



THE GOD I DON'T BELIEVE IN



by **Fr.Dennis Cassidy**

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At
St.Mary & St.Michael in Settle

INTRODUCTION – A little information about me

From the age of about 8 I felt a calling to the priesthood.



When I reached my teenage years I began to get more actively involved in the Church. I became involved with my parish justice and peace group at Our Lady of Lourdes in Headingley who opened up a whole new world for me that I had never realised existed – and I would like to publically thank them, many who are here today, for giving me that opportunity and putting up with my many questions over those years. I thank God so very much because it opened up a deepening awareness of the social

teachings of the Church within me.

I went off to Upholland College in Wigan at the age of 16, then to Ushaw College in Durham at 18. After two years I had a year out working at the youth retreat centre in Skipton and I was ordained in 1992.

Soon after ordination I went to St Cuthbert's in Bradford where I made many mistakes but the good people there forgave me and gave me a very good grounding for my future very varied ministry. I then went to St Austin's in Wakefield where I worked in the hospital, hospice and prison and from there to be University Chaplain in Bradford for 9 years. From there I became Parish Priest at Corpus Christi in Leeds for 3 years, then I went to Rome for two years and I taught in Spain for a year.

Just two years ago I went to St Joseph's Keighley where I am now.

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'A lawyer, to disconcert Jesus, put a question, 'Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?' Jesus said, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also.'(1)



There was once a Spanish bishop who said on a TV show, "The God I don't believe in" whose words I have used in the title for this day. He made the remark after sitting in silence throughout a debate on a panel show where the panellists had attacked the Church and religion in general. Eventually the panel shows host got a little embarrassed and he asked the bishop if he would like to reply. He began by saying, "The God I have heard about here tonight is the God I do not believe in." In Jesus' day, long before such TV panel shows there was no shortage of religious debate. There were many who put all their heart, all their energy and their entire minds into merely talking about religion. One of these debaters, this unfortunate lawyer, now attempted to draw Jesus into the confusing mist of words and the tangled web of argument; he asks Jesus, "Which is the greatest commandment of the law?" At that time the Jewish law had 613 precepts, 365 prohibitions, corresponding to the days of the year; and 248 laws of direction, one for every bone in the body. So was there one in particular which was the key to all the others? It was a question that had taken up endless hours of debater's energy and time.

Jesus cuts through the web of opinions and commentaries in a simple and yet challenging answer. Religious laws and prophets' sermons mean nothing if they are not pointed towards total love of God and love of ones neighbour as oneself. Love of God and love of neighbour were not new precepts. But Jesus emphasised the necessary connection between the two as no one had ever done before. You cannot have one without the other. Love of God whom we cannot see is bogus if it is not expressed in love of the people whom we do see. And love of people whom we do see is incomplete unless it is infused by the love of God. In the strength of his answer Jesus was more or less saying, like the bishop on TV, "*Yours is the God I do not believe in ... yours is the religion I have no time for.*"

God is the source of all love because the life of the Trinity, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is a relationship of eternal love which pours forth into the beauty of creation, into the lives of all people. This I would suggest is at the very core of our reflection today.

At the tender age of 15 I went with a group of people who were thinking about the priesthood to Woodhall. During that weekend we called in at the Carmelite monastery there which began my growing interest in Carmelite spirituality. The two great founders of the discalced Carmelite order were of course St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. There is no doubt that despite his many difficulties John of the Cross had a wonderful relationship with the Lord and the truths that he uncovered have relevance to us today. At the heart of



his work was his belief that, “*if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more.*”¹ When God created humanity his original plan was to have a close intimate relationship with people. The word intimate comes from the Latin root *in-timor* which means *into risk*. This relationship is beautifully expressed in one of the Genesis stories of creation. God calls out to Adam and Eve inviting them to walk with Him “*in the cool of the evening.*” However humanity, represented in the persons of Adam and Eve, wanted to be independent of God. The whole course of Salvation History has been God’s effort, through his own initiative, to reveal himself to humanity inviting us to turn back to him; this is once again beautifully expressed in the Book of Hosea, “Turn again then to God, hold fast to love and justice, and always put your trust in your God”².

