

Charismatic and Contemplative: What Would John of the Cross Say?

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My first encounter with John of the Cross happened shortly after my senior year at Notre Dame. Making a Cursillo a few months before graduation had a very big impact on my life. From a place of confusion I had been brought, by the grace of God, to a very strong encounter with the reality of the risen Lord, and had been infused with a very great desire to be one with Him and to serve Him. I actually think I was introduced to both the contemplative and charismatic dimensions of the faith, without having the terminology to describe what was happening.

I knew John was “deep” and decided that I should read him. I started with *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and got perhaps 100 pages into it before I decided that it was too “dark” and negative, and put it down, unfinished. I went on to graduate school in philosophy at Princeton and the Lord provided other means to help with my spiritual growth.

After my first year at grad school I was asked by a Bishop to help establish the first national office for the Cursillo movement in Lansing, Michigan. During this time the charismatic renewal movement in the Catholic Church blossomed and I soon became involved with that, helping establish its first publications, its first international office and leadership structures, and its first communities. For four years my wife and myself and young family lived in Belgium, assisting Cardinal Suenens in the mandate he had been given by Pope Paul VI and later John Paul II to help the charismatic renewal develop soundly in the Church.

In the late 1989’s and early 1990’s many of the Catholic charismatic communities went through a time of purification and reform which was difficult but necessary. During this time I decided to take a graduate level theology course in Ecclesiology at Sacred Heart Seminary in the Archdiocese of Detroit as many of the issues being raised in the communities were issues touching on ecclesiology. The Dean encouraged me to complete a master’s degree in theology and gave me credit for a lot of the writing I had already done as an incentive.

It was during a History of Spirituality course that I encountered John of the Cross again. The assigned reading was “Spiritual Canticle.” I remember sitting in the Zurich, Switzerland, airport, waiting for a flight back to the States (my graduate theology studies were part-time and I continued to travel widely) and doing my assigned reading. As I read the “Spiritual Canticle” it was as if my life was flooded with illumination. Everything I had ever experienced, hoped for, desired, dared to dream about, in both natural and supernatural life, was being expressed in John, with a clarity and depth that literally took my breath away. I couldn’t keep my eyes open; I could hardly speak, so great was the light flooding my being.

This experience opened in me a great desire to read all of John, all of Teresa, all of Therese and to really understand what they were given by God to teach. As I did so they became the most important guides in my spiritual life. And then, unexpectedly, I received a telephone call from Franciscan University of Steubenville asking if I was willing to teach a graduate course in theology in the area of evangelization in the summer MA program. I said I’d be interested but was wondering if I could teach John and Teresa instead. They said yes and that began a new and unexpected phase in my life.

While continuing my work with Renewal Ministries, as its President (an organization devoted to Catholic renewal and evangelization, heavily involved in media and also involved in mission work in an ongoing way in more than 20 countries; www.renewalministries.net) I began to teach in the area of spiritual theology in a regular way. For the past 4 years at Franciscan University in their summer program, then the required course in Catholic Spirituality for theology majors at Ave Maria College here in Michigan, and for the past several years, the Introduction to Spirituality course for college-level seminarians and lay pastoral ministers at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, and most recently a graduate level course at the seminary in the area of Evangelization and Spirituality. The Carmelites figure prominently in some of these courses.

During this time I have continued to be active in speaking at many renewal oriented events in many places in the world, but at other events as well, including Carmelite conferences and retreats. I periodically run into people who tell me something like this: “I used to be charismatic but now I’ve gone on to the contemplative.” Or, from another angle, “I much prefer the quiet of contemplative prayer and could never be a charismatic.” Or: “How could you encourage the expression of charismatic gifts? Don’t you realize what John of the Cross says about these kinds of spiritual experiences?”

There seems to be a wide-spread impression that the contemplative and the charismatic are contradictory, not complementary, and that John of the Cross condemns the exercise of charismatic gifts. I would like to begin to offer some reflections on this issue that perhaps might be part of a wider reconsideration of these assumptions, which, I believe, are faulty, and not really representative of John’s actual position, or the truth as presented in scripture and the magisterial teaching of the Church. There are many issues that need to be dealt with, but let’s focus for now on simply one.

Does John of the Cross Condemn the Exercise of the Charismatic Gifts?

We know from reading John that one of his major concerns is pointing out how anything less than God Himself, in the Beatific Vision (or in certain forms of spiritual communications that themselves are actual participations in such union), can function as an obstacle – blocking, slowing us down, or deflecting us - from progress towards the ultimate goal of such union.

One of his very important contributions is his laser-like insights into how even most spiritual experiences can function as obstacles to union with God, if we seek them or cling to them. John acknowledges that God gives these experiences for various reasons, including our human weakness, but encourages us not to cling to them, but to allow the grace of them to effect deeper faith, hope and love in our lives.

