

John of the Cross

Spiritual Canticle 16-18



John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 16 (Transposed from Stanza 25 in the first version of the Canticle)

Catch *us* the foxes.
For *our* vineyard is now in flower,
While *we* fashion a cone of roses
Intricate as the pine's;
And let no one appear on the hill.

- 'One of the most remarkable delights received in her interior communion with God comes from the gift of herself to her Beloved'(16.1).
- 'The vineyard is in flower when she is united in her will with the Bridegroom, and finds joy in him'(16.4).
- However, she can still experience disturbances in feelings, imagination and thought (16.2).
- 'The flesh opposes the Spirit'(Galatians 5:17, referred to it 16.5).

Canticle 2:15-17

‘Catch us the foxes, the little foxes, that damage the vineyards, when our vineyards are in bloom.

My lover is mine and I am his who browses among the lilies.

Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, return, my lover; be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains.’

Canticle 3:5

‘I adjure you, O Daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles and hinds of the fields: do not disturb or interrupt our love until it is spent!’

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Catch us the foxes.
For our vineyard is now in flower,
While we fashion a cone of roses
Intricate as the pine's;
And let no one appear on the hill.

- This stanza describes what happens 'when God is beginning to withdraw her from the senses so that she may enter the garden of the Bridegroom'(16.6).
- Notice the 'us' in 'catch us'. 'She is one with her Beloved'(16.7).
- 'For the perfect enjoyment of this communion with God, all the senses and faculties, interior and exterior, should be unoccupied, idle, and empty of their own operation and object. The more active they are at such a time, the more they hinder communication'(16.11).
- 'Let only the will appear, attending to the Beloved in a surrender of self'(16.11).

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 17 (Transposed from Stanza 26 in the first version of the Canticle)

Be still, deadening 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.

- 'Since she lives with the driving force of a fathomless desire for union with God, any delay whatever is very burdensome and disturbing'(17.2).
- 'She invokes the Holy Spirit'(17.2).
- The Spirit causes movement in the aromatic herbs causing their perfume to spread. In this way the Holy Spirit energises virtue (17.5).

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South wind come, you that waken love,
Breathe through my garden,
Let its fragrance flow,
And the Beloved will feed amid the flowers.

- 'What she most enjoys is pleasing the Beloved'(17.8).
- 'By means of the Holy Spirit, who prepares the dwelling, the virtues of her soul delight the Son of God, so that through them He might enjoy more her love'(17.10).

Canticle 4:12-15

A garden enclosed my sister, my bride, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed. Your channel is a paradise of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every scented tree. Myrrh and aloes, with all the finest spices. A garden fountain, a well of life giving water, flowing from Lebanon. Arise, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow upon my garden that its fragrance may be wafted abroad. Let my lover come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.

Canticle 6:2-3

My lover has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spice, to browse in the garden, and to gather lilies.

I am my lover's and my lover is mine; he browses among the lilies.

‘We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’(Ephesians 2:10).

‘I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love’(Ephesians 3:16-17).

‘The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit’(Romans 8:25-26).

2Corinthians 3:16-18; 4:6-7

‘Turn to the Lord. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And 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 ...

It is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, [the icon of God]. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

The 'gifts' of the Spirit (Isaiah 11:2-3)

'The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and fortitude,
the spirit of knowledge and piety.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.'

The 'fruits' of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)

'love,	joy,
peace,	patience,
kindness,	generosity,
faithfulness,	gentleness
self-control'.	

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me'(Galatians 2:20).

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Stanza 18 (Transposed from Stanza 31 in the first version of the Canticle)

You girls of Judea,
While among flowers and roses
The amber spreads its perfume,
Stay away, there on the outskirts:
Do not seek so much as to touch our thresholds.

- 'She raises her eyes towards her Beloved'(18.2).
- The 'girls' are the senses which 'strive persistently to distract the will'(18.4).
- The amber is 'the divine Spirit of the Bridegroom abiding within the soul'(18.6).
- She is determined to respond to God's inspiration and to yield to the attraction to love by leading a virtuous life for Him.

Difficulties in Mental Prayer Eugène Boylan

‘All we can do is to renew our attention to God according to the way in which we are praying to him. This should be done quietly, without vexation, or even without surprise at our own folly. If we could only realise how much this continual turning back to God shows Him our real love for Him and pleases Him more than that rapt attention that has its roots in self-love, we should never be dissatisfied with our prayer on account of its numerous distractions. If prayer be a lifting up of the mind to God, then every time we turn away from distractions to renew our attention to God, we pray – and we pray in the teeth of difficulty and despite ourselves. What can be more pleasing to God? What more meritorious?’

Difficulties in Mental Prayer Eugène Boylan

‘We should be very greatly surprised if we could get a glimpse at the account book that the recording angel keeps, and see the different values that are set on our various attempts at prayer. The prayer that pleases us, and with which we were well satisfied, would often be quite low in his estimate, while the prayer that disgusted us, which was apparently made up of nothing but distractions, might be found to have won a very high degree of approval.’

Difficulties in Mental Prayer Eugène Boylan

‘Sometimes the mere return to God is sufficient to banish the distraction; but very often the same distracting thought keeps coming back, despite our attempts to get rid of it. One way of dealing with such obstinate intruders is to make them the subject of the prayer. With a little ingenuity, some relation can be found between the distracting idea and God. It may, perhaps, give us something to pray for; it may serve as a motive to praise God; it could be used as evidence of our need for God’s grace ... If all else fails, we can fall back upon the advice of the author of *The Cloud* for dealing with distractions, that we should endeavour to look over their shoulders as if we were looking at some object beyond them and above them – which is God.

‘No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it’(1Corinthians 10:13).

‘When something distasteful or unpleasant comes your way, remember Christ crucified and be silent. Live in faith and hope, even though you are in darkness, because it is in this darkness that God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God, for He watches over you and will not forget you. Do not think that He leaves you alone; that would be an affront to Him’(Letter Pentecost 1590).

‘The soul has endured no tribulation, or penance, or trial to which there does not correspond a hundredfold of consolation and delight in this life’(Living Flame 2.23).

God's longing is to love us. He is delighted when we put time aside to be with him and to open our hearts to receive this love and to respond. God knows our weakness and loves us as we are. If we want to be with God and are genuine in wanting our hearts to be alert to receive God's Spirit, we may be disappointed because of various distractions and trials but we can be sure that God is delighted with us and that the rain of his love is gently falling on the field of our hearts. No distraction on our part can hinder God from loving us.

In any case we go to prayer not for ourselves but to praise, thank and love God. We are to trust that our good intentions are seen by God. Whatever our feelings, God is certainly loving us.