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Compiled from notes by Vivien Foster, Annette Goulden, Barbara Thacker

The Spiritual Canticle

Talk 1 General Introduction

The Spiritual Canticle expresses who John of the Cross (John+) is – we come into his heart and his soul. He tries to express the love that ensued from profound mystical experience, whether that be God's presence, God's absence or God's mystery. It needs to be expressed. First, John gives us a general introduction:

Introduction (p. 469)

This commentary on the stanzas that deal with the exchange of love between the soul and Christ, its Bridegroom, explains certain matters about prayer and its effects. It was written at the request of Mother Ana de Jesus, prioress of the discalced Carmelite nuns of St Joseph's in Granada, in the year 1584.

- a) This is the exchange of love between the human being and Jesus Christ. We are invited into, given insight into that love. Love is the subject of the Canticle; love is being mutually exchanged.
- b) Praying and the effects of prayer are almost incidental, but prayer is what makes the exchange of love possible and enables the person to grow in this exchange. What are the effects of prayer? How does it change a person?

The Canticle was written at the request of Ana de Jesus. It is a work grown out of an exchange of experience: her part in it is *very* important. It was written over ten years, from November 1577 to August 1588, beginning in prison as 31 stanzas, to sustain and encourage *himself*. It is based on his favourite book of the Bible, the Song of Songs, and his poetry emerges from extensive reflection on that text

John shared these stanzas in his spiritual direction and teaching. His method was to give verses and invite others to reflect, drawing *out* information from the person. Teresa knew the poetry and setting to music, but died prior to publication of the commentary.

There are three distinct parallel entities:

the experience of God
the poem
the commentary

The commentary is not a commentary on the poem but rather a commentary on the experience. Thus, we have two different attempts to express the inexpressible experience of the love of God. The poem is the most important.

John found that the 39 stanzas (Canticle A) didn't fit well when he tried to teach it, and people who turned to the commentary found it didn't make sense. So, he re-wrote and re-arranged it a few years later as Canticle B with an added stanza 11. But in rearranging it he also lost something of the authenticity of the experience that is not logical. .

John knows that to put the experience of the song of love into words is impossible. But there is a great need.

Art and beauty give a person a way of expressing something when words and rational explanations don't work. Religious experience cannot be expressed yet there is a great need to express it. Hence, music, art, symbolism, beauty, are so important, because they work better than words and so are universally present in all religions.

One of the great disservices done to the Spiritual Canticle is to try to explain it. It must be treated as a work of art and should be approached accordingly. It is not about understanding, but it must be allowed to *speak* to us. Listening is the most helpful approach, as it was actually written to be sung, starting with John and Teresa themselves.

The entire poem is a Biblical work, steeped in scripture and a reconfiguration of the Song of Songs. It is a Biblical work of listening, as John shares his experience of profoundly listening to the Bible, the Word of God transforming a person.

The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul. (sayings of Light and Love, 100)

John heard the Word in the deepest silence within his prison cell.

What might that do to us?

Ezekiel 16:5-14 is the fulcrum in Stanza 24: total transformation of the person in beauty as a result of the exchange of love.

Other key passages are:

The Psalms,
Isaiah 58:10-14 (Stanza 36)
Revelation 2&3: Letters to the seven churches
John 17: Priestly prayer of Jesus
[1 Cor 2:7-10a]

These and other passages are all in the Canticle. For John, the Bible is a living reality in his life, a constant companion teaching him.

Let the Canticle speak, let it inspire, let what happens happen. Don't try to understand it – it is beyond understanding. It takes us to a place that is beyond understanding, the endpoint of the poem, and gives a *way* of understanding. It doesn't teach a person how to "get there".

John celebrates the wonder of what is already there.

It is a celebration and awesome understanding of what being "there" is. This love song is already there in every human being, and the person is continually being invited into it.

Enjoy the Canticle. Let it carry you. Experience it and reflect upon the experience. The poem is where one needs to sit.