

THE VIRTUE OF DETACHMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: A STUDY OF  
ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THOMAS MERTON

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the  
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of

Master of Arts in Theological Studies

By

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December, 2012



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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE VIRTUE OF DETACHMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION: A STUDY OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THOMAS MERTON**

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In popular reflection on vocation, expectations for the holiness of the laity are often set quite low. Many reserve high holiness to those who take vows or are ordained, or banish mystic union with God from the realm of ordinary experience which everyday Christians could hope to enjoy. There remains a significant and irreducible difference between the vocations in the role that each vocation plays in the Church, yet each vocation's fundamental orientation is towards union with God and remains unfulfilled if it does not accomplish uniting the disciple to God.

An important obstacle to the actual accomplishment of union in this life by many disciples is a misunderstanding of the detachment. Detachment is relevant to every Christian disciple because it is an irreplaceable element on the way to union. Detachment allows for the authentic formation of the disciple's identity in Christ, is necessary for the perfection of the theological virtues, and is the image of the mystical marriage with God. In the growth of the soul's union with God, the disciple learns how to truly love both God and others, so detachment properly understood is learning to love with one's whole self.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First of all, I would like to thank the Religious Studies department for all of their guidance, support, and flexibility as I pursued this unusual course of study which would have been impossible in a less personal institution. Particular thanks on this matter to Dr. Doyle, Dr. Yocum, Dr. Smith, who all went above and beyond in advocating for me and for the creation of the program from which I am graduating. Additional thanks to my advisor, Dr. Levering for wonderful conversations and guidance both in this work and personally. Thanks also to Dr. Johnson and Dr. Portier for being my readers, but also mentors during my time in the program.

I would also like to thank my community for their support during the final stages where I really needed encouragement. Credit also to all of my friends, who helped me to develop my thinking on this topic by caring enough to listen to me ramble, especially to Caitlin Cipolla-McCulloch, and to Rob Broderick, for helping me to re-organize my thoughts at a critical moment in the composition. Credit also to my family, for whom I am more grateful for every day.

Thanks be to God!

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## INTRODUCTION

Detachment is an irreplaceable element in the Christian's fundamental vocation of "becoming God by participation" (*Living Flame of Love*, 671). The Christian life is a glorious adventure. There is nothing more ambitious, more reckless than pursuing the face of God. And yet, that is one's destination for which one walks along this Way. The purpose of one's life is to give glory to God and to seek his face. Like the death and resurrection of the Lord, these two purposes are in fact one, for no one can see the face of God and live, yet the glory of God is the human person fully alive. Fulfillment of this vision of God is not yet possible in this life, yet a certain prefiguring of it must occur in the course of human life. In one's life in the flesh, the beatific vision is prefigured by a loving union with God, in which one comes to resemble the divine one through love.

Loving union with God is the highest manifestation of the Christian life before one is called to the fulfillment of that union in one's final death to self. Yet, far too often union with God seems to be too ambitious of a goal for an ordinary Christian. Is it not something mystical, reserved for only a few whom God especially graces with His presence? While mystical phenomena are necessarily only the experience of a few, those exceptional graces are not the content of nor the way to union. Neither does authentic mysticism rely on extraordinary signs to mark its progress, as the mystics themselves attest. Rather, one's progress is marked by the growth of the virtues in the life of the

person. Union occurs not through extraordinary signs, but through ordinary progress in the virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The grace necessary for the soul's union with God is not an extraordinary grace but an ordinary one. Indeed, the day is coming when 'a

Christian will either be a mystic or not a Christian at all'. Union with God is not exceptional but the basic vocation of the Christian life, the purpose of any particular calling.

Yet, 'the gate that leads to salvation is narrow and broad is the gate that leads to destruction'. How can one say that union with God is the intended purpose for all? The critical distinction lies in the fact that it is not a lack of invitation on God's part, but rather a rejection of the invitation to the wedding feast by his disciples, who each have something more pressing to accomplish. This rejection of God's invitation is commonplace and the broad gate for no other reason than the fact that to accept the invitation of God is to accept the Cross. Discipleship is the choice to die, an invitation not easily accepted. But 'no one can see the face of God and live' and 'the one who loses his life for my sake will save it', because one cannot withstand the glory of God as one is, but must die to self and live only for Him, with one's whole heart, mind, soul and strength.

Death to self is not so much an annihilation of oneself but rather a continually deepening conformity to Christ. It is one aspect, one moment in the continual death-resurrection which brings the soul into correspondence with the image of Christ which is naturally in them. Therefore, one's death to oneself is a rejection of one's false self in order to embrace one's true identity in Christ. Paul counsels the Colossians to imitate the

death and resurrection of the Lord in their living persons, writing that “you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory. Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly, immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry” (Col. 3:3-5). As the disciple dies to self, one is more purely in the image of Christ.

The process of this death to self is manifested in the lives of all the saints, who love God absolutely and above all else, who find it their greatest and enduring joy to suffer for the sake of their beloved one. One of the greatest representatives in the course of the Christian tradition of a disciple who wholeheartedly embraced the cross out of love for God is St. John of the Cross. St. John of the Cross writes extensively on the death to self as a part of the growth of the virtues in the person on one’s way to God. He names the ongoing process of death to one’s false self in the life of the disciple as detachment. John argues that through detachment from all that is not God, including oneself, one is able to come to union with God.

Detachment is particularly necessary in light of the fact that Christ is both the destination and the way of the Christian life. It is not possible for one to ‘achieve’ union with God, for God is utterly beyond any created thing. God sustains the soul in being, is the first to move the soul with His invitation, and is the power by which the disciple grows in likeness to Christ. Because of this, from a created perspective, a ‘negative way’ is necessary, because one can neither fully perceive or contain God, nor manage union through one’s positive efforts. Instead, one comes to union with God by accepting God’s invitation, by receiving God’s love. This becomes possible only as one becomes

detached from all that is not God. Detachment, then, is a necessary practice in the life of any disciple, because it allows God to unify the soul to Himself.

This is the thesis of this paper: that detachment is a necessary practice in the life of any Christian disciple. I assume, based on the overwhelming evidence from the Christian tradition, that the fundamental vocation of the Christian life is union with God. Because of this, union is not an extraordinary grace, accomplished through mystical wonders, but rather the ordinary progress of the soul in virtue supported by grace. Through faith, hope, and charity, the soul is elevated by God to union with God. Detachment is an essential element in the growth of each of the theological virtues, and therefore must be a part of every Christian's life.

To show the importance of detachment, I rely on the theology of St. John of the Cross and upon Thomas Merton, his contemporary interpreter. Because John's depth exceeds Merton's in certain places and because Merton is more accessible than John by reason of his contemporary time period which necessitates less conceptual translation, there are twin reasons to begin with Merton and proceed to John. The first reason that I begin with Merton is that he frames his approach to detachment in terms of a response to contemporary questions about identity and despair, giving an easy entry point into a discussion of detachment. The second reason that I place St. John at the end is that the work builds to a climax, beginning with existential questions of identity, working through the infused virtues as the means to union, to end with the content of union as described by St. John of the Cross. This approach begins with one's contemporary experience and leads the reader gradually into contact with one of the deepest sources for understanding the spiritual life.

The first chapter provides a conceptual model for detachment which is then used to examine the paradoxes of Merton's and John's writings about the spiritual life. The denser paradoxes surround the relationship of the person's agency and God's agency in the growth of the person, as well as the ongoing death and resurrection of the disciple. By understanding detachment both as active formation and passive receptivity, the sometimes contradictory explanations of the content of detachment in Merton and John become much more clear. By placing this chapter first, one is able to use the conceptual description to unravel the difficulties of the later chapters.

The second chapter uses Merton to introduce the idea of detachment and its significance for the spiritual life. Merton discusses heavily both the importance of detachment for the disciple's understanding of one's authentic identity and the role that the virtues of hope and charity play in the union of the soul to God. The section on Merton concludes with a preliminary reflection on the fundamental and universal importance of detachment for the Christian life.

The third chapter reflects on St. John of the Cross's approach to faith and to charity as the means to union with God, as well as reflecting on the union of the soul to God through the image of a mystical marriage, one common throughout his work. Understanding the embrace of the cross as a positive expression of the love of the soul for God is powerfully understood through the use of this image. Detachment can ultimately be seen not only as the means to union with God, but also the content of that union. For:

“When you delay in something  
You cease to rush towards the all.  
For to go from the all to the all  
You must deny yourself of all in all.

And when you come to the possession of the all,  
You must possess it without wanting anything.  
Because if you desire to have something in all  
Your treasure in God is not truly your all.” (*Ascent*, 151)

## **CHAPTER I**

### **WHAT IS DETACHMENT?**

Writers on detachment often speak in contradictory images, which result in readers thinking that detachment is something inhuman or otherworldly. However, the contradictory statements and images result from a dual way that the process of detachment is understood. From a disciple's existential viewpoint, initially one understands detachment as active asceticism where the disciple intentionally forms themselves in virtue so that one's identity is gradually conformed to Christ through the disciple's active choosing. But later in the disciple's formation, one realizes that even one's active detachment is a response to the action of God in the soul. At this point, the disciple recognizes that one makes larger strides towards God by awaiting the action of God.

This chapter responds to this difficulty in understanding detachment by naming and explaining these two perspectives: detachment as formation and detachment as receptivity. By equipping the reader with these lenses, the concept of detachment laid out by the mystic authors can be understood much more easily. I have divided them here in the order of how each is learned in the disciple's existential experience, placing formation before receptivity, which also allows for the later sections to have greater depth than the

initial ones. In addition, both perspectives see different aspects of detachment's contribution to the growth of the theological virtues in the disciple.

The first section, detachment as formation, explains the need for formation in relation to anthropology. Since each person is ill-formed, having impulses which point in any direction, it is necessary to actively decide between which impulses to follow and to establish a trajectory for the soul. By making a pattern of intentional choices which have one's end as God, the person is gradually oriented habitually towards one's true end. Detachment is necessary to for effective formation because it allows the disciple to be free from the impulses which are not oriented towards God. The disciple is able to have total focus on God to the exclusion of all else.<sup>1</sup> This is the active element in detachment, where one intentionally resists impulses not in line with one's characteristic orientation to God and establishes the virtues in themselves through the decisions that disciple habitually makes.

The second section, detachment as receptivity, establishes this second perspective focusing on an important reversal: no matter one's efforts, no created thing is capable of becoming like God without divine assistance, or even of existence. Therefore, the disciple's greatest effort is to receive well the action of God within one. Detachment from oneself and from one's own power are the soul's existential efforts to receive God.

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<sup>1</sup> This understanding of detachment in John is also articulated by Richard P. Hardy in his article *Embodied Love in St. John of the Cross*. He argues that "the positive result of what seems to be a totally negative process is a transformation of the person into someone completely focused on the living God" (Richard P. Hardy, *John of the Cross: Man and Mystic*. [Boston, MA: Pauline Press, 2002], 2).

This occurs through faith, which through the corresponding faculty of the intellect, unites the disciple to God. This second perspective establishes a key insight into understanding detachment: that detachment is necessary because one's growth in holiness depends primarily on God.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding detachment through these two perspectives is important because a call to detached contemplation is an integral part of the universal call to holiness. Each disciple's call to holiness is one's call to be present to the Lord. The act of being simply present to God is contemplation. In accordance with the bulk of the tradition, "Vatican II laid it down that for all men and women 'action is subordinated to contemplation'" (Dubay, 10). Contemplation can also be understood as the visitation of the Lord to the waiting soul, which has detached from all created things.

Detachment is an essential part of every Christian vocation, because the union of the soul to God is an image of the soul's salvation. Union through detachment prefigures the disciple's beatific relationship to the Lord in death.<sup>3</sup> All those called to salvation are also called to union with God in this life, albeit through a glass, darkly. This call asks everything of the disciple, starting with one's identity and extending to the one's entire

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Kurian describes this aspect of detachment as receptivity in language closer to John's own language: "Nada in a way, is simply a resting in God, a method of abandoning ourselves to God. Through practice, we develop an ability to abandon ourselves to this state in trust that is God's will for us and even of willing it because God wills it... Waiting. Waiting is my work. My work is waiting. Lord, help me to wait well" (Kurian, *Ascent to Nothingness* [London: St. Paul's Publishing, 2000], 213).

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange confirms that union with God is the basic Christian vocation: "since every just soul enjoys habitual union with the Blessed Trinity dwelling within it, the mystical union, or the actual, intimate, and almost continual union with God, such as it is found here on earth in holy souls, appears as the culminating point on earth of the development of the grace of the virtues and of the gifts, and as the normal, even though rather infrequent, prelude to the life of heaven" (Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation* [St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1954], 127).

life. Yet this is the only task worth pursuing, because the disciple who aims for anything other than union with God has aimed too low, and set one's sights on what is not God.

