

The beginnings of transforming union¹

We have already noted the first experiences of contemplative prayer when our stretching towards God gives way to a yielding to him. We have been watering the garden of our soul when suddenly a mysterious spring of love wells up from the depths of our being. We have been working at prayer when suddenly an unexpected and fragrant perfume draws us into a deeper communion. We have been rowing energetically when a gentle breeze catches our sail and carries us forward. We are pursuing our journey to the centre of our soul when a door opens and we feel the warmth coming from the open fire that is burning there. Teresa of Avila speaks of these early experiences of contemplation as an 'interior recollection that is felt in the soul' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.3).

Such is God's longing to share with us the fullness of divine communion, that, provided we surrender to the love that is being offered to us, these transient moments deepen: we experience ourselves wrapped in silence in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Quiet. However, the union with God which is experienced in the Prayer of Quiet is a union of the will only. We saw that the imagination, memory and thoughts, left with nothing to hold their attention, go off in whatever direction they fancy. John of the Cross speaks of the sense faculties, from the point of view of prayer, being left out in the night. We discussed some of the confusion and difficulties which this can cause.

Let us accept the guidance of Teresa as she shares her experience as her contemplative communion with God deepened. She tells us that sometimes while she was in the Prayer of Quiet she had brief² experiences of a more complete union of love which she calls the Prayer of Union.

'This is the union which I have desired all my life; it is for this that I continually beseech our Lord' (*Interior Castle*, V.3.5).

The communion with God which she experienced in these brief moments was very different from any previously experienced (*Interior Castle*, V.1.7). She could experience the Prayer of Quiet while engaged in other activities. This was not possible in the Prayer of Union. In this prayer the whole of her soul, and not only her will, was drawn into communion.

'When there is union of all the faculties, things are very different because none of them is able to function. The intellect is in awe ... There is no memory or thought' (*Spiritual Testimonies* 59.6).

'All the faculties are asleep in this state ... During the time that the union lasts, the soul is left as though without its senses, for it has no power to think even if it wants to.'

(*Interior Castle*, V.1.4)

'God is working in the soul without anyone disturbing him, not even ourselves.'

(*Interior Castle*, V.1.6)

Teresa spells out some of the characteristics of this Prayer. The first is a deep assurance that we have truly been in communion with God who has touched us with love. She writes:

'God so places Himself in the interior of the soul that when we return to ourself we can in no way doubt that we have been in God and God in us. This truth remains with us so firmly that even though years go by without God's granting that favour again, we can neither forget nor doubt that we have been in God and God in us' (*Interior Castle*, V.1.8).

¹The Interior Castle (Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1979) pages 85-171 and Marie-Eugène OCD *I am a daughter of the Church*, Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1955, 168-299.

² On the short duration of these experiences, see Interior Castle V.1.9; V.2.7; Spiritual Testimonies 59.6.

A second characteristic of the Prayer of Union is the knowledge that God is offering us perfect detachment and obedience. God is inviting us to comply faithfully to his action as he frees us from the last remaining bonds that fetter us and hinder our flight to God:

‘Everything the soul sees on earth leaves it dissatisfied, especially when God has again and again given it this wine which almost every time has brought it some new blessing ... It is no longer bound by ties of relationship, friendship or property. Previously all its acts of will and resolutions and desires were powerless to loosen these and seemed only to bind them the more firmly; now it is grieved at having even to fulfil its obligations in these respects lest these should cause it to sin against God. Everything wearies it, because it has proved that it can find no rest in creatures’(*Interior Castle*, V.2.8).

‘The soul is much more detached from creatures because it now sees that only the Creator can console and satisfy it’(*Interior Castle*, VI.11.10).

We can experience the gift of the Prayer of Union only if we are resolved to give ourselves wholly to God and if our will is completely subject to God.

‘Whether you have little or much, He wants everything for himself’(*Interior Castle*, V.1.3).

‘God does not want our will to have any part to play in this prayer, for it has been entirely surrendered to him’(*Interior Castle*, V.1.12).

‘The soul has now surrendered itself into God’s hands and God’s great love has so completely subdued it that it neither knows nor desires anything save that God shall do with it what He wills’(*Interior Castle*, V.2.12).

