

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual Meeting

Saturday 9th March, 2024, in St Mary's German Church, Sandwich Street, London

THE SECRET STAIR

*With Rowan Williams exploring the spirituality of Martin Luther
and John of the Cross*

A presentation by the Rev Dr Robert Opala

1. INTRODUCTION



I would like to begin our reflection with a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*:

When the Reformation came the providence of God raised Martin Luther to restore the gospel of pure and costly grace. He lived in a monastery. He was a monk. He had left all to follow Christ. But God shattered all his plans. So, once more he must leave his nest and follow. But this time everything was taken from him, even his pious self.

I have chosen this quotation because I believe that his words could be the best introduction to my presentation. So, we are going to talk about spirituality of Martin Luther and John of the Cross, but also about certain similarities between their experiences and views on grace, faith, justification, and mystical union with God. I think it is a fascinating subject, which has never been fully explored. So, when I've been asked to lead a session on some aspect of ecumenical spirituality, my thought ran straight away to this topic. Lutheran theology and Carmelite spirituality have been my passion for many years. I find in them an inspiration for my own faith and life journey.

Exploring the subject with Archbishop Williams

We will explore these similarities together with Archbishop Rowan Williams. The former Archbishop of Canterbury has a great knowledge of the 16th century Carmelite reformers and mystics: John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. He also has a good understanding of Luther's teaching. So, I believe he will be a good guide for our journey. Rowan Williams published in 1979 a brilliant book on the history of Christian spirituality, *The Wounds of Knowledge* and the last chapters of the book are dedicated to our two reformers. Although Luther was determined to reform the Church using his theological concepts and arguments, John of the Cross had chosen a different approach. He wanted to reform the Church from within. Both ways were important and justified and today Martin Luther and John of the Cross stand, as Archbishop Williams says, at the highest point of Christian theology and spirituality in the troubled age of the 16th century Reformation.

2. THE STORY OF ONE SOUL'S LIFE: JOHN OF THE CROSS

Situation in Spain

So, let's look first at John's life. The story begins in the 16th century Spain, which was not the best place for a poor and sensitive child. John grew up in the country, which witnessed unbelievable

scenes of religious intolerance towards those believing differently. Since 1483, when the newly united Catholic kingdom introduced a secular version of the Holy Inquisition, many Jews, Muslims, and non-Catholic Christians in Spain had become the target of persecution. After completing its mission of forcing Jews and Arabs to become *convertos* (converts to Catholicism) the Inquisition was now ready to turn its weapons against its new enemies: the *luteranos*. This notion defines not only Lutherans, but all kinds of Church reformers.

Emperor Charles V and the Catholic reforms



The reign of Carlos I, the king of Spain, who in 1519 was elected, as Charles V, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, was shaped by his personal hostility towards the Protestant Reformation. His plan for the unity of Christendom was destroyed by young national kingdoms led by their Protestant rulers.

And after he was defeated by the German princes and supporters of Luther's Reformation, Charles turned his anger against those Spaniards who might think differently than the Catholic Church.

But his controversial actions did not stop some members of religious orders in Spain to initiate a renewal of spiritual life within the Church.

Rowan Williams stresses that those who think that the 16th century renewal of the Church was only the work of Protestant reformers are wrong. There were also Catholics, especially members of religious communities, who performed a genuine work of renewal. He says that Catholic renewal, with its inner and mystical character, started in Spain, which was almost untouched by the Reformation. John was one of those who lit new lights of spiritual life in Spain. Protecting himself from the destructive influence of ecclesial and political powers, he stayed in the lowest and most deserted place of human existence where only God could find him.

John's childhood

Juan de Yepes, as was John's real name, was born in 1542 in a small Castilian village as the third son of Gonzales and Catalina de Yepes. There was a romantic love story in which a rich boy fell in love with a poor girl. The boy's family was not happy about this relationship, so they took his inheritance away. From that moment, the life of the couple became a struggle and pain of their everyday life. So, when their sons were born, poverty and starvation were the reality of their childhood. It was a life filled with hardship and hunger, but – at the same time – it was a life in which love was given the most privileged place. This love was



given to John by his parents, especially by his mother Catalina. Some scholars even think that his doctrine of mystical union with the loving God was built on his experience of poverty and hardship, but also on his experience of the loving care of his mother.

