

13. FIFTH MANSION – (iv)

(Spiritual Betrothal)

Christian spirituality offers us rich symbolisms to understand the nature of encounter between God and soul. Carmelite spirituality is simply our traditional Catholic spirituality, only very precisely expressed, personally experienced and faithfully lived. It is applicable and appropriate to hermits as well as popes, priests as well as lay men and women, businessmen as well as the sick and home-bound. Carmelite spirituality has expressed for us all the journey of prayer from beginning to end, for any who seek an authoritative guide for the pilgrimage. The rich symbolism used by mystics like Teresa and St. John of the Cross are timeless precious pearls of mysticism.

The Scriptures

The Scriptures teach not only that by faith man is justified and forgiven, but that Christ dwells in him but through Christ the Holy Trinity. St. Paul declares of the Christians that they are in Christ (Rm 8.1) and again that Christ is in them (Gal 2.20). They live in fellowship or communion with God (1 Jn 1.3). Not only does the Holy Spirit dwell and work within them, so that they have the earnest of the Spirit in their hearts (1 Cor 1.22), the witness of the Spirit that they are God's children (Rm 8.16) and the sealing with the Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:13), but the Father and the Son also come to the believers and take their abode in them (Jn 14.23). Christ is in the believers (Col 1.27) and they in him (Rm 8.1). As many as have been baptized into Him have put on Christ (Gal 3.27) and are in the Lord (Rm 16.11) and are made nigh because they are in Him (Eph 2.13) and are free from condemnation (Rm 8.1). They are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones (Eph 5.30), members of Christ (1 Cor 6.15) and partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1.4). Christ lives in them (Gal 2.20) and dwells

in their hearts by faith (Eph 3.17), is in them (Rm 8.10), and is to be formed in them (Gal 4.19). The believers are members of His body (Rm 12.4,5); they are united with Him as the branch with the vine (Jn 15.5), and their life is His life flowing through them. This is quite a lot mystical theology present in the Holy Scriptures.

The Mystery

This union explained in this Mansion, as its name indicates, is a mystery. It is experienced by the believer, but cannot adequately be put into words. The fullness of the experience is proportioned to the degree of faith and sanctification. The union is established when the sinner comes to faith and is justified, and grows more close, intimate and strength-giving as his sanctification increases. The spiritual life which he leads has its source and vitality in Christ. Believers live in Christ, and He in them, and His life flows into and through them. Without Him they can do nothing (Jn 15.5).

Brief Encounter

Using another symbol apart from silkworm to butterfly is the marriage encounter between the bride and the bridegroom. Teresa states that the prayer of union is something like the brief meeting the couple before their betrothal. In her judgment, spiritual betrothal has not yet taken place between the soul and God. The two have encountered one another— be it ever so briefly— and affirmed not only their compatibility, but also their love for each other. In this meeting, a union of hearts takes place, which allows them to share a deep intimacy. Spiritual betrothal and marriage flow from this all-important union. Without it, the betrothal is nothing but a business contract and the marriage likely to be empty of love.

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This brief encounter can lead to even higher mystical states, but the soul must take care not to allow the evil one to lead it astray . Even though a person in these mansions has united his or her will to God's, Teresa says that the evil one can use his wiles in many ways to darken one's mind and compromise one's will. The evil one can strike even in the most carefully guarded places. One must never presume to be beyond his influence.

The Three Stages

The three forward moving periods that the symbol refers to are illustrated by Teresa in this way: meetings, betrothal, and marriage. The meetings are necessary on the social level so that the two can get to know each other and find out what they have in common. During betrothal the relationship passes from knowledge to love. In marriage each one surrenders completely to the other.

St. John of the Cross was giving talks to the nuns at St. Joseph's at this time when Teresa was writing this section. Most probably it was from him that the nuns first heard talk about bridal love and the Song of Songs. It is reasonable, then, to suspect that in introducing her nuptial symbolism Teresa had been listening to conferences given by John of the Cross, which followed in the tradition of Paul, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and up through Bernard and Ruysbroek. But Teresa, nonetheless, gives her own touch of originality to the ancient symbol. From the biblical poem, she moves quickly and spontaneously to the human reality of marriage. “And even though the comparison may be a coarse one, I cannot find another that would better explain what I mean than the sacrament of marriage” (IC V,4,iii).

Love is never idle

Love is never idle, and a failure to grow in love is a very bad sign. Teresa overwhelmed writes “how little is all we do to serve and suffer and accomplish so as to dispose ourselves for the great favors of the sixth

dwelling places. May His Majesty and the Holy Spirit move my pen, Teresa entreats, so that his name be praised and that we strive to serve a Lord who, even here on earth, pays through favors like these so that here on earth we can understand something of what he will give us in heaven (cfr. IC V,4,x-xi)

Practical Conclusion

Teresa is fond of making her sisters understand that there is no letting off of their enthusiasm for God but this enthusiasm must be in all the time be manifested in works for God: “A soul that has tried to be the betrothed of God himself, that is now intimate with His Majesty, and has reached the boundaries that were mentioned, must not go to sleep” (IC V,4,x).

She concludes this Mansion with a sort of prayer that has ingredients of charity and works for others: “May it please His Majesty that we may merit to render him some service, without as many faults as we always have, even in good works, amen” (IC V,4,xi).

(End of Fifth Mansion)

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