouraged and characterized by self-hate, that we can�t imagine anyone loving us. If no one loves us, then God can�t love us, and we lose our whole reason for existence. All this misery is an illusion that we impose. These days, we would say that we create it. It�s our baby, and we refuse to reject it. This is horrible suffering. It has no purpose, no benefit, and it�s all ours.

            If we perfect this self-hate, we experience hell. But we can reject this ultimate suffering. It takes some effort, but the more we reject this self-hate, the more open we are to God�s love. St. John helps people emerge from this self-destruction. He realizes how difficult emergence is, and comes to help us. He works with our details. He accompanies us in our misery. His letters give many examples of assisting people to convert from hatred to love.

            It�s true that this conversion takes effort, and that effort can be suffering. But this suffering is well worth it. By converting to love from hate, we remove the added layer of suffering that we impose. For many people, this removes the major suffering. So we realize that a little suffering eliminates a lot of suffering. This is the basic conversion dynamic, repeated many times in many ways. Eventually, we completely reject the suffering that we impose. Therefore, we suffer far less. This is how St. John could endure excruciating bodily pain. He found the purpose for it, and united it with Christ�s pain. The purpose is to use suffering to atone for sin. Becoming at one with God is so good, that the pain doesn�t matter. St. John calls this imitating Christ.

            Another way to say this is that we eliminate the suffering of sin by accepting what is happening. Once we accept the events in front of us, we quit personally adding to our suffering. We can reduce our rebellion against these events from a lot, to a little, to zero. That�s a great improvement. The pain of the effort pays off in much more pain-reduction. We might even say that all the added pain disappears when we decide to quit adding it. St. John tells us this in his poems by describing our pain because we do not have God, and our joy in finding Him.

            That�s the chorus of these �Stanzas of the Soul that Suffers�: �I live, but not in myself�. As long as I try to live in myself, I cause my self indescribable suffering. But when I decide to live in God, then I diminish the suffering I used to add. As this addition dwindles to zero, I come alive to God�s love. My hope abounds. It runs ahead of my decisions to give myself to God. Though I cease hurting myself by sin, my longing for God is so painful that I �die because I do not die�.

            St. John rejoices that �I no longer live within myself�. But he �cannot live without God�. So he is in between his old life of sin and his ultimate life in God. He expresses this as �I have neither Him nor myself�. The tension of this transition leaves him wondering: �What will life be?� Tension makes this transition �a thousand deaths�, or much worse than the suffering of one death. So he is �dying because I do not die�. His symbols catch his psychological love-struck condition quite well.

            The next verse delves deeper into love�s pain. �This life that I live is no life at all� tells us that his distress of lacking God is terrible. Since this intermediate love is not life, �I die continually until I live with you�. This echoes the hope of the chorus. He hopes to live with God. He has God�s assurance in Jesus that eventually he and God will be one. So he prefers that unity. That�s why he says: �Hear me, my God; I do not desire this life�. No wonder: �I am dying because I do not die�.

            The rhythm of this poem strikes just the right note at just the right time. As we yield to its sounds, symbols, and timing, we dwell in St. John�s condition. Ultimately, we dwell in him. This is why we come to know him so well, though he says nothing directly about himself. He doesn�t tell us what he thought or felt in fragments, as we usually communicate with friends and relatives. Instead, he shares these deepest strivings for God. They show him most completely.

            To complete this poem-experience, it helps to repeat the chorus after each verse. Hope sustains us in real life, so it gets us through the longing of this poem. Next, St. John emphasizes: �When I am not with You, what life can I have?� Our most fundamental need is for God, yet we are without Him. This life of separation from God is not real life. Putting it as a question highlights our distress: �what life can I have?� We so desperately need God that our present condition is unacceptable. Our present life is a poor excuse for union with God. But we must go through our present life to enter real life. Our hope sustains us to �endure the bitterest death known�.