Life in Medina

When John was 9 years old, the family moved to Medina where John went to a primary school. He learned how to read and write, but also carpentry and tailoring. He also liked to help in the local parish church as an altar boy. When John turned 17, he began to work in a local hospital for men suffering from sexually transmitted infections. He gave his whole heart to this job showing much care and compassion towards his patients. The hospital manager appreciated John's work and

supported his further education. So, he joined a new Jesuit College where he learned Latin, Greek, and philosophy. He graduated at the age of 21 but he was quite a shy and sad young man with many bitter and painful experiences.

With the Carmelites

The hospital manager wanted to pay for John's training to become a priest and to continue his work in the hospital, but John decided differently. In 1563, he joined the Carmelite Order. After a year spent in the Carmelite novitiate, he was moved to Salamanca for his study. The Carmelites had their own college in Salamanca, but John could also attend classes in the university. As a student of theology, he read Thomas Aquinas and other theologians of his time. He also loved to pray silently. Shortly after his ordination in 1567, he experienced a period of depression, anxiety and disappointment because of the quality of spiritual life in his own Carmelite Order. He was even thinking of leaving the Order. He wanted to join much more radical Carthusians, but everything changed when he met the Carmelite nun, Teresa of Jesus. Teresa already started her work on reforming the Carmelite Order and she invited John to help her to restore the original Rule of Carmel. John happily joined her and the work of reforming the Carmelites was launched. But his plans failed.



Reforming the Carmelite Order

John's work on reforming the Carmelite Order was not received well by many Carmelites. It created massive tensions among some powerful friars who eventually sent him to prison in Toledo. He was kept under brutal conditions and isolated in a small dark cell. But it was in this cell where John experienced his conversion, which changed his entire life. In his prison cell, he wrote one of his most beautiful poems *The Dark Night*. After nine months spent in the prison, John managed to escape, but it took a year to recover and to become active again. He later wrote his most important book, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in which he explained his spiritual doctrine of mystical union with God. John also continued his work of reforming the Order until he became unwell. He died on the 14th of December 1591 in the Carmelite monastery in Andalusia at the age of 49.

3. MARTIN LUTHER: LIFE AND WORK OF THE REFORMER

Luther's childhood



Martin was born in 1483 into a middle-class Saxon family. He was a bright and intelligent child, so his ambitious and dominant father wanted him to become a lawyer. But something unexpected happened, which shocked the whole family. In 1505, after a terrifying experience during a thunderstorm, Martin decided to join the Augustinian Order. His father was furious as it was an act of disobedience. Erick Erikson, the Jungian psychologist and Lutheran historian, can see in this brave action Martin's psychological need for independence from his father's influence. However, as it was a transitional period of his Early Adulthood, Martin still suffered psychologically and spiritually at this stage of his life.

Searching for gracious God

Luther searched for a gracious God who would liberate him from his existential anxiety. But at the same time, he stabilised his professional and social status by becoming a priest and popular theologian, which is a typical experience during the Middle Life Transition. This stage is the most crucial of all. For every person, it is the time of terminating the Early Adulthood and entering the Middle Stage of life. It is a kind of bridge that connects two important phases in human life. Psychologists note that during this process all possible changes may happen, from biological and psychological to spiritual and religious. In Luther's case, there was a certain event that marked the beginning of his own Mid Life Transition. It is known as *the Tower Experience* during which he discovered a merciful and gracious God.