## DETACHMENT AS FORMATION

There are two perspectives which are essential for understanding St. John's conception of detachment – detachment as formation and detachment as receptivity. St. John's written perspective is nearly entirely from the understanding of detachment as receptivity, and so is made more comprehensible by the addition of understanding what he assumes is simultaneously working in the person. St. John repeatedly divides the experience of the nights into two, the night of the senses and the night of the spirit. While it would be simple to identify the night of the senses with formation and the night of the spirit with receptivity, a better description acknowledges that formation and receptivity are not sequential but simultaneous. The positive work of fostering virtuous habits is an active work of the disciple, but the first moment of this active formation is in fact the reception of God's grace. But also, the effective work of God done without the resistance of a person's attachments is something which builds on the habitual goodness of the person, whose active formation continues to be habitually lived in the commitments that person has made.

Detachment as formation is best understood to be training for authentic relationship, in which the person forms habits which are supportive of love. The purpose of the active part of detachment is to enter into relationship with God and with others. Deep relationship with God allows a disciple to love other people with God's own love and enter into more intimate relationships than is merely humanly possible. Any

detachment that removes one from intimate relationship with God or from persons is contradictory. The active and intentional aspect of detachment enables the formation of virtues, that is, habits supportive of love.

Formation is best described using language concerned with virtue.<sup>4</sup> This language assumes a certain kind of conception of the human person, a dynamic and directional understanding of human nature. Understanding these two components in John's anthropology is a vital component in comprehending how John conceptualizes the spiritual life. John assumes a directional or oriented anthropology. In John's thought, the person is always more authentic the more they are identified with God. Intrinsically, the human person is absolutely oriented towards God, and the more the person consciously promotes this orientation in the way that they live, they are fulfilled in one's purpose. This can be seen as John states that: "Remember always that you came here for no other reason than to be a saint; thus let nothing reign in your soul that does not lead you to sanctity." (*Counsels of Perfection*, 729) The project that John sets out on assumes that the life of a disciple is to love God absolutely, and that every created thing pales in comparison to this task. John's project is more a description of how a disciple might respond to and fulfill this orientation, rather than defending this essential orientation's existence.

John's anthropology is also dynamic or moldable, since the disciple's character is his or her accumulated habits. In turn, these habits are conscious or unconscious

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<sup>4</sup> However, John assumes a certain kind of virtue language that differs from other virtue ethics language in that it is not centered on the agent but God. Daniel Dombrowski that "for virtue ethicists who are also religious believers... the agent in 'agent-centered ethics' fades into relative insignificance. John of the Cross helps us to understand why this is the case" (Dombrowski, "John of the Cross and Virtue Ethics," *Mystics Quarterly* 30 [2004]: 7-14, at 6).

responses to the impulses to act that a person has. Coming full circle, the impulses that a disciple has are derived from the character of the disciple. The circle is interrupted by the moment of responses to impulses, in which the disciple is free to choose to form virtuous or vicious habits, or neglect to be conscious of one's response at all. Therefore, a person has the capacity to choose what he or she becomes by changing the way that he or she habitually acts. This anthropology has ancient roots, stemming from the Greeks and used extensively by the early Greek Fathers and desert monastics.

There are substantial differences in terminology between John's anthropology and contemporary conceptions of the human person. One of the most important and misleading differences is the meaning of the term 'passion'. It has come to mean those impulses which are most powerful, without reference to their orientation. Both the very best and the very worst of human motivations are bound together in this term in contemporary language. Therefore, when John repudiates the passions, it can seem as if John is too stodgy, too ascetical to be a teacher of what it means to love. But an examination of the way that these early writers described the human person provides a crucial insight into the way that John understands human experience. Roberta Bondi observes that there is an important difference in the way that the word 'passion' is used by ancient writers and in contemporary language:

"As a word, 'passion' carries a negative meaning most of the time because for them a passion has as its chief characteristics the perversion of vision and the destruction of love. ... Strong emotions which accompany love, or lead to love or even are an expression of love are not passions. Real love, as opposed to manipulative love that serves the lover alone, produces love rather than destroying love, and so it cannot be a passion." (Bondi, 58)

A way to frame what the ancients meant by ‘passion’ is by describing it as an impulse that is contrary to authentic, generous love. It is a desire that must be resisted by the choice of the disciple in order to be faithful to love.

Detachment from desires, then, is the capacity to make choices that resist the power of our sinful impulses and act in a way that corresponds to our intrinsic orientation toward God. John names these pernicious impulses variously as desires and appetites. It is in this sense that John writes: “If there is to be success in judging the things of God, the appetites and satisfaction must be totally rejected, and these things of God must be weighed apart from them. For otherwise one will infallibly come to consider the things of God as not of God, and the things that are not of God as of God.” (*Living Flame of Love*, 704) Our impulses are not a clear indicator of what action is the best, but rather correspondence to our orientation towards God. So by gradually developing detachment from their impulses and ‘passions’, a disciple is able to have the freedom to choose what is authentically best for the disciple, rather than being trapped by their impulses into patterns of behavior which are harmful to one’s relationship with God and others.

The implication of this directional and dynamic anthropology is that the disciple’s character is able to be formed by the habitual decisions that the disciple makes.

Detachment, then, is an essential part of this formation, because it allows the disciple the freedom to choose virtuous habits over responding affirmatively to one’s impulses.

Detachment in the conscious and intentional aspect is the capacity to discipline one’s own passions to prepare the disciple to develop virtuous habits – especially faith, hope, and a habitual charity through which the union with God is effected.

But this union is beyond our own action. A person's intentional action, even if one's milieu encourages and forms virtuous habits, is insufficient to form a disciple's character after the divine image. It is for this reason that John chooses to focus his writings on the activity of God in the disciple – that the work of making a person holy is the work of God and not of the disciple. This brings us to the second aspect under which detachment can be understood, detachment as receptivity.

#### DETACHMENT AS RECEPTIVITY

Union between the soul and God is not something that the soul can achieve through its own works, but the soul does have to prepare itself for union with God. But because the disciple's own agency is insufficient, John writes: “no creature or knowledge comprehensible to the intellect can serve it as a proximate means for divine union with God” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 173) but rather only faith. This is the first of three correlations John makes in the *Ascent* between the theological virtues and the powers of the soul.

In understanding detachment as receptivity, instead of trying to strive towards God with the intellect, the person should instead wait for God's action in blind faith, because God's action is more effective than the action of the disciple. Because of the soul's emptiness, caused by detachment, God will rush more closely to the detached soul: “As soon as natural things are driven out of the enamored soul, the divine are naturally and supernaturally infused since there can be no void in nature” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 199). This does not, however, imply a rejection of the person's agency: God “...is ever desirous that insofar as possible people take advantage of their own reasoning powers. All matters must be regulated by reason save those of faith, which though not

contrary to reason transcend it” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 235). In the same manner, he shows that the virtues of hope and charity interact in a binding way with the faculties of the memory and the will.

For John, it is a purification process that gradually quiets the person to be able to be bound in intimate union with God through a gradual identification with God. This can be seen in the parallel section on charity in the *Ascent* when he states that “The entire matter of reaching union with God consists in purging the will of its appetites and emotions so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical with the will of God” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 293). Since loving charity is the action of the will, as the soul becomes conformed to God’s will more completely, it also becomes capable of loving as God loves. A complete identification between the disciple’s will and the will of God, while not in the disciple’s power to effect, is authentic to the person’s true identity,<sup>5</sup> as John takes care to explain in another place:

“The soul’s will is not destroyed there, but is so firmly united with the strength of God’s will, with which he loves her, that her love for him is as strong and perfect as his love for her; for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God’s. Thus the soul loves God with the will and strength of God himself, united with the very strength of love with which God loves her” (*Spiritual Canticle*, 619)

Union with God is the fulfillment of the disciple’s orientation, and is therefore an authentic expression of the person rather than an erasure of the person in favor of God’s self-expression. This crucial passage also points out one of the essential implications of

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<sup>5</sup> John M. Lozano writes that “total adherence to Jesus and communion with him was the key concept shared by the different apostolic communities in order to describe what we would refer to today as Christian identity.” This is one of the many ways that identity is tied to detachment and to the union of likeness. (Lozano, “John of the Cross: A Radical Reinterpretation of Discipleship,” [*Carmelite Studies*, (1992): 11p(online).], 1).

this union of God by God's action on the will – the person no longer loves with only their own love, but with “one will and love, which is God's” (*Spiritual Canticle*, 619).

The action of God in the soul which is received is a healing and recollection of the whole person, character and passions in this love. God gathers and heals the whole person, orienting the disciple towards Godself completely. This total orientation of the entire capacity of the disciple moves the person into, in John's words, “the true fulfillment of the first commandment, which, neither disdaining anything human nor excluding it from this love, states: ‘You shall love your God with your whole heart, and with your whole mind, and with your whole soul, and with all your strength’” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 420). This is the culmination and the destination of the orientation of human life – to be unified with God in love.

## CONCLUSION

These two lenses into understanding detachment are useful to sort out the disciple's experience along the way to God. From one perspective, detachment is a lifetime of effort on the part of the disciple to resist and master one's own inherent tendencies to love-destroying selfishness, and the active intention which forms new habits supportive of loving God and others. From the other, detachment can be seen as the ‘via negativa’. Trusting in nothing else but God, the disciple is led by God in faith, hope, and charity to the soul's ultimate glory: conformity with Christ. Each perspective will be useful in deciphering the various paradoxes presented in the writings of Merton and St. John on detachment.

Positively speaking, the disciple seeking to practice detachment has twin tasks in front of him/her, both of which are beyond his/her power without God's assistance:

formation in virtue and receptivity to contemplation. In virtue, the disciple actively imitates Christ in his/her character and in his/her care for others. And in contemplation the disciple waits confidently on the love of the Lord. Approaching these tasks from the perspective of detachment is crucial because apart from detachment, the disciple would seek to God with one's own capacities, and necessarily become lost. In detachment, one begins by admitting one's insufficiency yet, trusting in the mercy and the love of God, seeks the face of God in spite of one's infinite difference from the Creator.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **DETACHMENT IN THOMAS MERTON**

Thomas Merton, a twentieth century mystic and writer, is an excellent doorway to understanding detachment through the question of identity, a universally applicable inquiry. Speaking in contemporary language and from an open-minded perspective, he examines human experience and finds contemporary experience sorely lacking an understanding of contemplation. Inviting the reader to let go of his/her prized projects which define one's identity, he offers the alternative of detached contemplation which allows God to be the true center of one's identity. In opposition to accomplishments, he shows how virtue is the true measure of a person. Through virtue, one is united to God in the depth of one's solitude.

The contemplative's solitude is always relational, reaching out and waiting on God's love, and turning to love others with that same love. Relational solitude is in direct opposition to individualist isolation, becoming detached from oneself in order to be more completely present to another. Significantly for this project, Merton's challenge issued to a broad audience, as a corrective for the isolation experienced as a part of contemporary life, is a challenge to seek detachment. Detachment reverses the individualist worldview by switching the focus from drawing the outside world into the self to moving away from the false self towards wholly devoting oneself to the love of God. This challenge is a one Merton invites all persons to consider as the true response

to the question of their identity. Merton's challenge to detachment centers on two topics. The first major element in Merton's challenge is that detachment is necessary for one to come to an authentic understanding of one's identity. Detachment from self plays a primary role in Merton's thinking on identity because it frees one from one's false self to participate in one's true self in Christ. Vocation is primarily a question of finding one's authentic identity in Christ. This vocation is a detached one because no vocation is primarily about finding oneself fulfilled, but rather about how one loves, since the solitude of a person is not erased by finding his/her vocation.

Merton's other major contribution on the theme of detachment is his connection of detachment to the theological virtues of hope and of charity. Hope is formed by detachment because one learns to hope in God and not in one's own strength. The practice of detachment from self is the humility which is needed for growth in hope. Detachment is an essential element in hope. Because one does not hope for what one already sees, but rather for that which is beyond sight, detachment from the visible allows one to hope more authentically. Hope relies on trusting in God rather than in ourselves. Therefore pride is the enemy of hope, and to combat the tendency to hoard or to boast, humility detachment is necessary. Detachment is a foundational practice in allowing the growth of hope by opposing pride. This hope allows one to trust in the will of God for oneself as the concerned care which nurtures one and calls one to one's best good.

Charity is the central point in the union of the soul to God, because it is through love that God lifts the soul to Himself. Detachment is necessary in the growth of charitable love because attachments distort and destroy authentic love by causing the lover to act selfishly and possessively instead of encouraging the best good of the

beloved. The growth in and perfection of charity needs to be supported by detachment. Detachment from self is a prerequisite for loving well, because charitable love desires the good of the beloved above all else. In this desire, one is forgetful of self and remembers only the good of the beloved. Detached charity moves the disciple to be so in love as to not distinguish between the self and the beloved so that what is good for the beloved is good for the lover.

