

The Living Flame of Love

Prologue & Stanza 1

At the Feast of Tabernacles, Our Lord used water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit:

On the last day of the great festival, Jesus stood and cried out:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.

Let anyone who believes in me come and drink.

As scripture says: From his heart shall flow streams of living water. (John 7:37-38)

He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive....

It is not surprising that St Teresa of Avila, when describing the four degrees of prayer, used water as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, watering the garden of the soul in four different ways (Life 11:6). However, at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples as tongues of fire. The use of both fire and water as symbols of the Holy Spirit is enshrined in the 9th century hymn - *Veni Creator Spiritus*:

Thou who art called the Paraclete,
Best gift of God above,
The living spring, the living fire,
Sweet unction and true love.

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* St John of the Cross describes the active purification of souls on their journey towards for union with God, but in *The Living Flame of Love*, John describes the “fiery” activity of the Holy Spirit in souls who have already reached union with the divine Bridegroom in “spiritual marriage” and are only a step away from everlasting glory.

Stanza 1

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest centre!
Since now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! If it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

St John wrote *The Living Flame of Love*, his most sublime work, for a lay person, Doña Ana de Peñalosa. This is significant, especially for secular disalced Carmelites.

In the prologue John tells Doña Ana, that 'devout and noble lady', of his difficulty in writing this commentary on his poem. He says it was a task requiring deep recollection of soul. He makes a statement in the prologue that we should bear in mind:

"The words I have written are as far from the reality as a painting is from the living object it represents".

When we read John's commentary on the Living Flame, we can't help wondering: how could anything be more magnificent than this? But the reality John is trying to convey is far greater than his limited powers of description.

If anyone might be thinking the Living Flame of Love is an exaggeration, John asks them to remember that Jesus did promise that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit would come and make their home in those who love Him? (John 14:23)

John teaches that there are degrees of union of the soul with God: habitual union and actual union. To illustrate this, he uses the image of a log of wood on a fire.

Habitual union is when the soul is transformed and aglow with the Holy Spirit, like the red hot log in the heart of a fire.

Actual union comes about when God's self-communication to the soul becomes more intense. Living flames of love and exultation flare up from the soul, bathing it in glory and refreshing it with the quality of divine life (CP 3).

This is a foretaste of eternal life during which the soul is one step away from departing from earth. The soul cannot remain permanently in actual union; this is possible only in the glory of heaven.

The nature and work of the Living Flame (CP 1-26).

What does this living flame of love do? It draws to itself the little flames of love flaring up from the human soul in actual union and they become one great flame. John says:

"All the acts of the will of that soul are united to this flame and they are carried up and absorbed into the great flame of the Holy Spirit, just as the angel went up to God in the flame of Manoah's¹ sacrifice." (CP 4).

¹ Manoah was the father of Samson - Judges 13:20

In this state the soul cannot make acts by itself because the Holy Spirit makes them all. As a result, all the acts of the soul are divine since they are prompted by God and carried out in God (CP 4).

John believed that just one of these “divinised” human acts is more meritorious and valuable than all the good deeds performed in a lifetime by that person before they reached this state of actual union (CP 3).

It seems to such persons that every time this flame shoots up, making them love with delight and divine quality, it is giving them eternal life, since it raises them up to the activity of God in God (CP 4).

Because the soul experiences God so vividly and tastes Him with such delight and sweetness, it exclaims: “O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul”.

“Since this flame is a flame of divine life, it wounds the soul with the tenderness of God’s life and it wounds it so deeply as to make it dissolve in love.” (CP 7).

And where is the soul wounded? “In its deepest centre”, deeper than the level of the senses and deeper than the devil can reach; the more interior it is, the more secure it is (CP 9).

One should read commentary paragraph no 8. It is John’s account of how God’s love is never idle and delights in “playing” in the deepest centre of the human soul.

John tells us that the soul has other centres less profound than the deepest centre, but he hastens to add that the soul is not like a physical object that has different parts or different levels (CP 10). Then he says something quite striking: The soul’s centre is God (CP 12). St Elizabeth of the Trinity latched onto this saying in a big way.

As the soul enters into deeper and deeper degrees of active union with God, it experiences deeper and deeper levels within itself. When the soul has attained the final degree of union, God’s love wounds it in its ultimate and deepest centre. This illuminates and transforms its whole being, its power and its strength, until it appears to be God!

John gives the example of bright light shining on a crystal. When the crystal (which is the soul) is 100% pure, it is totally illuminated by the light and it becomes indistinguishable from the light. (CP 13).

In Commentary paragraphs 19 to 25 John looks back at the Dark Night when the flame was oppressive to the soul during its purification. Then the soul was like a cold, damp log having just been put on the fire and was crackling and spitting in protest.

John marvels at the difference between the harrowing effect the living flame of love had on the soul during its Dark Night and the glorious effect it has in the final stages of active union when it is no longer oppressive, but glorious..... *and yet it's the same flame!* (CP 17)

Therefore when we experience affliction and distress in our own spiritual lives (and in the life of the Church as a whole) it does not necessarily mean that the Holy Spirit has abandoned us. It could be that He is purifying us and preparing us to receive greater glory. Remember how, after Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit led Him into the desert to be put to the test by the devil (John 4:1).

The desire for glory (CP 27-36)

Now that the soul has reached its deepest centre in God, all that remains is for God to take the soul to Himself in the eternal union of the beatific vision. So the soul's final request is:

"Now consummate, if it be your will." (CP 27)

This is not the same kind of craving for heaven that afflicted the soul in the earlier stage of its spiritual growth, but a gentle, delightful desire for perfect union with God, as and when He wills it.

"Thy kingdom come thy will be done." (CP 28)

St Teresa said something similar to this in the 7th dwelling place of the Interior Castle.

So now the soul is poised in readiness for the removal of the last veil that separates it from perfect union with God, namely, the union of its soul and body (CP 29). This veil is so very thin that the glory of God can be seen vaguely shining through it. In its last "sweet encounters" with its Creator the soul begs Him to tear through the veil by bringing its earthly life to an end. By these final glorious assaults of divine love, God perfects the soul and raises it out of the flesh. He penetrates and deifies the substance of the soul, absorbing it above all created being into His own being (CP 35).

John tells us that the death of persons who have reached this stage of union with God is very different from the death of those who have not. Even when these blessed persons are be sick or old, their souls are not wrested from their bodies unless by some impetus and encounter of love far more sublime than previous ones. The death of such persons is very gentle and very sweet, more gentle and sweet than was their whole spiritual life on earth.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. Ps 116:15

Finally, John stresses the importance of making acts of love of God in this life so that, being perfected in a short time, we may not be detained long, either here on earth or in the next life, before seeing God.