Tower Experience



The *Tower Experience* happened at the crucial time of the Reformation.* The Prince of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, wanted to protect Luther from the Pope and the Emperor hiding him in Wartburg Castle. And in this castle – while suffering from anxiety and depression – Luther was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of God's purifying love. Sam Keen, the American psychologist, describes this event in the following way: *After years of fear and anxiety, Luther discovered that his life was of ultimate worth not because of any work he accomplished, but because he was accepted by God as a*

sinner. And Erik Erikson concludes that after experiencing a series of major doubts and emotional sufferings, Luther's *Tower Experience* opened the gate to the new stage of his life. He was 38 years old and free from his old *angst*. Many of Luther's biographers agree that this event was much more important than nailing the *95 Theses* as it helped to create the doctrinal ground for the Reformation. * [Whilst many scholars believe that the 'Tower Experience' occurred in the tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg (later Luther's home) Dr Opala explained that he subscribes to a more recent theory that it took place at a later date while Luther was in Wartberg Castle.]

Letter to Romans 1:16-17

So, what really happened during the *Tower Experience*? Luther did not waste his time when the prince kept him hiding in a safe place but continued his work on the commentary to *The Letter to Romans*. At the same time, he struggled with his own doubts concerning grace, faith, and salvation. So, when he was reflecting on two verses from the *Letter to Romans* (1:16-17), he discovered something that initiated his own conversion and gave the theological ground for his Reformation. So, let's read these verses: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the justice of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.* When Martin grasped the true meaning of these verses, he admitted: *I hated that phrase: justice of God.* And then, he concluded: *But I understood these words wrongly as an active justice of God who only looks for a sinful man to punish him.* And as we said, after this experience everything changed in Martin's life. God who – as he believed – wanted to punish him was gone forever as he now discovered a gracious and merciful God. Here is what he said about this experience: *I meditated night and day on those words until at last, I paid attention to their context: 'The justice of God is revealed in the Gospel, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.'* *I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. But I also began to understand that it is a passive*

justice by which the merciful God justifies us by faith. All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates.

Changes in Martin's Life and Middle Life Transition

After the *Tower Experience*, Martin changed his name from Luder to Luther or *Elutherius* (liberated by God), which indicated some significant adjustment in his life. One of the events, which helped Martin to modify his new life, was his marriage with the ex-Cistercian nun, Katharine von Bora. There are many fascinating stories about their relationship, which had nothing to do with any romantic love story. The truth is that Katie was really a good match, which Luther later acknowledged in his writings. He knew that with his wife's help, it was much easier to build the bridge between his previous life as an Augustinian friar and the new one as an influential reformer. The role of a husband helped him terminate the guilt caused by his father's criticism of his previous life. It was the first time when Martin was able to say that his father was right about the nonsense of his celibacy.

Luther's Mid-Life Transition was a painful experience. He went through many challenging changes in the first half of his life, but the second one was much more stable and productive. He was a happy husband, father, theologian and religious leader. He spent his final years on writing and enjoyed every moment to be with his family and old friends. He died in 1546 in Eisleben at the age of 63.

4. FINDING THE COMMON GROUND

Why Secret Stair?



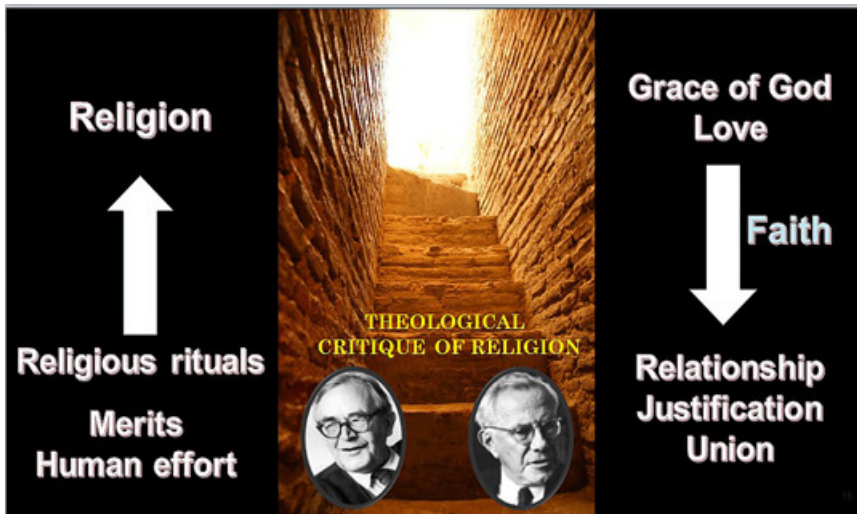
As we are now more familiar with the life of Martin Luther and John of the Cross, I would like to explore their teachings. So, first, why is the phrase, *the Secret Stair*, the title for our talk? I borrowed this title from Rowan Williams's book, *The Wounds of Knowledge*. The last chapter of this book, dedicated to John of the Cross, is named *The Secret Stair*. He believed that this image could explain the right direction of the human journey to God, which is the main concept in the teaching of John of the Cross. This title is also helpful to make a connection between John's view on the union with God and Luther's doctrine of justification.

