

Commentary

2. Since the soul longs so ardently for union with the Bridegroom and is aware that she finds no means or remedy in any creature, she turns to speak to faith, as to that which most vividly sheds light concerning her Beloved, and takes it as a means toward this union. Indeed, there is no other means by which one reaches true union and spiritual espousal with God, as Hosea indicates: *I will espouse you to me in faith* [Hos. 2:20]. With this burning desire she exclaims, which is the meaning of the stanza: O faith of Christ, my Bridegroom, would that you might show me clearly now the truths of my Beloved that you have infused in my soul and are covered with obscurity and darkness (for faith, as the theologians say, is an obscure habit),² in such a way that what you communicate to me in inexplicit and obscure knowledge, you would show suddenly, clearly, and perfectly, changing it into a manifestation of glory! Would that you might do this by drawing back from these truths (for faith is the covering and veil over the truths of God)! The verse then runs:

O spring like crystal!

3. She says faith is like crystal for two reasons: first, because it concerns Christ, her Bridegroom; second, because it has the characteristics of crystal, being pure in its truths, strong, clear, and cleansed of errors and natural forms.

And she calls it a spring because from it the waters of all spiritual goods flow into the soul. Christ our Lord, speaking with the Samaritan woman, called faith a spring, declaring that in those who believe in him he would make a fountain whose waters would leap up unto life everlasting [Jn. 4:14]. This water was the Spirit that believers were to receive through faith [Jn. 7:39].³

If only, on your silvered-over faces,

4. She calls the propositions and articles of faith "silvered-over faces." To understand this verse as well as the others, it should be known that faith is compared to silver in the propositions it teaches us, and the truths and substance it contains are compared to gold. For in the next life we shall see and enjoy openly this very substance that, clothed and covered with the silver of faith, we now believe.

David says of faith: *If you sleep between the two choirs, the feathers of the dove will be silvery and the hinder parts will be of the color of gold* [Ps. 68:13]. This means that if we close the eyes of the intellect to earthly and heavenly things, which he terms "sleeping between," we shall remain in faith. He

2. Cf. A. 2. 3. 1 and note 1.

3. Cf. F. 3. 8.

calls faith the dove; and its feathers (the truths it tells us) are silvery because in this life faith proposes these truths to us covered and in darkness. As a result she calls these truths silvered-over faces. Yet when faith comes to an end, when it terminates through the clear vision of God, the substance of faith, having been stripped of the veil of silver, will have the color of gold.

Faith, consequently, gives and communicates God himself to us but covered with the silver of faith. Yet it does not for this reason fail to give him to us truly. Were someone to give us a gold vase plated with silver, we would not fail to receive a gold vase merely because of its being silver-plated. When the bride of the Song of Songs wanted this divine possession, God promised to make her, insofar as possible in this life, gold earrings plated with silver [Sg. 1:11]. He thereby promised to give himself to her, but hidden in faith.

The soul, then, exclaims to faith: Oh, if only on your silvered-over faces (the articles we mentioned) by which you cover the gold of the divine rays (the eyes I have desired), and adds:

you would suddenly form
the eyes I have desired,

5. The eyes refer to the divine truths and rays. Faith, as we mentioned, proposes these truths to us in its covered and inexplicit articles. The soul, in other words, says: Oh, if only the truths hidden in your articles, which you teach me in an inexplicit and dark manner, you would give me now completely, clearly, and explicitly, freed of their covering, as my desire begs!

She calls these truths "eyes" because of the remarkable presence of the Beloved she experiences. It seems that he is now always looking at her. Thus she says:

which I bear sketched deep within my heart.

6. She says these truths are sketched deep within her, that is, in her soul, in her intellect and will. For these truths are infused by faith into her intellect. And since the knowledge of them is imperfect, she says they are sketched. Just as a sketch is not a perfect painting, so the knowledge of faith is not perfect knowledge. Hence the truths infused in the soul through faith are as though sketched, and when clearly visible they will be like a perfect and finished painting in the soul. As the Apostle says: *Cum autem venerit quod perfectum est evacuabitur quod ex parte est* [1 Cor. 13:10]; this means that when what is perfect, the clear vision, comes, what is in part, the knowledge of faith, will end.

