

## Talk 4 : Louis and Zelig Martin

As we're celebrating the feast of Louis and Martin, the parents of St Therese, it seems rather appropriate to look at a part of the Canticum that meant so much to Therese. Indeed, the whole of the writings were important for Therese; she tells us how important they were to her. But in particular it was the Spiritual Canticum and the Living Flame. We see the same for Elizabeth of the Trinity. The Spiritual Canticum has been so important for many Carmelites through the centuries. And particularly for Therese, stanza's 27, 28 and 29 were very influential on Therese's thinking. We'll see that they are about the fullness of love. We are all familiar of her discovery that her vocation was to be love in the heart of the church, inspired by Cor. 13. Undoubtedly also, we have these chapters of St John of the Cross, which we know Therese read over and over again and very much identified with them. The key phrase is "All I do is love". Everything that a person does is love. That became her life.

### The soul transformed

From the point of view of the Spiritual Canticum, from stanza 22 to the very end, what John is speaking about is union with God, or the fullness of love, spiritual marriage, the fullness of Christian maturity, the fullness of relationship between bride and bridegroom. There are various ways we can word this. He is giving us a picture of what this is like. What kind of person is now living the fullness of love? It's beyond words. It's impossible to describe, but John wants to give us a sense of this.

He begins his introduction to Stanza 26 by saying,

What then, is the state of this happy soul in her bed of flowers where these things and so many others take place, in which she has for her couch the Bridegroom, the Son of God, and for a covering and hanging, love of this very Bridegroom? She can certainly repeat the words of the bride: his left hand is under my head [Sg.2:6]. We can therefore assert truly that the soul is here clothed with God and bathed in divinity, not as though on the surface, but in the interior of her spirit, super abounding in divine delights.(26:1)

What a statement that is! To be clothed in God and bathed in divinity! John is almost searching around for language here; he wants to convey the sense that this is complete.

We also have to be careful nowadays with how we understand the term "soul". What John means by "soul" is the whole person. Or, more specifically, the true person. The whole person, but set free from all that distort or compromise the fullness of who the person is. By the soul, he here means the whole person, not a part of the person or a particular dimension of the person. But then John goes on to make an important clarification: it's not superficial, it is in the deep interior. So, to others, the person won't look any different, neither will it look any different to the person herself. She won't feel or seem any different to herself or to others, because we are talking about something that is deeply interior. This is what John is trying to hold here all the time: that balance.

The reality is that the person is *totally* transformed, *totally* another person. "Clothed in God", "bathed in divinity", "God by participation," we get used to such phrases in the Canticum that John is using all the time. It seems this person is almost a god, but isn't. At the same time, John is emphasising that this person is totally and completely human and has no sense that she is different. The transformation is spiritual and therefore cannot be known or understood in any earthly way of knowing and understanding. But yet there is awareness of it, the person has a sense of it, as will other people. They will get slight glimpses of how special this person is but it is always a sense of something undefinable, illusive. It doesn't fall in with the rules of planet earth, to put it like that. It's there deep within.

The rest of stanza 26 expresses this in various different ways.

God can easily infuse and increase love without the infusion or increase of particular knowledge. This is the experience of many spiritual persons; they frequently feel they are burning with love of God, with no more particular knowledge than before. (26:8)

There is a contradiction in that very phrase: how can you burn with love and not know you are burning with love? There is some awareness and yet it is not “up here”, in some intellectual sense. They understand very little but love a great deal. It’s not a decision: God is transforming the person from the deepest place within.

### **Mother and child image**

Let’s concentrate on stanza’s 27 and 28.

John begins his introduction to stanza 27 with one of the most extraordinary statements in all of his writings.

In this interior union God communicates himself to the soul with such genuine love that neither the affection of a mother, with which she so tenderly caresses her child, not a brother’s love, nor any friendship is comparable to it. The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favours and exalts this humble and loving souls reaches such a high degree – O wonderful thing, worthy of all our awe and admiration! – that the Father himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though he were her servant and she his lord. And he is as solicitous in favouring her as he would be if he were her slave and she his god. So profound is the humility and sweetness of God!

This interior union is the deepest place within the person. God communicates himself, and that is so important. He is not communicating some kind of knowledge or some kind of experience, as we would use the word today. God is not communicating knowledge; he is *giving* himself in this mutual surrender that we saw yesterday.

The mother and child image is very important to John; he uses it in so many times and in different ways, in all its poverty and tragedy. He is speaking from experience: the loving mother who brought him up in great poverty. She had a powerful influence on John. But also, as John was growing up, his brother and sister lived in the same house, and his sister gave birth to seven children, of whom six died in infancy. John witnessed all of this as a young boy and teenager. He is *very* aware of a mother’s love and the tragedy and pain of it all. He has visually seen it; this is an image he has grown up with. It is there in his consciousness: the mother and child image.