The notion of stair & theological critique of religion

The 20th century Protestant theology has developed a great method of exploring the entire mystery of God-man relationships. It is called *the theological critique of religion*. We don't have enough time to discuss this method, but we can use it in our reflection. The image of the *stair* reflects on this method as it helps to explain the work of God's redemption. This method also offers some tools in our

search for similarities between the teachings of Martin Luther and St John of the Cross with regard to faith, grace, justification and mystical union with God.

So, when we say, *climbing the stair*, we may think of some aspects of human effort of moving up. The direction of this move is from the bottom of the stair to the top. But Martin Luther and John of the Cross knew that the only movement in God-man relationship, which works for our redemption, runs the other way: from the top to the bottom. This move is effective only when



accepted with faith. Rowan Williams confirms that Luther and John are aware of the right direction. It is seen in Luther's distinction between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man and in John's description of the soul's journey, which ends when she is united with God. But during this journey God also purifies the soul in the flame of His love, though for the soul it is a dark night experience.

The same desert, the same hell

Archbishop Williams confirms that similarity between Martin Luther and John of the Cross. The image of *the dark night* in John's poetry symbolises the lowest place of human existence and the starting point of the journey. He says that John knew that dark and deserted place of human misery and hardship from his own life experience. But Luther was also familiar with this experience in his life. He also experienced the same terrified place, which he did not hesitate to call it hell. But in that place, he was rescued by God. Williams says that *John of the Cross had been into the same desert, the same hell as Martin Luther*. The physical and spiritual pain that they both experienced made them capable of unmasking the religious man who dwelled in them and who wanted to earn his salvation by his pious work.



The liberating grace

Martin Luther and John of the Cross shared the same view on God's grace, which liberates us from the tyranny of our existence. This grace justifies us from our sins, transforms our hearts, saves us from death and opens the door to the Kingdom of God. This grace is a pure gift of God's love. This grace is only received through faith. But faith is also God's grace, which our two reformers clearly understood. According to John of the Cross, this grace can also lead the soul to union with God in this life. It is the engine that purifies and justifies the sinner. In Luther's teaching the grace of faith becomes the most important aspect of his doctrine of justification, which he expressed in his famous saying, *Articulus stantis et cadentis Ecclesiae: if the doctrine on justification stands, the Church stands; if it falls, the Church falls*.

Luther's doctrine of justification – explanation

According to Luther's doctrine of justification, we are saved by Christ alone (*solus Christus*). It is God's grace (*sola gratia*) given to us without any condition because of God's love. The gift of justification is received only through faith (*sola fide*) and not by our merits, devotions or good work. The view on the grace of justification by faith offers the common ground for our reflection. Luther even said, *without grace we are nothing*, and John confirmed this in the same way: *Sin gracia no somos nada*. So, they both teach us that everything in our existence – our life and our salvation – comes from God's justifying grace. And they both complement each other saying that the grace of justification works on two levels: outside us when God pardons us for our sins, and inside us when God cleanses and transforms our hearts.

