

SEMINAR ON SPIRITUALITY
THE DARK NIGHT: A TEXT AND
ITS CONTEMPORARY
PERSONAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

The aim of this year's seminar was to examine a classic text both to understand it in its own context and to explore its relevance to present day personal and social concerns. *The Dark Night* was particularly chosen because of interest in its possible applicability to a broader range of persons than had previously been proposed and because it might be helpful in understanding cultural experiences of impasse. The presentations were given by Constance FitzGerald (Baltimore Carmel), Steven Payne (Weston School of Theology), and Keith Egan (St. Mary's, Notre Dame). Keith Egan and Vernon Gregson (Loyola, New Orleans) chaired the sessions.

Constance FitzGerald's presentation was on "Impasse and Dark Night." She interpreted John of the Cross' concept and symbolism of dark night with particular emphasis on his three signs for discerning the passage from meditation to contemplation, to show what 'new understanding' dark night brings to the contemporary experience of impasse.

In developing a model like dark night, one is not offering a magical solution to life's impasses which promises certain, automatic breakthrough. What we assert about dark night is perhaps, in the end, a faith statement which says that even in the absence of the psychological experience of breakthrough, even in spite of lack of evidence of transcendence in one's life, there is still the capacity to believe that life is not lost.

Impasse has two dimensions. On the one hand, in a true impasse there is no way out, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation. The most dangerous temptation is to give up, to surrender to cynicism and despair, in the face of the hopelessness and meaninglessness that encompass one and engender a sense of failure and rejection.

On the other hand, genuine impasse situations because of their very difficulty can sometimes result in breakthroughs of enormous creativity. A situation of no potential is, paradoxically, loaded with potential *if* one can actually appropriate it with full consciousness of one's suffering, while daring to believe in new possibilities. This implies a surrender to mystery because the new vision, the alternative, is not given on demand. It is the fruit of unconscious processes in which the situation of impasse becomes the concrete focus for contemplative reflection.

In his writings John of the Cross concentrates on desire. The experience of dark night is the way desire is purified and freed. It is *in* the very experience of darkness, in the withdrawal of accustomed pleasure,

reassurance and joy that this transformation is taking place. Night is the progressive purification and transformation of the human person *through* what one cherishes and *through* what gives one security and support. We are affected by darkness, therefore, where we are most deeply involved and committed and in what we love most. In fact, it is only when love has grown to a certain depth of commitment that its limitations can be experienced. This brings us to John's signs for discerning the genuineness of the dark night purification. The first sign underlines one's powerlessness to pray with one's reason, with discursive thought. Because a new kind of love and a deeper level of communication is developing and is already though secretly operative (contemplation), one's usual way of functioning does not work. Inherent in this experience is the changing and shattering of one's image of God and the 'other' and the consequent challenge in the end to re-accept both oneself and the 'other,' that is, reality.

The emphasis in the second sign is on emptiness in life experience and deadness of desire. Not only is prayer dry, but *life* is dry. The time must come in our development when neither God, nor the 'other,' nor one's life project satisfy, but only disappoint, disillusion and shatter one's naive hope. Precisely because desire seems dead, the temptation to quit becomes overpowering and a sense of worthlessness invades one's self-perception. Yet this very deadness is mediating the transfiguration of desire. By themselves, this powerlessness and dryness are not necessarily nor automatically purifying. Thus the absolute necessity of the third sign which has two moments and moves from painful anxiety about culpability to a new and deeper appreciation of God and the 'other' in loving, quiet attentiveness. The most confusing part of the dark night is the suspicion that much of the darkness is of one's own making. The only way to break out of this vicious circle of self-doubt is to surrender in faith and trust to incomprehensible mystery which beckons onward beyond calculation, order, self-justification and fear. This means it is precisely as broken, poor and powerless that one opens oneself to the dark, hidden mystery of God.

As Americans we are not educated for impasse, for the experience of human limitation and darkness that will not yield to hard work, studies, statistics, rational analysis and well-planned programs. We see only signs of death and death must be blotted out of consciousness in a culture that clings to the fantasy of omnipotence in the fear that there is nothing beyond death. Yet is it possible these insoluble crises are signs of transition in our national development and in the evolution of humanity and crisis is the birthplace and learning process for a new consciousness and harmony?

If there is a feminist experience of dark night today, it will be in itself a critique of religious consciousness and therefore ultimately of Christianity with its roots in a sexist, patriarchal culture. Today feminists struggle with the Judaeo-Christian image of a male God and a male Church. The masculine image of God is experienced as unsatisfying and confusing because it serves to reinforce male domination, a patriarchal value system and an entire world view. This is impasse for women precisely

because their past religious experience has come to them through these images and this inherited symbol system, which simply does not function for women as it did before. There seems to be no way out of this godless situation since women find impasse even in attempted solutions, and no genuine evolution of God images has really occurred.