            This bitterest death is living without God. So �I pity myself, for I go on and on living�. This living without complete union with God is pitiful, and bitter. What a fine expression of his profound love. It is all-consuming. It is total. So �I am dying because I do not die� to be one with God Who is Love Himself. St. John does not tell us how loving God is explicitly, but this message gets to us by the intensity of love expressed here.

            Because St. John had watched a fish die in agony outside the water, he felt compassion for it. But by comparison, the fish �has this relief: the dying it endures ends at last in death�. But because St. John has not died yet, he rightly notes: �What death can equal my pitiable life?� Like the fish, St. John continues to die for lack of God: �For the longer I live, the longer my dying�. At the very least, we rejoice that St. John understands our predicament. He realizes how hard it is to keep going to God, when our desire to be one with Him is frustrated.

            In the past, St. John has found relief in Jesus, especially in His body, blood, soul and divinity present in the Eucharist. Many hours of worship eased his pain of loss. So he refers to �relief beholding You in the Sacrament�. In this sense, he experiences with St. Paul: �To live is Christ, and to die is gain�, Phil 1:21. But recently, St. John�s love has outstripped this relationship, so: �I find this greater sorrow: I cannot enjoy you wholly�. St. John�s ardor exceeds even adoring God present in his most intimate form as the Eucharist. �All things are affliction since I do not see You as I desire.� For all the delight in God�s love, St. John has not attained God fully. So �I die��

            While the hope of seeing God rejoices St. John�s heart, the fear of losing Him doubles his sorrow. Again, he dies because he does not die. He prays: �Lift me from this death, My God, and give me life�. This prayer spurts from him because his desire for God explodes beyond him. �Do not hold me bound with these so strong bonds� speaks volumes about the body restricting our journey to God. All of his experiences cascades into misery because he does not die.

            St. John says �I will cry out for death, and mourn my living while held here for my sins�. As he knows full well, his own sins keep him from God, Who is Love. John is responsible for that invisible barrier between him and Love. So he must use Christ�s gift of redemption, and pray as Jesus taught us. He begs God to be able to �truly say: now I live because I do not die�. What does this mean? How can we solve this puzzle? First we savor what it might mean, wonder about it, explore it, and enjoy its mystery. Because we are built for unending union with God, because we are made to wonder about God�s mystery for all eternity, we dwell in this facet of God�s infinite being.

            Dwelling there, it dawns on us that St. John prays for eternal life, the moment when God raptures him to Himself. Then John�s life will never end. He can not die, therefore he lives. At last, he attains real life. Mortal life is our trial. We hang in the balance. Shall enjoy union with God, or not? If we pass all trials, without sinning, we would soon accept God�s love, and unite with Him. By sin, we delay God�s gift of union. Knowing this, we pray with all our hearts to accept salvation. We want to follow Christ to God through death, and achieve our heart�s desire: Love Himself.

            In this context, we agree to transform all suffering into joy. Jesus gives us good example. His passion, accepted for Love, transforms agony into ecstasy. By embracing death, He transforms it into everlasting life. His resurrection assures us that God invites us to participate in this transformation. Resurrection also affirms our ultimate condition: life so full that it never ends. Eternal bliss, rejoicing in God�s love, fulfills our entire being. All suffering, all longing, properly applied, brings us closer to God. St. John�s poetry conveys this message in striking ways.

**H. John's Poem**: "Spiritual Canticle", Campbell�s translation.

?A donde te escondiste,                         Where can your hiding be,

Amado, y me dejaste con gemido?         Beloved that you left me thus to moan

Como el ciervo huiste,                            While like the stag you flee

Habiendome herido;                               Leaving the wound with me?

Sali tras ti clamando, y eras ido.        I followed calling loud, but you had flown

Pastores, los que fuerdes                       O shepherds, you that, yonder

Alla� pour las majadas al otero, Go through the sheepfolds of the slope on high

Si por ventura vierdes                             If you, as there you wander,

Aquel que yo mas quiero,                       Should chance my love to spy                Decidle queadolezco, pueno y muero Then tell him that I suffer, grieve and die.

