

THE DARK NIGHT

[Introduction to The Dark Night](#)

[Prologue for the Reader](#)

[Stanzas of the Soul](#)

[Book One](#)

[Chapter 1](#): Quotes the first verse and begins to discuss the imperfections of beginners.

[Chapter 2](#): Some of the imperfections of pride possessed by beginners.

[Chapter 3](#): Some imperfections of spiritual avarice commonly found in beginners.

[Chapter 4](#): The imperfections of lust, the third capital vice, usually found in beginners.

[Chapter 5](#): The imperfections of the capital vice of anger into which beginners fall.

[Chapter 6](#): The imperfections of spiritual gluttony.

[Chapter 7](#): The imperfections of spiritual envy and sloth.

[Chapter 8](#): The beginning of the exposition of this dark night. An explanation of verse 1 of the first stanza.

[Chapter 9](#): Signs for discerning whether a spiritual person is treading the path of this sensory night and purgation.

[Chapter 10](#): The conduct required of souls in this dark night.

[Chapter 11](#): Explains three verses of the stanza.

[Chapter 12](#): The benefits this night causes in the soul.

[Chapter 13](#): Other benefits of this night of the senses.

[Chapter 14](#): An explanation of the last verse of the first stanza.

[Book Two](#)

[Chapter 1](#): The beginning of the treatise on the dark night of the spirit. Explains when this night commences.

[Chapter 2](#): Other imperfections of these proficient.

[Chapter 3](#): An explanation for what is to follow.

[Chapter 4](#): The first stanza and its explanation.

[Chapter 5](#): Begins to explain how this dark contemplation is not only night for the soul but also affliction and torment.

[Chapter 6](#): Other kinds of affliction suffered in this night.

[Chapter 7](#): A continuation of the same subject; other afflictions and straits of the will.

[Chapter 8](#): Other afflictions that trouble the soul in this state.

[Chapter 9](#): Although this night darkens the spirit, it does so to give light.

[Chapter 10](#): Explains this purgation thoroughly by means of a comparison.

[Chapter 11](#): The beginning of an explanation of verse 2 of the first stanza. Tells how the fruit of these dark straits is a vehement passion of divine love.

[Chapter 12](#): The resemblance of this frightful night to purgatory. How the divine wisdom illumines those who suffer this night on earth by the same illumination with which it illumines and purges the angels in heaven.

[Chapter 13](#): Other delightful effects of this dark night of contemplation in the soul.

[Chapter 14](#): An explanation of the three last verses of the first stanza.

[Chapter 15](#): Second Stanza

[Chapter 16](#): An explanation of how the soul is secure when it walks in darkness.

[Chapter 17](#): An explanation of the secrecy of this dark contemplation.

[Chapter 18](#): An explanation of how this secret wisdom is also a ladder.

[Chapter 19](#): An explanation of the first five of the ten steps on the mystical ladder of divine love.

[Chapter 20](#): The remaining five steps of love.

[Chapter 21](#): An explanation of the term "disguised" and a description of the colors of the disguise the soul wears in this night.

[Chapter 22](#): An explanation of verse 3 of the second stanza.

[Chapter 23](#): An explanation of the fourth verse. Tells of the soul's wondrous hiding place during this night and how, though the devil enters other very high places, he is unable to gain entry to this one.

[Chapter 24](#): The concluding explanation of this second stanza.

[Chapter 25](#): A brief explanation of the third stanza

Introduction to The Dark Night

A work called *The Dark Night* has come down to us from John of the Cross in manuscripts separate from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Explaining the passive purifications of both the senses and the spirit, this work fulfills John's several promises in the *Ascent* to treat of the passive nights. That the passive purifications are necessary to attain union with God seems obvious from the first chapter of the *Ascent*, where the author proposes to explain the active and passive nights. And a number of times as he moves through his material, he asserts that active purification alone is insufficient for attainment of union. This work, *The Dark Night*, then, describes how God purifies the soul passively and brings the theological life to the perfection delineated in the *Ascent*. The far-reaching demands of the *Ascent*, which John never finished expounding, are fully met through the passive purifications of the *Night*. Though different in literary style, this latter work furnishes a necessary complement to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

A Commentary

The divisions that John setup in the *Ascent* took him far away from his original promise of commenting on the stanzas of the poem. In the *Night*, turning to the poem once again, he states his intention to explain its stanzas. And this time the exposition of the subject matter follows the poem more closely and is more influenced by it.

In a broad division of the poem, John gives us a clue to what we might expect in his commentary. He tells us in a brief prologue that the first two stanzas refer to the effects of the two kinds of purification, sensory and spiritual; and the last six speak of the effects, wonderful though ineffable, of illumination and union. Thus the poem describes two fundamental conditions in the spiritual process: the painful passage through the night, and the unspeakable joy of encountering God. In commenting on the stanzas, he pays particular attention to these conditions to which the poem intuitively and creatively alludes. But the verses of the poem do not set out a program to be rigorously embraced. John composed them after he had passed along the constricted path that leads to eternal life, the path he called a dark night. From the height of a blessed union with God, in this poem he sings of his happiness in having escaped from himself and other enemies, disguised and by a secret ladder, at night, in darkness. He then uses his own experience as a paradigm for others, souls who must find their freedom in this same way.

Reading the work, we have to be aware from the start that the text as written by John contained no divisions into chapters or books, no chapter headings. The conventional divisions, introduced by Diego de Salablanca in the first edition of 1618 and still used today, help to present and refer to the work in a more manageable form. Though editors could possibly devise other, better arrangements, the preservation of the traditional divisions is undoubtedly useful for references and quotations. In his actual composition of the work,

John proceeded as he did in his commentaries on *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*; that is, he used the stanzas and verses as the only dividing marks. But this commentary on the *Night* turns out to be much more uneven than the others. In fact, John comments on the first stanza twice, and gives as the reason that the symbol, though it speaks mainly of the purification of the spirit, can refer as well to the first night or purification of the senses. Differently explained in the *Ascent* and the *Night*, the poem, as we read along, begins to find its genuine meaning when the commentary turns its focus on the passive purification of the spirit. Other explanations are more distant from this dynamic moment.

The *Ascent*, then, beginning as a commentary, moved outside the span of the poetic verses and shifted into a treatise in its own right. The *Night* maintains its link with the poem and its style as commentary, but at times digresses into its own little treatises noticeably removed from the poem itself.

In contrast to our expectations, hardly does John begin to comment on the third stanza of the poem when he sets aside the work. Of the eight stanzas, he explains only two. These two alone enable him to give a thorough presentation, though somewhat repetitious, of the subject that in this work most interests him: the dark night of purgative contemplation. In a way, the commentary for the second stanza resembles a musical variation on a theme. And we can suppose that an explanation of the remaining stanzas would have drawn him into a lengthy elaboration of the life of union, a subject whose features he treats extensively in other works.

The Doctrine

While dealing with his material, John works on two levels: his personal experience and his doctrinal reflections. His personal experience expressed in the poem, seen from the perspective of one

who has escaped in the night and is looking back, becomes the framework on which he builds his doctrine applicable to others. Woven into the description, then, of the spiritual experience symbolized by the dark night image, we find the doctrinal explanation, on a theological level, of the phenomena described. These levels become particularly evident in [chapters 4-18](#) of the second book, the central texts of the work.

Two basic allegories serve to illustrate the purifications. In the one, regarding the initial purgation, God is likened to a loving mother who first nurses her child, carries and caresses it in her arms, but who then must wean it, teach it both to walk on its own and to put aside the ways of childhood. In the other, the purification of the spirit, God's action is likened to fire working on and transforming a log of wood.

In his exposition, John does not present a program of detailed asceticism for attaining the poverty of spirit implied by the radical purification. His emphasis is on allowing God to lead, on accepting the Lord's work with all its consequences. At the same time the teaching must be seen in relation to the main focus of the *Ascent*, as a prolongation and complement to it.

The main topics of the book are: the experience of the night; the theological principles underlying both its causes and its purpose; analysis of a person before, during, and after the purification; and the fruits of love and illumination. *Night* is divided into Book One and Book Two. The first book, consisting of 14 chapters, explains what refers to the passive night of the senses; the second, containing 25 chapters, explains what refers to the passive night of the spirit. What is really at stake in the spiritual journey to union with God is all ongoing work of purification, a cleansing of all that is repugnant to God's holiness. The purity implied is impossible without personal effort, but this effort, however intense, does not achieve the radical stripping demanded by the union. God's own intervention is necessary through a purifying communication that works passively,

beyond the realm of what human effort can achieve. Human effort does little more than dispose one for the divine action.

The negation (poverty, purity, nakedness, void, death, and so on) of the dark night is in reality theological communion. The emptying of self is transformed into the fullness of God. We find in John's vocabulary and style the paradoxical language of St. Paul: light/darkness, life/death, spirit/flesh, new self/old self.

The human work and the divine action are not perfectly successive; rather, they are parallel and simultaneous. It is the predominance of one over the other that permits the establishing of a certain relative succession, which of course means that in the final stage of the purification the divine is clearly prevalent. Since the divine intervention may also come with greater or lesser intensity and efficacy, we can speak of parts or periods of passive night. The high point of the dark night, being the passive night of the spirit, from the viewpoint of time belongs within that period of the spiritual life that John calls the spiritual betrothal, borrowing from the tradition of commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Though the verses of the poem refer directly to this high point, their author, as a teacher, extends their meaning, adjusting them that they may speak to other periods or situations as well.

What the person undergoing the dark night experiences is a painful lack or privation: darkness in the intellect; aridity in the will regarding the exercise of love; emptiness of all possessions in the memory; and a general affliction and torment as a consequence. Such persons receive a vivid understanding of their own misery and think they will never escape from it. Their faculties seem powerless and bound; all outside help appears useless; they feel no hope for any breakthrough or remedy in the future. The effect of all this is the dread-filled experience of being abandoned by God. This feeling of being abandoned by God becomes the worst part of the suffering since we are dealing with one who longs for God with utmost love.

All these painful experiences as well as the beneficial fruits of the transformation are attributable to contemplation. This contemplation is an inpouring of God into the soul, a divine, loving knowledge that is general, without images or concepts, obscure and hidden from the one who receives it, a knowledge that both purifies and illumines. If John speaks of this knowledge as general, he does so not because contemplation refers to something imprecise but because it embraces the totality of the relationship: an attitude of personal and complete receptivity before God who is communicating himself in his personal infinitude. Seen thus, "general" points to the totality or whole, not to the generic or imprecise. The novelty of the knowledge then does not lie in the information, but in a new sense of the presence of God through faith and love. The one who receives it is in a kind of passive activity. There are no adequate human controls; before God, only poverty, confidence, and abandonment remain. But contemplation is not identifiable with dark night; it may be given in forms that produce effects different from these purifying ones. In addition, it is worth saying that if this night darkens, it does so only to give light; if it humiliates, it does so only to exalt; if it impoverishes, it does so only to enrich.

The point of arrival to which the night leads is the "new self," divinized in being and operation, living now a life of faith, hope, and love, fortified and pure.

John's exposition of the night may seem to disengage that experience from the rest of life. But the night cannot occur apart from the external happenings of every day, nor can we forget, while reading, the event of John's imprisonment in Toledo with all its social and material deprivations. Our horizons open to many possible forms in which we may experience a dark night, according to the grace, state in life, and historical or personal circumstances of the individual. John leaves to each reader and each age the task of making the suitable applications. What is essential is that the

sufferings and privations bring about a growing response of faith, hope, and love; without this transforming theological life the night would fail to purify and produce fruit.

The work may be divided this way:

Book One:

Introductory description of the dark night.

Necessity of the passive night demonstrated by way of the imperfections (seven capital vices) of beginners ([chap. 1-7](#)).

The passive night of the senses ([chap. 8](#)).

The signs for recognizing this night ([chap. 9](#)).

The appropriate response ([chap. 10](#)).

Experiences of love ([chap. 11](#)).

Benefits of the night: knowledge of God and of self; virtues ([chap. 12-13](#)).

Duration and accompanying trials ([chap. 14](#)).

Book Two:

Introductory description of the proficient's experience ([chap. 1](#)).

Necessity of the passive night of the spirit, demonstrated by way of the imperfections of proficientes ([chap. 1-3](#)).

The passive night of the spirit ([chap. 4](#)).

Nature ([chap. 5](#)).

Afflictions ([chap. 5-8](#)).

Positive content ([chap. 9](#)).

Illustration as fire acting on wood ([chap. 10](#)).

The enkindling of love and its fruits ([chap. 11-14](#)).

Description of the passive night of the spirit based on the second stanza: darkness, secure, secret, ladder, disguised ([chap. 15-24](#)).

Summary explanation of the third stanza ([chap. 25](#)).

The manuscript copies of *The Dark Night* generally receiving the most credit from scholars are *Hispalensis* and *Roma*. The first is conserved in the National Library of Madrid; the second, in the general archives of the discalced Carmelite Friars in Rome.

Prologue for the Reader

An explanation of the stanzas describing a soul's conduct along the spiritual road that leads to the perfect union with God through love, insofar as it is attainable in this life. A description also of the characteristics of one who has reached this perfection.

In this book we will first cite the entire poem, then each stanza will be repeated separately and explained, and finally we will do the same thing with the individual verses.

The first two stanzas describe the effects of the two kinds of spiritual purgation that take place in a person: one, a purification of the sensory part; the other, a purification of the spiritual part. The remaining six stanzas speak of some of the marvelous results obtained from spiritual illumination and union with God through love.

Stanzas Of The Soul

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

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

3. On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.

4. This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared.

5. O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

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

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

8. I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;

all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.

Beginning of the explanation of the stanzas that deal with the way a soul must conduct itself along the road leading to union with God through love, by Padre Fray John of the Cross.

Before embarking on an explanation of these stanzas, we should remember that the soul recites them when it has already reached the state of perfection - that is, union with God through love - and has now passed through severe trials and conflicts by means of the spiritual exercise that leads one along the constricted way to eternal life, of which our Savior speaks in the Gospel [Mt. 7:14]. The soul must ordinarily walk this path to reach that sublime and joyous union with God. Recognizing the narrowness of the path and the fact that so very few tread it - as the Lord himself says [Mt. 7:14] - the soul's song in this first stanza is one of happiness in having advanced along it to this perfection of love. Appropriately, this constricted road is called a dark night, as we shall explain in later verses of this stanza. The soul, therefore, happy at having trod this narrow road from which it derived so much good, speaks in this manner:

Book One

[A treatise on the night of the senses]

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

[Explanation]

1. In this first stanza, the soul speaks of the way it followed in its departure from love of both self and all things. Through a method of true mortification, it died to all these things and to itself. It did this so as to reach the sweet and delightful life of love with God. And it declares that this departure was a dark night. As we will explain later, [\[1\]](#) this dark night signifies here purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things.

2. The soul states that it was able to make this escape because of the strength and warmth gained from loving its Bridegroom in this obscure contemplation. It emphasizes its good fortune in having journeyed to God through this dark night. So great was the soul's success that none of the three enemies (the world, the devil, and the flesh, which are always in opposition to the journey along this road) could impede it, for that night of purifying contemplation lulled to sleep and deadened all the inordinate movements of the passions and appetites in the house of sense. The verse then states:

One dark night,

=====

[1] In [N. 2. 4. 1.](#)

Chapter 1

Book One

[Quotes the first verse and begins to discuss the imperfections of beginners.]

1. Souls begin to enter this dark night when God, gradually drawing them out of the state of beginners (those who practice meditation on the spiritual road), begins to place them in the state of proficient (those who are already contemplatives), so that by passing through this state they might reach that of the perfect, which is the divine union of the soul with God.

We should first mention here some characteristics of beginners, for the sake of a better explanation and understanding of the nature of this night and of God's motive for placing the soul in it. Although our treatment of these things will be as brief as possible, it will help beginners understand the feebleness of their state and take courage and desire that God place them in this night where the soul is strengthened in virtue and fortified for the inestimable delights of the love of God. And, although we will be delayed for a moment, it will be for no longer than our discussion of this dark night requires.

2. It should be known, then, that God nurtures and caresses the soul, after it has been resolutely converted to his service, like a loving mother who warms her child with the heat of her bosom, nurses it with good milk and tender food, and carries and caresses it in her arms. But as the child grows older, the mother withholds her caresses and hides her tender love; she rubs bitter aloes on her sweet breast and sets the child down from her arms, letting it walk on its own feet so that it may put aside the habits of childhood and grow accustomed to greater and more important things. The grace

of God acts just as a loving mother by re-engendering in the soul new enthusiasm and fervor in the service of God. With no effort on the soul's part, this grace causes it to taste sweet and delectable milk and to experience intense satisfaction in the performance of spiritual exercises, because God is handing the breast of his tender love to the soul, just as if it were a delicate child [1 Pt. 2:2-3].[\[1\]](#)

3. The soul finds its joy, therefore, in spending lengthy periods at prayer, perhaps even entire nights; its penances are pleasures; its fasts, happiness; and the sacraments and spiritual conversations are its consolations. Although spiritual persons do practice these exercises with great profit and persistence, and are very careful about them, spiritually speaking, they conduct themselves in a very weak and imperfect manner. Since their motivation in their spiritual works and exercises is the consolation and satisfaction they experience in them, and since they have not been conditioned by the arduous struggle of practicing virtue, they possess many faults and imperfections in the discharge of their spiritual activities. Assuredly, since everyone's actions are in direct conformity with the habit of perfection that has been acquired, and since these persons have not had time to acquire those firm habits, their work must of necessity be feeble, like that of weak children.

For a clearer understanding of this and of how truly imperfect beginners are, insofar as they practice virtue readily because of the satisfaction attached to it, we will describe, using the seven capital vices as our basis, some of the numerous imperfections beginners commit. Thus we will clearly see how very similar their deeds are to those of children. The benefits of the dark night will become evident, since it cleanses and purifies the soul of all these imperfections.

=====

[\[1\]](#) As he has previously, John describes the state of beginners by using the image of a mother lovingly nursing and caring for her child; see [A. 2. 14. 3](#); [17. 6-7](#); [A. 3. 28. 7](#).

Chapter 2

Book One

[Some of the imperfections of pride possessed by beginners.]

1. These beginners feel so fervent and diligent in their spiritual exercises and undertakings that a certain kind of secret pride is generated in them that begets a complacency with themselves and their accomplishments, even though holy works do of their very nature cause humility. Then they develop a somewhat vain - at times very vain - desire to speak of spiritual things in other's presence, and sometimes even to instruct rather than be instructed; in their hearts they condemn others who do not seem to have the kind of devotion they would like them to have, and sometimes they give expression to this criticism like the pharisee who despised the publican while he boasted and praised God for the good deeds he himself accomplished [Lk. 18:11-12].[\[1\]](#)

2. The devil, desiring the growth of pride and presumption in these beginners, often increases their fervor and readiness to perform such works, and other ones, too. For he is quite aware that all these works and virtues are not only worthless for them, but even become vices. Some of these persons become so evil-minded that they do not want anyone except themselves to appear holy; and so by both word and deed they condemn and detract others whenever the occasion arises, seeing the little splinter in their brother's eye and failing to consider the wooden beam in their own eye [Mt. 7:3]; they strain at the other's gnat and swallow their own camel [Mt. 23:24].

3. And when at times their spiritual directors, their confessors, or their superiors disapprove their spirit and method of procedure, they feel that these directors do not understand, or perhaps that this failure to approve derives from a lack of holiness, since they want

these directors to regard their conduct with esteem and praise. So they quickly search for some other spiritual advisor more to their liking, someone who will congratulate them and be impressed by their deeds; and they flee, as they would death, those who attempt to place them on the safe road by forbidding these things - and sometimes they even become hostile toward such spiritual directors. Frequently, in their presumption, they make many resolutions but accomplish very little. Sometimes they want others to recognize their spirit and devotion, and as a result occasionally contrive to make some manifestations of it, such as movements, sighs, and other ceremonies; sometimes, with the assistance of the devil, they experience raptures, more often in public than in private, and they are quite pleased, and often eager, for others to take notice of these.

4. Many want to be the favorites of their confessors, and thus they are consumed by a thousand envies and disquietudes. Embarrassment forbids them from relating their sins clearly, lest their reputation diminish in their confessor's eyes. They confess their sins in the most favorable light so as to appear better than they actually are, and thus they approach the confessional to excuse themselves rather than accuse themselves. Sometimes they confess the evil things they do to a different confessor so that their own confessor might think they commit no sins at all. Therefore, in their desire to appear holy, they enjoy relating their good behavior to their confessor, and in such careful terms that these good deeds appear greater than they actually are. It would be more humble of them, as we will point out later, [\[2\]](#) to make light of the good they do and to wish that no one, neither their confessor nor anybody else, should consider it of any importance at all.

5. Sometimes they minimize their faults, and at other times they become discouraged by them, since they felt they were already saints, and they become impatient and angry with themselves, which is yet another fault.

They are often extremely anxious that God remove their faults and imperfections, but their motive is personal peace rather than God. They fail to realize that were God to remove their faults they might very well become more proud and presumptuous.

They dislike praising anyone else, but they love to receive praise, and sometimes they even seek it. In this they resemble the foolish virgins who had to seek oil from others when their own lamps were extinguished [Mt. 25:8].

6. The number of these imperfections is serious in some people and causes them a good deal of harm. Some have fewer, some have more, and yet others have little more than the first movements toward them. But there are scarcely any beginners who at the time of their initial fervor do not fall victim to some of these imperfections.

But souls who are advancing in perfection at this time act in an entirely different manner and with a different quality of spirit.[\[3\]](#) They receive great benefit from their humility, by which they not only place little importance on their deeds, but also take very little self-satisfaction from them. They think everyone else is far better than they are, and usually possess a holy envy of them and would like to emulate their service of God. Since they are truly humble, their growing fervor and the increased number of their good deeds and the gratification they receive from them only cause them to become more aware of their debt to God and the inadequacy of their service to him, and thus the more they do, the less satisfaction they derive from it. Their charity and love makes them want to do so much for God that what they actually do accomplish seems as nothing. This loving solicitude goads them, preoccupies them, and absorbs them to such an extent that they never notice what others do or do not accomplish, but if they should, they then think, as I say, that everyone is better than they. They think they themselves are insignificant, and want others to think this also and to belittle and slight their deeds. Moreover, even though others do praise and value

their works, these souls are unable to believe them; such praises seem strange to them.

7. These souls humbly and tranquilly long to be taught by anyone who might be a help to them. This desire is the exact opposite of that other desire we mentioned above, of those who want to be themselves the teachers in everything. When these others notice that someone is trying to give them some instruction, they themselves take the words from their very mouths as though they already know everything.

Yet these humble souls, far from desiring to be anyone's teacher, are ready to take a road different from the one they are following, if told to do so. For they do not believe they could ever be right themselves. They rejoice when others receive praise, and their only sorrow is that they do not serve God as these others do. Because they consider their deeds insignificant, they do not want to make them known. They are even ashamed to speak of them to their spiritual directors because they think these deeds are not worth mentioning. They are more eager to speak of their faults and sins, and reveal these to others, than of their virtues. They have an inclination to seek direction from one who will have less esteem for their spirit and deeds. Such is the characteristic of a pure and simple and true spirit, one very pleasing to God. Since the wise Spirit of God dwells within these humble souls, he moves them to keep these treasures hidden, and to manifest only their faults. God gives this grace to the humble, together with the other virtues, just as he denies it to the proud.

8. These souls would give their life's blood to anyone who serves God, and they will do whatever they can to help others serve him. When they see themselves fall into imperfections, they suffer this with humility, with docility of spirit, and with loving fear of God and hope in him.

Yet I believe very few souls are so perfect in the beginning. We would be happy enough if they managed not to fall into these

imperfections of pride. As we will point out later, then, God places these souls in the dark night so as to purify them of these imperfections and make them advance.

=====

[1] For a related passage, see [A. 3. 28. 2-3](#).

[2] In [nos. 6-8](#) and chap. [12. 7-9](#).

[3] Here for comparison John begins to describe traits of proficients and the perfect.

Chapter 3

Book One

[Some imperfections of spiritual avarice commonly found in beginners.]

1. Many beginners also at times possess great spiritual avarice. They hardly ever seem content with the spirit God gives them. They become unhappy and peevish because they don't find the consolation they want in spiritual things. Many never have enough of hearing counsels, or learning spiritual maxims, or keeping them and reading books about them. They spend more time in these than in striving after mortification and the perfection of the interior poverty to which they are obliged.

Furthermore, they weigh themselves down with overdecorated images and rosaries. They now put these down, now take up others; at one moment they are exchanging, and at the next re-exchanging. Now they want this kind, now they want another. And they prefer one cross to another because of its elaborateness. Others you see who are decked out in *agnusdeis* and relics and lists of saints' names, like children in trinkets.[1]

What I condemn in this is possessiveness of heart and attachment to the number, workmanship, and overdecoration of these objects.

For this attachment is contrary to poverty of spirit, which is intent only on the substance of the devotion, benefits by no more than what procures this sufficiently, and tires of all other multiplicity and elaborate ornamentation. Since true devotion comes from the heart and looks only to the truth and substance represented by spiritual objects, and since everything else is imperfect attachment and possessiveness, any appetite for these things must be uprooted if some degree of perfection is to be reached.

2. I knew a person who for more than ten years profited by a cross roughly made out of a blessed palm and held together by a pin twisted around it. That person carried it about and never would part with it until I took it - and the person was not someone of poor judgment or little intelligence. I saw someone else who prayed with beads made out of bones from the spine of a fish. Certainly, the devotion was not for this reason less precious in the sight of God.[\[2\]](#) In neither of these two instances, obviously, did these persons base their devotion on the workmanship and value of a spiritual object.

They, therefore, who are well guided from the outset do not become attached to visible instruments or burden themselves with them. They do not care to know any more than is necessary to accomplish good works, because their eyes are fixed only on God, on being his friend and pleasing him; this is what they long for. They very generously give all they have. Their pleasure is to know how to live for love of God or neighbor without these spiritual or temporal things. As I say, they set their eyes on the substance of interior perfection, on pleasing God and not themselves.

