The Spiritual Exercises of St. John of the Cross

from The Ascent of Mt. Carmel

I advise you not to read this selection from St. John of the Cross as a moral absolute, or a rigid way of living that must be applied meticulously. Rather, consider these maxims as a series of thought experiments which help you rise to the heights of Mt. Carmel by letting go of your limitations, preferences, and ego to make room for the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.

I give you suggestions that help you to use these spiritual exercises in your daily prayer life. Feel to adapt them as is most conducive to your station in life and towards cultivating stillness.

Keep in mind that by overcoming one’s repugnance towards suffering and discomfort, one is able to a place of greater spiritual freedom, or detachment, and cultivate that stillness which makes us available to God and neighbor.

Section I

St. John of the Cross writes:

“Endeavor to be inclined always:

Not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
Not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful;
Not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
Not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
Not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
Not to the most, but to the least;
Not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;
Not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing;

Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and, for Christ, desire to enter into complete nakedness, emptiness, and poverty in everything in the world.”

The Spiritual Exercises of St. John of the Cross

Spiritual Exercise #1

Use these maxims as a means of exploring your experience. Chew on each one and try to identify those difficult parts of your life that you need to accept. Identify those distasteful experiences and people you need to embrace. Proceed likewise through each section of the maxims and try to realize that when making decisions, discernment moves beyond sense pleasure and even spiritual pleasure.

Spiritual Exercise #2

Take your rosary beads, and call to mind each maxim or pick individual words from the maxim. Then in the decade, pray the Jesus Prayer or some other line of scripture, imagining that as you call to mind the maxim, you are penetrating it and allowing it to sink into the heart.

Spiritual Exercise #3

Write a reflection or conversation with Jesus based on each maxim or any inspirations that arise when considering the maxims. Seek to discover the stillness of the Holy Spirit and a playful, gentle disposition.

Note: These exercises can be done standing, laying on one’s back, laying prostrate, kneeling, or sitting back one’s heels (a form of kneeling). In addition, one can alternate between poses as a means of drawing one’s attention towards Christ’s presence. If these exercises are done in public (such as adoration), one should avoid excessive movement so as not to disrupt the prayer of others within a close proximity.

Section II

St. John of the Cross also writes:

“To reach satisfaction in all desire satisfaction in nothing.
To come to possess all desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all desire to be nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all desire the knowledge of nothing.

To come to enjoy what you have not you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not you must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not you must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not you must go by a way in which you are not.”

Spiritual Exercise #1
In these maxims, take a moment to imagine your interior life as three layers of experience. These layers are your bodily sensations, or sense perceptions, your interior life, or psychology, and finally your deepest self, or the place of the heart. Imagine that these maxims help you to reach past those first two layers and connect with the still presence of Christ's love in the heart.

Allow yourself to let go of those limitations which involve basing decisions on your sense perceptions and your psychology, and imagine a deeper illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Exercise #2 and #3
See the previous ways of dwelling within the heart and internalizing these maxims.

Section III
St. John of the Cross writes,
“A Method to Avoid Impeding the All
When you delay in something you cease to rush toward 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 purely your all.”

Spiritual Exercise #1
Likewise, use these maxims to penetrate reality to the core of your being, the heart, the place of encounter. Imagine dwelling with Jesus Christ there, resting in his love, and experiencing a deeper font of refreshment.

Spiritual Exercise #2 and #3
Same as before.
Also note that the postures can be used throughout all sets of exercises.
Does this spiritual exercises help? Please comment and share.