

THE LIVING FLAME

In his introduction to this work (addressed to Dona Ana de Penelosa) St John of the Cross refers us to his favourite scriptural theme of the Indwelling as we read it in St John's Gospel (14:23).

John's other writings had led up to a high state of union with God as transformation in God. This book then professedly deals with a further intensification of the life of union with God which as John states, comes with time and practice!

When the individual reaches the desired goal (i.e. union with God), there is a great sense of happiness and peace. 'From its bosom flow rivers of living water' (Jn 7:38).

This is now a deeply loving and intimate encounter with the Lord in prayer. It has remained for many years in His presence allowing the fire of contemplation to purge and purify it and fill it with a knowledge and awareness and love of God. This has achieved the perfection of faith, everything has been leading up to this.

The soul addresses the Holy Spirit in words:

O living flame of love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest centre ! Since
now you are not oppressive,
Now consummate: if it be your will;
Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter.

The person who is united to God is constantly trying to rise to Him through prayerful words of love and desire. 'The Spirit himself comes to the aid of our spirit in words beyond all utterance' (Rom 8:26). John echoes what he has asserted in the *Spiritual Canticle* (Stanza 29), 'that one of these acts of love is more valuable than anything else the person has done'.

John compares the state to a log of wood that is steadily burning, and has itself been transformed into fire. Now and again a flame will rise from the object, according to the intensity of the fire. This is the living flame of love[^]—~ "3 o^{L9}*f<-#*.£*,

John touches on the 'deification' theme of Greek theology: the soul is now acting in a divine way because of its transformation in God. It is able 'to share the divine nature' (2 Pet 1:4).

In a loving communion with the Father, Son and Spirit, the soul enjoys a foretaste of eternal life. This is the experiential working of grace in the soul, a living, vital encounter with God. God is an ocean of love and beauty that inundates the soul causing it to melt and flow in that same mightily current. We are dealing here with a deep mystical experience of divine love. The soul is held in the ecstatic embrace of God's love but it is a gentle, delicate experience that does not manifest itself as 'violently' as previously. This is a time of celebration and festivity, characterised by all the arts and stratagems and playfulness of divine love.

What we witness here then, proceeds completely from the divine initiative. We are dealing with infused contemplation, so the soul is completely passive to God's work. John is saying that for the soul God has now become its centre of gravity towards whom it has 'gravitated' with all its strength. Love has been the powerful attraction that has drawn the soul to God. Again we meet the love that intensifies literally by degrees, seven in all, like the seven mansions of Teresa. John reminds us that in this 'deepest centre' we are on the threshold of eternal life, to which it bears a great resemblance, and so he feels it is daring even to talk about it. This experience is ineffable and also incredible, because it is hard to believe that God can be so condescending as to live in a deep communion with one of his creatures. We are dealing not just with a fire, but with a conflagration that gets out of control! John writes in the language of tenderest love, a love that touches and wounds, that whispers and embraces.

This has been a great and glorious development by contrast with what has preceded it along the road of spiritual progress. When the flame of God's love touches the heart that is not yet purified it meets with tremendous resistance from human nature. What in itself is great and glorious, then appears as something that torments and harasses rather than a love that embraces and heals.

We have seen this fire at work on the soul's sins and defects in the *Ascent* and the *Dark Night*. There the divine light only served to throw in relief the misery and darkness of the soul. This has been a veritable martyrdom for soul and spirit as they pass through purgatorial fire.

When the divine flame has done its work of purification then it is no longer oppressive but sweet. Before it was a painful assault from outside, now it is a gentle smouldering from within.

The soul now asks for the perfection and consumation of this union which comes about in the beatific vision. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, the soul hears the Bridegroom's voice calling to it, 'Arise and make haste my love, my dove, my beautiful one and come, for winter is now past, the rains are over and gone . . .' (Cant 2,III) The soul enjoys a 'sweet encounter' with its beloved and there is nothing between them but the thin veil of mortal life.

John gives us a marvellous description of a holy death which is unsurpassed in spiritual literature.

'The death of such persons is very gentle and very sweet, sweeter and more gentle than was their whole spiritual life on earth. For they die with the most sublime impulses and delightful encounters of love, resembling the swan whose song is much sweeter at the moment of death'.

This could be a very appropriate description of the death of Therese of Lisieux about three hundred years later!

John's prayer bears the stamp of the impetuosity of the lover, calling on the divine power to intervene suddenly and 'break the web of this sweet encounter'. John says that the Lord takes to himself, before their time, souls that love him ardently.

Stanza 2

St John now addresses the Holy Spirit in the words 'O sweet cautery'. This is because the Spirit is a fire that burns and transforms.

Holy Spirit of fire,
Home everlasting so bright and clear
Speak this day in our heart
Lighten our darkness and purge us of fear
Holy Spirit of fire.

The loving warm breath of the Spirit caresses the soul, enkindling it in love and causing it to glow and shine brightly and ardently. It both wounds and heals at the same time and it infuses a feeling of deep satisfaction and peace into the depths of the heart. 'Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love'.

If the needle that cauterises the flesh is not sharp and pointed but tender and soothing, then the wound it causes is not hurtful but instead gives immense delight. Moreover this new wound acts like a healing cautery by touching all the old wounds of the soul, whether those caused by its limitations and sins or by its miseries, and transforms them all into one joyous wound of love. And so the soul's ills including all hurtful memories, are healed by the deep working within it of the Spirit of love.

John's language here is truly sublime as he describes for us the paradox of love.