### MERTON ON IDENTITY AND DETACHMENT

The most basic connection between detachment and its universal significance is the role that it plays in the formation of one's identity. Because of the taint of original sin, every disciple is in need of forming their identity. Detachment plays a critical role in one's identity because it is through detachment that one is able to respond authentically to one's sinful impulses and be formed after the image of Christ, in whom each one finds one's true identity. Both aspects of detachment can be perceived, but detachment as formation is particularly prominent in the discussion of detachment and identity.

In Merton's thinking on the connection between identity and detachment, one of his more important images is the distinction between one's true self and one's false self.<sup>6</sup> In his chapter 'Things in Their Identity' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he begins by reflecting that each individual pleases God and gives God glory by being precisely themselves. He sees that "each particular being, in all its individuality, its concrete

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<sup>6</sup> Merton uses western psychological categories but is not constrained to them, because he also uses eastern anthropological insights in his understanding of the self, which he uses to issue "a radical challenge both to Western individualism and to common misconceptions about the contemplative life as a solitary state"(Glenn Crider, "Thomas Merton's Contemplation-Rarefied Emblem of Being Human and Living in Mystery," [*Crosscurrents* (December 2008): 592-607], 5).

nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God” (*New Seeds*, 30). Sanctity, then, is giving glory to God by becoming true to one’s own unique identity.

To come to find one’s authentic identity, one must become detached from one’s false self. The false self “is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him” (*New Seeds*, 34). One comes into the world unformed, subject to impulses and desires which pull one in every which direction, not heeding one’s orientation to God. For Merton, “to say I was born in sin is to say that I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask” (*New Seeds*, 33). One’s false self is the mask with which one is born, where one turns inwardly and is prevented from loving. Merton continues to identify the false self with original sin as he writes that “Every movement of my own natural appetite, even though my nature is good in itself, tends in one way or another to keep alive in me the illusion that is opposed to God’s reality living within me. ... This is because I am born in selfishness. I am born self-centered. And this is original sin” (*New Seeds*, 43). The sin of selfishness is really a sin of idolatry, in which one worships oneself, trusting in one’s own power and denying one’s reliance on God. In reality, our whole being is reliant on God to be sustained in existence, so “to worship our false selves is to worship nothing” (*New Seeds*, 26). The false self is the result of original sin, and is our distortion away from loving as God loves towards our own selfishness.

The turn away from the false self points out a basic truth about detachment: detachment is not an opposition between God and creatures, because opposition implies comparison, and there is no comparison between God and creatures. As Merton points

out, “we do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached *from ourselves* in order to see and use all things in and for God” (*New Seeds*, 21). The death of the false self is made possible by the virtue of detachment. Detachment is oriented towards “escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter[ing] by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls” (*New Seeds*, 25). Through detachment, one encounters one’s true identity in God who is at home in the deepest part of oneself.

Detachment as formation is an integral part of the response to one’s false self. False self, for Merton, is the part of our identity which is made up of sin. Since sin is the opposite of being, of reality, any part of our self-understanding built with sinful habits is in fact an illusion. Merton observes that “my false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God’s will and God’s love – outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion” (*New Seeds*, 34). One comes to know the false self by recognizing the lies one tells oneself, and facing the uncomfortable realities in one’s life that underlie those falsehoods.

The false self is made up of the half-truths that are known to be false as well as the flaws that we have not yet gained the maturity to notice. Merton writes that “the crucial problem of perfection and interior purity is the renunciation and uprooting of all our unconscious attachments to created things and to our own will and desires” (*New Seeds*, 256). Attachment to comfort, to illusion, keeps one from approaching one’s true

identity in Christ.<sup>7</sup> Merton writes that each person finds one's true self in conformity to Christ, for "whatever is in God is really identical with Him, for His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him" (*New Seeds*, 35). The disciple's identity is found in finding oneself in Christ.

Because Merton understands holiness as congruence to one's true identity, he asserts that "for me sanctity consists in being myself and for you sanctity consists in being *yourself*. ... Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self." (*New Seeds*, 31) But this is not a simple task. The question becomes whether one is able to know oneself enough to be able to identify whether one is operating out of one's true self or out of one's false self.

Detachment as receptivity is an essential part of this pursuit of God, because one cannot rely on one's own energies to find or be in God. Discovering one's identity is beyond one's ability, because God cannot be found unless God reveals himself in contemplation and one's identity is found only in God. "This is something that no man can ever do alone. Nor can all the men and all the created things in the universe help him with this work. The only One Who can teach me to find God is God, Himself, Alone" (*New Seeds*, 36). Merton understands the problem with false self to be that it orients the life of the person inwardly, to themselves, while an authentic identity is oriented towards

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick O'Connell summarizes Merton saying: "only by a radical self-surrender, by stripping away the illusion of one's own autonomy, by letting go of the story we have invented in order to provide for ourselves and identity over which we exercise control, can 'paradise' be re-entered". Attachment is always a form of illusion or idolatry. (O'Connell, "The surest home is Pointless – Merton's Poetry," [*Crosscurrents*, (December 2008): 522-544.], 18).

God. The role of detachment in the identity of the disciple is turning away from the false self toward the true identity found in Christ.

For Merton, coming to know one's identity is about coming to terms with one's fundamental solitude, where one is alone with God. In spending time alone with God, one learns to love both God and creatures more completely. Indeed, Merton writes that "The only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men" (*New Seeds*, 52). Solitude in Merton is an element in the path to union with God since without it, it is impossible to become recollected in one's love of God. Solitude prepares one for union, because "solitude is not separation" (*New Seeds*, 56), but rather the movement of the self towards the God who is at the center of its existence.

For Merton, coming to know one's identity happens by coming to terms with one's fundamental solitude. This is most clearly exposed in Merton's brief work *Thoughts in Solitude*, which is a meditation on the identity of the disciple in terms of an irreducible solitude. In this work, he reflects on the role of solitude in developing the full life of a mature Christian. Although it emerges from his external solitude in his experience of being a hermit, he makes sure to explicitly state that "what is said here about solitude is not just a recipe for hermits. It has a bearing on the whole future of man and of his world" (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 14). His thoughts on solitude apply beyond an external solitariness because the essence of what he is saying is that the human condition is experienced as something longing for more, something unfulfilled.

He begins by summing up his previous discussion of the distinction between the honest identity found in God and the illusion which is the sinful false mask. Every lack of love which one avoids admitting is an illusion which God sees through and must be stripped away from the disciple in detachment. The detachment that Merton looks for in the disciple is a death to self. This death is not something that deprives the disciple of life, but rather of one's illusions. It therefore is an entry into a more truthful understanding of oneself which is more alive because of this death. Merton writes that this "death by which we enter into life is not an escape from reality but a complete gift of ourselves which involves a total commitment to reality. It begins by renouncing the illusory reality which created things acquire when they are seen only in their relation to our own selfish interests" (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 19). By leaving behind the lure to gratify one's desires, one is able to be oriented towards the reality that is God instead. This renunciation corresponds to the truth since sinfulness is unreality and the departure from conforming to the image of God.

To move beyond the mask, Merton suggests that it is necessary to learn to love ourselves exactly as one is. Instead of telling lies hiding one's faults in order to pretend that one deserves love, the solution is precisely the opposite: admitting one's flaws and that one cannot earn or deserve the manner in which they are loved by God. Merton reflects that "the spiritually poor man loves his very insufficiency" (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 45), which is to say that humility in the face of one's failures is the only way to be honest and to defeat the temptation to living in a mask. This humility admits one's very real faults, working against them while simultaneously admitting that overcoming them is beyond our power. In some sense, a disciple humbly accounts himself as nothing. But

“to really know our ‘nothingness’ we must also love it. And we cannot love it unless we see that it is good” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 44). That is to say, to move beyond the mask, it is necessary to love oneself with all one’s flaws, and to present that flawed person honestly before God to be loved.

This presentation of oneself before God to be loved requires that one has been recollected, that is, established one’s own solitude. This does not mean a simple external isolation or a work of introspection done by an individual. It is primarily the work of God. Merton acknowledges this as he warns the reader: “Do not flee to solitude from the community. Find God first in the community, and he will lead you to solitude” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 110). One’s solitude is the authentic inner self formed by the joint action of God and the soul’s collaboration in that action. Complementing what is written in *Thoughts in Solitude*, in *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton writes that “true solitude is the home of the person” (*New Seeds*, 53). The sanctity of this home in the person is reinforced in Merton’s many discussions on how to love. In this home, the person is able to “live by the strength of an apparent emptiness that is always truly empty and yet never fails to support us at every moment” (*New Seeds*, 62). In solitude, one recognizes one’s weakness and begins to rely not on one’s own capacity but on God.

The ‘point’ of solitude is to be at home with God, since, as Merton observes, “as soon as you are really alone you are with God” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 109). In collaboration with the grace of God, one is able to prepare a home for God within themselves, which entails going out of oneself. “To ‘go out of ourselves’ is to act at the very summit of our being, not moved by our own nature but moved by God Who is at once infinitely above us and Who yet dwells in the depths of our being” (*Thoughts in*

*Solitude*, 113). Solitude is the meeting place between God and the soul. One is able to come into contact with the solitude of God, who communicates himself in silence. In these silent moments with God, the soul is taught many secrets, and “the greatest of God’s secrets is God himself. He waits to communicate Himself to me in a way that I can never express to others or even think about coherently to myself. I must desire it in silence. It is for this that I must leave all things” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 114). In solitude the soul discovers its identity by being taught who it is by the Lord.

Detachment as receptivity is essential to entering into solitude. The true self that is discovered by contact in solitude with God does not merely leave behind all created things, but rather learns to perceive them from within its solitude with God. In this solitude, one is generous because one is able to live and be present as God wills. Indeed, “we cannot live for other until we have entered this solitude. If we try to live for them without first living entirely for God, we risk plunging with them all into the abyss” (*No Man is an Island*, 228). But at the same time, living entirely for God transforms the disciple not into something totally different but rather their true self, one’s most human potential. Our very individuality and freedom gradually becomes the presence of God. “This is the mystery of our vocation: not that we cease to be men in order to become angels or gods, but that the love of my man’s heart can become God’s love for God and men, and my human tears can fall from my eyes as the tears of God” (*Thoughts in Solitude*, 119) To love as our best selves, one must leave one’s false self behind and be taught one’s true identity by God in solitude.

For Merton, one’s true identity is the opposite of selfishness. One is really oneself when one is in God, for “The secret of my full identity is hidden in Him He alone

can make me who I am” (*New Seeds*, 33). “But whatever is in God is really identical to Him.” (*New Seeds*, 35) This means that “ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence” (*New Seeds*, 36). When one is hidden in God, one’s true identity is revealed: “Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character” (*New Seeds*, 60)

### MERTON ON DETACHMENT AND HOPE

Merton sees the effect of detachment on the growth of hope to be an important element in the development and expression of one’s vocation. In his book *No Man is an Island*, Merton writes on the theme of hope, noting that hope needs to be prepared for by a habit of detachment to reach its fullest stature. It is the eager anticipation of what is not seen; realizing that the best gift God has to offer is not able to be conceived or perceived, because God’s best gift is himself. Merton connects the development of hope to the depth of one’s detachment, noting that “Hope is proportionate to detachment. It brings our soul into the state of the most perfect detachment” (*No Man is an Island*, 15). The fullness of hope prepares the soul to receive the grace of union with God which is the disciple’s fundamental vocation.

This hope in God is founded on detachment in two main ways. The first is that detachment allows one to let go of reliance on one’s own power, both of which are best understood in terms of detachment as receptivity, as corresponds to the nature of hope. The appropriate action in hope is to wait on the Lord and trust that He will come. One’s virtue is not simply a matter of discipline and well-formed habits, but relies on God’s life

in us. Merton emphasizes this, noting that “if we fill our lives with silence, then we live in hope, and Christ lives in us and gives our virtues much substance” (*No Man is an Island*, 259). The fact that the virtues are developed in the disciple by God’s action is also encourages one in hoping and waiting on God. Merton turns to the story of the wise and foolish virgins waiting on the bridegroom at the wedding. Noting that all, both the wise and foolish were unable to stay awake and make it through the night on their own power, Merton interprets the parable: “The wise have oil in their lamps. That is to say they are detached from themselves and from the cares of the world, and they are full of charity. They are indeed waiting for the Bridegroom, and they desire nothing else but His coming, even though they may fall asleep while waiting for His coming” (*No Man is an Island*, 44). It is not to say that one can be unprepared and enter into union with God, but rather that all have fallen short and that in spite of this there is no cause for despair. To be detached and full of charity is enough, even though the disciple is never strong enough to be without need of mercy.

The second is that, when trusting in God, there is nothing visible to found one’s confidence on, which Merton describes when he writes that “hope deprives us of everything that is not God, in order that all things may serve their true purpose as means to bring us to God” (*No Man is an Island*, 15). Hope complements the understanding of detachment because it holds in mind that which the disciple is aiming at and oriented towards, the reward and the goal of detachment. Merton describes this goal when he writes that a disciple “cannot place his trust in the things of this life. His treasure is somewhere else, and where his treasure is, his heart is also. We are saved by hope for that which we do not see” (*No Man is an Island*, 183). This reveals the additional feature

of hope in terms of detachment, which is that if the disciple is truly to treasure God with one's whole heart, mind, soul, and strength it is necessary to treasure created things only in terms of one's relation to God. Detachment, therefore, is a foundation to a mature understanding of hope.

