

**LIVING GOD'S WORD LIKE THE SAINTS**

**BY DANIELLE NUSSBERGER, PH.D.**

# LEARNING ABOUT CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER WITH THE SAINTS



At several points in the Gospels we meet the Jesus who withdraws to the quiet places to pray and who entreats His disciples to do the same. For example, in Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus explaining to His disciples, "...when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt 6:6).





Nicolò Lorenese;  
*Saint John of the Cross  
Receives the Cross from  
Christ* (17th c.); Santa  
Maria della Vittoria  
(Rome)

Then, He gives them the Lord's Prayer as a means of entering into such a contemplative space. In today's world, it often seems next to impossible for us to experience the retreat of prayer's solitude in the midst of our culture's frenetic pace that includes staying connected to everyone and everything with the constant demands of work and family facilitated by the 'the call' of our mobile devices. Perhaps, now more than ever, we are desperately in need of the saints as shining examples of how and why we are to "go to our inner room." For they show us that we must frequently go to that quiet space in order to stop everything that we are doing so that God can enter in and teach us the art of listening that is the heart of all meaningful interpersonal communication.

One of the Christian tradition's most celebrated saints of prayerful solitude and contemplation is the sixteenth century Spanish Carmelite mystic, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). Many of us have heard references made to his famous image of the "dark night of the soul." Several contemporary authors, like Ronald Rohlheiser in his *The Shattered Lantern*, have drawn upon St. John of the Cross' spiritual writings to rekindle a love of contemplative prayer in today's Christian believers.<sup>1</sup> Whether we meet St. John through his many mystical writings (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, *The Living Flame of Love*) or we are introduced to him by skilled commentators like Rohlheiser, the message is always the same: remove yourself from everything, including your own thoughts and desires, in order to find yourself anew being filled to overflowing with God's abundant grace.

This separation from everything, including our own perceptions of ourselves and the world around us, is what John of the Cross is describing by using the image of the "dark night." John knew well that when we withdraw for a time from everything that we normally cling to (including people, things, and our own ideas

and expectations), at first we feel lost in a kind of darkness, because we are dwelling in an emptiness that we cannot fill. It is precisely this emptiness, created by the Spirit's removal of everything that we depend upon, that is the necessary precondition for communion with God, because now God has a space in which to come and dwell with us most intimately. For, as John of the Cross expresses it in *The Living Flame of Love*, "...God does not fit in an occupied heart" (3.48).<sup>2</sup> In the dark night, our false selves are put to death by the healing touch of the Holy Spirit, making it possible for us to echo John's words: "You have wounded me in order to cure me, O divine hand, and you have put to death in me what made me lifeless, what deprived me of God's life in which I now see myself live" (*Living Flame of Love*, 2.16).<sup>3</sup>

In the silence, the darkness, and the emptiness, the Spirit trains us to wait and listen, both of which are passive actions that make it possible for the newness of God's light to transform our ways of thinking and being. As a teacher of prayer, St. John of the Cross shows us how prayer is a way of being open to the self-transformation that God's Spirit continuously desires to work within us. Because of the Spirit's constant presence, we are never truly alone in the darkness of solitude. This is why John can say, "Oh night that was my guide! Oh darkness dearer than the morning's pride, Oh night that joined the lover to the beloved bride transfiguring them each into the other."<sup>4</sup> Relying on the *Song of Songs*, he describes the goal of contemplative prayer as one of intimate union between us and the God who loves us so passionately. This imagery helps us to understand the necessity of repeated, prayerful withdrawal to the quiet places, because now we can relate it to our need to carve out intentional spaces for communion with our dearest loved ones.

Just as human relationships depend upon constant efforts of self-denial in the interest of hearing and knowing one's beloved, so too does the God-human relationship flourish when we heed Jesus' summons to "go to our inner room, close the door, and pray to our Father in secret." St. John of the Cross encourages us not to be afraid to do what Jesus calls us to do. He helps us to hear Jesus speak these reassuring words to us: "Be still. Be quiet. For you will not be able to hear me if you do not have times where you dwell in the silence. Though it is challenging to do so, you must frequently shut the door on everything else, let go of everything else, to create an open space in your heart where I can come to you."



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## NOTES

1 Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004).

2 *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991).

3 Ibid.

4 *Poems of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Roy Campbell (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 11-13.