

The Living Flame of Love

Stanza 4

The intimacy of Union

“How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart
where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.”

St John of the Cross speaks from his own experience of this union in the centre and depth of the soul where God dwells alone, as its only Lord, secretly and silently. (CP 3)

The effects of Union

- The awakening of God in the soul
- The breathing of God in the soul
- The overflowing of love

The awakening of God in the soul

This awakening is the movement of the Word in the substance of the soul ... But it also seems that all the virtues and substances and perfections and graces of every created thing glow and make the same movement all at once.... disclosing the beauties of their being, power, loveliness and graces. The soul is conscious of how all creatures, earthly and heavenly, have their life, duration and strength in God. Although the soul knows all these things are distinct from God.... It now knows things better in God 's being than in themselves. Here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: the soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures! (CP 5)

This awakening is the movement of the Word; but how can the Word move?

Only things move. The Eternal Word is the Son of God, and God doesn't move.

John would answer: That's right, God does not really move; he only seems to move.

It is the soul that is moved when God removes some of the veils in front of it so that it can vaguely discern his countenance full of graces. (CP 7) The soul is awakened from the sleep of natural vision when it sees all created things for the first time from a supernatural perspective, with all their harmony and movement IN GOD. It is the movement in created things that gives the impression of God moving. Nevertheless God does not move. Rather, he is the principle and root of all movement in creation.

Therefore “You wake in my heart” may be good poetry, but in fact, it is not God who is awakened in the soul; but the soul that is awakened by God from the sleep of natural vision to supernatural vision. (4/6) Likewise, when the soul succumbs to the sleep of natural vision, it seems that God is asleep; but of course, God never sleeps. (CP 8)

“You wake in my heart”. What exactly does St John mean by “heart” in this poem? Well, he doesn’t mean the emotions or the will, but the very substance of the soul, and the awakening is the communication of God’s excellence to the substance of the soul.

It is as though an immense, powerful voice sounds in it, the voice of a multitude of excellences, of thousands of virtues in God, infinite in number. The soul is established in them, terribly and solidly set in array in them like an army. (CP 10)

How can frail human nature survive such a powerful and glorious divine communication? John takes as an example Queen Esther fainting as she came into the presence of the awesome King Ahasuerus. (Est 15:9-17) Even though she was his queen, she still fell unconscious at the sight of His Majesty. Likewise, even when a soul is in a state of perfection with its lower part well purged and in conformity with the spirit, it is still overwhelmed by the grandeur and glory of God. On the other hand, if an un-purged soul were to experience the same intensity of God’s power and glory, it would be utterly devastated. (CP 12)

However, God has many other attributes, especially his tender mercy, with which he reassures the soul and protects it from being blown away by the experience of his grandeur and glory, just as God shielded Moses with his right hand until his glory had passed by. (Exod 33:22) “where in secret you dwell alone” When talking about the indwelling of God in the soul, people often ask if he dwells in all souls or only in very holy ones. St John says:

“God dwells secretly in all souls and is hidden in their substance, for otherwise they would not last. Yet there is a difference, a great difference, in his dwelling in them. In some souls he dwells alone, and in others he does not dwell alone. Abiding in some, he is pleased; in others, he is displeased. He lives in some as though in his own house, commanding and ruling everything; and in others as though a stranger in a strange house where he is not permitted to give orders or do anything”.

John explains that God is most at home, most secret and most alone, in the soul where there are no strangers dwelling; then he is free to do what he wishes. Who are these strangers? They are uncontrolled appetites and affections that take control of the soul. With such objectionable strangers dwelling there, the Beloved, has no privacy to show his great love for the soul. On the other hand, when he is at home and alone in the soul, he can embrace her secretly and intimately.

John assures us that there is no way the devil can interfere with the embrace of the Beloved and his Bride, “nor can the human intellect understand how it occurs”. (CP 14)

“Oh, how happy is this soul that experiences God resting and reposing within it”.
(CP 15)

The soul is well aware of her Bridegroom and ordinarily enjoys him in this way. If he were always awake within it, communicating knowledge and love, it would already be in glory. He is usually in this embrace with his Bride as though asleep in the substance of the soul. If the Bridegroom, when he does awake, scarcely opening his eyes, has such an effect on the soul, what would things be like if he were ordinarily in it fully awake?

It would be a shame to try to summarize the end of ***The Living Flame***, rather, we should let St John of the Cross have the last word on the breathing of God in the soul and the overflowing of love by reading CP 16-17 in full.