

A great teacher of Christian spirituality and a genuine witness to the truth of God's love, **Saint John of the Cross** will never be lost in the memory of the Church, especially today as we celebrate his *dies natalis*, his "day of birth" into eternal life, which took place on December 14, 1591 in a monastery at Úbeda, Spain. St. John died at a relatively young age of 49. But such was his positive impact on the life of the Church that we could not think of the Carmelite reform of St. Teresa without the contribution of St. John of the Cross. Furthermore, we could not deepen our understanding of Christian mysticism without the written works of St. John. What can we learn from the life and theology of St. John of the Cross? Allow me to underline two points.

First, we focus on **union with God**. In explaining to us this ultimate goal of Christian spirituality, St. John of the Cross used the act of ascending Mount Carmel as a metaphor. Have you tried mountain climbing? The act of rising or climbing upward is never easy, especially when we have a lot of baggage. Aduna'y usa ka tawo nga excited kaayong mosaka sa bukid pero wala gyud siya matigayon sa iyang tinguha tungod kay daghan kaayo siya'g dalang bagahe. The same holds true for us in our journey to God. For us to reach our goal which is to be united to God, we need to go through the process of detachment. We need to know how to surrender our baggage to God that we may be one with Him.

What baggage are we carrying right now? Dear friends, there are different kinds of baggage we may be carrying around. This baggage can be a negative feeling from the past that robs us of the liberating power of forgiveness. It can be a feeling of fear that paralyzes us from doing the will of God in all the circumstances of our life. It can also be an addiction to sin that hinders us from perceiving God's presence. It can be our attachment to wealth and money that holds us back from being generous to others, especially the poor.

In the book entitled *Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, St. John has this interesting remark: "Those who are attached spend all their time going to and fro about the snare to which their heart is tied"; but spiritual persons are those people who find joy in serving God; they are not consumed by vanity for their fulfillment in life is God's "glory in all things" (Bk. III, Chap. 20, p. 303). Dear friends, for us to reach a certain degree of union with God, we need to empty ourselves of all forms of

attachment in order to arrive at a level which St. John of the Cross calls “nada” (nothing). Only then can God be our all.

Let us focus on the second point: **holiness of life**. Indeed, St. John of the Cross would never have collaborated in the reform of the Church during the sixteenth century without his constant struggle to be holy. The true reformers of the Church are the saints. Now holiness for St. John is not perfectionism. He was fully aware of humanity’s wounded nature. But he was also confident in our capacity to be open to God’s grace. We may fall in life, but we can also rise up and hold on to God’s mercy.

In his written work entitled *Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John speaks about some signs of maturity in one’s response to God’s call to holiness. For him, those who walk in the way of holiness are those people whose “eyes are fixed only on God, on being his friend and pleasing him; this is what they long for...Their pleasure is to know how to live for love of God or neighbor” (Bk.1, Chap.3, p. 366). Notice how St. John emphasizes the necessity of knowing how to live for love of God and neighbor. Indeed, holiness of life is a touchstone for knowing whether we are truly united with God or not. But holiness becomes concrete only when we allow the *living Flame of God’s love* to purify and to transform us.

In today’s Gospel reading (John 17:11,17-26), Jesus prays to the Father: “*Father...that they may be one like us...with me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one.*” In verse 26, Jesus continues: “*in order that the love you have for me may be in them.*” Friends, these words of our Lord remind us that as we are united with Him and with the Father, we are gradually transformed deep within through the Holy Spirit so that God’s Love may be in us.

Now, was it easy for St. John of the Cross to grow in holiness? I don’t think so. John struggled a lot in life. His life was never a walk in the park. His father was disowned by his noble family for marrying a poor woman. When his father died, his mother was painstakingly looking for a decent job to feed the family. As he joined the Carmelite order, he was asked by St. Teresa of Avila to help in the reformation of Carmel by going back to the purity and radicalism of the Gospel values. Thus, he became a threat to the Order. He was kidnapped and imprisoned for nine months in a very small and dark cell by his fellow Carmelite brothers. He

was beaten several times a week and was forced to be in a solitary confinement in order to let him suffer psychologically and physically. Amidst these painful experiences, did he fall into bitterness? No. In his many dark nights, he allowed himself to be purified by the fire of God's unconditional love; this enabled St. John to forgive and to find consolation in the Cross of Jesus. He said: "Donde no hay amor, pon amor y sacarás amor" (Where there is no love, put love and you will draw out love).

Dear friends, as we continue to use the name *Juan de la Cruz* as the national personification of the Philippines, let us allow the teachings of this great *Doctor mysticus*, "Mystical Doctor", to echo in our hearts: union with God and holiness of life through our daily gestures of love.

May Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. John of the Cross intercede for us. Amen.

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