In turn, hope motivates one's detachment, offering a vision of the unseen God. It holds out in memory the promise of God which is the reason for the struggle of detaching oneself from natural inclinations. In addition, Merton points out that "hope seeks not only God in Himself, not only the means to reach Him, but it seeks, finally and beyond all else, God's glory revealed in ourselves" (*No Man is an Island*, 23). That is, hope reminds us that one can become a living praise of God. This hope sustains one through the suffering experienced in the process of detachment, since "if we love God and love others in Him, we will be glad to let suffering destroy anything in us that God is pleased to let it destroy, because we know that all it destroys is unimportant" (*No Man is an Island*, 90) next to the glory of God. This hope moves one to persist in one's attempt to focus exclusively on God.

Despair is the enemy of hope. The cause of despair is always a false pride in which one confidently assumes that one has the capacity to overcome a situation. When this expectation is proven false by circumstance or experience, it can be catastrophic for the person. The confidence that propelled the person forward is crushed, and, having nothing to trust in now that even self-reliance has proven unreliable, the person can slip towards despair. Merton points out this basic flaw in human reasoning; reminding the reader that "to place your trust in visible things is to live in despair" (*No Man is an Island*, 16). Despair is rooted in pride, opposed to hope which is rooted in detachment.

When confronted with despair, a person can either submit to it, or admit his/her own insufficiency. When a person manages to become detached from one's own pride, the person is able to accept the mercy of God. Paradoxically, experiences of weakness which can cause despair are crucial in the growth of an acceptance of God's mercy, for "only the man who has had to face despair is really convinced that he needs mercy" (*No Man is an Island*, 21). Honestly owning up to one's flaws is the first step in responding to despair.

Acceptance of mercy in the face of weakness is essential in the growth of hope. Hope in God is founded on the merciful action of God. The experience of God's presence despite being conscious of being unworthy moves the person to thankful gratitude. Merton exclaims "How close God is to us when we come to recognize and to accept our abjection and to cast our care entirely upon Him! Against all human expectation He sustains us" (*No Man is an Island*, 206). God supports and sustains the disciple in particularly noticeable ways when the disciple is at one's weakest.

The strength of God is made manifest most powerfully precisely at those moments where the disciple is weakest. Hope expects the support of God to do what one knows is impossible for oneself. The power of God is made perfect in weakness, acting in the disciple when the disciple is consciously relying on God for support. Merton expresses this when he says that "the power that manifests itself in our weakness is the power that was the strength of Christ's weakness – the love of the Father" (*No Man is an Island*, 211). Rather than loving with a creaturely love, the disciple acts out of God's own love instead when the disciple trusts God.

Hope also reveals an aspect of trusting in God's will. Since each one is loved by God, hope contradicts the despair which would prevent one from recognizing that God's will is in one's best interest. Submission to the will of God is the means by which God's action, that is, God's strength, reinforces the person's action. To not do the will of God is to doubt that God loves you and wills the best for you. Entering into obedience to God has two levels. The first level is the level of obedience in action. Acting in accord with God's will, when it is not one's own will, is a good way to grow in the practice of virtue. Yet it is incomplete. God desires a total union between the creature and the creator, so "sanctity does not consist merely in doing the will of God. It consists in willing the will of God" (*No Man is an Island*, 56). To will the will of God is always to will one's own best good as well, and it is a mark of sanctity to do so.

Detachment plays a major role in Merton's understanding of freedom. Freedom is not merely a lack of restrictions on the ability to choose, but rather a conscious orientation towards one's best good. And since there is no greater good than God, "freedom is perfect when no other love can impede our desire to love God" (*No Man is an Island*, 18). Perfect freedom for Merton consists in being able to have one's own will correspond to the will of God, in a confident hope in God's love.

Merton rejects an account of freedom that is focused merely on removing constrictions on one's will, reflecting that "I do not find in myself the power to be happy merely by doing what I like. On the contrary, if I do nothing except what pleases my fancy I shall be miserable almost all the time" (*No Man is an Island*, 25). Merton's reflection illustrates a problem in understanding freedom, that to choose according to inclination or desire does not result in experiencing happiness.

To find a solution for this problem in the conception of freedom, Merton argues that freedom itself has a purpose and an orientation. Then, desires need to be evaluated based on their correspondence to their orientation instead of seeing the capacity to choose unlimitedly as a good in itself. Observing that happiness is not the result of following one's desires in the absence of restrictions on one's agency, Merton asserts that "this would never be so if my will had not been created to use its own freedom in the love of others" (*No Man is an Island*, 25). For Merton, the purpose for freedom against which desires are judged is whether the desire is an action of authentic love of God.

But freedom is not merely being able to judge whether desires play into an authentic love of God and others. Freedom is not experienced in isolation. Instead, Merton argues that "my freedom is not fully free when left to itself. It becomes so when it is brought into the right relation with the freedom of another" (*No Man is an Island*, 25). By 'right relation' Merton wants to exclude imperfect subjugations of one's will to another. The fulfillment of freedom is found in, as Merton writes, "serving another will, that does not mean it will find its perfection in serving *every* other will. In fact, there is only one will in whose service I can find perfection and freedom. ... I can only become perfectly free by serving the will of God." (*No Man is an Island*, 26) Obedience to the will of God fulfills and complements and understanding of freedom as the orientation of one's desires towards an authentic love, because it recognizes one's dependence on God even in one's freedom.

The seemingly contradictory relationship between human agency and the Divine will is able to become coherent when it is realized that a hopeful trust in God's love transforms what it means to submit to God's will. Merton observes that "one of the

greatest speculative problems in theology is resolved in practical Christian living by the virtue of hope. The mystery of free will and grace... is resolved in hope which effectively co-ordinates the two in their right relation to one another” (*No Man is an Island*, 22). From a hopeful perspective, there is no conflict between authentic human freedom and following the will of God. Instead, the two gradually become identical.

The increasing conformity of one’s actions to the divine will is not sufficient by itself. One’s actions must not merely be done out of obedience, begrudgingly. Instead, there must be a genuine conversion of the will to the will of God. Merton writes that “I might still go through life conforming myself to certain indication of God’s will without ever fully giving myself to God. For that, in the last analysis, is the real meaning of His will. He does not need our sacrifices, He asks for our *selves*” (*No Man is an Island*, 63). The next step in discovering one’s freedom lies in choosing to allow God’s will to mold one’s will. This is because conformity of will is “only the beginning. Charity, divine union; transformation in Christ: these are the end” (*No Man is an Island*, 63). The end of the Christian life, unity with God, is realized in the same way that one’s true freedom is realized: by a union of will between oneself and God.

#### MERTON ON DETACHMENT AND CHARITY

Detachment is an important element in Merton’s understanding of charity, which can be seen in three main ways. First, detachment is a foundation for charity, because it forms one’s identity in hope of God’s love. Well-formed hope, detached hope, deepens one’s charity because it teaches one to make sacrifices in love. Second, loving charity is incomplete without reciprocation, and seeks to make the other equal to itself. God’s charity elevates one to likeness with God when one has been able to receive the gift of

perfect charity. Third, charity is expressed corporately, in the vocation of the person within the body of Christ. One shares the fruits of one's relationship with God in charity expressed to others.

Detachment is a foundation for charity not only because it develops hope, but also because it leads one to be able to make sacrifices for the sake of serving the good of the other. Detached hope prepares the way for growth in the growth of charity because it places the focus on God who seeks out the disciple. Merton believes "we cannot even look for Him unless we have already found Him, and we cannot find Him unless he has first found us" (*No Man is an Island*, xvii). Hope develops charity because it gives the person reason to purify oneself of selfishness for the reception of divine charity, because it recognizes that one pursues not the reward of one's own holiness surrender to the will of God, which is simultaneously what is one's best good and how to love God. Detaching oneself from one's own will and surrendering to the will of God is essential in the deepening of charity.

Detachment does not merely mean letting go of sinful behaviors and attachments, but also entails letting go of inordinate attachment to all good things. Constrained by human limitedness, one is not able to go after every good but must prioritize which goods to pursue. Merton reminds the reader that "goods must be sacrificed precisely as goods ... the fulfillment of every individual vocation demands not only the renouncement of what is evil in itself, but also of all the precise goods that are not willed for us by God" (*No Man is an Island*, 137). One must let go of some genuine goods in order to pursue God and the goods which God wills for one. Detaching oneself even from genuine goods is an important step in the growth of charity, because it prioritizes God over all else.

One good that one can become attached to is the experience of God's presence. True charity is not merely a love of the presence of God but also of God's seeming absence. Even the good of the presence of God is not to be loved instead of God himself. Merton warns that "those who love only His apparent presence cannot follow the Lord wherever he goes. They do not love Him perfectly if they do not allow Him to be absent" (*No Man is an Island*, 238). One's attachment to the presence of God can be made into an idol if it is esteemed above God. Charity grows even in the absence of God because one must grow to love God in all and above all else, whether it is presently enjoyable or not.

Another idol that can be made is that of one's projects, even those done out of love for God and neighbor. Attachment to successful ministry can prevent one from trusting in the providence of God in the defeat and failure of earnest and charitable projects. Merton goes beyond this level, wondering in a poignant passage:

"we must be detached not only from the immediate results of our work –and this detachment is difficult and rare – but from the whole complex of aims that govern our earthly lives. We have to be detached from health and security, from pleasures and possessions, from people and places and conditions and things. We have to be indifferent to life itself, in the Gospel sense, living like the lilies of the field, seeking first the Kingdom of God and trusting that all our material needs will be taken care of into the bargain. How many of us can say, with any assurance, that we have even begun to live like this?" (*No Man is an Island*, 110)

Detachment is not a mere discipline against that which is sinful, nor even letting go of goods that have been made into idols, but a practice that affects one's whole way of life. Loving in hope, the disciple trusts in God's promise without concern for one's own visible success or failure.

Loving God in the midst of failure is an entry point into the mystery of the cross. Another way that detachment can be understood is not only the letting go of goods but

also the embrace of that which is harmful out of love. Merton recognizes this when he writes that “beyond rational temperance there comes a sacrificial death which is on a higher level than mere virtue or practice discipline. Here the Cross of Christ enters” (*New Seeds*, 209). Charity grows not only in the rational growth of virtues, but also through a graced response to suffering.

Suffering can certainly be destructive of one’s life in Christ, particularly if one experiences failure in something one is deeply attached to. However, suffering need not destroy one, and is able to serve instead as a path to union of will with God. As Merton remarks, “the effect of suffering upon us depends on what we love” (*No Man is an Island*, 89). If one loves one’s success, or the feeling of the presence of God, or the love of another person and is deprived of that good and suffers for it, that one is likely not to grow but to be harmed. But if one has developed a sense of detachment that allows one to let go of all those loves, one takes refuge in the love of God which cannot be taken away. This allows one’s response to suffering to be transformative.

A transformational response to suffering reinterprets the experience as primarily being an opportunity to offer oneself to God. What is offered is not the evil of the pain. Instead, “what we consecrate to God in suffering is not our suffering but our *selves*” (*No Man is an Island*, 78). Suffering and sacrifice do not offer evil to God, but rather are for the sufficiently detached person an opportunity to offer oneself to God wholeheartedly in love.

Sacrifice of suffering as an act of love is motivated by one’s concern for the good of the other. In love of God, this good is expressed in terms of acting for the greater

glory of God or in following the will of God. Merton, as a man deeply in love, reminds the reader of the desire of authentic love, which: “seeks one thing only: the good of the loved” (*No Man is an Island*, 5). One in love is taken by the needs and wants of the one they love, even if this means difficulty or suffering on one’s own part.

But this difficulty is not resented because the lover considers the good of the beloved as one’s own good. The sacrifice involved in acting on behalf of the loved one is not an impediment to one fiercely in love. Merton astutely observes that “love not only prefers the good of another to my own, but it does not even compare the two. It has only one good: that of the beloved, which is, at the same time, my own. Love shares the good with another not by dividing it with him, but by identifying itself with him so that his good becomes my own” (*No Man is an Island*, 4). This identification by the lover with the beloved allows the lover to share in the good gifted to the beloved by one’s own sacrifice.

Charity is not merely love poured out on an unresponding subject. Rather, it acknowledges the best in the loved one, lifting up what is good and encouraging it in the beloved. Following John, Merton knows that “charity, in order to be perfect, needs an equal. It cannot be content to love others as inferiors, but raises them to its own level” (*No Man is an Island*, 170). The union of identification, if it is to be authentic, raises both lovers to equivalence with each other. A perfect charity elevates the beloved to an equality with the one loved.