Notice it is God the Father, not the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. People down through the centuries who wanted to pick out a heresy in John, often looked at this one. The Church always taught that Jesus Christ gave himself and abased himself and became as all people are, but never God the Father. Here, God the Father becomes servant, slave. *Very* strong language, the love here is so beyond anything that we know or understand, therefore one doesn’t know or understand it. John is going beyond the boundaries of all language to try to express this. The person *doesn’t* know or understand it, doesn’t feel it, we are way beyond feelings here. Yet the soul is aware of it. In some way or other.

We can imagine Therese being fascinated by this, loving every word of it, changing how she saw things, how she perceived things. Although her experience was very different, she too has known this.

She then, the bride, makes a complete surrender of herself and gives him the breast of her will and love. This mutual surrender of God and the soul is made in this union. Surrender is a big word for

John of the Cross, a total giving. It is the kind of giving of Jesus in the Incarnation, particularly upon the Cross. It is a giving now by the person, a giving that reciprocates the giving of Jesus.

### **We are equal to what we love: detachment**

That is the introduction to stanza 28. God makes use of nothing but love. Nothing else is of *use* for God. God can only use love. Whatever God does in a person, whatever God does in this world, is always done through love. In the Living Flame John will assert that even when it is painful, even when it seems oppressive to the human being, *all* God's actions in a person's life are love. They are *always* acts of love. He does not act in *any* other way, only in a loving way.

John goes on to say:

Since there is no way by which he can exalt her more than by making her equal to himself, he is pleased only with her love. For the property of love is to make the lover equal to the object loved. SC 28:1

That is the principle of John of the Cross, particularly in the Ascent of Mount Carmel. There he is using it in relation to anything that one needs to be detached from. This is his argument: this is why we need to be detached from *everything* that is less than God. Because if we become attached to something that is less than God, we become equal to whatever it is that we love. That's what love does. When one loves something or someone in a way that is distorted, not healthy, not right, if there is self-interest involved, we make ourselves equal to that. So whatever one is attached to, one becomes equal to it, and it gets a control over us.

So now that the person is totally detached, she loves only God, and everything else and everyone else the person loves is *through* God and *in* God; the person becomes equal to God.

“Nor have I any other work” (28:6)

She says she no longer has all this “work” because all her thoughts, words and works are of God and are directed towards him without *any* of the former imperfections. Thus the verse means: I no longer go about satisfying my appetites or that of others, not am I occupied or detained with other useless pastimes or things of the world. (28:7)

It is a very important statement, “no longer satisfying my appetites *or* that of others.” That can sometimes be far more difficult than getting rid of my own appetites. The appetites of others can manipulate and control and distort us. Here, the person is free from the appetites of others. Others may not always be happy about this; it often leads to a lot of misunderstanding because the person now has the inner freedom. Not only is she freed from all her own appetites, addictions, all the sort of things that would have controlled her in the past, she also freed from the appetites of others. There is a sort of clarity here, a true truthfulness in one's relationship with others.

That's why they often say that a saint is hard to live with, because they live totally in truth. There can be no deception here. The saint is not going to be controlled or manipulated. There is an inner freedom here. So, John puts it very well: “the appetites of others”. Other people can have all kinds of subtle control, and the person is free of that.

### **Every act is love**

Then John goes on to quote a line from the psalms that comes up over and over again in his writings. Ps 59:10, “I will keep my strength for you.” (SC 29:8) I spoke a little bit about it yesterday: in that great commandment to love God with all one's strength. John combines that with this line from the psalms, saying, “Now she is truly loving God with all her strength”. Because *nothing* could then compromise or weaken that strength – whether it may be coming from within oneself or coming

from others or from circumstances or the situation around her. All her strength goes into loving God and loving everyone else and everything else through God. It doesn't mean (and John clarifies this several times) that she stops loving the people around her, family, friends and others, but in fact she loves them with a greater purity and truth and freedom. It's a much greater love because it is love that is coming down from God and therefore it is in truth and freedom, a more authentic love for *all* those whom she loves. She doesn't stop loving the people around her, but rather, the opposite.