Buscando mis amores,                           To fetch my loves more near,

Ire por esos montes y riberas,     Amongst those mountains & ravines I�ll stray,

Ni cogeres las flores,                             Nor pluck flowers, nor for fear,

Ni temere� las fieras                              Of prowling beasts delay,

Y pasare� los fuertes y fronteras. But pass through forts & frontiers on my way

**Pregunta a las Criaturas              Question to all Creatures**

!Oh bosques y espesuras,                       O thickets, densely trammeled,

Plantadas por el mano del Amado! Which my love�s hand has planted along [the height!]

!O prado de verduras,                              O field of green, enameled

De flores esmaltado,                                With blossoms, tell me right

Decid si por vosotros ha passado!     If he has passed across you in his flight?

**Respuesta de las Criaturas            Answer of all creatures**

Mil gracias derramando,                       Diffusing showers of grace,

Paso� por estos sotos con presura,  In haste among these groves his path he [took,]

Y yendolos mirando,                              And only with his face,

Con sola su figura                                 Glancing around the place,

Vestidos los dejo de hermosura.           He clothed them in beauty with a look.

Peers' translation:

Bride: 1. Where have you hidden,

Beloved, and left me moaning?

You fled like the stag

After wounding me;

I went out calling You, & You were gone.

2. Shepherds, you that go

Up through the sheepfolds to the hill,

If by chance you see Him I love most,

Tell Him that I sicken, suffer, and die.

3. Seeking my Love

I will head for the mountains & for the watersides,

I will not gather flowers,

Nor fear wild beasts;

I will go beyond strong men and frontiers.

**Questions to all creatures**

4. O woods and thickets

Planted by the hand of my Beloved!

O green meadow,

Coated, bright with flowers,

Tell me, has He passed by you?

**Answer of all creatures**

5. Pouring out a thousand graces,

He passed these groves in haste;

And having looked at them,

With His image alone,

Clothed them in beauty.

St. John expresses our longing for God so well, that we can use this poem to crystallize our fractured experiences. They appear broken up to us because our abilities are broken. So the tiny details shimmer and slide before us hiding their meanings. We hardly can keep up with fleeting events. At the bottom of each and every event is the meaning of union with God. This purpose smashes into the frustrating fact that we are not yet united to Him. So John asks: �Where have you hidden?� As poetry, this is the right amount of ambiguity. Clearly, God does not hide. But our experience of loss can be expressed as if He were hiding from us. Our yearning for Him fits the picture of Him teasing us with His love, then disappearing. Our love for Him is our search for Him. John calls Him Beloved, and states our longing as �moaning� for Him. Our experience of God is rather like seeing a stag in full view for a second, only to see him bound away into the woods. He fled like a stag, but His love wounded me. I gasp, I try to unite with Him, but He was gone.

            Again John uses all possible resources, inquiring of the shepherds if they have seen the Beloved. If they meet Him, please tell Him that I�m dying for Him. My love is like fragments, shattered by His absence. So I gather all my loves up (the plural is lost in Peer�s translation), and set out to find my Beloved through rugged country. Nothing distracts me, neither floral beauty not fear of wild beasts. So do I love Him that I go right through strong men and borders, which resist my passage. I am not afraid of anything, even of visiting foreign lands.

            No dense woods, no thorny thickets deter me. I recognize that my Beloved planted them all. God, Creator, is the source of all created good, even if it impedes my progress to Him. I must learn to pass creatures by, on the way to God. He is present in His creations, but He is more intimately present to me by His grace, and I seek that closer union. So I ask His creatures if He has come this way, that I may follow. So eager am I to be with Him, that I glide right through His lovely creatures to pursue Him. This is our part of love, to respond to God�s initiative. He started it! He loved us first, and each of us accepts this love in some degree. Then we respond in some way. The more we realize His love, the more we want to respond. The search-symbol expresses this desire.

