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CARMELITE STUDIES

Spiritual Development
and Contemporary Psychology

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Christus Publishing, LLC
WELLESLEY, MA
www.ChristusPublishing.com
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Introduction

For this second volume of *Carmelite Studies* we are going to follow some advice of St Teresa carried in the Introduction to the first volume of our series, that is, “it is we who are the beginners now [and] let them continually strive to be beginners too.” We are bringing together studies by persons who, in recent years, have reaped the fruits of long hours of research on Carmelite authors so as to obtain for their findings the highest level of academic recognition. Now active in their respective fields of specialization, almost every one of them crowned his or her academic career with a doctoral dissertation on a Carmelite topic.

The first part of this volume, as a result, presents articles by a cluster of young American authors who have done theses on either St Teresa or St John of the Cross. What further characterizes all of these works is their common approach of mining the teachings of the two Carmelite mystics in a particularly fascinating way: they use the findings of such established twentieth-century psychologists as Rollo May, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and Carl Jung and apply them to Teresa and John’s descriptions of spiritual development. The overall effort discernible in their four articles is one of contextualization for our times and our quest after modern approaches to interiority, even as they pay tribute to the perennial wisdom of both Carmelite saints. We hope that our presentation of this set of studies will encourage still others to seek out links between currents of contemporary thought and the always fascinating testimonies of the mystics.

Due to the length of “Spiritual Development and Contemporary Psychology,” the second part contains just two articles. By dealing with
a Marian theme the second one mines a vein of Carmelite spirituality long held in esteem by the Order, namely, devotion to Mary the Queen Beauty of Carmel. The first article, for its illustrious author and interesting background, obviously deserves a more detailed introduction.

Last year the first doctoral thesis of Pope John Paul II, submitted by him as a young priest to Rome’s Angelicum University in 1948, was published in English under the title *Faith According to St John of the Cross* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981). As indicated by the translator-editor, Fr Jordan Aumann, OP, the young Polish Fr Wojtyla did this thesis under the direction of leading theologians in the Eternal City and then composed a shorter summary of it for the Warsaw theological journal called *Collectanea Theologica* after he returned to his homeland. That summary article was written in Latin, as was the thesis, and both have remained inaccessible to an English-language reading audience—along with so many other works of this great admirer of John of the Cross —until his election to the papacy. *Carmelite Studies* appreciates this chance to make the summary of “Papa Wojtyla’s” thesis available to our readers in the fine translation of Fr Christopher Latimer, a member of the Institute of Carmelite Studies and also Editor-in-Chief of *Spiritual Life* Magazine. Thanks go too, to the Libreria Editrice Vaticana for its kind authorization to publish this translation for the first time. Karol Wojtyla’s thoughts of thirty years ago are of primary importance for us today, with the way the Church he now leads needs to lean on the sustaining power of faith more than ever. The same faith that St John of the Cross relied on for light in the “dark night” is necessary for us to see through our own night of nuclear fears, structured and random violence, financial uncertainty, devious political maneuverings, unjust oppression of human rights in all forms, and other social ills around the world. While the world of Pope John Paul II is no longer the same one he knew when he first wrote this summary, one can still hope that we will face it with a serenity like his own for having read his words on the “saint of the dark night.” To ensure that our text maintains some of the flavor of the Pope’s article of 1950, we will give the direct quotes from
St John of the Cross placed in the footnotes by Fr Wojtyła according to the original Spanish version then current.

One final word about *Carmelite Studies* itself. The sales records of our first volume have been most gratifying (5,000 copies sold by the end of eleven months), and they have encouraged the Institute of Carmelite Studies to carry on with a fair amount of optimism. Future volumes are already taking shape and we hope we will succeed at accomplishing our self-assigned task of enriching our readers’ spiritual growth in the process. Look for many articles in the near future on St Teresa, in connection with the Fourth Centenary of her death.

John Sullivan, OCD
Editor
Contemporary Psychology and Carmel
Christian Freedom and the Nights of St John of the Cross

David Centner, O.C.D.

Father David Centner did his theological studies in Rome at the Teresianum. He obtained the Doctorate in Sacred Theology there by presenting a thesis on the theme of this article.

