

John of the Cross

II. Spiritual Canticle 13-21

The spiritual espousal,
life of not-yet-perfect love

Spiritual Canticle 13-15



John of the Cross : 'The Spiritual Canticle'.

Stanza 13

Withdraw them, Beloved
I am taking flight!

(The Beloved responds) Return, dove
The wounded stag
Is in sight on the hill,
Cooled by the breeze of your flight.

- In asking her Beloved to withdraw his eyes, she is asking him 'to cease communicating them to her *in the body*, in which she is unable to receive and enjoy them as she longs to. She wants Him to communicate them to her in her flight *outside the body*' (13.2).
- 'It should not be thought that because she says to withdraw his eyes, she really desires Him to do so. Her words spring from natural fear' (13.5).
- 'It seems that she is being loosed from the flesh in these rapturous visits and that she is leaving her body behind' (13.4).

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

Stanza 13

*Withdraw them, Beloved
I am taking flight!*

'This is why her suffering for God at this time is so intense: she is drawing nearer to Him, and so she experiences more deeply within herself her lack of God, very deep darkness, and a spiritual fire which dries her up and purges her, so that thus purified she may be united with Him. As she draws closer to God, and until God introduces her into His divine splendours through transformation in love, she experiences this darkness within herself' (13.1).

'God does not place His grace and love in the soul except according to her desire and love. Anyone who truly loves God must strive not to fail in this love. If she strives in this way she will induce God, if we may speak in these terms, to love her more and to find delight in her' (13.12).

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

Stanza 13

*Withdraw them, Beloved
I am taking flight!*

- 'I know someone who was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows' (2Corinthians 12:2, referred to in 13.6).
- 'These feelings are experienced in such visits by those who have not yet reached the state of perfection, but are advancing along the way. Those who have reached perfection receive all communications in peace and gentle love. These raptures then cease' (13.6).
- John refers to the writings of Teresa on raptures and ecstasies (13.7).

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

Stanza 13

(The Beloved responds) **Return, dove**
The wounded stag
Is in sight on the hill,
Cooled by the breeze of your flight.

- The beloved tells her to return. 'For the communication which you receive from Me is not yet of the state of glory to which you now aspire. Return to Me, for I am He whom you, wounded with love, seek. For I, too, like the stag, wounded by your love, begin to reveal myself to you in your high contemplation, and I am refreshed and renewed in the love which arises from your contemplation'(13.2).
- She is wounded and so He, the Beloved, is wounded.
- 'Return to the ark of love'(14.1 – referring to Noah in Genesis 8:9).

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

Stanza 14

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

Stanza 15

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

- 'A state of spiritual espousal with the Word, the Son of God ... a state of peace and delight and the gentleness of love begins in her'(14.2).
- 'She tastes in a sublime way the Wisdom of God reflected in the harmony of His creatures and works ... confirmed in love'(14.4).
- 'That which was created has life in the Word'(John 1:4; referred to in 14.5).
- He refers to the gentle breeze experienced by Elijah (1Kings 19:11-13, 14.14).
- 'I keep watch like a solitary bird on a housetop'(Psalm 102:7, referred to in 14.24).
- 'Creatures are for her a harmonious symphony of sublime music'(14.25).

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

Stanza 15

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

- 'The Spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said'(Wisdom 1:7; referred to in 15.27).
- 'I stand at the door and knock. If you open I will enter and sup with you, and you with me'(Apocalypse 3:20; referred to in 15.29).
- 'Although the bride enjoys so much good in these visits of the state of espousal, she still suffers from her beloved's withdrawals and from disturbances and afflictions'(15.30).
- With attachments broken, she is able to enter into the heart of creation, and there commune with the transcendent God in silence and solitude.

The supper that refreshes and deepens love

Therese of Lisieux

'My Longings before the tabernacle' Stanza 2

'I'd like to burn away, to be
Consumed – near God by day and night;
A steady glow of mystery,
A sanctuary lamp, alight.

What happiness is mine: I've flame
Within me! – Daily thus can I
Win Jesus souls, and by the same
Heart's-fire He came to light them by.'

Silence and Solitude

If we are to learn to pray we must learn to be silent; we must learn not to be afraid of solitude. Jesus gives us an example:

‘In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed’(Mark 1:35).

‘Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God’(Luke 6:12).

‘Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him’(Luke 9:18).

‘Jesus said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him’(Mark 14:34-35).

‘Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’(Matthew 6:6).

We are never alone. God is in the centre of our soul drawing us to Himself. We are reminded of this by John of the Cross:

‘The soul’s centre is God ... We are not yet in our deepest centre when we can go deeper in God’(Living Flame I.12).

Let us, then, conquer our fear and allow God to draw us into silence and solitude:

‘The Lord will fight for you. You have only to keep still’(Exodus 14:14).

‘Be still and know that I am God’(Psalm 46:10).

‘Our greatest need is to be silent before this great God with the appetite and with the tongue, for the only language God hears is the silent language of love’(Letter 22nd November 1587).

In a short poem, *The Sum of Perfection*, he writes:

‘Forgetfulness of creation, remembrance of the Creator,
attention to what is within, loving the Beloved.’

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

Stanza 29

'If, then, I am no longer
Seen or found on the common,
you will say that I am lost;
that stricken by love,
I lost myself, and was found.'

'Great wrong would be done to a person who possesses some degree of this solitary love, as well as to the Church, if we should urge him to become occupied in exterior or active things, even if the works are very important and demand only a short time. Since God has solemnly entreated that no one awaken a soul from this love, who will dare to do so and remain without reproof. After all this love is the end for which we were created. (continued)

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

Stanza 29

**'If, then, I am no longer
Seen or found on the common,
you will say that I am lost;
that stricken by love,
I lost myself, and was found.'**

Let those, then, who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labour, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. For through their prayer they would merit this result, and themselves be spiritually strengthened. Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm'(Spiritual Canticle 29.3).

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

Stanza 35

'She lived in solitude
and now in solitude has built her nest;
and in solitude He guides her,
He alone, who also bears
in solitude the wound of love.'

'By the activity of her natural operations, she loses inner solitude and recollection and, consequently, the sublime image which God was painting within her. Thus all her efforts are like hammering the horseshoe instead of the nail. On one hand she does harm, and on the other receives no benefit' (Living Flame 3.45).

Teresa of Avila

‘We must be careful in doing good works, even those of obedience and charity, not to fail to have frequent inward recourse to our God. And believe me it is not length of time spent in prayer that brings a soul benefit: when we spend our time in good works, it is a great help to us and a better and quicker preparation for the enkindling of our love than many hours of meditation. Everything must come from the hand of God’(Foundations 5.17)

Father Marie-Eugène OCD, *'I want to see God'*, 420).

'Activism takes cover under numerous and often noble excuses: necessities of life, urgent duties of one's state, fear lest a certain milieu win and dissipate people. joys to be had in generous action which opens up and enlarges one's power, the aridities and apparently useless abjection of prayer, and above all a great pity for those around us whose extreme material or spiritual misery is a constant appeal to our Christian charity.'