The more wounded the lover, the healthier he is, and the cure love causes is to wound and inflict wound after wound, to such an extent that the entire soul is dissolved into a wound of love (Stanza 2 para.7).

This wound is a touch of the divinity about which John has told us in the *Ascent*, book 3, and in the *Spiritual Canticle*.

In this stanza John also talks about a slightly different form of this divine wound whereby an angel pierces the heart with an arrow of love. He is obviously alluding to the experience recounted for us by St Teresa in Book 29 of her *Life*. This interpretation is beyond doubt for he mentions that founders may receive this grace in order to have the riches of the Spirit to share with and pass on to their followers.

Teresa relates in the incident known as the transverberation of her heart:

It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me . . . and he left me all on fire with great love for God (ch.29).

For John, the 'gentle hand' signifies the Father and the 'delicate touch' signifies the Son. He meditates on the marvel of the omnipresent Father resting with gentle hand upon the soul. This leads him on to address the Son, the Word of God, in a beautiful prayer of praise and thanksgiving for His delicate and delightful touch. The feeling is inexpressible and ought really to be received and savoured in silence. In the liturgy of the Church, we often think about and anticipate the 'reward of eternal life'. Again, John sees here the soul enjoying a foretaste of that future state. This reward comes after many labours and sufferings which have been endured along the road to this blessedness. Through these the soul has died to itself and so now it experiences a resurrection from the dead. A complete metamorphosis has come about and the soul lives a divine life. It becomes God through participation, but John insists that he is no pantheist, the individual retains his own identity. So keen is the feeling of delight here that the soul imagines that it has become the special object of God's favour, that he has no time for anyone else besides itself. 'It feels . . . that he has no one else on the earth to favour nor anything else to do, that everything is for the soul alone'

Stanza 3

Prayer is now completely infused and so the knowledge of God is flowing abundantly and lovingly into the soul. This is a divine gift of the Spirit that lights up the soul and makes it burn vehemently. 'From his fulness we have all received' (Jn 1:16). God loves us in a sovereign way in accordance with all his infinite attributes. 'I am yours and for you, and delighted to be what I am so as to be yours and give myself to you' (3, para. 6).

The soul feels inundated with the torrent of the divine goodness and 'drinks deep from the wells of salvation' (Is

St John now describes for us the working of God's grace in a soul completely united with Him. 'He who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit with Him'

There is a marvellous interaction between the soul and God because, as the soul shares in the very life of God. This is the meaning of grace in the Christian life, and mysterious is the flowing of the life of grace. In this loving exchange with God, all one's energies are engaged and all the powers of the soul cling to God who is their object. The mind thirsts to know God more fully and the will hungers for him and the memory longs to possess Him. The soul has moved from being 'engaged' to God to possessing Him in a mystical union. During the intervening period after the soul had given its 'yes' to God, the desire to possess Him grew enormously. The Holy Spirit bestows his anointings on the soul which serve to prepare it for the longed-for union.

John tells us, 'In the first place it should be known that if a person is seeking God, his beloved is seeking him much more' (3,28). This means that the beloved will draw the soul through the fragrance of his ointments, through His divine ^{ms}SH&&:fo\$ and through His loving touches. This has been a great theme of the *Spiritual Canticle*.

John departs from his subject here for a while to touch on another concern of his — that is his anxiety that people receive enlightened spiritual guidance especially at critical times of spiritual growth. This has been very thoroughly covered in the *Ascent/Night*. There is a long discussion on the role of the spiritual director, especially in guiding the person through the transition period between meditation and contemplation. An ill-equipped director can retard or block progress at this stage.

Other obstacles are placed in our way by the devil or by ourselves.

The soul and its faculties had formerly lived in darkness and obscurity before they were purified by the dark nights and the suffering involved in them. Now however they are transformed and so reflect the divine glory in a mutual exchange of love.

In this spiritual marriage there is mutual giving and mutual surrender. The soul loves and praises God for what He is in Himself and because He has given himself to it.

Stanza 4

In this final stanza of the *Living Flame*, the soul is rejoicing in having arrived at the state of spiritual marriage.

The spouse now turns to her Lord where he awakes in the nuptial chamber of her heart. This is an unspeakable experience of spiritual awakening, because Jesus the Word of God is intimately united with the soul and so there is a marvellous sense of oneness with Him. The soul is no longer alone, they are no longer two but one, for all its thoughts and desires have now mingled with those of the Son of God. Everything seems to come alive, like a dawn chorus in the soul, and so the heart seems to expand in all directions like a rose opening to the sun. The Lord treats the soul like a friend, a brother, a sister, and a spouse and so too his love is supremely gentle and delicate and takes away all fear. Because the heart has been cleansed and made ready the bridegroom abides there holding the soul in a close and intimate embrace. The bride is reposing on the arms of her lover and she awakes to feel the breath of the Holy Spirit upon her

He is usually there, in this embrace with his bride, as though asleep in the substance of the soul.

And it is very well aware of Him and ordinarily enjoys Him (4, para 15)

The final lines of the stanza talk about this sweet breathing of the Holy Spirit. Here John draws his commentary to a close, abruptly leaving aside

He who has written so sublimely about the love of God is now powerless to continue. He tells us that he has no desire to speak of this experience. It is a deep feeling of the presence of the Spouse that further inflames and stimulates love, so it is fitting that St John of the Cross, the Doctor of divine love should leave us, singing the praises of that great Lord who unites himself with the human person in the most intimate embrace of love.