

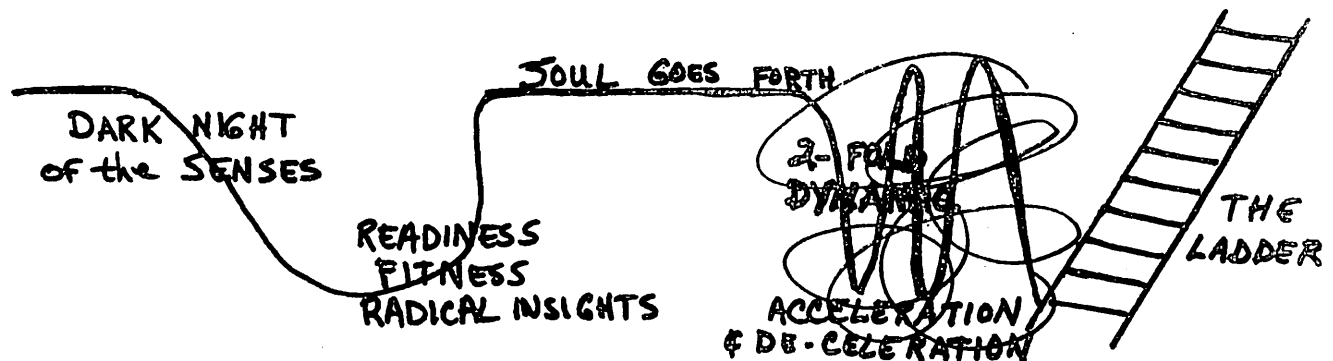
Base Centrum

Spring Quarter

Research Guild

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS
Research Report

May 15, 1973



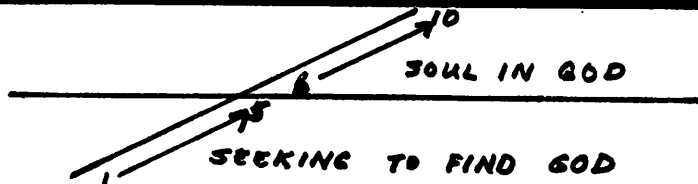
We were talking a while ago about Justification and Sanctification, and the plateaus you hit in your life. It is nothing strange. We are all aware that these come. You begin to think of your life rather like stairsteps. Man's life comes along in blobs and chunks and then he has some great spiritual experience which shakes loose all of that. We call that Justification.

Out of that struggle he hits this great plateau. It is not as when you learned you had sensual capabilities and could "whoop it up," and have a great time--when you found out that you could really go out and enjoy all your senses. But it is a great happening in the midst of the pain, and struggle, and suffering of life. John talks about it as sweetness. It is a time in which you have conquered; you have won. You have gone through the Dark Night of the Senses, and there is a kind of fitness, a readiness that you have never experienced before in your life. There is a way in which you have radical insight about things that come along and life just speaks. Rocks shout out long paragraphs on what life is about.

And then, life changed on you. No longer is it this kind of a sensation at all. John says here that the soul goes forth, and then all that is no longer there. Life comes more like a two-fold dynamic. He speaks of this as ascent and descent; but within the ascent and the descent there is acceleration and deceleration and acceleration and deceleration.

There are times, also, when there are breakthroughs in which all of this just evaporates and what you have is this great transparent breakthrough in which everything about your life is transformed. It is not like anything you even knew before. It is not like you have had a new experience which helps you understand the past experience. It is more like that you have had this happen and your whole life is made new. You have to tell a brand new story about the life you did not even have the day before yesterday. All of your life is made new, and all of your future is made new, and all of the ways you had of grabbing a hold of it in the past do not work any more. Your task then is to create a whole new world. The old heaven and earth pass away and a new heaven and earth come into being. In the midst of that, you do not know, you can not spell it out, but it is there. Your understanding fails you. Your senses try to appropriate it but do not get a hold on it.

In the midst of that John spells out with his image of the ladder that this dumbfounds you. You do not know what to do with yourself. You are not totally



displeased but you are not totally pleased either. But there comes a time when you get sick; that is, it is like sickness. It is like a hot fever. This You do not want to eat soup or anything, you really do not like anything. Before, you had that happen to you, but you kind of "whomped up" yourself to get interested. You were not really interested in sex, but you kind of talked yourself into it, and you got to feeling kind of sexy and you got a little sex. Now, you could not care less. There is just a hot fever there and nothing really appeals to you. You are just gone. He uses the term "languish" in chapters 19 and 20. That is a good Southern term. The way women got to looking beautiful was that they languished. If they were in a perpetual rush their beauty never could emerge. The only way beauty ever emerged was if you had a chance to kind of languish. Those southern beauties never walked too fast or too jerkily, or made any gesture that was too quick. It all had to be in a beautiful flow of grace; but the key to it was just to languish around. Well, you just kind of languish around. That is the first rung. John says it is some kind of preparation.