It’s important though to note a critical distinction between spiritual experiences that we are the recipients of, given for our own spiritual growth (consolations in prayer, spiritual delight, various types of visions, locutions, raptures etc.), and spiritual experience, that we are supposed to be the transmitters of, for the sake of the growth of the church, or the work of evangelization (words of knowledge or wisdom intended for others, healing gifts, miracles, prophetic words, tongues and interpretation, gifts of generous giving, gifts of administration, gifts of teaching and preaching, gifts of “helps,”

etc).. While there indeed can be an area of overlap within these two kinds of spiritual experiences, the distinction nevertheless is an important one.

The second kind of spiritual experiences are referred to as “charisms” or gifts in the New Testament. The New Testament doesn’t try to give an exhaustive list of such charisms or workings of the Spirit for the sake of others, but provides several such lists as indicators of the rich and varied working of the Spirit through Christians for the sake of others. Some of the main lists – and biblical teaching on charisms - are those found in 1 Cor. Chapters 12-14 and Romans 12:1-8.

While not intending to write a balanced and comprehensive positive theology of the charismatic workings of the Spirit for the sake of others John does deal with them in the *Ascent* III, chapters 30-32. In this Book of the *Ascent* John is dealing with how the will can become attached to genuine goods in a way that blocks progress to union with God. In these particular chapters he’s dealing with the reality of supernatural goods and how the will can become attached to them, the fifth of the six classes of goods he discusses. So even though his purpose in writing is to focus on possible dangers he does assume the reality and usefulness of the charismatic gifts of the Spirit (following the Thomistic terminology he calls them *gratiae gratis datae*) and specifically cites the charismatic gifts of 1 Cor. 12: 9-10 as the type of workings of the Spirit he’ll be discussing.

“Examples of these are the gifts of wisdom and knowledge given by God to Solomon (1 Kgs.1 3: 7-12) and the graces St. Paul enumerates: faith, the grace of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, knowledge and discernment of spirits, interpretation of words, and also the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 12:9-10).”

John acknowledges the biblical teaching concerning these gifts. “The exercise of these gifts immediately concerns the benefit of others, and God bestows them for that purpose, as St. Paul points out: *The spirit is given to no one save for the benefit of others* (1 Cor. 12:7). This assertion is understood in reference to these graces.” (A, III, 30, 2)

He then talks about the two kinds of benefits God bestows through these gifts.

“The temporal includes healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, raising the dead, expelling devils, prophesying the future so people may be careful, and other similar things.

The spiritual and eternal benefit is the knowledge and love of God caused by these works either in those who perform them or in those in whom, or before whom, they are accomplished.” (A, III, 30, 3)

As regards the persons exercising such gifts, John counsels them to rejoice not in the fact that they possess and exercise such gifts, but only in the fact that they are doing God’s will motivated by true charity. He quotes the important and familiar biblical warnings to this effect; 1 Cor. 13:1-2 with its warnings to keep the primacy of love to the forefront, and Lk. 10:20 with Jesus’ counsel to rejoice in the really important things, not just that the demons are subject to us in the work of evangelization, but that “your names are written in the book of life.” (A, III, 30, 4-5)

As regards the persons benefiting from the exercise of these gifts, John points out that while it is a good for bodies to be healed, devils expelled and for genuine prophecy to inspire and alert people, the joy that should be taken in these temporal goods should not be great (“the temporal benefit, supernatural works and miracles merit little or no joy of soul”), unless the souls of those experiencing such benefits, turn to God and become

united, or more deeply united, with Him. As Jesus indicated, there is great joy in heaven when one sinner repents. Fuller expressions of joy should be appropriately reserved for what has eternal value, like true repentance and turning back to God.

John brilliantly points out the dangers to the souls of those who exercise these gifts by rejoicing excessively in the merely temporal benefits of such goods. He points out how inordinate attachment or rejoicing in the possession of these gifts can lead very easily to their inappropriate or even inauthentic exercise. As John puts it: “People, on account of their joy in the gift, not only long to believe in it more readily, but even feel impelled to make use of it outside the proper time.” (A, III, 31, 2) This can lead people, John points, to even make things up, so attached are they to the appearance of having a particular gift.

There’s even a danger of opening to demonic manipulation in the exercise of the gift. “When the devil observes their attachment to these wonders, he opens a wide field, provides ample material for their endeavors, and meddles extensively.” (A, III, 31, 4) This inordinate attachment to the exercise of these gifts, if it opens to demonic manipulation, can even lead to explicit pacts with the devil which turns the person into a magician, sorcerer, wizard or witch.

Another harm from exercising the gift apart from charity or obedience to the will of God and impulses of the Spirit is to bring discredit upon the genuinely supernatural. The unsuccessful exercise of a gift, apart from the will of God, leads to sowing distrust and contempt for the things of God in the hearts of those who observe this. Faith is then weakened in many different ways in the heart of those inordinately attached to the gifts, and in the hearts of those who witness the inauthentic exercise of the gifts.

John also mentions the obvious temptation to vanity and vain-glory that the immature exercise of these gifts will generate in the hearts of those who exercise these gifts for motives other than the glory of God and the good of souls.

In the course of brilliantly pointing out the dangers in the exercise of these gifts – which is the main purpose of his teaching here - John also, almost incidentally, gives a lot of positive instruction about how these charismatic gifts should be exercised.