‘The soul has no desire to seek or possess any free will. It gives to the Lord the keys of its will’(*Life*, 20.22).

A third characteristic is that in the Prayer of Union we receive the gift of a deeper love for God. This is manifest in a fourth characteristic which is God’s gift to us of a profound love of others and a new zeal to be active in the mission of the Church which is ‘the fullness of Him who fills the whole of creation’(Ephesians 1:23), his body which ‘builds itself up in love’(Ephesians 4:16). Christ ‘loved the Church and gave himself up for her’(Ephesians 5:25). When our will is united to his we share his love and his willingness to offer himself in love for others. This involves suffering at seeing others offending God, and a desire to suffer with Jesus for their redemption. After the grace of union, the soul, ‘having now a clear realisation that the fruits of this prayer are not our own, we can start to share them and yet have no lack of them’(*Life*, 19).

‘The surest sign that we are keeping the two commandments of love is that we are really loving our neighbour ... Be certain that the farther advanced you find yourself in this, the greater is your love for God’(*Interior Castle*, V.3.9).

Father Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Love makes perfect apostles, for love alone can form worthy instruments of God, and only love’s flame makes apostolic activity fruitful’(*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 226).

God is bringing about this union. There is nothing we can do to achieve it. However, God respects our freedom. We can dispose ourselves for union by our love (see *Satirical Critique*, 5), and we can choose to remain open to God’s action. Teresa likens the experience to a cocoon in which a silkworm is being transformed into a butterfly. Teresa also suggests that our attitude under grace at this time is to be like wax under a seal: we are to remain soft, quiet and consenting (*The Interior Castle*, V.2.12).

For some, this union is a fruit of a special mystical grace:

‘For the short time that the condition lasts, the soul is without consciousness and has no power to think, even though it may desire to do so ... In fact, it has completely died to the world so that it may live more fully in God. This is a delightful death, a snatching of the

soul from all the activities which it can perform while it is in the body'(*Interior Castle*, V.1.3).

However, God can offer this grace in whatever way God chooses. Things are not yet fully clear, and there is still a process of purification to be undergone before the complete transforming union takes place which is the goal of God's dealings with the soul here in earth. But for all that the soul is enjoying the beginnings of a union that will come to perfection in the Beatific Vision.

The grace of spiritual betrothal³

In 1556, Teresa experienced a deepening of her prayer of Union. In her prayer she experienced Jesus promising to take her as his bride. Overwhelmed with love, she promised to give him her whole heart and soul. She speaks of this mutual commitment as a spiritual betrothal.

‘You will have often heard that God betroths himself to souls spiritually ... It is a union of love with love, and its operations are entirely pure, and so delicate and gentle that there is no way of describing them; but the Lord can make the soul very deeply conscious of them.’
(*Interior Castle*, V.4.3)

‘God uses means so delicate that the soul itself does not understand them ... they proceed from the very depths of the heart ... The soul is conscious of having been most delicately wounded, but cannot say how or by whom; but it is certain that this is a precious experience and it would be glad if it were never healed of that wound ... The Beloved is making it very clear that he is with the soul and seems to be giving it such a clear sign that he is calling it that it cannot doubt the fact, and the call is so penetrating that it cannot fail to hear him.’
(*Interior Castle*, VI.2.1-3)

‘It is as though from the fire enkindled in the brazier that is my God a spark leapt forth and so struck the soul that the flaming fire was felt by it’(*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4).

However, the spark that inflamed Teresa’s heart with love was not yet enough to set her soul on fire. The promised marriage was not to take place for another sixteen years. The delay increased her desire. Marie-Eugène writes:

‘The Divine tactic is to cause desire to grow in order to increase love and obtain from the soul a more active and intense preparation for perfect union. These desires God fans into flame by his calling to the soul in which he makes Himself felt; or by visits so sudden and so fleeting as hardly to be recognised. The painful and delightful wound made by the first encounter has enlarged. The flame of love leaps forth in greater ardour, and the desires for possessing God become keen and living’(*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 228).

The delay is also the cause of pain, like ‘a sudden, sharp wound in the most intimate part of the soul’(*Interior Castle*, VI.11.2), ‘a wound in which it seems as though an arrow is thrust into the heart or into the soul itself’(*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.17).