INTRODUCTION

Libertad! Uhuru! Freedom Now! Later generations might well call our age an age of liberation. The aspirations of men and women for freedom and their experience of personal and social alienation from it can be termed leitmotifs of the complex social developments of the past few generations. Liberation and alienation are pervasive themes in art and literature, in national and international politics; and their influence can be felt in the ferment which is changing the life of such basic social units as the family and Church. Freedom has become an important theme in theologies which are not content merely to examine its abstract nature but which seek to foster programs of pastoral liberation by Gospel values.

One must know what freedom is in order to begin the task of real-
izing it. But freedom is never fully known. It is a transcendental value which exceeds every category of discursive knowledge. Though a given in human experience it is looked for as something to come. It is a mystery, a problem which encroaches on its own data and, like so many other basic values, tends to be defined in terms of itself. As Karl Rahner says: “The ground of freedom is the abyss of mystery which can never be conceived as something not yet known but knowable in the future . . .”\(^1\) It is an \textit{a priori} category of experience which must be examined theologically through the use of a transcendental method.\(^2\) For many idealist schools of philosophy and the theologies and political ideologies derived from them, freedom is not an attribute of persons at all but an \textit{a priori} structure of reality.\(^3\) Empiricist philosophies tend to explain away freedom entirely.\(^4\) Because it is a transcendental value, freedom is not amenable to direct examination by the natural sciences, though they may help to elucidate it and foster the conditions of its realization. The humanist psychologist Carl Rogers could hardly make this fact clearer when he states:

For some time I have been perplexed over the living paradox which exists in psychotherapy between freedom and determinism. In the therapeutic relationship some of the most compelling subjective experiences are those in which the client feels within himself the power of naked choice. . . . Yet as we enter this field of psychotherapy with objective research methods, we are, like any other scientist, committed to a complete determinism.\(^5\)

Still, the problem of freedom goes beyond the age-old question of the existence of a free will. Determinism is not the central problem. Rollo May states:

Indeed, the central core of modern man’s “neurosis,” it may be fairly said, is the undermining of his experience of himself as responsible, the sapping of his will and ability to make decisions. The lack of will
is much more than merely an ethical problem: the modern individual so often has the conviction that even if he did exert his “will”—or whatever illusion passes for it—his actions wouldn’t do any good anyway. It is this inner experience of impotence, this contradiction in will, which constitutes our critical problem.⁶

E. W. Trueman Dicken went straight to the heart of the problem when he wrote:

We commonly speak as if freedom of the will depended simply upon our power to choose between a right and a wrong course of action, unmindful of the fact that we cannot strictly be said to be “free” to will anything which we cannot accomplish. We may indeed wish it, but there is no freedom of choice where there is no possibility of realizing what we wish.⁷

It is this crisis of the entire person which distinguishes the present problem of freedom from earlier disputes regarding free will. The question we face today is not whether the will is free but whether we are, or even can be, free. If a person is so psychologically out of touch with himself that he cannot effectively will anything, or if in his individuation he is so cut off from the world of people and things that any choice that may be possible for him has no bearing on his goals as a human person, he is not free. He is alienated. He lives in dissociation from himself, the world, and others. He loses something of his “self” and becomes the instrument of his circumstances while trying to make an instrument of those—including himself—from whom he has become dissociated.⁸

If we may extrapolate from our contemporaries’ experience of nonfreedom in alienation we may arrive at some positive understanding of that transcendental value we call freedom: it is at least the achievement of a selfhood and an existence which is lived by an individual, through personal choices, for the sake of his own purpose, goal, or end in life.⁹
And indeed, as Karl Rahner has stated in one of his many works touching on freedom, it is neither “freedom of choice” nor an interior stoic “freedom of attitude” like that exalted by Sartre and which is more truly called fatalism.