John points out the importance of exercising these gifts in a way that’s appropriate “as to time and manner.”

“It is true that when God bestows these gifts and graces he gives light for them and an impulse as to the time and manner of their exercise.” (A, III, 31, 2)

John also points out that in order for the gifts to work properly there needs to be a true detachment from our own ideas and desires about how it all should work and a deep trust in God, a true docility to the moving of His Spirit.

“Those, then, who have this supernatural gift, should not desire or rejoice in its use, nor should they care about exercising it. God, who grants the grace supernaturally for the usefulness of the Church or its members, will also move the gifted supernaturally as to the manner and time in which they should use their gift. Since the Lord commanded his disciples not to be anxious about what or how to speak, because the matter was supernatural one of faith, and since these works are also a supernatural matter he will want these individuals to wait until he becomes the worker, by moving their heart (Mt. 10:19; Mk. 13:11). For it is by the power of God that every other power should be exercised. In the Acts of the Apostles the disciples beseeched him in prayer to extend his

hand to work signs and cures through them, so faith in our Lord Jesus Christ would be introduced into hearts (Acts 4:29-30).” (A, III, 31, 7)

In all of this John is motivated not by a desire to “squelch” the charismatic gifts of the Spirit but to assure their authentic exercise, so that they might truly achieve the ends, both in those who exercise them, and in the lives of those who benefit from them, that God intends for them to have.

What answer can we now give to our original question? **Does John of the Cross condemn the exercise of the charismatic gifts? No, he doesn't. On the contrary, he gives much helpful advice about how they should be exercised so they effectively accomplish the purpose for which God gives them.**

Obviously, John's teachings on spiritual experience in other parts of his writings, and more specifically, his teachings on the charismatic gifts in the section of the *Ascent* that we've focused on in this article, would be of great use for those involved in the Catholic charismatic renewal. I have been doing my best in the last number of years to introduce the wisdom of the Carmelites to the charismatic renewal movement.

On the other hand, doesn't the dichotomy, that some in Carmelite circles seem to hold, between the contemplative and charismatic dimensions of the Spirit's work, need to be reexamined?

And this, particularly in light –not just of John of the Cross's own teaching which we have just examined - but of what many rightfully call, the “Carmelite” Pope, John Paul II's fervent calls for the whole Church to open to the charismatic workings of the Spirit (as well as to the depth of contemplative prayer!).

During the feast of Pentecost, in 1998, the Pope asked representatives of all the renewal movements of the Church to join with him to celebrate this feast. Over 500,000 people from more than 50 different movements came. What the Pope did was to gather together the teaching of Scripture and Vatican II, on the gifts of the Spirit and proclaim them with urgency and passion. He begins:

“The Church's self-awareness (is) based on the certainty that Jesus Christ is alive, is working in the present and changes life...With the Second Vatican Council, the Comforter recently gave the Church ...a renewed Pentecost, instilling a new and unforeseen dynamism.

Whenever the Spirit intervenes, he leaves people astonished. He brings about events of amazing newness; he radically changes persons and history. This was the unforgettable experience of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council during which, under the guidance of the same Spirit, the Church rediscovered the charismatic dimension as one of her constitutive elements: ‘It is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the people, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank...He makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church” (*Lumen gentium*, n.12).”

With these words Pope John Paul II honestly acknowledged what many theologians, scripture scholars and church historians had demonstrated in their studies,

that the charismatic workings of the Holy Spirit are an essential and complementary reality to the sacramental and hierarchical dimensions of the Church's existence. The pope also honestly acknowledged that the charismatic dimension, important as it was, was nevertheless in a way forgotten, or overshadowed by perhaps a too exclusive emphasis on the sacramental and hierarchical, and it required a special action of the Holy Spirit in the Second Vatican Council to bring the Church back to an awareness of the importance of this "constitutive" dimension.

The Pope in his speech went on to make this explicit: "The institutional and charismatic aspects are co-essential as it were to the Church's constitution. They contribute, although differently, to the life, renewal and sanctification of God's People. It is from this providential rediscovery of the Church's charismatic dimension that before and after the Council, a remarkable pattern of growth has been established for ecclesial movements and new communities... You present here, are the tangible proof of this 'outpouring' of the Spirit."

The Pope then made this extraordinary plea to all Christians, rising from his seat with difficulty, as he did so: "Today, I would like to cry out to all of you gathered here in St. Peter's Square and to all Christians: Open yourselves docilely to the gifts of the Spirit! Accept gratefully and obediently the charisms which the Spirit never ceases to bestow on us!"¹

Benefiting from the brilliant wisdom of John of the Cross about how these gifts can operate purely and authentically, may we indeed respond to this call of the Pope and the Spirit to open ourselves to his gifts, not primarily for our sakes but for the sake of the Church and the world.

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¹ (*L'Observatore Romano*, English Language Edition, June 3, 1998; **This is the day the Lord has made!** Holy Father holds historic meeting with ecclesial movements and new communities; pp. 1-2.)