

# SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

## Homily for the solemn professions

“Teresianum”, 14th December 2010

This tradition, established in our International College, of having the rite of solemn professions coincide with the feast of Saint John of the Cross, seems to me quite good. Then as our Constitutions say, «in St John of the Cross, too, we have a living image of the true Carmelite. We can apply to him the words of St Paul: 'Take me for your model, as I take Christ' (cf. 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). The vocation of the renewed Carmel is mirrored in his life and his teaching» (nº 12). John of the Cross must be for us not only a great mystic, an extraordinary poet and an eminent doctor of spiritual theology. In him our same vocation reaches fulfilment and, for this reason, we must look to him to learn how to live our daily life, how to take our decisions both small and great, and how to build up our Carmel of today both spiritually and materially.

For this reason, I say to you, my brothers, that today you should surrender yourselves forever and with all your heart to our family of Carmel: do not lose sight of John, do not consider him an unachievable model, take him as a spiritual director, as a master of the things of God, as a profound expert of our humanity, as a friend and brother who, on the basis of his own experience, can teach us how to live those moments of trial which we have to face in our religious journey. John is, for me, a simple man. What I say could appear strange. I believe we can sum up his sanctity in one word: simplicity. It is a simplicity that harmoniously unites values that could appear opposed, such as austerity and gentleness, love for solitude and total openness to his brother, depth of thought and lightness of poetical inspiration, contemplation and a strong apostolic activity.

This harmony of opposing things is explained, according to my understanding, only in one manner, John has fully absorbed reality, life. John has abandoned his ego, and in this passivity, he has assumed reality just as it is, in all its richness and profundity. That is why he was able to say: “Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth, all is mine, for Christ is mine and all for me”. John reached the centre of created things, and from this centre, from this ontological foundation encountered Christ. For as the Apostle says, “reality is the body of Christ” (Col 2: 17).

John’s capacity of theological synthesis, better still of the theological virtues, is impressive: taking in the profound link between creatures, unified in the reality of the total Christ, creator and redeemer, and uniting it all in Christ, centre of the Trinitarian life. Unlike other authors, John does not dwell on a devotion to Jesus Christ, he introduces us to the inexhaustible mine of his mysteries, without however losing anything of the tie with reality, with the flesh. God clothed all things in supernatural grace at the same moment in which the Word was made flesh. From then on all is united to God, and it is a grace of union that can and ought to be assumed from the contemplative gaze. Contemplation is nothing more than the meeting of eyes: God gazes on the human being with love and the human being manages to gaze on God with love, with the same love in complete and full giving, before entirely welcoming it. There is nothing more simple than two lovers gazing into each other’s eyes, but neither is there anything more demanding and committing. It is the moment in which the word is superseded, because we are dealing with a different communication, it is what John of the Cross calls “exhaling” the same Spirit. Anthropologically we could say: to breathe as one, the one in the breathing of the other. Was this not how creation began, man began to breathe because God had communicated his breathing, the breath of life?

However, what is the way that leads to this simplicity that unites and transforms? John gives one sole reply, that can turn out difficult, and to which we are trying to reply, like the disciples of Jesus: "This sort of talk is hard to endure! How can anyone take it seriously?" (Jn. 6:60). John writes: «... The gate entering into these riches of his wisdom is the cross, which is narrow, and few desire to enter by it, but many desire the delights obtained from entering there» (CB 36,13). We know that the most original symbol by which John described the way of the cross is the dark night. All his poetical inspiration, if we think about it thoroughly, is nothing else but this: a transfiguration of the way of the cross into a way of loving flight, of evasion/liberation towards the Beloved. The encounter with the Beloved is not possible without a change of dimension, an existential change. This change John describes with the symbol of the night. The encounter, the embrace, is realized in the night, not in the day.

The night is the place of loss of autonomy, of the capacity of self-determination. If darkness is abandoned, and miraculously darkness is transformed into light, it is because in darkness is developed desire, the call of love lives upon the one who «is awaiting me in a place distinct from any other». The night separates from all and from everyone, but draws us to a solitary encounter with the one who contains within himself all and everybody. We know that this doctrine, which never ceases to surprise and excite us, is born from experience, from a path already lived, made up of setbacks and falls that are transformed into brilliant victories, base deeds that are converted into glories, from deaths that had only been the eve of resurrection.

To be human is an immense grace since in Christ this is the condition of God himself. However there is a way of being human which is not given us by nature. We must convert ourselves into human beings, and the sole way to become a human being is what God himself has taught us: to make ourselves obedient unto death and death on the cross. If this is a difficult saying, it is only this doctrine which is solid, since they are words of light and love. It is my wish brothers that you are going to make your solemn profession: that «happy venture» of a night illuminated and set on fire with desire for the Beloved. You cannot lose yourselves if this light burns in your hearts; this light will lead you in all certainty to the arms of the One who is waiting for you much more than we are waiting for him.