

The Living Flame of Love

Stanza 2

O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
that tastes of eternal life
and pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.

All Christian doctrine begins and ends with the Blessed Trinity. See how St John of the Cross constructed his Second Stanza within a Trinitarian framework: the delightful wound is the cautery of the Holy Spirit, the gentle hand is the Father, the delicate touch is the Son.

The Cautery of the Holy Spirit

St John quotes Deut 4:24 - Our Lord God is a consuming fire, a fire so mighty that it would consume a thousand worlds more easily than the fire of this world would burn up a straw. It does not afflict, consume and destroy the soul in which it burns, rather, according to the strength of love, it divinizes and delights it, burning gently within it.

That is why the 2nd stanza begins: "O sweet cautery."¹

St John points out that after any wound has been cauterized, it looks like a wound caused by a burn. Likewise if the soul has been wounded by its miseries and sins, when its wounds have been cauterized by God's love, they become wounds of love. Therefore when we repent and allow God to cauterize our souls with his love, God not only forgives and wipes away our sins, but He makes the ugly wounds left by our sins beautiful!

This must be especially encouraging for people who have fallen into some exceptionally grievous sin and are tempted to think that they have messed themselves up so badly that God will not restore them to a state of grace, even if they repent.

God's love also wounds the soul, for the sake of giving delight, until it is dissolved into one great wound of love that makes the soul completely healthy and transformed.

¹ Cautery - a metal device applied, red hot, to a wound to stop bleeding and kill infection, and it can also mean the act of cauterizing.

“For this cautery is a touch only of divinity in the soul, without any intellectual or imaginative form or figure” (CP 8)

And so the soul exclaims: “O delightful wound!”

John tells us that there is another cauterization of the soul, not as deep as the one just mentioned, and it comes about through an intellectual form: a seraph pierces the soul with an arrow burning with love.

St Teresa described this experience in *The Book of Her Life* - 29:13-14. Sometimes this wounding is not only in the soul but in the body as well, as in the case of St Francis of Assisi. John says it is a wonderful thing when one experiences physical pain in the body together with extreme delight in the soul! However, when the wound is made only in the soul, the delight can be more intense and sublime. (CP 13). It seems that the whole universe is a sea of love in which the soul is engulfed. The centre point of this unbounded sea of love is within the soul itself (CP 10).

John tells us that few people reach these heights. They are usually those who will go on to make a valuable contribution to the life of the Church; founders and the like (CP 12). He also repeats a caution that we have heard many times before, namely, that we could never attain such heights relying on our own ability and reasoning (CP 14).

The gentle hand of The Father and the delicate touch of The Son

Listen to St John addressing God the Father:

“O hand, you are as gentle to my soul which you touch by resting gently on it,
as you would be powerful enough to submerge the whole world
if you rested somewhat heavily on it,
for by your look alone the earth trembles.
You never kill unless to give life, never wound unless to heal.
When you chastise, your touch is gentle,
even though your touch could destroy the world.
When you give delight you rest very firmly on the soul
and thus the delight of your sweetness is immeasurable.
“You have wounded me in order to cure me, O divine hand,
and you have put to death in me what made me lifeless....
You granted me this with the liberality of your generous grace
with the touch of the splendour of your glory..... which is your only begotten Son” (CP 16).

When we read these words, we sense John's difficulty in trying to describe the experience of being touched directly by God. Let us not forget that God is the one, infinite, absolute Being, who accounts for His own eternal existence. All other beings exist only because God caused them to exist and holds them in existence.

There is a vast difference between God and the things He has created. GOD IS BEING, pure and simple. In Him there is nothing like volume or shape or form or accidents to put boundaries on His infinite nature. The soul that receives His delicate touch is in substantial contact with the substance of God and therefore it tastes eternal life.

The problem is - all words in human language (like sweetness, splendour, substance, eternal life, glory) come from human experience of created beings, but when the soul is touched by the uncreated Being of God, language simply cannot cope.

It must have been very difficult for John to write about this sublime spiritual state. He himself readily acknowledges the inadequacy of his words. Nevertheless he tried his best because he wanted to encourage those on their way to perfection, even though they might not fully comprehend what he is saying. His words will mean far more to those who have already reached this perfection.

So for us who are more or less beginners, we will just have to be patient if some of the things John says go "over our heads". It would be a big mistake for us to write off his teaching as a "heavenly minded spirituality of no earthly use", simply because we do not adequately understand it. People do tend to disregard what they do not understand, just as the followers of Christ rejected his teaching on the Eucharist (John 6).

John goes on to say that the gentle hand of the Father and the delicate touch of the Son pays every debt. The soul is now thoroughly convinced that it has been abundantly compensated for all that it has suffered along the way to perfection (CP 23). Jesus has indeed kept his promise – "hundredfold in this life and everlasting life as well" (Mt 19:29).

In commentary paragraph 27 John anticipates a question from his reader: "Why haven't I reached these heights?" He tells us that it is not because God doesn't want all of us to be perfect. The obstacle lies within ourselves: it is our unwillingness to suffer discomfort and mortification on the narrow, uphill road that leads to life (Mt7:14). Therefore one needs great constancy and fortitude.... as St Teresa so often said.

Those who have reached this elevated state can now clearly understand why it was necessary for them to suffer so many trials and tribulations along the way. During that time of its purgation, it seemed that God was killing the soul.

But now it can say:

“in killing, you changed death to life.”

God made use of suffering to purify and strengthen the soul to give it the capacity to receive the glory of eternal life.

We must not think that John is glorifying suffering. Our purification and strengthening comes about, not from the trials in themselves, (lots of people suffer in this world, but it does not necessarily make them holy) but through our growth in the theological virtues, faith, hope and love - the fruit of our fidelity in time of trial.

“O souls, who in spiritual matters desire to walk in security and consolation,
If only you knew how advantageous it is for you to suffer
in order to reach security and consolation!
If only you knew that, without suffering,
you cannot attain what you desire, but will only turn back.”

If you did know, you would not look for comfort, either from God or from creatures” (CP 28).