



The Ascent of Mount Carmel

San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross)

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Written between 1578 and 1579 in Granada, Spain, after John's escape from prison, the Ascent is illustrated by a diagram of the process outlined in the text of the Soul's progress to the summit of the metaphorical Mount Carmel where God is encountered. The work is divided into three sections and is set out as a commentary on four poetic stanzas by John on the subject of the Dark Night. John shows how the Soul sets out to leave all worldly ties and appetites behind to achieve "nothing less than transformation in God".

The Ascent of Mount Carmel Details

Date : Published May 26th 2006 by Kessinger Publishing (first published 1579)

ISBN : 9781428614000

Author : San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross)

Format : Paperback 428 pages

Genre : Christianity, Catholic, Spirituality, Religion, Theology, Christian, Faith

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From Reader Review The Ascent of Mount Carmel for online ebook

Virgil says

Has a mystic feel to it. Great at points, but you have to chew the meat of what is good, and spit out the bones of what is bad.

Galicius says

I read two translations simultaneously. There were many times when I had to switch back and forth to try to understand what St. John was trying to get across.

It took me about an hour to read and reflect on most of the average 91 chapters here to approach anywhere near understanding of St. John's message over a time of three months. After finishing this deep spiritual guide I realize that it may be a difficult life prescription to anyone but a solitary, perhaps a religious person as Thomas Merton was, for example. An ordinary individual living in a common society must find time and space for contemplation. I do not see how a limited attempt can lead him to any great mystical experience by which St. John of the Cross describes as an escape from time that may seem but a moment? Surely your partner in life or family member would never understand what you are doing unless you somehow succeeded in going on such a journey together.

I often stumbled on the meaning of what I was reading every couple of chapters or so. Having access to two translations helped. I used David Lewis and E. Allison Peers. That usually clarified points St. John was making but not always completely.

I read the first half in four weeks then spent the next three weeks reading the first half again. Then another four weeks to the end.

Elizabeth Andrew says

I remain enamored of John of the Cross. It's well worth the slog through his books just to inhabit his cosmology--one where we already are united with the Ultimate, where reason is a God-given faculty we're admonished to use, and where faith permeates and transcends reason. Faith is a path of unknowing because mystery (or God) cannot be known. John in great detail delineates the path of unknowing, which is an admirable and of course impossible undertaking. I'm so glad for his companionship!

Chrystal says

The theme of this mystical treatise is how the spiritual man will properly use the powers of the soul in order to reach the divine union with God, which process St. John of the Cross calls "The Active Spiritual Night." What does this look like in a Christian's life? Well, after much mystical treatment and a very long, repetitive section on visions, a very clear and rational teaching comes to light: The natural man is ruled by his 1)

Intellect, 2) Memory, and 3) Will. After the spiritual man goes through the "Active Spiritual Night," his natural tendencies will give way to their spiritual counterparts, which will then begin to rule in the Christian that has reached divine union with his Maker: 1) Faith, 2) Hope, and 3) Charity.

So instead of making decisions based upon our Intellect, we act in Faith. In place of being swayed and brought down by our Memories, we live in Hope. Instead of acting upon our fleshly Will, we act in Charity because we are now in union with our Creator, who modeled this Spiritual way of life through His Son Jesus.

The modern reader might be daunted by the 16th century style of this work, and the Protestant reader such as myself will have to ignore the sections concerning images and rosaries, etc., but there is much to be gained in total.

Brian Stine says

The advice given by St John of the Cross is by no means easy advice to take. The Ascent Mount Carmel is essential the most timeless guide there is for separating oneself from worldly pleasures and pursuing things that are holy. My only problem with it is that I'm not sure that this is really right approach to take. This dichotomy between what we enjoy, and what we're supposed to do, is sometimes artificial, and I think its best that people delight in what's merely good on any level. The Lord is not absent from our "worldly" pleasures, rather he experiences them and rejoices in them. Let no man forget that Jesus himself, drank wine on festive occasions. While I do hope my words are not taken as advocacy for some kind of strange Christian version of hedonism, I just think its a bit difficult for me to reconcile this approach, even among more conservative Catholics.

Luke Langley says

A great work discussing the discernment and approach towards union with God. He is incredible at describing the spiritual journey through purgation of senses and spiritual pleasure attaching ourselves to God alone, and invaluable classic. Criticisms: only that he didn't allow enough for the fact that God created this world good and it is through the things of this world that we come to know Him, where he seems to say that we should get no enjoyment out of anything in this world. Also he spends considerable time urging us to not dwell on visions or from God, something which I at least have never had, and something which if God wants to give, who are we to deny the vision?

booklady says

After years of wanting to read this, many starts and restarts, I *finally* finished it! It turned out not to be so insurmountable as I'd made it out to be. Was this because of a mental block or because it was too soon? Loved how he tied Faith to the Intellect, Hope to the Memory and Charity to the Will. Those sections were the best and require careful rereading/outlining. Much to be gained there. Dripping with Scripture, John brought out example after example many which I'd never heard or considered in the light which he used them. Knew his reputation as a scholar but was still delighted. Yet, I think he wouldn't like that. Everything he wrote was the finger pointing to the Word, Himself.

My only complaint: it ended abruptly ... like he hadn't finished it? How disappointing!

Sally says

Clear and helpful guidance on the mystical path.

Eli Kittim says

The definitive book of mysticism and spiritual rebirth!

