

17. THE STRAW DRAWN BY AMBER

God attracts as fire attracts. God is powerful and certainly more than fire is. That is why anyone who is enamored by God has no limits to his/her thirst for Him. Teresa continues the narration of her experiences and comes to a point where she finds herself explaining a very important moment in mystical life, that is flight of the spirit. “There is another kind of rapture – I call it flight of the spirit – which, though substantially the same as other raptures, is interiorly experienced very differently” (IC VI,5,i). The soul is determined now to do no more than what the straw does when drawn by the amber – if you have noticed – and abandon itself into the hands of the One who is all powerful, for it sees that the safest thing to do is to make a virtue of necessity. And that I mentioned a straw is certainly appropriate, for as easily as a huge giant snatches up a straw, this great and powerful Giant of ours carries away the spirit (IC VI,5,ii). The soul need courage, total dedication and surrender to God’s will. This is a crucial period of time for the soul to keep God in its centre and allow him to take charge of its life. Teresa compares this state of experience to a small boat or a bark that is not in control of itself when engulfed by massive waves of the sea “A bark cannot prevent the furious waves from leaving it where they will; nor does the pilot have the power, nor do those who take part in controlling the little ship. So much less can the interior part of the soul stay where it will, or make its senses or faculties do other than what they are commanded; here the soul doesn't care what happens in the exterior senses” (IC VI,5,iii). She says that in this rapture persons are not sure whether they are in or out of the body. They seem to be in another region of extraordinary light where many things are taught to them. These things are experienced as imaginative visions. Understanding is given without words. She says that at other times the soul experiences intellectual visions, and without seeing anything with the eyes of the body or

the soul, knowledge is represented in a way Teresa can't explain.

Take it from this Exile

When there is intense experience one feels lost and found. The intensity of the experience makes one to forget and recall. That is what happens when the soul is with God and experiencing the authentic touch of his care and love. There is a strong yearning to die and to be with him forever: “With the strongest yearnings to die, and thus usually with tears, it begs God to take it from this exile. Everything it sees wearies it. When it is alone it finds some relief, but soon this torment returns; yet when the soul does not experience this pain, something is felt to be missing.” (IC VI,6,i). The soul desires to not to offend God and at the same time involve itself in great works for God’s kingdom. That is why Teresa advises her sisters not to be distressed at so many things happening in the world but pray for the conversion of sinners. “Obeying and not offending our Lord, it thinks, is the complete remedy against deception. Thus, in its opinion, it would not commit knowingly a venial sin even were others to crush it to pieces. It is intensely afflicted upon seeing that it cannot free itself from unknowingly committing many venial sins” (IC VI,6,ii).

Then Teresa says, “A woman in this stage of prayer is distressed by the natural hindrance there is to her entering the world, and she has great envy of those who have the freedom to cry out and spread the news abroad about who this great God of hosts is.”

We marvel at the great wisdom and accomplishments of Teresa. We also know Teresa was careful about what she wrote, what she said, and how she led. Although she doesn’t specifically identify herself in the above passage, she notes a woman’s lack of “*freedom to cry out*”. Commenting on this passage, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez say, “Teresa . . . is actually telling of her own suffering, doubts and trials with her confessors because of her

extraordinary experiences in prayer. One cause of distress for her was the contemporary view of appropriate roles for women, which prevented her from being able to speak in public about the greatness of God.”

Tears: Real and False

People cry. Crying is a normal emotional response. Some people cry more than others. Crying is not a sign of weakness, in fact, some people with great emotional strength cry. Teresa is not criticizing crying in this section of the IC. She is, however, concerned about what she calls “*false tears*“. These are contrived spiritual experiences or emotional displays for attention or manipulating others.

Emotionalism leads to self-deception, the deception of others, and deception by the devil: “*A thousand times they will be led to think they weep for God, but they will not be doing so.*” Instead of emotionalism we should focus on the work of spiritual formation and cultivating virtue. “*Let’s not think that everything is accomplished through much weeping but set our hands to the task of hard work and virtue. These are what we must pay attention to; let the tears come when God sends them without any effort on our part to induce them.*” (IC VI,6,vii).

We all know that Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. It was a moment of deep feeling because he loved him. God will engage us emotionally, but we must “*let him give us what he wants, whether water [tears] or dryness. . . . With such an attitude we shall go about refreshed, and the devil will not have so much chance to play tricks on us.*” (IC VI,6,vii).

Practical Conclusion

What is absolutely clear is that all our spirituality and experience of God depends on our hard work in the sense that we need to be prepared of God’s grace. We have to do our part and not become too emotional with spiritual experiences. That is why Teresa boldly says: “*Let’s not think that everything is accomplished through much weeping but set our hands to the task of hard work and virtue.*” (IC VI,6,ix).