An important paragraph, then, is number 9 of stanza 28. Again, it helps us to clarify this, and again, Therese quotes this:

It should be known that when a soul reaches this state, all the activity of the spiritual and sensory parts [that means the whole person, every dimension of the person](in what she does or in what she suffers and in whatever manner) always causes more love and delight in God, as we have said. Even the very exercise of prayer and communion with God, in which she was accustomed to considerations and methods, is now wholly the exercise of love. Hence, whether work is temporal or spiritual, this soul can always say, "Now that my every act is love." (SC 28:9)

Often this can confuse people. "The exercise of prayer and considerations and methods", the ways that the person prayed in the past she maybe doesn't pray any more, or she *can't* pray that way anymore, because now prayer is totally an exercise of love. The person may not pray as they used to pray. It can cause difficulty: "I *can't* pray", "I don't know how to pray". But in reality, the prayer has gone deeper, the prayer is now simply love. Therefore, the whole life of this person is prayer, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, everything – all the person's thoughts and actions and relationships and whatever they may be, are all acts of love.

### **Action and contemplation are one**

John goes on to say, "Hence, whether work is temporal or spiritual, this soul can always say, "Now that my every act is love." Therese loved that phrase. Whether in the work was temporal or spiritual, in the kitchen or in the chapel, in the garden or at the Office, wherever it was, everything was love.

There's no difference anymore between the temporal and the spiritual. It may be that this was a journey with the two worlds, and it can seem that one is in competition with the other, but now the two are one there is no difference because they are both raised up. It is love. Whether in the chapel or doing daily work or business or golf, whatever it may be, it is all an act of love, it is all one. There is no competition, no difference.

Because the person isn't *feeling* this, sometimes she wonders, "is this really it?" Of course it is, that's the mystery of it. Now it is purely love. This is what God wants, what God has been longing for. This is what God created the person for. The strongest statement John gives of this is in his introduction to stanza 29, which is John's great defence of love, of the contemplative life, of prayer.

Just to give a flavour of this:

It should be noted that until the soul reaches this state of union of love, she should practice love in both the active and contemplative life. Yet once she arrives, she should not become involved in other works and exterior exercises that might be of the slightest hindrance to the attentiveness of love towards God, even though the work be of great service to God. For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one is doing nothing, than all these other works put together. (29:2)

This *pure* love can be expressed in quiet contemplation *or* activity. One doesn't stop active works but only ones that can be the slightest hindrance to this attentiveness. There is discernment in those works that are right and those not right.

### **The Church**

John brings the Church in here. Everything in the Spiritual Canticle can be related to the Church, just as it is to the individual. In the Book of the Apocalypse, the Bride is the Church; the bridal image is a very strong Christian image of the Church being the Bride of Christ, Bride of the Lamb. Everything in the Spiritual Canticle can be applied to the Church, and this is what really benefits the Church, the Body of Christ in our world. It is the love. Not "the greatness of the works, but the love with which the works are done." (LF). That's what builds the Church, the Body of Christ. John is always a person of the Church.

"After all, this love is the end for which we were created" (SC 29:3). This is a quote we often see in John of the Cross. This pure love, this free love, is life-giving and builds up the Church.

In this stanza, the soul replies to all those who impugn her holy idleness and desire every work to be the kind that shines outwardly and satisfies the eye, and do not know the secret source from which both the water flows and all fruit is produced. (SC 29:4)

It is not how something looks. In answering those who want something to look well, to be spectacular, the "holy idleness" and all the works that are genuine, that are of real value, come from this secret source from which the waters flow. This is a reference to chapter 4 in John's Gospel, when Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "I will give you living water that will flow the deepest place within you to eternal life". That's what does the *real* good.

### **Living in faith**

In his last paragraph of stanza 29, John is making a further point:

Should we desire to interpret the verse more spiritually and in closer accord to what we are discussing here, it ought to be known that when a soul treading the spiritual road has reached such a point that she has lost all roads and natural methods in her communion with God, and no longer seeks him by reflections or feelings or by any other way of creatures or of the senses, but has advanced beyond them all and beyond all modes and manners, and enjoys communion with God in faith and love, then it is said that God is her gain, because she has certainly lost all that is not God. (SC 29:11)

This powerfully sums up what John is trying to say in all these stanzas, that now the person treading the road has lost all roads. The person is living the purity of faith that John particularly speaks about in his Dark Night and in the Ascent of Mount Carmel. For John, *every* stage of the spiritual life is lived in faith, and the closer one comes to God, the darker that faith is and the more pure that faith is. All the props and indicators that one might have relied on up to now are taken away. all the methods, all the ideas in the head (John really goes into detail here), reflections, modes and manners. The person has advanced beyond all these boundaries and therefore is living the purity of faith and love.

The person doesn't have what we might call indicators for God; there are no signposts any more. One can only get on and live life in the purity of faith and love. That was how Therese lived. That was what she meant by "looking at a dark wall" that's all she was looking at, in faith and love.

Therefore, anything a person *knows*, is not God. She is set free from *everything* that is not God. she has God alone.

