

14. Transforming Union and Spiritual Betrothal



Experiencing contemplation

We have already noted (Presentation 10) the first experiences of contemplative prayer when our stretching towards God gives way to a yielding to God.

We have been watering the garden of our soul when suddenly a mysterious spring of love wells up from the depths of our being.

We have been rowing energetically when a gentle breeze catches our sail and carries us forward.

We are pursuing our journey to our centre when a door opens and we feel the warmth coming from the fire that is burning within.

If we yield to the drawing that puts us in a dark path beyond images, thoughts and feelings the dark will deepen. If we are courageous enough to live with the lack of feeling and the distractions that occur when our imagination and mind are left to free-wheel, we will observe over time growth in self-knowledge, and so in humility, as well as the other virtues, especially obedience and detachment – virtues we have long admired in Jesus.

Our prayer is dark but we find ourselves with Nicodemus, going by night to Jesus, the light of the world (John 3).



We find ourselves with Mary of Magdala. We are all too aware of the tomb and the emptiness, but we believe that our seeking Jesus is not in vain (John 20).



If I seek God alone, I will find myself more and more free to give myself (body, soul, heart – all of me) entirely to God. I am, in Paul's words 'being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:14). All of me, including my mind, memory and imagination, is absorbed in communion for 5, 10, 15 minutes.

When dark, arid prayer is our constant experience John of the Cross has this advice: 'Pay no attention to discursive meditation, since this is not the time for it' (Dark Night I.10.4). The dark must deepen if the roots are to be purified. If we truly want Jesus to be our only light, we must trust the dark.

The Prayer of Quiet

Such is God's longing to share with us the fullness of divine communion, that, provided we surrender to the love that is being offered to us, these transient moments deepen: we experience ourselves wrapped in silence in what Teresa calls the Prayer of Quiet.

However, the union with God that is experienced in the Prayer of Quiet does not envelop our imagination, memory and thoughts. Left with nothing to hold their attention, they go off in whatever direction they fancy.

We have already touched on some of the confusion and difficulties that this can cause (Presentation II).

Prayer of 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, which she calls the Prayer of Union.

‘This is the union which I have desired all my life; it is for this that I continually beseech our Lord’ (*Interior Castle*, V.3.5).

‘The union is as if the ends of two wax candles were joined so that the light they gave is one. The wicks and the wax and the light are all one. Yet afterwards the one candle can be perfectly well separated from the other and the candles become two again’ (*Interior Castle* VII, 2).



The communion with God that she experienced in these brief moments was very different from any previously experienced (*Interior Castle*, V.I.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 her whole being 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, we are left as though without our senses, for we have no power to think even if we want to’ (*Interior Castle*, V.I.4).

‘God is working in us without anyone disturbing God, not even ourselves’ (*Interior Castle*, V.I.6).

Teresa spells out some of the characteristics of this Prayer of Union.

1. The first is a deep assurance that we have truly been in communion with God who has touched us with love.

‘God so places God’s Self in the interior of the being 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.I.8).

2. 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 divine action as God frees us from the last remaining bonds that fetter us and hinder our flight to God.

We are not suggesting that God has changed. God is offering complete union to everyone, all the time. It is that we are now ready to welcome what God is offering us.

‘Everything we see on earth leaves us dissatisfied, especially when God has again and again given us this wine which almost every time has brought us some new blessing ... Now we are no longer bound by ties of relationship, friendship or property. Previously all our acts of will and resolutions and desires were powerless to loosen us from these; now we are grieved at having even to fulfil our obligations in these respects lest these should cause us to sin against God. Everything wearies us, because we can find no rest in creatures’ (*Interior Castle*, V.2.8).

‘We are much more detached from creatures because we now see that only the Creator can console and satisfy us’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.II.10).

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.

‘Whether you have little or much, God wants everything.’

(Interior Castle, V.I.3)

‘God does not want our will to have any part to play in this prayer, for it has been entirely surrendered’ *(Interior Castle, V.I.I2)*.

‘We have now surrendered ourselves into God’s hands and God’s great love has so completely subdued us that we neither know nor desire anything save that God will do with us what God wills’ (*Interior Castle*, V.2.12).

‘We have no desire to seek or possess any independent free will. We give to God the keys of our will’ (*Life*, 20.22).

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

4. This is manifest in a fourth characteristic which 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, which is 'the fullness of Christ who fills the whole of creation' (Ephesians 1:23), his body which 'builds itself up in love' (Ephesians 4:16). Christ 'loved the Church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25). When our will is united to his we share his love and his willingness to offer himself in love for others. This involves suffering at seeing others offending God, and a desire to suffer with Jesus for their redemption.

After the grace of union, ‘having now a clear realisation that the fruits of this prayer are not our own, we can start to share them and yet have no lack of them’ (*Life*, 19).

‘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 this, the greater is your love for God’ (*Interior Castle*, V.3.9).

Marie-Eugène

‘Love makes perfect apostles, for love alone can form worthy instruments of God, and only love’s flame makes apostolic activity fruitful’ (*I am a daughter of the Church*, page 226).

