

# 21. Transforming Union

I imagine that most readers of this book will recognise something of their own experience in what Teresa and John have shared with us of their own journey in prayer up to and including the beginnings of passive prayer described in the previous chapter. Teresa goes on to describe three further stages of growing intimacy with God, stages which she herself experienced and which she identified in others who confided in her. In this chapter we will reflect on some typical experiences that belong to what she speaks of as the fifth and sixth stages of the inner journey. If we do not recognise our experience in these pages, it is hoped that we will at least find encouragement not to be content with a lesser communion when God is beckoning us to a deeper trust and a more complete purification of our love.

## The beginnings of transforming union

Teresa tells us that sometimes while she was in the Prayer of Quiet she had brief experiences of a more complete union of love that she calls the Prayer of Union. 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)

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:

God so places Himself in the interior of the soul that when we return to ourselves 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.1.9).

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 God's action freeing us from the last remaining bonds that fetter us and hinder our flight to God. Teresa writes:

Now all that it sees on earth displeases this little butterfly. It now has wings. How can it be happy with moving step by step when it can fly? ... Everything wearies it, for it has learned through experience that creatures cannot give it true rest (*The Interior Castle* V.2.8).

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.

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).

A third characteristic is that in the Prayer of Union we receive the gift of a deeper love for God.

This deeper love for God bears fruit in a fourth characteristic that 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. When our will is united to that of Jesus we share his love and his willingness to offer himself in love for others.

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 love for your neighbour, the more advanced you will be in your love for God (*Interior Castle* V.3.8).

These four characteristics of the prayer of transforming union are of special importance, for they are like reassuring beacons shining in what can otherwise be a dark place, a place over which we have no control and in which we have entrusted ourselves in faith to God's guiding Spirit.

Teresa likens the experience to a cocoon in which a silkworm is being transformed into a butterfly. She 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). This union is the fruit of a special mystical grace:

During the time that the union lasts the soul is left without its senses, for it has no power to think even if it wants to ... it is like one who in every respect has died to this world so as to live more completely to God (*Interior Castle* V.1.4).

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 to which God's love is drawing us here on 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 betrothal

In 1556, at the age of forty-one, and twenty years after entering the convent, 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 have already often heard that God espouses souls spiritually ... It is all a matter of love united to love, and the actions of love are most pure and so extremely delicate and gentle that there is no way of explaining them; but the Lord knows how to make them very clearly felt (*The 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 wounded in a most delightful way, 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 ... 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.2.1-4).

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 had the effect of increasing her desire. It was also the cause of pain, like 'a sharp wound in the 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).

John of the Cross 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 again to have anything in itself that is alien from him ... Inasmuch as God 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 (*Spiritual Canticle* 27.6).

Sometimes these more profound experiences of communion with God are accompanied by unusual mystical graces. They are also often associated with profound and enduring experiences of darkness. We shall examine these elements in turn in the following two chapters, before reflecting in the final chapter on the ultimate stage of contemplative prayer.