7. Over this sketch of faith the sketch of love is drawn in the will of the lover. When there is union of love, the image of the Beloved is so sketched

in the will, and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is that in the union and transformation of love each gives possession of self to the other and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love.

8. This is the meaning of St. Paul's affirmation: *Vivo autem, iam non ego; vivit vero in me Christus* (I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me) [Gal. 2:20]. In saying, "I live, now not I," he meant that even though he had life it was not his because he was transformed in Christ, and it was divine more than human. He consequently asserts that he does not live but Christ lives in him. In accord with this likeness and transformation, we can say that his life and Christ's were one life through union of love. This transformation into divine life will be effected perfectly in heaven in all those who merit the vision of God. Transformed in God, these blessed souls will live the life of God and not their own life—although, indeed, it will be their own life because God's life will be theirs. Then they will truly proclaim: We live, now not we, but God lives in us.

Although transformation in this life can be what it was in St. Paul, it still cannot be perfect and complete even though the soul reaches such transformation of love as is found in the spiritual marriage, the highest state attainable in this life.⁴ Everything can be called a sketch of love in comparison with that perfect image, the transformation in glory. Yet the attainment of such a sketch of transformation in this life is a great blessing, for with this transformation the Beloved is very pleased. Desiring the bride to put him as a sketch in her soul, he said in the Song of Songs: *Put Me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm* [Sg. 8:6]. The "heart" signifies the soul in which God dwells in this life as a seal, which is the sketch of faith mentioned above; the "arm" signifies the strong will in which he is present as the seal, which is the sketch of love we just discussed.

9. The soul's state at this time is such that I do not want to neglect saying something about it, even though briefly, regardless of the fact that it is indescribable. It seems to the soul that its bodily and spiritual substance is drying up with thirst for this living spring of God. Its thirst is like David's when he said: *As the hart longs for the fount of waters, so does my soul long for you, my God. My soul has thirsted for God the living fount; when shall I see and*

4. The expression "spiritual marriage" appears here for the first time, being identified with the state of union or transformation. This is not the state in which the bride finds herself at this point in the poem.

near before the face of God? [Ps. 42:1-2]. This thirst so exhausts the soul that she would think nothing of breaking through the midst of the camp of the Philistines, as did David's strong men to fill their containers with water from the cistern of Bethlehem, which was Christ [1 Chr. 11:18]. She would consider all the difficulties of the world, the fury of demons, and eternal afflictions nothing if by passing through them she could plunge into the unfathomable spring of love. In this respect it is said in the Song of Songs: *Love is as strong as death and its jealousy as hard as hell* [Sg. 8:6]. It is incredible how ardent the longing and pain is that the soul experiences when she sees she is near the enjoyment of that good, yet it is not given to her. The more the object of her desire comes into sight and the closer it draws, while still being denied her, so much more pain and torment does it cause. In this spiritual sense Job says: *Before I eat, I sigh; and the roaring and bellowing of my soul is like overflowing waters* [Jb. 3:24], that is, on account of its craving for food. By the food is meant God because the yearning for food, or the knowledge of God, is commensurate with suffering for him.

STANZA 13

Introduction

1. The reason the soul suffers so intensely for God at this time is that she is drawing nearer to him; so she has greater experience within herself of the void of God, of very heavy darkness, and of spiritual fire that dries up and purges her so that thus purified she may be united with him. Inasmuch as God does not communicate some supernatural ray of light from himself, he is intolerable darkness to her when he is spiritually near her, for the excess of supernatural light darkens the natural light. David indicated all this when he said: *Clouds and darkness are round about him; fire goes before him* [Ps. 97:2-3]. And in another psalm he asserts: *He made darkness his covert and hiding place, and his tent round about him is dark water in the clouds of the air; because of his great splendor there are in his presence clouds, hail, and coals of fire* [Ps. 18:12-13], that is, for the soul drawing near him. As the soul comes closer to him, and until God introduces her into his divine splendors through transformation of love, she experiences within herself all that David described. In the meanwhile, like Job, she exclaims over and over: *Who will grant me to know him and find him and come unto his throne?* [Jb. 23:3].¹

1. This paragraph recalls the teaching and descriptions contained in *The Dark Night*. The visits of the Bridegroom in the following stanzas characterize the stage of spiritual betrothal. The sufferings related to these divine communications stem from the soul's not being totally purified.