Freedom is first of all “freedom of being.” It is not merely the quality of an act as such as it is sometimes performed, but a transcendental qualification of being human. . . . Primarily . . . freedom is not concerned with this is or that which it might do or not do. . . . Freedom is never a mere choice between individual objects, but it is the self-realization of man who makes a choice, and only within this freedom in which man is capable of realizing himself is he also free as regards the material of his self-realization. He can do or not do this or that with respect to is own inescapable self-realization.¹⁰

But to say that man will be free when he has realized himself and that he is free insofar as he is realizing himself is still not to say what freedom is. “What we shall later be has not yet come to light.”¹¹ In the final analysis, a proper understanding of freedom can only be derived from theological reflection on man’s end as revealed in Jesus who stated: “If you live according to my teaching . . . then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”¹² Theology, for its part, cannot ignore the contemporary issue of freedom and alienation. Nor has it.¹³ Yet much of its attention has been directed toward the social and political implications of christian freedom with a near neglect of the personal dimensions of freedom which are no less important. This is somewhat surprising since freedom is one of the preoccupations of the great schools of Christian spirituality.

The importance of freedom is especially evident in the writings of the Spanish Carmelite St John of the Cross—a point not overlooked by his commentators. Marilyn May Mallory, for example, does not hesitate to summarize the saint’s doctrine in terms of freedom;¹⁴ and Jacques Maritain says of him that he “leads liberty through all the nights of
renunciation” and calls the path that leads to the heights of Carmel “the sole road of liberty.” Even the theologians of liberation have begun to pay attention to St John of the Cross.

The fact is that in the works of St John of the Cross, and in particular in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night of the Soul*, freedom terms, images and analogies occur with such regularity and prominence that there can be no doubt that in some sense freedom and unfreedom are major concerns of the saint. But if we raise the question as to whether or not the mystical doctrine of St John of the Cross is relevant to our theological examination of our contemporary crisis of freedom, we face several difficulties of a distinctly academic nature. The first of these is the fact that man today perceives himself in a very different fashion from the way a sixteenth-century Spaniard thought of himself. This means that we cannot content ourselves with comparing or applying sixteenth-century phenomena and models to present-day man but must seek to understand the saint’s doctrine of liberation in terms of our present-day understanding of man. Although he writes about liberty, St John of the Cross was not especially interested in man’s self-realization in a secular sense. We cannot assume that he is addressing our problem just because he employs a familiar vocabulary. Much of the data of interest to us must be extrapolated from his writings at the risk of misrepresenting his thought. This task is complicated by certain idiosyncrasies of John the author and by some deficiencies in his formal theological education. But we must exercise caution, too. It is entirely possible that his basic intuition on a subject may be correct notwithstanding objections on our part to his theological or psychological exposition. Where we encounter difficulties, a statement of that fact is of more service than a bowdlerized version of the saint—our interpretation may be at fault! We must also avoid the danger of confusing psychological and theological methodologies and of reducing the saint’s doctrine to a kind of psychology of mystical experiences.

These difficulties appear formidable enough and suggest that anything one might derive from the saint’s mystical doctrine would be
useful constructs for theological inquiry but only tenuously related to his actual thought. Our experience has been the contrary. It is our belief that the mystical doctrine of the Spanish saint in his Ascent and Dark Night provides us with precious insights into growth in freedom, insights that are applicable to Christian life in general and for all times and not merely to the life of those called to mystical union.

FREEDOM, UNION AND SALVATION

Does St John of the Cross speak of the problem of freedom and alienation experienced by modern man? If so, is his doctrine theologically valid for us today? This is our primary question. To answer it we will have to examine both the saint’s writings and what theology has to tell us about freedom and alienation.

St John’s Literary Exposition

1. Frame of Reference: The Soul’s Journey

The main analogy which St John uses to explain his doctrine is that of flight and rendezvous by night. The symbol of night is so powerful that the reader often overlooks the element of motion in the analogy. Much of the saint’s doctrine regarding liberation makes sense only by reference to the motion of the soul in its journey toward union with its beloved.

2. The Principal Terms Used

In expounding his doctrine St John frequently employs words and comparisons which indicate various kinds of possibilities and impossibilities. While these are sometimes mere figures of speech they may often have analogical meanings that speak of freedom and alienation. This is especially true when John uses such words with a negative particle in a sense that clearly indicates an undue impediment to an activity: “Joy is blinding to the heart and does not allow it (no le deja) to consider and ponder things . . .”; and, “The third sign . . . is the powerlessness . . . to meditate (el no poder ya meditar). . . . ”18
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