

The grace of spiritual marriage

Teresa now attempts to share with us her most intimate experience of communion with God in prayer. It has been a long, courageous journey into the centre of her soul, made possible only because it has been, from the beginning, a journey of love. On November 18th 1572, Teresa experienced herself being taken by Christ as his bride. She writes:

‘He appeared to me in an imaginative vision, very interiorly, and he gave me his right hand and said: “Behold the nail. It is a sign that you will be my bride from today on”’(*Spiritual Testimonies* No. 31).

This vision was different in quality from all previous encounters:

‘first, because this vision came with great force; second, because of the words the Lord spoke to her and also because in the interior of her soul, where He represented himself to her, she had not seen other visions except the former one¹’(*Interior Castle*, VII, 2.2).

At last her soul, fully purified, was able to receive the fullness of the transforming union of love with Christ. John of the Cross writes of:

‘A mutual surrender by total possession in consummated union of love as far as may be in this life’(*Spiritual Canticle*, 27).

‘The soul is dissolved in that transformation wherein, inflamed and changed in love, it was annihilated and undone as to all that which was not love, and left so that it knew nothing except love’(*Spiritual Canticle*, 17).

‘When the soul rids itself totally of whatever does not conform with the divine will, it is transformed in God through love ... The soul that has attained complete conformity and likeness of will is totally united and transformed in God supernaturally ... There can be no perfect transformation unless there is perfect purity. The enlightenment, illumination and union of the soul with God is in proportion to its purity’(*Ascent*, II,5).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘Spiritual marriage comes finally to seal the union and change the promises into a communication of persons in the transformation of love ... Henceforth, in mutual possession, God and the soul rejoice in their reciprocal perfect love’(page 230).

‘Transforming union designates the degree of charity that brings about the perfect union with God which we call spiritual marriage, through the transformation and likeness of love’(page 567).

‘The soul becomes God by participation’(page 582).

Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘From that day² I have been penetrated and surrounded with love. Every moment this merciful Love renews me and purifies me, leaving in my soul no trace of sins’(*Autobiography*, 8.133).

Teresa first spoke of contemplative union in the Prayer of Union. There the union was fleeting, incomplete and experienced in darkness, though accompanied by the certainty of having been in contact with God. Later she experienced a deeper union which she speaks of as spiritual betrothal. In the deepest part of her soul she experienced, as it were, a flame of divine love coming directly from God. In the communion of spiritual betrothal Jesus promised to take her as his bride, and she said Yes. Now, in the grace of spiritual marriage, the promise is realised. Now the whole of

¹ An intellectual vision of the Blessed Trinity mentioned in *Interior Castle* VII.1.6-7.

²She is referring to the day on which she composed her Act of Oblation - 9th June, 1895.

her soul is drawn into its centre where God dwells. While she is experiencing this pure state of prayer (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.1), she is wrapped in a complete union of will, a complete and constant communion of love, a compenetration of perfect communion. This union is definitive and unbreakable. The transformation of her soul is complete.

To speak of the union as perfect is not to say that it is static or that the soul has arrived at its goal. In the prayer of spiritual marriage the soul experiences the first light of a new day. The day itself, however, is for eternity and is experienced in the Beatific Vision. With the gift of spiritual marriage the soul is bathed in light, and it is the light of this new day, now beginning. The soul has been transformed by love, and there is nothing there but love, a love that is now pure. There is nothing that can hinder its growth. The fire has taken hold. To change the image, the water of life is flowing freely between the heart of Jesus and the heart of his beloved. Nothing now can separate the soul from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Teresa attempts to find images to describe this love:

‘The soul always remains with its God in the centre. Let us say that the union is like the joining of two wax candles to such an extent that the flame coming from them is but one, or that the wick, the flame, and the wax are all one. But afterward one candle can be easily separated from the other and there are two candles; the same holds for the wick. In spiritual marriage the union is like what we have when rain falls from the sky into a river. All is water, for the rain that fell from heaven cannot be divided or separated from the water of the river. Or it is like what we have when a little stream enters the sea. There is no means of separating the two. Or, like the bright light entering a room through two different windows. Although the streams of light are separate when entering the room, they become one’(*Interior Castle*, VII.2.4).