John's doctrine of mystical union with God

Perhaps, you may feel less familiar with the spiritual doctrine of Saint John of the Cross, which is often called the *mystical union with God*. Many Protestants may not feel comfortable when they hear this word *mystical*. In general understanding, every theology is mystical and then, consequently, every theologian is a mystic. According to one of the greatest Lutheran theologians in the 20th century, Paul Tillich, every theologian is a mystic when they are not afraid to touch the *mysteries of the most secret wisdom of God*. So, mysticism is not about doing magical things. It is our contemplation of God's work of salvation and our enjoyment of living from the fruits of God's salvation. Following this view, Luther and John were mystics. The only difference between them was that Luther was a preacher and theologian, while John was a poet and his teaching was an extension of his poetry about the intimate and transformative relationship between God and man.



5. RETURN TO THE MYSTICAL & THE SEARCH FOR SIMILARITIES

Hostile attitude towards Luther in Spain

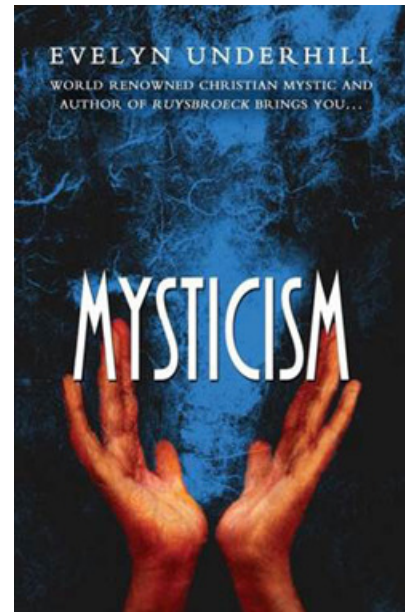
Martin Luther and John of the Cross were very different men. So, searching for similarities between them seems to be an uneasy task. These two influential Christian reformers affected very differently the course of events throughout the entire Christian world. The 16th century's loss of unity in the Western Church had caused much suspicion and uncompromised antagonism between the believers of the Old Church and the followers of the new way. It also affected most of John's followers who put him in stark opposition to Luther. Even his closest companion, St Teresa of Avila, prayed to God to protect the Church from *those terrible Lutherans*. This shows a massive prejudice against Luther in Catholic Spain. But we must also admit that John himself never said anything against Luther. Archbishop Williams even states that John's concern was not the Protestant reformers, but a very active religious movement in Spain called *illuminati* who preached false mystical ideas and values.

Return to mysticism: Paul Tillich

After 450 years of Catholic-Lutheran antagonism, the first theologian who tried to compare Luther's theology with the spiritual system of John of the Cross was Paul Tillich. According to Tillich, John of the Cross inspired many people to follow Christ on the way of mysticism. But it wasn't Tillich who first opened the Protestant circle for mysticism. The 18th century Lutheran theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, already explained to his fellow-Protestants that mysticism was a positive spiritual experience and expression of faith.

Anglican approach to mysticism & the Rhineland mystics

The Anglican circles have always showed positive attitudes towards mysticism. It is clearly visible in the poetry and spiritual writings of Evelyn Underhill and Thomas Eliot. And although Anglican theology can see mysticism as a pure psychological experience, it also believes that God may be present in every mystical experience. Therefore, Archbishop Williams didn't have any problem to link Luther with John of the Cross. Analysing the work of the 14th century Rhineland Mystics, Williams discovered that the two reformers were deeply influenced by the German medieval writers from the region of Rhineland (Meister Eckhard).



Purification as God's act of love - similar understanding

John promoted an idea of practicing radical detachment during the soul's journey to God. But he also knew that this exercise does not purify the sinner. It rather helps the sinner not to obstruct the work of God. And Rowan Williams confirms that John's teaching is not about *man's self-salvation*. John's idea is similar to Luther's view on Christian renewal. The German reformer believed – says Williams – that *'the purification of the soul is what God does in us, but our own act of mortification is what we do. This act, however, cannot remove the roots of sin in us'*. Archbishop Williams also suggests that the work of purification experienced by Martin and John during the early stage of their life made them feel abandoned and condemned by God. They sensed that God appeared to them as *enemy and oppressor*. But when the journey through the *dark night* ended, they met their gracious God of love and mercy.