When the love relationship is between God and a disciple, the love of God elevates the disciple to equality with God. Merton sees that “such a love leads to God

because it comes from Him” (*No Man is an Island*, 167). The love of God that is given by God to the disciple perfects the charity already practiced in the life of the disciple, and “God Himself creates the purity and the love of those who love Him and one another with perfect charity” (*No Man is an Island*, 13). Because of the love that God has for each disciple, God elevates to equality with Himself each one that is willing to respond in charity to God’s love.

The action of God cannot be overstated in either the growth of detachment or of charity. God acts not only in forming the soul when the soul is active in forming itself, but the soul makes especial progress when it is merely receptive to the action of God. Detached receptivity is contemplation,<sup>8</sup> because it is “an ascent to a supremely active passivity in understanding and love” (*New Seeds*, 86), which “is a pure Gift of God” (*New Seeds*, 185). The disciple is making the most progress along the way not when one strives mightily but when one is able to receive the action of God. For this reason, “in contemplation we know by ‘unknowing’” (*New Seeds*, 2). It is the unique characteristic of contemplation that “it is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God Who chooses to awaken us” (*New Seeds*, 10). In contemplation, one rests in the love of God who draws the soul ever closer to Himself. Merton describes contemplation, writing that contemplation is:

“To gather all that I am, and have all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God,

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<sup>8</sup> Contemplation in Merton is essentially detached because it is “an experiential and intuitive awareness of God as God actually exists, separated from our tendency to view God merely in terms of our own needs and anxieties and separate as well from our philosophical and theological conceptualizing about God” (Ross Labrie, “Contemplation and Action in Thomas Merton,” [Christianity and Literature, Vol. 5 No. 4 (Summer 2006) p.475-492],3).

to do His will. And then to wait in peace and emptiness and oblivion of all things. It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of God” (*New Seeds*, 46)

Understanding contemplation in this way leads one back to the importance of the virtue of detachment, which moves the disciple towards blind faith, pure hope, and perfect charity.

But even the perfection of the disciple is not the highest elevation of the human person. The beloved ones of God in turn love all the others with whom they are in contact with, and desire to share the love that they have received. “For unless it can share everything with the beloved, charity is not at rest. So it cannot find contentment merely in its own perfection. It demands the perfection of all” (*No Man is an Island*, 170). One consumed by charity desires to share one’s joy with each other person.

When one loves God absolutely, detached and forgetful of all created things, one learns to love all creation with God’s own love which has grown in the disciple.

Detachment is the root of this love of God, but it in turn allows one to love that which was left behind even more dearly, with God’s own love. Merton explains:

“Because we love God alone, beyond and above all things, and because our love shows us that He infinitely exceeds the goodness of them all, we become indifferent to all that is not God. But at the same time our love enables us to find, in God Himself, the goodness and the reality of all the things we have renounced for His sake. We then see Him Whom we love in the very things we renounced, and find them again in Him” (*No Man is an Island*, 103)

Detachment is not alienation from what is renounced, but an effort to love more deeply and authentically. For, “when charity is fully mature, the brother whom I love is not too much of a distraction from the God in Whom my love for him terminates” (*No Man is an Island*, 172). Full-fledged charity is the flame of God’s love with which one loves God and all God’s creation. Detachment is always oriented towards the development of this

exemplary charity, which is the method by which God perfects the soul. In this one is able to realize their call to holiness.

Each one's particular vocation is a manifestation of this call to love absolutely. Since the holiness of each is bound up with the holiness of all, even a perfect individual charity has much more room to grow. The location of a complete perfection in charity is in the Church, where all are able to worship God as one. Within the Church, each one is able to find one's role, one's vocation of how to love God and neighbor. Developing in charity because of one's relationship with God allows one to participate more fully in one's vocation because "the more perfect we are ourselves the more we are able to contribute to the good of the whole Church of God" (*No Man is an Island*, 8). The quality of one's relationship to God nourishes one's activity in the life of the Church.

## CONCLUSION

So far the first two elements in the life of the disciple that are affected by the practice of detachment have been exposed: finding one's true identity and growing in the theological virtues of hope and of charity. Merton is helpful to begin the conversation on detachment with a contemporary reader because of the lack of a need to translate his conception of the human person, and by approaching the question of detachment through shared contemporary questions about one's true self. One implication of detachment's role in forming one's true identity is that detachment is necessary in the life of every person. Since all have fallen and stand in need of the mercy of God, one finds one's true freedom not in the absence of restriction on the capacity to follow one's desires, but in ordering one's desires to the most perfect end. To avoid the restlessness that comes from following each whim, one must find true freedom and authentic identity in Christ.

Merton also points out the second crucial step in the inquiry into detachment: the role of detachment in perfecting the theological virtues. Through the theological virtues the disciple is formed after the image of God through one's intentionally chosen habits and receives the virtues through the working of God in one's person. It is through the infused virtues that the soul is unified to God, but these build upon the virtue naturally present because of the habits of the disciple. These virtues lead to soul onwards towards its beloved. As one learns to be cherished by God, one's own capacity to love expands in proportion to one's virtue.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **DETACHMENT IN ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS**

The importance of detachment as necessary for relationship with God is emphasized most in the writings of St. John of the Cross. John's emphasis is on how every believer is called to intimate unity with God. Foundationally, John relies on the difference between God and creatures as a crucial element in his theology of union. It is precisely because of his emphasis on the difference between God and creatures that the vision he articulates of the meaning of the spiritual life is so beautiful.

Rather than obviating the infinite distance and replacing it with some lesser, non-infinite distance which some great persons could cross, he remains faithful to the idea that union is utterly beyond the capacity of any created person. But God, out of love, elevates the soul to equality to himself because love desires to love an equal. Therefore, the union of the soul to God relies not on anything in the creature but on the love of God which is infinite and can do all things. Precisely because of this faith in God, the disciple's invitation to union with God cannot rely on any particular quality in the disciple but on God's ever-present love. Just as every decision means saying 'yes' to one choice and 'no' to every other possibility, saying yes to God's invitation to union means refusing to let any created thing have priority in one's life over God.

In John, since the disciple relies absolutely on God to grow in union with God, faith is the only way to union with God. Faith is the centerpoint of John's theology - it is because of the nature of faith that John emphasizes detachment and 'nada'. Karol

Wojtyla, in his doctoral dissertation *Faith According to St. John of the Cross*, explains the nature of the virtue of faith and why it necessitates detachment. An exposition of his argument and relating it to detachment, will also be a major thrust of this chapter. Faith

and charity are inseparable in John's work, so any examination of John's conception of faith is incomplete without examining the relationship between the two. The virtue of charity is perfected when one is able to lay down one's life for a friend. As one becomes a friend of God, it gradually becomes clear that embrace of the cross is part of every Christian vocation. Growing in charity, one is able to hear the Lord speaking in one's own life that 'whoever wants to be my disciple should pick up his cross and follow me'.

Thus far, detachment has only been discussed as a help to the virtues or as an element in the formation of one's identity. This section names a new aspect of detachment – it is not only the means to union, but the content of union as well. In this union, the disciple embraces the cross out of love to give glory to God. The practice of detachment is incomplete without an embrace of the cross. And because of detachment, this embrace is able to be perceived by the disciple as a good, because it is done out of love for God and neighbor. Since in union one is in the image of Christ, the disciple in union with the Lord is necessarily cruciform. This is expressed beautifully by another canonized saint, Edith Stein, who interprets and explains this facet of St. John of the

Cross in her work *The Science of the Cross*. This chapter will draw extensively upon her connection of the mystical marriage to the cross and to detachment. In addition, her biblical foundations for the embrace of the cross connect it to the basic experience of discipleship, furthering the argument that detachment is a necessary practice for all disciples. The connection between detachment and the final theological virtue, faith, and detachment as the embrace of the cross are the final two elements in our reflection on detachment.

#### DETACHMENT AND FAITH IN ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

Karol Wojtyla, in his dissertation *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross*, expounds the conception of faith contained in the principal works of St. John of the Cross. In his work, there are three themes that are useful for understanding the role that detachment plays in the spiritual life. The first important theme is the understanding of faith as a form of blindness. The difference between faith and knowledge lies in this blindness. Detachment from the images that are provided by concepts is an initial moment in the development of the virtue of faith. The second element that Wojtyla points out that faith is supernatural in form, and so provides a proximate means to union with God. Despite the fact that no created thing can cause a likeness between the soul and God, faith is divine in essence and can provide a proportional path to union with God, unlike every created thing. The third element which Wojtyla focuses on is how faith and charity are inseparable. This discussion illuminates the union which is the end of Christian life, and how detachment plays into the disciple's vocational response to God.

The first important element that Wojtyla points out in his discussion of faith is the ‘blindness’ that faith causes in the disciple. This blindness results from the nature of faith to leave behind conceptual vision, while not contradicting what can be seen. However, faith is not a privation but also a vision of that which cannot be comprehended. The blindness of faith results not from a lack of light but from an overabundance of light. The essential difference between God and the disciple means that the disciple is overwhelmed and unable to clearly perceive God, but rather only in the darkness of faith. This discussion of faith leads to a dilemma – one experiences nothing, but in fact is being led in darkness to the heart of the divine One. This dilemma is the center of why detachment is important in the spiritual life.

In the understanding of faith, the first important moment is to recognize that God is beyond any conceptual description. God’s infinity means that any concept must ultimately be insufficient to attain to union with God. Therefore, a detachment from concepts is necessary in the formation of the intellect. The clarity of knowledge can never fully capture the wholeness of God, and so it is necessary to approach God in humility, in the intellectual obscurity of faith. Wojtyla writes that “knowledge through faith is obscure, not clear. Hence, in faith God is a hidden God; he is hidden because through faith he is in the intellect as the object known in the knowing faculty” (Wojtyla, 63). The approach to God in faith corresponds to Merton’s conception of authentic charity developing in a reverence of the other’s solitude, because it allows God to approach the soul in God’s own time.

In this darkness, the lack of concepts, the person is drawn into likeness with God because of God’s action in the intellect through faith. The darkness of faith fulfills the

intellect, and this fulfillment happens in the intimacy of the soul with God through faith. Wojtyla describes John's approach to faith, writing: "He says that faith bestows on the intellect a likeness to God because as God in himself, in his intimate nature, is darkness to the intellect, so faith obscures and darkens the intellect" (Wojtyla, 69). Since the solitude of God, is beyond the capacity of a created power to perceive, the path to union between God and the disciple relies on faith's blind perception of God.

Through the progression of the whole life of the disciple, the vision of faith remains a trust and not perception. In this life, there is never a replacement of the obscure blindness of faith with a clear vision of God. The darkness is never overcome except after death in the vision of the resurrected life. Wojtyla writes that "throughout a person's earthly life the virtue of faith will continue to work interiorly, preparing it gradually, through the grades of contemplation and the purgation of the dark nights, for the beatific vision in glory. The entire mystical evolution takes place within the limits of the obscurity of faith" (Wojtyla, 90). Darkness in faith, then, is always a part of the disciple's life, because of the difference between the nature of God and the nature of any created thing.

Detachment enters into Wojtyla's explanation of faith at this point. In addition to the formal reason why faith is blind (the difference in nature between the disciple and God), there is an additional, more subjective explanation as well. Wojtyla has an insight into this in this passage: "Objectively speaking, the reason is that they lack a proportional likeness to God, but here in chapter 4 of book I [of the Ascent] the reason is a more subjective one: the soul clothed with these things (or more properly, clothed with desires for such things or with voluntary attachments to such things) is not capable of

union with God” (Wojtyla, 99). Crucially, the life of faith is sustained in the experience of the disciple by the increasing practice of detachment. The orientation of faith towards God is not only a detachment from clear concepts, but is also a detachment from all created things, to accept the priority of faith.

The priority of faith in the path to union with God of the disciple is the motivation for detachment. Because faith is an absolute trust of God, and one never is able to fully know or perceive God in this life, to develop the life of faith it is necessary to become detached from trusting in or relying on any created thing. John’s position is that “His general principle is that such things must not be sought or desired. ....all these apprehensions are essentially corporeal.... Hence when they are compared to faith, their slight value becomes apparent” (Wojtyla, 119). In detached faith, the disciple trusts more and more absolutely in God and less in any created thing.

The foundational principle for John’s theology, the motivation for detachment, the explanation of his emphasis of ‘nada’, all this is rooted in the conception of faith that John articulates. This is something that Wojtyla emphasizes as a key to understanding John’s writings: “the whole concept of the dark night is based on the structure and intrinsic logic of faith” (Wojtyla, 115). Detachment is the ground in which faith grows, for without it one necessarily still relies on created things and not on God. The basic principle from which John’s theology is generated is that “Faith, not creatures, is the means of union” (Wojtyla, 204). The blind, obscure faith is where one meets and perceives God, and this faith is grown in and developed by detachment.