3. Yet until a soul is placed by God in the passive purgation of that dark night, which we will soon explain, it cannot purify itself completely of these imperfections or others. But people should insofar as possible strive to do their part in purifying and perfecting themselves and thereby merit God's divine cure. In this cure God will heal them of what through their own efforts they were unable to remedy. No matter how much individuals do through their own

efforts, they cannot actively purify themselves enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love. God must take over and purge them in that fire that is dark for them, as we will explain.

=====

[1] See [A. 3. 35-37](#) for further descriptions. An *agnusdei* was a small wax disk with the image of a lamb. Blessed by the pope in special ceremonies that took place every seven years, it was worn as protection against natural disasters.

[2] The identify of these persons is unknown; some think the first one might have been St. Teresa.

Chapter 4

Book One

[The imperfections of lust, the third capital vice, usually found in beginners.]

1. A number of these beginners have many more imperfections in each vice than those I am mentioning. But to avoid prolixity, I am omitting them and touching on some principal ones that are as it were the origin of the others.

As for the vice of lust - aside from what it means for spiritual persons to fall into this vice, since my intent is to treat of the imperfections that have to be purged by means of the dark night - spiritual persons have numerous imperfections, many of which can be called spiritual lust, not because the lust is spiritual but because it proceeds from spiritual things. It happens frequently that in a person's spiritual exercises themselves, without the person being able to avoid it, impure movements will be experienced in the sensory part of the soul, and even sometimes when the spirit is deep in prayer or when receiving the sacraments of Penance or the

Eucharist. These impure feelings arise from any of three causes outside one's control.[\[1\]](#)

2. First, they often proceed from the pleasure human nature finds in spiritual exercises. Since both the spiritual and the sensory part of the soul receive gratification from that refreshment, each part experiences delight according to its own nature and properties. The spirit, the superior part of the soul, experiences renewal and satisfaction in God; and the sense, the lower part, feels sensory gratification and delight because it is ignorant of how to get anything else, and hence takes whatever is nearest, which is the impure sensory satisfaction. It may happen that while a soul is with God in deep spiritual prayer, it will conversely passively experience sensual rebellions, movements, and acts in the senses, not without its own great displeasure.

This frequently happens at the time of Communion. Since the soul receives joy and gladness in this act of love - for the Lord grants the grace and gives himself for this reason - the sensory part also takes its share, as we said, according to its mode. Since, after all, these two parts form one suppositum, each one usually shares according to its mode in what the other receives. As the Philosopher says: *Whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the receiver.*[\[2\]](#)

Because in the initial stages of the spiritual life, and even more advanced ones, the sensory part of the soul is imperfect, God's spirit is frequently received in this sensory part with this same imperfection. Once the sensory part is reformed through the purgation of the dark night, it no longer has these infirmities. Then the spiritual part of the soul, rather than the sensory part, receives God's spirit, and the soul thus receives everything according to the mode of the spirit.

3. The second origin of these rebellions is the devil. To bring disquietude and disturbance on a soul when it is praying, or trying to pray, he endeavors to excite impure feelings in the sensory part. And if people pay any attention to these, the devil does them great

harm. Through fear, some souls grow slack in their prayer - which is what the devil wants - in order to struggle against these movements, and others give it up entirely, for they think these feelings come while they are engaged in prayer rather than at other times. And this is true because the devil excites these feelings while souls are at prayer, instead of when they are engaged in other works, so that they might abandon prayer. And that is not all; to make them cowardly and afraid, he brings vividly to their minds foul and impure thoughts. And sometimes the thoughts will concern spiritually helpful things and persons. Those who attribute any importance to such thoughts, therefore, do not even dare look at anything or think about anything lest they thereupon stumble into them.

These impure thoughts so affect people who are afflicted with melancholia that one should have great pity for them; indeed, these people suffer a sad life. In some who are troubled with this bad humor the trial reaches such a point that they clearly feel that the devil has access to them without their having the freedom to prevent it. Yet some of these melancholiacs are able through intense effort and struggle to forestall this power of the devil. If these impure thoughts and feelings arise from melancholia, individuals are not ordinarily freed from them until they are cured of that humor - unless they enter the dark night, which in time deprives them of everything.[\[3\]](#)

4. The third origin from which these impure feelings usually proceed and wage war on the soul is the latter's fear of them. The fear that springs up at the sudden remembrance of these thoughts, caused by what one sees, is dealing with, or thinking of, produces impure feelings without the person being at fault.

5. Some people are so delicate that when gratification is received spiritually, or in prayer, they immediately experience a lust that so inebriates them and caresses their senses that they become as it were engulfed in the delight and satisfaction of that vice; and this

experience continues passively with the other. Sometimes these individuals become aware that certain impure and rebellious acts have taken place. The reason for such occurrences is that since these natures are, as I say, delicate and tender, their humors and blood are stirred up by any change. These persons also experience such feelings when they are inflamed with anger or are agitated by some other disturbance or affliction.

6. Sometimes, too, in their spiritual conversations or works, they manifest a certain sprightliness and gallantry on considering who is present, and they carry on with a kind of vain satisfaction. Such behavior is also a by-product of spiritual lust (in the way we here understand it), which generally accompanies complacency of the will.

7. Some spiritually acquire a liking for other individuals that often arises from lust rather than from the spirit. This lustful origin will be recognized if, on recalling that affection, there is remorse of conscience, not an increase in the remembrance and love of God. The affection is purely spiritual if the love of God grows when it grows, or if the love of God is remembered as often as the affection is remembered, or if the affection gives the soul a desire for God - if by growing in one the soul grows also in the other. For this is a trait of God's spirit: The good increases with the good since there is likeness and conformity between them. But when the love is born of this sensual vice it has the contrary effects. As the one love grows greater, the other lessens, and the remembrance of it lessens too. If the inordinate love increases, then, as will be seen, the soul grows cold in the love of God and, because of the recollection of that other love, forgets him - not without feeling some remorse of conscience. On the other hand, as the love of God increases, the soul grows cold in the inordinate affection and comes to forget it. For not only do these loves fail to benefit each other, but, since they are contrary loves, the predominating one, while becoming stronger itself, stifles and extinguishes the other, as the philosophers say.[\[4\]](#) Hence our

Savior proclaimed in the Gospel: *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit* [Jn. 3:6], that is: Love derived from sensuality terminates in sensuality, and the love that is of the spirit terminates in the spirit of God, and brings it increase. And this, then, is the difference between these two loves, which enables us to discern one from the other.

8. When the soul enters the dark night, all these loves are placed in reasonable order. This night strengthens and purifies the love that is of God, and takes away and destroys the other. But in the beginning it causes the soul to lose sight of both of them, as will be explained.

=====

[1] For a fuller treatment of related material see [A. 3. 21-23](#).

[2] This axiom as such has not been found in Aristotle. Aquinas makes use of it several times, for example, in *Summa theologiae* 1. 79. 6. The principle is important in John's teaching; see [N. 2. 16. 4](#); [E. 3. 34](#).

[3] The term melancholia, or melancholy, was used for the whole gamut of emotional disturbances believed to be caused by an excess of black bile. See [A. Prol. 4](#); [A. 2. 13. 6](#); [N. 1. 9. 2-3](#); also Teresa of Avila's *Foundations*, chap. 7.

[4] See [A. 1. 4. 2](#).

Chapter 5

Book One

[The imperfections of the capital vice of anger into which beginners fall.]

1. Because of the strong desire of many beginners for spiritual gratification, they usually have many imperfections of anger. When the delight and satisfaction procured in their spiritual exercises

passes, these beginners are naturally left without any spiritual savor. And because of this distastefulness, they become peevish in the works they do and easily angered by the least thing, and occasionally they are so unbearable that nobody can put up with them. This frequently occurs after they have experienced in prayer some recollection pleasant to the senses.

After the delight and satisfaction are gone, the sensory part of the soul is naturally left vapid and zestless, just as a child is when withdrawn from the sweet breast. These souls are not at fault if they do not allow this dejection to influence them, for it is an imperfection that must be purged through the dryness and distress of the dark night.

2. Among these spiritual persons there are also those who fall into another kind of spiritual anger. Through a certain indiscreet zeal they become angry over the sins of others, reprove these others, and sometimes even feel the impulse to do so angrily, which in fact they occasionally do, setting themselves up as lords of virtue. All such conduct is contrary to spiritual meekness.

3. Others, in becoming aware of their own imperfections, grow angry with themselves in an unhumble impatience. So impatient are they about these imperfections that they want to become saints in a day. Many of these beginners make numerous plans and great resolutions, but since they are not humble and have no distrust of themselves, the more resolves they make the more they break, and the greater becomes their anger. They do not have the patience to wait until God gives them what they need, when he so desires. Their attitude is contrary to spiritual meekness and can only be remedied by the purgation of the dark night. Some, however, are so patient about their desire for advancement that God would prefer to see them a little less so.

Chapter 6

Book One

[The imperfections of spiritual gluttony.]

1. A great deal can be said on spiritual gluttony, the fourth vice. There are hardly any persons among these beginners, no matter how excellent their conduct, who do not fall into some of the many imperfections of this vice. These imperfections arise because of the delight beginners find in their spiritual exercises.

Many, lured by the delight and satisfaction procured in their religious practices, strive more for spiritual savor than for spiritual purity and discretion; yet it is this purity and discretion that God looks for and finds acceptable throughout a soul's entire spiritual journey. Besides the imperfection of seeking after these delights, the sweetness these persons experience makes them go to extremes and pass beyond the mean in which virtue resides and is acquired. Some, attracted by the delight they feel in their spiritual exercises, kill themselves with penances, and others weaken themselves by fasts and, without the counsel or command of another, overtax their weakness; indeed, they try to hide these penances from the one to whom they owe obedience in such matters. Some even dare perform these penances contrary to obedience.

2. Such individuals are unreasonable and most imperfect. They subordinate submissiveness and obedience (which is a penance of reason and discretion, and consequently a sacrifice more pleasing and acceptable to God) to corporeal penance. But corporeal penance without obedience is no more than a penance of beasts. And like beasts, they are motivated in these penances by an appetite for the pleasure they find in them. Since all extremes are vicious and since by such behavior these persons are doing their own will, they grow in vice rather than in virtue. For through this conduct they at least become spiritually gluttonous and proud, since they do not tread the path of obedience.

The devil, increasing the delights and appetites of these beginners and thereby stirring up this gluttony in them, so impels many of them that when they are unable to avoid obedience they either add to, change, or modify what was commanded. Any obedience in this matter is distasteful to them. Some reach such a point that the mere obligation of obedience to perform their spiritual exercises makes them lose all desire and devotion. Their only yearning and satisfaction is to do what they feel inclined to do, whereas it would be better in all likelihood for them not to do this at all.

3. Some are very insistent that their spiritual director allow them to do what they themselves want to do, and finally almost force the permission from him. And if they do not get what they want, they become sad and go about like testy children. They are under the impression that they do not serve God when they are not allowed to do what they want. Since they take gratification and their own will as their support and their god, they become sad, weak, and discouraged when their director takes these from them and desires that they do God's will. They think that gratifying and satisfying themselves is serving and satisfying God.

4. Others, too, because of this sweetness, have so little knowledge of their own lowliness and misery and such lack of the loving fear and respect they owe to God's grandeur that they do not hesitate to insist boldly that their confessors allow them the frequent reception of Communion. And worse than this, they often dare to receive Communion without the permission and advice of the minister and dispenser of Christ. They are guided here solely by their own opinion, and they endeavor to hide the truth from him. As a result, with their hearts set on frequent Communion, they make their confessions carelessly, more eager just to receive Communion than to receive it with a pure and perfect heart. It would be sounder and holier of them to have the contrary inclination and to ask their confessor not to let them receive Communion so frequently. Humble resignation, though, is better than either of these two attitudes. But

the boldnesses referred to first will bring great evil and chastisement on one.

5. In receiving Communion they spend all their time trying to get some feeling and satisfaction rather than humbly praising and reverencing God dwelling within them. And they go about this in such a way that, if they do not procure any sensible feeling and satisfaction, they think they have accomplished nothing. As a result they judge very poorly of God and fail to understand that the sensory benefits are the least among those that this most blessed Sacrament bestows, for the invisible grace it gives is a greater blessing. God often withdraws sensory delight and pleasure so that souls might set the eyes of faith on this invisible grace. Not only in receiving Communion, but in other spiritual exercises as well, beginners desire to feel God and taste him as if he were comprehensible and accessible. This desire is a serious imperfection and, because it involves impurity of faith, is opposed to God's way.

6. They have the same defect in their prayer, for they think the whole matter of prayer consists in looking for sensory satisfaction and devotion. They strive to procure this by their own efforts, and tire and weary their heads and their faculties. When they do not get this sensible comfort, they become very disconsolate and think they have done nothing. Because of their aim they lose true devotion and spirit, which lie in distrust of self and in humble and patient perseverance so as to please God. Once they do not find delight in prayer, or in any other spiritual exercise, they feel extreme reluctance and repugnance in returning to it and sometimes even give it up. For after all, as was mentioned, [\[1\]](#) they are like children who are prompted to act not by reason but by pleasure.

All their time is spent looking for satisfaction and spiritual consolation; they can never read enough spiritual books, and one minute they are meditating on one subject and the next on another, always hunting for some gratification in the things of God. God very rightly and discreetly and lovingly denies this satisfaction to these

beginners. If he did not, they would fall into innumerable evils because of their spiritual gluttony and craving for sweetness. This is why it is important for these beginners to enter the dark night and be purged of this childishness.[\[2\]](#)

7. Those who are inclined toward these delights have also another serious imperfection, which is that they are weak and remiss in treading the rough way of the cross. A soul given up to pleasure naturally feels aversion toward the bitterness of self-denial.

8. These people incur many other imperfections because of this spiritual gluttony, of which the Lord in time will cure them through temptations, aridities, and other trials, which are all a part of the dark night. So as not to be too lengthy, I do not want to discuss these imperfections any more, but only point out that spiritual sobriety and temperance beget another very different quality, one of mortification, fear, and submissiveness in all things. Individuals thereby become aware that the perfection and value of their works do not depend on quantity or the satisfaction found in them but on knowing how to practice self-denial in them. These beginners ought to do their part in striving after this self-denial until God in fact brings them into the dark night and purifies them. In order to get to our discussion of this dark night, I am passing over these imperfections hurriedly.

=====

[\[1\]](#) In [chap. 5. 1.](#)

[\[2\]](#) Throughout these chapters, describing the situation of beginners in regard to each capital vice, John repeatedly points out their need for the purification of the dark night, which he begins to treat in [chap. 8.](#)

Chapter 7

Book One

[The imperfections of spiritual envy and sloth.]

1. As for the other two vices, spiritual envy and sloth, these beginners also have many imperfections. In regard to envy, many of them feel sad about the spiritual good of others and experience sensible grief in noting that their neighbor is ahead of them on the road to perfection, and they do not want to hear others praised. Learning of the virtues of others makes them sad. They cannot bear to hear others being praised without contradicting and undoing these compliments as much as possible. Their annoyance grows because they themselves do not receive these plaudits and because they long for preference in everything. All of this is contrary to charity, which, as St. Paul says, *rejoices in the truth* [1 Cor. 13:6]. If any envy accompanies charity, it is a holy envy by which they become sad at not having the virtues of others, rejoice that others have them, and are happy that all others are ahead of them in the service of God, since they themselves are so wanting in his service.

2. Also, regarding spiritual sloth, these beginners usually become weary in exercises that are more spiritual and flee from them since these exercises are contrary to sensory satisfaction. Since they are so used to finding delight in spiritual practices, they become bored when they do not find it. If they do not receive in prayer the satisfaction they crave - for after all it is fit that God withdraw this so as to try them - they do not want to return to it, or at times they either give up prayer or go to it begrudgingly. Because of their sloth, they subordinate the way of perfection (which requires denying one's own will and satisfaction for God) to the pleasure and delight of their own will. As a result they strive to satisfy their own will rather than God's.

3. Many of these beginners want God to desire what they want, and they become sad if they have to desire God's will. They feel an aversion toward adapting their will to God's. Hence they frequently believe that what is not their will, or brings them no satisfaction, is not God's will, and, on the other hand, that if they are satisfied, God

is too. They measure God by themselves and not themselves by God, which is in opposition to his teaching in the Gospel that those who lose their life for his sake will gain it and those who desire to gain it will lose it [Mt. 16:25].

4. Beginners also become bored when told to do something unpleasant. Because they look for spiritual gratifications and delights, they are extremely lax in the fortitude and labor perfection demands. Like those who are reared in luxury, they run sadly from everything rough, and they are scandalized by the cross, in which spiritual delights are found. And in the more spiritual exercises their boredom is greater. Since they expect to go about in spiritual matters according to the whims and satisfactions of their own will, entering by the narrow way of life, about which Christ speaks, is saddening and repugnant to them [Mt. 7:14].[\[1\]](#)

5. It is enough to have referred to the many imperfections of those who live in this beginner's state to see their need for God to put them into the state of proficient. He does this by introducing them into the dark night, of which we will now speak. There, through pure dryness and interior darkness, he weans them from the breasts of these gratifications and delights, takes away all these trivialities and childish ways, and makes them acquire the virtues by very different means. No matter how earnestly beginners in all their actions and passions practice the mortification of self, they will never be able to do so entirely - far from it - until God accomplishes it in them passively by means of the purgation of this night. May God be pleased to give me his divine light that I may say something worthwhile about this subject, for in a night so dark and a matter so difficult to treat and expound, his enlightenment is very necessary. The verse, then, is:

One dark night.

=====

[\[1\]](#) See [A. 2. 7.](#)

Chapter 8

Book One

[The beginning of the exposition of this dark night. An explanation of verse 1 of the first stanza.]

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

2. The first purgation or night is bitter and terrible to the senses. But nothing can be compared to the second, for it is horrible and frightful to the spirit. Because the sensory night is first in order, we will speak of it now briefly. It is a more common occurrence, so one finds more written on it. Then we will pass on to discuss more at length the spiritual night, for hardly anything has been said of it in sermons or in writing; and even the experience of it is rare.

3. Since the conduct of these beginners in the way of God is lowly and not too distant from love of pleasure and of self, as we explained,[\[2\]](#) God desires to withdraw them from this base manner of loving and lead them on to a higher degree of divine love. And he desires to liberate them from the lowly exercise of the senses and of discursive meditation, by which they go in search of him so inadequately and with so many difficulties, and lead them into the

exercise of spirit, in which they become capable of a communion with God that is more abundant and more free of imperfections. God does this after beginners have exercised themselves for a time in the way of virtue and have persevered in meditation and prayer. For it is through the delight and satisfaction they experience in prayer that they have become detached from worldly things and have gained some spiritual strength in God. This strength has helped them somewhat to restrain their appetites for creatures, and through it they will be able to suffer a little oppression and dryness without turning back. Consequently, it is at the time they are going about their spiritual exercises with delight and satisfaction, when in their opinion the sun of divine favor is shining most brightly on them, that God darkens all this light and closes the door and the spring of sweet spiritual water they were tasting as often and as long as they desired. For since they were weak and tender, no door was closed to them, as St. John says in the Book of Revelation [Rv. 3:8]. God now leaves them in such darkness that they do not know which way to turn in their discursive imaginings. They cannot advance a step in meditation, as they used to, now that the interior sense faculties are engulfed in this night. He leaves them in such dryness that they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual exercises and works, as they formerly did, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter. As I said, [\[3\]](#) when God sees that they have grown a little, he weans them from the sweet breast so that they might be strengthened, lays aside their swaddling bands, and puts them down from his arms that they may grow accustomed to walking by themselves. This change is a surprise to them because everything seems to be functioning in reverse.

4. This usually happens to recollected beginners sooner than to others since they are freer from occasions of backsliding and more quickly reform their appetites for worldly things. A reform of the appetites is the requirement for entering the happy night of the senses. Not much time ordinarily passes after the initial stages of

their spiritual life before beginners start to enter this night of sense. And the majority of them do enter it because it is common to see them suffer these aridities.

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

=====

[1] As John goes on he makes it clearer that his arrangement of the nights coincides with that mentioned in [A. 1. 1. 2-3](#). This passive night of the senses marks a transition from the stage of beginners to that of proficients; the passive night of the spirit, the transition from the stage of proficients to that of the perfect.

[2] In chaps. [1-7](#).

[3] In [chap. 1. 2](#).

Chapter 9

Book One

[Signs for discerning whether a spiritual person is treading the path of this sensory night and purgation.]

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

2. The first is that since these souls do not get satisfaction or consolation from the things of God, they do not get any from

creatures either. Since God puts a soul in this dark night in order to dry up and purge its sensory appetite, he does not allow it to find sweetness or delight in anything. Through this sign it can in all likelihood be inferred that this dryness and distaste is not the outcome of newly committed sins and imperfections. If this were so, some inclination or propensity to look for satisfaction in something other than the things of God would be felt in the sensory part, for when the appetite is allowed indulgence in some imperfection, the soul immediately feels an inclination toward it, little or great in proportion to the degree of its satisfaction and attachment.

Yet, because the want of satisfaction in earthly or heavenly things could be the product of some indisposition or melancholic humor, which frequently prevents one from being satisfied with anything, the second sign or condition is necessary.

3. The second sign for the discernment of this purgation is that the memory ordinarily turns to God solicitously and with painful care, and the soul thinks it is not serving God but turning back, because it is aware of this distaste for the things of God. Hence it is obvious that this aversion and dryness is not the fruit of laxity and tepidity, for lukewarm people do not care much for the things of God nor are they inwardly solicitous about them.

There is, consequently, a notable difference between dryness and lukewarmness. The lukewarm are very lax and remiss in their will and spirit, and have no solicitude about serving God. Those suffering from the purgative dryness are ordinarily solicitous, concerned, and pained about not serving God. Even though the dryness may be furthered by melancholia or some other humor - as it often is - it does not thereby fail to produce its purgative effect in the appetite, for the soul will be deprived of every satisfaction and concerned only about God. If this humor is the entire cause, everything ends in displeasure and does harm to one's nature, and there are none of these desires to serve God that accompany the purgative dryness. Even though in this purgative dryness the sensory part of the soul is

very cast down, slack, and feeble in its actions because of the little satisfaction it finds, the spirit is ready and strong.

4. The reason for this dryness is that God transfers his goods and strength from sense to spirit. Since the sensory part of the soul is incapable of the goods of spirit, it remains deprived, dry, and empty. Thus, while the spirit is tasting, the flesh tastes nothing at all and becomes weak in its work.[\[1\]](#) But through this nourishment the spirit grows stronger and more alert, and becomes more solicitous than before about not failing God.

If in the beginning the soul does not experience this spiritual savor and delight, but dryness and distaste, the reason is the novelty involved in this exchange. Since its palate is accustomed to these other sensory tastes, the soul still sets its eyes on them. And since, also, its spiritual palate is neither purged nor accommodated for so subtle a taste, it is unable to experience the spiritual savor and good until gradually prepared by means of this dark and obscure night. The soul instead experiences dryness and distaste because of a lack of the gratification it formerly enjoyed so readily.

5. Those whom God begins to lead into these desert solitudes are like the children of Israel. When God began giving them the heavenly food, which contained in itself all savors and changed to whatever taste each one hungered after [Wis. 16:20-21], as is there mentioned, they nonetheless felt a craving for the tastes of the fleshmeats and onions they had eaten in Egypt, for their palate was accustomed and attracted to them more than to the delicate sweetness of the angelic manna. And in the midst of that heavenly food, they wept and sighed for fleshmeat [Nm. 11:4-6]. The baseness of our appetite is such that it makes us long for our own miserable goods and feel aversion for the incommunicable heavenly good.

6. Yet, as I say, when these aridities are the outcome of the purgative way of the sensory appetite, the spirit feels the strength and energy to work, which is obtained from the substance of that interior food, even though in the beginning it may not experience

the savor, for the reason just mentioned. This food is the beginning of a contemplation that is dark and dry to the senses. Ordinarily this contemplation, which is secret and hidden from the very one who receives it, imparts to the soul, together with the dryness and emptiness it produces in the senses, an inclination to remain alone and in quietude. And the soul will be unable to dwell on any particular thought, nor will it have the desire to do so.

If those in whom this occurs know how to remain quiet, without care or solicitude about any interior or exterior work, they will soon in that unconcern and idleness delicately experience the interior nourishment. This refectio is so delicate that usually if the soul desires or tries to experience it, it cannot do so. For, as I say, this contemplation is active while the soul is in idleness and unconcern. It is like air that escapes when one tries to grasp it in one's hand.

7. In this sense we can interpret what the Spouse said to the bride in the Song of Songs: *Turn your eyes from me, because they make me fly away* [Sg. 6:4]. God conducts the soul along so different a path, and so puts it in this state, that a desire to work with the faculties would hinder rather than help his work; whereas in the beginning of the spiritual life everything was quite the contrary. The reason is that now in this state of contemplation, when the soul leaves discursive meditation and enters the state of proficients, it is God who works in it.

He therefore binds the interior faculties and leaves no support in the intellect, nor satisfaction in the will, nor remembrance in the memory. At this time a person's own efforts are of no avail, but are an obstacle to the interior peace and work God is producing in the spirit through that dryness of sense. Since this peace is something spiritual and delicate, its fruit is quiet, delicate, solitary, satisfying, and peaceful, and far removed from all the other gratifications of beginners, which are very palpable and sensory. This is the peace that David says God speaks in the soul in order to make it spiritual [Ps. 85:8]. The third sign follows from this one.