6. FAITH AS THE SOLE MEANS OF JUSTIFICATION AND UNION

The same understanding of faith



The necessity of faith is an equally essential theme in John's concept of union with God and in Luther's theology of justification. John saw the importance of faith as the only way of reaching the soul's final destination: the mystical union with God. He speaks about the notion of *faith alone* in his book, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. This phrase *sola la fe* in John's writings means the same as Luther's *sola fide*. John explains that there are two shades of meaning of the notion of *faith*. The first one is closely connected with the experience of *the dark night*, which defines the higher stage of the soul's journey to God. This stage is entirely about God's work within human heart when God purifies all spiritual faculties of the soul: the intellect, the will and the memory. But the second one is about God who communicates with the soul through faith giving her the knowledge of divine ideas. In this act of communication, the soul receives the divine light of truth, which is so bright that it may even blind the soul. That's why faith is often interpreted as *the dark night of the spirit*.

John's two aspects of faith meet Luther's theology

As we just said, John's concept of faith focuses on its two aspects: as the sole means of reaching God in this life and as the revealed truth about God's work of salvation. This concept means that faith purifies and guides the human soul, so she may enjoy all fruits of God's work of redemption, including the *mystical union*. John was aware of the human incapacity of reaching God by the soul's own strengths and efforts. And this one of the most important points for our reflection as it meets Luther's teaching expressed in *'The Smalcald Articles'*. Luther wrote in this work that *by*

faith we obtain a new and pure heart and by faith God makes us entirely righteous and holy for the sake of Christ. This explanation is similar to John's notion of transformation of the human heart, which also includes the cleansing power of faith. So, as John identified faith as a purifying *dark night*, Martin went through this *dark night*, which he described as hell. But this experience led him into the loving arms of God.

7. THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Theologia crucis

In my search for similarities between Luther and John of the Cross, I discovered that they also speak of another essential aspect of Christian theology called *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross). According to the contemporary theology, one of the inner criteria of true Christian devotion, spirituality and teaching, is the crucified Christ. The cross is the only criterion of Christian faith. As suggested by Rowan Williams, Luther and John were aware that it is impossible to live a true Christian life without the cross. For both of them, the test of true Christian living is to look into *the darkness of God being killed by his own creatures*.



Crucified Lord in Carmelite and Lutheran traditions

The theme of the crucified Lord is essential in Carmelite and Lutheran traditions. As already mentioned, contemporary scholars say that John and Martin were influenced by the medieval Rhineland mystics for whom the suffering Christ on the cross opened the way to our redemption. Christ standing in the centre of humanity redeemed the human race from its natural condition. They believed that without Christ and his suffering on the cross no one would be able to come to redemptive union with God. This view helped Martin and John formulate their theological ideas, which also show clear similarities in other major themes of their teachings on faith, justification, transformation and mystical union with God.

Luther's active and passive justice and John's active and passive night

Analysing Martin Luther and John of the Cross's view on God's encounter with man, we can see that they both believed that the cross of Christ is the central point of that encounter. John constructed his doctrine from the perspective of mysticism, which he understood as a loving, intimate and transformative relationship with God. Therefore, he was convinced that the experience of the cross in human life is an act of pure love. God saves us through the cross of Christ because of God's love for us. God also purifies us by the experience of the cross because of love. Otherwise, it would be a cheap grace, which – as Bonhoeffer teaches us – justifies the sins, but not the sinner. So, John believed that during our journey to union with God, our entire being is transformed by God's love. And this transformation takes place on two levels: the transformation of our senses and the transformation of our spirit. John of the Cross named the two levels of our transformation, the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit.

Luther also saw two aspects of the human experience of God in the process of justification. Constructing his system, he defined the doctrine of justification as based on two phases: *iustitia dei activa* (the active justice of God) and *iustitia dei passiva* (the passive active of God). The first element emphasises God's justice, which pardons the sinner because of love, but it doesn't transform the sinner. And in the second phase of justification, God transforms the sinner, though the righteousness of God is beyond the sinner. In other words, during the first phase, God pardons the criminal who is now protected from punishment, though still remains a criminal, but during the second phase, the sinner is transformed and becomes the child of God.

