

The Spiritual Canticle (Part Three)

Stanza 22.

This is the beginning of the highest spiritual state possible. It entails a complete liberation from the obstacles that hinder a loving union with God.

The way to this state has led through mortification and meditation on spiritual things. John himself states that these exercises lasted until the stage when the soul sang, "Pouring out a thousand graces".

From there on she embarked on the contemplative way which led to the state of Spiritual Espousal. Now at this stage we embark on the unitive way, which involves a wonderful array of favours from God. This is now the path which leads to a total transformation into Christ. Here nothing less than a complete surrender to God is called for.

St. Teresa treats of this state of spiritual marriage in the Interior Castle, Mansion 7. John tells us that the Lord wishes this state of union to come about just as much as the person has desired it. There is in fact a vast difference between this grace of spiritual marriage and the preceding one of espousal. St John writes, "The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as it is possible in this life". Such an exalted condition only comes about through the soul being confirmed in grace. John calls it 'a union of two natures in one spirit and love.'

This is now a completely new experience of intimacy with God. It is a divine embrace of the soul and God. The individual is greatly fortified for this embrace by God who gives it strength.

Stanza 23

There now follows a communication, of secrets on the part of the bridegroom, because it is the brides privilege to know the secrets of her

beloved. This communication of secrets involves a more intimate knowledge of the Incarnation of the Word and the Redemption of the human race.

The 'apple-tree' in the Song of Songs has been traditionally understood as referring to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and also to the tree of the cross. That is, how St. John interprets it in this, stanza. For John, Jesus in redeeming us also espoused us to himself. He tells us that each one was espoused by the Son of God on the cross and this grace is then applied to the soul when it receives the sacrament of baptism. But this has to be worked out progressively in the living of a life of perfection.

Stanza 24.

The theme now is one of total and mutual giving and the desirable qualities of this ultimate stage of spiritual progress are outlined. The picture John paints reminds us of the beloved disciple leaning on the breast of Jesus.

The strength of the divine virtues and qualities afford protection from the enemy - the devil. The one condition that might describe this state now is one of 'security'. 'nada te turba'. Closely allied to this is a state of quietude or freedom from anxiety. The abode of the soul is now decked out and hung with the purple of divine charity.

Stanza 25.

This new development in the life of the soul literally makes it advance by leaps and bounds, running the wap of perfection. This is the first notable effect of the new union, providing a stimulus to greater love.

Secondly the Lord frequently visits the soul to enkindle its love.

Thirdly there is an intoxicating effect which causes the soul to praise and thank God.

St. Therese has a lovely commentary on the words of the Song of Songs, "Draw me, and we shall run after you in the odour of your ointments". She says, "When I allow that fragrance to cast its spell over me, I don't hasten after you in the first person singular - all those whom I love come running at my heels". St John says the soul is conscious and aware of God's goodness - not just to itself but to others also. This high level of divine love is nourished by the Lord himself when he bestows a 'subtle touch' deep within and this when least expected. (cfr. Asc 2 Ch 25) An additional favour is that of "divine inebriation", something we see in St. Teresa and in St. Gregory of Nyssa, and this also greatly stimulates the love of the soul.

St. John here gives us his well-known comparison, "new lovers", he says, "are like new wine". All is anxiety while the process of fermentation is going on and so too moderation should be maintained. The "old lovers" on the other hand, those tried and practised in virtue are like "old wine". Consequently they are more loyal in the service of God.

Stanza 26.

The soul has now reached a state of spiritual maturity and fulfilment and in the words of the psalm, "she drinks at the torrents of your delights". As this is all a work of the Holy Spirit, St. John invokes the help of that same Holy Spirit in order to describe this state of perfection. He elaborates seven degrees of love in all, corresponding to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. This union with God involves the persons powers or faculties being filled with God. But as he points out elsewhere and as St Teresa repeats, the faculties are not always in actual union.' The soul's particular knowledge is assimilated to that of God, and so what he calls 'forms and figures' are eliminated in favour of what he calls a more absorbing kind of love. This is now the familiar 'state of unknowing'. Moreover the 'herd' of imperfections are now left behind.

Stanza 27.