8. The third sign for the discernment of this purgation of the senses is the powerlessness, in spite of one's efforts, to meditate and make use of the imagination, the interior sense, as was one's previous custom. At this time God does not communicate himself through the senses as he did before, by means of the discursive analysis and synthesis of ideas, but begins to communicate himself through pure spirit by an act of simple contemplation in which there is no discursive succession of thought. The exterior and interior senses of the lower part of the soul cannot attain to this contemplation. As a result the imaginative power and phantasy can no longer rest in any consideration or find support in it.[\[2\]](#)

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

Those who do not walk the road of contemplation act very differently. This night of the aridity of the senses is not so continuous in them, for sometimes they experience the aridities and at other times not, and sometimes they can meditate and at other times they cannot. God places them in this night solely to exercise and humble them, and reform their appetite lest in their spiritual life they foster a harmful attraction toward sweetness. But he does not do so in order to lead them to the life of the spirit, which is contemplation. For God does not bring to contemplation all those

who purposely exercise themselves in the way of the spirit, nor even half. Why? He best knows. As a result he never completely weans their senses from the breasts of considerations and discursive meditations, except for some short periods and at certain seasons, as we said.

=====

[1] This same maxim is followed in [A. 2. 17. 5](#); [C. 16. 5](#); [F. 3. 39](#).

[2] Of these three signs two are negative (lack of satisfaction, inability to practice discursive meditation) and one positive (solicitude about not failing God). The positive sign is the best indicator of God's communication (faith, hope, and love). These signs coincide with those explained in [A. 2. 13](#), except that here the positive sign represents an earlier phase of the transition to contemplation.

Chapter 10

Book One

[The conduct required of souls in this dark night.]

1. At the time of the aridities of this sensory night, God makes the exchange we mentioned [\[1\]](#) by withdrawing the soul from the life of the senses and placing it in that of spirit - that is, he brings it from meditation to contemplation - where the soul no longer has the power to work or meditate with its faculties on the things of God. Spiritual persons suffer considerable affliction in this night, owing not so much to the aridities they undergo as to their fear of having gone astray. Since they do not find any support or satisfaction in good things, they believe there will be no more spiritual blessings for them and that God has abandoned them.

They then grow weary and strive, as was their custom, to concentrate their faculties with some satisfaction on a subject of meditation, and they think that if they do not do this and do not feel

that they are at work, they are doing nothing. This effort of theirs is accompanied by an interior reluctance and repugnance on the part of the soul, for it would be pleased to dwell in that quietude and idleness without working with the faculties.

They consequently impair God's work and do not profit by their own. In searching for spirit, they lose the spirit that was the source of their tranquility and peace. They are like someone who turns from what has already been done in order to do it again, or like one who leaves a city only to re-enter it, or they are like a hunter who abandons the prey in order to go hunting again. It is useless, then, for the soul to try to meditate because it will no longer profit by this exercise.

2. If there is no one to understand these persons, they either turn back and abandon the road or lose courage, or at least they hinder their own progress because of their excessive diligence in treading the path of discursive meditation. They fatigue and overwork themselves, thinking that they are failing because of their negligence or sins. Meditation is now useless for them because God is conducting them along another road, which is contemplation and is very different from the first, for the one road belongs to discursive meditation and the other is beyond the range of the imagination and discursive reflection.

3. Those who are in this situation should feel comforted; they ought to persevere patiently and not be afflicted. Let them trust in God who does not fail those who seek him with a simple and righteous heart; nor will he fail to impart what is needful for the way until getting them to the clear and pure light of love. God will give them this light by means of that other night, the night of spirit, if they merit that he place them in it.

4. The attitude necessary in the night of sense is to pay no attention to discursive meditation since this is not the time for it. They should allow the soul to remain in rest and quietude even though it may seem obvious to them that they are doing nothing and

wasting time, and even though they think this disinclination to think about anything is due to their laxity. Through patience and perseverance in prayer, they will be doing a great deal without activity on their part.

All that is required of them here is freedom of soul, that they liberate themselves from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts, and care not about thinking and meditating. They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him. All these desires disquiet the soul and distract it from the peaceful, quiet, and sweet idleness of the contemplation that is being communicated to it.

5. And even though more scruples come to the fore concerning the loss of time and the advantages of doing something else, since it cannot do anything or think of anything in prayer, the soul should endure them peacefully, as though going to prayer means remaining in ease and freedom of spirit. If individuals were to desire to do something themselves with their interior faculties, they would hinder and lose the goods that God engraves on their souls through that peace and idleness.

If a model for the painting or retouching of a portrait should move because of a desire to do something, the artist would be unable to finish and the work would be spoiled. Similarly, any operation, affection, or thought a soul might cling to when it wants to abide in interior peace and idleness would cause distraction and disquietude, and make it feel sensory dryness and emptiness. The more a person seeks some support in knowledge and affection the more the soul will feel the lack of these, for this support cannot be supplied through these sensory means.

6. Accordingly, such persons should not mind if the operations of their faculties are being lost to them; they should desire rather that this be done quickly so they may be no obstacle to the operation of the infused contemplation God is bestowing, so they may receive it

with more peaceful plenitude and make room in the spirit for the enkindling and burning of the love that this dark and secret contemplation bears and communicates to the soul. For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love, as is brought out in the following verse:[\[2\]](#)

Fired with love's urgent longings

=====

[\[1\]](#) In [chap. 8. 3-4](#).

[\[2\]](#) In this number, John uses the term infused contemplation for the first time. The terms "infused," "supernatural," and "passive" are used similarly. Here he gives a definition of what means by infused contemplation. In considering the effects it produces in the soul, he will employ other terms, such as purgative, illuminative, and unitive.

Chapter 11

Book One

[Explains three verses of the stanza.]

1. The fire of love is not commonly felt at the outset, either because it does not have a chance to take hold, owing to the impurity of the sensory part, or because the soul for want of understanding has not made within itself a peaceful place for it; although at times with or without these conditions a person will begin to feel a certain longing for God. In the measure that the fire increases, the soul becomes aware of being attracted by the love of God and enkindled in it, without knowing how or where this attraction and love originates. At times this flame and enkindling increase to such an extent that the soul desires God with urgent longings of love, as David, while in this night, said of himself: *Because my heart was inflamed (in contemplative love), my reins*

were likewise changed [Ps. 73:21]. That is, my appetites of sensible affection were changed from the sensory life to the spiritual life, which implies dryness and cessation of all those appetites we are speaking of. And, he says: *I was brought to nothing and annihilated, and I knew not* [Ps. 73:22]. For, as we pointed out, [\[1\]](#) the soul, with no knowledge of its destination, sees itself annihilated in all heavenly and earthly things in which it formerly found satisfaction; and it only sees that it is enamored, but knows not how.

Because the enkindling of love in the spirit sometimes increases exceedingly, the longings for God become so intense that it will seem to such persons that their bones are drying up in this thirst, their nature withering away, and their ardor and strength diminishing through the liveliness of the thirst of love. They will feel that this is a living thirst. David also had such experience when he proclaimed: *My soul thirsts for the living God* [Ps. 43:3], as though to say, this thirst my soul experiences is a living thirst. Since this thirst is alive, we can assert that it is a thirst that kills. Yet it should be noted that its vehemence is not continual, but only experienced from time to time, although usually some thirst is felt.

2. Yet it must be kept in mind that, as I began to say here, individuals generally do not perceive this love in the beginning, but they experience rather the dryness and void we are speaking of. Then, instead of this love which is enkindled afterward, they harbor, in the midst of the dryness and emptiness of their faculties, a habitual care and solicitude for God accompanied by grief or fear about not serving him. It is a sacrifice most pleasing to God - that of a spirit in distress and solicitude for his love [Ps. 51:17].

Secret contemplation produces this solicitude and concern in the soul until, after having somewhat purged the sensory part of its natural propensities by means of this aridity, it begins to enkindle in the spirit this divine love. Meanwhile, however, as in one who is undergoing a cure, all is suffering in this dark and dry purgation of the appetite, and the soul being relieved of numerous imperfections

acquires many virtues, thereby becoming capable of this love, as will be shown in the explanation of the following verse: - ah, the sheer grace! -

3. God introduces people into this night to purge their senses, and to accommodate, subject, and unite the lower part of the soul to the spiritual part by darkening it and causing a cessation of discursive meditation (just as afterward, in order to purify the spirit and unite it to himself, he brings it into the spiritual night). As a result they gain so many benefits - though at the time this may not be apparent - that they consider their departure from the fetters and straits of the senses a sheer grace.

The verse therefore proclaims: "- ah, the sheer grace! -"

We ought to point out the benefits procured in this night, for it is because of them that the soul says it was a sheer grace to have passed through it.[\[2\]](#) All these benefits are included in the next verse:

I went out unseen,

4. This going out bears reference to the subjection the soul had to its senses, in seeking God through operations so feeble, limited, and exposed to error as are those of this lower part, for at every step it stumbled into numerous imperfections and much ignorance, as was noted above in relation to the seven capital vices.[\[3\]](#) This night frees the soul from all these vices by quenching all its earthly and heavenly satisfactions, darkening its discursive meditations, and producing in it other innumerable goods through its acquiring of the virtues, as we will now explain. For it will please and comfort one who treads this path to know that a way seemingly so rough and adverse and contrary to spiritual gratification engenders so many blessings.

These blessings are attained when by means of this night the soul departs from all created things, in its affections and operations, and walks on toward eternal things. This is a great happiness and grace: first, because of the signal benefit of quenching one's appetite and affection for all things; second, because there are very few who will endure the night and persevere in entering through this narrow gate and treading this constricted road that leads to life, as our Savior says [Mt. 7:14].

This narrow gate is the dark night of sense, in which the soul is despoiled and denuded - in order to enter it - and grounded in faith, which is foreign to all sense, that it may be capable of walking along the constricted road, which is the night of spirit. The soul enters this second night so that it may journey to God in pure faith, for pure faith is the means whereby it is united with God. Few there are who walk along this road, because it is so narrow, dark, and terrible that, in obscurities and trials, the night of sense cannot be compared to it, as will be explained. Yet the benefits of this night are incomparably greater than those of the night of sense.

We will say something now about the benefits of the night of sense as briefly as possible in order to pass on to our exposition of the other night.

=====

[1] In [chap. 10](#).

[2] John begins now to discuss a third topic: the fruits of this night. The basic benefit is knowledge of self and of God ([chap. 12](#)). The other benefits are the virtues ([chap. 13](#)) opposite the imperfections of which he spoke.

[3] In [chaps. 2-7](#).

Chapter 12

Book One

[The benefits this night causes in the soul.]

1. This glad night and purgation causes many benefits even though to the soul it seemingly deprives it of them. So numerous are these benefits that, just as Abraham made a great feast on the day of his son Isaac's weaning [Gn. 21:8], there is rejoicing in heaven that God has now taken from this soul its swaddling clothes; that he has put it down from his arms and is making it walk alone; that he is weaning it from the delicate and sweet food of infants and making it eat bread with crust; and that the soul is beginning to taste the food of the strong (the infused contemplation of which we have spoken^[1]), which in these sensory aridities and darknesses is given to the spirit that is dry and empty of the satisfactions of sense.

2. The first and chief benefit this dry and dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and of one's own misery. Besides the fact that all the favors God imparts to the soul are ordinarily wrapped in this knowledge, the aridities and voids of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make the soul recognize its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of its prosperity.

There is a good figure of this in Exodus where God, desiring to humble the children of Israel and make them know themselves, ordered them to remove their festive garments and the adornments they had been wearing in the desert: *From now on leave aside your festive ornaments and put on common working garments that you may be aware of the treatment you deserve* [Ex. 33:5]. This was like saying: Since the clothing you wear, being of festivity and mirth, is an occasion for your not feeling as lowly as you in fact are, put it aside, so that seeing the vileness of your dress you may know yourself and your just deserts.

As a result the soul recognizes the truth about its misery, of which it was formerly ignorant. When it was walking in festivity, gratification, consolation, and support in God, it was more content,

believing that it was serving God in some way. Though this idea of serving God may not be explicitly formed in a person's mind, at least some notion of it is deeply embedded within, owing to the satisfaction derived from one's spiritual exercises. Now that the soul is clothed in these other garments of labor, dryness, and desolation, and its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic lights in this most excellent and necessary virtue of self-knowledge. It considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in self because it is aware that of itself it neither does nor can do anything.

God esteems this lack of self-satisfaction and the dejection persons have about not serving him more than all their former deeds and gratifications, however notable they may have been, since they were the occasion of many imperfections and a great deal of ignorance. Not only the benefits we mentioned result from this garment of dryness but also those of which we will now speak, and many more, for they flow from self-knowledge as from their fount.

3. First, individuals commune with God more respectfully and courteously, the way one should always converse with the Most High. In the prosperity of their satisfaction and consolation as beginners, they did not act thus, for that satisfying delight made them somewhat more daring with God than was proper, and more discourteous and inconsiderate. This is what happened to Moses: When he heard God speaking to him, he was blinded by that gratification and desire and without any further thought would have dared to approach God, if he had not been ordered to stop and take off his shoes [Ex. 3:4-5]. This instance denotes the respect and discretion, the nakedness of appetite, with which one ought to commune with God. Consequently when Moses was obedient to this command, he was so discreet and cautious that Scripture says he not only dared not approach but did not even dare look [Ex. 3:6; Acts 7:32]. Having left aside the shoes of his appetites and gratifications,

he was fully aware of his misery in the sight of God, for this was the manner in which it was fitting for him to hear God's word.

Similarly, Job was not prepared for converse with God by means of those delights and glories that he says he was accustomed to experience in his God. But the preparation for this converse embodied nakedness on a dunghill, abandonment and even persecution by his friends, the fullness of anguish and bitterness, and the sight of the earth round about him covered with worms [Jb. 2:8; 30:17-18]. Yet the most high God, he who raises the poor from the dunghill [Ps. 112:7], was then pleased to descend and speak face to face with him and reveal the deep mysteries of his wisdom, which he never did before in the time of Job's prosperity [Jb. 38-41].

4. Since this is the proper moment, we ought to point out another benefit resulting from this night and dryness of the sensory appetite. So that the prophecy - *your light will illumine the darkness* [Is. 58:10] - may be verified, God will give illumination by bestowing on the soul not only knowledge of its own misery and lowliness but also knowledge of his grandeur and majesty. When the sensory appetites, gratifications, and supports are quenched, the intellect is left clean and free to understand the truth, for even though these appetites and pleasures concern spiritual things, they blind and impede the spirit. Similarly, the anguish and dryness of the senses illumine and quicken the intellect, as Isaiah affirms: *Vexation makes one understand* [Is. 28:19]. But God also, by means of this dark and dry night of contemplation, supernaturally instructs in his divine wisdom the soul that is empty and unhindered (which is the requirement for his divine inpouring), which he did not do through the former satisfactions and pleasures.

5. Isaiah explains this clearly: *To whom will God teach his knowledge? And to whom will he explain his message? To them that are weaned, he says, from the milk, and to them who are drawn away from the breasts* [Is. 28:9]. This passage indicates that the preparation for this divine inpouring is not the former milk of

spiritual sweetness or aid from the breast of the discursive meditations of the sensory faculties that the soul enjoyed, but the privation of one and a withdrawal from the other.

In order to hear God, people should stand firm and be detached in their sense life and affections, as the prophet himself declares: *I will stand on my watch* (with detached appetite) and *will fix my foot* (I will not meditate with the sensory faculties) *in order to contemplate* (understand) *what God says to me* [Hb. 2:1].

We conclude that self-knowledge flows first from this dry night, and that from this knowledge as from its source proceeds the other knowledge of God. Hence St. Augustine said to God: *Let me know myself, Lord, and I will know you.* [2] For as the philosophers say, one extreme is clearly known by the other. [3]

6. For a more complete proof of the efficacy of this sensory night in producing through its dryness and destitution the light here received from God, we will quote that passage from David in which the great power of this night in relation to the lofty knowledge of God is clearly shown. He proclaims: *In a desert land, without water, dry, and without a way, I appeared before you to be able to see your power and your glory* [Ps. 63:1-2]. David's teaching here is admirable: that the means to the knowledge of the glory of God were not the many spiritual delights and gratifications he had received, but the sensory aridities and detachments referred to by the dry and desert land. And it is also wonderful that, as he says, the way to the experience and vision of the power of God did not consist in ideas and meditations about God, of which he had made extensive use. But it consisted in not being able either to grasp God with ideas or walk by means of discursive, imaginative meditation, which is here indicated by the land without a way.

Hence the dark night with its aridities and voids is the means to the knowledge of both God and self. However, the knowledge given in this night is not as plenteous and abundant as that of the other

night of spirit, for the knowledge of this night is as it were the foundation of the other.[\[4\]](#)

7. In the dryness and emptiness of this night of the appetite, a person also procures spiritual humility, that virtue opposed to the first capital vice, spiritual pride. Through this humility acquired by means of self-knowledge, individuals are purged of all those imperfections of the vice of pride into which they fell in the time of their prosperity. Aware of their own dryness and wretchedness, the thought of their being more advanced than others does not even occur in its first movements, as it did before; on the contrary, they realize that others are better.

8. From this humility stems love of neighbor, for they esteem them and do not judge them as they did before when they were aware that they enjoyed an intense fervor while others did not.

These persons know only their own misery and keep it so much in sight that they have no opportunity to watch anyone else's conduct. David while in this night gives an admirable manifestation of such a state of soul: *I became dumb, and was humbled, and I kept silent in good things, and my sorrow was renewed* [Ps. 39:2]. He says this because it seemed to him that his blessings had so come to an end that not only was he unable to find words for them, but he also became silent concerning his neighbor, in the sorrow he experienced from the knowledge of his own misery.

9. These individuals also become submissive and obedient in their spiritual journey. Since they are so aware of their own wretchedness, they not only listen to the teaching of others but even desire to be directed and told what to do by anyone at all. The affective presumption they sometimes had in their prosperity leaves them. And, finally, as they proceed on their journey, all the other imperfections of this first vice, spiritual pride, are swept away.

=====

[\[1\]](#) In [chap. 10. 6.](#)

[2] See *Soliloquia*, 2. 1. 1, in Migne, PL 32. 885.

[3] From the philosophical axiom: *Contrariorum eadem est ratio*.

[4] Here John concludes his treatment of the basic benefit. The following numbers deal with the benefits opposite the imperfections and more properly belong in [chap. 13](#).

Chapter 13

Book One

[Other benefits of this night of the senses.]

1. In this arid and obscure night the soul undergoes a thorough reform in its imperfections of avarice, in which it craved various spiritual objects and was never content with many of its spiritual exercises because of the covetousness of its appetite and the gratification it found in spiritual things. Since it does not obtain the delight it formerly did in its spiritual practices, but rather finds them distasteful and laborious, it uses them so moderately that now perhaps it might fail through defect rather than excess.

Nevertheless, God usually imparts to those whom he brings into this night the humility and the readiness, even though they feel displeasure, to do what is commanded of them for his sake alone, and they become detached from many things because of this lack of gratification.

2. It is also evident regarding spiritual lust that through the sensory dryness and distaste experienced in its spiritual exercises, the soul is freed of those impurities we noted.[\[1\]](#) For we said that they ordinarily proceed from the delight of the spirit redounding in the senses.

3. The imperfections of the fourth vice, spiritual gluttony, from which a person is freed in this dark night, are listed above,[\[2\]](#) although not all of them since they are innumerable. Thus I will not refer to them here, since I am eager to conclude this dark night in

order to pass on to the important doctrine we have concerning the other night.

To understand the countless benefits gained in this night in regard to the vice of spiritual gluttony, let it suffice to say that the soul is liberated from all the imperfections we mentioned and from many other greater evils and foul abominations not listed, into which many have fallen, as we know from experience, because they did not reform their desire for this spiritual sweetness.

God so curbs concupiscence and bridles the appetite through this arid and dark night that the soul cannot feast on any sensory delight from earthly or heavenly things, and he continues this purgation in such a way that the concupiscence and the appetites are brought into subjection, reformed, and mortified. The passions, as a result, lose their strength and become sterile from not receiving any satisfaction, just as the courses of the udder dry up when milk is not drawn through them daily.

Once the soul's appetites have withered, and it lives in spiritual sobriety, admirable benefits besides those mentioned result. For when the appetites and concupiscences are quenched, the soul dwells in spiritual peace and tranquility. Where neither the appetites nor concupiscence reign, there is no disturbance but only God's peace and consolation.

4. A second benefit following on this one is that the soul bears a habitual remembrance of God, accompanied by a fear and dread of turning back on the spiritual road. This is a notable benefit and by no means one of the least in this dryness and purgation of the appetite, because the soul is purified of the imperfections that of themselves make it dull and dark, and cling to it by means of appetites and affections.

5. Another very great benefit for the soul in this night is that it exercises all the virtues together. In the patience and forbearance practiced in these voids and aridities, and through perseverance in

its spiritual exercises without consolation or satisfaction, the soul practices the love of God, since it is no longer motivated by the attractive and savory gratification it finds in its work, but only by God. It also practices the virtue of fortitude, because it draws strength from weakness in the difficulties and aversions experienced in its work, and thus becomes strong. Finally, in these aridities the soul practices corporeally and spiritually all the virtues, theological as well as cardinal and moral.

6. David affirms that a person obtains in this night these four benefits: the delight of peace; a habitual remembrance of God and solicitude concerning him; cleanness and purity of soul; and the practice of virtue. For David himself had such experience by being in this night: *My soul refused consolations, I remembered God and found consolation, and exercised myself, and my soul swooned away;* and then he adds: *I meditated at night in my heart, and I exercised myself, and swept and purified my spirit* (of all its imperfections) [Ps. 77:2-6].

7. In relation to the imperfections of the other three vices (anger, envy, and sloth), the soul is also purged in this dryness of appetite, and it acquires the virtues to which these vices are opposed. Softened and humbled by aridities and hardships and by other temptations and trials in which God exercises the soul in the course of this night, individuals become meek toward God and themselves and also toward their neighbor. As a result they no longer become impatiently angry with themselves and their faults or with their neighbor's; neither are they displeased or disrespectfully querulous with God for not making them perfect quickly.

8. As for envy, these individuals also become charitable toward others. For if they do have envy, it will not be vicious as before, when they were distressed that others were preferred to them and more advanced. Now, aware of how miserable they are, they are willing to concede this about others. The envy they have - if they do

have any - is a holy envy that desires to imitate others, which indicates solid virtue.

9. The sloth and tedium they feel in spiritual things is not vicious as before. Previously this sloth was the outcome of the spiritual gratification they either enjoyed or tried to obtain when not experienced. Yet this wearisomeness does not flow from any weakness relative to sensory gratification, for in this purgation of the appetite God takes from the soul all its satisfaction.

10. Besides these benefits, innumerable others flow from this dry contemplation. In the midst of these aridities and straits, God frequently communicates to the soul, when it least expects, spiritual sweetness, a very pure love, and a spiritual knowledge that is sometimes most delicate. Each of these communications is more valuable than all the soul previously sought. Yet in the beginning one will not think so because the spiritual inflow is very delicate and the senses do not perceive it.

11. Finally, insofar as these persons are purged of their sensory affections and appetites, they obtain freedom of spirit in which they acquire the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit.

They are also wondrously liberated from the hands of their enemies, the devil, the world, and the flesh. For when the sensory delight and gratification regarding things is quenched, neither the devil, nor the world, nor sensuality has arms or power against the spirit.

12. These aridities, then, make people walk with purity in the love of God. No longer are they moved to act by the delight and satisfaction they find in a work, as perhaps they were when they derived this from their deeds, but by the desire of pleasing God. They are neither presumptuous nor self-satisfied, as was their custom in the time of their prosperity, but fearful and disquieted about themselves and lacking in any self-satisfaction. This is the holy fear that preserves and gives increase to the virtues.

This dryness also quenches the natural concupiscences and vigor, as we also said. Were it not for the satisfaction God himself sometimes infuses, it would be a wonder if the soul through its own diligence could get any sensible gratification or consolation out of its spiritual works and exercises.

13. In this arid night solicitude for God and longings about serving him increase. Since the sensory breasts (through which the appetites pursued by these souls were sustained and nurtured) gradually dry up, only the anxiety about serving God remains, in dryness and nakedness. These yearnings are very pleasing to God, since as David proclaims: *The afflicted spirit is a sacrifice to God* [Ps. 51:17].

14. Since the soul knows that, from this dry purgation through which it passed, it procured so many and such precious benefits, as are referred to here, the verse of this stanza is no exaggeration: " - Ah, the sheer grace! - I went out unseen." That is, I went forth from subjection to my sensory appetites and affections unseen, so that the three enemies were unable to stop me. These three enemies entrap the soul - as with snares - in its appetites and gratifications and keep it from going forth to the freedom of the love of God. But without these satisfactions and appetites the enemies cannot fight against the soul.

15. Having calmed the four passions (joy, sorrow, hope, and fear) through constant mortification, and lulled to sleep the natural sensory appetites, and having achieved harmony in the interior senses by discontinuing discursive operations (all of which pertains to the household or dwelling of the lower part of the soul, here referred to as its house), the soul says:

My house being now all stilled.

=====

[1] In [chap. 4](#).

[\[2\]](#) In [chap. 6](#).

Chapter 14

Book One

[An explanation of the last verse of the first stanza.]

1. When this house of the senses was stilled (that is, mortified), its passions quenched, and its appetites calmed and put to sleep through this happy night of the purgation of the senses, the soul went out in order to begin its journey along the road of the spirit, which is that of proficients and which by another terminology is referred to as the illuminative way or the way of infused contemplation. On this road God himself pastures and refreshes the soul without any of its own discursive meditation or active help.

Such is the sensory night and purgation of the soul. For those who must afterward enter into the other more oppressive night of the spirit in order to reach the divine union of love - because not everyone but only a few usually reach this union - this night is ordinarily accompanied by burdensome trials and sensory temptations that last a long time, and with some longer than with others.[\[1\]](#)

An angel of Satan [2 Cor. 12:7], which is the spirit of fornication, is given to some to buffet their senses with strong and abominable temptations, and afflict their spirit with foul thoughts and very vivid images, which sometimes is a pain worse than death for them.