            Everywhere God goes, He showers grace. He spreads gifts like snow. There is no end to His giving, because He is Love. Love forever expands. Love creates. Love never ends. All God�s creatures show His love, and urge us on to unite with Him. All these creatures exist without effort, because God is infinitely Good. His Good cannot be confined. He flows into the void, creating as He goes. John emphasizes this with the poetic: �Clothed them in beauty with a look.� Peers misses this detail, though �image� is close enough for us to approximate John�s idea. The Spanish �figura� in this context is best translated as �resemblance�. All creatures resemble God. Each of them reveals something of the perfect being in a limited way. This profound resemblance tells us that each creature is a spark of Divine Fire. Something of God exists in each existing creature.

            It takes no more effort for God to create than for us to glance at something. Actually, it takes less effort, because God is infinitely powerful. Our little glance takes some energy from us, while God�s creation takes nothing from Him. These depths of John�s poetry show up after we investigate the more obvious relationships he expresses. As usual, we skim over the surface of these poems, leaving you to delve more profoundly into them as you pray.

**IV. John�s Map of Mount Carmel**

When people asked John for a map to God, he present�ed the one translated for you here. It is a spiritual path, therefore, not a point-for-point spatial map. It guides us on the psychological way which John has described in several forms already. This map allows us to keep track of directions and steps. Naturally, there is no space, no location, no steps, in the sense of one foot after another. This analogy to walking helps us, but should not hinder us by imposing limits like space and time. Spiritual travel transcends the limits that characterize geographic travel. Since we can�t picture that, and would give up, St. John provides a representation of this journey in space. He noticed experiences that mark our progress. These are like mileposts along the spiritual way. They use our common experience of striving for God to encourage our efforts. Here is this map:

As you can see, you can read general instructions down the left column. Moving to the right you have a list of desires: peace, joy�St. John notes, down the center of this map, that the more you seek them, the further they retreat from you. But if you no longer desire them, they cascade upon you. �I have them without desire.� This is why he reminds us to seek nothing. He means nothing created. Because we are most familiar with creatures that surround us, we define something as some creature. But no creature satisfies us. We gobble them down without satisfaction, growing hungrier the more we consume.

            Our first change, or our first step up Mount Carmel, or our first action in seeking God, is to abandon creatures. They distract us from actual satisfaction, so we must renounce them. St. John lists many distracting creatures which we must renounce. Each step up toward God is hard climbing, like ascending a mountain. So we must exert ourselves. St. John encourages us, reminding us that any thing that we can grasp is mere distraction. Leave all creatures to pursue the Creator. He alone satisfies our infinite desire.

            Because He is infinite, He exceeds our grasp. Yet, He calls us on. His love attracts us infinitely. He is the great lover whose love excels all we can imagine. He is the love of our life. With some encouragement from St. John, we can keep searching for Him. Recall those wonderful poems. They exalt in God�s love for us, and our attempts to love Him in return.

            Because His love transcends all limits, there is no law for His beloved. As St. Paul says, love exceeds the law: Rom, chapters 2, 7, 13; 1 Tim 1:1ff. St. John reiterates the famous statement: �Love God, and do what you will�. The reason for this is that if you really do love God then you unite your will with His. So your will becomes His. After that, whatever you will is what God wills.

            Notice that St. John says �after that�. After that means after purification, and after union with God. This process is not easy, and few people achieve it. But once a person accepts God�s love, unites with the God Who is Love, then their two wills are one. At that point, each individual is unique. There is no law for any of them because each does what God wants done.

            St. John was a fine example of that union. He was unique. He brought gifts that no other friar had to give. He reformed the order, when most friars wanted to stay as they were. He made heroic efforts, while other friars wanted to take it easy. He was not like the crowd. He did not follow mechanically. If we imitate him, and act along with Jesus, we can climb the mountain of love, represented by Mount Carmel. As we go up, we discard creatures, allow the Spirit to purify our souls, and no longer need the law that guided and supported us all that way. We emerge into the freedom of the children of God.