CONCLUSION

Luther's doctrine of justification connects with John's view on transformation

Concluding our reflection, I would like to say that Luther's doctrine of justification corresponds with John's understanding of transformation during which – as Rowan Williams says – God changes the soul by *degrees rather than into something wholly unconnected from the state in which it started*. In their views, the work of justification and transformation does not belong to the human person but comes entirely from God making the person righteous and transformed by Christ. The same dynamism in Luther's view on the reality of justification has been seen in the light of a new method of interpreting Luther's theology, developed among Lutheran theologians in Finland. This new method brings Luther much closer to John's concept of a transformative process of the human soul and her journey to God. The new school of interpretation argues that Luther always understood the doctrine of justification of sinner as a process of growing in Christ's righteousness rather than as a legal declaration. It stresses that the new life given to the justified sinners are constructed and verified only by their growth in the divine life of Christ.

Luther's justification is also about transformation

I believe that Luther's theology of justification by faith and John's doctrine of union with God are the most vital subjects in Christian life and thought. It is so because through faith in Christ human beings are given *the right to become children of God* (John 1:12) where the verb *to become* means that they are transformed by God. They also receive a new life in God as they are united with God. We must know that Luther does not speak about justifying faith in the tone of the 17th and 18th century Lutheran theology. His thought about faith is close to John's thought on the role of faith in the transformative process of human journey to God. And this faith does not only justify us legalistically but also – as Luther writes – *changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers*. And although Luther's theology of justification is expressed in the dialectical distinction between the Law and the Gospel, John's reflection on the spiritual ascent of the soul toward mystical union with God is also able to recognize the differences between the human way, which is our unproductive effort to reach God, and the divine way in which God walks down the spiritual stair to embrace us with His love and to save us.

John of the Cross: Poem – The Dark Night

**One dark night,
fired with love's urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! -
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.**

**In darkness, and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- ah, the sheer grace! -
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.**

On that glad night
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything
with no other light or guide
than the One that burned in my heart.

This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was awaiting me
- him I knew so well -
there in a place where no one appeared

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the Beloved into his Lover.

Upon my flowering breast,
which I kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay sleeping,
and I caressing him
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

When the breeze blew from the turret,
as I parted his hair,
it wounded my neck
with its gentle hand,
spending all my senses.

I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.

PERSONAL NOTES



I've developed a passion for Luther's theology since I was a student of theology in the Catholic University. It happened when I was to prepare an essay on the theology of the 16th century reformation and I found in the library a book by Luther, which was his commentary on the *Letter to Romans*. This book challenged my theological views and shaped by own spirituality. But I also developed a passion for Carmelite spirituality. I lived for 14 years in Carmelite monasteries in England and Ireland and, according to my experience, the

Carmelites are always aware that it is God who does the work in us. And as a Carmelite priest and friar, I learned how to go on the mystical journey to God. The fascinating thing is that my passion for Luther and his theology has never created any obstacle on my journey having St John of the Cross as my guide. It is rather the opposite as Lutheran theology always gives me the language, the words, and the theological notions that I could use to name some aspects of Carmelite spirituality promoting the mystical journey to God.

Thérèse and Martin: Carmelites and Lutherans according to Bishop Johannesson

I would also like to mention a recent book, which focuses on similarities between Martin Luther and Carmelite spiritual teachers. It was written by the Lutheran bishop of Uppsala in the Church of Sweden, Karin Johannesson, who titled her book: *Thérèse and Martin: Carmel and the Reformation in a New Light*. The author compares the teaching of the French Carmelite nun Saint Thérèse of Lisieux with the theology of Martin Luther. Bishop Karin also mentions in her book that there are many similarities between Luther and John of the Cross who was a spiritual mentor for St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She stresses that Thérèse – like John of the Cross and Martin Luther – distanced herself from an idea that people are capable to justify and redeem themselves.