2. At other times a blasphemous spirit is added; it commingles intolerable blasphemies with all one's thoughts and ideas. Sometimes these blasphemies are so strongly suggested to the imagination that the soul is almost made to pronounce them, which is a grave torment to it.

3. Sometimes another loathsome spirit, which Isaiah calls *spiritus vertiginis* [Is. 19:14], is sent to these souls, not for their downfall but

to try them.^[2] This spirit so darkens the senses that such souls are filled with a thousand scruples and perplexities, so intricate that such persons can never be content with anything, nor can their judgment receive the support of any counsel or idea. This is one of the most burdensome goads and horrors of this night - very similar to what occurs in the spiritual night.

4. God generally sends these storms and trials in this sensory night and purgation to those whom he will afterward put in the other night - although not all pass on to it - so that thus chastised and buffeted, the senses and faculties may gradually be exercised, prepared, and inured for the union with wisdom that will be granted there. For if a soul is not tempted, tried, and proved through temptations and trials, its senses will not be strengthened in preparation for wisdom. It is said therefore in Ecclesiasticus: *He who is not tempted, what does he know? And he who is not tried, what are the things he knows?* [Ecclus. 34:9-10]. Jeremiah gives good testimony of this truth: *You have chastised me, Lord, and I was instructed* [Jer. 31:18].

And the most fitting kind of chastisement for entering into wisdom consists of the interior trials we mentioned, since they most efficaciously purge the senses of all the satisfaction and consolation the soul was attached to through natural weakness. By these trials it is truly humbled in preparation for its coming exaltation.

5. Yet we cannot say certainly how long the soul will be kept in this fast and penance of the senses. Not everyone undergoes this in the same way, neither are the temptations identical. All is meted out according to God's will and the greater or lesser amount of imperfection that must be purged from each one. In the measure of the degree of love to which God wishes to raise a soul, he humbles it with greater or less intensity, or for a longer or shorter period of time.

Those who have more considerable capacity and strength for suffering, God purges more intensely and quickly. But those who are

very weak he keeps in this night for a long time. Their purgation is less intense and their temptations abated, and he frequently refreshes their senses to keep them from backsliding. They arrive at the purity of perfection late in life. And some of them never reach it entirely, for they are never wholly in the night or wholly out of it. Although they do not advance, God exercises them for short periods and on certain days in those temptations and aridities to preserve them in humility and self-knowledge; and at other times and seasons he comes to their aid with consolation, lest through loss of courage they return to their search for worldly consolation. God acts with other weaker souls as though he were showing himself and then hiding; he does this to exercise them in his love, for without these withdrawals they would not learn to reach him.

6. Yet, as is evident through experience, souls who will pass on to so happy and lofty a state as is the union of love must usually remain in these aridities and temptations for a long while no matter how quickly God leads them. It is time to begin our treatise on the second night.

=====

[\[1\]](#) The general principles previously explained allow for a wide variety in the ways they are actually realized. Here John mentions three kinds of temptations, but there can be many others, and the degree of intensity will also differ.

[\[2\]](#) This is a spirit of confusion; see [A. 2. 21. 11](#).

Book Two

Chapter 1

Book Two

*[The beginning of the treatise on the dark night of the spirit.
Explains when this night commences.]*

1. If His Majesty intends to lead the soul on, he does not put it in this dark night of spirit immediately after its going out from the aridities and trials of the first purgation and night of sense. Instead, after having emerged from the state of beginners, the soul usually spends many years exercising itself in the state of proficient. In this new state, as one liberated from a cramped prison cell, it goes about the things of God with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more abundant interior delight than it did in the beginning before entering the night of sense. Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation and spiritual solicitude, as was their custom. The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight. Nonetheless, the purgation of the soul is not complete. The purgation of the principal part, that of the spirit, is lacking, and without it the sensory purgation, however strong it may have been, is incomplete because of a communication existing between the two parts of the soul that form only one suppositum. As a result, certain needs, aridities, darknesses, and conflicts are felt. These are sometimes far more intense than those of the past and are like omens or messengers of the coming night of the spirit.[\[1\]](#)

But they are not lasting, as they will be in the night that is to come. For after enduring the short period or periods of time, or even days, in this night and tempest, the soul immediately returns to its customary serenity. Thus God purges some individuals who are not destined to ascend to so lofty a degree of love as are others. He

brings them into this night of contemplation and spiritual purgation at intervals, frequently causing the night to come and then the dawn so that David's affirmation might be fulfilled: *He sends his crystal (contemplation) like morsels* [Ps. 147:17]. These morsels of dark contemplation, though, are never as intense as is that frightful night of contemplation we are about to describe, in which God places the soul purposely in order to bring it to divine union.

2. The delight and interior gratification that these proficient enjoy abundantly and readily is communicated more copiously to them than previously and consequently overflows into the senses more than was usual before the sensory purgation. Since the sensory part of the soul is now purer, it can, after its own mode, experience the delights of the spirit more easily.

But since, after all, the sensory part of the soul is weak and incapable of vigorous spiritual communications, these proficient, because of such communications experienced in the sensitive part, suffer many infirmities, injuries, and weaknesses of stomach, and as a result fatigue of spirit. The Wise Man says: *The corruptible body is a load upon the soul* [Wis. 9:15]. Consequently the communications imparted to proficient cannot be very strong or very intense or very spiritual, as is required for divine union, because of the weakness and corruption of the senses that have their share in them.

Thus we have raptures and transports and the dislocation of bones, which always occur when the communications are not purely spiritual (communicated to the spirit alone) as are those of the perfect, who are already purified by the night of spirit. The perfect enjoy freedom of spirit without their senses being clouded or transported, for in them these raptures and bodily torments cease.[\[2\]](#)

3. To point out why these proficient must enter this night of spirit, we will note some of their imperfections and some of the dangers they confront.[\[3\]](#)

=====
[1] The interchange between sense and spirit highlights the intrinsic unity of the human person. This contemplation, sometimes dry and dark, sometimes serene and loving, invites comparison with the absence and presence of the Beloved in the drama of *The Spiritual Canticle*. The active night of the spirit explained at length in the *Ascent* also deals with the state of proficients.

[2] See [C. 13](#) for further explanation. There he refers us to St. Teresa's treatment of these matters. See her *Life*, chap. 20; *Interior Castle*, VI, chaps. 4-6.

[3] As in [Book 1](#), to explain the need for the purification John pauses first to speak of imperfections, in this case of the proficients.

Chapter 2

Book Two

[Other imperfections of these proficients.]

1. The imperfections in these proficients are of two kinds: habitual and actual. The habitual are the imperfect affections and habits still remaining like roots in the spirit, for the sensory purgation could not reach the spirit. The difference between the two purgations is like the difference between pulling up roots or cutting off a branch, rubbing out a fresh stain or an old, deeply embedded one. As we said, [\[1\]](#) the purgation of the senses is only the gate to and beginning of the contemplation that leads to the purgation of spirit. This sensitive purgation, as we also explained, serves more for the accommodation of the senses to the spirit than for the union of the spirit with God. The stains of the old self still linger in the spirit, although they may not be apparent or perceptible. If these are not wiped away by the use of the soap and strong lye of this purgative night, the spirit will be unable to reach the purity of divine union.

2. These proficients also have the *hebetudo mentis*, the natural dullness everyone contracts through sin, and a distracted and inattentive spirit.^[2] The spirit must be illumined, clarified, and recollected by means of the hardships and conflicts of this night. All those who have not passed beyond the state of proficients possess these habitual imperfections that cannot, as we said, coexist with the perfect state of the union of love.

3. Not all these proficients fall into actual imperfections in the same way. Some encounter greater difficulties and dangers than those we mentioned, for their experience of these goods in the senses is so exterior and easily come by. They receive an abundance of spiritual communications and apprehensions in the sensory and spiritual parts of their souls and frequently behold imaginative and spiritual visions. All of this as well as other delightful feelings are the lot of those who are in this state, and a soul is often tricked through them by its own phantasy as well as by the devil. The devil finds it pleasing to suggest to souls and impress on them apprehensions and feelings. As a result of all this, these proficients are easily charmed and beguiled if they are not careful to renounce such apprehensions and feelings and energetically defend themselves through faith.

This is the stage in which the devil induces many into believing vain visions and false prophecies. He strives to make them presume that God and the saints speak with them, and frequently they believe their phantasy. It is here that the devil customarily fills them with presumption and pride. Drawn by vanity and arrogance, they allow themselves to be seen in exterior acts of apparent holiness, such as raptures and other exhibitions. They become audacious with God and lose holy fear, which is the key to and guardian of all the virtues. Illusions and deceptions so multiply in some, and they become so inveterate in them, that it is very doubtful whether they will return to the pure road of virtue and authentic spirituality. They fall into these miseries by being too secure in their surrender to these

apprehensions and spiritual feelings, and do this just when they were beginning to make progress along the way.[\[3\]](#)

4. So much could be said about the imperfections of these proficients and of how irremediable they are - since proficients think their blessings are more spiritual than formerly - that I desire to pass over the matter. I only assert, in order to establish the necessity of the spiritual night (the purgation) for anyone who is to advance, that no proficients, however strenuous their efforts, will avoid many of these natural affections and imperfect habits. These must be purified before one may pass on to divine union.

5. Furthermore, to repeat what was said above,[\[4\]](#) these spiritual communications cannot be so intense, so pure, and so vigorous as is requisite for this union, because the lower part of the soul still shares in them. Thus, to reach union, the soul must enter the second night of the spirit. In this night both the sensory and spiritual parts are despoiled of all these apprehensions and delights, and the soul is made to walk in dark and pure faith, which is the proper and adequate means to divine union, as God says through Hosea: *I will espouse you (unite you) to me through faith* [Hos. 2:20].

=====

[\[1\]](#) In [N. 1. 11. 4.](#)

[\[2\]](#) An important factor in John's anthropology is that sin lies at the root of all the defects mentioned both here and in the first book.

[\[3\]](#) John deals with these matters more at length, and from the active perspective of the journey in faith, in [A. 2. 16-32.](#)

[\[4\]](#) In [chap. 1. 2.](#)

Chapter 3

Book Two

[An explanation for what is to follow.]

1. These souls, then, are now proficient. Their senses have been fed with sweet communications so that, allured by the gratification flowing from the spirit, they could be accommodated and united to the spirit. Each part of the soul can now in its own way receive nourishment from the same spiritual food and from the same dish of only one suppositum and subject. These two parts thus united and conformed are jointly prepared to suffer the rough and arduous purgation of the spirit that awaits them. In this purgation, these two portions of the soul will undergo complete purification, for one part is never adequately purged without the other. The real purgation of the senses begins with the spirit. Hence the night of the senses we explained should be called a certain reformation and bridling of the appetite rather than a purgation. The reason is that all the imperfections and disorders of the sensory part are rooted in the spirit and from it receive their strength. All good and evil habits reside in the spirit and until these habits are purged, the senses cannot be completely purified of their rebellions and vices.

2. In this night that follows both parts are jointly purified. This was the purpose of the reformation of the first night and the calm that resulted from it: that the sensory part, united in a certain way with the spirit, might undergo purgation and suffering with greater fortitude. Such is the fortitude necessary for so strong and arduous a purgation that if the lower part in its weakness is not reformed first, and afterward strengthened in God through the experience of sweet and delightful communion with him, it has neither the fortitude nor the preparedness to endure it.

3. These proficientes are still very lowly and natural in their communion with God and in their activity directed toward him because the gold of the spirit is not purified and illumined. They still think of God and speak of him as little children, and their knowledge and experience of him is like that of little children, as St. Paul asserts [1 Cor. 13:11]. The reason is that they have not reached perfection, which is union of the soul with God. Through this union, as fully

grown, they do mighty works in their spirit since their faculties and works are more divine than human, as we will point out. Wishing to strip them in fact of this old self and clothe them with the new, which is created according to God in the newness of sense, as the Apostle says [Col. 3:9-10; Eph. 4:22-24; Rom. 12:2], God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings. For this privation is one of the conditions required that the spiritual form, which is the union of love, may be introduced into the spirit and united with it.

The Lord works all of this in the soul by means of a pure and dark contemplation, as is indicated in the first stanza. Although we explained this stanza in reference to the first night of the senses, the soul understands it mainly in relation to this second night of the spirit, since this night is the principal purification of the soul. With this in mind, we will quote it and explain it again.[\[1\]](#)

=====

[\[1\]](#) John explains this first stanza three times, each time from a different perspective ([A. 1](#); [N. 1](#); [N. 2](#)). The stanza refers mainly to the night of the spirit.

Chapter 4

Book Two

[The first stanza and its explanation.]

First Stanza

One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings

- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

[Explanation]

1. Understanding this stanza now to refer to contemplative purgation or nakedness and poverty of spirit (which are all about the same),[\[1\]](#) we can thus explain it, as though the soul says:

Poor, abandoned, and unsupported by any of the apprehensions of my soul (in the darkness of my intellect, the distress of my will, and the affliction and anguish of my memory), left to darkness in pure faith, which is a dark night for these natural faculties, and with my will touched only by sorrows, afflictions, and longings of love of God, I went out from myself. That is, I departed from my low manner of understanding, and my feeble way of loving, and my poor and limited method of finding satisfaction in God. I did this unhindered by either the flesh or the devil.

2. This was great happiness and a sheer grace for me, because through the annihilation and calming of my faculties, passions, appetites, and affections, by which my experience and satisfaction in God were base, I went out from my human operation and way of acting to God's operation and way of acting. That is:

My intellect departed from itself, changing from human and natural to divine. For united with God through this purgation, it no longer understands by means of its natural vigor and light, but by means of the divine wisdom to which it was united. And my will departed from itself and became divine. United with the divine love, it no longer loves in a lowly manner, with its natural strength, but with the strength and purity of the Holy Spirit; and thus the will does not operate humanly in relation to God.

The memory, too, was changed into presentiments of eternal glory.

And finally, all the strength and affections of the soul, by means of this night and purgation of the old self, are renewed with divine qualities and delights.[\[2\]](#)

An explanation of the first verse follows:

One dark night,

=====

[\[1\]](#) Equivalents of this contemplative purgation of the night are poverty of spirit and dark, pure faith.

[\[2\]](#) Underlying this teaching on purification are the Pauline assertions about taking off the old self and putting on the new. See [A. 1. 5. 7](#); [N. 2. 3. 3](#).

Chapter 5

Book Two

[Begins to explain how this dark contemplation is not only night for the soul but also affliction and torment.]

1. This dark night is an inflow of God into the soul, which purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual, and which the contemplatives call infused contemplation or mystical theology.[\[1\]](#) Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens.

Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: by both purging and illumining, this contemplation prepares the soul for union with God through love. Hence the same loving wisdom that purges and

illuminates the blessed spirits purges and illuminates the soul here on earth.

2. Yet a doubt arises: Why, if it is a divine light (for it illuminates souls and purges them of their ignorance), does the soul call it a dark night? In answer to this, there are two reasons this divine wisdom is not only night and darkness for the soul but also affliction and torment. First, because of the height of the divine wisdom that exceeds the abilities of the soul; and on this account the wisdom is dark for the soul. Second, because of the soul's baseness and impurity; and on this account the wisdom is painful, afflictive, and also dark for the soul.[\[2\]](#)

3. To prove the first reason, we must presuppose a certain principle of the Philosopher: that the clearer and more obvious divine things are in themselves, the darker and more hidden they are to the soul naturally.[\[3\]](#) The brighter the light, the more the owl is blinded; and the more one looks at the brilliant sun, the more the sun darkens the faculty of sight, deprives and overwhelms it in its weakness.

Hence when the divine light of contemplation strikes a soul not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness, for it not only surpasses the act of natural understanding but it also deprives the soul of this act and darkens it. This is why St. Dionysius and other mystical theologians call this infused contemplation a "ray of darkness" - that is, for the soul not yet illumined and purged.[\[4\]](#) For this great supernatural light overwhelms the intellect and deprives it of its natural vigor.

David also said that clouds and darkness are near God and surround him [Ps. 18:11], not because this is true in itself, but because it appears thus to our weak intellects, which in being unable to attain so bright a light are blinded and darkened. Hence he next declared that clouds passed before the great splendor of his presence [Ps. 18:12], that is, between God and our intellect. As a result, when God communicates this bright ray of his secret wisdom

to the soul not yet transformed, he causes thick darkness in its intellect.

4. It is also evident that this dark contemplation is painful to the soul in these beginnings. Since this divine infused contemplation has many extremely good properties, and the still unpurged soul that receives it has many extreme miseries, and because two contraries cannot coexist in one subject, the soul must necessarily undergo affliction and suffering. Because of the purgation of its imperfections caused by this contemplation, the soul becomes a battlefield in which these two contraries combat one another. We will prove this by induction in the following way.

5. In regard to the first cause of one's affliction: Because the light and wisdom of this contemplation is very bright and pure, and the soul in which it shines is dark and impure, a person will be deeply afflicted on receiving it. When eyes are sickly, impure, and weak, they suffer pain if a bright light shines on them.

The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time this divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, persons feel so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against them and they are against God.

Because it seems that God has rejected it, the soul suffers such pain and grief that when God tried Job in this way it proved one of the worst of Job's trials, as he says: *Why have You set me against You, and I am heavy and burdensome to myself?* [Jb. 7:20]. Clearly beholding its impurity by means of this pure light, although in darkness, the soul understands distinctly that it is worthy neither of God nor of any creature. And what most grieves it is that it thinks it will never be worthy, and there are no more blessings for it. This divine and dark light causes deep immersion of the mind in the knowledge and feeling of one's own miseries and evils; it brings all these miseries into relief so the soul sees clearly that of itself it will never possess anything else. We can interpret that passage from David in this sense: *You have corrected humans because of their*

iniquity and have undone and consumed their souls, as a spider is eviscerated in its work [Ps. 39:11].

6. Persons suffer affliction in the second manner because of their natural, moral, and spiritual weakness. Since this divine contemplation assails them somewhat forcibly in order to subdue and strengthen their soul, they suffer so much in their weakness that they almost die, particularly at times when the light is more powerful. Both the sense and the spirit, as though under an immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief. The prophet Job, having experienced this, declared: *I do not desire that he commune with me with much strength lest he overwhelm me with the weight of his greatness [Jb. 23:6].*

7. Under the stress of this oppression and weight, individuals feel so far from all favor that they think, and so it is, that even that which previously upheld them has ended, along with everything else, and there is no one who will take pity on them. It is in this sense that Job also cried out: *Have pity on me, at least you, my friends, for the hand of the Lord has touched me [Jb. 19:21].*

How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul be so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh on the soul, but only touches it; and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant it favors and not to chastise it.

=====

[1] John identifies infused contemplation with mystical theology; and both of them with the dark night from the viewpoint of the cause of the night, not its effects. See [A. 2. 8. 6](#); [N. 2. 12. 5](#); [17. 2. 6](#); [C 39. 12](#).

[2] Darkness and affliction are the two negative effects of the night. These stem from a conflict between the divine and the human (chaps. 5-6); the remembrance of past prosperity with a hopeless

feeling about the present situation (chap. 7); and the powerlessness of the soul's faculties, unprepared to perceive the divine object (chap. 8).

[3] See Aristotle *Metaphysics* 2. 1.

[4] See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* 1. 1.

Chapter 6

Book Two

[Other kinds of affliction suffered in this night.]

1. The two extremes, divine and human, which are joined here, produce the third kind of pain and affliction the soul suffers at this time. The divine extreme is the purgative contemplation, and the human extreme is the soul, the receiver of this contemplation. Since the divine extreme strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it (by stripping it of the habitual affections and properties of the old self to which the soul is strongly united, attached, and conformed), it so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance - absorbing it in a profound darkness - that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death. It feels as if it were swallowed by a beast and being digested in the dark belly, and it suffers an anguish comparable to Jonah's in the belly of the whale [Jon. 2:1-3]. It is fitting that the soul be in this sepulcher of dark death in order that it attain the spiritual resurrection for which it hopes.

2. David describes this suffering and affliction - although it is truly beyond all description - when he says: *The sighs of death encircled me, the sorrows of hell surrounded me, in my tribulation I cried out* [Ps. 18:5-6].

But what the sorrowing soul feels most is the conviction that God has rejected it, and with abhorrence cast it into darkness. The thought that God has abandoned it is a piteous and heavy affliction

for the soul. When David also felt this affliction he cried: *In the manner of the wounded, dead in the sepulchers, abandoned now by your hand so that you remember them no longer, so have you placed me in the deepest and lowest lake, in the darkness and shadow of death, and your wrath weighs on me, and all your waves you have let loose on me* [Ps. 88:4-7].

When this purgative contemplation oppresses a soul, it feels very vividly indeed the shadow of death, the sighs of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of God's absence, of being chastised and rejected by him, and of being unworthy of him, as well as the object of his anger. The soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems that this affliction will last forever.

3. Such persons also feel forsaken and despised by creatures, particularly by their friends. David immediately adds: *You have withdrawn my friends and acquaintances far from me; they have considered me an abomination* [Ps. 88:8]. Jonah, as one who also underwent this experience, both physically and spiritually in the belly of the whale, testifies: *You have cast me out into the deep, into the heart of the sea, and the current surrounded me; all its whirlpools and waves passed over me and I said: I am cast from the sight of your eyes; yet I shall see your holy temple again* (he says this because God purifies the soul that it might see his temple); *the waters encircled me even to the soul, the abyss went round about me, the open sea covered my head, I descended to the lowest parts of the mountains, the locks of the earth closed me up forever* [Jon. 2:4-7]. The "locks" refer to the soul's imperfections that hinder it from enjoying the delights of this contemplation.

4. Another excellence of dark contemplation, its majesty and grandeur, causes a fourth kind of affliction to the soul. This property makes the soul feel within itself the other extreme - its own intimate poverty and misery. Such awareness is one of the chief afflictions it suffers in the purgation.

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

Since God here purges both the sensory and spiritual substance of the soul, and its interior and exterior faculties, it is appropriately brought into emptiness, poverty, and abandonment in these parts, and left in dryness and darkness. For the sensory part is purified by aridity, the faculties by the void of their apprehensions, and the spirit by thick darkness.

5. God does all this by means of dark contemplation. And the soul not only suffers the void and suspension of these natural supports and apprehensions, which is a terrible anguish (like hanging in midair, unable to breathe), but it is also purged by this contemplation. As fire consumes the tarnish and rust of metal, this contemplation annihilates, empties, and consumes all the affections and imperfect habits the soul contracted throughout its life. Since these imperfections are deeply rooted in the substance of the soul, in addition to this poverty, this natural and spiritual emptiness, it usually suffers an oppressive undoing and an inner torment. Thus the passage of Ezekiel may be verified: *Heap together the bones, and I shall burn them in the fire, the flesh shall be consumed, and the whole composition burned, and the bones destroyed* [Ez. 24:10]. He refers here to the affliction suffered in the emptiness and poverty of both the sensory and the spiritual substance of the soul. And he then adds: *Place it also thus empty on the embers that its metal may become hot and melt and its uncleanness be taken away from it and its rust consumed* [Ez. 24:11]. This passage points out the heavy affliction the soul suffers from the purgation caused by the fire of this contemplation. For the prophet asserts that in order to burn away the rust of the affections the soul must, as it were, be

annihilated and undone in the measure that these passions and imperfections are connatural to it.

6. Because the soul is purified in this forge *like gold in the crucible*, as the Wise Man says [Wis. 3:6], it feels both this terrible undoing in its very substance and extreme poverty as though it were approaching its end. This experience is expressed in David's cry: *Save me, Lord, for the waters have come in even unto my soul; I am stuck in the mire of the deep, and there is nowhere to stand; I have come unto the depth of the sea, and the tempest has overwhelmed me. I have labored in crying out, my throat has become hoarse, my eyes have failed while I hope in my God* [Ps. 69:1-3].

God humbles the soul greatly in order to exalt it greatly afterward. And if he did not ordain that these feelings, when quickened in the soul, be soon put to sleep again, a person would die in a few days. Only at intervals is one aware of these feelings in all their intensity. Sometimes this experience is so vivid that it seems to the soul that it sees hell and perdition open before it. These are the ones who go down into hell alive [Ps. 55:15], since their purgation on earth is similar to what takes place there. For this purgation is what would have to be undergone there. The soul that endures it here on earth either does not enter that place, or is detained there for only a short while. It gains more in one hour here on earth by this purgation than it would in many there.

Chapter 7

Book Two

[A continuation of the same subject; other afflictions and straits of the will.][\[1\]](#)

1. The afflictions and straits of the will are also immense. Sometimes these afflictions pierce the soul when it suddenly remembers the evils in which it sees itself immersed, and it becomes

uncertain of any remedy. To this pain is added the remembrance of past prosperity, because usually persons who enter this night have previously had many consolations in God and rendered him many services. They are now sorrowful in knowing that they are far from such good and can no longer enjoy it. Job tells also of his affliction: *I who was wont to be wealthy and rich am suddenly undone and broken; he has taken me by the neck, he has broken me and set me up as his mark so as to wound me. He has surrounded me with his lances, he wounded all my loins, he has not pardoned, he has scattered my bowels on the ground, he has torn me with wound upon wound, he has attacked me like a strong giant. I sewed sackcloth upon my skin and covered my flesh with ashes. My face is swollen with weeping, and my eyes blinded [Jb. 16:12-16].*

2. So numerous and burdensome are the pains of this night, and so many are the scriptural passages we could cite that we would have neither the time nor the energy to put it all in writing; and, doubtless, all that we can possibly say would fall short of expressing what this night really is. Through the texts already quoted we have some idea of it.

