

### 13. "How Gently and Lovingly You Awake in My Heart"

As we begin this topic, let us reflect on these words: "It should be known that if anyone is seeking God, the Beloved is seeking that person much more" (FB 3.28). In this topic, we will explore "The Living Flame of Love," in which John further examines spiritual marriage. As we will see, John of the Cross shares with his directees the most profound encounter that he had with Jesus Christ of which we know today.

**I. Prologue:** In the prologue to his final poem and commentary, "The Living Flame of Love," John of the Cross, as with the climax of "The Spiritual Canticle," brings his readers to the very vestibule of heaven. In the prologue to the "Flame", John anticipates a question: Why, when already he had written about spiritual marriage, is he doing so once more in the "Flame"? John responds that he treats in this poem and commentary "the highest degree of perfection one can reach in this life (transformation in God), [because] these stanzas treat of a love deeper in quality and more perfect within this very state of transformation" (FB Prologue). John wants us to know that there are degrees in spiritual marriage as one descends deeper and deeper into the gracious Mystery who is God.

In the heading to the prologue of the "Flame" we learn that the commentary was requested by his friend and benefactor Dona Ana del Mercado y Penalosa who, in the prologue, he calls "a very noble and devout lady." Once again, John wants to address the ineffability of the encounter with God: "Since they [the stanzas] deal with matters so interior and spiritual, for which words are usually lacking—in that the spiritual surpasses the sense - I find it difficult to say something of their content; also, one speaks badly of the intimate depths of the spirit if one does not do so with a deeply recollected soul" (FB, Prologue).

**II. A Work to Be Prayed Rather Than Studied:** This is a poem and commentary more to be prayed over than studied. John reminds his reader that "this flame is the Spirit of the Bridegroom, who is the Holy Spirit" (Flame 1.3). In fact, this commentary is in so many ways a treatise on the Holy Spirit who is the "principal guide" of souls (Flame 3.46). The Spanish scholar Federico Ruiz calls "The Living Flame of Love" John's Magnificat, that great New Testament hymn of praise and thanksgiving spoken by the Blessed Virgin.

Because the "Flame" reports on John's deepest encounter with God as relayed to us in his poem and explained in his commentary, it should be one of the first of John's writings that you read. Dante's Divine Comedy is similar in that we do not truly understand the Inferno and the Purgatorio until we had read the Paradiso. Note

how John becomes more and more wordless as he approaches the end of "The Living Flame of Love."

**III. The Flame of the Holy Spirit:** In the "Flame" poem and commentary, one meets John of the Cross, blessed and graced with spiritual marriage, encountering Christ the Bridegroom. Some readers of John of the Cross at first seem to notice what seems like an absence of Jesus Christ. But, attention to John's symbolism reveals that, while the words 'Jesus' and 'Jesus Christ' do not appear frequently, synonyms are everywhere: Son, Son of God, Word, Lord, Bridegroom, Spouse, Bridegroom, Savior, Messiah, etc. In Ascent 2.22.5, John has the Father say: "Fasten your eyes on him alone because in him I have spoken and revealed all and in him you will discover even more than you ask for and desire... For he is my entire locution." For John of the Cross, the Christian experiences God in Christ.

For some time, the thorough permeation of "The Living Flame of Love" by the "Song of Songs" was not appreciated. By consulting the Spanish text of the "Song of Songs," it becomes clear that the "Song of Songs" is the medium through which John shares his encounter with Christ in the poem and in the commentary. There is no doubt that popularly John of the Cross is best known for his Dark Night doctrine, but John uses the Spanish *fuego*, 'fire,' some 310 times in his writings and *luz*, 'light,' 436 times. Not only because of these images, but for many reasons like the "Flame," John of the Cross is every bit the doctor of fire and light as he is the doctor of darkness and night. In the "Flame," as elsewhere, John uses the imagery of the burning log of wood very effectively.

John of the Cross sees the flame who is the Holy Spirit bathing the soul in glory and refreshing it with the quality of divine life. John tells us that the acts of love produced by the Holy Spirit "...are most precious; one of them is more meritorious and valuable than all the deeds a person may have performed in the whole of life without this transformation, however great that may have been" (FB 1.3 and see CB 29.2).

The fourth and final stanza of the "Flame" may be a sacramental statement about the teaching in the tradition of the birthing of the Son of God in the womb or breast of the human heart. It is thought that John took the Spanish *seno* (bosom, breast even womb at times) from John 1:18, where we hear: "It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's bosom (*seno*), who has made him known." One hears of this teaching in "Flame": "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."

### **Review Questions**

1. What do you make of the suggestion that "The Living Flame of Love" is a text to be prayed with, especially the poem?
2. What do you think of John's insistence that the "Flame" is the key role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual life?
3. What impressed you most in the poem and commentary we call "The Living Flame of Love"?