God is bringing about this union. There is nothing we can do to achieve it. However, God respects our freedom. We can dispose ourselves for union by our love (see *Satirical Critique*, 5), and we can choose to remain open to God's action.

Teresa likens the experience to a cocoon in which a silkworm is being transformed into a butterfly. Teresa 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 (*Interior Castle*, V.2.12).

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 of God's dealings with us here in earth. We are enjoying the beginnings of a union that will come to perfection in the Beatific Vision.

The grace of spiritual betrothal

In 1556, Teresa experienced a deepening of her prayer of Union. In her prayer she experienced what she calls a 'delightful wound' in her heart. Jesus promised 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 will have often heard that God betroths God's Self to us spiritually ... It is a union of love with love, and its operations are entirely pure, and so delicate and gentle that there is no way of describing them; but the Lord can make us very deeply conscious of them' (*Interior Castle*, V.4.3).

‘God uses means so delicate that we do not understand them ... they proceed from the very depths of our being ... We are conscious of having been most delicately wounded, but cannot say how or by whom; but it is certain that this is a precious experience and we would be glad if we were never healed of that wound ... The Beloved is making it very clear that he is with us and seems to be giving us such a clear sign that he is calling us that we cannot doubt the fact, and the call is so penetrating that we cannot fail to hear’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.1-3).

‘It is as though from the fire enkindled in the brazier that is my God a spark leapt forth and so struck me that I felt the flaming fire’ (*Interior Castle*, VI.2.4).

However, the spark that inflamed Teresa's heart with love was not yet enough to set her on fire. The promised marriage was not to take place for another sixteen years. The delay increased her desire. The delay is also the cause of pain, like 'a sudden, sharp wound in the most intimate part of our being' (*Interior Castle*, VI.II.2), 'a wound in which it seems as though an arrow is thrust into our heart' (*Spiritual Testimonies*, 59.17).



Bernini. Ecstasy of Saint Teresa
Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome

‘Very often a desire unexpectedly arises, in a way which I cannot explain. And this desire, which in a single moment penetrates to our very depths, begins to weary us so much that we soar upwards, far above ourselves and above all created things. It is a martyrdom, severe but also delectable; for we will accept nothing earthly that may be offered us, even though it were the thing which we had been accustomed to enjoy most’ (*Life*, 20.9).

John of the Cross

‘In that sweet draught of God, wherein we are immersed in God, we surrender ourselves to God wholly, most willingly and with great delight, desiring to be wholly God’s and never again to have anything in ourselves that is alien from God ... Inasmuch as God transforms us, God makes us to be wholly God’s and empties us of all that we possessed and that was alien from God. Wherefore we are indeed completely given up to God, keeping nothing back, not only according to God’s will, but also according to what we do, even as God has given God’s Self freely to us. 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](#).’

(Commentary on Spiritual Canticle Stanza 18)

John of the Cross

Stanzas 13-21 of the Spiritual Canticle describe the Spiritual Betrothal:

{Bride}

13. Withdraw them, Beloved, I am taking flight!

{Chorus}

Return, dove, the wounded stag is in sight on the hill,
cooled by the breeze of your flight.

{Bride}

14. My Beloved is the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands, and resounding rivers,

the whistling of love-stirring breezes,

15. the tranquil night at the time of the rising dawn,

silent music, sounding solitude,

the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

[Bride]

16. 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.

17. Be still, deadening the 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.

18. You girls of Judea, while among flowers and roses
the amber spreads its perfume, stay away, there on the outskirts;
do not even seek to touch our threshold

[Bridegroom]

19. Hide yourself, my Love; turn your face toward the mountains,
and do not speak;

[Chorus]

19. but look at those companions going with her
through strange islands.
20. Swift-winged birds, lions, stags, and leaping roes,
mountains, lowlands, and river banks, waters, winds and ardours;
watching fears of the night:
21. By the pleasant lyres and the siren's song, I conjure you
to cease your anger and do not touch the wall,
that the bride may sleep in deeper peace.

John of the Cross *Living Flame*, Stanza 3

‘O lamps of fire!
in whose splendours
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now, so strangely exquisite,
give forth warmth and light to their Beloved.’

Commenting on this stanza, John Venard OCD writes:

‘This Stanza deals with matters so profound that St. John exclaims “May God be pleased to favour me here!” We have become God by participation ... like the air within the flame, which is transformed into the flame itself” (Living Flame, III.9). The Spirit is moving the soul as fire moves the air that is enkindled. It is like the overshadowing of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. We experience a deep perception and experience of the grandeurs of the wisdom and excellences of God. The caverns, or faculties, are wonderfully infused with the splendours of the “lamps of fire,” the attributes of God. We actually participate in these attributes of God; we see that God really belongs to us by “hereditary possession, with the right of ownership, as an adopted child of God” (The Living Flame of Love: simplified version with notes; Sydney: EJDwyer 1990, page 2).

John of the Cross

‘All that we do is of God, and our operations are divine, so that the one who is joined to God is one spirit with God. Hence it comes to pass that our operations are of the Divine Spirit and are divine’ (*Ascent* III, ii).