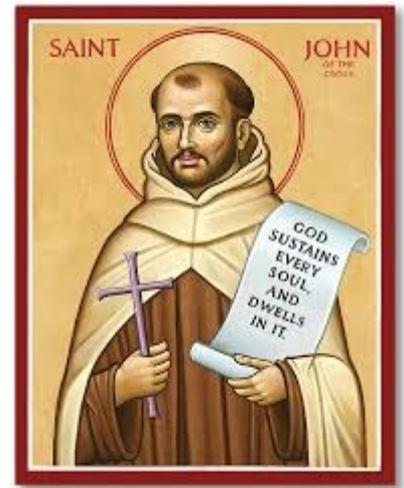


Freedom to Love

The Double Impact of Transforming Union

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3.17)



“The glory of God is the human person fully alive”. St Irenaeus

To be fully alive is to be free; only the free can love and love is the seed ground for transformation. The journey to transformation has freedom as its ultimate pathway.

This important concept of freedom – understood or misunderstood – is the pathway to transformation in the writings of St John of the Cross. Ruth Burrows rightly articulates this truth when she says that the goal of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night* “is to liberate us from the tyranny of the ego so as to reach union with the beloved” (Burrows Ruth., *Ascent to Love*, Dimension Books, Denville, New Jersey, 1987, pp. 37).

The whole frame of reference for the discussion of freedom to love which is the experience of union with the beloved in St John of the Cross is the journey inward to the centre of the person’s being – the soul. The analogy of flight and rendezvous by night which he employed indicates a certain movement. In other words, most of his teaching on freedom makes sense only by reference to the motion of the soul in its journey towards union with the beloved. Therefore, in this reflection, I would like to articulate this all important concept of freedom as an indispensable requirement for this journey to union with the beloved with particular attention on its dual/double impact.

Being that I am speaking to members of the Carmelite Family, I will be speaking with considerable presumption that you have read again and again the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*. In fact, I was duly informed that some groups are studying the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* while others are studying the *Dark Night*.

Regardless of the books you are studying, there is one thing to keep in mind. We are not followers of John of the Cross but Christ as he is not the goal of the spiritual life but he is a helpful guide to the goal of the spiritual life – the transformation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. In fact, John’s life, teachings and writings are centered on the incarnate Word – Jesus Christ – both in its goal and inspiration and in its details and means. So when you read John’s writings keep in mind that John is not drawing you to himself but leading you to that transformation in Christ.



There are various valid ways we can read the great works of St John of the Cross in order to fruitfully enter this experience of transformation. One of the ways would be the language of the book. Every book has a language and the language of these two books – *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night* – is the language of a journey, of a movement while his

other two books – *Spiritual Canticle* and the *Living Flame of Love* – have a language of love. The language of a journey becomes a thread to hold while reading the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night* of the Soul. The goal of this journey is freedom. How does John describe freedom? My intention is not to study these books but through its language understands its finality.

DESIRING FREEDOM

In his writings, St John of the Cross frequently uses symbols, images and metaphors to describe the experience of transformation. For example, a single poem of eight verses forms the basis for the three books of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, as well as the two books of the *Dark Night*. These poetic images stir up the imagination and engage the intellect in ways that are so much more effective than abstract ideas. In the same vein, St John of the Cross employed several images and metaphors in expressing the meaning of freedom. The most famous ones are that of the bird held captive by a thread, the comparison of the dulling of reason with the wine of Babylon and the enslavement of Samson by his enemies.

The figure of Samson is one that describes freedom and enslavement. However, St John of the Cross would refer to “dulling of the reason by the wine of Babylon” as the cause of Samson’s enslavement. “No matter how small the amount of this wine, it immediately takes hold on the heart and subdues it, producing obscurity in the reason...then it will find itself a captive of its enemies” (AS BK III, 22:5).

Here, He describes the consequences of not being free from attachment to natural good which “incites the senses to complacency, sensual delight, and lust”. (AS BK III, 22:2). From these symbols, images and metaphors, we can underscore the meaning of the concept of “freedom” as the “transcending of the self to the Father by a denial of self-sufficiency which comes from the prompting and the limitations of the ego”, thus, the mystical journey up the height of the mountain of Carmel in the darkness of the night is a liberation because it is an effective means of attaining, in so far as it is possible in this life, the perfection of love, the final transformation, the final freedom, which is freedom to love as God loves us.

St John of the Cross is asking two things of the soul that desires to enter upon the way of freedom. First of all he demands decision and generosity; for anyone who has not the courage to renounce himself in everything will never reach total detachment and union with God. The Soul must be inclined

“...not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;
not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
not to the most, but to the least;
not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;
not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing.
Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and, for Christ, desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world”. (AS BK I, 13:6).

At the same time, he demands “order and discretion”: “You should embrace these practices earnestly and try to overcome the repugnance of your will toward them. If you sincerely put them into practice with order and discretion, you will discover in them great delight and consolation” (AS BK I, 13:7). This underscores what John of the Cross calls **freedom from** as opposed to **freedom to**.