The second major moment in St. John of the Cross’ conception of faith is that, although it is perceived as darkness, it is in fact a blindness caused by an overabundance

of light. A person is naturally able to perceive and understand through the working of their sensory faculties. Summarizing John, Wojtyla writes that “Natural knowledge relies on the senses” (Wojtyla, 78-79), but “The reason why the virtue of faith surpasses every created nature and every intellect is the divine light that is present in faith” (Wojtyla, 67). The divine light overwhelms and blinds the soul because the light of the divine is too much for it. John’s classic explanation of the dark night is that it is not a departure of the divine presence, but rather when God draws too close for the level of purity of the disciple. The image is that of the disciple looking into the sun, where the light that is needed to see is in fact the cause of the disciple’s blindness.

But this overwhelmed blindness is also a fulfillment and a place of rest for the intellect. Because the intellect cannot be satisfied by any created thing but always longs for more, the soul searches constantly for more. It is not satisfied by appearances, but “the intellect naturally seeks the essence of things” (Wojtyla, 82). But in the case of God there is a difference between the essence of the seeker and the sought which prevents any clear knowledge. This explanation of the interaction between the blindness of the person and the divine light shining on them is deepened by a further explanation. Wojtyla writes that “the obscurity and darkness enable us the better to understand the ‘excessive light’ of faith. That light, although preserving all its connatural power in relation to that which is revealed, does not illumine the intellect intrinsically; rather, it elevates it beyond its natural capacity and beyond its natural incapacity for attaining the essence of that which is revealed “ (Wojtyla, 84-85). The very darkness or blindness serves to illuminate the nature of faith, and how it requires that one rely fully in God. This is necessary because when one is confronted with God “the natural light of the intellect is of no avail for

grasping the reality presented to it; it must be replaced by the infused light of faith” (Wojtyla, 83). That is, the darkness of faith is really the highest possible perception of the divine in this life because in becoming detached from the natural ways of perceiving, one is able to rely on God in simple faith.

The third important moment in understanding the blindness of faith is reconciling the real perception of God in faith with the experiential darkness. This seeming contradiction is easily resolved by noting that the vision and the blindness operate on two different levels, the psychological and the objective. Because of this, “the two characteristics, light and darkness, are so intimately related to the virtue of faith that either one can be predicated of faith with equal justification” (Wojtyla, 68). Faith is necessarily obscure psychologically because it elevates the person out of one’s natural capacity into what is not entirely comprehensible.

John uses the image of a man born blind attempting to understand colors to explain the different levels of how one is able to understand God in faith. Although he can be told what color is, and trust in the description and witness to color that others give him, the man will never understand what colors are. The man knows about colors, but does not know colors. In the same way, one can believe in faith the precepts of revelation, that is, to know about God, but it is a further level to know God. This knowledge is given to the disciple in faith. Through faith, God communicates himself to the disciple in the beginning stages of union. In John of the Cross’ description of the spiritual life, “faith not only unites the intellect with God by proposing to it the revealed truths which speak of God and what he is in himself, but it also presents the divinity to the intellect in a manner that is more ‘experiential’. ...it not only enables the intellect to

know God intimately and subjectively... but even more, to experience what God is” (Wojtyla, 69). Therefore, it can be seen that there are two real ways in which God is communicated to the soul, through the knowledge in which one learns about God, but also through the experience of God in faith. Wojtyla expertly points out that, in faith, “this means that the soul truly possesses God alone without any admixture of creatures, but psychologically the soul experiences nothingness or ‘nada’” (Wojtyla, 107). Therefore, detachment is experienced as nothingness, but is in fact the preparation in faith of the soul for union with God.

The second major element in John of the Cross’ understanding of faith is that it is a ‘proximate means’ to union with God. Union is the overriding concern that dominates all of John’s works and from which John draws all his priorities. And as Wojtyla points out, “anyone who seeks in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* whatever can be found there concerning faith will perhaps notice first of all how often St. John of the Cross repeats statements in which faith is referred to as the means of union with God” (Wojtyla, 33). By extension, faith as a means to union is overwhelmingly important in John’s theology.

John’s perspective is utterly centered on God, predominantly from the perspective of detachment as receptivity, rather than the perspective of detachment as formation. While both are always operating simultaneously in a person, John gives precedence to receptivity as the primary mode of understanding detachment because, while the action of the person is essential and important, God’s action is primary in that person’s growth in holiness. John notes that “it should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more. ... The soul, then should advert that God is the principal agent in this matter” (*Living Flame of Love*, 684). As a consequence of God

being the primary actor in the person's growth in holiness, John's perspective of placing the importance of God before all created things holds true, no matter their own goodness or holiness.

Rather than beginning with himself and moving towards God, John has already met God and is looking back to guide others along the way. Having already been united to God in love is a key awakening that animates and orients John's perspective.

Revealingly, John writes: "And here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: the Soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures" (*Living Flame of Love*, 710). Here John reveals the key insight of his whole personal orientation: that to put God first means to set aside everything else – but that in turn, putting God first allows one to love others not only with one's natural capacity to love, but with God's own love as well.

John recognizes the likeness between God and creatures, for to not do so would be a rather severe departure from the body of the tradition. Examining his works, it becomes clear that John loves creation from the way that it constantly appears in positive contexts, especially in the poems.<sup>9</sup> Beyond that, the images that John uses from creation multiply and recur in his works: the image of the consuming flame(*Dark Night of the Soul*, 405,416), the image of the nursing mother(*Dark Night of the Soul*, 361-2), the image of the bride(*Spiritual Canticle*, 628), the image of a ray of light through a window(*Dark Night of the Soul*, 411), the image of a bird tied by a single string(*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 143). All these images imply a careful observation of creation, looking

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Thompson examined the poetry of St. John in great detail, particularly the meaning of the grammar, style and images. Overwhelmingly, Thompson perceives a incarnational and positive spirituality in John's poetic writings. (Colin Thompson, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night*. [Washington D.C.:The Catholic University of America Press, 2003.]).

for the way that God is revealed in the goodness of what is. In addition, there are numerous attestations of John's unusually strong love for the beauty of creation, particularly of music and of the stars(Hardy, 93). He also made a habit of stopping along the way between his residence and the cloister where he ministered, stopping half-way up the hill to sit and observe the beauty of creation(Bruno, 327). All this is evidence that the "Mystical Doctor agrees with all the theologians in stating that there is some kind of likeness between God and creatures precisely as beings, or by reason of their existence" (Wojtyla, 39). John does not deny the goodness of creation or it's resemblance to God.<sup>10</sup>

However, the crux of the matter is the center around which the intimacy is built between creatures and God. St. Teresa of Avila, John's friend and spiritual companion, states in her *Interior Castle* that the best kind of friend is the one that cares more for her (Teresa's) relationship with God than for their relationship to each other(Dubay, 280,284). In forming the virtues, real intimacy with others is a nearly indispensable help. But as John notes: "No matter how much individuals do through their own efforts, they cannot purify themselves enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love. God must take over..." (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 367). For this reason, John's prioritization of the action of God over the formative action taken by the person in loving relationships is a valuable shift in perspective.

The difference that John perceives is that, while there is a resemblance between created things that the divine, there is a difference in their natures. Avoiding

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Chowning defends John's position, writing that "John's negation spirituality does not disparage the beauty and dignity of the human person. We were created in the image and likeness of God, created out of love to be the spouse of Christ, created for union with God thorough love. Love is the reason we exist"(Daniel Chowning, "Free to Love: Negation in the Doctrine of St. John of the Cross," [*Carmelite Studies*, (1992): 13p(online)], 4).

oversimplification, John also recognizes the infinity of God and the natural limitedness of created things. Because of the problem of infinity, “there is no essential likeness or connection between them and God. On the contrary, the distance between their being and his divine being is infinite” (Wojtyla, 39). No matter what perfections are attained by creatures, there always remains the distance of infinity from that perfection to God’s perfection.

Because of the infinite distance between God and creatures, there can be no adequate comparison between created things and God. Just as it is impossible to speak equivocally about God and creatures, because the meaning of the terms must be adapted to the infinity of God and the finite nature of all created things, it is impossible to compare between creatures and God. Summarizing a passage near the end of the *Ascent*, Wojtyla writes that: “His conclusion is that the Deity is not comparable to any creature; rather, there is an infinite distance between the divine reality or divine essence and all created things, considered in their very natures” (Wojtyla, 112). This applies despite the relative perfection of the creature, because the wholeness or fullness of a limited nature is still infinitely different from the perfection of an infinite nature. Therefore he writes again that “no creature, even the most perfect, considered in its essence, can be compared to the divine essence (Wojtyla, 40). No comparison is possible between created things and God.

No created thing can serve as a means to union with God, since it is not adequate to the task by reason of its finitude. Since no comparison can be made between God and creatures, creatures are not a viable way to work towards union with God. “And now we must state further that no created thing can serve as a means of union with God with

respect to the intellect. As St. John of the Cross says: Created things cannot serve as a proportionate means by which the intellect can reach God” (Wojtyla, 41). The essential difference, the difference in nature between God and creatures, prevents any created thing from serving as the basic path to union with God.

Although creatures have an essential difference from God, there must be some means to union with God. John of the Cross finds this means in faith. Wojtyla observes that in John’s writings, “it [faith] is the *proportionate* means of union, and therefore it possesses an *essential* likeness to God” (Wojtyla, 42). According to the writings of St. John, faith is able to unite the disciple to God, where every other created thing fails; faith is able to unite the soul to God.

Faith is able to be this means of union because, as Wojtyla notes, “the nature of the virtue of faith is well put in St. John of the Cross: that by which faith is faith is something similar to the divinity. Faith consists in that particular likeness” (Wojtyla, 43). The very definition of faith is contained in this likeness to God. The nature of faith is divine, and so allows a means to union between the soul and God.

Faith, therefore, can relate to the divine because it is similar to the divine nature. But the question remains as to how faith relates to the soul. John explains this relationship in a major portion of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. John of the Cross’ work *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is really two separate projects that John attempts. The first is centered around the explication of his poem “One Dark Night”, and centers on explaining the necessity of resisting the appetites that distract a person from God. The second project is a correlation of the three capacities of the person (Intellect, Memory, Will) to the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, Charity). *The Ascent of Mount*

*Carmel* is divided into three ‘books’. The first book and the first two-and-a-half chapters of the second book are devoted to the first project of explaining the poem. The rest of book two and all of book three are devoted to the second project of correlating intellect, memory and will to faith, hope and love. Intellect is the faculty to which corresponds. Wojtyla writes, that “the virtue of faith can serve as a proportionate means to union ... because this essential likeness relates directly to the intellect” (Wojtyla, 44) Faith, then, is the theological virtue that corresponds to the intellect of a person.

The virtue of faith serves to perfect the faculty of the intellect to render it capable of union with God. The practice of a virtue takes place in the habits of a person, and the faculty is formed by the habits for good or ill. In John’s theology a virtuous “habit constitutes a certain perfection of a faculty” (Wojtyla, 70). The intellect is perfected in the development of faith, and in this perfection of the faculty of the person, allows for a union between the person and God. Faith does not eliminate the operation of the intellect, but instead prepares it to be able to perceive what is possible of God. Wojtyla notes this aspect of faith when he writes that “faith does not transform the intellect intrinsically; it simply elevates the intellect and unites it with the essence of revealed truths” (Wojtyla, 90). The intellect is not removed or transformed, but rather perfected in faith to be able to receive a perception of God.

This perfection of the faculties does not result in a perfect clarity in this life, but rather an obscure vision. Faith receives God, but only blindly. In his own summary of his work, John writes that “the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity – which relate to these three faculties as their proper supernatural objects, and by means of which the faculties of the soul are united with God – produce the same emptiness and darkness,

each one in its own faculty: faith in the intellect, hope in the memory, and charity in the will” (Wojtyla, 54). The perfection of the faculties consists not in a perfect vision, but in an emptiness and darkness in which it is possible to receive the communication of God’s self. Therefore, the way that faith moves a person to union is because it serves as a bridge between the divine self and the intellect. To the intellect, the perfection of the faculty that occurs in faith is blinding and necessitates that one detach oneself from conceptual knowledge.

A mature detachment in the intellect is the result of the perfection of the intellectual faculty by faith. The intellect is gradually purified of concepts by faith so as to receive God. Wojtyla summarizes the process of the purification of the faculties by their corresponding virtues as he writes that “the soul is capable of making the transition from created things to the divine reality, but this transition requires a twofold night: the night of deprivation of created things that constantly stimulate the desire through sense knowledge to draw these things to itself; and the night of union with God” (Wojtyla, 104). The soul learns detachment in the nights through the practice of the virtues, and so the intellect is formed by the habit of faith.

This detachment is necessary because the faculties of the soul desire the infinite but possess only limited and creaturely capacity. Therefore, the soul is always restless when it is still occupied primarily with created things instead of God. It is an insight of St. John of the Cross that “union demands the purification of the faculties and their being emptied of everything finite, limited, particular, and distinct. The purgation of the faculties is therefore a function of the theological virtues” (Wojtyla, 232). The role of faith in the purgation of the soul is to trust not in created things but in God.