‘Having won such great favours, the soul is so anxious to have complete fruition of the one who has granted these favours that its life becomes sheer, though delectable, torture. It has the keenest longings for death, and so it frequently and tearfully begs God to take it out of this exile. Everything in this life that it sees, wearies it. When it finds itself alone it experiences great relief, but immediately the distress returns till it hardly knows itself when it is without it’(*Interior Castle*, VI.6.1).

‘Very often a desire unexpectedly arises, in a way which I cannot explain. And this desire, which in a single moment penetrates to the very depths of the soul, begins to weary it so much that the soul soars upwards, far above itself and above all created things. It is a martyrdom, severe but also delectable; for the soul will accept nothing earthly that may be offered it, even though it were the thing which it had been accustomed to enjoy most.’
(*Life*, 20.9)

In his commentary on stanza 18 of the *Spiritual Canticle*, John writes:

‘In that sweet draught of God, wherein the soul is immersed in God, it surrenders itself to him wholly, most willingly and with great delight, desiring to be wholly his and never

³Teresa, *The Interior Castle*, pages 126-143; *Life*, chapters 20-21; Marie-Eugène OCD, *I am a daughter of the Church*, pages 509-541.

again to have anything in itself that is alien from him ... Inasmuch as he transforms the soul into himself, God makes it to be wholly his and empties it of all that it possessed and that was alien from him. Wherefore the soul is indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to his will, but also according to what it does, even as God has given himself freely to the soul. So these two wills are surrendered, satisfied and given up to each other, so that neither shall fail the other, as in the faithfulness and stability of a betrothal.'

Stanzas 13-21 of the Spiritual Canticle describe the Spiritual Betrothal:

[Bride]

13. Withdraw them, Beloved,
I am taking flight!

[Chorus]

Return, dove, the wounded stag
is in sight on the hill,
cooled by the breeze of your flight.

[Bride]

14. My Beloved is the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,

15. the tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music,
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

16. Catch us the foxes,
for our vineyard in now in flower,
while we fashion a cone of roses
intricate as the pine's;
and let no one appear on the hill.

17. Be still, deadening the north wind;
south wind come, you that waken love,
breathe through my garden,
let its fragrance flow,
and the Beloved will feed amid the flowers.

18. You girls of Judea,
while among flowers and roses
the amber spreads its perfume,
stay away, there on the outskirts;
do not even seek to touch our thresholds.

[Bridegroom]

19. Hide yourself, my Love;
turn your face toward the mountains,
and do not speak;

[Chorus]

but look at those companions
going with her through strange islands.

20. Swift-winged birds,
lions, stags, and leaping roes,
mountains, lowlands, and river banks,
waters, winds and ardours;
watching fears of the night:

21. By the pleasant lyres
and the siren's song, I conjure you
to cease your anger
and do not touch the wall,
that the bride may sleep in deeper peace.

Another description of the prayer of spiritual betrothal is found in *The Living Flame*:

'O lamps of fire!
in whose splendours
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now, so strangely exquisite,
give forth warmth and light to their Beloved' (Stanza 3).

Commenting on this stanza, John Venard OCD writes:⁴

'This Stanza deals with matters so profound that St. John exclaims "May God be pleased to grant me his favour here!" The soul "has become God by participation in Him and in His attributes: it is like the air within the flame, which is transformed into the flame itself" (*Living Flame*, III.9) – the Spirit moving the soul as the fire moves the air that is enkindled. It is like the overshadowing of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. The soul experiences a deep perception and experience of the grandeur of the wisdom and excellences of God. The caverns, or faculties, are wonderfully infused with the splendours of the "lamps of fire," the attributes of God. It actually participates in these attributes of

⁴John Venard OCD *The Living Flame of Love: simplified version with notes*; Sydney: EJDwyer 1990

God; it sees that God really belongs to it by “hereditary possession, with the right of ownership, as an adopted child of God” (page 2).

John of the Cross writes:

‘All that the soul does is of God, and its operations are divine, so that the one who is joined to God is one spirit with him. Hence it comes to pass that the operations of the soul in union are of the Divine Spirit and are divine’ (*Ascent III*, ii).