To conclude my commentary on this verse [\[2\]](#) and further explain what this night causes in the soul, I will refer to what Jeremiah felt in it. Because his tribulations were so terrible, he speaks of them and weeps over them profusely: *I am the man who sees my poverty in the rod of his indignation. He has led me and brought me into darkness and not into light. He has turned and turned again his hand against me all the day. He has made my skin and my flesh old; he has broken my bones. He has built a fence round about me; and he has surrounded me with gall and labor. He has set me in darkness, as those who are dead forever. He has made a fence around me and against me that I might not go out; he has made my fetters heavy. And also when I might have cried out and entreated, he has shut out my prayer. He has closed up my exits and ways with square stones; he has destroyed my paths. He is become to me like a bear lying in wait, as a lion in hiding.*

He has turned aside my paths, and broken me in pieces; he has made me desolate. He has bent his bow and set me as a mark for his arrow. He has shot into my reins the daughters of his quiver. I have become a derision to all the people, and laughter and scorn for them all the day. He has filled me with bitterness, he has inebriated me with absinthe. One by one he has broken my teeth; he has fed me with ashes. My soul is far removed from peace. I have forgotten good things. And I said: My end, my aim and my hope from the Lord is frustrated and finished. Remember my poverty and my distress, the absinthe and the gall. I shall be mindful and remember, and my soul will languish within me in afflictions [Lam. 3:1-20].

3. Jeremiah gives vent to all these lamentations about his afflictions and trials and depicts very vividly the sufferings of a soul in this purgation and spiritual night.

One ought to have deep compassion for the soul God puts in this tempestuous and frightful night. It may be true that the soul is fortunate because of what is being accomplished within it, for great blessings will proceed from this night; and Job affirms that out of darkness God will raise up in the soul profound blessings and change the shadow of death into light [Jb. 12:22]; and God will do this in such a way that, as David says, *the light will become what the darkness was* [Ps. 139:12]. Nevertheless, the soul is deserving of great pity because of the immense tribulation and the suffering of extreme uncertainty about a remedy. It believes, as Jeremiah says [Lam. 3:18], that its evil will never end. And it feels as David that God has placed it in darkness like the dead of old, and that its spirit as a result is in anguish within it and its heart troubled [Ps. 143:3-4].

Added to this, because of the solitude and desolation this night causes, is the fact that individuals in this state find neither consolation nor support in any doctrine or spiritual master. Although their spiritual director may point out many reasons for comfort on account of the blessings contained in these afflictions, they cannot believe this. Because they are engulfed and immersed in

that feeling of evil by which they so clearly see their own miseries, they believe their directors say these things because they do not understand them and do not see what they themselves see and feel. Instead of consolation they experience greater sorrow, thinking that the director's doctrine is no remedy for their evil. Indeed, it is not a remedy, for until the Lord finishes purging them in the way he desires, no remedy is a help to them in their sorrow. Their helplessness is even greater because of the little they can do in this situation. They resemble one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move nor see nor feel any favor from heaven or earth. They remain in this condition until their spirit is humbled, softened, and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple, and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God, according to the degree of union of love that God, in his mercy, desires to grant. In conformity with this degree, the purgation is of greater or lesser force and endures for a longer or shorter time.

4. But if it is to be truly efficacious, it will last for some years, no matter how intense it may be; although there are intervals in which, through God's dispensation, this dark contemplation ceases to assail the soul in a purgative mode and shines upon it illuminatively and lovingly. Then the soul, like one who has been unshackled and released from a dungeon and who can enjoy the benefit of spaciousness and freedom, experiences great sweetness of peace and loving friendship with God in a ready abundance of spiritual communication.

This illumination is for the soul a sign of the health the purgation is producing within it and a foretaste of the abundance for which it hopes. Sometimes the experience is so intense that it seems to the soul that its trials are over. For when the graces imparted are more purely spiritual they have this trait: When they are trials, it seems to a soul that it will never be liberated from them and that no more blessings await it, as was mentioned in the passages previously cited; when they are spiritual goods, the soul believes its evils have

passed and it will no longer lack blessings, as David confessed on being aware of these goods: I said in my abundance: *I shall never move* [Ps. 30:6].

5. The soul experiences this because in the spirit the possession of one contrary removes of itself the actual possession and feeling of the other contrary. This does not occur in the sensory part because of the weakness of its apprehensive power. But since the spirit is not yet completely purged and cleansed of affections contracted from the lower part, it can, insofar as it is affected by them, be changed and suffer affliction, although insofar as it is a spirit it does not change. We note that David changed and experienced many afflictions and evils, although in the time of his abundance he had thought and said he would never be moved. Since the soul beholds itself actuated with that abundance of spiritual goods, and is unable to see the imperfection and impurity still rooted within, it thinks its trials have ended.

6. But this thought is rare, for until the spiritual purification is completed, the tranquil communication is seldom so abundant as to conceal the roots that still remain. The soul does not cease to feel that something is lacking or remains to be done, and this feeling keeps it from fully enjoying the alleviation. It feels as though an enemy is within it who, although pacified and put to sleep, will awaken and cause trouble.

And this is true, for when a person feels safest and least expects it, the purgation returns to engulf the soul in another degree more severe, dark, and piteous than the former, lasting for another period of time, perhaps longer than the first. Such persons believe thereby that their blessings are gone forever. The enjoyment of blessing that was theirs after the first trial, in which they thought they no longer had anything more to suffer, was not sufficient to prevent them from thinking in this second degree of anguish that now all is over and the blessings formerly experienced will never return. As I say, this strong conviction is caused by the actual apprehension of the spirit,

which annihilates within itself everything contrary to this conviction.

7. This is the reason that souls in purgatory suffer great doubts about whether they will ever leave and whether their afflictions will end. Although they habitually possess the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity), the actual feeling of both the privation of God and the afflictions does not permit them to enjoy the actual blessing and comfort of these virtues. Although they are aware that they love God, this gives them no consolation, because they think that God does not love them and they are unworthy of his love. Because they see themselves deprived of him and established in their own miseries, they feel that they truly bear within themselves every reason for being rejected and abhorred by God.

Thus, although persons suffering this purgation know that they love God and that they would give a thousand lives for him (they would indeed, for souls undergoing these trials love God very earnestly), they find no relief. This knowledge instead causes them deeper affliction. For in loving God so intensely that nothing else gives them concern, and aware of their own misery, they are unable to believe that God loves them. They believe that they neither have nor ever will have within themselves anything deserving of God's love, but rather every reason for being abhorred not only by God but by every creature forever. They grieve to see within themselves reasons for meriting rejection by him whom they so love and long for.

=====

[\[1\]](#) The afflictions arise from the memory and overflow into the will.

[\[2\]](#) John began commenting on verse 1 in [chap. 4](#) and continues until chap. 11.

Chapter 8

Book Two

[Other afflictions that trouble the soul in this state.]

1. Yet something else grieves and troubles individuals in this state, and it is that, since this dark night impedes their faculties and affections, they cannot beseech God or raise their mind and affection to him. It seems as it did to Jeremiah that God has placed a cloud in front of the soul so that its prayer might not pass through [Lam. 3:44]. The passage we already cited refers to this difficulty also: *He closed and locked my ways with square stones* [Lam. 3:9]. And if sometimes the soul does beseech God, it does this with so little strength and fervor that it thinks God does not hear or pay any attention to it, as the prophet Jeremiah also lamented: *When I cried out and entreated, he excluded my prayer* [Lam. 3:8].

Indeed, this is not the time to speak with God, but the time to put one's mouth in the dust, as Jeremiah says, that perhaps there might come some actual hope [Lam. 3:29], and the time to suffer this purgation patiently. God it is who is working now in the soul, and for this reason the soul can do nothing. Consequently, these persons can neither pray vocally nor be attentive to spiritual matters, nor still less attend to temporal affairs and business. Furthermore, they frequently experience such absorption and profound forgetfulness in the memory that long periods pass without their knowing what they did or thought about, and they know not what they are doing or about to do, nor can they concentrate on the task at hand, even though they desire to.

2. Since this night purges not only the intellect of its light and the will of its affections but also the memory of its discursive knowledge, it is fitting that the memory be annihilated in all things to fulfill what David said of this purgation: *I was annihilated and knew not* [Ps. 73:22]. David's unknowing refers to forgetfulness and a lack of knowledge in the memory. This abstraction and oblivion is

caused by the interior recollection in which this contemplation absorbs the soul.

That the soul with its faculties be divinely tempered and prepared for the divine union of love, it must first be engulfed in this divine and dark spiritual light of contemplation, and thereby be withdrawn from all creature affections and apprehensions. The duration of this absorption is proportionate to the intensity of the contemplation. The more simply and purely the divine light strikes the soul, the more it darkens and empties and annihilates it in its particular apprehensions and affections concerning both earthly and heavenly things; and, also, the less simply and purely it shines, the less it deprives and darkens the soul.

It seems incredible that the brighter and purer the supernatural, divine light is, the darker it is for the soul; and that the less bright it is, the less dark it is to the soul. We can understand this truth clearly if we consider what we proved above from the teaching of the Philosopher: that the clearer and more evident supernatural things are in themselves, the darker they are to our intellects.[\[1\]](#)

3. A comparison with natural light will illustrate this. We observe that the more a ray of sunlight shining through a window is void of dust particles, the less clearly it is seen, and that it is perceived more clearly when there are more dust particles in the air. The reason is that the light in itself is invisible and is rather the means by which the objects it strikes are seen. But, then, it is also seen through its reflection off them. Were the light not to strike these objects, it would not be seen and neither would they. As a result, if a ray of sunlight should enter through one window, traverse the room, and go out through another window without coming in contact with any object or dust particles off which it could reflect, the room would have no more light than previously; neither would the ray be visible. Instead, upon close observation one notes that there is more darkness where the ray is present, because the ray takes away and

darkens some of the other light; and this ray is invisible, as we said, because there are no objects off which it can reflect.

4. This is precisely what the divine ray of contemplation does. In striking the soul with its divine light, it surpasses the natural light and thereby darkens and deprives a soul of all the natural affections and apprehensions it perceived by means of its natural light. It leaves a person's spiritual and natural faculties not only in darkness, but in emptiness too. Leaving the soul thus empty and dark, the ray purges and illumines it with divine spiritual light, while the soul thinks that it has no light and is in darkness, as illustrated in the case of the ray of sunlight that is invisible even in the middle of a room if the room is pure and void of any object off which the light may reflect. Yet when this spiritual light finds an object on which to shine, that is, when something is to be understood spiritually concerning perfection or imperfection, no matter how slight, or about a judgment on the truth or falsity of some matter, persons will understand more clearly than they did before they were in this darkness. And easily recognizing the imperfection that presents itself, they grow conscious of the spiritual light they possess; for the ray of light is dark and invisible until a hand or some other thing passes through it, and then both the object and the ray are recognized.

5. Since this light is so simple, so pure, and so general, and is unaffected and unrestricted by any particular intelligible object, natural or divine, and since the faculties are empty and annihilated of all these apprehensions, the soul with universality and great facility perceives and penetrates anything, earthly or heavenly, that is presented to it. Hence the Apostle says that the spiritual person penetrates all things, even the deep things of God [1 Cor. 2:10]. What the Holy Spirit says through the Wise Man applies to this general and simple wisdom, that is, that it touches everywhere because of its purity [Wis. 7:24], because it is not particularized by any distinct object of affection.

And this is characteristic of the spirit purged and annihilated of all particular knowledge and affection: Not finding satisfaction in anything or understanding anything in particular, and remaining in its emptiness and darkness, it embraces all things with great preparedness. And St. Paul's words are verified: *Nihil habentes, et omnia possidentes* (Having nothing, yet possessing all things) [2 Cor. 6:10]. Such poverty of spirit deserves this blessedness.

=====

[1] See [N. 2. 5. 3.](#)

Chapter 9

Book Two

[Although this night darkens the spirit, it does so to give light.]

1. It remains to be said, then, that even though this happy night darkens the spirit, it does so only to impart light concerning all things; and even though it humbles individuals and reveals their miseries, it does so only to exalt them; and even though it impoverishes and empties them of all possessions and natural affection, it does so only that they may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general freedom of spirit in them all.

That elements be commingled with all natural compounds, they must be unaffected by any particular color, odor, or taste, and thus they can concur with all tastes, odors, and colors. Similarly, the spirit must be simple, pure, and naked as to all natural affections, actual and habitual, in order to be able to communicate freely in fullness of spirit with the divine wisdom in which, on account of the soul's purity, the delights of all things are tasted to a certain eminent degree. Without this purgation the soul would be wholly unable to experience the satisfaction of all this abundance of spiritual delight. Only one attachment or one particular object to which the spirit is

actually or habitually bound is enough to hinder the experience or reception of the delicate and intimate delight of the spirit of love that contains eminently in itself all delights.

2. Because of their one attachment to the food and fleshmeat they had tasted in Egypt [Ex. 16:3], the children of Israel were unable to get any taste from the delicate bread of angels - the manna of the desert, which, as Scripture says, contained all savors and was changed to the taste each one desired [Wis. 16:20-21]. Similarly the spirit, still affected by some actual or habitual attachment or some particular knowledge or any other apprehension, is unable to taste the delights of the spirit of freedom.

The reason is that the affections, feelings, and apprehensions of the perfect spirit, because they are divine, are of another sort and are so eminent and so different from the natural that their actual and habitual possession demands the annihilation and expulsion of the natural affections and apprehensions; for two contraries cannot coexist in one subject.

Hence, so the soul may pass on to these grandeurs, this dark night of contemplation must necessarily annihilate it first and undo it in its lowly ways by putting it into darkness, dryness, conflict, and emptiness. For the light imparted to the soul is a most lofty divine light that transcends all natural light and does not belong naturally to the intellect.

3. That the intellect reach union with the divine light and become divine in the state of perfection, this dark contemplation must first purge and annihilate it of its natural light and bring it actually into obscurity. It is fitting that this darkness last as long as is necessary for the expulsion and annihilation of the intellect's habitual way of understanding, which was a long time in use, and that divine light and illumination take its place. Since that strength of understanding was natural to the intellect, the darkness it here suffers is profound, frightful, and extremely painful. This darkness seems to be

substantial darkness, since it is felt in the deep substance of the spirit.

The affection of love that is bestowed in the divine union of love is also divine, and consequently very spiritual, subtle, delicate, and interior, exceeding every affection and feeling of the will and every appetite. The will, as a result, must first be purged and annihilated of all its affections and feelings in order to experience and taste, through union of love, this divine affection and delight, which is so sublime and does not naturally belong to the will. The soul is left in a dryness and distress proportional to its habitual natural affections (whether for divine or human things), so that every kind of demon may be debilitated, dried up, and tried in the fire of this divine contemplation, as when Tobias placed the fish heart in the fire [Tb. 6:16-17], and the soul may become pure and simple, with a palate purged and healthy and ready to experience the sublime and marvelous touches of divine love. After the expulsion of all actual and habitual obstacles, it will behold itself transformed in these divine touches.

4. Furthermore, in this union for which the dark night is a preparation, the soul in its communion with God must be endowed and filled with a certain glorious splendor embodying innumerable delights. These delights surpass all the abundance the soul can possess naturally, for nature, so weak and impure, cannot receive these delights, as Isaiah says: *Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered any human heart what he has prepared*, etc. [Is. 64:4]. As a result the soul must first be set in emptiness and poverty of spirit and purged of every natural support, consolation, and apprehension, earthly and heavenly. Thus empty, it is truly poor in spirit and stripped of the old self, and thereby able to live that new and blessed life which is the state of union with God, attained by means of this night.[\[1\]](#)

5. Extraneous to its common experience and natural knowledge, the soul will have a very abundant and delightful divine sense and

knowledge of all divine and human things. It must then be refined and inured, as far as its common and natural experience goes (for the eyes by which it now views these things will be as different from those of the past as is spirit from sense and divine from human), and placed in terrible anguish and distress by means of this purgative contemplation. And the memory must be abstracted from all agreeable and peaceful knowledge and feel interiorly alien to all things, in which it will seem that all things are different than before.

This night withdraws the spirit from its customary manner of experience to bring it to the divine experience that is foreign to every human way. It seems to the soul in this night that it is being carried out of itself by afflictions. At other times the soul wonders if it is not being charmed, and it goes about with wonderment over what it sees and hears. Everything seems very strange even though a person is the same as always. The reason is that the soul is being made a stranger to its usual knowledge and experience of things so that, annihilated in this respect, it may be informed with the divine, which belongs more to the next life than to this.

6. Individuals suffer all these afflictive purgations of spirit that they may be reborn into the life of the spirit by means of this divine inflow, and through these sufferings the spirit of salvation is brought forth in fulfillment of the words of Isaiah: *In your presence, O Lord, we have conceived and been in the pains of labor and have brought forth the spirit of salvation* [Is. 26:17-18].

Moreover, the soul should leave aside all its former peace, because it is prepared by means of this contemplative night to attain inner peace, which is of such a quality and so delightful that, as the Church says, it surpasses all understanding [Phil. 4:7].^[2] That peace was not truly peace, because it was clothed with many imperfections, although to the soul walking in delight it seemed to be peace. It seemed to be a twofold peace, sensory and spiritual, since the soul beheld within itself a spiritual abundance. This sensory and spiritual peace, since it is still imperfect, must first be

purged; the soul's peace must be disturbed and taken away. In the passage we quoted to demonstrate the distress of this night, Jeremiah felt disturbed and wept over his loss of peace: *My soul is withdrawn and removed from peace* [Lam. 3:17].

7. This night is a painful disturbance involving many fears, imaginings, and struggles within these persons. On account of the apprehension and feeling of their miseries, they suspect that they are lost and their blessings are gone forever. The sorrow and moaning of their spirit is so deep that it turns into vehement spiritual roars and clamoring, and sometimes they pronounce them vocally and dissolve in tears (if they have the strength and power to do so), although such relief is less frequent.

David, one who also had experience of this trial, refers to it very clearly in one of the psalms: *I was very afflicted and humbled; I roared with the groaning of my heart* [Ps. 38:8]. This roaring embodies great suffering. Sometimes on account of the sudden and piercing remembrance of their wretchedness, the roaring becomes so loud and the affections so surrounded by suffering and pain that I know not how to describe it save by the simile holy Job used while undergoing this very trial: *As the overflowing waters, so is my roaring* [Jb. 3:24]. As the waters sometimes overflow in such a way that they inundate everything, this roaring and feeling so increase that in seeping through and flooding everything, they fill all one's deep affections and energies with indescribable spiritual anguish and suffering.

8. These are the effects produced in the soul by this night, which enshrouds the hopes one has for the light of day. The prophet Job also proclaims: *In the night my mouth is pierced with sufferings, and they that feed upon me do not sleep* [Jb. 30:17]. The mouth refers to the will pierced through by these sufferings that neither sleep nor cease to tear the soul to shreds. For these doubts and fears that penetrate the soul are never at rest.

9. This war or combat is profound because the peace awaiting the soul must be exceedingly profound; and the spiritual suffering is intimate and penetrating because the love to be possessed by the soul will also be intimate and refined. The more intimate and highly finished the work must be, so the more intimate, careful, and pure must the labor be; and commensurate with the solidity of the edifice is the energy involved in the work. As Job says, *the soul is withering within itself and its inmost parts boiling without any hope* [Jb. 30:16, 27].

Because in the state of perfection toward which it journeys by means of this purgative night the soul must reach the possession and enjoyment of innumerable blessings of gifts and virtues in both its substance and its faculties, it must first in a general way feel a withdrawal, deprivation, emptiness, and poverty regarding these blessings. And such persons must be brought to think that they are far removed from them, and become so convinced that no one can persuade them otherwise or make them believe anything but that their blessings have come to an end. Jeremiah points this out when he says in the passage already cited: *I have forgotten good things* [Lam. 3:17].

10. Let us examine now why this light of contemplation, which is so gentle and agreeable that there is nothing more to desire and which is the same light the soul must be united to and in which it will find all its blessings in the desired state of perfection, produces such painful and disagreeable effects when in these initial stages it shines upon the soul.

11. We can answer this question easily by repeating what we already explained in part: [3] There is nothing in contemplation or the divine inflow that of itself can give pain; contemplation rather bestows sweetness and delight, as we shall say afterward. [4] The cause for not experiencing these agreeable effects is the soul's weakness and imperfection at the time, its inadequate preparation,

and the qualities it possesses that are contrary to this light. Because of these the soul has to suffer when the divine light shines upon it.

=====

[1] The key ideas here are poverty of spirit, transformation of the old self into the new, and the natural incompatibility of the human and limited with the divine and spiritual. Dealing with these ideas elsewhere, John also quotes this Isaian text. Cf. [A. 2. 4. 4](#); [8. 4](#); [A. 3. 24. 2](#).

[2] This Pauline passage was recited in the Divine Office at None on the Third Sunday of Advent. Perhaps that is why John attributes the words to the Church.

[3] In [chap. 5](#).

[4] This promise indicates John's plan to comment on the entire poem, the final stanzas of which refer to union. But the work is unfinished.

Chapter 10

Book Two

[Explains this purgation thoroughly by means of a comparison.]

1. For the sake of further clarity in this matter, we ought to note that this purgative and loving knowledge, or divine light we are speaking of, has the same effect on a soul that fire has on a log of wood. The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire. Fire, when applied to wood, first dehumidifies it, dispelling all moisture and making it give off any water it contains. Then it gradually turns the wood black, makes it dark and ugly, and even causes it to emit a bad odor. By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as

it is itself. Once transformed, the wood no longer has any activity or passivity of its own, except for its weight and its quantity that is denser than the fire. It possesses the properties and performs the actions of fire: It is dry and it dries; it is hot and it gives off heat; it is brilliant and it illumines; it is also much lighter in weight than before. It is the fire that produces all these properties in the wood.[\[1\]](#)

2. Similarly, we should philosophize about this divine, loving fire of contemplation. Before transforming the soul, it purges it of all contrary qualities. It produces blackness and darkness and brings to the fore the soul's ugliness; thus one seems worse than before and unsightly and abominable. This divine purge stirs up all the foul and vicious humors of which the soul was never before aware; never did it realize there was so much evil in itself, since these humors were so deeply rooted. And now that they may be expelled and annihilated they are brought to light and seen clearly through the illumination of this dark light of divine contemplation. Although the soul is no worse than before, either in itself or in its relationship with God, it feels clearly that it is so bad as to be not only unworthy that God see it but deserving of his abhorrence. In fact, it feels that God now does abhor it. This comparison illustrates many of the things we have been saying and will say.

3. First, we can understand that the very loving light and wisdom into which the soul will be transformed is what in the beginning purges and prepares it, just as the fire that transforms the wood by incorporating it into itself is what first prepares it for this transformation.

4. Second, we discern that the experience of these sufferings does not derive from this wisdom - for as the Wise Man says: All good things come to the soul together with her [Wis. 7:11] - but from the soul's own weakness and imperfection. Without this purgation it cannot receive the divine light, sweetness, and delight of wisdom, just as the log of wood until prepared cannot be transformed by the

fire that is applied to it. And this is why the soul suffers so intensely. Ecclesiasticus confirms our assertion by telling what he suffered in order to be united with wisdom and enjoy it: *My soul wrestled for her, and my entrails were disturbed in acquiring her; therefore shall I possess a good possession* [Ecclus. 51:25, 29].

5. Third, we can infer the manner in which souls suffer in purgatory. The fire, when applied, would be powerless over them if they did not have imperfections from which to suffer. These imperfections are the fuel that catches on fire, and once they are gone there is nothing left to burn. So it is here on earth; when the imperfections are gone, the soul's suffering terminates, and joy remains.

6. Fourth, we deduce that as the soul is purged and purified by this fire of love, it is further enkindled in love, just as the wood becomes hotter as the fire prepares it. Individuals, however, do not always feel this enkindling of love. But sometimes the contemplation shines less forcibly so they may have the opportunity to observe and even rejoice over the work being achieved, for then these good effects are revealed. It is as though one were to stop work and take the iron out of the forge to observe what is being accomplished. Thus the soul is able to perceive the good it was unaware of while the work was proceeding. So too, when the flame stops acting upon the wood, there is a chance to see how much the wood has been enkindled by it.

7. Fifth, we can also gather from this comparison why, as we mentioned earlier, [\[2\]](#) after this alleviation the soul suffers again, more intensely and inwardly than before. After that manifestation and after a more exterior purification of imperfections, the fire of love returns to act more interiorly on the consumable matter of which the soul must be purified. The suffering of the soul becomes more intimate, subtle, and spiritual in proportion to the inwardness, subtlety, spirituality, and deep-rootedness of the imperfections that are removed. This more interior purgation resembles the action of

fire on wood: As the fire penetrates more deeply into the wood its action becomes stronger and more vehement, preparing the innermost part in order to gain possession of it.

8. Sixth, we discover the reason it seems to the soul that all blessings are past and it is full of evil. At this time it is conscious of nothing but its own bitterness, just as in the example of the wood, for neither the air nor anything else gives it more than a consuming fire. Yet, when other manifestations like the previous ones are made, the soul's joy will be more interior because of the more intimate purification.

9. Seventh, we deduce that when the purification is soon to return, even though the soul's joy is ample during these intervals (so much so that it sometimes seems, as we pointed out, that the bitterness will never recur), there is a feeling, if one adverts (and sometimes one cannot help adverting), that some root remains. And this advertence does not allow complete joy, for it seems that the purification is threatening to assail the soul again. And when the soul does have this feeling, the purification soon returns. Finally, that more inward part still to be purged and illumined cannot be completely concealed by the portion already purified, just as there is a very perceptible difference between the inmost part of the wood still to be illumined and that which is already purged. When this purification returns to attack more interiorly, it is no wonder that once again the soul thinks all its good has come to an end and its blessings are over. Placed in these more interior sufferings, it is blinded as to all exterior good.

10. With this example in mind as well as the explanation of verse 1 of the first stanza concerning this dark night and its terrible properties, it will be a good thing to leave these sad experiences and begin now to discuss the fruit of the soul's tears and the happy traits about which it begins to sing in this second verse:

fired with love's urgent longings

=====

[1] This simile effectively describes the whole spiritual life to God's action in the soul, especially as presented in the *Night* and the *Living Flame*. See [F. Prol. 3](#); [1. 3-4](#), [19](#), [22-23](#), [25](#), [33](#); also [A. 1. 11. 6](#); [A. 2. 8. 2](#).