He makes a remarkable distinction between “**freedom from**” (negative freedom) and “**freedom to**” (positive freedom). For example, in Chapter 11 of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel Book I*, St John of the Cross sets out to explain how “**freedom from**” all appetites, even the smallest is very necessary for Union. However, Chapter 23 of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel Book III*, speaks of “**freedom to**” love all rationally and spiritually. While in the first book of the *Dark Night*, he brilliantly places the two senses side by side when he said; “Ah, the sheer grace! -- I went out unseen” That is, I went forth from subjection to my sensory appetites and affections unseen, (**freedom from**) so that the three enemies were unable to stop me. These three enemies entrap the soul -- as with snares -- in its appetites and gratifications (**enslavement**) and keep it from going forth to the freedom of the love of God (**freedom to love as God loves us**)”.

FREEDOM TO LOVE

St John of the Cross expresses the content of the freedom to love when he writes in the First Book of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, this freedom is to “have habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with his. You must then study his life in order to know how to imitate him and behave in all events as he would” (AS BK I, 13:3). Thus, he considers freedom to love as both a **gift** and a **task**. It is a gift because, Christ by his death on the cross, has liberated the human person from the slavery of sin such that we become co-heirs with Christ and we are able to say *Abba* father (Rm 8:5). St John describes Christ’s work of spiritual freedom in us as “*night*.” It seems that only in the darkness of this spiritual *night* is the Light Himself able to lead us out of the prisons we make of our own egos.

On the other hand, freedom is a task because one is expected to detach oneself by the mortification of the senses for, “(these are well structured in the dark night of the senses and of the spirit) in order to be truly free. The goal of these *nights* is the transformation of the soul, so that the soul can obtain true freedom:

“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”. DN BK II, 9

The desire for union with God is immediately given expression in the struggle for freedom since self-love and self-interest stand in the way of the soul's inner ascent to God. For these "prevents the soul to fly to freedom and repose of the sweetness of contemplation and union" (AS BK III, 16). In this sense, freedom becomes an indispensable requirement for union: "and until this very sensuality is stilled in such a way that the appetites do not war against the spirit, the soul will not go out to genuine freedom, to the enjoyment of union with its Beloved" (AS BK 1, 15).

THE DOUBLE IMPACT OF TRANSFORMING UNION

The striving for mortification and self-renunciation is part of the human sphere of activity. However, union with God, is not something we can bring about ourselves. "Union for John of the Cross is being transformed by God and united with God in love. In other words, it is as a result of this 'transformation' that we can participate in the divine life." (**citation needed**). In this union, the human does not cease to exist, rather his being human – created in the image and likeness of God – is fully realised.

Unless the person is "renewed" from within, external things will continue to be an obstacle that undermines the inner ascent to love.

The intrinsic bond between external *action* and internal *transformation* is significant in understanding John's invitation to make this journey to freedom. Rooted in the orientation towards God; the human person must continue to bear a responsibility to the World, with particular attention to the needs of one's neighbour. For St John of the Cross, unless the person is "renewed" from within (which is the result of the purgation of the senses – the dark nights), external things will continue to be an obstacle that undermines the inner ascent to love. True freedom to love does not consist in the pursuits of one's personal desires, John insists. It is only the soul that seeks the glory of God and the salvation of others that is truly free (See Burrows Ruth., *Ascent to Love*, Dimension Books, Denville, New Jersey, 1987).

Detached from every self-seeking, the soul penetrates to the inner enjoyment of peace and perfect charity. Thus, being 'transformed' the "truly free person" approaches reality and other people from within that love relationship with God as St Thérèse a faithful daughter of St John of the Cross would cry, "Ah! Lord, You know better than I do my weakness and imperfection; You know very well that never would I be able to love my sisters as you love them, unless You, O my Jesus, loved them in me" (MS C).

St John of the Cross sees freedom to love in a progression, a movement or a journey that liberates the soul from its bondage and deep shadows in order to gain the freedom to love and we find this double impact of this union from the chapters in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and in the *Dark Night*. This evolution involves a turning aside **from** the earthly towards God and also the turning back with a 'renewed' vision **to** the earthly from God. This double movement of 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' is very essential as it does not result in an ego-centric turning in to oneself, rather, it leads to a renewed involvement in one's own worldly activities and a new perception of being-in-the-world.

“...You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24)

This renewed perception – this true freedom is what St John of the Cross refers to as “freedom of the spirit by which the soul easily conquers temptations, passes through trials, and grows prosperously in virtue. This is an excellent good and very necessary in serving God.” (AS, BK III, 24).

CONCLUSION

St John of the Cross offers a realistic picture of true *human-divine* dimension of freedom that has not lost its validity for our generation. In fact, his teaching on freedom challenges the self-centeredness or the 'I' of the human person. For freedom does not consist in the pursuit of personal interest, rather freedom is the readiness to open oneself to receive from God the grace of 'transformation' in order to love rationally and spiritually. Thus, the divine initiative or the omnipotence of God and human freedom are not mutually exclusive. This paradox gives rise to the dialectic that serves as the driving force in the life, prayer and relationship in the life of a Christian, though we remain entirely free, yet God instils within us, by his grace, everything we need for a mature human living and therefore becomes the God in whom we live and move and have our being. (Act 17:28).