John does not seem to give you much clue about how this happens. But, somehow, you show up on the next rung and you become interested again. Before you were interested in reviving your senses, you were interested in what was going on with your will and your memory. Here, your interest is not about that at all. It is about the sickness you have, about this heat which burns you up. As a matter of fact, you are not interested in anything else. You are not interested in your senses. You are not interested in understanding, or getting something rational down on a piece of paper. The only thing that interests you is this heat which burns you up. This darkness and everything you have focuses on that. The only thing you are concerned about is about that. Your whole life becomes one central focus on "no-thing."

You then show up on another rung. You get revived; you get full of energy. You can work, you can think, you can write. It just flows out, but only about this. John says here that you go out and serve. I am not sure that points to doing good deeds; for you serve this "no-thingness." Not only that, there is a kind of a frustration which comes at this point--that in serving this no-thingness you can see everything you do in inadequate. It does not touch it. It does not quite make it. But the frustration is not the kind of frustration you had before when you saw that it did not pay off, so why do it. Your frustration drives you harder. You expend more energy, pour out more of yourself. This is the action of the soul going forth.

When you show up on the next rung you know you are on to something. Farther back, you got clear that this was what life was all about. This is what intrigues your interest, though John never lays it out that way. Before, you know that you are that close to the Mystery. He says you just see Mystery in everything: you eat food, you think a thought, you see a painting and all of life explodes with Mystery. You just stand in awe. Here, you get impatient seeing that there is something there--got to push through! Got to touch it! Got to grab hold of it--some way! And you press, you press, you press.

These last five are somewhat different from the first five. You were

searching for God, or the soul was going out and trying to find whatever it was that was burning it up. The soul goes after God.

Now at this point, you touch mystery and life really explodes. This is a wide expanse. You touch the mystery, and not only that, you run back and touch it again and again and again and again, and again and it gets faster. Perhaps that is the part that accelerated. Not only do you touch the mystery, but you grow bold. That is not the boldness of pride where you believe you are going to touch the mystery so somehow you are then with God. You could not care less. When you get bold then you know you have touched the mystery. My life is full of awe. Go back to those great passages in Kazantzakis where he talks about riding with the general. You hit the Center and you are clear you have hit the Center. You cannot explain it with any real understanding, but you are there.

Not only that, but you dare to grab hold of it. You seize it, you grab God by the legs and you cling. John pulls this through the bridal image, because to him this is like a bride getting married. This is some kind of a courtship period; the first kiss or something. You grab your lover and you do not let him go until he gives you satisfaction. You get satisfied. And he says you cannot stay there very long because it is just too much. Or you fall off that, and he does not say whether you come back the this rung. John also says you are full of desires. One of the prophets was told that you are a man full of desires so you just stay on this rung the rest of your life, because it is the best place for you. Then you are satisfied. That is the ninth rung.

On the last rung John points out that you do not stay here, in this satisfied state. He is clear that his satisfaction is not a kind of an exhilaration of "sense" at all. This is deeply interior. It is recovering sense in a brand new way which does not come to you as recovering your sense at all. Here, you go to this top rung, but he reminds us that the only time you make it there is when you die. That is when you go forth from the flesh. For him, this is the rung only certain people arrive at. They do not go through purgatory when they are dead, but there is, instead, complete union with the Father.

The soul is in God, but it is not as if this stops and something else starts. In this transparency that happens again. There is an intensification. The ladder which has been a secret ladder is no secret anymore.

What you see is that you are going to spend the rest of your life in this kind of unfolding intensity which is going to get more and more intense. That is what life is about. Your self-understanding is held over against nothingness; and the no-thing-ness increases and increases the intensity of that self-consciousness. He points out that this darkness that has been in your life is like dark blips when the light goes on, and you see flakes of dust. That is always going to be in your life. There will be a spot and that spot is always going to be in the process of being burned out. The struggle of life is always in the midst of that.