St. John now gives us a marvellous description of God's self-communication to the soul. It is a picture of complete tenderness "In this interior union, God communicates Himself to the soul with such genuine love that no mother's affection, in which she tenderly caresses her child, nor brother's love, nor friendship is comparable to it. (Par.1) St. John is now talking about a mutual surrender between the Lord and the soul, a surrender in which the Lord Himself takes the initiative. The Lord communicates his love and secrets to the soul. There is here some interchange in St. John's commentary between the two last phases of spiritual life which is understandable in view of the two redactions we have of the "Spiritual Canticle".

Stanza 28.

There is now a certain equality between the Lord and the soul. John reminds us of what Jesus says to his disciples at the last supper. 'I have called you friends, because all I have heard from my Father I have revealed to you.' (Jn. 15 v 17.)

All one's energies are now dedicated to God and employed in his service. We recall the words to St. Teresa, "You will look after my things and I will look after yours."

St. Therese quotes stanzas 26 and 28 in her Autobiography, and also adding in a vers from of one of his poems. This is her most extensive quote from St. John. She prefaces these quotations with the words, "Now self-abandonment is my only guide, the only compass I have to steer by".

Stanza 29.

St. John here makes a plea for an attentive life of prayer, waiting on God alone for those who have advanced to this stage. This is the part Mary chose which Jesus referred to as the 'one thing necessary'. Cfr Cloud ch.17. This however should not be anticipated in advance, but the soul should ordinarily busy itself in the Lord's service until called to this kind of contemplation.

The famous quote from St. John occurs here:

"For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems 'one is doing nothing, than all those works put together.'" St. Therese also quotes these lines in the letter to her Sister Marie. John then castigates those who "think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works" instead of giving half that time to prayer.

Consequently the soul given over to prayer and communion with God ought not to be criticised as doing nothing. But in this we must cultivate freedom of spirit and also be on our guard against human respect.

Stanza 30.

St. John goes on to say that the loving exchange between the soul and God is ineffable. It is a time of festivity and mutual rejoicing; "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

John sees a greater merit in the virtues acquired in youth, which he calls "cool mornings" because of the strength of temptation at that time of life. A second meaning here would be virtues acquired in the teeth of difficulty and dryness which is very pleasing to God. But the soul needs to cooperate with the Lord in nurturing these gifts and graces and virtues. St. John here also shows his awareness of the ecclesial nature of religious sanctity. Those who grow and mature in holiness are an adornment for Christ the Head of the Church.

Stanza 31.

In stanza 31 there is an extremely strong description of divine union. "The soul seems to be God, and God seems to be the soul", he writes. We have an illustration of this in the love of David and Jonathan, whose souls were 'knitted' to each other. The Lord is the 'principal lover' who absorbs the soul as a torrent would absorb a drop of morning dew.

St. John exalts the quality of strong love that attracts the divine love. God was drawn to us when he became incarnate in Jesus, "God has first loved us" (1 Jn. 4 v10). Faith also attracts the divine gaze and moves Him further to love the soul. (Cfr. Living Flame)

Stanza 32.

Love has power over the heart of God; it exercises a loving constraint over him to which he submits. We might think of Esther's hold on the heart of King Assuerus. The soul is now pleasing to God. There is a wonderful feeling of divine affirmation - the Lord has chosen and singled out the soul for his special favour and she knows it. The soul knows also that this is due to no merit of its own but purely the gracious love of God. This is a work of God's mercy. It must be a wonderful feeling to be the recipient of God's grace, in this experiential way. In the gospel we read that Jesus looked at the young man and loved him: St. John now says that the Lord now looks with love on the soul. St. John later reflects on the loss they suffer who are without God's grace, who live or more correctly are dead in sin.

God looks on us with love because he has forgiven our sins. He no longer accuses us of our sins once he has forgiven them, for God never judges twice. However although we are forgiven in the sacrament of penance, we ourselves might not forget our sinfulness. The Lord increases and multiplies his grace, he 'gives grace for grace' as St. John the evangelist says in the gospel.

Stanza 33.

The dialogue of love continues; the Lord proceeds to affirm and even praise the soul because it is newly clothed in the beauty of his grace. The habitual prayer of the soul is one of thankfulness and triumph, quiet praise and contemplation. We are now reaching the end of our search and the goal of our seeking in this divine fulfilment. This is the fruit of contemplation.

Stanza 35

There is now in the soul an increased need for solitude, to be alone with the alone." I will lead her into solitude and will speak to her heart ".The Lord then becomes the only guide of the soul, as St. Therese also says. Again the faculties of mind, will and memory are completely taken up and filled with God. St. John says that the love of the soul is reciprocated in solitude by the Lord.