The third major element in John's conception of faith is that faith is inseparable from the other virtues, but is connected in a particular way to the practice of charity. Union with God, as the goal and motivation of the virtues and their resulting detachment, dictates that "it is impossible to focus exclusively on the virtue of faith in his writings. This applies not only to faith as a distinct and separate virtue – since St. John always speaks of a living faith that operates through charity to unite the soul to God" (Wojtyla, 25). Because the nature of union with God determines the relationship between faith and charity, it is necessary to examine the possible types of union with God that St. John describes.

There are two kinds of union that John describes in his approach to the final stage of the spiritual life. The first kind is the natural union, which is the presence of God in every soul. This union is related to the creation of the person, who exists by a union with God in some manner. Union of this sort is assumed to exist by John and rarely treated. But he does say that "God is always present to the soul, giving to the soul its natural being" (Wojtyla, 49). Natural union is the presence of God to the person that sustains one in existence.

Supernatural union is the union between God and the soul that molds the soul after the image of God. This second kind of union is the union of likeness between God and the soul. It is not possible for God to communicate his essence to one, but the charity of God can transform the soul so that it stands as a perfect, though limited, reflection of God's image. To be like God requires a "union with God, which is the goal of the soul's striving, [which] is presented as a supernatural communication with God, a sharing in divinity itself through grace and love. And because of the power of love, the union can

reach the point of transformation – the transforming union in God” (Wojtyla, 52).

Through love, the love of God, the soul is reformed into the image of Christ, and is able to share in and reflect God’s own divinity which has been communicated to it.

Supernatural union is the union between the soul and God in love that transforms the soul.

Loving union of this second kind is the focus of St. John’s work. In this work, we are concerned not with the presence of God to every person, but the transformative summit of contemplation in which the soul is united to God. Wojtyla points out that “St. John of the Cross treats of the union of the soul with God throughout his work – what it is the means to attain it, the various degrees of union and its definitive degree. All four treatises treat of this same subject” (Wojtyla, 48). It can be seen then, that the transforming union with God is the center and the goal of St. John’s writings. His work is concerned throughout with describing and explaining this union so that others might be able to follow.

Transforming union does not occur through unaided faith but through faith in relation to charity. Love effects a likeness between the lover and the beloved, and so it is through the reception and practice of infused divine charity that one is able to resemble God. Faith, then, serves to prepare the soul to receive God’s own love with which it loves and is transformed. Understanding that it is love that is transformative of the soul, Wojtyla writes that “All of the activity of faith previously described is directed to charity...Faith is a means of union only in relation to charity” (Wojtyla, 137). The virtues complement one another, faith preparing the soul to be receptive of God and God’s love, faith moving the soul to likeness and union with God.

Within the transforming union, John distinguishes two stages. The first is that of a habitual union, where the soul is constantly united to God by means of a habitual presence to God in faith. The second type is that of actual union, in which the soul is drawn to God not only by means of the soul's habits, but acts in union with God's will in charity. Wojtyla writes that "Since in that text the habitual union of the soul and its faculties with God is distinguished from actual union, it is evident that actual union is more perfect" (Wojtyla, 70). The habitual union is something that is sustained in the soul over time, but the actual union flares up in this life as intense moments of love for God and is not able to be sustained until the next life.

Only charity is means to union of likeness. Despite the fact that faith unites the intellect with God, the capacity of the intellect cannot contain or even perceive God because of God's infinity. Therefore, "faith can be called the means of union of the intellect with God, but not the means of transformation" (Wojtyla, 254). This is because the intellect is the faculty proper to the virtue of faith, and "the intellect, considered in its natural capacity, is incapable of attaining to union with God" (Wojtyla, 61). The union of the intellect with God is insufficient to transform the soul in its entirety, the union of the will through charity is necessary too.

As has been explained before, one of the central operating principles in the writings of St. John of the Cross is that love causes a likeness between the lover and the beloved, and that this likeness is the cause of union between the soul and God. This is the reason that St. John argues that a perfect charity empties its corresponding faculty, the will. Making an analogy between the emptiness caused in the intellect by faith and the emptiness caused in the will by perfect charity, Wojtyla writes "since the act of

abnegation depends ultimately on the will and the will is operative through love, it is easy to see the connection between that which occurs in the intellect by way of the abnegation of particular species, which is the function of faith, and that which occurs in the will, where the negation of one form implies the affirmation of the opposite form” (Wojtyla,139). That is: because love has the power to cause a likeness with the object of its love, and because God is not like creatures, any love for created things as created things makes the soul unlike God and “incapable of pure union, with God and transformation in God, until the will puts aside its love, affection – or better, its attachment to creatures” (Wojtyla, 99). Detachment is a necessary element in the growth of charity, particularly for union with God to come to fruition.

St. John explains the necessity of detachment as an element in the union of likeness with God by means of the image of a window and the ray of light(*Dark Night of the Soul*, 411). The soul is like a window through which the light of God shines. The more dirt that is stripped away from the window, the more purely it passes the light through itself. The window itself becomes transformed by the ray of light that passes through it. So it is with the soul. As the soul is purified of every attachment, God can be more clearly perceived in that person because the image of God is brought forth in the person. The window communicates the same light that it receives, and so can become identical in image, but it remains a window and not the light by reason of its nature.

This image also serves to explain what John means by ‘becomes God by participation’, a phrase which is used frequently to explain what occurs in the union of the soul to God. In the image, the window retains its own nature, but is able to shine with

a light that is not its own. Incapable of emitting light on its own, the window still is light and gives light because it shares the light of God.

‘Union with God’ and ‘participation in divinity’ are interchangeable phrases in John’s writing, as can be seen by noting that when John writes “faith is the means of supernatural union for the intellect and its participation in divinity” (Wojtyla, 57), it is the same sense as the passages above describing how the virtues’ perfection of the faculties leads to union with God, except that ‘participation in divinity’ is substituted for ‘union’. Language about participation in God is important for understanding John’s approach to union with God because “it permeates the entire mystical doctrine of St. John of the Cross. We find it in *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, *The Living Flame*, and wherever he treats of the highest degrees of union” (Wojtyla, 89). Since the person’s nature remains the same, and remains finite, participation is the mechanism which moves the soul to likeness with God.

When the will is empty and devoid of all that is not God’s will in the perfection of charity, the soul participates in the love of God by being conformed to God’s will. Detached charity allows the will to let go of all of the soul’s passions and be “constantly and solely occupied in the same thing as the divine will, namely, loving God and giving to him by its love that which it has by participation- God himself” (Wojtyla, 230). In following the divine will, one loves with God’s love, just as the window shines with a light that it is not its own.

Because there must be an equality in love, God elevate the soul and gives himself to it so that “the soul becomes ‘God by participation’ and therefore by participation it possesses divinity itself. Then the will gives to the Beloved through love nothing less

than that which it had received from him: the gift of participated divinity” (Wojtyla, 230). In love, the soul gives freely back to God all that it has received from God.

The method of the soul’s elevation to perfect conformity with God as far as it is capable is caused by the action of God’s love for the soul which, when received without impediment, transforms the person into truly the image of God. John’s thought aligns with an ancient strand of the tradition that emphasizes a dramatic continuity between the human and the divine as one of the implications of the Incarnation. But this divinization is not without forgetting that any human perfection is always a creaturely and limited perfection, not to be confused with God even if the human person is conformed perfectly to the image of God.

John’s claim of becoming ‘gods by participation’ is limited by the natural capacity of human persons. John of the Cross distinguishes between God and human persons as he writes: “St. John [the Epistler] says: ‘We know that we shall be like him’ not because the soul will have as much capacity as God – this is impossible- but because all it is will become like God. Thus it will be called, and shall be, God through participation” (*Dark Night of the Soul*, 445). That is to say: God remains infinite, and humans remain creaturely and limited, but it is possible to have a perfect, though creaturely, conformity to God.

In participation with the divine, in unity with God, the soul loves God exclusively. Since the soul gives back to God all that it has received from God, one who loves God gives everything back to God. Any other love makes the soul like something other than God and disrupts the union between the soul and God. Wojtyla writes in summary of John that “the lover is united to the beloved and transformed into the beloved by

participation. It is in this sense that love is exclusive, because by its very nature it tends to transform the lover into the beloved” (Wojtyla, 113). Participation in God is dependent on a complete detachment, because the means to union with God is through the perfection of the soul’s faculties by the theological virtues which empty the soul of all that is not God. In this emptiness, the soul is able to love not only with its own love, but with God’s love as well.

### DETACHMENT AS THE CONTENT OF UNION

Detachment is more than a means to the development of the virtues which lead to union – it is also a precursor to the content of what union with God is like. The practice of detachment prepares one for union with God but is also the image of that union. This can be seen most clearly by reflecting on the cross, which has been done by Edith Stein in her work *The Science of the Cross*. This work is a reflection on the role of the cross in the writings of St. John of the Cross, both in the experience of the nights and in the union between the soul and God. Since we have already spoken extensively of the means to union and how that is furthered by the practice of detachment, in this section we will focus on union itself. Union is characterized by John, as an inheritor of the Catholic western mystic tradition, as a wedding between the soul and God. The mystical marriage is the highest result of the elevation of the soul in this life. In it, the soul loves God with God’s own love. In the union between the soul and God, the soul embraces the cross out of love.

Detachment, as has been said, is a critical component on the way to union. Through detachment, one leaves behind that which distracts it from loving God with one’s whole self. Detachment is paradoxical because although “it seemed to lead to

death ... it was the way of life” (Stein, 18). It prepares the person to wait on the Lord and for receiving God. Union with God, the fundamental vocation of the human person, is impossible without an adequate practice of the habit of detachment.

Union with God demands an abnegation of the false self, which is experienced as a real death. This can be seen to be true when one examines the mystery of the cross and resurrection. In the death of the old self, one is raised by God into a new form of life unimaginable beforehand. “This is the point. The Cross is not an end in itself. It is raised up and points above itself” (Stein, 11). The death of self in detachment is necessary for the soul to be raised up to union with God. As Stein summarizes St. John: “the cross and the night are the way to the heavenly light: this is the good tidings of the Cross” (Stein, 19). Detachment is the cross by which the soul can be raised to life with God.

It is necessary because the path to God is not something easily trod with little effort and assured success. Indeed, Stein reflects on the dangers of attachment to the soul which pursues God, writing: “how strait is the gate and how narrow the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it’ (Mt. 7:14). ... truly, it is very narrow, narrower than you believe.... This way to the high mountain of perfection can be ascended only by those travelers that bear no burden that might pull them down” (Stein, 20). The difficulty of the ascent must be acknowledged to understand how detachment is a foundation for the mystical marriage of the soul to God.

The soul yearns for the infinite, and no created thing can cause satisfaction that lasts. Moving from one thing to the next can distract the soul from its destination in God, but “the soul that has been inwardly touched by God can no longer find peace in anything

that is not God” (Stein, 180). The whole work of detachment prepares the soul to accept and be transformed in the soul’s union with God.

John of the Cross describes the soul’s union through the image of a marriage. The closeness of the union exceeds any other kind of love, needing to be described in the most intimate of human loves. “The eternal purpose for which God has created the soul is a relationship with him that could not be described more accurately than by a bridal union” (Stein, 183). The mystical marriage of the soul to God is the end towards which the infinite appetite of the soul is oriented.

However, the image of the marriage is like any other human language about God. The marriage relationship is in fact most completely fulfilled when applied not as an analogy of human loves to the soul’s relationship with God, but rather “the true meaning of a bride relationship is nowhere so truly and perfectly fulfilled as in the loving union of God with the soul” (Stein, 183). Mystical marriage, the union in love between the soul and God, is in fact the image which the human love in marriage reflects. “Once this has been grasped, the image and what it signifies actually exchange their roles: the bridal union with God is seen to be the original and true bridal state, while the corresponding human relationships appear as imperfect images of this original” (Stein, 183). Marriage language is the best description of the union between the soul and God because it focuses on the unitive power of love, which draws one ever closer to God.

In the delight of the union of the mystical marriage with God, the soul loves recklessly, leaving behind all restraint in order to love God absolutely. The divine love in the mystical marriage relationship is the power behind the fulfillment of the soul’s appetite. All else is left behind in the soul’s rush towards the beloved. As Stein writes:

“In return the soul, too, gives itself to him unreservedly: ‘It has only the one desire to belong to Him for ever and to retain nothing that is different from Him.’ And since God has removed from it all else to which it had been attached, the soul can give itself to him not only with its will but indeed wholly and completely” (Stein, 198). That is to say, the complete love which unifies the soul to God is made possible by the detachment which the Lord encourages and develops in the soul.

This love can only come to completion in the beatific vision in glory.<sup>11</sup> The total consummation of the mystical marriage cannot be completed until one is raised from the dead. “The greatest desire of the soul is equality with the divine love. It wishes to love God in the same what as it is loved by Him. But it cannot achieve this in this life, not even in the highest stage, since this needs the transformation of glory. There it will love God with the will and power of God Himself” (Stein, 202). One remains a limited person, unable to fully surrender to the love of God and return to God the same love with which one is loved.