Before Chapter 15, your whole concentration is in the process of getting these blobs burned out. The pain, the misery, and struggle is there. This misery

does not stop here. The misery goes on, but the focus of your life is no longer this misery. The focus of your life now is on this heat that burns you up. Then you know you dare to become the flame. The ninth step John calls: "the sweet burning"---the sweet burning of your life with God, or with the no-thingness.

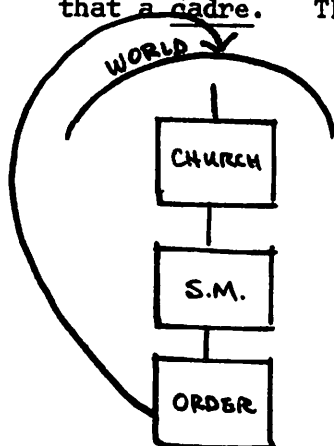
In the next part John starts with the disguise. He shows how when you go through this, you have to have this disguise to make it through, mainly because how the devil gets to you is through your senses and your understanding; mainly through your senses, however. Unless there is a disguise worked out; that is, unless there is a way those senses are held in check, the devil will trick you into thinking God is talking to you through your senses. The way he tries to trick you is to imitate God, and create some form of sense, such as the clarity that God intends for man to be more comfortable than he is. John believes that that is really not too much of a problem here. In using his mythological language, he talks about how the devil is blocked out. He does not know what is going on here is this communication between the nothingness and the soul. The only way the devil perceives you is through your senses. The senses are like those oscilloscopes which show the heartbeat of the patient. These communications every now and then become so intense that the oscilloscope forms a hiccough.

It is that hiccough that is so dangerous, in the sense that you get so profoundly excited about breaking through to the Mystery that the devil has a chance to re-enter here. He says it is not really too big an issue, for what happens is that you get your senses disciplined enough so that that becomes a victory. The devil really enables you to get on your journey because of this victory which pulls you back over against this nothingness to intensify and continue your journey.

Finally, in Chapter 24, this soul becomes "the nothing." Now that needs a lot of de-mythologizing.

In Chapters 1-14, it seems to me his main concern is to get you clear about this miserable struggle of being burned up. It is the law, and your attention is the fact that you are on fire. You struggle with, "Why the hell is my life burning up like this?" In Chapter 15, he says that what you find out about this Dark Night is that it is not your enemy. You thought all along that this was for some wrongdoing, (although you have to always go back and see that he is an inclusive writer). Everything he says really has the whole thing in it. In Chapters 16, 17, and 18 you find that he really does not say anything different than he does in the rest of the book. That gives you some kind of pause. His focus is first on this misery and this burning up; and then you see why the Dark Night is not your enemy at all. In fact, you could not lose in the Dark Night. You are safe and secure. That process of the burning up is the saving action. You discover that without those struggles, and humiliation, and the pain of having all your senses cut off from you, and your understanding darkened, you would be a zombie, a cynic. You would be some kind of a stoic trying to manipulate your feelings in order to be something. That Dark Night is just secure. It does not lessen the pain of it, but the focus is not on the pain. The focus now is on the heat of this Dark Night or what has overcome you.

Now, I rather imagine that for us as an Order to even decide to be an Order was really talking about this. It is as if the Lord has been preparing us for his service. It is like we ain't served him yet. We have been preparing. My image of that is the one we have worked with, where we understand that the church had to get renewed to renew the world. Then we saw that what the church needed to renew the world was an intentional body of people. First, we termed that a cadre.



Then we came to see that there has to be a movement of people who get in there and renew this church to renew the world. In order to have all this sustained in being so all this could get done we have to have our Order of people who have intensified their lives so that they could nurture this in order to get this job done. Then we saw that while you are doing that with one hand, you have to come over on the back side and attack the world square on. We built structures and structures and structures, and the Local Church Experiment, and Fifth City. Then we came around and met it with the Ecumenical Parish. And we have to back that up with the LENS and the Sanctification courses. There is an interior preparation going on in us. We are going to be used by the Lord. We are going to be used in history.

We saw early that you had to do something with the family. That had something to do with the sense. That was a "big burn" to have to take a new relationship to your children and your wife, and probably the worst was to take it to your in-laws and your parents. That did something to us. A new kind of people came out of that. You see that you go through a veil to be prepared to be service yere, to where that is not your struggle anymore. Your only struggle is centered in just how to serve this "nothing." Not only is that a sociological preparation, but it is an interior preparation. St. John comes along and enables us to articulate the interior experience.

-George Holcombe-