Stanza 36.

The trait of a sincere and genuine love for God is a desire to be alone with him in a deep communion, to the exclusion of everyone else. The soul now wants to experience the love of God, and to see itself mirrored in the beauty of the Lord's love. It is the same as if lovers gazed into one another's eyes to rejoice in their mutual beauty. Furthermore there is a desire to learn the secrets of the beloved. Cfr. Hopkins, Leaden Echo. 'beauty's self and beauty's giver'.

St. John refers to our adoption as children of God in the Church. We participate in God's nature with Jesus who is the natural Son of God. There is also a desire to explore the divine riches more deeply. These are inexhaustible, but to discover them it is necessary to embrace suffering and trial. Suffering, for the soul becomes a means of revelation, helping it penetrate further into the mysteries of God.

"O if only we could but now fully understand how a soul cannot reach the thicket and wisdom of the riches of God, which of many kinds, without entering the thicket of many kinds of suffering, finding in this her delight and consolation" In other words the cross must be accepted as a means of knowing and loving God.

Stanza 37

John now looks at the soul's longing to be plunged into the 'mystery and beauty of the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God. This is a longed-for and sought-after goal. It is the revelation of the face of God made visible in Jesus, through whom the human race is united with God. Everything revolves round the loved person of Christ Our Lord. This section on the person of Jesus is the one selected by the Church as most typical of St. John as the second reading for his feast. John alludes to what the holy doctors have written on the Incarnation but says that even they can never exhaust it.

We might think of the great work of St. Athanasius, 'De Incarnatione' written in the early centuries of the Church. Christ is a mine of hidden riches, "In him dwell all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge."

Stanza 39.

The soul has been engaged on a quest to discover the wisdom of God, both in himself and in its created manifestations, in 'the things that have been made ' .

Now the question is asked, 'how will this discovery take place? This desire has been instigated by that legitimate longing of love namely to love God as perfectly as he loves us. The answer lies in a complete transformation into God whereby the two wills are united, and this is brought about by the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is the happiness that awaits those destined for the joy of heaven.

The last stanzas of this poem are an effort to describe and give us a foretaste, of the happiness of heaven. This happiness is first of all a communication of the Holy Spirit of God. He quotes St.Paul to

the Galatians; "Since you are sons of God, God has sent the Spirit

of his son into your hearts, crying 'Abba, father." Our saint then goes on to comment on a sublime passage from the fourth gospel, Ch. 17, where it talks about us being one through a union of love, just as the Father and the Son are one in essential unity of love..

The famous passage from 1 Pet. crops up again, with the thought that we are destined to become 'partakers of the divine nature.'

Cfr 'image of God in the .Fathers') St. John's experience of intimacy and sharing in the divine, life makes-him cry out in loving desperation, "O souls created for these grandeurs and called to them! What are you doing? How are you spending your time."

John in his poem gives us the beautiful image of the nightingale's song, the music of Spring and new love. This is what heaven is like. This is the "voice of the bridegroom calling to the soul to sing a new song; 'Cantate Dommino canticum novum'! We might again recall some beautiful line's from Keats on the nightingale and certainly John would also have appreciated them; "Perhaps the self-same song that found a path Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home She stood in tears amid the alien corn." Earth can never be our true home - perhaps Keats unconsciously hinted at the beyond, the "yonder" of Hopkins, "magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn." Again we recall what indeed John reminds us of in the Song of Songs; "Arise, make haste my love and come, for see winter is now past, The rains are over and gone.'

Another quality of this blessedness is the 'beauty of the grove', By this is signified God as the source of all beauty. Again there is the gift of contemplation which John characteristically calls 'a serene night'. And finally there is the flame of the Holy Spirit. John would of course later devote a whole book to exploring the riches of this transformation. This flame consumes, completes and brings to perfection.

Stanza 40.

In this final stanza St. John sketches in the final details on his picture of the soul that has reached union with God. Detachment from all things has been achieved,

2. The devil is conquered and put to flight.

3. The emotions are brought under control.

4. The emotional and sensual side of the personality is in harmony with the spiritual side.

This work has all been undertaken for and with the help of Christ as a preparation for union with him. The Interior Castle or as John calls it more simply, the 'house' is now at rest and the siege has been lifted.

Now nothing remains but to look forward to the glorious consummation of heavenly glory

"The marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready".

(Tadgh Tierney ocd)