[2] In [chap. 7. 4-6](#).

Chapter 11

Book Two

[The beginning of an explanation of verse 2 of the first stanza. Tells how the fruit of these dark straits is a vehement passion of divine love.]

1. This second verse refers to the fire of love that, like material fire acting on wood, penetrates the soul in this night of painful contemplation. Although this enkindling of love we are now discussing is in some way similar to what occurs in the sensory part of the soul, it is as different from it, in another way, as is the soul from the body or the spiritual part from the sensory part.[\[1\]](#) For this enkindling of love occurs in the spirit. Through it the soul in the midst of these dark conflicts feels vividly and keenly that it is being wounded by a strong divine love, and it has a certain feeling and foretaste of God. Yet it understands nothing in particular, for as we said the intellect is in darkness.

2. The spirit herein experiences an impassioned and intense love because this spiritual inflaming engenders the passion of love. Since this love is infused, it is more passive than active and thus generates in the soul a strong passion of love. This love is now beginning to possess something of union with God and thereby shares to a certain extent in the properties of this union. These properties are actions of God more than of the soul and they reside in it passively,

although the soul does give its consent. But only the love of God that is being united to the soul imparts the heat, strength, temper, and passion of love, or fire, as it is termed here. This love finds that the soul is equipped to receive the wound and union in the measure that all its appetites are brought into subjection, alienated, incapacitated, and unable to be satisfied by any heavenly or earthly thing.

3. This happens very particularly in this dark purgation, as was said, since God so weans and recollects the appetites that they cannot find satisfaction in any of their objects. God proceeds thus so that by both withdrawing the appetites from other objects and recollecting them in himself, he strengthens the soul and gives it the capacity for this strong union of love, which he begins to accord by means of this purgation. In this union the soul loves God intensely with all its strength and all its sensory and spiritual appetites. Such love is impossible if these appetites are scattered by their satisfaction in other things. In order to receive the strength of this union of love, David exclaimed to God: *I will keep my strength for you* [Ps. 59:9], that is, all the ability, appetites, and strength of my faculties, by not desiring to make use of them or find satisfaction in anything outside of you. [\[2\]](#)

4. One might, then, in a certain way ponder how remarkable and how strong this enkindling of love in the spirit can be. God gathers together all the strength, faculties, and appetites of the soul, spiritual and sensory alike, so the energy and power of this whole harmonious composite may be employed in this love. The soul consequently arrives at the true fulfillment of the first commandment which, neither disdaining anything human nor excluding it from this love, states: *You shall love your God with your whole heart, and with your whole mind, and with your whole soul, and with all your strength* [Dt. 6:5].

5. When the soul is wounded, touched, and impassioned, all its strength and its appetites are recollecting in this burning of love. How will we be able to understand the movements and impulses of

all this strength and these appetites? They are aroused when the soul becomes aware of the fire and wound of this forceful love and still neither possesses it nor gets satisfaction from it, but remains in darkness and doubt. Certainly, suffering hunger like dogs, as David says, these souls wander about the city and howl and sigh because they are not filled with this love [Ps. 59:6 {Ps. 58:7}, 14-15 {15-16}]

The touch of this divine love and fire so dries up the spirit and so enkindles the soul's longings to slake its thirst for this love that such persons go over these longings in their mind a thousand times and pine for God in a thousand ways. David expresses this state very well in a psalm: *My soul thirsts for you; in how many ways does my flesh long for you* [Ps. 63:1], that is, in its desires. And another translation puts it this way: *My soul thirsts for you, my soul loses itself or dies for you.* [\[3\]](#)

6. As a result the soul proclaims in this verse: "with love's urgent longings," and not, "with an urgent longing of love." In all its thoughts and in all its business and in all events, it loves in many ways, and desires, and also suffers in its desire in many ways, and at all times and in many places. It finds rest in nothing, for it feels this anxiety in the burning wound, as the prophet Job explains: *As the servant desires the shade and as the hireling desires the end of his work, so have I had empty months and numbered to myself long and wearisome nights. If I lie down to sleep I shall say: When will I arise? And then I will await the evening and will be filled with sorrows until the darkness of the night* [Jb. 7:2-4].

Everything becomes narrow for this soul: There is no room for it within itself, neither is there any room for it in heaven or on earth; and it is filled with sorrows unto darkness, as Job says speaking spiritually and from our point of view. This affliction the soul undergoes here is a suffering unaccompanied by the comfort of certain hope for some spiritual light and good.

One's anxiety and affliction in this burning of love are more intense because they are doubly increased: first, through the

spiritual darkneses in which the soul is engulfed and which afflict it with doubts and fears; second, through the love of God that inflames and stimulates and wondrously stirs it with a loving wound.

7. Isaiah clearly explains these two ways of suffering in this state when he says: *My soul desired you in the night* [Is. 26:9], that is, in the midst of misery. This is one way of suffering in this dark night. *Yet within my spirit, he says, until the morning I will watch for you* [Is. 26:9]. And this is a second way of suffering: with desire and anxiety of love in the innermost parts of the spirit, which are the spiritual feelings.

Nonetheless, in the midst of these dark and loving afflictions, the soul feels a certain companionship and an interior strength; these so fortify and accompany it that when this weight of anxious darkness passes, the soul often feels alone, empty, and weak. The reason is that since the strength and efficacy of the dark fire of love that assails it is communicated and impressed on it passively, the darkness, strength, and warmth of love cease when the assault terminates.

=====

[1] In these chapters John refers to the various degrees of love. These main degrees are evident in this work: feelings of fervor on the sensory level ([N. 1. 1. 2](#)); a dry solicitude about serving God ([N. 1. 11. 2](#)); an enkindling of love on the sense level ([N. 1. 11. 1](#)); an esteeming love ([N. 2. 13. 5](#)); an impassioned enkindling of love in the spirit ([N. 2. 11. 1-5](#); [13. 3-9](#)).

[2] See [A. 1. 10. 1](#); [A. 2. 16. 1](#); [C. 28. 8](#).

[3] The only time Johns refers to another translation. This could have been a Latin version of the Septuagint.

Chapter 12

Book Two

[The resemblance of this frightful night to purgatory. How the divine wisdom illumines those who suffer this night on earth by the same illumination with which it illumines and purges the angels in heaven.]

1. We can therefore understand that just as this dark night of loving fire purges in darkness, it also in darkness does its work of enkindling. We can also note that as the spirits in the other life are purged with a dark material fire, so in this life souls are purged and cleansed with a dark, loving spiritual fire. For such is the difference: Souls are cleansed in the other life by fire, but here on earth they are cleansed and illumined only by love. David asked for this love when he said: *Cor mundum crea in me Deus*, etc. (A clean heart create for me, O God) [Ps. 51:12]. Cleanness of heart is nothing less than the love and grace of God. The pure of heart are called blessed by our Savior [Mt. 5:8], and to call them blessed is equivalent to saying they are taken with love, for blessedness is derived from nothing else but love.

2. Jeremiah shows clearly that the soul is purged by the illumination of this fire of loving wisdom (for God never bestows mystical wisdom without love, since love itself infuses it) where he says: *He sent fire into my bones and instructed me* [Lam. 1:13]. And David says that God's wisdom is silver tried in the fire [Ps. 11:6], that is, in the purgative fire of love. This contemplation infuses both love and wisdom in each soul according to its capacity and necessity. It illumines the soul and purges it of its ignorance, as the Wise Man declares it did to him [Ecclus. 51:25-27].

3. Another deduction is that this very wisdom of God, which purges and illumines these souls, purges the angels of their ignorances and gives them understanding by illumining them on matters they are ignorant of. This wisdom descends from God through the first hierarchies unto the last, and from these last to humans. It is rightly and truly said in Scripture that all the works of

the angels and the inspirations they impart are also accomplished or granted by God. For ordinarily these works and inspirations are derived from God by means of the angels, and the angels also in turn give them one to another without delay. This communication is like that of a ray of sunlight shining through many windows placed one after the other. Although it is true that of itself the ray of light passes through them all, nevertheless each window communicates this light to the other with a certain modification according to its own quality. The communication is more or less intense insofar as the window is closer to or farther from the sun.

4. Consequently, the nearer the higher spirits (and those that follow) are to God, the more purged and clarified they are by a more general purification; the last spirits receive a fainter and more remote illumination. Humans, the last to whom this loving contemplation of God is communicated, when God so desires, must receive it according to their own mode, in a very limited and painful way.

God's light, which illumines the angels by clarifying and giving them the sweetness of love - for they are pure spirits prepared for this inflow - illumines humans, as we said, by darkening them and giving them pain and anguish, since naturally they are impure and feeble. The communication affects them as sunlight affects a sick and bleared eye. This very fire of love enamors these individuals both impassionedly and afflictively until it spiritualizes and refines them through purification, and thus they become capable of the tranquil reception of this loving inflow, as are the angels and those already purified. With the Lord's help we will explain this state later.[\[1\]](#) In the meantime, however, the soul receives this contemplation and loving knowledge in distress and longing of love.

5. The soul does not always feel this inflaming and anxious longing of love. In the beginning of the spiritual purgation, the divine fire spends itself in drying out and preparing the wood - that is, the soul - rather than in heating it. Yet as time passes and the fire begins

to give off heat, the soul usually experiences the burning and warmth of love.

As the intellect becomes more purged by means of this darkness, it happens sometimes that this mystical and loving theology, besides inflaming the will, also wounds the intellect by illumining it with some knowledge and light so delightfully and delicately that the will is thereby marvelously enkindled in fervor. This divine fire burns in the will - while the will remains passive - like a living flame and in such a way that this love now seems to be a live fire because of the living knowledge communicated. David says in the psalm: *My heart grew hot within me and a certain fire was enkindled while I was knowing* [Ps. 39:3].

6. This enkindling of love and the union of these two faculties, the intellect and the will, is something immensely rich and delightful for the soul, because it is a certain touch of the divinity and already the beginning of the perfection of the union of love for which the soul hopes.^[2] Thus one does not receive this touch of so sublime an experience and love of God without having suffered many trials and a great part of the purgation. But so extensive a purgation is not required for other inferior and more common touches.

7. You may deduce from our explanation that when God infuses these spiritual goods the will can very easily love without the intellect understanding, just as the intellect can know without the will loving. Since this dark night of contemplation consists of divine light and love - just as fire gives off both light and heat - it is not incongruous that this loving light, when communicated, sometimes acts more upon the will through the fire of love. Then the intellect is left in darkness, not being wounded by the light. At other times, this loving light illumines the intellect with understanding and leaves the will in dryness. All of this is similar to feeling the warmth of fire without seeing its light or seeing the light without feeling the fire's heat. The Lord works in this way because he infuses contemplation as he wills.

=====

[1] Again, John did not complete this part of his planned work. The doctrine about the hierarchical illumination has its basis in Pseudo-Dionysius' work *The Celestial Hierarchy*.

[2] With respect to the divine touches, see [A. 2. 24. 4](#); [26. 3-10](#); [32. 2-4](#).

Chapter 13

Book Two

[Other delightful effects of this dark night of contemplation in the soul.]

1. Through this inflaming of love we can understand some of the delightful effects this dark night of contemplation now gradually produces in the soul. Sometimes, as we said, it illumines in the midst of these darkneses, and the light shines in the darkness [Jn. 1:5], serenely communicating this mystical knowledge to the intellect and leaving the will in dryness, that is, without the actual union of love. The serenity is so delicate and delightful to the feeling of the soul that it is ineffable. This experience of God is felt now in one way and now in another.

2. Sometimes, as we said, this contemplation acts on both the intellect and will together, and sublimely, tenderly, and forcibly enkindles love. We already pointed out that once the intellect is purged more these two faculties are sometimes united; and in the measure that they are both purged, this union becomes so much more perfect and deeper in quality. Yet before reaching this degree, it is more common to experience the touch of burning in the will than the touch of understanding in the intellect.

3. A question arises here: Why does one in the beginning more commonly experience in purgative contemplation an inflaming of

love in the will rather than understanding in the intellect, since these two faculties are being purged equally?

We may answer that this passive love does not act upon the will directly because the will is free, and this burning love is more the passion of love than a free act of the will. The warmth of love wounds the substance of the soul and thus moves the affections passively. As a result the enkindling of love is called the passion of love rather than a free act of the will. An act of the will is such only insofar as it is free. Yet, since these passions and affections bear a relation to the will, it is said that if the soul is impassioned with some affection, the will is. This is true, because the will thus becomes captive and loses its freedom, carried away by the impetus and force of the passion. As a result we say that this enkindling of love takes place in the will, that is, the appetites of the will are enkindled. This enkindling is called the passion of love rather than the free exercise of the will. Since the receptive capacity of the intellect can only take in the naked and passive knowledge, and since the intellect, unless purged, cannot receive this knowledge, the soul, prior to the purgation of the intellect, experiences the touch of knowledge less frequently than the passion of love. For to feel the passion of love it is unnecessary that the will be so purged in relation to the passions; the passions even help it experience impassioned love.

4. Since this fire and thirst of love is spiritual, it is far different from the other enkindling of love we discussed in the night of the senses. Although the sensory part shares in this love, because it does not fail to participate in the work of the spirit, the root and keenness of the thirst is felt in the higher part of the soul. The spirit so feels and understands what it experiences and the lack that this desire causes in it that all the suffering of sense - even though incomparably greater than that of the night of the senses - is nothing in comparison to this spiritual suffering. For the soul is conscious

deeply within itself of the lack of an immense and incomparable good.

5. We ought to point out that the burning of love is not felt at the beginning of this spiritual night because the fire of love has not begun to catch. Nevertheless, God gives from the outset an esteeming love by which he is held in such high favor that, as we said, the soul's greatest suffering in the trials of this night is the anguish of thinking it has lost God and been abandoned by him. We can always assert, then, that from the commencement of this night the soul is touched with urgent longings of love: of esteeming love, sometimes; at other times, also of burning love.

The soul is aware that the greatest suffering it experiences in these trials is this fear. If such persons could be assured that all is not over and lost but that what they suffer is for the better - as indeed it is - and that God is not angry with them, they would be unconcerned about all these sufferings; rather, they would rejoice in the knowledge that God is pleased with them. Their love of esteem for God is so intense, even though obscure and imperceptible, that they would be happy not only to suffer these things but even to die many times in order to please him. When the fire now inflames the soul together with the esteem of God already possessed, individuals usually acquire such strength, courage, and longings relative to God, through the warmth of the love that is being communicated, that with singular boldness they do strange things, in whatever way necessary, in order to encounter him whom they love. Because of the strength and inebriation of their love and desire, they perform these actions without any consideration or concern.

6. Mary Magdalene, in spite of her past, paid no heed to the crowds of people, prominent as well as unknown, at the banquet. She did not consider the propriety of weeping and shedding tears in the presence of our Lord's guests. Her only concern was to reach him for whom her soul was already wounded and on fire, without any delay and without waiting for another more appropriate time

[Lk. 7:37-38].[\[1\]](#) And such is the inebriation and courage of love: Knowing that her Beloved was shut up in the tomb by a huge sealed rock and surrounded by guards so the disciples could not steal his body, she did not permit this to keep her from going out with ointments before daybreak to anoint him [Mt. 27:64-66; Mk. 16:1-2; Jn. 20:1].

7. Finally, this inebriation and urgent longing of love prompted her to ask the man she thought was the gardener if he had stolen him and, if he had, to tell her where he had put him so she could take him away [Jn. 20:15]. She did not stop to realize that her question in the light of sound judgment was foolish, for obviously if he had stolen the Lord he would not have told her, and still less would he have allowed her to take him away.

The strength and vehemence of love has this trait: Everything seems possible to it, and it believes everyone is occupied as it is; it does not believe anyone could be employed in any other way or seek anyone other than him whom it seeks and loves; it believes there is nothing else to desire or to occupy it and that everyone is engaged in seeking and loving him. When the bride went searching for her Beloved in the plazas and suburbs, she thought that others were doing the same and told them that if they found him they should tell him she was suffering for love of him [Sg. 3:2; 5:8]. Mary's love was so ardent that she thought she would go and take Jesus away, however great the impediments, if the gardener would tell where he was hidden.

8. Such are the traits of these longings of love that the soul experiences when it is advanced in this spiritual purgation. The wounded soul rises up at night, in this purgative darkness, according to the affections of the will; as the lioness or she-bear that goes in search of her cubs when they are taken away and cannot be found [2 Sm. 17:8; Hos. 13:8], it anxiously and forcibly goes out in search of its God. Since it is immersed in darkness, it feels his absence and feels that it is dying with love of him. Such is impatient love, which

one cannot long endure without either receiving its object or dying. Rachel bore this love for children when she said: *Give me children, otherwise I shall die* [Gn. 30:1].[\[2\]](#)

9. It should be explained here why, even though the soul feels as miserable and unworthy of God as it does in these purgative darkneses, it possesses an energy bold enough to go out to be joined with God.

The reason is that since love now imparts a force by which the soul loves authentically, and since it is the nature of love to seek to be united, joined, equaled, and assimilated to the loved object in order to be perfected in the good of love, the soul hungers and thirsts for this union or perfection of love still unattained. And the strength now bestowed by love, and by which the will has become impassioned, makes this inflamed will daring. Yet since the intellect is not illumined but in darkness, the soul feels unworthy and knows that it is miserable.

10. I do not want to fail to explain why this divine light, even though it is always light for the soul, does not illumine immediately on striking as it will afterward, but instead causes trials and darkness. We already said something on this matter.[\[3\]](#) Yet we may reply particularly that the darkneses and evils the soul experiences when this light strikes are not darkneses and evils of the light but of the soul itself. And it is this light that illumines the soul so that it may see these evils. From the beginning the divine light illumines the soul; yet at the outset it can only see through this light what is nearest - or rather within - itself, namely, its own darkneses and miseries. It sees these by the mercy of God, and it did not see them before because this supernatural light did not shine in it. Accordingly, it only feels darkneses and evils at the outset. After being purged through the knowledge and feeling of these darkneses and evils, it will have eyes capable of seeing the goods of the divine light. Once all these darkneses and imperfections are

expelled, it seems that the immense benefits and goods the soul is acquiring in this happy night of contemplation begin to appear.

11. It is clear, consequently, how God grants the soul a favor by cleansing and curing it. He cleanses it with a strong lye and a bitter purge in its sensory and spiritual parts of all imperfect affections and habits relative to temporal, natural, sensory, and spiritual things. He does this by darkening the interior faculties and emptying them of all these objects, and by restraining and drying up the sensory and spiritual affections, and by weakening and refining the natural forces of the soul with respect to these things. A person would never have been able to accomplish this work alone, as we shall soon explain.[\[4\]](#) Accordingly, God makes the soul die to all that he is not, so that when it is stripped and flayed of its old skin, he may clothe it anew. Its youth is renewed like the eagle's [Ps. 103:5], clothed in the new self, which is created, as the Apostle says, according to God [Eph. 4:24]. This renovation illumines the human intellect with supernatural light so it becomes divine, united with the divine; informs the will with love of God so it is no longer less than divine and loves in no other way than divinely, united and made one with the divine will and love; and is also a divine conversion and changing of the memory, the affections, and the appetites according to God. And thus this soul will be a soul of heaven, heavenly and more divine than human.

As we have gradually seen, God accomplishes all this work in the soul by illumining it and firing it divinely with urgent longings for God alone. Rightly and reasonably does the soul add the third verse of the stanza:

- Ah, the sheer grace! -

=====

[1] Following St. Gregory the Great, the Latin Church in the past has generally identified Mary Magdalene with the repentant woman in Luke.

[2] This impatient love is the theme of the first 12 stanzas of *The Spiritual Canticle*.

[3] See especially [chap. 5. 2-3](#) and [chap. 9](#).

[4] In [chap. 16](#).

Chapter 14

Book Two

[An explanation of the three last verses of the first stanza.]

1. This sheer grace resulted from what is expressed in the following verses:

I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

We have the metaphor of one who, in order to execute a plan better and without hindrance, goes out at night, in darkness, when everybody in the house is sleeping.[1]

The soul had to go out to accomplish so heroic and rare a feat - to be united with its divine Beloved outside - because the Beloved is not found except alone, outside, and in solitude. The bride accordingly desired to find him alone, saying: *Who will give you to me, my brother, that I may find you alone outside and communicate to you my love?* [Sg. 8:1]. The enamored soul must leave its house, then, in order to reach its desired goal. It must go out at night when all the members of its house are asleep, that is, when the lower operations, passions, and appetites of its soul are put to sleep or quelled by means of this night. These are the people of its household who when

awake are a continual hindrance to the reception of any good, and hostile to the soul's departure in freedom from them. Our Savior declares that one's enemies are those of one's own household [Mt. 10:36]. The operations and movements of these members had to be put to sleep in order not to keep the soul from receiving the supernatural goods of the union of love of God, for this union cannot be wrought while they are awake and active. All the soul's natural activity hinders rather than helps it to receive the spiritual goods of the union of love. All natural ability is insufficient to produce the supernatural goods that God alone infuses in the soul passively, secretly, and in silence. All the faculties must receive this infusion, and in order to do so they must be passive and not interfere through their own lowly activity and vile inclinations.

2. It was a sheer grace for this soul that God in this night puts to sleep all the members of its household, that is, all the faculties, passions, affections, and appetites that live in its sensory and spiritual parts. God puts them to sleep to enable the soul to go out to the spiritual union of the perfect love of God without being seen, that is, without the hindrance of these affections, and so on. For these members of the household are put to sleep and mortified in this night, which leaves them in darkness, so they may not be able to observe or experience anything in their lowly, natural way that would impede the soul's departure from itself and the house of the senses.

3. Oh, what a sheer grace it is for the soul to be freed from the house of its senses! This good fortune, in my opinion, can only be understood by the ones who have tasted it. For then such persons will become clearly aware of the wretched servitude and the many miseries they suffered when they were subject to the activity of their faculties and appetites. They will understand how the life of the spirit is true freedom and wealth and embodies inestimable goods. In the following stanzas we will specify some of these goods

and see more clearly how right the soul is in singing about the journey through this horrendous night as being a great grace.

=====

[1] John's escape at night from prison seems to have influenced the poem. See [A. 1. 15. note 1](#).

Chapter 15

Book Two

Second Stanza

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

Explanation

1. The soul in its song continues to recount some of the properties of the darkness of this night and mentions again the happiness resulting from them.[1] It speaks of these traits in response to a certain tacit objection. It says that we should not think a person runs a more serious risk of being lost because of the torments of anguish, the doubts, the fears, and the horrors of this night and darkness; rather a person is saved in the darkness of this night. In this night the soul subtly escapes from its enemies, who were always opposed to its departure. In its journey in the darkness of this night, its garb is changed and thus it is disguised by three different colored garments, which we will discuss later;[2] and it departs by a very secret ladder of which no one in the house knows. This ladder, as we will also explain,[3] is the living faith by which it departs in so

concealed a way in order to carry out its plan successfully, and by which it cannot but escape very securely. The soul is particularly secure in this purgative night because its appetites, affections, passions, and so on, were put to sleep, mortified, and deadened. These are the members of the household that when awake and alive would not consent to this departure. The following verse then states:

In darkness, and secure,

=====

[1] This stanza, then, does not represent any new stage in the experience of the night. It is only a variation on the same theme.

[2] In [chap. 21](#).

[3] In [chap. 18](#).

Chapter 16

Book Two

[An explanation of how the soul is secure when it walks in darkness.]

1. We already said that the darkness the soul mentions here relates to the sensory, the interior, and the spiritual appetites and faculties, because this night darkens their natural light so that through the purgation of this light they may be illumined supernaturally. It puts the sensory and spiritual appetites to sleep, deadens them, and deprives them of the ability to find pleasure in anything. It binds the imagination and impedes it from doing any good discursive work. It makes the memory cease, the intellect become dark and unable to understand anything, and hence it causes the will also to become arid and constrained, and all the faculties empty and useless. And over all this hangs a dense and

burdensome cloud that afflicts the soul and keeps it withdrawn from God. As a result the soul asserts that in darkness it walks securely.

2. The reason for this security has been clearly explained. Usually a soul never strays except through its appetites, its gratifications, or its discursive meditation, or through its knowledge or affections. By these, people usually fail through excess or defect, or they change because of them or go astray, or experience inordinate inclinations. Once all these operations and movements are impeded, individuals are obviously freed from error in them, because they are not only liberated from themselves but also from their other enemies, the world and the devil. The world and the devil have no other means of warring against the soul when its affections and operations are deadened.

3. In the measure that the soul walks in darkness and emptiness in its natural operations, it walks securely. As the prophet says, the soul's perdition comes only from itself (from its senses and interior and sensory appetites); and its good, says God, comes only from me [Hos. 13:9]. Since the soul's evils are thus impeded, only the goods of union with God are imparted to the appetites and faculties; these appetites and faculties become divine and heavenly in this union. If they observe closely at the time of these darkneses, individuals will see clearly how little the appetites and faculties are distracted with useless and harmful things and how secure they are from vainglory, from pride and presumption, from an empty and false joy, and from many other evils. By walking in darkness the soul not only avoids going astray but advances rapidly, because it thus gains the virtues.

4. A question immediately arises here: Since the things of God in themselves produce good in the soul, are beneficial, and give assurance, why does God in this night darken the appetites and faculties so that these derive no satisfaction in such good things and find it difficult to be occupied with them - in some ways even more difficult than to be occupied with other things? The answer is that at this time there should be no activity or satisfaction relative to

spiritual objects, because the soul's faculties and appetites are impure, lowly, and very natural. And even were God to give these faculties the activity and delight of supernatural, divine things, they would be unable to receive them except in their own way, very basely and naturally. As the Philosopher says, *Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.*[\[1\]](#)

Since these natural faculties do not have the purity, strength, or capacity to receive and taste supernatural things in a supernatural or divine mode, but only according to their own mode, which is human and lowly, as we said, these faculties must also be darkened regarding the divine, so that weaned, purged, and annihilated in their natural way they might lose that lowly and human mode of receiving and working. Thus all these faculties and appetites of the soul are tempered and prepared for the sublime reception, experience, and savor of the divine and supernatural, which cannot be received until the old self dies.