Through revelation various things are communicated to us hence; as with all communication, a relationship is established. However, how easy is it for us to have a relationship with God? We can come to know things about God through natural phenomena, but some things about the Divine can only come through supernatural revelation, e.g. that there are three persons in one God. It is important for us to realise that even though we may know some things about God we, as human beings, are incapable of comprehending everything about God due to our limitations. God, however, is capable of coming down to our level revealing Himself to us where we are at. This revelation of God was perfectly manifested to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Christ we are able to be raised up by God, which will be fully completed at the end of our earthly existence.

In the human state that we are now in revelation should be seen as the uncovering of truths, e.g. in the parables we are constantly challenged to go deeper. In this, we are actively involved in communication with our God. To have a sense of something that has been revealed to us is in itself an activity of one’s relationship with God. The truth expressed by John of the Cross reveals that the action of God did not begin and end at the creation itself with His desire to have an intimate relationship with humanity but continues to this day through the incarnation of His Son which reaches out to individuals of every time and place through the sacraments, in the teaching of the Church and our work for justice and peace, as the Prophet Hosea cries out, “hold fast to love and justice’. The trouble is that we tend in ordinary life to work to attain various things and conclude that we have somehow earned what we have gained. John of the Cross uses the experience of the *dark night* to explain the truth that we, as individuals, do not gain this relationship with God in the ordinary sense of the word. John argues that there is a sense of helplessness and an acute awareness of one’s need of God as the person grows closer to God, John writes, “*The soul, then, should advert that God is the principal agent in the matter. He acts as a guide of the blind, leading it by the hand to the place it knows not how to reach.*”³

How then, in John’s terms, does God act as the *principal agent*? During my time in Rome I was very fortunate to be given the opportunity to study in a little more depth various traditions of Spirituality in the Church. When I told a seminarian that I was studying

¹ The Living Flame of Love 3:28

² Hosea 12:6-8

³ The Living Flame of Love 3:29



John of the Cross he exclaimed, "Oh! He is a James Bond like character who made a daring escape from His prison." In many ways this fits in well with a particular interpretation of John for, like James Bond, his description of the spiritual life is often couched in masculine terms and imagery. The adventure of the Ascent of Mount Carmel is tough and challenging to us both today and indeed to the people of his time. It is, then, all the more surprising that he gives an image of God seeking out His people in very feminine terms, not only as a mother but as someone infinitely more loving and caring.



"In this interior union God communicates himself to the soul with genuine love that neither the affection of a mother, with which she so tenderly caresses her child, nor a brother's love, nor any friendship is comparable to it. The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favours and exalts this humble loving soul reaches such a degree ... that the Father himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though he were her servant and she his lord. And he is solicitous in favouring her as he would be if he were her slave and she his god. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God!"⁴



In John's doctrine, while we need to be careful in qualifying what we say about God since human words are unable to fully explain God, he speaks of God not only as a mother but as willing to reverse the role as *"if he were her slave and she his God."*

In the Ascent of Mount Carmel John describes how the devil can be *"a great meddler with this kind of revelation"* and that he *"can make counterfeits"*.⁴ I began my reflection with the image of God that was been portrayed on that television debate bearing no resemblance to the God that the bishop believed in. In stark contrast the image of God as revealed in the Book of Genesis is the God who wants to walk with his creation *in the cool of the evening* in the Garden of Eden. The father of lies, the devil, deceived humanity with an untruth which led us to want to live independently of God, and as such to live a less than fully human life for, without an intimate relationship with God, humanity's true dignity and worth is somehow impaired.