If the impasse in which feminists find themselves is dark night, then a new experience of God, transformative of alienating symbols, is already breaking through even though it is now comprehensible yet, and impasse is the call to new understanding. Feminists have to realize that the gap which exists between human, patriarchal concepts and God, and which is internalized and appropriated by them so painfully in impasse, or dark night, is exactly what promises religious development and is the seed of a new experience of God, a new spirituality and a new order. They need to realize, too, that the experience of anger, rage, depression and abandonment is a constitutive part of the transformation and purification of the dark night.

Steven Payne's presentation focused on contemporary approaches to *The Dark Night* of St. John of the Cross. Over the years, interpretations of the Sanjuanist "noche oscura" image have ranged from Leibnizian to Buddhist. In fact, the very expression "dark night" has achieved such currency in our language that it is often used without any clear recognition of its origins. Even John himself does not use the phrase in a univocal way; he speaks not only of the "dark nights" of sense and spirit in their active and passive dimensions, but also of the "dark night" of sensory mortification, of the intellect, memory, and will, of faith (with hope and love), of contemplation, and even of God, for God, he says, "is also a dark night to man in this life" (*Ascent* 1, 2, i). Consequently, it would be foolhardy to pretend to identify and discuss the contemporary significance of the *Noche Oscura*. Instead, he simply wants to raise a few brief questions about some current approaches to *The Dark Night* and how they might help or hinder a proper appreciation of John's text today. The first question concerns the customary classification of John as an "apophatic" mystic largely on the basis of the *Ascent/Night*. Not surprisingly, commentators who adopt this "apophatic/kataphatic" schema often just take it for granted that John's image of the "dark night" is ultimately derived from Denys the Areopagite. This two-fold division of mystical authors is valuable and illuminating as far as it goes. Nevertheless, it seems that commentators frequently end up overstressing John's similarities with other authors deemed apophatic, and overlooking his affinities with representatives of the kataphatic tradition. It is significant that John cites Pseudo-Dionysius explicitly only four times, only twice in the *Ascent/Night*, and in each instance only to identify the source of the expression "ray of darkness." Surely it is significant that there are more frequent references to Gregory the Great, and that major sections of the *Dark Night* treatise show both a theological and verbal dependence on Gregory's *Moralia in Job*. Yet John's debt to Gregory has seldom been studied or even noted, perhaps because the latter is classed as a "kataphatic" mystic, and thus of the "other" tradition.

The tendency to lump together all "apophatic" mystics in an undifferentiated way, as if they all taught "the same thing," may also be related to another common misperception of John's mysticism as essentially non-cognitive, anti-intellectual, or voluntaristic. For John of the Cross mystical experience definitely has a cognitive component, involving not the rejection but the illumination of traditional Christian truth claims. Whatever else we may say of *The Dark Night*, this treatise offers no brief for religious emotionalism, romantic irrationalism, or the rejection of dogma and creed in favor of some content-less "pure faith." John, who in this respect might be placed alongside the modern "masters of suspicion" (Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche), is equally prepared to "unmask" not only our concepts and images of God, but also our spontaneous natural feelings, desires, and emotions about the divine.

The second question about *The Dark Night* arises directly out of experience as a spiritual director. I have frequently encountered individuals who exhibit all of the classic signs of John's "passive nights," yet who do not feel that the *Noche Oscura* really describes their situation, and derive little insight from reading the text. It generally has to do with the fact that their own spiritual journey seems to have followed a different course than the ideal Sanjuanist pattern of ever-deepening commitment to the Church and the Christian faith. Many are disturbed, not by the impression that God has rejected them, but by the feeling that God, faith, and prayer may all be illusory. In the Christian kingdom of sixteenth century Spain it was hardly possible to doubt the reality of God, so that the anguish of the "dark night" was experienced primarily as a threat to one's own self-esteem, sense of worth, etc. In the anthropocentric twentieth century, however, the same "impasse" or crisis point may be experienced primarily as a challenge to belief in a loving Lord; we discover, painfully, that the deity we believed in when we started out on the road of prayer quite literally *does not exist*, and that Divine reality (whatever it may be) transcends all we have imagined. When John's account of the sufferings of the "passive nights" is transposed into this modern key, it seems to accord more closely with the experience of many people today.

This brings up to the final question: How much should be included under the concept of "dark night"? It would be misguided to bind ourselves too closely to the letter of the *Noche Oscura*, or to treat the passive nights almost as if they were purely spiritual and interior ordeals arbitrarily imposed by God on a few chosen souls hidden away in cloisters. This was the mistake of many scholastic manuals of spiritual theology, which thus left *The Dark Night* a closed book to ordinary Christians. It is always worth recalling that John's own "passive nights" were intimately linked with the concrete physical and emotional torments of his nine months incarceration in Toledo (which included darkness, frostbite, fever, hunger, lice, dysentery, feelings of abandonment, fear of poisoning, threats against his life), and that John drew upon this concrete experience in seeking to describe the spiritual anguish of "the passive night of spirit."

It seems that for most Christians today the "passive nights" described

by John in the *Noche Oscura* are experienced, not within the security of a traditional monastic cell, but more often in "suffering for a cause," or in the purification of one's ministerial commitments through failure and disillusionment, or even in the "the quiet martyrdom of everyday life." Indeed, these nights are often mediated precisely by sufferings which seem anything but "spiritual" in the usual sense.