5. Consequently, if all spiritual communication does not come from on high, from the Father of lights, from above the free will and human appetite [Jas. 1:17], humans will not taste it divinely and spiritually but rather humanly and naturally, no matter how much their faculties are employed in God and no matter how much satisfaction they derive from this. For goods do not go from humans to God, but they come from God to humans.

Here we could explain, if this were the place, how many persons have numerous inclinations toward God and spiritual things, employ their faculties in them, derive great satisfaction by so doing, and think their actions and appetites are supernatural and spiritual when perhaps they are no more than natural and human. Because of a certain natural facility they have for moving the appetites and faculties toward any object at all, their activity with spiritual things and the satisfaction they derive are the same as with other things.

6. If by chance the opportunity arises we will give some signs for recognizing when the movements and interior actions of the soul in

its communion with God are only natural and when only spiritual, and when they are both natural and spiritual.^[2] Here it is sufficient to know that if the soul in its interior acts is to be moved by God divinely, it must be obscured, put to sleep, and pacified in regard to its natural ability and operations until these lose their strength.

7. Oh, then, spiritual soul, when you see your appetites darkened, your inclinations dry and constrained, your faculties incapacitated for any interior exercise, do not be afflicted; think of this as a grace, since God is freeing you from yourself and taking from you your own activity. However well your actions may have succeeded, you did not work so completely, perfectly, and securely - because of their impurity and awkwardness - as you do now that God takes you by the hand and guides you in darkness, as though you were blind, along a way and to a place you know not. You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes and your feet.

8. Another reason the soul not only advances securely when it walks in darkness but even gains and profits is that when in a new way it receives some betterment, it usually does so in a manner it least understands, and thus ordinarily thinks it is getting lost. Since it has never possessed this new experience, which makes it go out, blinds it, and leads it astray with respect to its first method of procedure, it thinks it is getting lost rather than advancing successfully and profitably. Indeed, it is getting lost to what it knew and tasted, and going by a way in which it neither tastes nor knows.

To reach a new and unknown land and journey along unknown roads, travelers cannot be guided by their own knowledge; instead, they have doubts about their own knowledge and seek the guidance of others. Obviously they cannot reach new territory or attain this added knowledge if they do not take these new and unknown roads and abandon those familiar ones. Similarly, people learning new details about their art or trade must work in darkness and not with what they already know. If they refuse to lay aside their former

knowledge, they will never make any further progress. The soul, too, when it advances, walks in darkness and unknowing.

Since God, as we said, is the master and guide of the soul,[\[3\]](#) this blind one can truly rejoice now that it has come to understand as it has here, and say: in darkness, and secure.

9. There is another reason the soul walks securely in these darkneses: It advances by suffering. Suffering is a surer and even more advantageous road than that of joy and action. First, in suffering, strength is given to the soul by God. In its doing and enjoying, the soul exercises its own weakness and imperfections. Second, in suffering, virtues are practiced and acquired, and the soul is purified and made wiser and more cautious.

10. Another more basic reason the soul walks securely in darkness is that this light, or obscure wisdom, so absorbs and engulfs the soul in the dark night of contemplation and brings it so near God that it is protected and freed from all that is not God. Since the soul, as it were, is undergoing a cure to regain its health, which is God himself, His Majesty restricts it to a diet, to abstinence from all things, and causes it to lose its appetite for them all. This effect resembles the cure of sick people when esteemed by members of their household: They are kept inside so that neither air nor light may harm them; others try not to disturb them by the noise of their footsteps or even whisperings, and give them a very delicate and limited amount of food, substantial rather than tasty.

11. Because dark contemplation brings the soul closer to God, it has all these characteristics; it safeguards and cares for the soul. Because of their weakness, individuals feel thick darkness and more profound obscurity the closer they come to God, just as they would feel greater darkness and pain, because of the weakness and impurity of their eyes, the closer they approached the immense brilliance of the sun. The spiritual light is so bright and so transcendent that it blinds and darkens the natural intellect as this latter approaches it.

Accordingly, David says in Psalm 17 [Ps. 18:11] that God made darkness his hiding place and covert, and dark waters in the clouds of the air his tabernacle round about him. The dark water in the clouds of the air signifies dark contemplation and divine wisdom in these souls. When God is joining them closer to himself they feel that this darkness is near him as though it were a tabernacle in which he dwells. That which is light in God and of the loftiest clarity is dense darkness for the soul, as St. Paul affirms [1 Cor. 2:14], and as David points out immediately in the same psalm: *Because of the splendor encircling his presence, the clouds and cataracts came out* [Ps. 18:12], that is, they came out over the natural intellect, whose light, as Isaiah says in chapter 5, *obtenebrata est in caligine ejus* [Is. 5:30].[\[4\]](#)

12. Oh, what a miserable lot this life is! We live in the midst of so much danger and find it so hard to arrive at truth. The clearest and truest things are the darkest and most dubious to us, and consequently we flee from what most suits us. We embrace what fills our eyes with the most light and satisfaction and run after what is the very worst thing for us, and we fall at every step. In how much danger and fear do humans live, since the very light of their natural eyes, which ought to be their guide, is the first to deceive them in their journey to God, and since they must keep their eyes shut and tread the path in darkness if they want to be sure of where they are going and be safeguarded against the enemies of their house, their senses and faculties.

13. The soul, then, is well hidden and protected in this dark water, for it is close to God. Since the dark water serves God himself as a tabernacle and dwelling place, it will serve the soul in this way and also as a perfect safeguard and security, even though it causes darkness. In this darkness the soul is hidden and protected from itself and the harm of creatures.

David's assertion in another psalm is also applicable to these souls: *You will hide them in the secret of your face from the disturbance of people. You will protect them in your tabernacle from*

the contradiction of tongues [Ps. 31:20]. This passage applies to every kind of protection. To be hidden in the face of God from the disturbance of people refers to the fortification this dark contemplation provides against all the occasions that may arise because of others. To receive protection in his tabernacle from the contradiction of tongues indicates the absorption of the soul in this dark water. This dark water is the tabernacle we said David mentions, in which the soul, with weaned appetites and affections and darkened faculties, is freed of all imperfections contradictory to the spirit, whether they originate with its own flesh or with other creatures. The soul can therefore truly say that its journey is in darkness, and secure.

14. There is another no less efficacious reason to help us understand clearly that this soul's journey is in darkness, and secure, that is, the fortitude this obscure, painful, and dark water of God bestows on the soul from the beginning. After all, even though it is dark, it is water, and thereby refreshes and fortifies the soul in what most suits it - although in darkness, and painfully.

From the outset individuals are conscious of a true determination and power to do nothing they recognize as an offense against God and to omit nothing that seems to be for his service. That dark love enkindles in the soul a remarkably vigilant care and interior solicitude about what to do or omit in order to please God. They will ponder whether they may have angered God and go over this in their minds a thousand times. They do this with much greater care and solicitude than before, as we mentioned in discussing the longings of love.[\[5\]](#) In this dark contemplation the soul's appetites, strength, and faculties are withdrawn from all other things, and its efforts and strength are expended only in paying homage to God. This is the way it goes out from itself and from all created things to the sweet and delightful union with God through love:

In darkness, and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised,

=====

[1] See [N. 1. 4. 2.](#)

[2] He never did deal explicitly with these signs.

[3] In [no. 7.](#) This is an important element in John's teaching about spiritual direction; see [F. 3. 29.](#)

[4] "is darkened by its clouds."

[5] In [chap. 13. 5.](#)

Chapter 17

Book Two

[An explanation of the secrecy of this dark contemplation.]

1. We ought to explain three properties of this night indicated in the three terms of this verse. Two of them, "secret" and "ladder," pertain to the dark night of contemplation now under discussion; the third, "disguised," refers to the soul and the way it conducts itself in this night.

Relative to the first two, it should be known that in this verse the soul calls dark contemplation a "secret ladder." By dark contemplation it goes out to the union of love because of two properties found in this contemplation: It is secret, and it is a ladder. We will discuss them separately.

2. First, it calls this dark contemplation "secret" since, as we mentioned, [1] contemplation is mystical theology, which theologians call secret wisdom and which St. Thomas says is communicated and infused into the soul through love. [2] This communication is secret and dark to the work of the intellect and the other faculties. Insofar as these faculties do not acquire it but the Holy Spirit infuses it and puts it in order in the soul, as the bride

says in the Song of Songs [Sg. 2:4], the soul neither knows nor understands how this comes to pass and thus calls it secret. Indeed, not only does the soul fail to understand, but no one understands, not even the devil, since the Master who teaches the soul dwells within it substantially where neither the devil nor the natural senses nor the intellect can reach.

3. Contemplation is called "secret" not only because of one's inability to understand but also because of the effects it produces in the soul. The wisdom of love is not secret merely in the darkneses and straits of the soul's purgation (for the soul does not know how to describe it) but also afterward in the illumination, when it is communicated more clearly. Even then it is so secret that it is ineffable. Not only does a person feel unwilling to give expression to this wisdom, but one finds no adequate means or simile to signify so sublime an understanding and delicate a spiritual feeling. Even if the soul should desire to convey this experience in words and think up many similes the wisdom would always remain secret and still to be expressed.

Since this interior wisdom is so simple, general, and spiritual that in entering the intellect it is not clothed in any sensory species or image, the imaginative faculty cannot form an idea or picture of it in order to speak of it. This wisdom did not enter through these faculties, nor did they behold any of its apparel or color. Yet the soul is clearly aware that it understands and tastes that delightful and wondrous wisdom. On beholding an object never before seen in itself or in its likeness, one would be unable to describe it or give it a name no matter how much one tried, even though understanding and satisfaction were found in it. And if people find it so difficult to describe what they perceive through the senses, how much more difficult is it to express what does not enter through the senses. The language of God has this trait: Since it is very spiritual and intimate to the soul, transcending everything sensory, it immediately silences

the entire ability and harmonious composite of the exterior and interior senses.

4. We have examples of this ineffability of divine language in Sacred Scripture. Jeremiah manifested his incapacity to describe it when, after God had spoken to him, he knew of nothing more to say than *ah, ah, ah!* [Jer. 1:6]. Moses also declared before God, present in the burning bush, his interior inability (the inability of both his imagination and his exterior senses) [Ex. 4:10]. He asserted that not only was he unable to speak of this conversation but that he did not even dare consider it in his imagination, as is said in the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 7:32]. He believed that his imagination was not only unable to speak, as it were, in the matter of forming some image of what he understood in God, but also incapable of receiving this knowledge.

Since the wisdom of this contemplation is the language of God to the soul, of Pure Spirit to pure spirit, all that is less than spirit, such as the sensory, fails to perceive it. Consequently this wisdom is secret to the senses; they have neither the knowledge nor the ability to speak of it, nor do they even desire to do so because it is beyond words.

5. We understand, then, why some persons who tread this road and desire to give an account of this experience to their director - for they are good and God-fearing - are unable to describe it. They feel great repugnance in speaking about it, especially when the contemplation is so simple that they are hardly aware of it. All they can manage to say is they are satisfied, quiet and content, and aware of God, and in their opinion all goes well. But the experience is ineffable, and one will hear from the soul no more than these general terms. It is a different matter when the communications the soul receives are particular, such as visions, feelings, and so on. These communications are ordinarily received through some species in which the sense participates and are describable through

that species or a similar one. Yet pure contemplation is indescribable, as we said, and on this account called "secret."

6. Not for this reason alone do we call mystical wisdom "secret" - and it is actually so - but also because it has the characteristic of hiding the soul within itself. Besides its usual effect, this mystical wisdom occasionally so engulfs souls in its secret abyss that they have the keen awareness of being brought into a place far removed from every creature. They accordingly feel that they have been led into a remarkably deep and vast wilderness unattainable by any human creature, into an immense, unbounded desert, the more delightful, savorous, and loving, the deeper, vaster, and more solitary it is. They are conscious of being so much more hidden, the more they are elevated above every temporal creature.

Souls are so elevated and exalted by this abyss of wisdom, which leads them into the heart of the science of love, that they realize that all the conditions of creatures in relation to this supreme knowing and divine experience are very base, and they perceive the lowliness, deficiency, and inadequacy of all the terms and words used in this life to deal with divine things. They also note the impossibility, without the illumination of this mystical theology, of a knowledge or experience of these divine things as they are in themselves, through any natural means, no matter how wisely or loftily one speaks of them. Beholding this truth - that it can neither grasp nor explain this wisdom - the soul rightly calls it secret.

7. This divine contemplation has the property of being secret and above one's natural capacity, not merely because it is supernatural but also because it is the way that guides the soul to the perfections of union with God, toward which one must advance humanly by not knowing and divinely by ignorance, since these perfections are not humanly knowable.

8. Speaking mystically, as we are here, the divine things and perfections are not known as they are in themselves while they are being sought and acquired, but when they are already found and

acquired. Accordingly, the prophet Baruch speaks of this divine wisdom: *There is no one able to know her ways or think of her paths* [Bar. 3:31]. The Royal Prophet of this road also speaks of this kind of wisdom in his converse with God: *And your illuminations enlightened and illumined the entire world; the earth shook and trembled. Your way is in the sea and your paths are in many waters, and your footsteps shall not be known* [Ps. 77:18-19]. Spiritually speaking, this passage refers to our subject. The lightning of God illumining the whole earth signifies the illumination this divine contemplation produces in the faculties of the soul; the shaking and trembling of the earth applies to the painful purgation it causes in the soul; and to assert that the way and road of God, by which the soul travels toward him, is in the sea, and his footsteps in many waters, and thereby unknowable, is similar to stating that the way to God is as hidden and secret to the senses of the soul as are the footsteps of one walking on water imperceptible to the senses of the body. The traces and footsteps God leaves in those whom he desires to bring to himself, by making them great in the union with his wisdom, are unrecognizable. In the Book of Job this fact is stressed in these words: *Do you perchance know the paths of the great clouds or the perfect sciences?* [Jb. 37:16]. This passage refers to the ways and roads by which God exalts souls (here referred to by the clouds) and perfects them in his wisdom. Consequently, this contemplation that is guiding the soul to God is secret wisdom.

=====

[\[1\]](#) In [chap. 5. 1.](#)

[\[2\]](#) The most probable source is in his *Summa theologiae* 2-2. 45.
2.

Chapter 18

Book Two

[An explanation of how this secret wisdom is also a ladder.]

1. The second characteristic has yet to be discussed, that is, how this secret wisdom is also a ladder. It should be known that there are many reasons for calling this secret contemplation a ladder.

First, as one ascends a ladder to pillage the fortresses containing goods and treasures, so too, by this secret contemplation, the soul ascends in order to plunder, know, and possess the goods and treasures of heaven. The Royal Prophet points this out clearly in saying: *Blessed are those who receive your favor and help. In their heart they have prepared their ascent, in the vale of tears, in the place which they set. For in this way the Lord of the Law will give a blessing, and they will go from virtue to virtue (as from step to step) and the God of gods will be seen on Zion* [Ps. 84:6-8]. He is the treasure of the fortress of Zion, and this treasure is beatitude.

2. We can also call this secret wisdom a "ladder" because as the same steps of a ladder are used for both ascent and descent, so also the same communications produced by this secret contemplation extol the soul in God and humiliate it within itself. Communications that are truly from God have this trait: They simultaneously exalt and humble the soul. For on this road, to descend is to ascend and to ascend is to descend, since those who humble themselves are exalted and those who exalt themselves are humbled [Lk. 14:11]. Besides this (that the virtue of humility exalts), God, in order to exercise the soul in humility, usually makes it ascend by this ladder so that it might descend, and he makes it descend that it might ascend. Accordingly, the Wise Man's words are fulfilled: *Before the soul is exalted, it is humbled, and before it is humbled, it is exalted* [Prv. 18:12].

3. Naturally speaking, and disregarding the spiritual, which it does not feel, the soul, if it desires to pay close attention, will clearly recognize how on this road it suffers many ups and downs, and how immediately after prosperity some tempest and trial follows, so much so that seemingly the calm was given to forewarn and

strengthen it against the future penury. It sees, too, how abundance and tranquility succeed misery and torment, and in such a way that it thinks it was made to fast before celebrating that feast. This is the ordinary procedure in the state of contemplation until one arrives at the quiet state: The soul never remains in one state, but everything is ascent and descent.

4. The reason is that since the state of perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and contempt of self, cannot exist without knowledge of God and of self, the soul necessarily must first be exercised in both. It is now given the one, in which it finds satisfaction and exaltation, and now made to experience the other, humbled until the ascent and descent cease through the acquiring of the perfect habits. For the soul will then have reached God and united itself with him. He is at the end of the ladder and it is in him that the ladder rests.

This ladder of contemplation, derived as we have said from God, is prefigured in that ladder Jacob saw in his sleep and by which the angels were ascending and descending from God to human beings and from human beings to God, while God leaned on the top [Gn. 28:12-13]. The divine Scriptures say that all this happened at night, while Jacob was sleeping, to disclose how secret is the way and ascent to God and how it differs from human knowledge. The secrecy of this ascent is evident, since ordinarily the losing and annihilation of self, which bring the most profit to individuals, are considered the worst for them, whereas consolation and satisfaction (which are of less value and in which one ordinarily loses rather than gains if attachment is present) are considered the best.

5. Speaking now somewhat more particularly of this ladder of secret contemplation, we declare that the principal property involved in calling contemplation a "ladder" is its being a science of love, which as we said is an infused loving knowledge that both illumines and enamors the soul, elevating it step by step to God, its Creator. For it is only love that unites and joins the soul to God.

For greater clarity we will note the steps of this divine ladder and briefly point out the signs and effects of each so that one may surmise which of these steps one is on. We will distinguish them by their effects, as do St. Bernard and St. Thomas.^[1] Knowing these steps in themselves is impossible naturally, because this ladder of love is, as we said, so secret that God alone measures and weighs it.

=====

^[1] The text closely followed by John in the next two chapters was an apocryphal work attributed by some to St. Bernard and by others to St. Thomas Aquinas. The author is now known to be a Dominican of the 13th or 14th century named Helvicus Teutonicus. The work, entitled *De dilectione Dei et Proximi* (On the Love of God and Neighbor) contains the section *De decem gradibus amoris secundum Bernardum* (On the ten degrees of love according to Bernard). It may be found in the Vives edition of Aquinas' works, vol 28, Paris, 1889.

Chapter 19

Book Two

[An explanation of the first five of the ten steps on the mystical ladder of divine love.]

1. We mentioned that there are ten successive steps on this ladder of love by which the soul ascends to God. The first step of love makes the soul sick in an advantageous way. The bride speaks of this step of love when she says: *I conjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you encounter my Beloved, to tell him that I am lovesick* [Sg. 5:8]. Yet this sickness is not unto death but for the glory of God [Jn. 11:4], because in this sickness the soul's languor pertains to sin and to all the things that are not God. It languishes for the sake of God himself, as David testifies: *My soul has languished* (in regard to all things) *for Your salvation* [Ps. 119:81]. As a sick person changes color and loses appetite for all foods, so on this step of love the soul changes the

color of its past life and loses its appetite for all things. The soul does not get this sickness unless an excess of heat is sent to it from above, as is brought out in this verse of David: *Pluviam voluntariam segregabis, Deus, haereditati tuae, et infirmata est*, and so on [Ps. 68:9].[\[1\]](#)

We clearly explained this sickness and languor in respect to all things when we mentioned the annihilation of which the soul becomes aware when it begins to climb this ladder of contemplation.[\[2\]](#) It becomes unable then to find satisfaction, support, consolation, or a resting place in anything. The soul therefore begins immediately to ascend from this step to the next.

2. The second step causes a person to search for God unceasingly. When the bride said that seeking him by night in her bed (when in accord with the first step of love she was languishing), she did not find him, she added: *I will rise up and seek him whom my soul loves* [Sg. 3:1-2], which as we said the soul does unceasingly, as David counsels: *Seek the face of God always* [Ps. 105:4]. Searching for him in all things, it pays heed to nothing until it finds him. It resembles the bride who, after asking the guards for him, immediately passed by and left them behind [Sg. 3:3-4]. Mary Magdalene did not even pay attention to the angels at the sepulcher [Jn. 20:14].

The soul goes about so solicitously on this step that it looks for its Beloved in all things. In all its thoughts it turns immediately to the Beloved; in all converse and business it at once speaks about the Beloved; when eating, sleeping, keeping vigil, or doing anything else, it centers all its care on the Beloved, as we pointed out in speaking of the anxious longings of love.[\[3\]](#)

Since the soul is here convalescing and gaining strength in the love found in this second step, it immediately begins to ascend to the third through a certain degree of new purgation in the night, as we will point out, which produces the following effects.

3. The third step of this loving ladder prompts the soul to the performance of works and gives it fervor that it might not fail. The Royal Prophet exclaims: *Blessed are they who fear the Lord, because in his commandments they long to work* [Ps. 112:1]. If fear, a child of love, produces this eagerness in the soul, what will love itself do? On this step the soul thinks the great works it does for the Beloved are small; its many works, few; the long time spent in his service, short. It believes all of this because of the fire of love in which it is now burning. Thus because of the intensity of his love, Jacob, obliged to serve seven more years in addition to the seven years he had already served, did not think these were many [Gn. 29:20, 30]. If Jacob's love for a creature could do so much, what will love of the Creator do when it takes hold of the soul on this third step?

Because of such intense love for God, individuals at this stage feel deep sorrow and pain about the little they do for him, and if it were licit they would destroy themselves a thousand times for God and be greatly consoled. They consequently consider themselves useless in all their works and think their lives worthless.

Another admirable effect produced here is that such persons think inwardly that they are really worse than all others. One reason for this effect is that love is teaching them what God deserves; another is that because the works they perform for God are many and they know them to be wanting and imperfect, they are confused and pained by them all, conscious that their work is so lowly for so high a Lord. On this third step the soul is far removed from vainglory, presumption, and the practice of condemning others. This third step causes these effects of solicitude and many other similar ones in the soul. And thus one acquires the courage and strength to ascend to the fourth step.

4. On the fourth step of this ladder of love a habitual yet unwearisome suffering is engendered on account of the Beloved. As St. Augustine says: *Love makes all burdensome and heavy things nearly nothing.* [\[4\]](#) The bride spoke of this step when, desiring to

reach the last step, she said to her Spouse: *Put me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love (the act and work of love) is as strong as death, and emulation and importunity endure as long as hell* [Sg. 8:6].

The spirit possesses so much energy on this step that it brings the flesh under control and takes as little account of it as would a tree of one of its leaves. The soul in no way seeks consolation or satisfaction either in God or in anything else; neither does it desire or ask favors of God, for it is clearly aware that it has already received many from him. All its care is directed toward how it might give some pleasure to God and render him some service because of what he deserves and the favors he has bestowed, even though the cost might be high. These persons proclaim in their heart and spirit: "Ah, my Lord and my God! How many go to you looking for their own consolation and gratification and desiring that you grant them favors and gifts, but those wanting to give you pleasure and something at a cost to themselves, setting aside their own interests, are few. What is lacking is not that you, O my God, desire to grant us favors again, but that we make use of them for your service alone and thus oblige you to grant them to us continually."

This degree of love is a very elevated step. For as the soul at this stage through so genuine a love pursues God in the spirit of suffering for his sake, His Majesty frequently gives it joy by paying it visits of spiritual delight. For this immense love that Christ, the Word, has cannot long endure the sufferings of his beloved without responding. God affirms this through Jeremiah: *I have remembered you, pitying your youth and tenderness when you followed me in the desert* [Jer. 2:2]. Spiritually speaking, the desert is an interior detachment from every creature in which the soul neither pauses nor rests in anything. This fourth step so inflames and enkindles individuals with desire for God that it enables them to ascend to the fifth step.

5. The fifth step of this ladder of love imparts an impatient desire and longing for God. On this step the desire of the lover to apprehend and be united with the Beloved is so ardent that any delay, no matter how slight, is long, annoying, and tiresome. The soul is ever believing that it is finding its Beloved; and when it sees its desire frustrated, which is at almost every step, it faints in its longing, as the Psalmist declares: *My soul longs and faints for the dwelling places of the Lord* [Ps. 84:2]. On this step the lover must either see its love or die. With such love Rachel in her immense longing for children declared to Jacob, her spouse: *Give me children or I will die* [Gn. 30:1]. On this step, *they suffer hunger like dogs and encircle the city of God* [Ps. 59:6]. On this step of hunger, the soul so feeds on love - for in accord with its hunger is its satisfaction - that it can ascend to the sixth step, which produces the following effects.

=====

[1] "You shall set aside for your inheritance a free rain, O God, and it was weakened."

[2] In [chap. 10. 2.](#)

[3] See, for example, [chap. 11. 6.](#)

[4] See *Sermo 70, De verbis Domini in Evangelium S. Matthei*, in Migne, PL 38. 444.

Chapter 20

Book Two

[The remaining five steps of love.]

1. The sixth step makes the soul run swiftly toward God and experience many touches in him. And it runs without fainting by reason of its hope. The love that has invigorated it makes it fly swiftly. The prophet Isaiah also speaks of this step: *The saints who hope in God shall renew their strength. They shall take wings like the eagle and shall fly and not faint* [Is. 40:31], as is characteristic of the

fifth step. The following verse of the psalm also pertains to this step: *As the hart desires the waters, so does my soul desire you, my God* [Ps. 42:1], for the hart when thirsty races toward the waters.

The reason for the swiftness of love on this step is that the soul's charity is now highly increased and almost completely purified, as is also stated in the psalm: *Sine iniquitate cucurri* (Without iniquity have I run) [Ps. 59:4]; and in another psalm: *I have run the way of your commandments, when you enlarged my heart* [Ps. 119:32]. The soul is soon brought from the sixth to the seventh step.

