

The Spiritual Canticle (Continued)

The beginning of Stanza 13 marks a new section of the book and a new stage of progress in the life of union with God. St. John stated in his introduction; "The subsequent ones (13-21) deal with the state of proficients in which the spiritual espousal is effected, that is of the illuminative way."

We are now touching on what Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdelene calls "The Feasts of Love" and this is indeed what is indicated - a celebration of divine love after the suffering ,pressures and desires that have proceeded them.

The opening note of this new celebration is that the Lord comes to visit the loving soul who longs for Him.

We might recall here the words of St. Paul, "I have espoused you to one husband that I might present you as a chaste virgin to Christ".

Our Carmelite Saints never tire of pointing out to us the amazing delicacy of the Lord's love for His creature. For instance, St. Therese in talking about her 'betrothal' mentions her predilection for snow. Against all the odds and despite weather forecasts she was delighted to find there was a heavy fall of snow, "No mortal lover would be in a position to humour his bride in such a way" she writes in her autobiography.

The early part of the Spiritual Canticle was concerned with the soul's preparations for the coming of the Lord. Up to now the 'bride' has been the only speaker in the poem, telling of her longings and fears and trials.

There are only two more lines in the Bride's dialogue and these are the opening verses of Stanza 13;

"Withdraw then Beloved, I
am taking night."

This is now a very advanced stage of the spiritual life. For John it is the time of illumination. Preparations are in hand for what John describes as the Spiritual Betrothal.

We now understand, I think, what St. Teresa means when she says, "Prayer in my opinion is nothing more than a sharing among friends, an intimate conversation with one whom we know loves us".

The soul feels the intimate presence of the Lord to such an extent that it verges on ecstasy.

We should remember here that not everyone has the same kind of experience. Not everyone will have unusual graces such as are described here. Perhaps it will depend on the particular temperament and make-up of each individual. In any case, St. John will insist (as does St. Teresa) that extraordinary graces are not strictly necessary for us to reach union with God. St. Therese, for example, doesn't discuss these kinds of unusual graces. As in her case, the alternative may be a deep peace within one's heart in spite of and in the midst of darkness and suffering. St. Teresa herself also reminds us that these favours are no indication true holiness. In any case, let us not forget extraordinary graces are only a stage of progress and they cease when a more complete union with God is achieved.

The first words of the spouse in the Spiritual Canticle are words of restraint to the soul. He tells her that this particular type of contemplation is not in fact the kind by which it can grasp or lay hold of God. It is a lower type of knowledge which is trying to anticipate the 'high knowledge' of the possession of God.

St. John is very careful to point out, something which has a central part in the Carmelite understanding of prayer and that is that love must flow from knowledge. Knowledge of God by itself is sterile, it must be vivified by the breath of the Holy Spirit the bond of love between Father and Son, St. Teresa would put it like this "It is not important to think much but to love much."

Infused contemplation really means what St. Paul talks about in Romans 5 - "The love of God has been poured out (infused) into your hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

This is the only kind of contemplation that can attain to God and unite us with Him. There is another very characteristic johannine trait in the words: "God does not give grace and love except in accordance with the person's desire and love". And if this seems rarified and out of touch with ordinary life* he tells us that this kind of love has to be worked out according to St. Paul's famous passage, "Love is patient and kind, is not envious, does no evil" in a word, it is acquired through love of our neighbour.

"My beloved is the mountains
And lonely wooded valleys
Stange islands
And resounding rivers,
The whistling of love-stirring breezes."

If you didn't know a lot about St. John of the Cross, you might think he was a pantheist like Wordsworth to write like that.

Wordsworth wrote:

" Therefore am I still,
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains and of all that we behold
From this green earth. Of all the mighty world of
eye and ear."

Then he refers to these as 'The guide , the guardian of my heart and soul,
of all my inner being`.

But St. John of the Cross did not see things that way. Creation did not
speak to him about itself, it spoke to him about its Creator. John
himself explains what these lines describe.

`She does no more than tells in song her Beloved's grandeurs.`.

This is a really marvellous section of the book, describing for us in a
wonderful way the infinite riches of God. It is well worth meditating on.
God is everything that can be desired in this world. In the old scholastic
theological jargon we said that God possessed all these qualities
"Eminenter" or in an eminent way. Not alone that but John tells us that
God communicates all these graces to the soul also, making her beautiful.
The soul feels that He is allowing her to share His kingdom and His riches.

It's just as if we had a multi-millionaire friend who told us to feel
free to wander in and out of his mansion, go for a cruise on his yacht or
take a spin in his Rolls-Royce whenever we felt like it.