James says

It has been sometime since I read John of the Cross and I think that biblical studies and Barth have ruined me for mysticism. Oh well. John of the Cross is a poetic soul and well I think there may be too much Neoplatonism in places, there is a lot of wisdom here. John of the Cross uses one of his poems to frame this discussion of progress in the spiritual life (like in Dark Night of the Soul) Ascent of Mt Carmel is built on a poem about a Dark Night of the Soul where we have the three 'dark nights': the dark night of the senses, the dark night of faith, and the dark night of God. Each of these correspond to times of night (early evening is the senses when we are starting out on the spiritual life; the dark night of faith is mid-night when the time seems darkest, and God is the dark night closest to the light of day where we experience the soul in union with God). These correspond to the classic mystical progression of purgation, illumination, union, although there is purgation that happens at every stage of the dark night. We strip away material attachments, the benefits and supernatural gifts of God until we find our joy in God alone. A lot to ponder, and some interesting examples of medieval exegesis too.

John Schneider says

As I was drinking my morning cup of coffee, I reached the end of St. John of the Cross's "The Ascent of Mount Carmel." I cannot say that I am finished with their work because I plan on coming back to its tremendous insights many more times. As my first foray into his poetic approach to theology, I found St. John dense but very accessible. I was also quite saddened that St. John did not finish "The Ascent" but left the work 98% complete: he was missing two chapters related to the virtue of charity at least. Much like St. Thomas's "Summa Theologiae," this work surpasses whatever minor faults it might have by imparting a truly awe-inspiring vision of God and His work in the soul.

Shella says

It gives great insight on how to keep one's soul in God's path

Leonardo says

Usado en La Oración Contemplativa Pág.53

Glen Grunau says

Thomas Merton called John of the Cross "the greatest of all mystical theologians". That could have been praise enough to draw me to the writings of this mystic, but what compelled me most was listening to the recording of a retreat (Intimacy: The Divine Ambush) with Richard Rohr and James Finley given in Santa Fe, New Mexico in April, 2013. During this retreat, James Finley made frequent references to the Works of St. John of the Cross, particularly the Ascent of Mount Carmel.

This book follows the ascent to intimacy with God through detachment from anything that would impede union with the Divine. At times, John seems harsh in his austere asceticism. I found myself reacting to his more severe suggestions that we need to detach ourselves from all sensory experiences that might distract from a singularity of focus on the Divine. These served as all too familiar reminders of the legalisms that tainted some of my own religious upbringing. Yet when I least expected it, John would soften in his stance and freely acknowledge that created beauty, experienced through the senses, can also assist us in our ascent to intimacy with God – as long as our love for the created does not replace our love for the Creator.

I was reassured to learn that John himself had a deep aesthetic (not to be confused with ascetic) sense and was drawn to locations of natural beauty for prayer - despite his caution to avoid the distractions of natural beauty in one's prayer life and instead cloister oneself in the privacy of one's room. John was also drawn to various works of art, including paintings and poetry, and recognized the valuable role that images can serve in our worship. John is well known for his own poetry, contained in his collected works. The copy of the Ascent which I just completed, is from The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, as translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D.

Perhaps John is best known for his work The Dark Night of the Soul. I have saved this one for next. January often serves as a bit of a "dark night" in my annual calendar, as I seem particularly prone to melancholy at this time of year. The Ascent and the Dark Night serve as companion works. Through the process of detachment, the Ascent teaches us about "active purification" of the senses; the Dark Night teaches us about "passive purification" of the senses. John makes it clear that active purification alone, as represented by our own spiritual practices, can never be sufficient for attainment of union with God.

To me this makes so much sense, as we are so easily prone to take pride in anything that we initiate on our spiritual journey. Union with God must always ultimately be an act of grace rather than a result of our own works, no matter how spiritually impressive they might be. In fact, one of the most valuable contributions of this book is the reminder of how frequently our spiritual practices, ministries, worship, and prayer are tainted with impure motivation. Should this be of any surprise to us given how much Jesus emphasized this in his Sermon on the Mount? Yet how infrequently do we hear this preached from our pulpits today! I was reminded that some of the most important areas of detachment that await me on my spiritual journey are detachment from my spiritual practices. Contemplative wisdom reveals how easily we substitute our attachment to our spiritual practices for intimacy with the divine, forgetting that our practices are the means

rather than the end.

Following are some excerpts from John's poem: The Spiritual Canticle. This poem served as a lovely introduction to Ascent of Mount Carmel.

1. Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag
after wounding me;
I went out calling you, but you were gone . . .

3. Seeking my love
I will head for the mountains and for water sides;
I will not gather flowers,
nor fear wild beasts;
I will go beyond strong men and frontiers . . .

6. Ah, who has the power to heal me?
Now wholly surrender yourself!
Do not send me
any more messengers;
they cannot tell me what I must hear . . .

17. In the inner wine cellar
I drank of my Beloved, and, when I went abroad
through all the valley,
I no longer knew anything,
and lost the herd that I was following.

18. There he gave me his breast;
there he taught me a sweet and living knowledge;
and I gave myself to him,
keeping nothing back;
there I promised to be his bride.

19. Now I occupy my soul
and all my energy in his service;
I no longer tend the herd,
nor have I any other work
now that my every act is love.

Frank says

This is one of the classics in Spanish. The book dates back to the 1500s and is touted as A Masterpiece in the Literature of Mysticism. In fact St. John of the Cross is called the greatest mystical writer of all times. This work is one all that easy to read. He talks about spiritual things no other writers had ever written about, at least in such detail. He explains how to become more closely united with God and the pitfalls to avoid. He

talks about when it is time to change the way you pray. In general he points out to souls the way to perfection as though illuminated by light from on high in his analysis of mystical experience.