Marie-Eugène writes:

‘The love that brings about transforming union can reach greater degrees of perfection and intensity. When the soul arrives at transforming union, all its natural tendencies and properties are absorbed by love. It is wholly filled with love according to its capacity. But this capacity can ceaselessly be enlarged. Love can go on progressing in new perfection and intensity. In the furnace of the purified transformed soul, love continues to kindle divine fires more and more subtle, until it carries away the soul as its spouse and its conquest into eternal life’(page 587).

Because purification is complete, aridity and interior disturbances are rare, and the senses, the memory, the imagination, the intellect and the will are, for the most part, stilled. Even when disturbance is experienced, it cannot penetrate into the centre of the soul where the soul enjoys communion with Christ, the Bridegroom (*Interior Castle*, VII.2.10), nor can it drive the soul away from this communion. In this state of union, we may experience, like Jesus and with him, a crucifixion, but the peace he gives is a peace that cannot be taken away.

‘The cross is not wanting but it does not disquiet or make the soul lose peace. For the storms, like a wave, pass quickly, and the fair weather returns, because the Presence of the Lord whom they experience makes them soon forget everything’(*Interior Castle*, VII.3.15).

‘There are no interior trials or feelings of dryness, but the soul lives, remembering the Lord with tender love’(*Interior Castle*, VII.3.8).

Teresa has been made aware, without images, and in a more sublime manner than ever before, of the presence of the Blessed Trinity in her soul (*Interior Castle*, VII.1.6). She has been utterly transformed, capable only of love. The love which the Father has for his Son now flows freely and without reserve into the heart of his bride, and her response is that of the heart of Jesus himself. The following statements of Saint Paul can now be said without reservation:

‘For me to live is Christ’(Philippians 1:21).

‘I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.’

(1Corinthians 2:2)

‘All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’(2Corinthians 3:18).

‘For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I count them as refuse that I may gain Christ and be found in him’(Philippians 3:9).

‘May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God’(Ephesians 3:17-19).

John of the Cross speaks of the intimate presence of God’s Spirit in the soul:

‘The soul calls it the breathing of the air, because it is a most delicate touch and feeling of love which habitually in this estate is caused in the soul by the communication of the Holy Spirit. Breathing with his divine breath, he raises the soul most sublimely, and informs her, that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father’(*Spiritual Canticle*, 39.3).

‘The flame of love is the Spirit of the soul’s Bridegroom, which is the Holy Spirit. The soul feels the Holy Spirit within itself not only as a fire which has consumed and transformed it, but as a fire that burns and flares within it. And that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life. Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love’(*Living Flame*, I.3).

‘The soul shines brightly with the warmth of love ... It is like the air within the flame, enkindled and transformed in the flame, for the flame is nothing but enkindled air. The movements and radiance of the flame are not from the air alone, nor from the fire of which the flame is composed, but from both the air and the fire. It is the fire which causes the air which it has enkindled to produce the movements and the radiance. We can consequently understand how the soul with its faculties is illumined within the radiance of God. The movements of these divine flames which are flickering and flaring up are not produced only by the soul that is transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produce them alone, but they are the work of both the soul and the Holy Spirit ... This activity of the flames are inspired in the soul by the Holy Spirit’(*Living Flame*, 3,9-10).

‘The operations of the memory and other faculties in this state are divine. God now possesses the faculties as their complete lord, because of their transformation in Him. Consequently, it is God who divinely moves and commands them according to his spirit and will. As a result the operations are not different from those of God; but those the soul performs are of God. They are divine operations. Since the one who is united with God is one spirit with God, as Saint Paul says [1Cor 6:17], the operations of the soul united with God are of the divine Spirit and are divine’(*Ascent*, III,2.8).

Teresa experienced the union of spiritual marriage ten years before her death. She had founded the first convent of reformed Carmel in 1562 and the second in 1567. This was followed by six more in the years prior to her receiving the gift of spiritual marriage. In the ten years after that experience she continued this constant travelling and organising and founded another seven convents as well as working for the reform of the friars. Her love impelled her to carry out the will of her Beloved and so continue his mission. She wanted only what her Spouse wanted and in her case it was that she strive, with all her energy, to renew the Church by establishing places of prayer all over Spain in which men and women would be open in love to God and so call down the fire of God’s redeeming and saving love on the Church and the world.