STANZA 38

Introduction

1. In the two preceding stanzas the bride's song focused on the good the Bridegroom will offer her in that eternal bliss. That is, the Bridegroom will really transform her into the beauty of both his created and uncreated wisdom, and also into the beauty of the union of the Word with his humanity in which she will know him face to face as well as from the back.

In the next stanza she discusses two things: first, the manner in which she will taste that divine juice of the sapphires, or rather the pomegranates; second, the glory she will give her Bridegroom through her predestination. It should be noted that even though she refers to these goods as successive parts, they are all contained in one essential glory. She says:

There you will show me
what my soul has been seeking,
and then you will give me,
you, my life, will give me there
what you gave me on that other day:

Commentary

2. The reason the soul desired to enter these caverns was to reach the consummation of the love of God, which she had always been seeking; that is, to love God as purely and perfectly as he loves her in order to repay him by such love. She declares to the Bridegroom in this stanza that there he will show her that which was her aim in all her acts: to love the Bridegroom as perfectly as he loves her. The second gift she will receive there is the essential glory to which he predestined her from the day of his eternity. Thus she declares:

There you will show me
what my soul has been seeking,

3. The soul's aim is a love equal to God's. She always desired this equality, naturally and supernaturally, for lovers cannot be satisfied without feeling that they love as much as they are loved. Since the soul sees through her transformation in God in this life that she cannot, even though her love is immense, equal the perfection of God's love for her, she desires the clear transformation of glory in which she will reach this equality. Even though there is a true union of will in this high state she now enjoys, she cannot attain the excellence and power of love that she will possess in the strong union of glory. Just as the soul, according to St. Paul, will know then as she is known by God [1 Cor. 13:12], so she will also

love God as she is loved by him. As her intellect will be the intellect of God, her will then will be God's will, and thus her love will be God's love. The soul's will is not destroyed there, but is so firmly united with the strength of God's will, with which he loves her, that her love for him is as strong and perfect as his love for her; for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God's. Thus the soul loves God with the will and strength of God himself, united with the very strength of love with which God loves her. This strength lies in the Holy Spirit in whom the soul is there transformed, for by this transformation of glory he supplies what is lacking in her, since he is given to the soul for the sake of the strength of this love. Even in the perfect transformation of this state of spiritual marriage, which the soul reaches in this life, she superabounds with grace and, as above, loves in some way through the Holy Spirit who is given to her [Rom. 5:5] in this transformation of love.

4. It should be noted that the soul does not say that there he will give her his love—although he really does—because she would thereby manifest only that God loves her. She states rather that there he will show her how to love him as perfectly as she desires. It is precisely by giving her his love there that he shows her how to love as she is loved by him. Besides teaching her to love purely, freely, and disinterestedly, as he loves us, God makes her love him with the very strength with which he loves her. Transforming her into his love, as we said, he gives her his own strength by which she can love him. As if he were to put an instrument in her hands and show her how it works by operating it jointly with her, he shows her how to love and gives her the ability to do so.

Until attaining this equality of love the soul is dissatisfied, nor would she be satisfied in heaven if, as St. Thomas affirms in the opusculum *De Beatitudine*,¹ she did not feel that she loved God as much as she is loved by him. And even though in this state of spiritual marriage we are discussing there is not that perfection of glorious love, there is nonetheless a living and totally ineffable semblance of that perfection.

and then you will give me,
you, my Life, will give me there
what you gave me on that other day:

5. What the soul says he will then give her is essential glory, consisting

1. Here is the only place that John cites this apocryphal work of St. Thomas Aquinas. With the exception of Scripture, this is the work that has most visibly influenced John. He makes use of it particularly in these last stanzas and in the *Flame*, 3. 82-85. The probable author is Helvicus Theutonicus, O.P. The work may be found in *D. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, vol. 28 (Paris: Vives, 1875). The section John refers to here may be found on pages 405-26.