But the love of this union is that which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and is the highest glory of this life. Despite its incompleteness in this life, the divine love moves the soul into participation with God and “thus is effected such an intimate union of both natures and such a communication of the divine with the human nature that both, without any change in their being, appear as God, It is true, this union cannot be perfect

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Howells on the distinction between the habitual actual union possible in this life and the beatific vision, stating that “the soul does not rest in the vision of God, as it will be able to do in heaven, but having attained the permanent union of spiritual marriage it goes out again into the world.” (Edward Howells, *John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila: Mystical Knowing and Selfhood*. [New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002], 128).

in this life, but it surpasses all one could say or think” (Stein, 193). The end of the disciple’s life is this union with God.

The identification between the soul and God becomes nearly complete. In the union of the soul to God, the soul patterns itself after the image of Christ. In this union, the soul “no longer live[s] their own life but the life of Christ, they endure not their own sufferings but the Passion of Christ” (Stein, 196). The identification of the soul with God extends to the sufferings of Christ and his sacrifice on behalf of sinners. In the soul united with God, “Christ becomes once more incarnate in the Christian, which means another resurrection from death on the Cross. The new man bears the marks of Christ’s wounds in his body... Thus the bridal union of the soul with God is the end for which the soul was created, bought by the Cross, accomplished on the Cross, and sealed with the Cross for all eternity” (Stein, 207). The resurrected mystical marriage of the soul leads the soul to crucifixion and sacrifice for God’s beloved ones. The marriage of the soul to God leads the soul to embrace the Cross.

Passions and desires are complex, some of which lead us not into love of God and others, but rather into a self-love which can harm or destroy those relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, it is necessary to embrace the cross, and lay down our desires out of love for God and neighbor. John writes: “If individuals resolutely submit to the carrying of the cross, if they decidedly want to find and endure trial in all things for God, they will discover in all of them great relief and sweetness” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 171). The

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<sup>12</sup>Connecting detachment from passion to the capacity to engage with one’s vocation, David Perrin in *Old Self and New Self in St. John of the Cross* writes that “Because of the inability to be settled in managing its sense life, the old self is not prepared to make important decisions in life, such as choosing a particular vocation or life direction”(David Brian Perrin, *For Love of the World: The Old Self and New Self in John of the Cross*. [San Francisco, CA: Catholic Scholars Press, 1997], 60).

discipline of forming one's desires is a sacrifice and causes suffering, but occurs for the purpose of deepening one's relationship with God and others.

The union of likeness that occurs in the mystical marriage of the soul to God leads to the identification of the soul with God in good times and in bad. In the mystical marriage, one is led to identification with Christ on the Cross.<sup>13</sup> In this imitation of Christ, one hears the call of Christ who "asks of him as from every other man that he should follow him: that he should form himself, and let himself be formed, into the image of him who bore the cross and died on it" (Stein, 4). In the embrace of the cross both aspects of detachment are most clearly perceived simultaneously: the disciple should 'form himself' and also be receptive to 'letting himself be formed' into the Crucified One.

Stein writes in the twin images of the way of the cross and of the crucifixion which explain vividly the active and passive parts of the spiritual life in relation to the cross. In imitation of Christ, the disciple actively is formed by following the Lord along the way of the cross. Detachment as receptivity manifests itself in the crucifixion of the disciple, in which one can choose to resist or embrace the cross of Christ. These two images serve to point out the positive content of detachment, which is the paradoxical 'glory of the cross'.

In Stein's presentation, the way of the cross is an image which explains the journey of the disciple. It can be seen as the basic active moment in the life of the disciple. She points out that discipleship is explained in terms of the way of the cross by

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Tyler echoes this location of the cross in John's theology: "For John, fear, disturbance, and pain are not an occasional add-on to Christian life, but may indeed be at the very heart of it, here is where we enter the true mystery of the Cross which lies at the heart of all John's theology." (Peter M. Tyler, *St. John of the Cross*. [London: Continuum Books, 2008], 46).

Christ: “when he said: ‘He that taketh not up his cross and followeth me is not worthy of me’ [and] ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’” (Stein, 7). The way of the cross as a model for discipleship is rooted in the Gospel, and illuminates our study of detachment.

The way of the cross is active because, like Christ, the disciple must choose to take each next step along the way. Each step forward in detachment is a movement away from the false self towards the disciple’s true identity. The disciple moves from one’s unformed human nature towards identification with the Lord through the way of the cross, because “the Cross symbolizes all that is so oppressive and contrary to nature that it seems as hard as death. And the disciple of Jesus is to bear this burden daily” (Stein, 7). Formation through bearing this daily burden is an active choice in the formation of the disciple.

Formation can seem ‘as hard as death’ because it really is a death of the false self. Dying to self is partially an active endeavor of the soul which strives after God. In this death there is the possibility of resurrection, for “whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but he who shall lose his life for my sake, shall save it” (Stein, 7). Dying to self requires the disciple to take each next step along the way to the summit.

Practically this death looks like intentional acts of self-denial out of love for God and others, and in accepting suffering graciously. Each disciple must “surrender their earthly life; to rise with Christ they must also die with him, certainly the lifelong death of suffering and daily self-denial, if necessary also the death of martyrdom for the message of Christ” (Stein, 7). The way of the cross entails carrying without complaint all the

sufferings which one encounters and intentionally acting out of love despite the difficulty.

The way of the cross ends in crucifixion. The death of the false self is painful, yet is the fulfillment of the baptism of the disciple. In this death, the disciple is opened to resurrection. “For those who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death. They are submerged in his life so as to become members of his Body; as such they suffer and die with him, but also rise with him to eternal and divine life” (Stein, 10). The death of baptism is completed in the death of the false self on the cross.

This way is not an optional path which can be left aside by some and taken up by others. To fulfill one’s fundamental end of union with God, it is necessary that one imitate Christ not only in his life but also in his death. Therefore, “To die with Christ on the Cross and to rise with him becomes a reality for every believer” (Stein, 11). The way of the cross is a part of every disciple’s path.

The embrace of the cross is the fullness of detachment. Here one is powerless to resist, and is passive in the face of death. Yet, one retains the power to reject the moment of death or to remain open to the action of God in the experience. In the death of the false self, the disciple must be receptive to the coming resurrection.

Yet a begrudging receptivity to suffering and death are insufficient. The one transformed in God is able to embrace the cross out of love for God. Stein exclaims: “when will men realize that the depths of the wisdom and the infinite riches of God are inaccessible to the soul unless it takes upon itself the fullness of suffering, unless it longs for this and finds its consolation in it?” (Stein, 202). The full meaning of the practice of detachment comes into view when it is seen as the ability to find consolation in the cross.

The union of the soul to God results in the soul beginning to love as God loves, which is love through the cross. Stein writes that suffering “is the ultimate proof of their love for him. If they do not shrink from it but willingly let themselves be drawn into the dark night, then this very night will become their guide” (Stein, 18). In the night of suffering, the soul is drawn ever closer to God. At the summit of the way of the cross, it is discovered that the suffering which one has so carefully avoided and rejected is where the disciple is able to come to one’s fullest identification with Christ.

Indeed, the embrace of the cross is the content of the disciple’s union with God. Suffering and even death are transformed by one’s relationship with God. Describing the mystical marriage, Stein writes that “this union consists... [ellipsis original] only in a death on the Cross while living in the body” (Stein, 20). The content and the experience of the mystical marriage consist in embracing the cross and finding consolation in it.

Because the soul actively imitates Christ along the way, it can be said that “the disciple of Jesus not only accepts the Cross that has been laid on him but crucifies himself” (Stein, 11). One who embraces the cross is able to, like Paul ‘rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). The embrace of the cross is the positive content of detachment because, as Stein writes, “living faith in Christ crucified and surrender to him give us life and are the beginning of future glory. Hence our only Glory is the Cross: ‘God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’” (Stein, 10). Detachment’s fullest meaning is uncovered within the mystical marriage of the soul to God in the embrace of the Cross.

The formation and the receptivity of the soul which practices detachment lead the disciple to practice detachment as clinging to the cross. When the disciple has become identified with Christ to the point where consolation is found in crucifixion because of the love that God has for the soul which loves God even while it sacrifices, it can be understood that “the more perfect this active and passive Crucifixion, the more intimate will be the union with Christ crucified and the more abundant will be man’s share in the divine life” (Stein, 21). Detachment finds its completion in embrace of the Cross, through which one participates in the life of God.

## CONCLUSION

John of the Cross completes the treatment of the theological virtues begun in the chapter on Merton and also introduces the final aspect of detachment under consideration, the embrace of the cross in union with God. Having entered into the discussion on an interesting and relevant point, through Merton’s reflections on detachment and identity, we returned to St. John of the Cross to explain why detachment is necessary in the first place and found the answer to be the infinite difference between God and creatures which is bridged by God’s own action when the disciple is disposed to receive it in detached faith. The faithful disciple is drawn into union with God because love desires to love an equal, and God’s love draws the soul into an equality with God. Through this loving elevation, the soul is unified with God.

Loving union with God is not a simple matter of resting in the presence of God, but rather the increasing unity with God conforms the disciple to the crucified Christ. Detachment is necessary at this stage to embrace the cross of Christ in love, which is what union with God ultimately leads to. But this real death to self allows the disciple to

be raised up to a greater love of God. In this intense and absolute love of God, one turns and loves God's children more deeply than was previously possible. This focus of the soul's desires on God transforms the disciple into a passionate lover of creation because every created thing speaks to the disciple of the One whom the disciple loves without reservation. This love of creation in God is characteristic of the saints, whose boundless energy and sacrifice for others is often incomprehensible unless understood in terms of an absolute and focused love for God. Authentic detachment always leads the disciple deeper into this love.

## **CONCLUSION: DETACHMENT AND VOCATION**

I have pursued this project for the purpose of introducing the concept of absolute detachment as something compatible with the lay vocation. Reading authors throughout the tradition on the practice of detachment, I noticed that the initial practice of detachment in many saints was much too extreme to be recommended to those in the lay state. The stories of sanctity are over and over again too harsh, too extreme, painful and strange, extraordinary and bizarre. The legends of the holy ones are too frequently a barrier to imitation of their holiness except to the very strangest people, because of the strictly disciplined asceticism that seems to precede sainthood.

But just like Francis on his deathbed when asked what he would do differently if he had his life over again, as these saints progressed into the realms of the highest holiness, almost all recommend to those that follow after that they proceed more gently than they themselves had. And after all of these saints' incredible asceticism, these persons who have worked for and desired isolation with God are thrown back into the world in their embrace of the Cross. This result of detachment leading to the most intense and intimate relationships with both God and others is the story of the saints. It happened with St. Catherine of Siena, it happened with St. Teresa of Avila, it happened with St. Francis, it happened with St. Paul, it happened with Thomas Merton, and it happened with St. John of the Cross. In this 'mystic turn' the disciple loves creation with the love of God.

After the turn, these saints teach that to love God is without reservation is the deepest possible love for the world. The purpose of this paper was to establish that authentic detachment is not primarily about isolation, suffering, solitude, or asceticism.

Rather, detachment is only authentic as a support to building up one's relationship with God. Detachment must always be about relationship with God, because true relationality is not selfish. The kind of detachment they have after the turn is even more authentic than the kind they describe before it. It differs because it is more aware of the way that the human person loves God in and through the world and the real human persons that are in it. This is important because a completed conception of detachment is something that can be practice in any particular vocation, that is, by every disciple.

Since developed forms of detachment are more gentle, it is possible for the practice of detachment to be learned in a way that is detached and relational, about God and other. Despite the seeming incompatibility between the kind of detachment described in the initial steps of the saints' journeys with lay life because of the way it de-emphasizes the physical and the communal aspects of one's discipleship, which are often only fully expressed in the later life stages of common models of holiness, leading many people to think they are not called to union with God. Instead, holiness has been seen by something reserved for a few, who choose an exceptional path. While the path to holiness does require extraordinary virtue, it requires ordinary grace. The hope of this paper, then, is to encourage other disciples as to the possibility of attaining to the highest holiness in this life.

To revisit the argument of the paper, there are three major ways that detachment influences the life of the disciple: through formation of one's identity, in the reception

and perfection of the theological virtues, and by transforming one to be able to embrace the cross. Each of these elements is a necessary part of the life of any disciple, and each cannot reach its intended stature without the support of a developed practice of detachment.

Finally, detachment is the only appropriate response to the greatest commandment. Without the formation of the person in detachment, one remains constrained from loving God wholly by one's false self and by desires not oriented towards the one whom one should love above all things. Not only that, but the God whom one seeks cannot be found by normal means but only through detached faith. Hoping in the Lord's love, one receives in charity the gift of union with God. For behold! He stands at the door and knocks, waiting to be enter. It is every disciple's task to detach oneself from whatever distracts one from receiving the Lord, inviting him in saying: Come, Lord Jesus!

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