She now knew herself as God knows her, and so she could leave care of her soul completely to God, while she attended to God's affairs (*Interior Castle*, VII.3.2). Spiritual marriage made her soul totally like wax under a seal, completely available for God's will, carried out with all her heart and soul, all her mind and strength. Teresa insists:

'The reason for prayer, the purpose of this spiritual marriage is always the birth of good works' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.6).

'The soul is much more occupied than before with everything pertaining to the service of God' (*Interior Castle*, VII.1.8).

The way in which this sublime grace of spiritual marriage is granted varies from person to person (*Interior Castle*, VII.2.1). Furthermore, God's design for each person is unique. But for everyone, as for Teresa, this transforming union of love will bind us to Jesus and to his mission, in whatever way he graces us to carry it out. Mindful of the fact that 'the Lord looks not so much at the greatness of what we do, but at the love with which we act' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.15), we are all called to experience a deep longing to serve the One who gave himself for us, even on the cross (*Interior Castle*, VII.3.6).

'The Lord can do nothing greater for us than grant us a life which is an imitation of that lived by his beloved Son. I feel certain, therefore, that the favours which he grants are given to us to strengthen our weakness so that we may be able to imitate him in his great sufferings.'

(*Interior Castle*, VII.4.4)

'Let us desire and be occupied in prayer not for the sake of our enjoyment but so as to have the strength to serve' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.12).

We are not to 'build castles in the air' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.15), but are to love those given to us by providence (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.14).

'Do you know when people really become spiritual? It is when they become the slaves of God and are branded with his sign, which is the sign of the Cross, in token that they have given him their freedom. Then he can sell them as slaves to the whole world, as he himself was sold' (*Interior Castle*, VII.4.8).

The fourteenth century Flemish mystic, Ruusbroec, assures us that contemplative prayer unites us to God and so to carrying out God's will in our daily lives. He writes:

'A person who has been sent down by God from the heights of contemplative prayer into the world is full of truth and rich in all the virtues. He sees nothing of his own but only the glory of the one who sent him. He is accordingly righteous and truthful in all things and has a rich and generous foundation which rests on God's own richness. He will therefore always flow forth to those who need him, for the living spring of the Holy Spirit is so rich that it can never be drained dry. Such a person is a living and willing instrument of God with which God accomplishes what he wishes in the way he wishes. Such a person does not attribute these accomplishments to himself but gives God the glory. He stands ready and willing to do all that God commands and is strong and courageous in suffering and enduring all that God sends him. He therefore leads a common life, for he is equally ready for contemplation or for action and is perfect in both' (*The Sparkling Stone*, page 184).

This is consistent with the insistence of Saint Dominic that we are to hand on to others what we have experienced in contemplation ('contemplata tradere'), and with Saint Ignatius Loyola who urged those who joined him as Companions of Jesus to be contemplative in action ('in actione contemplativus').

Our main guides to the deeper mysteries of contemplative prayer have been Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Towards the beginning of this series we noted that prayer for Teresa is

essentially something very simple. She speaks of it as ‘an exercise of love’(Life 7.12), ‘an intimate sharing between friends ... taking time frequently to be alone with God who we know loves us’(Life 8.5). ‘The soul is a paradise where the Lord finds his delight’(The Interior Castle I.1.1). ‘In its centre take place very secret exchanges between God and the soul’(The Interior Castle I.1.3).

However, such is our propensity for self-deception and the distracted nature of much of life that we can fail to listen to our deepest longings and we can fail to dare the inner journey of prayer. We thank God for the guidance and encouragement of Teresa and John, remembering Teresa’s warning: ‘As much as I desire to speak clearly about these matters of prayer, they will be really obscure for one who has not had experience’(Life, 10.9). These two great teachers of prayer have opened up for us the marvels of their own journey of love and they have warned us of the pitfalls. However, in the words of John Climacus, the seventh century abbot of the monastery on Mount Sinai:

‘You cannot learn to see just because someone tells you to do so. For that you require your own natural power of sight. In the same way, you cannot discover from the teaching of others the beauty of prayer. Prayer has its own special teacher in God, who grants the prayer of the person who prays’(The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 28).

It is for each of us to listen to the call of love in our own hearts and, in the company of Jesus our brother and friend, to dare the purifying journey into the embrace of God. We conclude with the following advice from the same master of the spiritual life:

‘Do not hurry to contemplation at the wrong time. Rather, let it come to you, seeking out the beauty of your lowliness, ready to join you for a long time in a spotless marriage’(The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 7).