            Be sure to get the timing right. While we are still attached to creatures, still relying on them for delight, we need the law to prevent our abuse of these creatures. The law is harsh because we are harshly trying to extract from creatures what belongs to God alone. But as we reject creatures for God, we no longer need the law. After sufficient purification, we can identify with God so much that the law is irrelevant. This is St. John�s message in this map.

            But we still want something, and mis-define something as some limited creature. So St. John keeps reminding us that no-thing is our aim. No-creature is our guide, so that we do not fall into temptation, and take something less than God for God Himself. Even at the peak of Mount Carmel there is no creature, no �thing�. We are going beyond creatures, beyond things, to the Creator, to Infinite being. God has no limits, no boundaries, no surface. So He is not at all like creatures, whose limits define them.

            Every notion that we have of God must shrivel up and blow away as God approaches us. In poetic terms, the fire of His love burns our notions away. His truth far excels any concept we can have. His love surpasses any loving experience we have. His beauty is beyond all creation�s marvels. His unity surpasses our understanding of it. One way to say it is: �That creature�s good, very good indeed, but not good enough�. Each idea, however exalted, is far below God. However large, it�s too small. With this approach, we avoid hang ups, and keep going to God.

            Since our journey covers the infinite difference between creatures and God, we can�t get there on our own. Our limits preclude this infinite journey. God must take us to Himself. That is God�s initiative. He is the lover, and all souls are receptive to Him. To acknowledge His initiative, we use masculine symbols for God. St. John effectively, symbolizes the soul as feminine to the stag, or to the shepherd. It�s true that God cares for us, but in a commanding way. It�s true that God dies for us, as the shepherd does for his sheep. But the truest way to symbolize God�s creative power is in male form, and the soul in feminine form. Boys do not like this, but need to get used to it. Girls can help teach men to be receptive, and eventually to surrender totally to God.

            In this map, in poetry, and in prose, St. John must employ symbols because God�s infinity surpasses all description. As Creator, God has no limits, no confinements, no restrictions to identify Him. All we have to go on is the positive activity of His creatures. This activity requires a Source. When we contemplate this activity, we notice that it requires an infinite Source. Our abilities are limited, but complete enough to recognize the necessity of an infinitely active Creator.

            This Creator intrigues us. Somewhere around the age of seven, each of us figured out His existence, and wondered about Him. Subsequent activities and ideologies may have dimmed this great experience, but it remains the core of reality. God fascinates us, and surprises us. The more attention we pay, the more He pursues us, and the closer we get to Him. However, His infinity frustrates us because the closer we get, the more of Him we notice. There�s no way to close the gap. Hence the symbol of the mountain expresses our ascent wonderfully well. The closer we get to the top, the harder the journey. But every feature of this trip confirms that there is a top.

            All along the way, each step in the right direction gets steeper. Naturally, this is correctly ambiguous, allowing for some part of the trip to be more like sailing along in a strong wind. Some pilgrims recount that all of this journey is excruciating. Many people report nothing but drudgery. However, the result is worth this effort. Other pilgrims affirm great peace and joy in parts of this trek. One way to say this is that there are plateaus between steep ascents. John describes both. This symbolizes the entire spectrum of experiences. But John�s emphasis on the difficulties is best. Why? Because most people quit trying near the beginning, which is all about suffering. Beginners have not yet learned how to employ suffering. At the start, suffering looks entirely negative. That�s why people avoid it like the plague.

            Until we experience how it expresses love, we do not recognize the value of suffering. To see its value, we must learn from Christ. His passion and death teach us the genuine value suffering has. His love shines through all that pain. His willingness to take all our sinful misery on Himself, shouts love to us. The movie *The Passion of the Christ* provides multiple images of love. One of them is the way Jesus eagerly embraces the cross. His agony in the garden shows the great difference between doing His will and doing His Father�s will. This is the difference between breaking the union which love is, and maintaining it through great temptation.

            Because John lived this union in Christ, he transformed all his suffering into love. When we learn this transformation, we increasingly accept God�s desire to unite with us. Then our advance up Mount Carmel accelerates. The distance up is infinite, but if we agree to accompany God, and take the first thousand painful steps, then we freely agree to God�s love. This is a stark way to say what John says in his beautiful poems and his comments about them.