Here the descriptions of super-abundance tumble over one another like
the 'resounding rivers' of peace of which he speaks . The language is
beautiful and delicate, "The whisper of love-stirring breezes".

Karl Wojtyla (as he was at the time) makes a lot of this image in his thesis on St. John. He comments " When St. John of the Cross distinguishes between 'breezes' and 'whistling*', he describes the former as the divine communication to the soul in the spiritual espousal; the latter is the resounding of this communication to the intellect by way of a lofty and most delightful knowledge of God, which constitutes the satisfaction, and fruition derived from this state."

The poem continues with the beautiful lines (My beloved is) -
'The tranquil night,
At the time of the rising dawn
Silent music
Sounding solitude
The supper that refreshes and deepens love."

There is a great aura of peace about this passage. The darkness of night is receding and we are given glimpses of the approaching morning. We are reminded of that lovely passage in the Song of Songs itself -

"Arise, my love, my lovely one and come,
For see the winter is now past, the rains are over and gone,
The flowers appear 4n the earth, the season of glad songs has come,
The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land."

John has heard all this music in his heart. He was, as we know, a lover of music, so he could say, "creation will be for the soul a harmonious symphony of sublime music, surpassing all concerts and melodies of the world¹."

Many years ago Estelle White in her hymn "O the love of my Lord is the essence of all that I love here on earth" is hinting at what John is saying. The last line goes " His touch is as gentle as silence" Again the poet Keats comes to our rescue with this beautiful illustration of what his fellow lyricist sings about here:

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter;
therefore ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone."

`The supper that refrehes and enkindles love`.The image here is that of the supper and here are many scriptural echoes for this. The one that would appeal to me here is Ps. 22.

"He has prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes,
My head he has anointed with oil,
My cup is overflowing."

John doesn't mention the Eucharist specifically but perhaps equivalently for he says that the supper is the beloved and what more appropriate description of Holy Communion could you get?

We move on in Stanza 16 to discuss the same theme. But in this life we are reminded that there is no such thing as uninterrupted communion with God. We must realise the reality of the human condition and our vulnerability to suffering and temptation. John indicates that the soul can be troubled by sexual temptations and other disturbances connected with sensuality. These temptations must be resisted and warded off in the normal way of Christian life, that is by resolute prayer.

At this stage of spiritual development there is special need to allow God to do His work. God wants to communicate Himself to the soul and any activity or effort on our part will only impede this inflowing. It's a question of waiting on God.

Stanza 17 sets out to provide an antidote for an obstacle that arises. Everyone who tries to pray, at least has experienced this problem. How do we cope with dryness? The chilling wind freezes and dries up the soul. The Lord seems to be absent, far away. This is something very painful and causes great suffering. John's remedy is disarmingly simple but perhaps difficult to carry out. In a way it seems to beg the question! If you can't pray, then just keep on praying'. "

The second great remedy is to call on the Holy Spirit - "On our dryness pour thy dew".

The theme of trial, temptation and various kinds of disturbance continue through the next stanza also, the 18th. Unruly movements of the lower appetities continue to obtrude themselves on the quiet of the soul. It needs to be insisted that this is a life-long struggle and nobody is ever immune from this kind of temptation.

The following stanza (19) prays for God's communication to come to it, but to bypass the realm of the senses, because the senses cannot sustain the force of these communications. Knowledge of God that comes through the senses is necessarily inferior to that which is communicated directly by God to the mind. What St. John is really asking here is that God should give Himself as He is to the soul. This is a sublime request but it is exactly what is understood by the full blossoming of the Christian life of grace in the soul.

We are now nearing the completion of the second stage of spiritual growth. The scriptural inspiration for it has been these words of Hosea " I will espouse thee to me in faith. "

The picture is one of a gradual build-up of strength and fortitude for the life of union with God. Peace and tranquillity begin to reign in the soul as a result of the forceful influence of God's grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit. There is a harmony introduced into the soul that is like the original harmony planned by God.

In the language of the ' dark night ' as applied to both sense and spirit "My house being now at rest", John paints a picture of a soul, and of course, in this case his own, that is completely at rest in God. He doesn't hope for anything because being now satisfied with union with God in this life there is nothing left to hope for.

St. John is not saying that we live in an unreal world, not feeling anything at all, but rather that we do not feel joy and sorrow as formerly. It means that all the time a deep peace is preserved in the soul. Remember St. Teresa's bookmark "Nada te turba", "Let nothing disturb you'.