

12. From the Search for the Hidden Christ to the Manifestation of Christ's Beauty

We begin this topic with the words of St. John of the Cross: "Let us rejoice, Beloved, / and let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty / to the mountain and to the hill, / to where pure water flows, / and further, deep into the thicket." In this topic, we will explore the "Spiritual Canticle," which powerfully illustrates the journey of spiritual marriage.

I. The "Spiritual Canticle" What all transpired physically, emotionally, and spiritually during the long cold, wintry months and during the stifling hot summer days of John of the Cross's cruel imprisonment at Toledo has to be left to our imaginations. What we know for sure is that when he escaped undernourished, gaunt, fatigued, and seriously in need of medical attention, he brought with him gorgeous poetry that is a report of his spiritual transformation, especially the 31 stanzas of the "Spiritual Canticle."

The "Spiritual Canticle" is a title derived from the Latin *Canticum Canticorum*, the "Canticle of Canticles," also known as the "Song of Songs." John's poem is a precious gem of Spanish poetry, well-known to Spanish students. In addition to its beauty as sheer poetry, the "Spiritual Canticle" tells the story of the bride who searches for her lover (Stanzas 1-12), enters into the relationship known as spiritual betrothal (stanzas 13-21), and finally is united to her lover in spiritual marriage (stanzas 22-40). We know those divisions from John of the Cross's commentary on the poem.

This poem shows John at his very best as a poet who mined the scriptures, especially the Song of Songs, for their wisdom. He finds vignettes and symbols in the scriptures that enable him to tell the story of his own mystical transformation. Clearly, he wants the reader to learn about God's love by joining him in both the poetry and commentary.

There are two versions of the poem and commentary. The earlier version is known as "Canticle A" (CA), and the later version known as "Canticle B" (CB). Both versions of the poem appear in the Kavanaugh-Rodriguez translation, but only the commentary on CB is included. There had been some doubt about the authenticity of CB, but scholars no longer have any doubts about its being the work of John of the Cross.

As an alumnus of the University of Salamanca, Juan de la Cruz belonged to a tradition that knew how important prologues were to readers, and knew that the

author owed it to readers to give significant guidance in reading the work at hand. In the heading to the prologue to the "Spiritual Canticle," we learn that this commentary "was written at the request of Mother Ana de Jesus, prioress of the discalced Carmelite nuns of St. Joseph's in Granada."

II. Prologue: For guidance from John of the Cross on the stages of the journey to spiritual marriage, we turn to CB 22.3. John tells his readers that "the soul . . . becomes divine, God through participation, in so far as is possible in this life." Note that John of the Cross represents a fairly rare case of a Western author seeing the journey in grace as a process of deification, divinization, or becoming God-like. □ The "Spiritual Canticle" also shows how spiritual marriage brings one deeply into the life and love of the Triune God, where daringly John sees the human person gifted with a certain mutuality and certain equality with God, aspects of the friendship with God that are attained in this stage.

John of the Cross sees in this culmination of the spiritual life that one has come to the anteroom of heaven. "Such is the song of the soul in the transformation that is hers in this life, the delight of which is beyond all exaggeration. Yet since this song is not as perfect as the new song of the glorious life, the soul in this bliss becomes mindful of the new song of glory, hearing faintly in the song of this life the excellence of the possession of glory, which is incomparably more precious" (CB 39.10). "Manuscript Sanlucar," from which "Canticle

The "Spiritual Canticle" has numerous truly memorable lines, such as Christ drawing the person to himself, and descriptions in lines such as this, "the tranquil night / at the time of the rising dawn, / silent music, / sounding solitude, / the supper that refreshes and deepens love" (CB 15).

Review Questions

1. Read the prologue to "The Spiritual Canticle" carefully, and make a list of things that John of the Cross wants his readers to know.
2. How can one become comfortable with the language of spiritual betrothal and spiritual marriage?
3. Ponder any one stanza from "The Spiritual Canticle" and ask yourself: What does it mean in the context of the journey to transformation in God through love?