2. The seventh step of the ladder gives it an ardent boldness. At this stage love neither profits by the judgment to wait nor makes use of the counsel to retreat, neither can it be curbed through shame. For the favor God now gives it imparts an ardent daring. Hence the Apostle says: *Charity believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things* [1 Cor. 13:7]. Moses spoke from this step when he besought God to forgive the people or else strike his name out of the book of life [Ex. 32:32]. These souls obtain from God what, with pleasure, they ask of him. David accordingly declares: *Delight in God, and he will grant you the petitions of your heart* [Ps. 37:4]. On this step the bride became bold and exclaimed: *Osculetur me osculo oris sui* [Sg. 1:1].^[1] It is illicit for the soul to become daring on this step if it does not perceive the divine favor of the king's scepter held out toward it [Est. 5:2; 8:4], for it might then fall down the step it has already climbed. On these steps it must always conserve humility.

From the free hand and boldness God gives on this seventh step, that one may be daring in his presence with an ardent love, follows the eighth step. Here the soul captures the Beloved and is united with him as follows.

3. The eighth step of love impels the soul to lay hold of the Beloved without letting him go, as the bride proclaims: *I found him whom my heart and soul loves, I held him and did not let him go* [Sg. 3:4]. Although the soul satisfies its desire on this step of union, it does not do so continually. Some manage to get to it, but soon turn

back and leave it. If one were to remain on this step, a certain glory would be possessed in this life, and so the soul rests on it for only short periods of time. Because the prophet Daniel was a man of desires, God ordered him to stay on this step: *Daniel, remain on your step, because you are a man of desires* [Dn. 10:11]. After this step comes the ninth, which is that of the perfect.

4. The ninth step of love causes the soul to burn gently. It is the step of the perfect who burn gently in God. The Holy Spirit produces this gentle and delightful ardor by reason of the perfect soul's union with God. St. Gregory accordingly says of the Apostles that when the Holy Spirit came upon them visibly, they burned interiorly and gently with love.[\[2\]](#)

We cannot speak of the goods and riches of God a person enjoys on this step because even were we to write many books about them the greater part would remain unsaid. For this reason and also because we will say something about them later, I will mention no more here than that this step of the ladder of love is succeeded by the tenth and final step, which is no longer of this life.

5. The tenth and last step of this secret ladder of love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God that a person possesses at once on reaching it. After arriving at the ninth step in this life, the soul departs from the body. Since these souls - few that there be - are already extremely purged through love, they do not enter purgatory. St. Matthew says: *Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt*, etc.[Mt. 5:8].[\[3\]](#) As we mentioned, this vision is the cause of the soul's complete likeness to God. St. John says: *We know that we shall be like him* [1 Jn. 3:2], not because the soul will have as much capacity as God - this is impossible - but because all it is will become like God. Thus it will be called, and shall be, God through participation.

6. Such is the secret ladder of which the soul here speaks, although on these higher steps it is not very secret to the soul, for love reveals a great deal through the remarkable effects it produces.

But on this last step of clear vision at the top of the ladder, where God rests, as we said, [4] nothing is any longer hid from the soul, and this because of its total assimilation. Accordingly our Savior exclaimed: *On that day you will not ask me anything*, etc. [Jn. 16:23]. Nevertheless, until that day, however high the soul may ascend, something will still be hidden in proportion to one's lack of total assimilation to the divine essence.

Thus, by means of this mystical theology and secret love, the soul departs from itself and all things and ascends to God. For love is like a fire that always rises upward as though longing to be engulfed in its center.

=====

[1] "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."

[2] See *Homilia 30 in Evangelium*, in Migne, PL 76. 1220.

[3] "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God."

[4] In [chap. 18. 4.](#)

Chapter 21

Book Two

[An explanation of the term "disguised" and a description of the colors of the disguise the soul wears in this night.]

1. Now then, after having explained why the soul calls this contemplation a secret ladder, we have still to comment on the third word of this verse, "disguised," and tell why it also says that it departed by this "secret ladder, disguised."

2. It should be known for the sake of understanding this verse that people disguise themselves by simply dissembling their identity under a garb and appearance different from their own. And they do this either to show exteriorly by means of that garment their will and aspiration toward gaining the favor and good pleasure of their

beloved, or also to hide from rivals and better execute their plan. They then choose the garments and livery that most represent and signify their heart's affections and with which they can better dissemble themselves from their enemies.

3. The soul, then, touched with love for Christ, her Spouse, and aspiring to win his favor and friendship, departs in the disguise that more vividly represents the affections of her spirit.[\[1\]](#) Her advance in this disguise makes her more secure against her adversaries: the devil, the world, and the flesh. The livery she thus wears is of three principal colors: white, green, and red. These three colors stand for the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity, by which she not only gains the favor and good will of her Beloved but also advances very safely, fortified against her three enemies.

4. Faith is an inner tunic of such pure whiteness that it blinds the sight of every intellect. When the soul is clothed in faith the devil is ignorant of how to hinder her, neither is he successful in his efforts, for faith gives her strong protection - more than do all the other virtues - against the devil, who is the mightiest and most astute enemy.

As a result, St. Peter found no greater safeguard than faith in freeing himself from the devil, when he advised: *Cui resistite fortes in fide* [1 Pt. 5:9].[\[2\]](#) To obtain the favor of the Beloved and union with him, the soul can have no better inner tunic than this white garment of faith, the foundation and beginning of the other garments or virtues. *Without faith, as the Apostle says, it is impossible to please God* [Heb. 11:6]; and with faith it is impossible not to please him, since he himself declares through the prophet Hosea, *Desponsabo te mihi in fide* [Hos. 2:20], which is similar to saying: If you desire, soul, union and espousal with me, you must come interiorly clothed in faith.

5. The soul wore her white tunic of faith when she departed on this dark night and walked, as we said, in the midst of interior darkneses and straits, without the comfort of any intellectual light -

neither from above, because heaven seemed closed and God hidden, nor from below, because she derived no satisfaction from her spiritual teachers, and suffered with constancy and perseverance, passing through these trials without growing discouraged or failing the Beloved. The Beloved so proves the faith of his bride in tribulations that she can afterward truthfully declare what David says: *Because of the words of your lips I have kept hard ways* [Ps. 17:4].

6. Over this white tunic of faith the soul puts on a second colored garment, a green coat of mail. Green, as we said, signifies the virtue of hope, by which one in the first place is defended and freed from the second enemy, the world. This greenness of living hope in God imparts such courage and valor and so elevates the soul to the things of eternal life that in comparison with these heavenly hopes all earthly things seem, as they truly are, dry, withered, dead, and worthless. The soul is thus divested of all worldly garments and does not set her heart on anything there is, or will be, in the world; she lives clothed only in the hope of eternal life. Having her heart so lifted up above the things of the world, she is not only unable to touch or take hold of worldly things, but she cannot even see them.

7. By this green livery and disguise, the soul is therefore protected against its second enemy, the world. St. Paul calls hope the *helmet of salvation* [1 Thes. 5:8]. A helmet is a piece of armor that protects the entire head and covers it so there is no opening except for a visor through which to see.

Hope has this characteristic: It covers all the senses of a person's head so they do not become absorbed in any worldly thing, nor is there any way some arrow from the world might wound them. Hope allows the soul only a visor that it may look toward heavenly things, and no more. This is the ordinary task of hope in the soul; it raises the eyes to look only at God, as David asserts it did with him: *Oculi mei semper ad Dominum*^[3] [Ps. 25:15]. David hoped for nothing from anyone else, as he says in another psalm: *Just as the eyes of the*

handmaid are fixed on the hands of her mistress, so are our eyes on the Lord our God until he has mercy on us who hope in him [Ps. 123:2].

8. As a result, this green livery, by which one always gazes on God, looks at nothing else, and is not content save with him alone, so pleases the Beloved that it is true to say the soul obtains from God all that she hopes for from him. The Bridegroom of the Cantic consequently says of his bride that she wounded his heart by merely the look of her eyes [Sg. 4:9]. Without this green livery of hope in God alone, it would not behoove anyone to go out toward this goal of love; a person would obtain nothing, since what moves and conquers is unrelenting hope.

9. The soul advances through this dark and secret night in the disguise of the green livery of hope, for she walks along so empty of all possessions and support that neither her eyes nor her care are taken up with anything but God. She places her mouth in the dust that there might be hope [Lam. 3:29], as we previously quoted from Jeremiah.[\[4\]](#)

10. Over the white and green, as the finishing touch and perfection of this disguise, the soul puts on a third color, a precious red toga. This color denotes charity, the third virtue, which not only adds elegance to the other two colors but so elevates the soul as to place her near God. Charity makes her so beautiful and pleasing to God that she dares to say: *Although I am black, O daughters of Jerusalem, I am beautiful, and for this reason the king has loved me and brought me into his chamber [Sg. 1:5].*[\[5\]](#)

With this livery of charity, a livery that by manifesting love increases love in the Beloved, the soul receives protection and concealment from the flesh, her third enemy. For where there is true love of God, love of self and of one's own things finds no entry. Not only does charity protect her, but it even makes the other virtues genuine, strengthens and invigorates them in order to fortify the soul, and bestows on them loveliness and charm so as to please the Beloved thereby. For without charity no virtue is pleasing to God.

This is the seat draped in purple on which God rests, as is said in the Song of Songs [Sg. 3:10].

The soul is clothed in this red livery when, as explained in the first stanza, she departs in the dark night from herself and from all creatures, fired with love's urgent longings, and advances by the secret ladder of contemplation to perfect union with God, who is her Beloved salvation.

11. This, then, is the disguise the soul says she wore on this secret ladder in the night of faith, and these are its colors. These colors are a most suitable preparation for union of the three faculties (intellect, memory, and will) with God.

Faith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with the divine wisdom.

Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St. Paul says, hope is for that which is not possessed [Rom. 8:24]. It withdraws the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on what it hopes for. Hence only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with him.

Charity also empties and annihilates the affections and appetites of the will of whatever is not God and centers them on him alone. Thus charity prepares the will and unites it with God through love.

Because these virtues have the function of withdrawing the soul from all that is less than God, they consequently have the mission of joining it with God.

12. Without walking sincerely in the garb of these three virtues, it is impossible to reach perfect union with God through love. This garb and disguise worn by the soul was very necessary for her to reach her goal, which was this loving and delightful union with her Beloved. It was a great grace for the soul to have put on this vesture, and to have persevered in it until attaining her end or goal, the

union of love, which she so desired. Consequently she proclaims in the next verse:

- ah, the sheer grace! -

=====

[1] As he moves out of his discussion of purgative contemplation, John begins to speak more in the style of *The Spiritual Canticle*, referring to Christ in terms of "Beloved" or "Bridegroom" and to the soul as "bride," although this symbolism in itself is basic to the poem.

[2] "Resist him, steadfast in faith."

[3] "My eyes are ever toward the Lord."

[4] In [chap. 8. 1.](#)

[5] As it stands the text comes from an antiphon in the Divine Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Chapter 22

Book Two

[An explanation of verse 3 of the second stanza.]

1. It was manifestly a great grace for the soul to have successfully undertaken this departure, in which she liberated herself from the devil, the world, and her own sensuality. In having reached the happy freedom of spirit desired by all, the soul went from the lowly to the sublime; being earthly, she became heavenly; and being human, she became divine, and arrived at having her conversation in heaven [Phil. 3:20], as is proper to this state of perfection, which we will now discuss, although somewhat more briefly.

2. What was more important and the reason I undertook this task was to explain this night to many souls who in passing through it do not understand it, as is pointed out in the prologue. [1] The nature of

this night has now been explained to some extent. We have also discussed the many blessings this night brings to the soul - though in a way that makes them seem less than what they in fact are - and how great a grace it is for one who passes through it. We have written of these blessings so that when souls become frightened by the horror of so many trials they might take courage in the sure hope of the many advantageous blessings obtained from God through these trials.

This night was, besides, a sheer grace for the soul on account of what she says in the next verse:

in darkness and concealment,

=====

[1] John must be referring to the long prologue of the *Ascent* because it is there that he pointed out the matter. From the reference, one may note how the *Ascent* and *Dark Night*, although different works, deal with the material of a comprehensive initial plan in which the purification was to be treated from both active and passive perspectives. Neither of these works can be interpreted apart from the other.

Chapter 23

Book Two

[An explanation of the fourth verse. Tells of the soul's wondrous hiding place during this night and how, though the devil enters other very high places, he is unable to gain entry to this one.]

1. "In concealment" amounts to saying in hiding or under cover. As a result, departing in darkness and concealment more truly indicates the security the soul speaks of in the first verse of this stanza. She received this security along the way toward union with God through love by means of this dark contemplation. "In darkness

and concealment" is like saying that since the soul walked in darkness in the way we mentioned, she was concealed and hidden from the devil, and from his deceits and wiles.[\[1\]](#)

2. The reason the darkness of this contemplation frees and hides the soul from the wiles of the devil is that the contemplation experienced here is infused passively and secretly without the use of the exterior and interior faculties of the sensory part of the soul. The soul's journey, consequently, is not only hidden and freed from the obstacle these faculties in their natural weakness can occasion, but also from the devil, who without these faculties of the sensory part cannot reach the soul or know what is happening within it. Accordingly, the more spiritual and interior the communication and the more removed it is from the senses, the less the devil understands it.

3. It is very important to the soul's security that in its inner communion with God its senses remain in darkness, without this communication, and that they do not attain to it. First, so that there may be room for a more abundant spiritual communication, without any hindrance to freedom of spirit from the weakness of the sensory part. Second, so that, as we say, the soul might journey more securely, since the devil cannot enter so far within it. Hence we can understand spiritually those words of our Savior: *Let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing* [Mt. 6:3]. This is like saying: Do not allow the left side, the lower portion of your soul, to know or attain to what happens on the right side, the superior and spiritual part of the soul; let this be a secret between the spirit and God alone.

4. It is quite true that even though the devil is ignorant of the nature of these very interior and secret spiritual communications, he frequently perceives that one is receiving them because of the great quietude and silence some of them cause in the sensory part. And since he is aware that he cannot impede them in the depths of the soul, he does everything possible to excite and disturb the

sensory part, which he can affect with sufferings, horrors, and fears. He intends by this agitation to disquiet the superior and spiritual part of the soul in its reception and enjoyment of that good.

Yet when the communication of such contemplation shines in the spirit alone and produces strength in it, the devil's diligence in disturbing the soul is often of no avail. It receives instead new benefits and a deeper, more secure peace. For what a wonderful thing it is! In experiencing the troublesome presence of the enemy, the soul enters more deeply into its inner depths without knowing how and without any efforts of its own, and it is sharply aware of being placed in a certain refuge where it is more hidden and withdrawn from the enemy. There the peace and joy that the devil planned to undo increase. All that fear remains outside; and the soul exults in a very clear consciousness of secure joy, in the quiet peace and delight of the hidden Spouse that neither the world nor the devil can either give or take away. The soul experiences the truth of the bride's exclamation in the Song of Songs: *Behold, sixty men surround the bed of Solomon, etc., because of the fears of the night* [Sg. 3:7-8]. She is aware of this strength and peace even though she frequently feels that her flesh and bones outside are being tormented.

5. At other times, when the spiritual communication is not bestowed exclusively on the spirit but on the senses too, the devil more easily disturbs and agitates the spirit with these horrors by means of the senses. The torment and pain he then causes is immense, and sometimes it is ineffable. For since it proceeds nakedly from spirit to spirit, the horror the evil spirit causes within the good spirit (in that of the soul), if he reaches the spiritual part, is unbearable. The bride of the Song of Songs also speaks of this disturbance in telling of her desire to descend to interior recollection and enjoy these goods: *I went down into the garden of nuts to see the apples of the valleys and if the vineyard was in flower; I knew not; my soul was troubled by the chariots* (by the carts and roaring) *of Aminadab* (the devil) [Sg. 6:11-12].[\[2\]](#)

6. At other times, when the communications are accorded by means of the good angels, the devil detects some of the favors God desires to grant the soul. God ordinarily permits the adversary to recognize favors granted through the good angels so this adversary may do what he can, in accord with the measure of justice, to hinder them. Thus the devil cannot protest his rights, claiming that he is not given the opportunity to conquer the soul, as was his complaint in the story of Job [Jb. 1:9-11; 2:4-5]. He could do this if God did not allow a certain parity between the two warriors (the good angel and the bad) in their struggle for the soul. Hence the victory of either one will be more estimable, and the soul, victorious and faithful in temptation, will receive a more abundant reward.

7. We must note that this is why God permits the devil to deal with the soul in the same measure and mode in which he himself conducts and deals with it. True visions ordinarily come from the good angel, even if Christ is represented, for he hardly ever appears in his own Person. If a person receives true visions from the good angel, God permits the bad angel to represent false ones of the same kind. Thus an incautious person can be deceived, as many have been. There is a figure of this in Exodus where it says that all the true signs Moses worked were seemingly worked by Pharaoh's magicians: If he produced frogs, they also did; if he turned water into blood, they also did so [Ex. 7:11-12, 19-22; 8:6-7].

8. Not only does the devil imitate this kind of corporeal vision, but he also simulates and interferes with spiritual communications coming from a good angel, since he can discern them, as we said; and as Job said, *omne sublime videt*^[3] [Jb. 41:25], imitates and interferes with them. Yet he cannot imitate and form these spiritual communications as he can those granted under some appearance or figure, for these are without form and figure, and it is of the nature of the spirit to be formless and figureless.

He represents his frightful spirit to the soul in order to attack it in the same way in which it receives the spiritual communication, and to assail and destroy the spiritual with the spiritual.

In this case, when the good angel communicates spiritual contemplation, the soul cannot enter the hiding place of this contemplation quickly enough to go unnoticed by the devil. He then presents himself to it with some spiritual horror and disturbance, at times very painful. Sometimes the soul can withdraw speedily without giving this horror of the evil spirit an opportunity to make an impression on it, and it recollects itself by the efficacious favor the good angel then gives it.

9. At other times the devil prevails, and disturbance and horror seize upon it. This terror is a greater suffering than any other torment in life. Since this horrendous communication proceeds from spirit to spirit manifestly and somewhat incorporeally, it surpasses all sensory pain. This spiritual suffering does not last long, for if it did the soul would depart from the body on account of this violent communication. Afterward the soul can recall this diabolic communication; doing so is enough to cause great suffering.

10. All we have mentioned here takes place passively without one's doing or undoing anything. Yet it should be understood that when the good angel allows the devil the advantage of reaching the soul with this spiritual horror, he does so that it may be purified and prepared, through this spiritual vigil, for some great feast and spiritual favor that God, who never mortifies but to give life or humbles but to exalt [1 Sm. 2:6-7], desires to give. This favor will be granted a short time afterward, and the soul, in accord with the dark and horrible purgation it suffered, will enjoy a wondrous and delightful spiritual communication, at times ineffably sublime. The preceding horror of the evil spirit greatly refines the soul so it can receive this good. These spiritual visions belong more to the next life than to this, and each is a preparation for the one following.

11. We have been speaking of God's visits by means of the good angel, in which the soul does not walk in such complete darkness and concealment that the enemy cannot somehow reach it. Yet when God visits the soul directly, this verse is fully verified. In receiving spiritual favors from God, the soul is in total darkness and concealment as far as the enemy is concerned.

The reason for this concealment is that since His Majesty dwells substantially in that part of the soul to which neither the angel nor the devil can gain access and thereby see what is happening, the enemy cannot learn of the intimate and secret communications there between the soul and God. Since the Lord grants these communications directly, they are wholly divine and sovereign. They are all substantial touches of divine union between God and the soul. In one of these touches, since this is the highest degree of prayer, the soul receives greater good than in all else.

12. These are the touches the soul began to ask for in the Song of Songs on saying: *Osculetur me osculo oris sui*, etc. [\[4\]](#) [Sg. 1:1]. Since a substantial touch is wrought in such close intimacy with God, for which the soul longs with so many yearnings, a person will esteem and covet a touch of the divinity more than all God's other favors. After the bride in the Song had received many favors, which she related there, she was unsatisfied and asked for these divine touches: *Who will give you to me, my brother, that I might find you alone, outside nursing at the breasts of my mother so that with the mouth of my soul I might kiss you and no one might despise me or attack me?* [Sg. 8:1]. This passage refers to the communication God gives to the soul by himself alone, outside and exclusive of all creatures, for this is the meaning of the terms "alone" and "outside nursing at the breasts." The breasts of the appetites and affections of the sensory part are dried up when in freedom of spirit the soul enjoys these blessings with intimate delight and peace, unhindered by the sensory part or the devil (who opposes them through the senses). The devil, then, would not assail the soul, because he would

be unable to reach these blessings or come to understand these divine touches of the loving substance of God in the substance of the soul.

13. No one attains to this blessing except through an intimate nakedness, purgation, and spiritual hiding from all that is of creatures. Accordingly, one reaches this good in "darkness" (as we have explained at length and now repeat in reference to this verse), "and concealment" (in which the hidden soul, as we said, is confirmed in its union with God through love). The soul in its song consequently exclaims: "In darkness and concealment."

14. When these favors are bestowed in concealment (only in the spirit, as we said), a person is usually aware, without knowing how, that the superior and spiritual part of the soul is withdrawn and alienated from the lower and sensory part. This withdrawal makes one conscious of two parts so distinct that one seemingly has no relation to the other and is far removed from it. And, indeed, this is in a way true, for in the activity that is then entirely spiritual there is no communication with the sensory part. A person in this way becomes wholly spiritual, and in these hiding places of unitive contemplation, and by their means, the passions and spiritual appetites are to a great degree eliminated. Referring thus to the superior part, the soul says in this last verse:

my house being now all stilled;

=====

[\[1\]](#) This chapter presents John's most detailed analysis of the interference of the devil in the spiritual life.

[\[2\]](#) See [C. 40. 3.](#)

[\[3\]](#) "Every high thing he sees."

[\[4\]](#) "Let him kiss me with the kiss of the mouth."

Chapter 24

Book Two

[The concluding explanation of this second stanza.]

1. This is like saying: Since the superior portion of my soul is now, like the lower, at rest in its appetites and faculties, I went out to divine union with God through love.

2. Insofar as the soul is buffeted and purged through the war of the dark night in a twofold way (in the sensory and spiritual parts with their senses, faculties, and passions), she also attains a twofold peace and rest in the faculties and appetites of both the sensory and spiritual parts. Consequently the soul repeats this verse of the first stanza. The sensory and spiritual parts of the soul, in order to go out to the divine union of love, must first be reformed, put in order, and pacified, as was their condition in Adam's state of innocence. This verse, which in the first stanza refers to the quiet of the lower and sensory part, refers particularly in this second stanza to the superior and spiritual part, and consequently the soul has repeated it.

3. By means of the acts of substantial touches of divine union, the soul obtains habitually and perfectly (insofar as the condition of this life allows) the rest and quietude of her spiritual house. In concealment and hiding from the disturbance of both the devil and the senses and passions, she receives these touches from the divinity. By their means the soul is purified, quieted, strengthened, and made stable so she may receive permanently this divine union, which is the divine espousal between the soul and the Son of God.[\[1\]](#)

As soon as these two parts of the soul are wholly at rest and strengthened, together with all the members of the household, the faculties and appetites (also put to sleep and in silence regarding earthly and heavenly things), Divine Wisdom is united with the soul in a new bond of the possession of love. This union is wrought, as is asserted in the Book of Wisdom, *Dum quietum silentium contineret*

omnia, et nox in suo cursu medium iter haberet, omnipotens sermo tuus, Domine, a regalibus sedibus prosilivit[\[2\]](#) [Wis. 18:14-15]. The bride in the Song of Songs explains the same thing when she states that after she passed by those who took away her veil and wounded her, she found him whom her soul loved [Sg. 5:7; 3:4].

4. One cannot reach this union without remarkable purity, and this purity is unattainable without vigorous mortification and nakedness regarding all creatures. "Taking off the bride's veil" and "wounding her at night," in her search and desire for her Spouse, signify this denudation and mortification, for she could not put on the new bridal veil without first removing her other one. Persons who refuse to go out at night in search for the Beloved and to divest and mortify their will, but rather seek the Beloved in their own bed and comfort, as did the bride [Sg. 3:1], will not succeed in finding him. As this soul declares, she found him when she departed in darkness and with longings of love.

=====

[\[1\]](#) This divine espousal now refers to spiritual marriage rather than spiritual betrothal. The state of spiritual marriage, which John explains in more detail in *The Spiritual Canticle*, is identical with that of the perfect.

[\[2\]](#) "When peaceful stillness compassed everything and the night in its course was half spent, your all-powerful word, O Lord, leapt down from your royal throne."

Chapter 25

Book Two

[A brief explanation of the third stanza.]

Third Stanza

On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.

Explanation

1. Still using the metaphor and simile of temporal night to describe this spiritual night, the soul enumerates and extols the good properties of the night. She found and made use of these properties by means of this night and thereby obtained her desired goal securely and quickly. We will list three of these properties here.

2. The first is that in this glad contemplative night, God conducts her by so solitary and secret a contemplation, one so remote and alien to all the senses, that nothing pertinent to the senses, nor any touch of creature, can reach or detain her on the route leading to the union of love.

3. The second property of this night, mentioned in this stanza, has as its cause the spiritual darkness of this night, in which all the faculties of the higher part of the soul are in obscurity. In neither looking nor being able to look at anything, the soul is not detained in her journey to God by anything outside of him, for in her advance she is free of hindrance from the forms and figures of the natural apprehensions, which are those that usually prevent her from being always united with the being of God.

4. The third property is that, although the soul in her progress does not have the support of any particular interior light of the intellect, or of any exterior guide that may give her satisfaction on this lofty path - since these dense darkneses have deprived her of all satisfaction - love alone, which at this period burns by soliciting

the heart for the Beloved, is what guides and moves her, and makes her soar to God in an unknown way along the road of solitude.

The next verse is:

On that glad night,[\[1\]](#)

=====

[\[1\]](#) The work ends here. John has achieved his goal, to explain the purification of the dark night.