

The Living Flame of Love

Stanza 3

St John of the Cross likes to use imagery in his teaching method. In this third stanza he invites us to descend into deep caverns and explore them with lamps of fire.

O lamps of fire!
in whose splendours
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.

Each stanza of the Living Flame describes different aspects of the same glorious reality, where the light of faith is enriched by glimpses of the light of glory.

The lamps of fire

By “lamps of fire” St John means the attributes of God: omnipotent, wise, good, merciful, just, loving..... and many more beyond our imagining.

We must not think that these divine attributes are appendages of God. They are the very being of God. Though they are many, they coalesce in the unicity of God and burn as one flame, one lamp.

However, in the soul united with God, they seem to burn as different lamps. For example:

- In so far as God is omnipotent, he imparts light to the soul according to his omnipotence
- In so far as God is wise, he imparts light to the soul light according to his wisdom....

and likewise with the other attributes. John says -

“They illumine and impart warmth to it individually, for it has clear knowledge of each and through this knowledge is inflamed with love” (CP 3).

St John of the Cross wrote the Living Flame in 1586. Many years later, in 1670, Isaac Newton conducted an experiment in which a ray of white light shone through a prism, refracting into the various colours of the spectrum. Had John, in his day, known about this discovery, he

might well have used it as an example of how the attributes of God are all one in the unicity of God, but appear to be many when they shine in the human soul (the prism).

The deep caverns of feeling

These deep caverns are the spiritual faculties of the soul: the intellect, memory and will and they give every human being a capacity for God. We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 27 -

“The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God. God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will man find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for”.

St John expresses this truth beautifully when he says:

“These caverns (*intellect, memory and will*) are as deep as the boundless goods of which they are capable (*of receiving*), since anything less than the infinite fails to fill them. From what they suffer when they are empty, we can gain some knowledge of their enjoyment and delight when they are filled with God.” (CP 18)

Then John makes a very significant statement:

“When these caverns (*intellect, memory and will*) are not emptied, purged and cleansed of every affection for creatures, they do not feel the vast emptiness of their deep capacity ... Yet when these caverns are empty and pure, the thirst, hunger and yearning of the spiritual feeling is intolerable. Since these caverns have deep “stomachs”, they suffer profoundly; for the food they lack is God. This commonly occurs at the end of illumination and purification.” (CP 18)

Here John goes into a long diversion about purification of the soul which we have already covered in *The Ascent*, so we shall skip it and move on to page 701¹ where St John says:

“If the anointings that prepare the soul for the union of spiritual marriage with God are so sublime, what will be the possession of knowledge, love and glory of the intellect, will and memory in this union with God? Certainly the satisfaction, fullness and delight of these caverns will then correspond to their former hunger and thirst” (CP 68).

¹ *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, ICS Publications Revised Edition 1991, *The Living Flame of Love*, Introduction, page 701.

When John speaks of the feeling of the soul, he means the power and strength that the substance of the soul has for enjoying what it experiences in its faculties: intellect, memory and will (69). In the state of union which is spiritual marriage, the feeling of the soul is illumined and enriched by the possession of the light or knowledge of God, whereas before all was obscure and blind:

- obscure - because it did not have the light or knowledge of supernatural things
- blind - due to the cataracts of sin, or occupying its appetites with other things.

John is quite explicit about this:

“In so far as the appetite proposed some satisfaction, the feeling was blind to the grandeurs of divine riches and beauty on the other side of the cataract, just as something in front of the eye, no matter how small, is sufficient to obstruct the vision of things before it, no matter how large.” (CP 72)

“Those who are not so spiritual as to be purged of appetites and satisfactions, but still keep in themselves something of the animal self, believe that things most vile and base to the spirit (things closest to the senses according to which they are still living) are highly important; and things that are loftier and more precious to the spirit (further withdrawn from the senses) are considered to be of little value. They even sometimes regard them as foolishness.” (CP 74)

John then goes on to say something that people may find surprising:

“The soul’s desire for God is not always supernatural, but only when God infuses it himself and gives strength for it. This is far different from natural desire, and until God infuses the desire there is very little merit in it. Thus when you, of your own power, have the desire for God, your desire amounts to no more than natural appetite ... When you of yourself become attached to spiritual things and bound to their savouriness, you exercise your natural appetite and thus you put cataracts before your eyes and become an animal self. Then you can neither judge nor understand the spiritual self, which is above every natural feeling and appetite.” (CP 75)

We should not take offence when John speaks about our “animal self”. Human beings are, after all, rational animals. God created us with appetites which are good in themselves and some of them we have in common with other animals. However, John wants us to keep in mind that God created us with a view to raising us to the level of his divinity. Clearly this will not happen if we remain fixed at the level of our natural appetites.

John seems to anticipate that some people may have doubts about his teaching:

“If you have any further doubts, I do not know what to say, except that you should re-read this and perhaps you will understand. (CP 75)

Since we have studied the *Ascent, Books 2&3*, concerning the purification of the intellect, memory and will, we should not have any difficulty understanding what John is saying.

John now returns to the main theme (CP 76). Now the soul has overcome its obscurity and blindness. The deep caverns of its faculties have become, not only bright and clear, but like a resplendent light.

“They now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely, both warmth and light to their Beloved.”

Think of a bright sunny day. A ray of sunlight shines on a window of a house a mile away, causing the panes of glass to shine as brilliantly as the sun itself. So it is with the caverns of the soul (*the faculties*) when they are divinely illuminated. They themselves become lamps that shine back to God, giving him the same kind of warmth and light that they have received from him. God sees the beauty of his own attributes shining back to him from the soul. John confidently asserts that having been made one with God, the soul has somehow become God through participation. Although it is not God as perfectly as it will be in the next life, it is like the shadow of God. Through this substantial transformation, it performs in God, since:

“the will of the two is one will. God’s operation and the soul’s are one.” (CP78)

“This is the soul’s deep satisfaction and happiness: seeing that it gives to God more than it is worth in itself: that very divine light and divine heat that are given to it. It does this in heaven by means of the light of glory, and in this life by means of a highly illumined faith.” (CP 80)