Keith Egan's presentation included as well a response to Constance FitzGerald's predistributed paper. He noted that for John of the Cross night is a symbol that serves as well as an extended metaphor, one that reveals the new depths of meaning that emerge during the journey to union with God in love as John personally and vicariously experienced that journey. John offered three reasons for calling this journey toward union with God a night. The first has to do with the point of departure, because the individual must deprive himself of his appetite for worldly possessions. This denial and privation is like a night for all his senses. The second reason refers to the means or the road along which a person travels to this union. Now this road is faith, and for the intellect faith is also like a dark night. The third reason pertains to the point of arrival, namely, God. And God is also a dark night to man in this life. These three nights pass through a soul, or better, the soul passes through them in order to reach divine union with God. (*Ascent* I, 2, 1.) Night, then, for John of the Cross is a symbol and a metaphor for the whole journey to God, for all that it means to be human. To be human is to journey in darkness. A recurring moment in that journey is the darkness of the impasse.

Impasse also is not a one-dimensional term. John has not given us one word for this experience but he perceives it as the passage from meditation in prayer to the contemplation which is all God's gift. John is concerned with providing guidance as to when a person must discontinue relying upon human means to journey to God, when she or he must surrender to the mystery who is God by allowing God to become more active within oneself. It is a passage from impotence to God's gifted activity, from frustration "to a union with God beyond all knowing." (*Ascent* II, 14, 4) What FitzGerald has called *impasse*, therefore, and for which John has no name but various descriptions is hugely varied negative experience that through faith gives way to the rich and unimaginable creative experience of contemplation in which God has entered human activity more fully.

John of the Cross is especially attuned to what we may now call spirituality enriched by feminine symbolism. He moves from the use of the ordinary Spanish word *corazon* throughout his works to describe heart until he comes to what he sees to be the ultimate experience of God as described in his poem and commentary *The Living Flame of Love* where for heart he uses a word *seno* which means breast and womb and heart. John's use of *seno* shows the ultimate experience of God to be a truly feminine experience in its symbolic character.

The Dark Night commentary represents a deeper and more vivid way of seeing the process that John has first outlined in *The Ascent of Mount*

Carmel. What we may well call an intellectual conversion gave new power to John's vision. He abandoned the writing of the *Ascent* in mid-sentence. This conviction about the more powerful, more poetic character of *The Dark Night* commentary is in need of further study. Moreover, it is necessary, I believe, to compare more critically the three signs as they are presented in the *Ascent* and in the *Dark Night*.

John's commentaries on the spiritual experience of his poems is in continuity with the medieval interpretation of scripture, in fact, in the tradition of spiritual interpretation. Theologians have long read the commentaries as if the poems never existed. What is needed now is an explicit exploration of the relationship of all the poems to their commentaries. Until this is done, we know much less about John's spiritual experience and its relationship to the doctrine that appears in the commentaries — for there is doctrine in both the poetry and in the commentaries even though it has been presumed for too long that John's doctrine occurs exclusively in the commentaries.

In the lively discussions which followed, the insightfulness and helpfulness of the presentations was frequently referred to. There was widespread agreement that the dark night experience which John describes is in fact much more frequent than had been supposed in the past and that John does not overstress its severity. It was also pointed out that dark night is not a once and for all experience and that one can move in and out of this type of experience throughout one's life. This seems to have happened to John himself.

The question of how to distinguish true dark night experiences from false ones, namely, dark nights of our own making, was discussed. It was suggested that an important criterion was the person's attempting to tell the truth about the experience he or she was having whether or not that truth conformed to any clear orthodoxy either spiritual or doctrinal. Such an attempt at truth-telling was both a sign of authenticity and a purification of inauthenticity.

It was pointed out that impasse shatters one's present horizon and that it can become the way ahead only if we let it overcome the restrictions of our present way of seeing ourselves, others, and God. Rather than being a sign of death dark night is instead a sign of life. It is a dark sign to move on in hope to a new experience, to deeper, freer, more committed love. Interpretation of the experience is a key. To understand oneself to be in dark night can itself be an act of faith and hope.

The experience of God in impasse for women, it was suggested, is the crucible in which our God images and language can be transformed both for women and for men. From this a more balanced value system and social fabric can be generated. The signs of dark night which women are experiencing indicate that this can be an important next step in any creative re-visioning of the future both for men and for women.

Although the richness and analogical character of dark night was acknowledged, it is recalled that there is some danger in using the term

too loosely, so that every negative or painful experience becomes dark night. This would empty the phrase of a definite meaning and would be a stark departure from John who distinguishes the passive nights of sense and spirit from experiences brought on by transitory weakness, laziness, or sin. Although it might be ultimately impossible to provide sharp distinctions, John's observations must be taken seriously if his analysis is to prove enlightening to present personal and social experience.

After expressions of gratitude to the presenters for a particularly enlightening seminar, the members of the seminar decided to take a text, yet to be determined, from American spirituality for the next year's meeting. They also nominated Keith Egan to a three year term as moderator of the seminar.

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