The heart of the temptation that the devil deceived Adam and Eve with was the knowledge of good and evil, *"God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil."*⁵ As John of the Cross notes, *"All the world's wisdom and human ability compared to the infinite wisdom of God is pure and utter ignorance. Accordingly, to reach union with the Wisdom of God, a person must advance by unknowing rather than by knowing."*⁶

In what many describe as a post-modern novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, we read at the story's end the seeming death of the Middle Ages. A new dawn was breaking upon the horizon giving birth to a new world. In writing the book Eco invited the

⁴ The Ascent of Mount Carmel Bk 2:27 1-3

⁵ Genesis 3:5

⁶ The Ascent of Mount Carmel Bk 1:4:5



reader at the beginning of this Millennium to reflect upon what has gone before and where all the possible consequences will lead us. As for Eco's revelation of truth, the Latin quotation that ends his book reads in translation, "*Yesterday's rose endures its name; we hold empty names.*"⁷ While the era that the novel deals with can be captured under the title the Middle Ages and while theorists discuss the modern and even the post-modern age, Eco doubts that the truth can ever be encapsulated in a single word or system. The fact that the reader *holds empty names* means that in Eco's view it is up to the reader to interpret their lives in accordance to the truth as they perceive it. However, perception is not enough in terms of working out truth and yet, it would seem, that it is only through our human limitation that we can come to knowledge of truth. Thus, in this present era, we must accept that there are things we will never fully understand or control within our experience of the world. We need to accept the limitations not only of ourselves but also of others and not to have the arrogance that seemingly permeated through the Enlightenment period of imagining that humanity can gain knowledge of the whole truth solely by the use of rationality. This acceptance can bring with it a certain uncertainty and an anxiety that no doubt John of the Cross encountered within the people of his own age.

Perhaps at the heart of these feelings of anxiety in humanity is the wound that is within the inner being, John writes, "*Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning? You fled like a stag after wounding me; I went out calling but you were gone*"⁸ John (along with St Augustine who wrote, 'Our soul is restless until it rests in God') would argue that this void can only be filled by God. John of the Cross' doctrine presents the *via negativa* (his way of negation) as the journey a person must make in order to fill this void and enter humanity's ultimate fulfilment.

However, this way of negation is presented to us in a very stark way. In the Ascent of Mount Carmel he writes, "*Endeavour to be inclined always: 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...*"⁹ If one was to take this passage of John in isolation and not refer to the rest of his work one might conclude that John really has nothing to say to the present age. Yet, as we read the signs of the times, it is obvious that there is a struggle to acquire truth and happiness within the experience of many people's lives. This struggle seems to lie in many directions; there are some who try to find it in the purely material things of the world, yet it would seem that material wealth does not bring true happiness. Even within the realms of religion there are people who see in the externals of religion a supposed certainty that they grasp on to as a foundation of fulfilment rather than the faith expressed so beautifully in the '*Song of the soul that is glad to know God by faith.*' "*Its clarity unclouded still shall be: Out of it comes the light by which we see Though it be night*"¹⁰ Faith is of a different quality to certainty because faith involves a belief which can only be understood in a limited way by our reason since it involves the transcendent; for *the light by which we see* stretches out into eternity. John of the Cross gives a teaching that helps people to see more clearly and yet paradoxically sometimes more dimly on the level of

⁷ Eco, Umberto *The Name of the Rose* Page 502

⁸ The Spiritual Canticle Stanza 1

⁹ The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book 1:13:6

¹⁰ *Song of the soul that is glad to know God by faith.* R Campbell Stanza 6



feelings (and emotions) by the light of faith and thus their relationship with God and others, into an eternity that will be crowned with perfect union with God.

This quest for union with God is wonderfully expressed in the second preface for Lent in the new translation of the English missal when we pray, *“For you have given your children a sacred time for the renewing and purifying of their hearts, that, freed from disordered affections, they may so deal with the things of this passing world as to hold rather to the things that eternally endure.”* For me this prayer encapsulates the main message of John’s teaching and why it is a good guide to me as a priest but also why it presents such a huge challenge to me.

John’s way of negation begins firstly with our appetites and passions, a real homing in on what it is in the depth of our lives that we rely upon to sustain us both in our lives of faith and the living out of that faith in our daily lives.