            Quite naturally, we expect our search for God to find Him. John insists that we will not find him this side of death. Even the top of Mount Carmel lacks the fullness of God. So John keeps reminding us that we find �nada� = nothing. As we noted a couple times, �nada� guides us well, because we mis-define God as some kind of creature. Instead, He is beyond all creatures. No limited being can compare to God�s infinity. His limitlessness distinguishes Him from the creaturely realm. If creatures are somethings, then God is nothing, by comparison. This is the correct amount of ambiguity. It�s perfect poetry. It says all that we can say with language.

            Mentally, when our spirits work properly, we can know that God is infinite. But we cannot picture infinity. We cannot think in our usual way about God. We require help to approach Almighty God. This help is faith, expressed in our starting poem: �As if by night�. So John leads us generously from poem to poem, to commentary, to map. His consistent expression is too much at first. But gradually we get the point of all these symbols. Along the way, these symbols sustain our search. After our efforts, we are closer to God than before. We have squelched some of our illusions. Faith increases as we employ it. But our thirst is greater than before. �How well we know the spring that flows�, but always �by night�.

            Because our Source and Destiny is greater than all creation, to approach Him we must use greater powers than creation provides. Fortunately, in Christ, He provides supernatural virtues (powers) to accomplish this task. Faith is the first of these powers, symbolized by partial knowing and partial unknowing: �as if by night�. Hope, symbolized by infinite longing, will not rest until we unite with God. �And the greatest of these is charity�, 1 Cor 13:13. Love, symbolized by fire, unites Creator and creature as the �coal becomes the fire�.

            Then we allow God to create us, to make us be in His image and likeness. Instead of rebelling against His love, we accept it, grow in it, and become it. Freely did He make us, and freely must we accept His love. The more we freely agree, the more His love expands through our resistance. Yes, we squirrel away some of ourselves, and He asks for what we withheld. If we give it to Him, we are more united with Him. This is the basic love dynamic.

            Since He gave us all we are, why would we withhold anything from Him? It does not make sense. But it does make sin. The irrational, counter-natural decision we make when we sin, is a dead loss. No good comes of it. Good comes from God�s continued love of us sinners. Good comes if we reject sin. These are the advantages we can gain, even from sin. But sin itself is void, empty, no good at all. As we realize this, we can more fully give our sins to Jesus. After all, He came to take them away. In Confession, the Sacrament of Penance, we freely give those negations away. God heals us of these wounds, and takes us to Himself as closely as we allow.

            This way of saying it reminds us of all John�s pursuit poems. God continuously seeks us, and we refuse His advances. Even if our image is seeking the hidden God, the truth is that God seeks us, never abandoning us, no matter how we stiff-arm Him. John helps us through our illusions by his symbols, arranged so beautifully that they catch us off-guard. Though our experience is of God hiding from us, reality is that He shines through to us. But He never imposes Himself upon us. Always, He entices us to love Him more. His infinite love floods us, as much as we allow Him. He asks permission to love us more. Let�s let Him love us!

            Yes, our confused experience hangs up on suffering. We can even reject suffering, flee from it in terror, and thus suffer more. This is a downward spiral. But we can also learn from Christ to transform suffering with love. As John did, so can we use suffering to unite with our Great Lover, God. God the Son, in the visible human form of Jesus Christ, used suffering to show His infinite love for us. We can second this motion, to use our tiny suffering to show our small love for Him. Practice makes perfect, so the more we transform suffering by love, into more love, the better we get at this dynamic. By this action, we increasingly become Love, Himself.

            Eventually, we get into the rhythm of love, and become more charitable. Eventually, we can let God do His Trinitarian thing in us. We can allow the Trinitarian Community to be Love in us. This is the ultimate union we call heaven. Glimpses of it are available to us on earth, but complete allowance of God to be God in us raptures us into heaven.

            With a boost from St. John of the Cross, may your journey take you to God