

24. Perfect Communion

Both Teresa of Jesus and John of the Cross use the metaphor of marriage to help describe the communion of love which they experienced at the end of the long, courageous journey into the centre of the soul – a journey made possible only because it was, 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 this nail. It is a sign that you will be my bride from today on' (*Spiritual Testimonies* No. 31).

Speaking of herself in the third person she writes:

This vision was different from any previously experienced because it came with great force, because of the words the Lord spoke to her, and also because in the interior of her soul, where the Lord represented himself to her, she had not seen other visions except the former one [An intellectual vision of the Blessed Trinity mentioned in VII.1.6-7] (*Interior Castle* VII, 2.2).

At last, fully purified and transformed in love, she had reached the goal of complete communion with Christ.

John of the Cross writes:

This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the Beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life (*Spiritual Canticle* 22.3).

Now the soul 'knows nothing except love' (*Spiritual Canticle* 27.8).

Therese of Lisieux writes:

From that day [9th June, 1895 – the day on which she composed her Act of Oblation] 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 sin (*Story of a Soul* 8.133).

In the grace of spiritual marriage, the promise that has sustained us throughout our journey is realised. Now we are drawn wholly into our centre where God dwells. While experiencing this pure state of prayer, we are wrapped in a complete and constant communion of love. This union is definitive and unbreakable. The transformation is complete.

To speak of the union as perfect is not to say that it is static or that we have arrived at our goal. In the prayer of spiritual marriage we experience the first light of a new day. The day itself, however, is for eternity and is experienced in the Beatific Vision. We have been transformed by love, and there is nothing remaining but love, a love that is now pure. There is nothing that can hinder growth. The water of life is flowing freely between the heart of Jesus and our heart. Nothing now can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Teresa finds 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).

Because purification is complete, aridity and interior disturbances are rare, and the senses, memory, imagination, intellect and will are, for the most part, stilled. Even when disturbance is experienced, it cannot penetrate into the centre of the soul where we enjoy communion with Christ, the Bridegroom. No disturbance can take the soul away from 'its place and its peace' (*Interior Castle* VII.2.10). 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. Teresa writes:

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).

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 that the Father has for his Son now flows freely and without reserve into her heart, and her response is that of the heart of Jesus himself. This is the final stage of a journey of transformation described by Saint Paul:

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).

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 state is caused in the soul by the communication of the Holy Spirit. Breathing with God's divine breath, God 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 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 is inspired in the soul by the Holy Spirit (*Living Flame* 3,9-10).

In chapter twenty-one we noted that Teresa experienced the communion of love that she calls 'spiritual betrothal' in 1556. She founded the first convent of reformed Carmel in 1562 and the second in 1567. This was followed by six more foundations in the years

prior to her receiving the gift of spiritual marriage. After receiving the gift of spiritual marriage she was to live for ten more years. During these ten years she was continually travelling and organizing. She 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 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 (see *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 ... 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.4.4,12).

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).

Throughout the journey to the heart, prayer has never been divorced from life. Here, at the most intimate communion attainable in this life, we hear Jesus invitation and his eminently practical words:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25:34-36).