For John, the practices he describes take place within a deep relationship of love, *“Lost to myself I stayed my face upon my lover having laid from all my cares releasing threw them amongst the lilies there to fade.”*¹¹ The passions need to be quelled because the person needs to become aware that what they quell in their ordinary passions is done in order to experience the greater love that is being offered to humanity by the *Beloved* who is God. As Edith Stein, *“If the soul is to have room for God all these dark desires must be pulled up by the roots.”*¹²

The motivation therefore for people to both identify and uproot these *dark desires* is the motivation of love. John describes the relationship between God and humanity in terms of a romance where the girl goes out into the night to seek her *Beloved*. No doubt the kernel of his thinking grew in clarity through his own experience of the physical dark night he endured during his imprisonment at Toledo from which (in order to escape) he had to make a leap of faith into the darkness not knowing as he jumped if he would be dashed against the rocks. Similarly the girl (the soul) as she goes out into the night takes a great risk. We are told she sings the praises of the night, in other words she sings the praises of quelling the ordinary passions in order that she might be able to grasp the *Beloved* free from everything else that would distract her from her quest for the *Beloved*. So much of our lives can be taken up with trying to satisfy our needs. Of course we have certain needs that in order to survive we need to satisfy, e.g. the need for food and drink, warmth and rest. However, what John points to is the tendency within people to make the passions and their fulfilment so central to our lives that there is a distinct possibility that we turn them into little gods or idols. In the extreme these pleasures can turn into addictions or habits that in fact do us damage. There is the example of the alcoholic who so despises himself and his addiction that he drinks in order to blot out his feelings of self-revulsion. John is convinced that rather than living a life where certain lower passions take control we should deny ourselves these *other loves* in order to enter the great romance and gain the greater love with the *Beloved*.

¹¹ *The Dark Night* Poems of St John of The Cross R Campbell

¹² *The Science of the Cross* Edith Stein page 32



This for John, and indeed for all of us, demands a great deal of trust indeed a leap into the night because we are inviting the Lord in to take control of our lives. We often try to comfort ourselves with the illusion that it is oneself who is in control of one's life in the many ordinary day to day ways that we live it. In fact God is our creator, it is he who calls us into existence, sustains us and the one who will call us to leave this earthly existence. While we all know this on one level we can still live our lives with various levels of awareness of this truth because of our human conditioning and the result of original sin. John gives us an opportunity not only to embrace this truth but to live in such a way that this truth will make us free, free of our inordinate passions and to live our lives in the knowledge that all the good gifts of life come from God and are to be used in ways that will continue to lead us towards union with God and our neighbour rather than away from God and neighbour. *"The soul sings ... of its good luck and grace it had in departing from its inordinate sensory appetites and imperfections."*¹³

John's doctrine for me as a priest guides me and challenges me in many ways. Catherine of Siena talks about the importance of self-knowledge in God aware both of our imperfection and God's immense love for us. John expresses this in many powerful ways especially in his poetry; his guidance helps me to strip away the layers of complacency that have grown up in my life over the years. He also makes it very clear that I can do none of this purification purely through my own effort *"The soul would not have succeeded in entering it, because souls are unable to empty themselves of all their appetites in order to reach God"*¹⁴ For a person to *advance by unknowing* involves huge risk. The *Beloved* in seeking us out invites us to enter deeply into an intimate relationship with Him, again *in-timor* which means *into risk*. Clearly then the theme of trust in God is the challenge of intimacy with Him. Once we live in that intimate relationship with God then we come to realise that it is not just about me and God. The life of the Trinity is a mutual sharing of love and affection which, by its very nature reaches out to others. This surely should be the heart of all our work for justice and peace because it is a recognition of God's care and affection for all he has created. Anything that injures that creation through injustice and an absence of peace is in direct contradiction to God's plan for his creation.



This is one of an occasional series of publications by the Commission arising from various events that it has organised.

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For more information about the Commission, and to get more involved please see our website:

<http://www.leedsjp.org.uk/>

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¹³ The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book 1:1:1

¹⁴ The Ascent of Mount Carmel Book 1:1:5